

A Kiss From The Rose

Samantha
Reynolds

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my very own Prince who puts up with a cranky wife who hates to do laundry and my daughter who is very tolerant when Mother is writing.

“143”, hon!

To my Mother and Aunt Judy who always have supported me! Thank you for all you do! And Aunt Judy, you started all this by letting me read as many romance books as I could consume every summer of my childhood.

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Once upon a time, at the edge of Faery, there was a rose garden...

Hundreds of fragrant white roses in full bloom swayed in the soft spring air as she knelt in the heart of the rose bed.

Sturdy leather gloves protected her hands from sharp thorns, which drew blood if she was careless. A mangled straw hat perched atop her head. The frayed brim kept the bright southern sun from scorching her fair skin. An old oval wicker basket sat at her feet while she painstakingly gathered flowers for drying. These blooms would hang upside down in the house to perfume the air through the next winter. The roses had belonged to her mother, and had been her pride and joy. Now they were Kayleigh's.

The sounds of spring floated on the air around her; the buzzing of bees, a young mother robin's chirpy song to her young... The sweet, delicate aroma of roses meshed hauntingly with the smell of fresh, rich earth.

Scooting sideways on her knees, Kayleigh McConnell reached for the next bloom...and abruptly sat back on her heels, startled. A single bud of purest scarlet blazed in a sea of creamy white. She'd never heard of a rosebush changing color, not without creative grafting. This one bud had beaten the odds.

She took off her glove and reached out with a slender finger to trace the satiny velvet curve of the bloom. Perfect, the crimson bud was barely unfurled, and the petal curled over her finger. Her lips turned up into a smile, she murmured, "Aren't you the brave little soul?"

The kitchen's screen door slammed shut in the distance.

She sat up straight and sighed. She didn't want to fight with her brother today.

"Kayleigh? Where are you?" His voice sounded scratchy, obviously from smoking too many cigarettes.

"In the rose garden." Kayleigh waited with baited breath, wondering what kind of a mood he was in today. Personally, she was tired of all the guessing games and walking around on eggshells. All she wanted was to plant her flowers, fall in love, and have a family here at the edge of her mother's prized roses. Always, it had been what she wanted. And always, it seemed to be far beyond her reach.

Matthew slouched to the edge of the garden. His white shirt was wrinkled and hanging out of his dirty jeans. His eyes red and glassy in his pale and gaunt face; he wore his normal 'I-don't-care-what-you-think' attitude with stubborn pride.

Kayleigh bit her lip. At least he had taken a shower and had managed to fingercomb his blond hair today. *One day he'll snap out of it.*

She hoped...

He dropped his gaze and fiddled with the fragile branch of one of the rose bushes. "I don't know why

you take care of these things. They're more trouble than they're worth." His words were laced with sarcasm and bitterness as he stared at the roses.

Kayleigh sighed softly. That bitterness hadn't always been there. When they were younger, they had never been happier than when taking care of the roses with their mother. Now he stared at them as though they were a reminder of everything he had lost. But that wasn't the fault of the roses. "Hush, Matthew. They can hear you."

He shook his head. "They're just flowers, Kay, they can't hear crap. I don't know why you bother."

She frowned up at him. "I bother because she loved them."

Matthew scowled down at the ground. "What the hell is this?" He reached out and grabbed the stem of the red bloom, twisting the slender branch in his strong fingers. It broke off in his hand.

Kayleigh reeled in shock. He'd destroyed the only red rose the garden had ever produced without thought or conscience. "Why did you do that?"

He threw the bloom to the ground and took a step back to stomp it into the dirt. "It was too perfect."

Too perfect? Her heart constricted as she watched the rosebud shatter under his heel. He would have never done that a year ago. Ever. A pang echoed in her heart for the lone bud that had struggled so hard.

He shrugged his massive shoulders and raked a hand through his hair. The dark circles under his eyes told her he still had trouble sleeping. "I'm going out. I don't know when I'll be back." Straightening his shoulders, he waited for her to respond.

She knew he expected her to argue, but she needed some peace. If his taking off and leaving the house gave her that peace, well, so be it. She put down the spade she had been using to mulch. "Where are you going?" She tried to keep her tone light and not too maternal.

He looked away. "I'm heading over to Jimmy's."

Jimmy. She ground her teeth. She couldn't stand him. He'd never done a decent day's work in his life. "Why do you hang out with him?"

He turned and his cold gaze caught hers in warning. "Don't start on me."

"Start? What did I say?" Kayleigh blinked up at him. Anything could set him off when he decided to go off on one of his tangents, and it looked like today was going to be one of those days.

"Do you have to work tonight?" he asked in a softer tone.

"No." Kayleigh pulled off both her gloves and tossed them in her rose basket. "I'm meeting Angela at Robbie's."

His lip curled sourly. "I don't like that place."

She raised her brow at him, her temper rising in answer to his tone and sarcasm crept into her voice. "I don't like Jimmy, but that hasn't stopped you. Has it?"

He flinched. "Whatever." He turned on his heel and marched off toward the driveway, heading for the old beat-up station wagon that had been their mother's. He jerked the car door open and got in. The door slammed shut and the car coughed to life. It turned sharply in a spray of gravel and sped down

the drive, toward the main road.

She stood up and looked down at the lone red bloom crushed into the dirt at her feet. "I'm never going to escape this."

Chapter One

Kayleigh stood on the narrow sidewalk and looked down Main Street Quinton with its quaint wrought-iron street lights left over from the forties. The early evening air hung heavy around the citizens of the small town, despite the light caress of the wind. That suited Kayleigh's mood just fine.

She folded her hands across her chest and headed down the walk in no particular hurry. Everywhere she looked were cozy little houses surrounded by white picket fences and bright cheery flowers.

She smiled sourly. *And the standard nosy neighbors.*

Quinton was a good place to raise a family, but not so wonderful if you were still single. The eligible male population of Quinton mostly consisted of adult men who had apparently decided that growing up and taking responsibility was not something they wanted. They wanted someone to wash their clothes, fix their meals, and take care of their children—and them. They wanted a mother—not a life partner.

She rolled her eyes. Oh, yes, and let's not forget the two-minute round of sex that would be required at least two nights a week. There were, of course, exceptions to this rule, but they were few and far

between. Those exceptions got snatched up so quick it would make a single girl's head spin.

She passed by Mel's Diner, where you could get a good meal without it costing you a fortune, and next door was the Medicine Man Pharmacy. Further down was Stacy's Fine Jewelry, where all the women loved to gather and look at the glittery stuff they wanted for Christmas. The dry cleaners and a tiny little movie theater capped off the end of the street.

It could be any small town in the south, but this was her town. It was home.

She turned left on Brevard Street and headed toward the little bar and grill. Going to Robbie's was an extravagance, one that she really couldn't afford, but tonight she'd needed to get out, to stretch her legs – to be somewhere else for a change.

Robbie's Bar and Grill was located right in the middle of town. You could go out and have a nice dinner or sit at the bar on a Saturday afternoon and watch the football game. The building itself had to be at least fifty years old and made of sturdy red brick. The double doors had ovals of stained glass in the center that made you think of an old town pub. A green awning hung over the triple wide windows where the old folks could check out the goings-on outside. There was another entrance at the back for people who drove.

Kayleigh grabbed the big brass handle of the heavy wooden door and walked in.

Harriett, with her gray hair all teased up for the night and her husband Mel, who never went anywhere without his Atlanta Braves ball cap on,

smiled and gave her a wave as came in. They were regulars, and Friday night had been their date night through three children and now eight grandchildren.

The smell of steak sizzling on an open grill assaulted her nose and made her mouth water. A quick scan of the restaurant showed that most of the tables were still open, but it was Friday night and that would change quickly enough.

Kayleigh made her way toward the back, boots clicking on the stained hardwood floor. The pub had been divided in half, with the bar in the back and the restaurant in the front. Last week Robbie, the owner, had added red linen tablecloths with candles to the tables. A nice touch, really, might have something to do with the fact that he and Erma, his girl friend of three years, were finally getting serious.

She stopped at a small booth to clasp old Eddie on the back. She smiled asking if his team had won today. He was wearing his traditional battered orange and yellow sports jacket in honor of his favorite football team. Not bothering to listen to his reply, she leaned across the table to snatch the cigarette out of Charlie's hand just to aggravate him, then dodged his playful slap. They both shooed her off with a grumble to leave old men to their vices.

Her smiled drifted away, but she made a conscious effort to bring it back as she moved over to the bar. God, she was just so tired... A half-hearted smile lifted her lips as she slipped onto a red leather stool. "Hey Robbie, how's it going tonight?"

Robbie, the owner and her boss, was a man in his late fifties with gray hair and twinkling gray eyes.

"Enjoying your night off, eh, love?" He smiled at her with real warmth and his thick Irish accent made her feel all warm and fuzzy. "What'll you be having?"

"Yeah." Kayleigh slapped her money down on the polished hardwood surface of the bar and nodded firmly "I'll be having a Guinness."

Robbie built her Guinness and slid the tall, frosted glass in front of her. "You eating tonight?"

Kayleigh shrugged, wrapping her hands around the chilled glass. "Maybe later, I'm waiting on Angela. She's meeting me here in a little bit."

"Well, you enjoy yourself; I'm expecting we'll get crowded in here shortly. Good thing you came in early, otherwise you might have found yourself standing."

Kayleigh nodded, well aware that he was right. She took a sip of her dark beer, careful not to let the froth leave a mustache on her upper lip. The cool liquid felt rich on her tongue, and was a welcome relief after the walk.

Abruptly, the image of her brother's stark expression as he stood in the garden staring down at the crushed rose crossed her thoughts. A frown wrinkled her brow. What the hell had come over him?

Ever since their parent's death by an automobile accident last November, he hadn't been the same. She scowled into her Guinness. Hell, *she* wasn't the same. There wasn't a day that went by that she didn't think of their parents. But it had been six months, and Matthew still wasn't over the worst of his grief. He never left the house unless it was to go buy more beer or to go and hang out with that nasty character,

Jimmy Reger. On top of that, he'd become sullen and unpredictably violent.

Worry hung like a lead weight on her chest. She wouldn't be able to carry both of them financially for too much longer. The bills kept coming in and the money kept pouring right back out. She winced. She needed a miracle to keep the farm.

She took another swig of the dark brown bitter ale. Her greatest fear seemed to be coming true; that she would be sitting on this bar stool twenty years from now alone, grown old from work and worry with no family, and no great love of her life.

A familiar high-pitched laugh rang out from across the smoky room.

Kayleigh looked up to see Angela bouncing her way from the back door. Dark straight hair cut into a bob framed a face a pixie would envy. She was cute as a button, with big, wide hazel eyes and a smile that went from ear to ear. Angela stopped to wave hello to mutual friends and chatted here and there while making a beeline straight toward Kayleigh.

Great... Kayleigh sighed. *Angela was in high spirits, Lord help us all.* She pasted a half smile on her face in greeting.

"How ya doing, toots?" Angela clapped her hard on the back as she dropped onto the empty red leather barstool next to her.

"Tired." Kayleigh tried to keep up her smile.

"Girl, you have got to get out more." Angela rolled her eyes in one of her grand gestures. "All you do is work, work, work. Boooooo—ing."

Kayleigh sat up straight. "I'm here, aren't I? What

do you call this? ” She waved her hand toward the rest of the bar. “This is out.”

Angela raised an arched brow.

Kayleigh turned back to her beer and winced, praying Angela wouldn’t bring up Matthew. She didn’t want to talk about him tonight. She lifted her glass to take a quick swallow.

“Guess what? I’ve got a surprise for you.” Angela’s hazel eyes lit up with a secret, her smile all teeth. She leaned closer. “There’s fresh meat in Quinten tonight, baby. Now, don’t look yet, but over in the corner are two of the cutest guys I have ever seen. If I wasn’t already happily married I would drag both of them back home with me.”

Kayleigh choked on her beer and sputtered to clear her throat. “Angela, you hussy! You would not.”

Angela giggled and squirmed on her stool. “Yeah I would. Take a quick peek. Barbara filled me in, they’re from Ireland.” Angela sighed dreamily for effect.

Kayleigh gave her a doubtful look. “Let me guess, they’re here for two weeks and then they’ll be off again?”

“You know what?” Angela pointed her finger at Kayleigh. “*You* are a party pooper. Where is your sense of adventure? You used to be so full of life and you never turned down a challenge.” She wagged a skinny finger in Kayleigh’s face. “You’ve always wanted to go to Ireland, and you never know, they might be here for a while. Cheer up. Good grief, you look like the walking dead.”

Kayleigh rolled her eyes. “I *feel* like the walking

dead, I'm so tired I think my legs and feet are permanently asleep. All I want to do is sit here and enjoy a nice quiet peaceful evening. No fuss, no muss, no crazy antics." She quirked a brow at Angela "Oh, and like Barbara would know an Irishman if he came up and bit her on the ass? She thought Robbie was from Africa, for Pete's sake."

Angela tilted her head. "Just take a look, would you? These guys look like they walked off a movie screen. I swear." She made a cross over her chest. "Promise."

Kayleigh sighed. "Alright, I'll look." She narrowed her gaze at her friend. "But I'm telling you, I'm not getting involved with some guy who wants to get his kicks and then hightail it outta here like the hounds of hell are on his heels."

"Just look," Angela tilted her head a bit harder and pouted artfully.

Trying to be discreet, Kayleigh dropped her napkin onto the dirty wood floor, and then reached down to pick it up. She lifted her head and glanced in their direction.

Across the bar, in a shadowed booth sat two men, one dark and one light. Their faces looked like they belonged on sculptures, or fine art paintings. Both had broad shoulders and forearms rippling with muscle as they handled their glasses.

Kayleigh actually had to close her own mouth. *Wow, Angela was right!* But cute didn't come close. No, these two were off the handsome Richter scale.

One had ink-black hair that hung to his shoulders in waves. He caught her eye as he scanned the bar.

There was a devilish set to his shoulders. The women would go nuts over him. The pale blond guy was a little too pretty for her taste. He kept looking over his shoulder and checking the door. He didn't look comfortable. Barbara could have him.

Pulling herself back up, Kayleigh scanned the bar for Barbara and smirked when she saw her outdated eighties hairdo. She was talking on the phone while chomping on her chewing gum, and staring straight at them. Kayleigh let loose a chuckle. Those boys were in for a world of trouble. As soon as Barbara got off that phone, this place would be packed with every eligible woman in Quinten.

Angela gave Kayleigh's arm an insistent tug with her manicured fingers, almost pulling her clean off her stool. "Well, what do you think? Cute, huh?" Angela's face was bright with excitement.

Kayleigh straightened and nodded. "Okay, I hate to admit it, but you're right." She nodded toward the booth. "Cute doesn't even begin to describe them. But what are they doing in here? We're not exactly a bubbling metropolis."

"You..." Angela stuck her finger in Kayleigh's face again. "...have no faith. Who cares why they're here? Nice change of scenery, if you ask me. Almost makes me wish I was still single."

Kayleigh laughed. "You *would* say that, you hussy."

"I take exception to that." Angela pressed her hand to her ample bosom in mock sincerity. "I'll have you know that I'm saving all my sleazy ways for the love of my life." She grinned and grabbed Kayleigh's arm.

"Come on let's get a closer look."

"Oh, no!" Kayleigh raised her hands and shook her head. "*I'm* not on the prowl." She gently peeled Angela's fingers from her arm. "In fact, I'm surprised my eyes are still open. It's way past my bedtime."

Angela pouted, and if her bottom lip stuck out any farther it would hit her chin. She lowered her brows and delivered The Look—the one she'd been giving Kayleigh since first grade. That look told Kayleigh that no matter what she did, somehow, she was going to end up in trouble.

Kayleigh barely repressed her groan. Didn't Angela realize that men clouded the brain? And she needed all her wits about her right now. She didn't have time for a man in her life.

Angela's spine stiffened. "You're not getting out of this. Now, which one do you like?"

Kayleigh rolled her eyes in frustration. God, they were reverting back to high school tactics—if she didn't pick one, Angela would assign one of them to her.

The steely look in Angela's eyes told her she wasn't going to give up until Kayleigh gave in.

With a long sigh, Kayleigh conceded, "Oh, alright, the black-haired one."

"I knew it!" Angela practically bounced on the stool. Snatching up her purse, she linked her arm through Kayleigh's and pulled. "Time for a potty break. That way you can get a closer look at tall, dark, and Irish."

Kayleigh allowed herself to get dragged off the barstool and towed toward the bathroom. What

choice did she have? Angela was hell bent and determined, and when Angela decided you were going to do something, there was no stopping her. But still, as they passed the table where the men sat, she couldn't help but glance in their direction.

His direction.

God, he was beautiful... Midnight waves spilled over his shoulders in a flood of utter darkness. He was dressed completely in black. Tailored slacks graced his muscular thighs, and the sweater he wore defined the musculature of his upper arms. He could have been plucked right from her late night fantasies.

He glanced her way, and their eyes met. Striking eyes the deep blue of a Caribbean sea twinkled at her.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and she fell into those compelling blue eyes.

He turned to stare directly at her and didn't look away. His full, sensual lips turned up into a smile that could break hearts for a mile.

Kayleigh's heart staggered under the impact of his smile, then beat so fast she thought it might pop out of her chest. Angela disappeared, the bar faded. Knees weak, wondering if she was going to fall to the floor, she tentatively smiled back. A knee-jerk reaction, how could she not?

He inclined that handsome head in a small nod of acknowledgment.

Kayleigh was breathlessly rooted to the spot, pinned by his gaze. Her entire body trembled like a plucked violin. She took a single step back. If she didn't get to the bathroom right that very minute, she was going to do something infinitely stupid. Like go

up and ask him where he'd been all her life, and by the way, can I have your babies?

Angela yanked her arm hard, turning her away from that devastating smile and cutting off the silent communication between her and the drop-dead gorgeous man.

Forcibly towed into the hallway leading to bathroom, Kayleigh had to take several deep breaths before she could even think straight. She shook her head in sheer wonder. It was probably a good thing Angela had pulled her away. That was obviously the type of man a good girl should avoid at all costs. You could tell, just by his smile alone, that he would break your heart if you weren't careful... And, damn it, she was always careful.

When they reached the inner sanctum of the bathroom with its tile floors and marble sinks Angela waved a hand in front of Kayleigh's face. "Are you all right?" She tugged Kayleigh to the gray cushioned bench. "Sit down on that chair before you fall down. I'm going to get you a cool towel. You're not going to pass out, are you?"

Kayleigh collapsed onto the bench and giggled. "No, I'm fine." Her pulse still hammered in her ears. *God, his smile was lethal!*

Angela gave her a worried look. "How many beers did you have, anyway?"

Kayleigh rubbed her trembling arms. "As far as I'm concerned, not near enough!"

"Are you are on any kind of medication?" Angela set her hands on her hips. "Cause if you are, you better tell me right now."

"Oh, please..." Kayleigh took the damp towel from Angela and put it to the back of her neck, letting the cool damp soak into her skin. "Did you see his eyes? He has the most unusual blue eyes. I swear I thought I saw them changing color." She slapped a hand over her mouth, shocked. *God, did I just say that out loud?*

Angela grabbed the back of Kayleigh's neck and pushed her head down. "Head between your legs and breath slow. I don't want you to faint."

Kayleigh burst out laughing. Good God! Angela was the one who had forced her to walk by that incredible man in the first place and *now* she was worried? That struck her as far too funny and she kept laughing until her stomach hurt and tears poured from her eyes. Her laughter died as she realized that she was running out of air. Drawing in a deep breath she slapped Angela's hand away. "I'm fine, you crazy woman. Leave me alone, will you?"

Angela wrinkled her nose, her hazel eyes confused. But that didn't stop her mouth for long. "Kayleigh Marie, you scared the daylights out of me."

Still struggling to get her breath back, Kayleigh snorted. "Didn't mean to, sorry, he just took me by surprise."

"I thought you'd gone off into la-la land."

"I think I did." Kayleigh looked over at the closed door, replaying the memory of his gaze in her thoughts. Her dream man now had a face, and wow, what a face. Long lean features, an angular jaw that could have been chiseled from marble, and those eyes—he had eyes that could melt the polar ice cap. The heat of his gaze had been a smoldering fire that

burned straight into her heart.

Her brain flashed a mental warning sign in her brain.

Stay away! Heartbreak up ahead! Danger! Danger! Danger!

But he'd had an air about him, the way he held himself so erect, so very what? Royal? He'd looked amused and bored at the same time, while the man sitting in the booth across from him had looked like he was ready to have a stroke.

Wonder how long they're staying. Wonder where they're staying? Kayleigh turned to her friend, burning with curiosity. "So what else did Barbara tell you?"

Angela's face broke into an ear-to-ear smile. "I thought you'd never ask."



Diarmuid swept both hands through his black mane, his thoughts focused on the woman who had just passed him. *Great Gods, what a fine-looking lass! Could she be the one?* The one who could save him? Whether or not, she was definitely worthy of his attention. He turned to look at Cathal. "Did you see her?"

Cathal looked nervously around the bar while running his finger over the lip of his empty glass. "See who?"

Diarmuid pointed to his friend's empty glass. "Keep that up and I'll be peeling you off the floor." He leaned closer to his friend. "Did you see *her*?"

"Which her? There's dozens of them—all around!" Cathal swallowed hard and his gray eyes narrowed.

"All these women are making me nervous. Look at those over there, the ones bunched up on the other side of the bar. They look like a pack of wolves." He hunched his shoulders. "I don't like this at all, it could too easily get out of hand. I think we should leave."

Diarmuid grinned and a chuckle escaped. "You'd think that I would be the one worried. After all, your life is not in danger, now is it?"

Cathal's face paled and a muscle twitched at the corner of his eye. "They're staring at me." Picking up Diarmuid's half-full glass of beer, he downed it in one gulp.

Diarmuid took a hard look at his lifelong best friend. It really was no wonder that the women were staring. Cathal's unusual coloring would always bring stares, with his silver white hair and sad gray eyes.

Cathal set the empty glass back down on the wooden table with a clunk and eyed his friend somberly. "Look, I would take your place if I could. You should have left me in that underwater cave to rot. Yet here you sit making light of a very dire situation that isn't in the least comical."

Diarmuid followed Cathal's nervous glance over to the women. "You worry too much, my friend. What do you think a group of mortal women could possibly do to us?" He raised a brow. "At least they are not redheaded trolls that would like to eat you for lunch. And for that matter have you forgotten who we are? What we are capable of? We could turn them all into goats with a flick of our hands." He raised his hand in a negligent wave.

Cathal cursed beneath his breath and brought his wide-eyed gaze back to Diarmuid. "By the Goddess, don't you do it! You'd have us thrown out on our backsides! We are not here to make mischief in this realm. Remember your purpose for being here; to find a woman you can steal back to Faery and be done with this bargain. The sooner the better."

"You are a boring fellow, my friend." Diarmuid sat back in his chair and smiled. *You'd think after three hundred years, Cathal would learn when I was joking.* He chuckled softly. "You have so little faith in my charms, it's disturbing, really. Where have I gone wrong?" He brought his elbow up to the table and let his chin come to rest in his palm as he studied his friend. "Do you honestly think that once I find this woman she will be able to refuse *me*?"

Cathal's nose twitched in annoyance and his gaze went back to the women. Lifting a finger he gestured to the approaching women and sank lower in the seat. "I knew it. Now we're in trouble. I told you we should have remained invisible. Those women are headed this way along with our waitress." He cringed and sank deeper into his chair. "You'd better hope the woman we seek is not in this group. I really don't like the look in any of their eyes. Maybe we should disappear now?"

Diarmuid shook his head. "Disappear? How cowardly of you, and to think of the battles you've fought." He swung around in his chair to look at the women again. "Calm yourself, Fae. Women are the same no matter what dimension you are in." He continued to smile at their approach, but did indeed

say a small prayer in hope that he would not be doubly cursed with a hag of a woman tied to his side. "Good evening, ladies." He gave them his most charming smile, one meant to disarm and confuse.

Their waitress spoke first. "Hi." She stammered. "These ladies wanted to meet you." She let out a nervous laugh. "We don't get many visitors in Quinten."

Diarmuid had to work to hide his distaste. The woman wore entirely too much muck on her face. Dark lines ringed her eyes, and there was some kind of blue tint smeared below her eyebrows. She was missing most of her front teeth, and the smell of cheap perfume overwhelmed the small area where they sat. Did she honestly believe she looked attractive?

Diarmuid let out a sigh. Attention he was used to, but by fair maidens, not women who looked like life had done them an injustice.

Scanning the women's faces, he looked for his treasure, the woman he had seen earlier. She wasn't in this group of agitated female flesh. A flash of titian hair over by the bar caught his eye and spotted her. Ah...she hadn't disappeared after all! He leaned around the women to watch her take her seat. Yes, he definitely needed to investigate further. The predatory urge to walk over and simply claim her rose within him.

He glanced up at the crowd of women, but they showed no signs of leaving.

A flash of annoyance struck. *Damn...* He'd have to think of a graceful way to excuse himself, but not a

single thing came to mind. He sat back and settled for merely drinking in the sight of her.

His quarry glanced in his direction, a darting peek, obviously checking to see if he was still there. She quickly looked away.

His smile deepened. Unlike this mangy pack, *she* didn't need all of the artifices that these women wore. She had a natural beauty that begged one to look closer, deeper and explore.

His gaze roved the snug denim trousers that outlined her tight, lithe figure. His focus traveled to her tiny waist, then lingered on small, pert breasts that thrust up and away. His gaze moved higher to take in her exquisite heart-shaped face framed with hair of living flame. That shimmering brilliance was the perfect palette for eyes the deep green of a forest at first light. Her arched brows were of a lighter shade than her hair, and her nose had a soft curve in profile. She had the kind of face that would inspire a poet to write.

She smiled at her friend, her full, rosy lips parting to reveal straight white teeth that reminded him of tiny pearls.

His mouth watered at the thought of tasting her lips. Small in stature, she would barely come to his shoulders. She would fit perfectly against his heart. His palms itched to touch her. Everything in him demanded he use the power he controlled to simply take her.

The instant reeling arousal that tightened his trews made him bite down on his bottom lip. He relished the small nip of pain. It brought him back to his

current dilemma. Alas, he couldn't steal her away and take her home with him, as much as he would like to do just that. This hunt had strict rules. He would have to work slowly, but slow went against his grain.

He sighed, wishing for days of old when the Fae roamed the earth in this dimension, taking and loving as they would without worry or fear of reprisal. Or curses...

A large bull of a man walked through the door with anger written in white lines around a mouth pulled down in a fierce frown.

An expectant hush fell over the tavern.

Diarmuid's attention focused and his eyes narrowed as the angry man made his way toward his redheaded siren.

His? When had she become *his*?

"Don't even think about it, D." Cathal said in a low growl. "We don't need the trouble." He hadn't used Diarmuid's real name, an important caution for the Fae. If your true name was known, you could be called forth from beyond the veil of Faery and trapped in the mortal world.

Diarmuid looked about and snorted in derision. Humanity had obviously forgotten much over the centuries. He doubted if anyone even knew the old ritual.

The angry villain stopped at his siren's chair.

Diarmuid's gut clenched in response to the threat. The immediate need to defend her made his hands curl into fists at his sides. Unable to sit still while the tension mounted, he excused himself from the ladies at their table, leaving them with Cathal.

Cathal didn't look particularly happy with him.

He shot him a look of apology, but if that man threatened his beauty, he would act. He would not tolerate a bully, or a man that abused a woman. He would gladly crack the mortal's skull if he tried such a maneuver with his siren. He needed to move closer.

Closer to her.

Chapter Two

Diarmuid wove in a predatory circle around the people of the bar until he was finally close enough to hear the conversation taking place.

The big bear of a man towered over the woman, his blond hair sticking up out of place on his head. His eyes were bleary and bloodshot from drink. "Kayleigh, what are you doing here?"

So, her name was Kayleigh. It fit her.

"Go away," She growled up at the man. "I'm allowed a night to myself without you coming in here and stirring things up."

"What?" The man sneered. "Are you looking for a man now?"

The bar went quiet as everyone listened to the argument between them.

Kayleigh's lady friend sat on her stool nervously stirring her drink while looking like she'd prefer to slide beneath the bar and hide.

Kayleigh snorted in response, obviously not intimidated by the man's size or the anger on his face. "What I'm looking for is some peace and quiet."

He leaned back and folded his arms. "You can get peace and quiet at home. Not this place."

At home? Diarmuid bristled. Could this be her husband? A surge of unexpected jealousy rose up within him at the thought. He hadn't traveled across the worlds to find her, only to lose her before it began!

Kayleigh's face flood with color and a dangerous light came into her beautiful green eyes. "You're my brother, not my husband."

Her brother? A cool wash of relief rushed down Diarmuid's spine. *Good.*

"You do remember that I work in this—" She waved her hand. "—place, so that you have a roof over your head? Maybe *you* shouldn't be here. While you're at it, maybe you should quit wallowing in self-pity over what can't be changed." She sighed and turned away. "Go away, I'm not in the mood to fight with you."

"Let's go, I don't like the idea of my sister being here."

"I'm not going *anywhere*." She delivered a very unladylike snort. "I haven't had a night out with Angela in three months, while you've been out with Jimmy time and again." She clenched her small fists. "God, I hate it when you hang out with him. Nothing good ever comes of it, and then you always show your ass." She lifted a brow at him. "Like you are right now."

Diarmuid nearly smiled. This was no simpering lass to be ordered about.

Kayleigh jabbed a finger at her brother. "Look, if you don't want to stay, then fine. Leave. I doubt anyone here will miss you. I'm going to stay and

enjoy myself." She turned her back on him.

Matthew suddenly leaned over and picked her up as if she weighed nothing. In a single heave, he tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

Kayleigh shrieked, punching his back with her fists. "What are you doing, you great big sack of cow manure? Put me down!"

He turned toward the back of the bar and started walking. "No."

"Yes!" She bit down on the tender skin of his lower back.

He hissed with pain, but kept walking. "I said we're leaving."

Diarmuid silently cursed as he watched them. *The caveman technique? Not one normally used on a sister. They knew too many secrets, and paybacks were bloody hell.*

"You've got to go to sleep sometime, and I swear when you do, you're going to regret this!" She landed a quick kick into his stomach.

Matthew grunted. "I asked you nicely, and since you won't listen..."

"You did no such thing!" She pummeled his back. "What is wrong with you?"

Clearly intervention was required. Diarmuid narrowed his eyes. The lad was in for a surprise if he thought to get away with that kind of behavior right in front of him. He could not afford to let her be carted away before he knew if she indeed was the woman that could save him.

The big blond man carted Kayleigh toward the door in the back of the bar, glaring at anyone that

might try to stop him. He shoved the door open one-handed and ducked out.

The chatter and noise of the bar abruptly began again. Couples twittered at each other across tables.

"There they go again."

"One day those two are going to kill each other."

Kill each other? What was this? Surely they did not mean such a thing! Diarmuid pushed away from the stool on which he'd been leaning to follow them.

He passed by Cathal and the Fae shot him a look of warning, which he ignored with a grin. It wouldn't take long for Cathal to follow, but hopefully the situation would be well in hand by the time Cathal removed himself from the women hanging onto his every word.

Pushing open the heavy door, he slipped out into the dark night.

The light from a post illuminated the scene in the parking lot. Her brother still had her tossed over his shoulder and they were still screaming curses at each other. Kayleigh's high-pitched words rang in the air as she landed a swift punch to her brother's lower back.

Diarmuid winced. The man would have serious bruises come the morning.

Walking up behind them, he tapped the large man on his shoulder, then ducked, avoiding the wild swing of Kayleigh's feet. "I think you need to put her down," he said in a voice meant to calm.

Matthew turned around, lips pulled back away from his teeth in a snarl. His eyes were wild, the whites bloodshot from too much drink. "Are you

going to make me?"

Half-closing one eye, he flinched back from the stench of alcohol that emanated from the man's person. Diarmuid shook his head. Some men never learned. Controlling his anger with a deep breath, he decided that asking hadn't worked. Perhaps telling would. "Put her down. If it's a fight you're wanting, I'll be happy to oblige you."

Matthew rolled Kayleigh off his shoulder, letting her fall roughly to the ground.

She hit hard and yelped, then rolled out of the way, her eyes wide.

Diarmuid winced. That had to hurt.

"Look, mister," Matthew began with his hands set aggressively on his hips, "I don't know who the hell you are and you don't know us. Back off."

Kayleigh scrambled to her feet and knocked the dust off her pants, looking thoroughly disgusted.

Diarmuid raised his brows not in the least intimidated. He looked at Kayleigh questioningly. "Do you want me to back off?"

Kayleigh crossed her arms primly. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

Diarmuid raised his brows at her. "Oh, and I could see that you were doing such a *fine* job of it, too." He turned and looked at Matthew. "You know, she has a right to a good time as much as anyone."

"I'm her brother..."

"Yes, well, being her brother doesn't give you the right to humiliate her in front of her friends." He held his hands up in surrender "I'm sorry, but I cannot allow a woman to be treated this way." He watched

the larger man through narrowed eyes, alert for any sudden moves.

Matthew scowled. "Who the hell are you to tell me what I can do with my sister?"

Diarmuid lifted his chin. "Someone who thinks you've stepped over the line."

Matthew's jaw tightened and his face reddened with fury. He dropped his head. The muscles bulged in his neck. His hands curled into fists at his side. He took an aggressive step toward Diarmuid. "And just what are you going to about it?"

"Whatever needs to be done." Diarmuid smiled, knowing full well that it would only infuriate him more.

"Stop it, you two!" Kayleigh stalked around them, looking from one to the other. "You're acting like a pair of children!"

Violent tension hung in the air between the men.

"She's leaving." Matthew curled his lip. "Go find another whore for the night."

Kayleigh gasped. "What did you just say?"

Matthew tossed her a glance over his shoulder. "You, stay out of this."

"Screw you! I'm going back inside to finish my drink." Kayleigh turned and started for the door.

Matthew turned and grabbed her arm. "I said, you're going home."

"Take your hand off her." Diarmuid ground out between clenched teeth.

Matthew released her with a snarl and charged toward Diarmuid.

Diarmuid waited, watching Matthew's clumsy

advance as though he moved in slow motion. The human was obviously an untrained clod.

The big man's fist headed straight toward his jaw in a broad and sloppy roundhouse punch.

Diarmuid nearly laughed in his face as he feinted to his left, easily ducking the intended blow.

Matthew's fist slid right past Diarmuid's shoulder, carrying his weight along with him.

Diarmuid turned and lashed out with a swift uppercut of his own. Matthew wasn't capable of moving quickly enough to dodge the punch.

Diarmuid's fist connected with Matthew's jawbone and the blonde man's head flew backward, his lips slack, and eyes wide. The force of the punch shoved him fully two steps back.

Pain from bone connecting with bone lanced up Diarmuid's arm. He opened and closed his fist. *Damn, that hurt.* His eyes narrowed as he watched Matthew.

Matthew shook his head to clear the daze from his eyes and raised his fists. He focused his rage on Diarmuid. "Now you've asked for it." He swung wildly at Diarmuid, one hand coming after the other in a pinwheel of motion.

Diarmuid avoided both punches without even trying. A sidestep here, a fake to the right. *Bloody amateur...* Diarmuid didn't want to seriously injure Kayleigh's brother; his fair lass probably would not take kindly to that, but he would have to finish this soon.

Matthew stopped suddenly, his fists dropped low and he gasped for air.

Diarmuid snorted. The man obviously wasn't used

to someone who knew how to fight properly.

Matthew raised his hands again.

Idiot! Does he not know when to quit? Diarmuid brought his fist up and took a half-step to deliver a punishing jab...

Kayleigh screamed. "No! Stop!" She grabbed onto Diarmuid's fist with both hands and put all her body weight into it, stopping the forward motion of his punch. "Stop it right now!"

Diarmuid halted right where he was. *Bloody Hell.* He lowered his arm, not about to hurt her.

Kayleigh shouted at her brother. "They're going to call the cops, Matthew! I don't have the money to bail you out!"

Diarmuid looked over at Matthew. If her brother took one step closer, he was going to drop him where he stood.

Matthew's face went utterly white as he perceived the threat in Diarmuid's eye. His clenched hands dropped to his sides as he gasped for breath.

Diarmuid turned to look at the small hands covering his fist, and the touch scorched him to the soul. He looked up to her face and lost himself in her confused green eyes. "Tell him to go home, lass, if you want it to end." His voice was calm, but firm. "Otherwise, I'll make sure he goes home unconscious. That way I know he'll not harm you tonight."

She blinked and her hands trembled around his. "Go home, Matthew."

"Not...without...you," Matthew panted.

Diarmuid looked over at him, frowning. "You would be wise to do as she says; otherwise we may

end up finishing this in a prison cell. Is that what you want?" Of course, he would never see the inside of a prison—invisibility had its advantages—but Matthew surely would, and his Kayleigh-lass was bound to take it badly.

Matthew turned his gaze and cursed beneath his breath.

Relieved that it looked like the other man would back down, Diarmuid scanned his surroundings.

A crowd had gathered outside the pub, watching them with avid curiosity.

Diarmuid scowled in disgust. *Bloody hell, what was this? A carnival? Next thing you know they'd be selling tickets. Humans, what a bloodthirsty lot they are.* His eyes met Cathal's. The lad was but a few steps away. He gave him a brief nod and a slight smile. Cathal had remained close if needed.

Matthew looked around at the sea of faces and scowled. He gave Kayleigh a hard, angry look, and then turned on his heel, sending a last disparaging glare at their audience.

Diarmuid turned back to Kayleigh, her hand still on his fist. He brought her small hand to his lips and lightly kissed her knuckles. Shock, the sizzle of flesh meeting flesh took him unaware. He lost himself in feminine eyes that were as green as the most brilliant leaf in the forest. A sprinkle of freckles danced across the bridge of her pert little nose, and her lips...he sighed. He would dream of her lips on his, her hands in his hair. She could not be more perfect had she been born a Princess of the Rose. A pang hit him in the area of his heart. He'd only thought to protect, but

now there was more.

So much more.

He let his lips curve up into a smile while the scent of jasmine wrapped around him.

Chapter Three

K ayleigh stood there, stunned. Never before had a man come to her rescue. Everyone else was too afraid of Matthew. She knew he was harmless, but... She looked up into his sapphire blue eyes. Her breath stilled. He was even more handsome up close with his high cheekbones and angular jaw. Her head barely reached his shoulders, and what nice broad shoulders they were.

He trapped her gaze. Slowly, he raised her hand to his full sensual mouth and caressed her knuckles with lips that were soft and supple. A courtly kiss, a princely kiss, a kiss found only in fairy tales.

A kiss beyond her wildest dreams.

Suddenly, she found herself barely able to think past the beating of her own heart. Her body hummed with unfamiliar warmth. The same feeling came over her that she'd experienced earlier in the bar when their eyes had met. Something about him called to her very core...chemistry, maybe?

His intent gaze unnerved her and she had to look away. Why would such a man look at her? Her hands were rough from working the farm, caring for the

land. She wasn't sophisticated and didn't think herself worthy of the adoration that shone from his eyes. She tugged to free her hand.

He didn't release her. "Are you all right?" His voice was soft and smooth. Ireland had left her mark on him, and the sweet cadence of his voice melted her insides.

How could you resist a voice that moved over you like the soft brush of deep dark velvet?

She had to swallow to speak. "Yes...yes, I'm fine." She looked up at him and he caught her gaze again. Enraptured, she found herself unable to stop staring at his finely sculpted face.

Slowly, the murmur of voices floated into her consciousness, and the awareness brought her back. She resisted it. She wanted to look into this man's eyes forever. Their depths held such promise. What had he done to her? In two hours, her whole world had tilted on its axis because of this one man.

Reality intruded at last and she finally realized that she was standing in the middle of a public parking lot surrounding by people who knew her – while holding the hand of a total stranger as though she'd never let him go. She winced. "Well, I guess since the show's over, I should go. Thank you. I want to apologize for Matthew, he's normally not like that. He's going through a rough time."

He released her hand with a slight nod. "There is no need for an apology, but he needs help, Kayleigh. Serious help."

Kayleigh lifted her chin, her pride pricked that this total stranger would comment on Matthew's mental

state. "He'll work through it. He just needs time. He'd never hurt me."

The man raised his dark brows in obvious doubt.

"He wouldn't! Not me." She shook her head and frowned. "How do you know my name? We've never met before."

He smiled and looked down. "Your brother spoke your name when you were arguing in the bar." His blue gaze lifted to hers. "I hope you are right where your brother is concerned."

Kayleigh raised her chin a notch. "He wouldn't hurt me." He made no move to leave, but merely continued to smile down at her. "Would you like to go for a walk? Let things settle down a bit before you go back in?"

Walk with him? She took a step back not sure how to react to his question. She didn't even know his name. To go anywhere with this perfect stranger would be insanity...but...

But she couldn't dismiss the heat sizzling between them. It could very well burn them both to a crisp.

And he'd just defended her against her brother—the brother who had never lost a fight. Still mad at Matthew and feeling rebellious, she made her decision. She tilted her head cocked a brow. "No funny stuff?"

He delivered an exaggerated expression of shock.

It made her laugh and the tension suddenly drained from her shoulders. "All right, I'll let you walk me to the house, but no further. Just a walk. I didn't really want to go back into the bar and face everyone anyway."

He smiled with the small victory and his eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Mind you, I'll be taking what I can get. I'm a patient man." He winked at her, giving lie to his statement.

Patient? Riiight... She grinned. Well, at least he had a sense of humor. "So what brings you to Quinten?"

They strode away from Robbie's Bar and Grill and the sounds of the night drifted softly around them. The familiar song of the crickets singing to the moon eased her frayed nerves.

"A woman." His voice was very serious.

A woman? Oh... She looked down at the ground. "Someone in particular? Maybe I know her?" God, she hoped not...

"I think you probably do." He gave her a coy sideways glance. "She has this lovely smile, a precious dimple in her left cheek, and a wicked sharp tongue."

A dimple? Like mine? Kayleigh bit her lip. Could he be talking about her? God, she hoped so! Deciding to be brave she met his direct gaze. "What do you want from this woman?"

His lips teased her with a shy half-smile.

The shy routine? She rolled her eyes. *Oh, please...!* A man who looked like he did, and carried himself the way he did, couldn't possibly be shy.

"I'd like time, actually, time to get to know her," he said softly. "Time enough to see if her lips taste as good as they look. Time enough to see if she'll burn in my arms as I hold her, but time is something I'm short on."

Kayleigh stumbled and would have fallen if he

hadn't reacted quickly and caught her. She coughed, trying to clear the mental image of his strong arms wrapped tightly around her. *Wow, what a romantic...* "Well...um..." She cleared her throat. "That's a lot to ask for. Does this woman even know your name?"

"No, she's yet to ask."

"What is your name?"

"Diarmuid McNamara, at your service." He bowed low from the waist in front of her, an extremely old-fashioned gesture.

Kayleigh didn't know what to think. The man was an enigma. One minute he was quietly teasing her and in the next he took her breath away with his sensual words. He charmed her in spite of her reservations and his words made her heart jump in her chest.

And he was well aware of it.

Kayleigh lifted her chin. "You're a bold one, aren't you? What if the woman is not interested in you?"

"Well, if that should occur, then I should expire on the spot." He lifted his head and gave her a sly glance. "But I've a feeling that she likes my smile."

Stunned at the brutal honesty in his gaze, she stopped walking. He was serious. *He was nuts!* You didn't meet a woman for the first time and tell her these kinds of things. He was breaking all the rules. And she just couldn't take the suspense anymore...

She looked up at him. "Are you talking about me?"

He gave her a thoughtful look. "I believe the correct answer to that question would be..." He smiled. "Yes."

Oh, my... The breath rushed right out of her and

she felt the world shift under her. She hadn't actually expected that answer – not really. She reeled in shock. How *did* you respond to something like that? She suddenly had this overwhelming urge to kiss him, to taste the forbidden just once. Without thinking, she moved toward him and closed the distance between their bodies. His smelled sweet and fragrant, like a rose.

They stopped on the lamp lit street, in the open night air and stared at each other.

He moved forward and pulled her into his arms.

She shouldn't do this, but she couldn't resist.

His strong fingers ran down her spine and drew her closer to his rock-hard frame.

Kayleigh looked up into his spectacular eyes. They were the blue of a flame's heart, blazing with passion, and intent.

His lips descended ever so slowly toward hers. His kiss began feather-soft, a caress, and then quickly became firm, and demanding; insistent that she let him in.

She opened under his mouth. His taste was an aphrodisiac to her soul, calling forth passion and heat. Her hands encircled his waist, locking behind his back.

He teased, softly stroking the inside of her mouth with his tongue. His hand crept up to hold the nape of her neck as he eased those fiery lips down to her neck, blazing a trail of liquid fire along her sensitized skin.

She moaned and trembled in his arms. It felt like a dream, all fuzzy and out of focus. A sweet dream you didn't want to wake up from, and when you did, it

left you feeling lost. There was no thought, but of him. No world, but the two of them. He became the very air she needed to survive. He would kill her with his kisses; for she would die without them.

He lifted his head from her throat.

She whimpered at the loss of warmth, and opened her eyes to look at him.

His gaze was not on her, but over her shoulder.

Kayleigh turned to see what had stolen his attention and saw the man he'd been with earlier standing under the street light, watching them. He stood in silence, gazing at them, arms crossed in front of his broad chest, a concerned expression on his face. Light reflected off silver tendrils of hair and shrouded him in a white glow, an unnatural light.

She blinked, and it was gone. It had only been a trick of the moonlight.

Diarmuid murmured something under his breath, then cursed into the night but didn't release her. He looked back down at her. "I have to go talk to him. I'll only be a moment." An apologetic expression flitted across his face while he rubbed her arms.

Kayleigh reluctantly moved out of his embrace, the loss of his heat causing her to shiver. The wind had picked up, a chill in the breeze. What had he done to her? Had she lost her mind? Her morals? Questions pounded at her brain until a dull ache throbbed behind her eyes. She watched as he moved toward his friend with easy graceful strides.

Okay, this is crazy. She had never done such a thing in her life, but Diarmuid was different. Different in the way he made her feel. The sizzle of his kiss

promised more pleasure than she had ever dreamed of and the danger of that alone made her heart race inside her chest. The realization that she could fall for him made her do a double take. But could she walk away from him now? She shook her head. *No, not yet.*

Kayleigh waited while Diarmuid spoke with his friend.

The blond man's hands moved in agitated gestures as he talked and his expression grew fierce.

Diarmuid's back straightened, tensed, and then he shoved his hands into his pockets.

The blond man stalked off, obviously not happy about something.

Diarmuid returned to her. "My apologies, Cathal never has had good timing."

"He looked upset."

"Cathal is always upset over something. It's his nature." He shrugged. "Now, where were we?" He smiled at her, showing off those beautiful straight white teeth.

Kayleigh couldn't look at him, or he would see her desire for him shining in her eyes. "I think I should be going home." She needed to step back and evaluate this attraction to him.

"There was nothing funny about it, Kayleigh. We were just getting to the good part."

Kayleigh moved away from him. She couldn't get sucked back into the devastating whirlpool of his kiss. "No. I think I should head home." She ignored the chill that ran up her spine. Refusing him was the hardest thing she had ever done, when all she longed to do was pull him back into her arms. He felt perfect

and warm. Being in his arms felt like she had finally come home, but how could that be? He knew she was lying, she could see the disappointment on his face. It only made her feel worse.

"Well then, lass, let me walk you the rest of the way home. It is the least I can do." A note of sadness tinged his voice, as if he hated to leave her.

"All right, if you want to, it's not far," she agreed.

Diarmuid walked quietly beside her, his hands in his pockets.

The thought him sprawled on top of her, his hands on her body made her pulse kick. She wished that she were the kind of woman to take a man home for a quick romp, but she wasn't. Not that kind of girl, anyway. Still, the mental picture of them sprawled naked in her bed, his hands on her body, his lips on her skin tempted her. Then the realization that he wouldn't stay hit her hard. He would leave and she would still be here, and she wasn't sure she could risk that.

She forced her mind away from him and back to her work and the chores that would have to be done the next morning. The land waited for no one. The demands of the farm and the gardens weren't a chore to her, but only a way to keep her sanity. Tending to the plants and flowers had been a blessing she couldn't do without. The land anchored her and kept her sane.

It wasn't how she had envisioned her life when she had been small, but things rarely happened the way you planned them. The man at her side confused her. Why would he want a nobody from a small town in

South Carolina? It didn't seem natural the way they responded to each other. Perhaps he had put her under a spell of some sort.

"Will you be leaving soon?" she asked.

"I've got some time." He turned to look at her. "Tell me about your home."

Kayleigh smiled; reassured that he wasn't angry with her. "I've grown up here. I've never known anything different. Spring is my favorite season, when the flowers poke their heads up, it amazes me. Where once there was only cold hard ground, in a matter of weeks the hyacinths pop up with spots of purple all over the flowerbeds, and the daffodils make everything so yellow and bright. The roses are my favorite, though, and when they start to bud and the dogwoods bloom, the air is so sweet you can hardly stand to breathe."

He nodded understanding. "You've a love of the earth, then. So few people care about the land. It's refreshing. In my homeland, spring is a time of celebration. You would like it there." His words were musical like the notes in a song, wrapping around her, enchanting her soul. She wondered how many other women had listened to him, only to be trapped in his spell. A shiver ran along her spine, a sort of warning she chose to ignore.

"I've always wanted to go to Ireland. My Grandfather was born in County Cork. He went back once, but he was very sad when he returned. He told me that things never remained the same once you leave and go back years later for a visit. Something changed him while he was there, but he would never

talk about it." Her eyes misted with sudden tears. "He passed away several years ago."

His perceptive gaze caught hers. "He must have been a fine man."

She could only nod. The pain of her grandfather's loss, and her parents, was a gaping wound in her heart that refused to heal. Only among her roses, in that garden of fragrant velvet and bitter thorns, did she find true peace. Her roses were all the family she had now, except for Matthew. But lately, he seemed gone too...

He gave her a small smile. "Nature gives and takes away. That's always the way of it."

She nodded again and blinked back the mist. She took a deep breath and gathered herself. Not here, not now. Not with him so close to her. If she started crying, she might never stop.

He caught her hand in his warm grip. "So, on to brighter things. Tell me, where is your favorite place? The place you run to when you need peace and quiet, your piece of the sky?"

Kayleigh smiled, taking comfort in his warm palm. "On the back of our property, there's a waterfall..."

His bright gaze focused on hers. "A waterfall, you say?"

She looked over at him and nodded. "I think it's the most beautiful place on earth. The water is clear and falls over a small cave." She sighed with the memory. "It was Grandfather's favorite spot. He used to say it was where the little people came out to play. He swore he could see them dancing in the trees on a clear night. They were fancy stories for a small girl.

I've never seen the little people, but I always go there when the moon is full to try and catch a glimpse of them in all their finery."

Diarmuid's smile was a touch sarcastic. "So then, you don't believe in the little people?"

Kayleigh playfully tugged on his hand. "But of course!" She laughed, just a little. "My grandparents used to leave a plate of food and chocolate out at night for them every night." She leaned closer and whispered. "Matthew and I would wake up early to see if they had eaten it. The plate was always clean. Matthew said Grandfather ate the food, but I'm not so sure." She pulled back with a toss of her red curls and shrugged. "Grandfather always told me to be kind to them, if you wanted a peaceful house. So...I still leave goodies out for them."

Diarmuid nodded sagely. "Your Grandfather was a wise man. Not all fairies are pleasant creatures. Some of them can be downright nasty."

Kayleigh arched a brow at him. "Know a lot about fairies, do you?"

He snorted and swept a hand through his black mane. "You don't grow up in A Aran, lass, and not understand the importance of the Fae. They are a powerful force, but most seem to have forgotten about them." He looked away.

She examined her toes. "Most of my friends think I'm crazy, for leaving a plate out for them."

He tugged on her hand to make her look up into his blinding smile. "No, you're not crazy. Beautiful, but not crazy. Perhaps I'll come by to visit your waterfall. It sounds like a divine place." He leaned

closer to whisper in her ear. "Mayhap I'll get lucky and see the Fae Queen herself. Though I've heard she doesn't travel as much these days."

Kayleigh shivered in spite of herself. God in heaven his voice... She had to swallow before she could speak. "And just what do you think the Queen would say to hear you talk like that?"

He grimaced. "She probably did hear me, and is plotting my penance as we speak. She's a wily woman, that one!"

Kayleigh laughed. "Then you've met her?"

"Would you be surprised or shocked if I told you I had?" He raised a dark brow. "You would think I was crazy then, wouldn't you?"

"No, not crazy..." She smiled. "Maybe a little touched in the head. Did Matthew land a blow that I didn't see?"

"You think so?" Quick as lightning, he leaned over and grabbed her, lifting her high in the air as if she weighed nothing.

"Oh, my God!" Kayleigh squealed. "What are you doing? Put me down!" Laughter exploded from her lips.

He grinned up at her. "So I'm daft, am I?"

"Yes! God, yes! Anyone can see you're touched!"

"Is that so?" He spun her around in circles. "I suggest you take back those words!"

She screamed with laughter, feeling deliciously childish again, with no worries, no troubles nipping at her heels. "Okay! Okay! I take it back! You're not daft!"

"Well then, that's better." He brought her back

down to earth slowly, letting her body slide intimately against his own, his touch much like the breath of heaven.

She melted into him relishing his strength, the male scent of him. Her arms found the hard planes of his upper arms and she held on not wanting to let go of him.. How did you fight such a thing? She couldn't. Her arms slipped up to wind around his neck. She wasn't going to think about this now. There would be time enough to think and worry later.

The laughter left his eyes, to be replaced with a smoldering heat that could only be desire. He held her there locked into his body not allowing her feet to touch the ground. He never uttered a sound, just gazed down at her, looking deeply into her eyes, searching, waiting for a sign from her.

Kayleigh smiled up at him, she wanted this. Wanted his kiss. She didn't want to regret it later.

Diarmuid molded her body into his, crushing her to him. He leaned down and with a wicked smile, tenderly bit her bottom lip.

She gasped and he took advantage of her surprise, his tongue invading her mouth, dancing, teasing, and tasting her. The flavor of honey and almonds, rich and erotic, invaded her mouth while strong hands came lower and cupped her bottom. He fed voraciously from her lips, and she wanted more. Moist heat pooled at the juncture of her thighs, and she felt the lean, hard line of his arousal against her stomach.

Then once again he pulled those wicked lips from her mouth and whispered in her ear. "Do you want

me to stop, love?" he said softly.

"No." she answered. And it was the truth. She didn't want him to stop. In his arms the world stopped and existed only for the two of them.

He nibbled on the lobe of her ear and his warm breath caressed. Inside of her a fire burned low and deep, spreading, craving, wanting more of him.

She dropped her hand from around his neck to rest just above his heart. The steady beat and heat of him set off a firestorm of sensation.

Diarmuid's breath became heavy as he took the curve of her neck, sending sweet inviting chills down her spine. "What you do to me," he murmured against her skin. Not taking his mouth from her skin he slipped one arm behind her knees and for a moment he cradled her against his chest. "I've got you."

"I can see that." She uttered, pliant in his arms.

Suddenly he dropped to his knees and set her down in the grass. He followed her down one hand remaining at the back of her neck as he took her lips in a burst of passion and need. His kiss changed from gentle and sweet to demanding and insistent. He fanned the flames of the fire that sparked between them until she thought surely she would explode from the jolting heat of his kiss.

Chapter Four

“**K**ayleigh, what are you doing out there with him?” A harsh voice ripped into the night.

Diarmuid quickly pulled Kayleigh behind him, protecting her out of instinct. *Damn it, the man was her brother, not her Father. He didn't know when to quit.* “Kayleigh, let me handle this,” he whispered. He shouldn't have lost himself. He'd practically made love to her in her own yard. He hadn't sensed her brother's presence. He'd been hoping the man would drown himself in the bottle of whiskey he'd been drinking. Something would have to be done about him.

It was his fault. He'd continued to walk with her, unable to resist her charms, even though Cathal had warned him about her brother. But Kayleigh stole his breath and his mind with her sweet lips. Never in hundreds of years had he felt such an intense emotional high. The woman bewitched him.

It hit him that this was real, and he had found her.

Kayleigh shoved at him, trying to move him out of the way as she scrambled to her feet. “I can handle this, Diarmuid. I don't need you to fight my battles for me.”

Glad that her anger wasn't directed at him, he still felt the need to protect her. "No, lass, you'll not handle him alone. The man is in his cups." He reached back and took her hand in his and pulled her to his side.

"I know what I'm doing." She looked up at him and made a face. "I've been dealing with him for quite a while now without your help."

Diarmuid watched the burly man make his way toward them. The distance between them wasn't great but Matthew's gait was slow and he stumbled twice almost falling.

"What are you doing with him?" Matthew's words jumbled together, making them hard to understand. "I've tried to protect you from men like him all your life. He only wants one thing," he pointed a finger at Diarmuid "and I'll be damned if he's going to get it *that* easily. What would our Mother think if she were here to see this?"

Kayleigh flinched at her brother's words, and said nothing for a moment. Then as if coming out of shock, her eyes narrowed to slits and she firmed her lips into a thin line before blasting words back at her brother. "I am twenty-six years old. I don't need you telling me what I can and cannot do. How many times have I told you that? You want to know what our Mother would do... She'd bend you over her knee and blister your butt good for what you've become. What happened to you? You are not acting like the brother I grew up with."

Diarmuid bent his head to whisper in her ear. "You're treading on thin ice with him. Don't push

him now. He's ready to blow," Diarmuid tried to warn her, but she wouldn't listen.

"Don't interfere." She snapped back at him.

Diarmuid threw his hands up in surrender. "Have it your way, love."

"Damn right I will! He's my brother, and I've had it with him." She turned back toward Matthew pointing that nasty finger at him and continued. "You're lazy, Matthew, and we're going to end up losing this farm and that doesn't seem to bother you a bit. You haven't worked in six months. I've tried to give you time to come to grips with what happened with Mom and Dad. I've worked two jobs, count 'em...one, two" she said holding up two fingers for effect "trying to keep this place going, and for what? So you can sit and drink yourself into a stupor every night of your life? Well, it's going to stop, and it's going to stop right now! If you don't get sober, and I mean *now*, I'm going to throw you out. Then what will you do? We can't change the past, Matthew. You can't bring them back. No matter how many bottles of whiskey you drink, they are not coming back." A furious Kayleigh stood with her hands on her hips and glared at her brother.

Matthew's mouth worked, opening and closing, but no sound coming out.

The anger between brother and sister hung like a tangible barrier between them, two sides of a coin separated by thought and emotion. Diarmuid thought Matthew might turn around and go back into the house, but that didn't happen. Instead, he took a step forward. Closer.

"You don't understand." Matthew began. "You'll never understand. Throw me out if you want." He said with a disgusted wave of his hand. "But you're not going anywhere him." Matthew glared at Diarmuid. "You're making a mistake getting tangled up with him. He'll tell you all kinds of lies and when he's done with you, he'll throw you away like a used paper cup. Then where will you be?"

Anger began to simmer beneath the surface of his skin at her brother's words.

The wind picked up blowing leaves around the yard in small little whirlwinds. Clouds moved in and lightening suddenly lit the night sky. Thunder boomed above their heads.

He struggled to maintain control, but emotion rolled through him. The very air around him sizzled. "Tread lightly," Diarmuid warned. "You *don't* know me. You don't know what I'm capable of and I'm not going to hurt your sister. In fact, she may be the very one to hurt me." Diarmuid took a deep breath, trying to control his panic that Matthew might use his influence to keep Kayleigh away. "You don't want me as your enemy."

Matthew stood wavering in front of him, his mouth curled in a sneer.

The storm around them gathered strength. The night sounds silenced from the elements Diarmuid controlled.

Matthew's face scrunched up in fury. "What are you going to do, Fairy boy? Punch me again? Come on if you want to give it a try!" Matthew lunged at Diarmuid, going for a full body tackle.

Diarmuid saw the man coming and simply stepped out of the way. A bolt of lightening flashed down about a hundred yards from the inebriated man. The force knocked him off his feet.

Kayleigh ran to her brother, trying to help him up. "Matthew, go back in the house. I'll discuss this with you in the morning." She locked her arms under his shoulders and tugged him up. "Go on in. I'll deal with you later."

Matthew pushed Kayleigh's hands away. "I can get up by myself. I don't need your help." He slurred.

Diarmuid listened to the exchange and doubted that Matthew would see reason. His violent tendencies concerned him. If Matthew raised a hand to hurt Kayleigh, he wouldn't be responsible for his actions.

A cool wind blew over Diarmuid's face. Cathal had to be close; he could feel the tingle of Fae magic in the wind. Cathal was only one of the few who could counter the emotional torment of the storm he'd created.

He looked at Kayleigh where she stood with her brother, her eyes weary and her face drawn. She looked back at Diarmuid and gave him an apologetic look while helping Matthew to his feet. "Go on, Matthew, go..." she said none too gently.

Diarmuid didn't want her to see this side of his nature, or the violence he could create when he lost his temper. Closing his eyes, he forced the tremendous power roiling inside of him to calm, stilling the wind with his mind.

Matthew threw him a scathing glance, "Hurt her

and you'll live to regret it, if I have to go through the fires of hell to do it."

Diarmuid sighed. "Are you not in hell now?" He couldn't resist saying.

Kayleigh waited while Matthew staggered back to the porch and then finally went inside. Satisfied that he was safely in the house, she paced back and forth, nervous and skittish as a colt after this last scene with her brother. "Sorry about his behavior. I've said that a lot tonight." Her eyes glistened with the sheen of unshed tears. Her shoulders slumped and she ran her hands through her hair.

Diarmuid cursed himself. The last thing he wanted to do was add to her troubles. In fact, he wished that he could just carry her away from all of it. It was possible, but she would never forgive him for it, and they would both be punished if he stole her away.

"You know it's not necessary for you to apologize for the behavior of your brother."

"I know, but..."

"But nothing, don't fret about it. As you said before, he'll work through it."

The sound of the night crept around them, a bullfrog calling in the distance. Time to go, he knew, but he dreaded leaving her. "Meet me tomorrow." The words sounded desperate even to his own ears and he winced. He couldn't let her go, not when she meant so much. She alone might have the power to save him. He couldn't chance letting her turn from him. No matter if he had to get down on his knees and beg. His very life depended upon it.

Kayleigh turned from him, a sad look in her eyes.

"I have to work."

He pushed a little harder. "And after work? Surely you'll not be there the entire night?" He *had* to see her again. *Had* to persuade her that there would *be* a next time. Her choice, though, it had to be her choice.

"No, but it'll be late."

He moved forward to put his hands on her shoulders. He couldn't resist touching her. He lifted one hand and stroked her cheek. "Kayleigh." He needed to look at her, memorize her face, the feel of her skin. It had to last him till he could see her again. "Please?"

Her torn expression sliced at him. She looked ready to drop from fatigue. He wanted to see her laugh, really laugh again, to see those merry lights dance in her beautiful emerald eyes. If she kept this up she'd be old before her time, and that would be a crime. This woman deserved so much more than what lay ahead of her. If she couldn't break the mold, wasn't strong enough to pull away and cut the ties that bound her to her brother, there would be no hope for the two of them. He had to try.

A soft laugh escaped her lips. "I shouldn't do this. I really should say thank you, and walk into the house."

His heartbeat pounded in his ears. He couldn't use Fae magic to make her agree, and he saw the indecision written over her face and held his breath.

Stepping back away from him she shook her head. "All right. Meet me at the waterfall at midnight tomorrow."

Thank the Goddess, yes, now he could breathe again.

"The waterfall? And where would that be?"

Kayleigh grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the back of the house.

Diarmuid could just make out the path along the tree line leading into the woods.

"Follow that path." She said. "It leads directly to the heart of our property and the falls. Meet me there, at midnight."

"You'll be there?" he asked.

"Yes. You could bring us something to eat? I'm always starving after the late shift at Robbie's."

Diarmuid smiled, elated that she had agreed to see him again. "Ah, food for the working is never a problem, but this isn't a trap, right? Matthew won't be there waiting to pulverize me?"

She gave him a sad smile "No. He'll probably be passed out by then. That's why I'm so shocked; he never pays attention to me or what I do."

He brought the back of her hand to his lips. "Until tomorrow, then?"

Kayleigh stepped back toward the house until their hands parted and fingertips clung. "Yes, until tomorrow."

A small caress of the wind brought her fragrance to him. The scent of jasmine reached out to bind him as the strongest, heaviest chains never could. He went to her, reached for her once again, half expecting her to back away.

She didn't, and slipped back into his arms so easily. They fit perfectly, her head reaching just below his chin.

Diarmuid took her face into his hands, rubbing his

thumbs along her smooth, silky cheeks.

He had to kiss her.

Leaning down, he gently brushed his lips with hers. It was the promise of a kiss; a promise that he wouldn't leave her waiting, and it took every ounce of his control to keep it that way.

Chapter Five

K ayleigh brought her fingers to her tingling lips and smiled as she watched Diarmuid walk back down the street. *Wow. Now that was a kiss.* Mind spinning she turned and headed back to the house.

It was a simple house, built by her grandfather, though now the wood was weathered from the wind and rain. Still, it had a fresh coat of cream-colored paint that made it bright and cheery. Her mother had planted ornamental hollies and pansies along the side of the house as a border. She'd have to replant the pansies soon. They wouldn't last long in the heat of summer.

She opened the door to the screened-in porch and walked in. This was one of her favorite places. After a long day of working, she'd bring a nice glass of tea outside and sit in the white wicker furniture her mother had loved so well and lose herself in a book, but those moments were few and far between these days.

She walked to the door that led from the porch to the kitchen and hesitated for a moment with her hand on the brass knob. She really didn't want to have to deal with Matthew tonight, but some things couldn't

be helped. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open.

Matthew stood by the kitchen sink, looking out the window. There was anger in the line of his shoulders and he didn't move when she entered. Obviously he was still mad. Well, truth be told, she wasn't exactly a happy camper herself.

"Are you pleased with yourself?" she asked.

He gazed out through the window into the night. "I might ask you the same thing." He turned to face her, leaning back against the counter. "What are you doing letting some strange guy walk you home? I thought you had more sense than that."

She let out a little huff of disbelief. "Oh, so now all of a sudden you care what I do? Geez, Matthew, I've come and gone on my own for the last six months. Half the time you're not even conscious when I get home. What's the big deal?"

"Don't like him."

Kayleigh rolled her eyes. "Well, that's a big surprise. You don't like anybody." Turning on her heel, she left him in the kitchen to mope or whatever it was that he did best these days.

She didn't want to talk to him anymore tonight. At one time he'd been her best friend. They had shared everything. Secrets, the treasures of childhood, the joy of a spring day. He wasn't the same person. He'd lost his girlfriend of two years, his job and his self-worth. Sometimes she wondered if he somehow blamed himself for their parent's death. It bothered her that he never wanted to talk about the accident. In fact he avoided the subject like a vile disease.

She glanced up to look at the pictures of her family hanging on the wall. A family history recorded in photographs. She raised a hand and touched her parents' wedding picture. "Miss you guys," she said out loud. The rug beneath her feet softened the sound of her boots as she went around the corner past the living room and headed up the stairs.

Sixteen steps. Every time she walked up or down she counted them. *Crazy habit.*

At the top of the landing, she walked straight past the old cherry bookcases and the little antique hall table and went into her bedroom, which was the first room on the right.

Turning on the light, she went straight for the bed, and sank down on the mattress to pull off her boots.

She loved her room. The cool mint color of the walls with the tiny handpainted pink rosebuds made her feel safe. The shelf to the right held her books. They were lined up straight, and most were worn from having been read so many times. Little stuffed teddy bears were shoved above the books and her collection of music boxes sat on the second shelf, another obsession from her past.

There were pictures of Angela on her dresser, one from their high school graduation and another one from Angela's wedding.

Her mother's jewelry box sat in the middle of her dresser. All the important things were in this room.

Falling backwards on the bed with her hands out to her sides, she closed her eyes. Why did life have to be so complicated?

Her thoughts floated back over the night and came

back to Diarmuid. What a strange name for a strange man. God, why did he have to be so damn handsome? All that thick black hair and those cobalt blue eyes...eyes that could stop a woman's heart at fifty paces. But he would leave soon. He'd told her that tonight. He didn't have much time. "Damn it!" she said to the open air of her bedroom. She knew it, had known the truth when she'd first laid eyes on him.

What to do?

She had agreed to meet him at the waterfall tomorrow night. Should she tell him she couldn't see him again? That she didn't want to get involved with someone who wouldn't be around long? That would be the smart thing to do. Now she had to convince her heart.

A little voice inside her head taunted her to take what he offered. Getting up, she got undressed and slipped on her nightgown. Moving back to the bed she slipped between the covers. Turning on her side, she closed her eyes and instantly his image came into her mind. His face, the sound of his voice, the way his hard body felt pressed up against hers, she was going to drive herself crazy thinking about it.

Every nerve ending in her body sprang to attention at his touch. She didn't want to fall for him, couldn't take more heartbreak. But could she really resist him? Did she want to resist him?

She just didn't know.

Feeling drowsy, her eyes drifted closed with her thoughts still on the strange man that had come to her rescue like a white knight out of some kind of fairy

tale.



Diarmuid wandered away from the house and backtracked. It had taken all his self-control not to let Kayleigh know that he had full knowledge of her waterfall.

A waterfall that was not what it seemed.

There were gates between Faery and the mortal world. Kayleigh's waterfall happened to be one of them. In fact, it was the very gate he and Cathal had traveled through only yesterday.

How strange that only a thousand years ago the Fae had roamed this realm with mortal and beast alike. But all good things must come to an end. Mortals began to consider the Fae their enemy and open war broke out between the two races. The mortals demanded the Fae cease to use their magic, afraid of what they did not understand. The Fae refused and so left the mortal realm, using their vast magic to transport them to another dimension. Another world of their own choosing.

Their Goddess had led them to AArán, the world of the Flower Fae. But even in this new world evil still found a way to invade the land. He had seen it first hand. The sister of the Goddess, the Sea Witch, was a vile creature and controlled the vast lakes and oceans of AArán, just waiting for the chance to usurp her sister and destroy her and everything she loved.

Cathal had unknowingly caught the Sea Witch's attention and would now be dead had he not

intervened.

He had made a bargain with the Sea Witch for Cathal's release. Part of that bargain was that he return to the mortal realm and claim a woman of mortal flesh and convince her to return with him to Faery.

So they had come. When they had walked through the Lily gate of A Aran and found themselves in a cave behind a waterfall, he had not been overly surprised. He knew that his Goddess watched over them and provided for their needs. She had seen to their need for water and sun. They had to replenish themselves in this world. Mortal food could be consumed, but it did not nourish their form. Sometimes being a Prince of the Rose had advantages. He was the Rose Prince of A Aran. He knew his duty and he would not fail in this quest.

The moon lit the ground, throwing shadows on the path as he made his way back to the big oak where he knew Cathal would be waiting for him. The sounds of the night called to him. The moist dew clung to his skin, where it quickly evaporated. The night was a time of growth for the flowers and those of his kind.

He spotted Cathal leaning against the trunk of the Oak, a scowl on his face with his silver hair hanging loose around his shoulders.

May the Goddess save me from a sulking Fae.

Probably still mad that he had left him with the mortal women. Cathal would consider that act a fate almost as dire as death. The Fae had no use for mortals. But Cathal did not know the truth of why they were really here. He followed blindly where his

Prince led.

Diarmuid approached his friend and knew that this was going to be a heated discussion.

"What were you doing with her?" Cathal's irritated tone and flashing eyes betrayed his annoyance.

Diarmuid smiled. "What did you think I was doing with her? I needed to talk with her, spend time with her. I needed to know if she was the one we seek."

Cathal raised arched silver brows at him. "And what did you find?"

"She is the one."

Cathal shot him a skeptical look. "We only arrived yesterday. I doubt we would find her *that* quick." Cathal began to pace, his gray eyes flashing in the light of the moon. "Do you realize that storm of emotion you created almost turned fatal? Had I not been there to temper it, you might have killed him."

Diarmuid raised one brow. "But you *were* there, and no real harm came to anyone. I saw no body parts, and everyone was well and fine when I left."

Cathal frowned. "It could have been worse."

"It could have...yes." Diarmuid picked his way toward the large tree side stepping the large roots.

He thought back on Kayleigh. He'd known the moment he touched her.

Diarmuid looked up at the stars twinkling in the now cloudless sky. "Now I have only to convince her that she belongs with me. Then I will truly be free."

"If as you say, she is the one...Let's grab her and take her back to Faery with us. That is the way of our people. Why do you hesitate?" Cathal insisted.

"I cannot do that, Cathal. She must come of her

own free will."

Cathal shook his head. "Since when? We have never had to have a mortal's approval before we take them through the gate." Cathal narrowed his eyes. "What is it that you are not telling me?"

Diarmuid raked his hands through his hair in frustration. "It is part of the bargain. I must win her love and she must *agree* to come back to Faery with me."

"Are you daft?" Cathal's mouth dropped open in shock. "She'll never leave with you once she knows what you are." Cathal stopped his pacing in front of Diarmuid. "You cannot tell her."

"I have no choice. I will tell her when the time is right."

Cathal turned on his heel uttering a string of Fae curses that would make the lowest of the Fae blush. Turning back to Diarmuid, Cathal gave him an anguished look. "You never told me of this."

"You never asked."

"I am your best friend, I shouldn't have to ask. All of this is my fault. If I had never gone to the lake to drink, we would be back in AArán enjoying a nice wine and falling into our own beds. But no, now we are here, and you are faced with an impossible task. You should have left me to die."

Diarmuid laughed. Not a happy laugh, but one that mocked the fates. "Yes, I should have left you there, where the sunlight could not dance upon your armor. I should have let your petals turn brown and fall away. I think not. You would have done the same for me. You are my dearest friend. We have been

together a long time."

Cathal fell silent for a moment lost in thought. "I still do not understand how I came to be caught within the Sea Witch's clutches. I came only to drink, and before I knew what had happened, she talked in riddles of love and enchantment. I spurned her advances, a Fae and the sister of a Goddess." he scoffed. "It could never be."

Diarmuid nodded, understanding the pain of his friend. "Yes, and there is that whole evil thing. I highly doubt she would have made a good lover." He cringed when he thought of how cold and clammy her hands had felt on his arms when he had negotiated for Cathal's release. "And did you have feelings for the Sea Witch?"

Cathal's eyes went wide and he sneered. "Feelings? Yes. I wanted to run her through with my sword. Love is a mortal word, not a Fae one. "

Diarmuid nodded. "Understood." He walked to the tree and let his hand rest against the rough bark. "I must have a plan to win Kayleigh over. Somehow I must convince her to come with me, otherwise I'll be lost."

Cathal turned away from him only to quickly face him again. "If you took her back to Faery, could you still break the curse?"

Diarmuid crossed his arms over his chest. "You ask questions that I have no answers for. The Sea Witch said only to bring back the one fated to love me. So I will do what I must. I will bring her to Faery and save Aaran as well as myself."

"If she won't come with us what will happen to

you?"

Diarmuid let out a long sigh and grimaced. The words caught in his throat. "I will lay down in the meadow of bright flowers and I will go to sleep. Very simple, really. This is my last chance." He saw Cathal's eyes open wide at this information.

"No one simply lies down to sleep in the field of flowers. Be honest and say what you mean. If she does not go to Faery, you will die." Another string of curses followed. "A Aran's fate—Your fate lies in the hands of a mortal?"

Diarmuid watched as Cathal vented his frustration.

Cathal's eyes went cold and his jaw clenched in anger. "They sent us away, do you not remember? They shunned us because we were different. We left because *they* no longer believed in magic. It drained us, drained our powers. I can feel it even now. And you are telling me that your life will be forfeit if this mortal woman does not come back with you? I will not allow this. You will force her to come back to Faery. You must tell her of the curse."

Rolling his shoulders to ease his tense muscles, Diarmuid answered, "She cannot know of the curse. She must come of her own free will. She cannot be stolen, taken, or manipulated with Fae magic. She is to know what I am before she makes her decision."

"Surely you jest. How are you to convince her?"

A wicked thought entered his mind. "How else do you show a woman that you desire her?"

Cathal stopped his pacing. "Can you do this?"

Diarmuid raised both brows, "You doubt me again?"

"You know I cannot allow her to remain here when the consequences are so dire."

"You will not allow? And how do you propose to stop it?"

Cathal threw his hands wide. "What would you have me do? I cannot stand idly by while your very life hangs in the balance. I am the Captain of your Guard, tasked with seeing to your safety."

Cathal came to stand directly in front of Diarmuid, his finger pointing into his chest. "I will not allow you to fall." Cathal's voice rose in anger. "*You will not fall because of me.*" He turned away to pace again. "You must do what you must. You must charm her, make her fall so in love with you that she cannot see the day without you in it. It is the only way."

Cathal's shoulders dropped and he frowned, his eyes filled with untold anguish. "I would not live in a world without you in it. You will not fall while there is still air in my lungs."

Diarmuid sighed. "Let us hope it doesn't come to that."

Cathal wandered off and Diarmuid let him go. He would need time to sort it out.

Turning he leaned back against the sturdy strength of the tree. He had not been prepared for her. Her face, the soft oval shape of it with thick auburn lashes framing eyes so green he could lose himself in them. The curve of her neck, her full sensual lips could make a man forget his purpose. He couldn't afford to let that happen. But the sadness he'd seen in her eyes pulled at him, tugged at something deep within him and brought forth the urge to protect her.

He pushed away from the tree.

He would not become distracted.

Would not let her use her body or her scent to trap him. But when she smiled, his stomach had done a little flip. His pulse had raced with her laughter and she had made him smile with her quick wit. Her skin rivaled the petal of the rose and he had not been able to stop himself from kissing her. He longed to go and sit beneath her window and simply watch her sleep. He found himself wondering what she wore now to rest. He mentally shook himself to stop the direction in which his thoughts were heading. Sexual frustration held no appeal for him. Settling down at the base of the tree, he closed his eyes and let his mind imagine how her creamy skin would feel beneath his fingers. Would she writhe and moan beneath him? He let out a sigh. Tomorrow he would find out more.

Chapter Six

K ayleigh slipped out of the house at exactly five minutes until twelve. Midnight, the witching hour, when most of the world lay sleeping in their beds. Not her, not tonight. Tonight she would meet Diarmuid. A nervous anticipation grew within her at the thought of seeing him again.

Finally, she'd decided on a pair of faded blue jeans, a pink oxford shirt and sweater. She hadn't wanted to seem too eager. She'd worn her sturdy boots for walking in the woods, and left her hair loose, hanging down around her shoulders.

The cool night air brushed against her skin, making her glad she'd put on a sweater. Stars shone like tiny pinpricks of light against the dark background of an endless sky.

She quickly made her way down the stairs and off the porch and across the yard. The light of the moon lit the path. Soft blades of grass cushioned her steps leaving a wet trail behind her. Towering trees cast eerie shadows on the dirt path as she walked and the cadence of the crickets took on a haunting quality in the dead of the night.

The sound of rushing water soothed her frayed

nerves. Taking a deep breath for courage, she moved through the thick brush toward the waterfall. It's just a date, she kept telling herself, just enjoy yourself.

As she cleared the woods, the waterfall beckoned...she spotted him sitting on a large boulder with one arm draped across a bended knee, seemingly lost in thought.

He made a striking picture, his profile in shadow within a beam of moonlight that came through the trees.

Kayleigh took a step forward. Her foot crunched on a branch.

Startled, Diarmuid looked up and saw her.

"Don't you look nice?" The velvet timbre of his voice raised chill bumps on her arms. He rose from his sitting position on the rock and came forward.

"Thank you."

"I wasn't sure you would come."

"No? I keep my promises."

Diarmuid reached for her hand and she let him take it, savoring the warmth from the simple touch.

Reaching out to brush a wayward lock of hair from her face, he tucked it behind her ear. "That's a good thing to know. Come here, I've got a surprise for you."

A surprise?

Draping an arm around her shoulders, he led her forward.

There in front of the falls, on a grassy spot, stood a lace-covered table set for two with crystal goblets and fine china. Two elaborately carved wooden chairs were tucked under the cloth. An ornate silver

candleholder with strange markings held a white candle in the center, its flame flickering. A silver bucket held a bottle of champagne wrapped in white linen, and a single red rose lay across one plate. Small silver bowls were scattered on the table. One held strawberries, another cheese, and the last bread.

Her hand fluttered to her throat. She couldn't speak, charmed beyond words. He had gone to a lot of trouble for her.

A girl could get used to this kind of treatment.

"Speechless, are you?" His charming grin melted.

What girl in her right mind wouldn't be speechless?

Kayleigh turned to him. "Thank you. I don't know what to say. I never imagined anything like this in my wildest dreams..."

Diarmuid took her face into his hands, his full sensual lips curving into a seductive smile. "Don't ever doubt your worth, Kayleigh. I don't believe anyone deserves it more."

She took a deep breath; afraid he would become vapor before her very eyes and disappear.

She pinched her arm. *Yep, awake. I'm not dreaming.*

He led her to a chair and waited for her to sit as he tucked her under the table and placed a napkin in her lap. Only then did he turn to the iced bottle of champagne. He popped the cork, pouring the bubbly golden liquid into her glass.

She noticed him watching closely as she looked over the fine table he had set for her.

"Your day? How was it?" he gently reminded her with a satisfied male grin on his face.

Kayleigh swallowed hard. "Um...good, actually."

Very long, but good." She fiddled with her glass, swirling the wine before taking a sip. She giggled as the bubbles tickled her nose.

"Champagne makes me silly."

"Well then, I'm all for silly. As you see, there are strawberries, if you'd like some. Even chocolate, but I'm afraid I couldn't round up a pot to melt it, so we'll have to manage under the circumstances."

"I'm impressed. Do you do this with all the women?"

She smiled at him from beneath her lashes. *Say no, please say no.*

He licked his lips and stared at her mouth.

Her stomach clenched at his provocative gaze. By all the stars in heaven he had to be the most handsome man she'd ever seen. And the fact that he consumed her with such heat in his eyes made her pulse jump with excitement.

"I wouldn't say all the women. A true gentleman never tells. Does the thought bother you?"

He sat down.

Kayleigh lowered her eyes. She hated to admit it, but yes, it bothered her. They hadn't known each other a day and she would be a fool to think that the man hadn't been with other women. An utter fool.

Diarmuid waited with the question still hanging between them.

Taking a sip of champagne for balance and courage she answered. "I guess every girl likes to think she's special. I wouldn't be an exception."

He nodded. "Would it help if I told you that I feel things when I'm around you that I never thought I'd

feel?"

He looked away toward the waterfall before continuing.

"I've never been susceptible to pangs of the heart, but when I saw you last night at the pub..." he shook his head. "I'm rambling."

He reached out and picked up a square of white cheese. "Hungry?"

Kayleigh grinned when he cut himself short and let him change the topic of conversation. She didn't really want to go there anyway. She wasn't ready to delve deep into the emotions he made her feel.

"I'm starving."

She moved to take the piece of cheese from his hand —

"Uh, uh, uh." His eyes teased. "I'll do the honors. Open wide."

Kayleigh laughed. She couldn't help it. He was going to feed her? A small flutter began within her at the romantic gesture.

Dropping her hand back into her lap, she leaned forward to take the morsel from his hand. There was something infinitely intimate about being fed by him.

The pads of his fingers lingered with a caress on her lips.

Good God in heaven, she might just melt into one big puddle at his feet if he kept this up.



Diarmuid studied Kayleigh, resisting the urge to bury his fingers in her long, fiery red tresses. Her eyes held

wonder at the small thing he had done, this surprise he had concocted with Fae magic. He felt a twinge of guilt, but brushed it off.

She picked up a strawberry and bit into the soft flesh of the fruit, and a small dribble of juice escaped the corner of her mouth.

He reached out and wiped it away with his thumb, bringing the succulent juice to his lips. He let the tangy-sweet taste linger on his tongue and knew she would taste of strawberries and champagne, a heady combination.

The classic lines of her face framed a small pert nose that at the moment twitched from the teasing bubbles of her champagne. Her lips, full and the color of a ripened peach, made him ache to taste her again.

Slow. He forced himself to remember that she was mortal, not Fae, and he tamped down on the desire that swamped his system.

Bent on seduction, he let his desire for her show in his eyes while he watched her every movement with predatory stillness.

Kayleigh sat back in her chair and wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"That was delicious. Thank you."

He nodded, "you're welcome. Have you had enough?"

"Yes, I'm fine, this is really good champagne." She took another sip.

He pushed back his chair and stood. "Will you come with me? I've something I'd like to show you."

"More?"

"Yes. More." He answered. *Much more.*

Kayleigh grinned. "You are a hopeless romantic, aren't you?"

Hopeless romantic? He'd never thought of himself in that way, but he loved being outside with a beautiful woman at his side. How could a man—or a Fae—go wrong?

She took his outstretched hand.

He moved around the table and helped her to her feet.

Leaving the table behind, he guided her to the place he had prepared earlier.

Her soft gasp brought his gaze to her face.

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

He'd laid a blanket out on the grass in front of the waterfall. Turning on the charm, he turned and stared deeply into her eyes. "Will you stare at the stars with me?"

"Stare at the stars? On a blanket? With only the light of the moon?" She cast him a wary sideways glance. "Is that all you want to do?"

He couldn't suppress the laugh that began deep within him. "Sounded like a good place to start. Don't you like the stars?"

"Of course I do."

"Well then, come on. I won't bite." He took note of her skeptical look.

He let go of her hand to drop down to the blanket.

Kayleigh stood staring down at him with a cautious look in her eyes.

"Come on then, for the love of the Goddess, I'll not do anything you don't choose me to do."

She huffed teasingly at him. "You never know. I

know your kind. You ply me with wonderful food, and then you lure me over here to a blanket in front of a waterfall. What am I supposed to think?" she teased.

"That I want to kiss you? Not a crime that I'm aware of."

Kayleigh pursed her lips. "As a rule, I kiss my dates when they walk me to the house."

Diarmuid shook his head. "Oh no. I'll not be kissing you near the house. That crazy addlepatated brother of yours might decide to come busting out of the house again."

Kayleigh's brow lowered as she considered his words. "Addlepatated? Is that a word?"

"It is where I come from."

"You are the strangest man." She smirked.

He delighted in the laughter that lit up her face. "You have no idea how strange I am."

Stretching out he leaned back on the blanket, tucking his hands behind his head. Tilting his head up to look at the sky, he waited for her to sit. If she was so worried about a kiss, then he would slow it down and make her ask for it. He wouldn't push.

Not yet.

But it would be interesting to see what his little minx would do, and if she could resist giving in to her curiosity where he was concerned.

Kayleigh dropped down beside him on the blanket.

They sat there for several minutes in the silence of the night. The tinkling sound of the waterfall melded with the sound of crickets singing and the occasional grunt from a bullfrog. He loved the air here. The clean

sweet scent of the earth and the water surrounded him. It almost felt like home.

Diarmuid felt her gaze upon him. He gave her a quick look and when their eyes met, she glanced away.

Kayleigh looked up at the night sky and then back at him. "I thought you wanted to kiss me?"

Drawing himself up to a sitting position, he returned her direct stare. "If it's a kiss you're wanting, I'll leave that up to you. After all, who am I to break tradition?" He held out his hands in a gesture of surrender. "But I'm right here, if you change your mind."

She pouted. "You don't play fair."

He frowned. "And what's not fair about it? I'm letting you decide. I thought that was what you wanted."

Women. You could never understand them.

"It's not like I've never been kissed before..." she added.

He rolled over to his side and propped himself up on his elbow. "Yes, but have you ever been kissed by the likes of me?"

Kayleigh shrugged. "If you've had one kiss, you've had them all."

Diarmuid growled softly under his breath. *We'll see about that.* Reaching over, he grabbed her and pulled her down beside him.

"Would I have to wait forever for you to make the first move? You seemed eager enough to kiss me last night."

She giggled while valiantly pretending to struggle.

"I was in shock last night. And I was mad at Matthew for creating a scene. He told me to leave you alone, so of course being the rebellious girl I am, I did exactly the opposite."

"Well, I for one am glad of it. Rebellious or not. I've gotten myself into trouble a time or two."

"Really? What kind of trouble?" Kayleigh rolled over onto her side to face him, and she narrowed her eyes as if he was a puzzle she couldn't figure out. "You are so different. Maybe that's why I'm so intrigued with you. I can't seem to get you off my brain."

He grinned. *She thought of him?* Maybe there was hope for him after all. "I'm still waiting."

She looked confused. "Waiting for what?"

Diarmuid sighed. "For you to kiss me."

Making a face she leaned in close and kissed him on the nose. "There, I kissed you. Feel better now?"

Aching to feel her soft lips on his, he decided it was time to take matters into his own hands. In a quick move she wasn't expecting, he reached over and pulled her on top of him.

"Impatient, are we?" she laughed throatily. "I don't know about all this."

He inwardly groaned when her soft breasts crushed into his chest and he let his hands drop from the middle of her back to the curve of her ass. *Oh, yes, that was much better.*

She playfully batted at his hands. "You're a sneaky devil, aren't you?"

"So I've been told."

"Hmmm. I don't know if I like that."

"Payback time for you teasing me about the kissing thing."

Kayleigh wiggled, trying to roll off him, but he held her in place.

"You're creating problems." He gave her a small slap on those delightful cheeks. "Be still." Passion fueled his blood at her movements. He knew she couldn't miss the hardness of him pressing between her legs. Reaching up to cup her face in his hands, he purposefully licked his lips and allowed his desire free reign. He knew it would surface to his eyes and she would see his longing for her... "You do something to me, Kayleigh, and I'm not sure what to do about it."

She looked down at him, her smile fading to be replaced with a hunger he recognized. "I know. I seem to be having the same problem."

"Kiss me," he whispered.

Slowly she lowered her head.

Soft, pliant lips met his and he traced the contours of her mouth with his tongue.

Such a sweet mouth. Great Gods, but he would die of the torture.

She sighed, opened to him, her fingers tightening on his shoulders.

Immediately he took control of the kiss, needing more, wanting more. His hands roamed her back, caressing and sliding lower over her jean-clad hips. How he wished he could use his magic to make their clothes disappear and feel the naked softness of her skin.

Must go slow. Must go slow. Must not scare her.

He chanted the words in his head while rampant desire raged with his self-control. He wanted her like he had never wanted another woman or a Fae. Wanted her with his entire being and it was very slowly killing him to temper the passion that raged. Instinct threatened to take over, to roll her over and lose himself in the sweet recesses of her body.

A moan sounded deep in her throat as their tongues danced and played. She tasted of strawberries and champagne. Her hands memorized the planes of his body, eager to please with fingers that teased until he thought he might lose his mind. He hated to end it but if they kept this up he wouldn't be able to stop until he was inside of her.

He pulled back from her mouth and she followed with a whimper.

"Mmm...Why did you stop?"

Diarmuid took a deep breath. "Because the way my thoughts were headed." He reached up and twirled a strand of her hair in his fingers. *So silky.*

"Where were they headed?" she asked, her lips curling into a wicked smile.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Surely you can feel where my thoughts were headed?"

Kayleigh's mouth fell open into a little 'O' of surprise. "Well, yes, I um, could feel that you were as turned on as much I was by that kiss."

He gave her a questioning look. "Turned on?"

"Yeah, you know. Arousal? Passion?"

He nodded in understanding. "Yes, that is a good way to put it. And I promised you I would do nothing that you didn't choose."

She cocked her head to one side. "So I have to choose to kiss you?"

"Yes. You must choose." He sighed. He wished he had been in this world longer so that his outdated words didn't almost give him away.

Kayleigh propped her elbows up on his chest and sniffed at the air. "Do you smell roses?"

Damnation, he couldn't hide the scent. Not even if he rolled in horse dung. It clung to him, part of him. "Yes. Does it bother you?" he asked.

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "No. I like it. It reminds me of my mother's rose garden."

Barely escaped that one. "Are you going to kiss me or lie here and smell the air all night?"

"I didn't want to tease you."

He reached up, palmed her neck and pulled her down to where their breath mingled. He whispered, "Tease me."



He couldn't be real, could he? This man who looked at her like she was his last meal on earth? Kayleigh sighed and lowered her head, keeping her eyes open, wanting to look into the amazing blue of his eyes while their lips met. The strength of him amazed her, and the fact that he wasn't pushing her about sex stunned her. That was a first.

His lips were soft and pliable beneath hers, and he opened his mouth to her and she couldn't resist. She ran her tongue over the edge of perfect white teeth that made her insides melt when he smiled, the taste

of him sweet on her tongue, clean and fresh. The smell of roses wafted over them, and she lost herself in the kiss. The tinkling of water falling into the pool from the falls made the entire setting magical.

Special.

His strong hands wrapped around her waist, then moved up to stroke her back in small, slow, soothing circles. The man took his time. There was no rush with him, just a slow languid discovery.

Desire unfurled low in her belly, her skin became sensitive to his touch.

He pulled away from her mouth to kiss her nose, her eyelids, and her cheeks.

Her heart lurched at the gesture. He made her feel precious.

Cherished.

The tantalizing swirl of his tongue slipped down to tease the column of her throat.

A quick nip from his teeth on the strong muscle of her neck shot desire straight to her core. Her hips flexed forward into his.

They were tormenting each other with their kisses and she feared they would burst into flames or shoot high into the sky until they became stars themselves.

Lust, brutal and demanding, crashed into her.

She craved his skin like an addiction for which there was no cure. She needed to feel his skin beneath her fingers. Her hands crept low to the hem of his sweater and moved up under the soft cotton material to relish the hard plane of muscles where her fingers tangled within the thick coarse mat of hair.

His mouth came back to her hers with an urgency

she couldn't deny him. The kiss deepened.

Tongues twisted and mated.

Her heart raced, her pulse pounding inside her head.

Suddenly, he pulled back.

Damn it.

He inhaled deeply, closed his eyes.

"Time for a breather."

A breather? She didn't want a breather, she wanted him to take her, make her forget everything. "A breather?"

"Yes. You're killing me, love." One of his hands cupped the curve of her bottom and squeezed. "You are...intoxicating." He opened his eyes, his expression guarded but his lips twitched into a half smile. "It's hard to go slow with your soft hands upon my skin."

Biting her bottom lip, she went to remove her hands.

"No." he stopped her. "Don't. I need only...a moment."

Diarmuid closed his eyes.

Her own heart still racing in her chest, she lowered her cheek to hear the strong beat of his heart under her ear.

In the heat of the moment, she'd forgotten everything. The fact that she'd promised herself to enjoy but not get too attached. *What had happened to that plan?* It had disappeared with the onslaught of his kiss. Diarmuid made the world go fuzzy, where the lines of right and wrong blurred, when he kissed her.

She felt his hand in her hair, stroking and soothing.

"It's not you, Kayleigh. It's me. There are reasons,

good ones, why we must take this slow."

Taking her hands from under his shirt, she rolled to lie beside him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"Removing the temptation."

"Temptation, huh?" he gave her a sideways glance, a wicked gleam in his eye.

She raised her head. "Don't let your ego get the better of you. You're right." She shook her head. "Strange, really."

"What's strange?" he said staring at the sky again.

"I'm not like this."

He smiled. "No?"

She punched his arm. "No. I'm not."

He smirked. "Pity."

"Then pity this," Kayleigh challenged.

Coming up on her elbow, she cupped his face in one hand, the new whiskers of his beard rough against the tender skin of her palm. She looked deep into mesmerizing sapphire eyes that blazed with an inner fire.

Keeping her eyes open, she took his lips, traced the line of his mouth, and delved deep.

He groaned and returned the kiss with a passion that rocked her soul.

Hot, greedy lips devoured, and tasted. The flame between them rose higher than before. Out of control it swamped them, surrounded them.

Her hands tangled in his thick mass of black hair, holding him within her grip.

Oh God, they were doing it again.

She pulled back with a groan. "We did it again."

He traced her cheek with the back of his fingers, "Yes. Apparently, we have no self-control."

Grinning, "No. None at all. What are we going to do about this?"

He pursed his lips. "Practice?"

"That will just get us in trouble again."

"Perhaps. But what is life if not a little risky?"

He rolled to his side to face her, slipping one muscled arm around her waist. "Might as well have a bit of fun."

Kayleigh lost all track of sane thought when he kissed her again. She gave in and let him carry her away.



They stopped again, this time both of them breathless.

"We can't keep this up," she told him, lying within the circle of his arms, trying to bring the world back into focus.

"No. Not immediately, anyway." His eyes were still closed.

"What time is it?" She checked the time. "My God. It's after four o'clock in the morning. I'm never going to make it all day without a nap."

Kayleigh scrambled out of his arms to a sitting position and sat cross-legged for a moment until the initial dizziness of sitting up too quickly subsided.

Diarmuid just gave her that naughty smile. "Can you not call and tell them you are ill?"

"I wish. But Robbie depends on me."

He sat up and toyed with a strand of her hair.

"Everyone depends on you, Kayleigh. But tell me, who do you depend on?"

No one. It was a brutal truth, one she didn't like to think about. It wasn't by choice, that was for sure. "It doesn't matter. I need the money anyway." Shit...she had to plant the new roses that had come in this afternoon, or wait, it was yesterday now.

"Oh, my God. I've got to work in the garden tomorrow, too." She blew out a puff of air. "I guess it's true. No rest for the wicked, huh?"

"I would hardly call you wicked."

"I'm sorry but I have to go." She added, feeling bad for some crazy reason. "Come on and I'll help you clean up."

Diarmuid got up to his feet while he ran his hands through his hair pushing that one disobedient lock off his forehead. "Not necessary. I'll take care of it." He held out a hand to help her up. "Anyway, we have to get you to bed."

Kayleigh couldn't help but smile. A man who would clean up? It was a shame he would have to leave soon. "Are you sure? I don't mind."

She took his hand and he pulled her to her feet.

"I'm sure. It's nothing. I can take care of it with a wave of my hand."

"As long as you're sure."

"Not another word about it." He reached out and brushed what looked to be grass out of her hair. "I mussed you up good, didn't I?"

She nodded. "I had a really good time tonight."

"So did I. Much better than I expected." He took her hand. "Come on, let's get you home."

She allowed him to pull her away from the falls, and the enchanted little haven they had created.

"So, will I be able to see you tomorrow?"

Her heart skipped a beat at his question. She could feel the smile on her face. He wants to see me again. The thought made her feel giddy.

"I'm going to be in the garden most of the morning, it's a never-ending battle, plus I think Ms. Green is coming by to pick out a couple of potted roses. Maybe in the afternoon before I head out to Robbie's? I'm working the late shift again tomorrow night."

Walking in sync, he squeezed her shoulder. "Maybe I'll surprise you."

They came to the back of the house, and he paused at the foot of the steps leading up to the back porch. She couldn't remember when she'd had such a good time. "Thank you for a wonderful night." She reached up to cup his cheek in her palm.

"The pleasure was all mine," he said and pressed a kiss into the center of her hand.

Damn, the man was romantic.

Hungry eyes devoured her as he bent low to catch her mouth. A groan sounded from deep within his throat as he ended the kiss. "I wish you didn't have to go. I dare not touch you again, or you'll never get inside."

"I'd love to stay, but I have a lot to do tomorrow. Some of us aren't on vacation..." she teased.

He tilted his head and looked at the rose garden. "What will take so much of your time?"

"The garden, mostly. The roses need to be weeded

and the old blooms snipped off, then I've got to put down the slate for the path and I've got to plant the new bushes I got in this week, or they'll die."

"How many roses do you have?"

"There are hundreds of them, but I'm going to have to sell some to pay the mortgage this month. But I've got more rooting. We'll make it."

"And your brother? He helps you with this?"

Kayleigh looked away. It was an honest question but she never liked to talk bad about Matthew. "He used to, but not since Mom died." She frowned.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"It's okay." She touched his arm.

He gave her a slow sensual smile that weakened her knees. "I don't think I'll be able to breathe if I can't see you."

Kayleigh rolled her eyes. "There you go again. All that romantic talk. I don't know what to say when you do that, it must be an Irish thing."

"Then say yes, say you'll see me tomorrow."

She bit the tender skin inside her jaw. "I shouldn't. I have enough work here to keep me busy for weeks, and you'll be leaving soon, won't you?"

He looked away at the question and wouldn't meet her eyes. "Does it matter that I have to go? Can't we take what time we have and work on the rest?"

"It's tempting, but I think I need a day or so to think on it."

"Why?" he demanded, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"I can't think straight when you're around. My brain turns to mush." *Too much information, Kayleigh.*

"Let's take it one day at a time. How does that sound?"

He didn't look happy, his lips turned down in a frown. "I don't like it. I want to see you tomorrow. I don't want to waste a minute."

"Where are you staying? If I get done with the roses, I can give you a call. If I don't, then you can come by the bar on Wednesday and we'll make plans."

A strange expression crossed his face. "How about I just check in with you tomorrow and see if you have time."

"Okay, that will work." Kayleigh turned to step up onto the stairs leading into the house.

What the hell?

Two mature rose vines were intertwined through the lattice on either side of the back door. They were in full bloom. There had to be hundreds of blooms on the vines.

Impossible.

There was no way anyone could have done this while she was gone. Her mind whirled trying to think how it could have been done in such a short time.

"I can't believe this."

"What?"

"These roses were not here when I left tonight."

"Don't you like them?"

Kayleigh turned to look at him. What was he saying? "Of course, but it would take hours to get the vines through this lattice, and look, not one of the blooms are damaged." She frowned. *Hours. It would have taken hours to do this.*

Diarmuid coughed.

She turned back to him to see him hold a hand over his mouth while he continued to cough. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, swallowed the wrong way, I suppose." He ran a hand through his hair. "Perhaps your brother planted them to please you."

Shocked she turned back to look at the roses again. "No way would he ever touch roses." She reached out and traced a petal with her finger. "But what is even more strange is that one is red and one is white." She leaned in and took a whiff. "Can you smell this? It's magnificent. Oh my God, I can't believe this."

"They do have a strong scent."

"Strange. This is very strange."

Diarmuid scuffed his feet in the dirt, his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

Why did he look so uncomfortable? This whole thing was puzzling.

He grabbed her hand from the rose and turned her back around, a wide smile on his handsome face. "So do I get another kiss before you go?" Diarmuid scuffed his feet in the dirt.

"A kiss?"

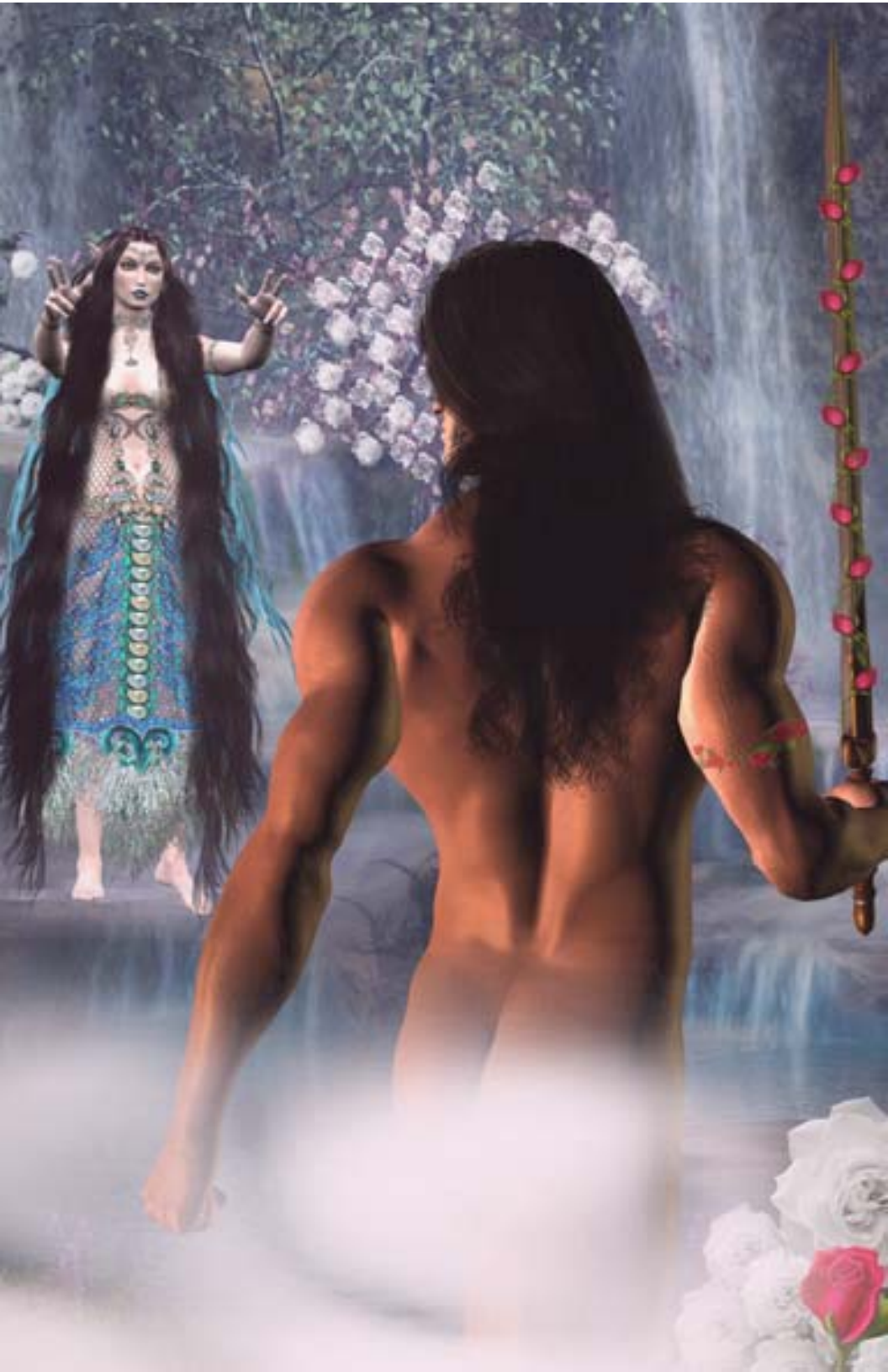
He smiled, looking like a little boy with trouble on his mind. "It's not all I want, but it's what I'll take for the moment."

She slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her, enjoying the fire that sprang to life the instant their lips touched. Chemistry. They had it in spades.

Chapter Seven

Diarmuid woke up to the sun shining through the petals of the rose where he had slept. He had dreamed of Kayleigh, her naked body sliding against his own, their limbs tangled within each other and the smell of jasmine lingering over him. He stretched and smiled. For the first time he felt like he might win his battle with the Sea Witch. He'd been a fool to bargain with her in the first place. She'd been tricky. He'd expected an old hag or crone, but when he'd approached her domain and she'd come out to greet him, he'd been struck by her dark beauty. Hair black as midnight fell to her feet, her beauty the legend of songs, but her heart remained cold and ugly. He felt it in his bones. And she had captured Cathal.

Poor Cathal, who'd lost his family to illness so many years before had been taken into the royal family of AAran. They might as well have been brothers. He would have done anything to see him released, even forfeiting his own life if need be. But he hadn't dreamed of letting AAran fall to the Sea Witch. She had tricked him and her words haunted him.



"Ah, so it is the Prince of the Rose come to rescue his friend." Her voice so sickeningly sweet, he'd cringed.

"Why did you take him? He did you no wrong."

The witch paced within the stone walls of her keep. A dark, damp Cave that made him long to run back outside where the sun would protect him from one such as her.

An evil smile appeared on her face. Her full lips thinned with selfishness. "I wanted him. He pleased me."

"He will die here. You know this."

"The Flower Fae has never been my favorite. But a Rose Fae, now that is a thing of beauty, is it not?" She circled him and he turned with her, making sure he never left his back unprotected. He could not take a chance on letting her capture the both of them. "Take me. Take me instead and let him go."

"Tsk, ts, ts. Take you and anger my sister the Goddess?" She paused. "I shall make you a bargain, Prince of the Rose."

"I'll take it."

Her inky black brows rose in surprise. "You have not heard my terms yet."

Diarmuid steeled his voice, "Release him and I'll do your evil deed."

A sinister smile played upon pale lips. She rubbed her palms together as she thought. "Before you say yea or nay, hear me out."

"I am listening." He tightened his grip on his sword.

The Sea Witch slithered over to him, her pale, clammy fingers caressing his arms. "You are a beautiful creature, aren't you?"

Diarmuid gritted his teeth. "What have you, witch?"

"If you want to save your dear, dear friend... You will go

into the mortal world and find the one fated to love you. You must go through the Lily gate of A Aran. She will reside just beyond the gate, near the waterfall surrounded by pure white roses. Convince her to come to Faery as your bride. I will even let Cathal come with you, he is looking a little peaked at the moment. Not enough fresh air, I suppose, in an underwater cavern. Like a flower under glass he is." Her laugh grated over him. A cackle, evil in its intensity.

"What is the other part of the bargain?"

Her smile widened as she clasped her hands together. "Yes, there are always a few minor details. She must come by her own free will. You cannot tell her of your quest. She must think that it is true love that would force your hand. But if you fail to bring the woman back to Faery, then A Aran becomes mine once again, to be flooded with water and those that I lost to the Goddess."

He clenched his jaw at her words. His free hand knotted in a tight fist. "I cannot do that. I have no authority to make such a bargain."

The witch snickered. "A shame, really, I don't think your friend will last much longer. The petals of his pretty armor are already falling into the water."

"Damn you. I will do it."

A mock expression upon her face, the witch cackled. "You will? So you agree?"

"I agree to bring the mortal woman back with me."

"There is more. She must love you more than her own life, more than she loves those things closest to her."

"I will do it."

"And A Aran will fall to me if you fail."

"I do not have the power to agree to such a thing."

The witch came to stand behind him. "Ah, but you do."

The blood of the royal rose flows in your veins. You may not rule, but the bargain is still made."

"I made no bargain for the land of A Aran."

"Yes, you did."

"Let him go, then. I will do this thing, and in return you will not bother A Aran ever again. We will be free of your tricks and your floods. You will take yourself to another dimension."

She squealed, a high-pitched sound that hurt his ears.. "You dare to bargain more with me?"

"I will dare what I have to.

"Agreed. I will add one stipulation, noble young prince. If you fail to bring your mortal love to Faery, there is one way to save A Aran. If you fall to the field of flowers, and take your own life, I will spare your city of roses should you fail in your quest of love." She waited while he thought.

"Agreed."

Diarmuid shook himself. The memory of the Sea Witch still had the ability to make his skin crawl. He could not fail. Would not allow himself to fail. He had no desire to fall in the field of flowers. Not then and not now. He had found her, the woman fated to love him. Kayleigh was the woman fated to love him, and now it was time to go find her.



God, it was hot for spring.

Kayleigh went to the shed at the back of the house where she'd had the slate dropped off. Had she been

out of her mind to do this? Yeah, a pathway from the porch to the garden was a great idea, but she'd hoped Matthew would help her. She should have known better.

Leaning over, she grabbed another large piece of the gray-colored stone and hefted it up into her old rusty wheelbarrow. The sucker was on its last legs. The tires were patched and still lost air. Thank the heavens for air compressors or she'd never be able to move all this stone.

Stepping between the wooden handles she lifted and started off to the rose garden. When she rounded the corner of the house, she stopped.

"What in the world?"

The roses had gone crazy.

They were over a foot and a half taller. Every last bush in full bloom, but not normal blooms. These were bigger than her outstretched hand. She stood in shock. First the flowers at the back porch, and now this?

What on earth was going on?

Logically she knew there was no reasonable explanation for this...no good scientific reason for this to be happening. A shiver ran down her spine, something was at work in her rose garden, but for the life of her she couldn't understand what...



Angela and Kayleigh were in the rose garden, the sun bright and warm above them. She still hadn't tackled the stone path yet. The wheelbarrow still sat where

she had left it when Angela had pulled into the driveway.

Angela looked like she'd just walked out of *Vogue Magazine*.

She felt dowdy in plain work clothes and her hair yanked up into a ponytail to keep it out of her face. She had on her best work jeans and tennis shoes, the old ones she always wore when she worked outside.

Yanking on a particularly stubborn weed, Kayleigh put her weight into dislodging it. Clearing the weeds out alone was going to take forever.

"So what happened last night?" Angela sat about a foot away, her pretty blue sundress spread out around her tan legs. She looked like a princess with her artfully made up face and curled hair.

"I thought you came by to help me." Kayleigh huffed and pulled hard on another weed.

"I did. But I also wanted to know what happened last night. Best friend's rights and all that jazz."

Kayleigh looked at her best friend. Dressed in a sundress and heels, she knew that Angela hadn't come to work. Nosy is what she was. "Why should I tell you? And why are you wearing a sundress to help me pull weeds?"

Angela grinned, her short black hair bouncing around her. "I'm meeting Steve for lunch here in a bit. This dress is guaranteed to make him drool. Don't you think?"

"I swear it's amazing the man can still walk after all you do to torment him."

"I can't help it if I have an active sex life. That is one major thing about marriage. You can get it when

you want it. You could do with some sex yourself."

Kayleigh rolled her eyes. "Sex is the least of my problems."

"Will you spill, woman? I'm dying here."

Reaching down to pick up her snips, she teased Angela some more. "Okay, so he's a great kisser."

Angela came up on her knees and grabbed her arm. "You kissed him. You actually kissed him?" she sat back down. "Will wonders never cease."

Kayleigh shrugged. "Geez, lay off, will you? Yes, I kissed him. After a bit. I'm still not sure seeing him again is a good idea, though."

Angela's eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open. "Are you crazy? Even if he doesn't stay, think of the great memories you'd have." She wagged a pointed finger at her friend. "That man has an ass to die for."

Kayleigh gave Angela a playful slap. "I cannot believe you. Men do have brains, you know."

Angela huffed. "Who cares if they have brains? It's the body and the face that's important."

Kayleigh shook her snips at Angela. "You are hopeless."

"I know. So come on, what else?"

"Well, he wanted to see me today but I told him I was busy."

Angela let out a squeak. "You told him what? My God, where did I go wrong in your training, huh? Where? I'm a failure. You've got the most gorgeous man we've ever seen panting after you and you put him off."

Kayleigh snickered. "I don't want to seem too

willing, Angela."

"Willing, hell! I would have attacked him."

A sneaky smile crept onto Kayleigh's face. "You have no idea. He's very romantic." She went to another bloom, counted down to the fifth leaf and snipped. "He brought food, and we looked at the stars. Then we kissed and then we kissed some more." Kayleigh stopped and thought for a moment. "I don't know what it is about him. He makes me feel comfortable, and every time I think I'm in control everything goes haywire again. I wasn't even going to see him again."

"Okay, you're nuts. Absolutely nuts. Enjoy him, Kayleigh. How many times in your life do you meet a guy like him? Enjoy it, but protect your heart. Who knows, maybe he'll decide to come live here because he just can't live without you. Or you could always leave with him, you know."

Kayleigh gave Angela a sad smile. "You know I can't leave. Rather, I don't want to leave. I want to raise my children here. I love this place; it would break my heart to have to leave." Shaking her head, she went to the next dead bloom to snip. "Nah, I can't ever see that happening."

Angela came to kneel beside her, pulling her dress free of her knees, and draped an arm across her shoulders. "You know what, chickie? Sometimes you have to take the bull by the horns and just go for it. You can't live your life trying to protect yourself all the time. What's the fun in that?"

"You're right. Maybe I will enjoy him. Just take it as it comes."

"That's my girl! Now I've got to go pick up Steve." Angela stood and brushed off her skirt. "But I'll call you later. And if tall, dark and Irish shows up, do what I would do and enjoy every minute of it!"



Kayleigh decided she had put off the slate job long enough. Wishing for another set of strong hands and an able body, she groaned when she lifted the heavy piece of stone.

"Are you out to kill yourself, then, with no help whatsoever?"

Diarmuid's voice sounded right at her ear. She hadn't even heard him walk up.

It scared her so badly she dropped the large piece of stone...right on her big toe.

"Ouch! Shit, shit, shit!"

Kayleigh hopped around on one foot.

"Are you all right?" Instantly Diarmuid was there, lifting her off her feet. "Woman, you are going to drive me mad." He carried her to the steps of the back porch and set her down.

Kayleigh grimaced and when she could catch her breath in between the throbbing pain, she slapped at him. "No, I'm not all right. You scared me to death. You shouldn't sneak up on people like that. See what happened?"

Diarmuid went down on one knee in front of her.

Now that the initial shock wore off, she looked at him. Today he wore tight blue jeans and a long sleeved T-shirt pushed up almost to his elbows. That

T-shirt didn't hide a thing and revealed a well-developed physique. Muscle rippled as he moved.

"Let me see."

She brushed his hands away. "I'm fine. It just smarts a bit, that's all."

"Quit being a baby, what if you've broken it?"

She wiggled her toe inside of her shoe, well...tried to wiggle it. Not much room in tennis shoes. "It okay...just hurts."

He wasn't listening to her. Already he had untied her shoe and was very carefully slipping it off her foot.

"You don't have to do that, you know."

He paused with his fingers beneath her sock almost to the heel. "I don't *have* to do anything. I want to make sure you are unharmed." And with that, he pulled her sock the rest of the way off. "Now bend..."

Yeesh...he was worse than a mother. "Oh, all right, for Pete's sake." She flexed her toes and swallowed hard with the bite of pain.

Diarmuid nodded. "It's not broken."

It still throbbed like the devil. Her toe was red and felt like hell, but she would survive.

Tilting her head to the side, she reached up to brush the curl of dark hair that fell over his forehead. "So do you always come to the rescue?"

"Only when silly women do things they have no business doing."

She straightened at his words. "Silly? I'm not silly. If I don't do it, who will?"

He slipped her sock back on and patted her foot. "I'm glad it's not as bad as I thought."

Kayleigh grabbed her shoe and slipped it back on. "Worse things have happened to me than dropping a piece of slate on my toe."

Diarmuid stood, put his hands in the back pocket of his jeans and looked over at the wheelbarrow... "So what are you trying to do?"

She slipped her shoe back on, and tied her laces into a bow before she got up. *Damn thing still hurt.*

She pointed where the grass had been worn down from the porch to the garden. "I'm putting down a path from the porch to the garden. I thought it would look pretty."

He looked out at the garden. "The roses are doing well."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Yes, they are. Strange, though, they've grown a foot almost overnight. And the blooms...they're so big...I don't understand it."

Turning around, he smiled back at her and held out a hand. "Some things aren't meant to be understood, but just are." He winked at her. "Come on, I'll give you a hand with that stone."



They worked for the rest of the afternoon, putting down the slate for the path and finished weeding the roses. The two of them worked well together, as soon as she knew she needed something she would turn to get it and there he was...first it was the spade, then a rake, and the last was the wheelbarrow to haul off the trash.

"Are you reading my mind?"

A deep male laugh escaped him. "I can do a lot of things, but reading minds is not one of them. Would be a nice trick, though, might come in handy."

She started raking the rest of the old mulch they had replaced into a big pile to take to the compost bin. They had gotten so much accomplished, it made her head spin. In another hour she'd have to go work at Robbie's...and she still hadn't gotten that nap she'd planned on. But she smiled when she looked at the rose garden. It looked beautiful, nice and tidy. It would have taken her days to do all this without his help.

When he came from the back of the yard for another load, she drank him in...a fine sheen of perspiration made his T-shirt stick to his chest, outlining all that hard muscle. He didn't seem to mind the work.

He grinned at her, his eyes so dark a blue you almost wondered if he wore contacts. Pleasure went deep as she watched the way he moved with such efficiency, the wind ruffling his black hair.

Too good to be true.

There was a saying about that...Most things too good to be true usually were, and then Angela's words from earlier came back to her...*Enjoy him while he's here...*

She looked down at the pile of weeds and grass. "This is it...last load. Then I've got to go take a shower and get ready for work." The rake still in her hands, she gazed at him. "Thanks for all your help. You didn't have to do all this."

He set the wheelbarrow down. "I didn't have anything planned for today," and added with a shrug, "I like working outside."

"It shows."

"So is that all I get for helping you?" The wicked glint in his eye sparked a jolt of lust deep within her.

Deciding to play his game, she dropped the rake. With a seductive roll to her hips, she glided to him. "Well, there are other ways to repay favors."

Diarmuid crossed his arms across his massive chest. "I'm listening."

Like a cat stalking its prey, she circled him, letting desire and need show in her eyes. "A man like you...I can think of all kinds of ways to repay you."

Kayleigh trailed a hand over his back and raked her nails across his T-shirt-clad shoulders. "What did you have in mind, handsome?"

When she came to stop in front of him, she noticed the high color in his cheeks. Letting her gaze wander slowly from his face, down the length of him, she chuckled at the bulge in his tight jeans.

She stepped in close, trailing one finger down the middle of his chest to the waistband of his jeans. Leaning in, she reached up and kissed him, letting her hand fall lower, then lower still until she cupped the ridge of his arousal.

His sudden intake of breath wasn't lost on her, and she rubbed her palm along the length of that fine erection. She teased him, taunted him. Dared him to respond.

In a flash of movement so fast it could have been a lightning strike, he wrapped his arms around her.

Lifted her off her feet and plundered her open mouth.

He sucked on her tongue. Nibbled on her lower lip.
And something deep inside of her broke.

Chapter Eight

The days turned into a week, and one week turned into two. And every night she met him at the waterfall. They talked about everything. His homeland and how he missed it, to nature and even politics. She was surprised to learn that Diarmuid had no idea of the current world situation, or even what went on locally. She harassed him constantly about it. He would only hang his head and give her a bashful smile.

But still in all the long hours they spent together, whether out by the waterfall or when he would unexpectedly show up to help her with the farm, he never really spoke of himself. She really didn't know any more about him than she had to begin with. He would change the subject or steer the conversation back to her and her family when she probed too deeply.

The time would come when he would have to go, and the mere thought of his absence made her knees weak. What would she do when he left?

She couldn't make him stay, and her heart ached with the knowledge. They were at an impasse, a stalemate, and Kayleigh didn't want to have to think

about it. It hurt to know that one day this wonderful man might not be around to laugh and joke with, that he might not be around to kiss her senseless beneath a bright full moon.

When he left, he would take her heart with him, she knew that now. How had it happened that he had stolen it so quickly?

Tonight she would ask him how many days they had left. It couldn't be much longer, and she needed to prepare herself for the worse.

She thought of him every moment of every day. Washing the dishes became a new way to daydream about him. While working at Robbie's she constantly checked the door, waiting for him to come waltzing in with Cathal to sit at the bar and chit chat for a while.

Diarmuid had become a habit. A habit she didn't want to give up.

Taking her hands out of the dishwater, she shook them off and went to grab a hand towel by the sink, when she noticed a strange mark on her hand. Drying them quickly she studied the mark in the center of her palm. It looked like a rose had been etched into her skin. *How strange.* She scrubbed at the mark, but it didn't budge. She rubbed harder until her skin turned a bright pink. The mark remained.



"Your time is almost up, and you've only but kissed her. When do you suppose you're going to tell her all?" Cathal paced as he spouted words of anger and impatience.

"I thought you liked her." Diarmuid let out a sigh and stretched out upon the grass.

"I do like her. But our time runs short."

By the Goddess, how did he tell her? When should he tell her? But how did one tell a woman that she had such power over him? And could he really tell her and stay in keeping with the bargain? The words of the Sea Witch rang inside his head. "She must make the choice of her own free will."

He had made sure to be careful, to not scare her, but to tell her of his heritage might push her so far away that all would be lost. Weariness pulled at him and again he looked down at the mark of the Rose in the center of his palm.

A mate.

He hadn't expected this. The symbol of the Rose was as old as the legend of his people. They had carried it with them when they'd been forced underground. Forced to create a new world where they would hide in secret beyond the veil. His mate would carry a similar mark in the palm of her hand. He wondered even now if Kayleigh bore the mark. It still had not appeared as of yesterday, and he was beginning to worry.

"These things take time, Cathal. You know this and you know I cannot force her hand."

Cathal shot him a look of disgust. "It would be better if we could simply steal her away. Damn witch." He continued to pace back in forth in front of the great Oak tree.

Diarmuid smirked. Cathal had never been involved with the fairer sex for longer than it took to

sate his desire. "Yes, my friend. But you were not cursed by the Sea Witch, either."

"Don't even mention that scaly wench to me. She tried to kill me."

"And lucky you were to escape her tentacles."

"Yes, luck," he scoffed. "Luck that got you cursed for trying to help me."

Diarmuid closed his eyes as the sun warmed his face. "I must take a wife, one who will come to me and forsake her world; otherwise I will be trapped in the veil. Do not give up hope. All is not lost yet."

"Well, you have three days to convince her now, don't you? I suggest you take care of this thing. I am tired and wish to go home."

"You may return home at any time you like. I do not hold you here against your will. It is only your honor that holds you in this place."

"I swore I would protect you, and I mean to do it."

Diarmuid laughed as Cathal disappeared into shimmering light only to reappear between the branches at the top of the old Oak in a fit of temper.

He had agreed to meet her at the waterfall after her shift at Robbie's. The plan had been set in motion. He would tell her all tonight. Then he could do no more, the decision would remain hers and hers alone. He would set the stage, and then he would offer her the world.

His world.

Immortality.

A life where she would never have to work again. Never be alone again or mistreated. He would offer her great riches and the ability to do as she wished.

He grinned. Tonight she would be his. Somehow, some way he would convince her.



Kayleigh looked in the mirror. Her long auburn hair gleamed after a hundred strokes. She checked to make sure she didn't have any lipstick on her teeth. One hand came to rest on her stomach. Oh, God. Tonight she was going to do it. Whatever had to be discussed would have to be discussed. She couldn't wait one minute longer. He teased her constantly but always pulled back at the last minute. No more. She'd seduce him if she had to, jump his bones as a last resort, but she would have him tonight if it killed her.

The outfit she chose to wear proved it, the sexiest dress she owned. A black, slinky concoction made for sin that clung to her curves with a daring slit up to her thigh. The scooped neck dipped low to show off her full breasts. If this dress didn't do the trick, then the man was a saint.

Her stomach was a bundle of nerves. Need and anticipation clamored inside of her. A quick glance at the clock on her dresser told her she only had a few minutes before she'd have to leave.

They were meeting at the waterfall. She now thought of it as 'their' place. No longer hers alone. If he left, she wondered if she'd ever be able to go back.

Thank God Matthew wasn't home to see her all dressed up. She didn't need grief from him tonight. She'd taken the night off just for this purpose. Grabbing her short, beaded bolero jacket, she headed

out of the house. Her hands shook as she put on the jacket.

Get ready, 'cause here I come.

She saw him the minute he walked through the trees. Dressed all in black, he reminded her of Heathcliff wandering in from the Moors. His black hair, still wet, clung to his head and that stray lock that would never mind his fingers stubbornly curled over his brow. He walked as she imagined a warrior of old might walk. Shoulders straight back and his head held high. He only needed a sword to complete the picture.

Diarmuid's eyes widened when he saw her and he stood still as a statue. "You're early; I thought I might get here before you tonight."

She waited for him, not moving, not trusting herself. Not right now, not when the urge to throw herself into his arms was so strong. "I took tonight off."

Hungry eyes roamed over her, taking in the dress. He came to her and ran his hands over her upper arms. "You are the most beautiful thing these eyes have ever seen. Have I told you that? Your skin is like the finest cream and softer than the most expensive silk. I think you're trying to kill me with that dress."

Blood rushed to her face and looked away from that knowing gaze. "No, you're no use to me dead." Then she looked back, defying him to deny her. "I wanted tonight to be special, a night neither of us would forget."

He took a deep breath, briefly closed his eyes, and then released it with a nod of his head. "Ah, love.

Every moment with you is special. But I may have a hard time controlling myself with you in that heart-stopping dress."

She gave him a sly smile, "Then I guess it's doing its job."

He quirked a brow at her. "Ah, so your aim *is* to torment me until I am blind with passion."

She moved forward and wound her arms around his neck, let her fingers play in the soft hair at his neck, and whispered in his ear. "Something like that. You've teased me. No, tortured me enough for two lifetimes this past week. The time for games is over, no more playtime. I don't think I could take it."

Diarmuid curled his hand around her throat, testing the pulse that beat frantically against his fingers. "Yes, I agree," his voice a velvet murmur against her ear. "The time for games is over."

He lowered his head, his eyes fierce with longing, and took her lips in whisper of movement. Carefully he parted her lips and then he devoured, his tongue a weapon of desire.

Kayleigh surrendered to it, surrendered to him. He was all she had ever wanted. And maybe, just maybe he would chose to stay with her instead of leaving. Sweet lips robbed her of thought. Knees weak, she leaned into him, needing his solid strength. Strong arms tightened around her and held her close as if afraid she would disappear.

An ache began at the apex of her thighs; her skin grew warm and flushed. She wanted him. Wanted his heat deep within her, moving and taking her to a world where nothing else mattered but the two of

them. Then once again she felt him pull back. No, her mind screamed, not yet. I'm not done with him yet.

"I'm sorry, love, but there are things that must be said. Things I can no longer hide from you."

Kayleigh opened her eyes to gaze into concerned blue ones. "What do you mean?" Suspicion planted a small seed of doubt in her mind. "You're not married, are you?" she spat and moved back from him as if he had the plague or some other vile disease.

A look of utter shock came over his face and he shook his head. "No. I'm not married."

Kayleigh's mind whirled. Well, if he wasn't married, then what was the problem? The man generated enough heat to stabilize the State of California's energy problems, and he kept stopping right at the crucial moment.

She huffed. "I don't understand." She threw her hands outward and began to pace in front of him. "I go and get all dolled up, I even put on makeup. I'm wearing flipping garters and a thong, all for you, and now you want to talk? Who is the woman here? Cause it sure doesn't sound like it's me."

Diarmuid's eyes went wide and he took a step back. "Hold on there a minute. I never said I didn't want you, and for the record, I love women."

Kayleigh shot him a caustic glare.

"Wait, that didn't come out right either. You've got me bloody un-hinged here. Just give me a minute to get my bearings. It's not anything at all like you're thinking."

Temper got the best of her; she didn't want to give him time. How embarrassing. She'd practically

thrown herself at him. All this work for nothing, not to mention she lost two hour's wages plus tips this afternoon for his sorry Irish ass. Matthew hadn't spoken one word to her in two weeks because she was seeing him, and now this?

"Okay, I'll give you five minutes." She said holding up five fingers. Mocking his accent, "You better make it good, boy-o."

Pacing and muttering beneath his breath he finally turned back to her. "You're not really going to believe this, but then you might."

"What? Believe what? Just spit it out." *Good grief, what could be so horrible?*

"I'm not human." His words had been a whisper.

Kayleigh's mouth dropped open. Did he just say what she thought he said? "Did you just say you were not human?"

"Yes," he answered. He ran his hands through his hair.

Gaping at him, she laughed. A nervous, I'm going to lose my mind laugh. "You're not human? Okay, then did you fly in on your spaceship this afternoon just in time for our date?"

He frowned and narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm not going to continue unless you take me seriously."

"Well, if you're not human, then what are you? Peter Pan?"

Pursing his lips and shoving his hands in his pockets he looked lost. "I'm a Rose Fae. The term Faerie is what I believe mortals used once."

"What?" she screeched.

His voice rose in response. "There, I've told you.

I'm of the Seelie Court of the Tuatha De. That's why I cannot, well...you know. If I did, I'm afraid it wouldn't go well with you."

"Can't what? Make love to me?" She stalked off only to turn back around and stalk back to him. She laughed, a harsh sound even to her own ears. Well, this was a fine how do you do. All her life she'd wanted to meet a Faerie, and now here was Diarmuid professing to be one of the lost race. "Prove it."

His frown deepened, taken back by her anger. "Prove it, you say? You'll promise not to run?"

Kayleigh stood her ground. "Yes, I promise. I'll stand right here, even if you turn green and shrink five feet."

He chuckled at that, and then his laugh became deeper until he threw his head back with abandon.

"I don't see what's so funny."

He held up a hand. "I'm sorry. I forgot the human penchant for thinking all the Fae were only little wee men in forest-colored outfits with pointed shoes."

"Well, aren't they?"

"Some." He continued to laugh. "But not my race." He slapped his hands against his legs and the laughter bent him over. "You're going to lead me a merry little race, now, aren't you?"

Scrunching her lips into a pout, she waited. Let him laugh, at least she wasn't claiming to be one of the little people. "What? Don't Faeries have sex?"

He laughed harder. "If...If you don't stop, I'm going to fall down."

"Well, I hope you do. I'm going home." She turned on her heel and marched in the direction of the house

until Diarmuid, still trying to regain his composure, grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

"Don't go, love. Truly, I'll see what I can do to prove it to you." He looked down and then he looked at his hand. "Here, this should prove it to you." He held out his palm for her to inspect it.

"I don't see anything."

"But you do, and if I'm a betting man, and all the Fae are, I'll say you have one in the center of your palm as well."

Kayleigh grew thoughtful. "A rose?"

"Aye. The mark of the Rose. 'Tis the mark of royalty, the mark of the house of AAran. Don't you know that? I thought you said your grandfather came from the old country."

"He did, but he never said anything about the mark of the Rose."

"And you're Irish?"

"You know that I am."

"Well, most of the human race that knew of the Rose of AAran lived thousands of years ago. It appears that the legend has died as well." He grabbed her hand.

Kayleigh clenched her fingers in tight.

"Stop it, Kayleigh Marie."

"Don't you use that tone with me."

"Then let me see the mark, I know it's there."

"You don't know anything." She stomped her foot in annoyance.

"Then you don't care if I look then do you." He forced her fingers to open, and let out a big sigh. "I knew it. We are fated to be together. There is no

mistaking it now. You're sure you didn't know of the Rose of A Aran?"

"No." Kayleigh still didn't really believe him. Maybe he needed mental help, there was a clinic not far from the farm.

"The Rose Fae are my people, and this mark that sits in the center of your palm means that we are fated to be together." He held out his hand, palm up, to show her an identical mark in the center of his hand. "I have the exact match to your mark."

"Your people? It doesn't prove anything." She wasn't buying any of this. What did he take her for? Some stupid woman without an intelligent thought in her head?

Diarmuid let out an exasperated sigh. "Close your eyes. I'm not supposed to be doing this, but as you have to make the choice, then you might as well know what you're in for..." he waited. "Close them, or it'll not work."

Kayleigh closed her eyes. *Leave it to me to find the one wacko from Ireland.* But she did as he asked and stood perfectly still. "Can I open them now?"

He moved behind her and his breath stirred the hair on the nape of her neck. A chill ran down her spine. God, but the man reeked of sensuality even as crazy as he was. The heady smell of roses surrounded her.

"Ready?" he asked in that drawl and lilt that she'd grown to treasure.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Don't open them yet." He turned her back around to face him. "Okay. You can open your eyes now."

She almost didn't want to look. What if this was all just a game, what if he only wanted to trick her with an ill timed joke. The man had become famous for that in the last few days, but something in his voice told her that behind his laughter rang a note of truth. So taking a deep breath and counting to ten, she opened her eyes. She blinked twice, then shook her head to clear her vision.

Her mouth fell open at the sight before her. Diarmuid stood in front of her, but he wasn't the same man and definitely not the same species.

He had wings and very pointed ears.

His beautiful eyes had changed color from palest blue to the dark of midnight. His black shirt and trousers were gone, replaced by a gossamer fabric that glittered like diamonds in the setting sun. Every color of the rainbow shone in the material with his movement. The pants, if you could call them that, looked more like tights, and clung to the muscles of his legs. The shirt made of the same material came down to mid-thigh. It tied around his waist and opened at the neck to reveal beautiful male skin.

He looked like a fairytale prince. His hair now fell past his shoulders and there were braids on either side of his face. Woven into the braids were jewels so tiny you might almost miss them if not for the light of the sun. But the biggest change, not to mention the pointed ears, was the wings.

Wings? Oh, my. The shock of it all hit her like a cement truck. The man had wings. "Have you always had those?" she squeaked out.

He looked over his shoulder to where she pointed.

"These? Yes, since I transformed into adulthood. Do they bother you?"

She couldn't speak. All the blood drained out of her brain and she couldn't form a coherent sentence. He had been telling the truth. He really was a Faerie.

Kayleigh's hand fluttered to her stomach. "I don't think I'm feeling very well." The world seemed to fade back into a dark tunnel and became smaller and smaller until it blinked out completely.

Chapter Nine

Diarmuid caught her in mid-swoon. By the Goddess, he hadn't expected this. Anger, disbelief and perhaps laughter, but for her to faint? That had never occurred to him. But then again he'd never appeared without human glamour to anyone before. New territory, it seemed.

He caught her up in his arms and moved over to the large boulder where he could sit comfortably with her in his arms. His Kayleigh. Poor thing, she hadn't believed him. Well, and it was a shock to her system for sure. He lowered his head and kissed her pink lips.

Her eyelids flickered and then she opened them. "You're still the same."

"I'm afraid so, love." He grimaced. What if she couldn't handle the truth? This wasn't the bad part, but he couldn't tell her what would happen to him if she failed to choose him. If they made love and she chose to remain here, then he would return to the land of the Fae and he would fall into the field of flowers. There would be no other for him. "Can I touch them?" she quietly asked.

He looked down on her beautiful face, the face of a

human angel, and nodded. "Yes. You may touch them. They're stronger than you think."

She reached out a tentative hand and stroked the upper band of his right wing. "It's so soft. It reminds me of a butterfly's wing."

He shrugged; she wasn't far off the mark there. With her in a prone position in his lap, he enjoyed her nearness. He inhaled her scent and closed his eyes. "So are you ready to talk to me now?"

Her eyes were still glazed and now that she saw him in his true form he waited with baited breath to see if she would still want him. It was all well and good to want him when he looked normal, but now? She squirmed in his arms, and he spread his legs a bit, as she was causing quite the reaction in his lower extremities.

A delicate hand flicked forward from his wing to lift one of his braids. The braids, too, were part of his heritage, one of the things that proclaimed his blood of the rose. He thankfully was not the heir of A Aran. That duty belonged to his older sister, but even as a younger sibling his power reached far and wide. There were not many who would challenge a Prince of A Aran. "So do you find me as attractive now, love? Now that you see me in my true form?" Her eyes came back to his and he lost himself in their emerald depths.

"Do you think me so shallow that I'd turn away from you because you're different?"

He turned his head. He didn't want her to see the anguish and pain that lurked in his soul. And that is exactly what she *would* see if she looked too long. She

would see his dying need of her and he could not afford to let happen.

He brought her up into a sitting position. His voice dropped an octave, husky with emotion that felt foreign to him. He had lingered long beyond the veil and these new feelings tore at him. "Now is the time we talk."

"More talking?"

He gave her a dazzling smile. "Yes, more talk. There are a few rules you need to be aware of."

"Rules?" She raised a dainty brow at him.

"Yes. If you had not been marked by the rose, and we had made love, after I left you would have pined for me."

Confusion clouded her eyes. "That's an old word."

A smile flirted with his lips. "Yes, but one that best describes what would have happened."

"Go on."

"You would have pined to your death, I'm afraid."

She straightened and sat up at the comment and gave him a shocked look. "You mean I would have died of a broken heart?"

"Yes."

"That's awful." She punched him hard in the shoulder. "Why would you have done that to me?"

He tilted his head to the side and pursed his lips. "I wouldn't have done it on purpose, and need I remind you of your little fit of temper earlier before you showed me the mark of the Rose upon your hand?"

"Well, okay. So you've got me there. But what happens now that I've got this mark. Do you know it won't come off no matter what I do?"

"No, it will never come off. You will bear that mark until your last breath."

"That sounds kind of final." Her nose scrunched up as she frowned.

He loved the way her facial expressions gave away her emotions.

"I'm trying to take all this in. It's not every day you find out you've been having lurid fantasies about a Faerie."

"You've been having dreams about me?"

Kayleigh huffed. "Don't go getting all macho on me. I should have never told you. But anyway, having dreams and falling for a guy who isn't human doesn't exactly happen everyday. But I think I always suspected there was something weird about you. You never invited me to your room and you would never tell me where you were staying. Where did you stay? And where is Cathal?"

"We stayed here, of course. Where else would I stay? The gate between our worlds is behind the waterfall."

Kayleigh slapped her palm to her forehead. "Geez, I should have known it was that simple. Right behind the waterfall, eh? And you've been sleeping on my property since when?"

All of sudden Diarmuid felt like a youngling being scolded by one of his elders. "Since that first night."

"So you've been this close to me, and I didn't even know it. Do you sleep on the ground? In a tent?"

Diarmuid couldn't meet her gaze. How did he tell her he slept within the bud of a rose? "Your rose garden is quite comfortable."

Kayleigh got up from his lap, her clingy dress bunched up around her very generous butt. "Quit looking at my backside, buster, I'm not done with you yet."

Diarmuid sighed.

"So if we make love now, what happens?"

"The mark of the Rose upon your hand means that we are fated to be together. It does not mean that you must remain with me. However, if we were to make love, you could then make the choice to come to A Aran and be my bride."

"A Aran? That's where you're from? I thought you said you came from Ireland?"

"Yes, I did come from Ireland. But most of the Fae have left now and have sought refuge beyond the veil in," he searched for the word, "another dimension. But I am from the Kingdom of A Aran, a name Ireland once wore. I am the crown Prince. My mother is the Queen."

"She's the Queen?" she said with a look of disbelief. "And what would she say about all this?"

Eyes downcast he answered her, "I'm afraid she already knows."

Kayleigh continued to pace and Diarmuid could do nothing more than sit and watch.

"And it wouldn't bother her a bit that her son, the crown prince, is mated to a lowly human?"

"Well, I'm sure she wasn't happy, and she might have wished different for me, but if you return to A Aran with me, her pleasure would be great." Diarmuid bit his tongue. Damn the Sea Witch and her interfering ways. Why she had to curse him in this

manner muddled his brain. If he made a mistake and told her too much, they would both be lost within the veil. And that would be worse than falling in the field of flowers, for if you were lost within the veil, there was no hope of ever coming back.

Kayleigh pranced back to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips. "Okay, let me get this straight—could you lose the wings for a bit, they're distracting."

"Your wish is my command." With a single thought he imposed his human glamour once again.

"So if we had made love and I had not been your mate, I would have died. But now that we are so-called 'fated' to be together, you could make love to me and I would be granted permission to enter your kingdom as your wife. So if we make love, does that mean that in your world, we are married?"

Diarmuid gave her a wry smile. His Kayleigh had brains, and bless her, she continued to try and figure it all out in her head. "No. We would not be married, but you would be seen as my fiancé. I believe this is the word you humans use."

She nodded her head. "Mmmhmmm," she muttered. "Especially since we are mated and I'm stuck with this mark on my hand for the rest of my life. So tell me. What happens if we don't make love?"

The smile left Diarmuid's face. He took a deep breath and prayed to the Goddess that she would choose to go with him. "If we made love, it would be only that. Before I knew that you were fated to me, it could have caused you physical harm. If you do not return with me, then I must go back and fulfill my

duty to my people."

"So you can't stay here."

"No. I cannot. I have two more days and then I must return, with or without you."

Kayleigh collapsed in a heap to the ground in a heap of black satin where she had been standing. "So that's it, then?" she stammered. "I would never see you again."

"I'm afraid so. I have only been given this short amount of time to find you, and offer my gift to you. The gift would be to live with me in AArán until we chose the sleep of my people, which could be thousands of years." He got up and walked to her, kneeling before her taking her face into his hands. "Think of it, Kayleigh, you would want for nothing. You would have me by your side, there are no money problems in AArán, and flowers are everywhere. I could shower you with gifts and jewels. You would be the most beautiful princess we have ever been graced with."

"Could I come back? Ever?" Her voice had lost most of its bravado and she looked small and helpless sitting on the grass in front of him.

His gaze troubled, he let out a cautiously held breath. "I don't know."

Kayleigh searched his face for answers, for an easy way to resolve their problem. "So If I go with you, there is no guarantee that I could come back? I'd have to leave everything I love? My home, my family, my friends, this farm? All of it. I'd have to give everything up. What do you give up if I go back with you?"

Diarmuid stood and moved away. He couldn't look at her, couldn't help her with this decision. He went and stood upon the bank of the stream. Watched as leaves fell upon the fast moving ripples of water, dancing and dipping on the surface, only to be swept far away from where they fell.

He inhaled deeply for courage. "I would gain you, Kayleigh, and live a happy, healthy life. *You* would be my gift. I have given up much to come here and find you." He glanced back to look at her, his crestfallen beautiful Kayleigh sitting on the ground looking so defeated. A lone tear fell from her misty eyes.

If he had doubted at one time if he truly had a heart, he knew that something within him broke at the sight of her tears.

She swiped at the trailing tears on her cheeks. "You know?" she shrugged in defeat. "All of my life I wished for a Prince, but I thought he would want to stay here on the farm with me and raise a family." She plucked a blade of grass and threw it away. "Little did I know that I would have to lose everything to keep him."

Diarmuid could see the indecision roll over her in the slight slump of her shoulders, the shallow rise and fall of her chest, and the haunted look in her eyes. He could not, under any circumstance, try to sway her decision one way or another.

It was forbidden.

And he knew only too well the consequence to the both of them should he even try such a tricky maneuver. More than that, he didn't want to do such a thing. What good would it do to have her at his side

knowing that he had manipulated her feelings, her thoughts, and possibly her very soul?

It pained him to feel so helpless.

Thinking only of giving her a moment to herself, to give her time to think he moved away and walked close to the edge of the wood. The tall pines giving shade where the warmth of the sun might burn, he remained in the shadow.

Kayleigh remained in the middle of the glade, her head lowered and turned away from him. His hands tightened into fists at his side.

I hate this.

"Is there no other way?" her meek voice called out to him before he slid from her view. At the sound he turned, unable to resist the sorrow in her voice, and moved back to her. He dropped down beside her and sliding an arm around her shoulders then pulled her close unable to bear her tears any longer. "I wish I could tell you there was another way. Do you hate me for deceiving you?"

Chapter Ten

How could you hate a man who had come from a land so far away just to find you? Her heart hurt. Why her? Why did this have to happen? Why couldn't she have found some nice man who only wanted to settle down and have kids? But no, she had to fall for a guy who only had days left in her world.

She couldn't make this choice. Too much depended on her. But she couldn't stand the thought of never seeing Diarmuid's face again. He made her laugh, made her blood boil, and her heart sing. When had she come to depend on him so much?

And she had to give him up.

She couldn't leave. Even now, even before she thoroughly thought it out, how could she leave Matthew? Every day she was frightened when she went to wake him. Afraid of what she might find when she opened his bedroom door. How could she leave Angela, who'd called her only a few days ago with the news that she and her husband Steve were expecting their first child? She would never see that tiny face, the little one that would be her godchild. What a dirty hand the fates had played on them. She

finally found the man of her dreams, and she would lose him. She wanted to lie down and cry.

Diarmuid looked at her like she could save him, like she could just pick up and leave everything she had ever known and go with him, never knowing if she could come back.

She couldn't do it, but she didn't hate him. Could never hate him.

"No, I don't hate you."

She reached up and ran the backs of her fingers along his lean jaw. The tiny stubble of hair prickled her fingers. Did the Fae even have to do such mundane things as shave? There was so much she still didn't know.

Looking into his eyes, pleading with him for the truth, she asked the question she had to know. "Do you love me, Diarmuid? Tell me that. Is your heart open to me? Would you give up everything for me? Like you are asking me to do for you? Could you do it?" He turned his face into her hand and kissed her marked palm. "I never believed in love until I met you, Kayleigh. I thought it only a word Mortals tossed about to get their way. But now I know I was wrong. If I have a heart, it is yours. But no matter how much I may love you, I cannot stay."

"Why?" she cried, angry at his answer. "Why is it that you cannot stay and yet I would have to go?"

He moved to sit on the ground face to face with her. "Look at me, really look at me. You know what I am. I'm a rose. If I remained beyond my two days, I would be like a rose plucked and put into a vase upon your dresser, but like that rose... I would wither and

die."

Kayleigh didn't want to believe his words. How could this have happened? "It's not fair. Why did you even come here?" She turned her face away from him, not wanting to see the pain in his eyes, but she had to look back. Had to look at him.

Diarmuid closed his eyes, a look of pain etched on his features. "I had to try and find you. I never knew that when I came through the gate that I would find the other half of me. Can you blame me for wanting that? For wanting even one hour with you?"

Closing her eyes against the coming night, she tried to sort it all out in her mind. Her limbs were weak and she knew if she tried to stand, her legs wouldn't hold her. She thought back on the last two weeks with him. They had been the best weeks of her life. He'd made her so happy and had given her so much hope. How silly and stupid she'd been. She should have known that she could never have a man like Diarmuid. Even the fates conspired against her. *Let's give her a little taste of heaven and show her what she could have had...Oh, and now let's snatch it away.*

Lifting her head to look at him, her heart broke.

His head lowered, he stared at the ground, his long dark hair shielding his beautiful face from her view and she wondered how she would ever make it without him. Even now she found it hard to take the next necessary breath of air, knowing that he would leave her. She reached out to touch him and the agony in his eyes tore at her. He was as much a victim of this as she. None of this could be blamed on the other.

He was Fae, she was human.

They had been doomed from the start.

Getting up on her knees, she crawled to him.

He held open his arms and she relished the warmth and security of his embrace. How many more times would she feel his arms around her, how many more times would she be able to feel those full, sensual lips brush her own?

"Kiss me," she whispered softly.

Tenderly he took her lips, his hands curling around the nape of her neck, his fingers gentle. His touch...magical.

"Are you sure?"

She had never been more sure of anything in her life.

"Make love to me. Give me a memory to keep."

Diarmuid grimaced, his jaw clenched with emotion but he said nothing, only cradled her to him.

Her hands found the skin of his chest and delved within his tunic to caress. She couldn't seem to get close enough. His muscles twitched with every touch of her hand while his mouth moved over hers with infinite precision.

A sweet ache began low in her abdomen.

A need, a wanting, made her rock her hips forward. She gasped as gentle fingers tweaked her nipple through the fabric of her dress. Wicked lips pulled away from her mouth to leave a wet trail of moisture down the side of her neck. He nibbled on her ear and she moaned. Every touch, his every movement, brought her closer to the edge.

The edge of her sanity.

She needed him so much, wanted him to be with her forever, but knew that it could not be. She had to take what he offered and let it be enough. And it *would* be enough. She would make sure he never regretted coming to find her and she would savor every moment, every caress, and every fleeting touch of his body for the remainder of her life...

Putting her hands on his chest, she pushed against his solid weight.

He gave her a questioning look.

"Lie down. I want to feel your body stretched out on mine."

A seductive smile curved his lips upward and he leaned back, pulling her down with him. "Mmm...I like this." His hands ran over her face, the touch of his fingers making her crave more.

"What a gift you are. Your face, your skin, I want to devour you. I want to taste every inch of your body."

She smiled. She could give him this. A pleasure so great he would never forget her, never forget the woman he had to leave behind. "I'm all yours."

She scooted up to reach the strong column of his neck, wanting to taste him and leave her mark. Slipping her hands behind his head, she looked deep into his eyes as she lowered her head. "My turn to drive you crazy."

He groaned. "I'm driven by a madness only your lips can cure and I'm holding onto my control by a thread, lass. Do your worst, but be rest assured that I'll give it back in kind."

"I'm counting on it."

She nibbled at the corner of his mouth and his lips parted for her. She took him, letting his taste settle on her tongue. She wanted to memorize everything about him. The strong line of his angular jaw. The strength of his chin, how he tasted, and how his body felt, so firm and strong beneath her. She would need the memory in the long nights to come.

Strong hands cupped her bottom and kneaded the plump flesh of her backside while she drank from his lips. She grazed the cord of muscle down his neck, then soothed it with her tongue.

He growled. "You're not playing fair."

"That's right, I'm not."

His lips forming a feral grin, he grabbed her arms and rolled her onto her back. "So you think you can keep up with me?"

The boyish charm of his smile made her giggle. "I know I can."

"Well, we'll see about that, love" He waved his hand over their bodies, a deep laugh vibrating through him.

Their clothes disappeared in an instant and the shock of his male body now skin to skin with her own made her toes curl. The soft hair on his legs tickled and suddenly she became self-conscious.

"How did you do that?"

He smirked. "'Tis magic, love. The kind of magic I could shower upon you every day for the rest of your life if you'd only but let me."

She frowned. "I don't want to think about that right now."

He rested his forehead against hers and closed his

eyes. "I know, but you cannot blame a Fae for trying."

Forcing a smile on her face, she tipped her head back to kiss his nose. "I don't blame you."

"Close your eyes, love. I've no intention of making love with you for the first time on the cold, hard ground."

She squeezed her eyelids closed while weightlessness consumed her. "What are you doing? We're going to fall." She wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. Her throat constricted, a quick jolt of fear slicing through her.

"Don't open until I tell you. I have a surprise for you."

"I'm not going to open my eyes. Nope. Not going to do it. I'm scared to death what I'd see."

This being in love with a Faery thing seemed to get stranger by the minute.

Something squeezed her body and for a moment she couldn't breathe. Then the sensation eased and she felt normal again.

"What on earth?" Her body felt all tingly and extremely heavy all at once before something soft came up against her back. The sweet fragrance of roses teased her nose much stronger now than before. "Can I open my eyes now?"

He chuckled. "Yes, as long as you don't scream."

Kayleigh opened her eyes. *Cream silk everywhere.* It was the first thought that popped into her brain. Upon further inspection it looked like they were enclosed in a room of almost transparent creamy satin, the walls textured with vertical lines in a darker hue that crisscrossed to curve and tent above them.

"Where are we?" She whispered in awe.

"We...are inside one of your white roses...within the bud."

Her eyes flew back to his, the sparkling mischief couldn't be denied in the twinkling of his gaze.

"We're what?" she squeaked. "Inside a rose?" she pushed at him. "I have got to check this out, move, you big brute." She quickly got up, forgetting her lack of clothing; for some reason it didn't bother her. Not when she had to be *how little*? "How on earth did you do this?"

"It's magic, you don't have to understand it. The Rose Fae, my people, sleep within the bloom of the flower. The flower gives us a soft place to rest and we, in turn, feed the flower with our magic and make it grow."

She turned back to him. "My roses. You did that, didn't you?"

A sly grin appeared on his face. Proudly he answered her. "Guilty."

No one would ever believe her.

She walked to one of the walls and touched. Soft and silky against her calloused hand, her fingers knew the texture immediately. "But how did we get so tiny?" She turned and looked back to Diarmuid who grinned like an absurdly happy naked little boy. "We won't damage them? Is where you sleep?"

"Yes. This is where I rest, and no, it doesn't hurt them. As to how you are so small, well, that is another bit of Fae magic." He shrugged massive male shoulders that didn't at all resemble a flower. "You have heard the legend of Thumbelina?"

"Yes," she muttered, moving around the inside of the enclosure, letting her hand trail against the soft petals.

How could this be real?

Humbled and amazed she turned back to look at him in all his wonderful bare glory. His body glowed warm and bright, his shoulders wide, his long lean legs stretched out in front of him. And well, he looked really happy to see her.

"You're beautiful, did you know that?" She walked back to him, the smell of the rose heady in the air. A tattoo on his bicep caught her attention and she touched it almost afraid he would disappear. "I never realized that you had a tattoo..." A ring of roses wrapped around the rounded muscle of his upper arm. "So..." she arched one brow at him, "are Roses your favorite?"

He coughed and sputtered. "In my home I am called the Rose Prince of AArán. So yes, you might say the rose and I share a kindred spirit."

She circled around him and came to kneel behind him. "And you came all this way to find *me*?" Her hands fluttered over the broad expanse of his back.

She felt his breath hitch.

"The journey was worth any sacrifice I have made. If I only had a minute with you, it would have been enough." He turned his head to look up at her, his blue eyes brimming with emotion. He tugged on her arms and she moved over his shoulder and into his lap. "Now where was I?" One lean male finger skimmed the line of her collarbone. "You are the beauty, Kayleigh. Have you forgotten you are no

longer covered?"

Uh-oh, he'd made her forget.

Her eyes went back to him, he was just as naked as she was and wow, what a great body he had. Big strong thighs tapered into shapely male calves. Toned and trim, he would be a painter's dream. Not too muscular, but not thin, either.

He made her mouth water.

His magical hands found her breasts and gently kneaded, and then slid lower to tickle the tender section of skin at her ribcage. He dipped his head and captured her breast with his tongue. The small circles he made brought her nipples to taut little pebbles under his ministrations. His hands stroked and teased her abdomen and the flash of passion's fire unfurled in her belly. She couldn't remain still.

Her hands found him, teased and taunted, tweaked and tormented.

Diarmuid was so beautiful; she thought she might explode from it. Her fingers roamed through the long strands of his hair, fisting at his neck as she pulled him away from her breast to taste his lips again.

Tongues danced and swirled, the sweet nectar of his mouth intoxicating her.

Lean hands moved lower, feather-soft, scorching her skin. He nudged his leg between hers and opened her to his exploring hands. Gentle fingers found the bud of her womanhood, and he applied the smallest amount of pressure with his thumb while his fingers slid down in between her folds and then back again, making her legs tremble with his touch. "I can't take much more of this," she murmured.

"Oh, but you can. You won't rush me in this. I intend to take my time and enjoy you. Every delectable inch of you."

His lips left a wet trail from the line of her jaw down to the hollow of her throat. All the while his fingers teased her in a dance meant to drive her wild. He laid her back against the silky satin of the rose. Cerulean blue eyes alive with fire and light, capturing her gaze and holding it firmly.

She knew for him there was no sense of time, he relished every minute and only strove to bring her more pleasure than she had ever fathomed possible.

He broke eye contact and lowered his head. Wet hot lips teased the ribbon of flesh below her breast before trailing lower over her heart. He pressed his lips to the strong beat between her ribs. He glanced up at her, his lips only a hair's length from her skin. "I do this to you, Kayleigh. No one else will ever make you feel the way I do. No one...will ever be able to make the air burn in your lungs. Remember this...remember when you make your decision."

She couldn't speak as he moved over her, his lips an addiction she couldn't control.

His body gently slid, sinfully slow, lower, and lower still until his head remained at her waist. He flicked a wet caress over her belly button, sending shivers cascading, washing over her. Then, still lower that sinful tongue went until he supported himself on his elbows between her parted thighs. With a gentle touch he parted her folds and flicked at the nub of her sex with his tongue.

Small tremors made her legs quiver. A finger

teased her opening and she lifted her hips in response. She threw her head back and wove her fingers in his hair. She needed his hot heat deep within her. "Please. I can't take this any more."

"Not yet, love. Not until I hear you scream my name for mercy. Not until you lose control."

Lowering his head, he nipped at her clit, causing her body to writhe.

Torture, sweet torture wracked her body.

His voice shook her very soul. She opened her eyes to watch him. Such an intimate thing as he laved her with his tongue, and drove her so high she thought her body might shatter.

He slipped a finger inside of her, then another.

She lost control, could only ride the wave of sensual heat he created. An ache, her muscles tight...she exploded.

The world fell away until there could be nothing more than Diarmuid.

The force of her orgasm was so strong it lifted her body and she came up, only to fall back against the soft petal of the rose again. Wave after wave battered her body. Her brain went blank, and still he did not relent.

"I want you inside of me." She gasped and thought they might find tiny pieces of her scattered all over the garden.

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes," she shouted.

"Then scream for me."

And she did. It ripped from her throat until she was hoarse and quivering.

Only then did she feel the hard length of him touching her, teasing the center of her. "Yes. Oh, God, yes. Hurry, please," she pleaded.

With one long, sure stroke, he entered her with a look of such love on his face it brought a tear to her eye. She took him inside her, his body a perfection even the angels would envy.

"Are you all right?" he whispered next to her ear. "I would not hurt you for all the moons in AArán."

Her heart stuttered. "How could this hurt me? I love you." She smiled up at him and was sure her heart shone in her eyes, and he returned to her a smile of such gut-wrenching beauty she wondered if she would remember to breathe. Her hands found the taut muscles of his chest and fluttered over them, making him gasp at her touch. She trailed her nails along the ribbed and corded rope of his abdomen. *Heaven couldn't be better than this.*

He filled her, moving so slowly it should be considered pain.

"Kayleigh, my love, I never knew. Never dreamed such pleasure existed here with you. I would give you my very breath to remain."

Her eyelids half closed, she reached up to cup his face and brought him close. His long hair trailed over her body, teasing her nipples. She leaned up to kiss him, needing to complete them while he seated himself within her womb.

His thrusts moved her, emotion exploded within her and she knew that she would never, as long as she lived and breathed, forget this moment in time. The world stopped revolving and stars exploded behind

her eyes all the while the smell of the rose wrapped around them. Body on fire, her hands clasping him to her frame she breathed in his scent, the friction between their bodies lighting a flame so bright she thought it might blind her.

He continued to move, and pulled his lips from hers and suckled her breast, nipping at the tight little nub of her nipple. Little tingles began in the pit of her stomach again and her kegel muscles contracted around him, drawing forth a groan from his throat. "I can't hold out much longer, Diarmuid. Take me to the stars, take me away from all this and make me forget everything but you."

A strangled sound came from his throat before he could speak. "As you wish." His pace quickened and he worshipped her body with his own. She thought the heavens might open up and carry them away the feelings were so strong within the small cocoon of the rose. Pleasure washed over her as with one final stroke, he crashed into her. Wave after wave of sensation broke over her, stealing her mind and her breath.

Diarmuid roared his release as he went deeper still. He flung his head back, his eyes tightly closed, his jaw clenched as he surrendered to his passion. Kayleigh could only bathe in his gaze as her body writhed with the pleasure he gave her. They became one in that instant in time, their souls forever wrapped together. She screamed his name, and wrapped her arms around him. She held onto him to keep her sanity. Never, ever in all her years had she felt so special.

So very loved.

Chapter Eleven

Kayleigh lay face down sprawled on her bed. Today was the last day of his time in her world, and she had to make her decision.

Do I go or do I stay?

Her mind hurt from all the thinking she had done in the last forty-eight hours. Maybe it would be different if she thought that she could come back, but Diarmuid had told her that the possibility that the gate would remain open was slim. So if she went with him, the chances of seeing her friends and family again were almost zero. It would be like she had died.

How could she do that?

How could she not?

Kayleigh looked around her bedroom, her sanctuary since childhood. She would have to leave these pale-mint-colored walls with the tiny roses her mother had painted behind. All her books would have to remain. God, it hurt. And Matthew, how could she leave him behind? He would never understand. Never know the torture that she'd gone through, and she could never come back to see if he was okay.

She crawled up on her bed and grabbed her pillow.

All the things that were so familiar to her, even the smell of the cotton sheets and pillowslips beneath her face, would be things she'd never smell, feel again...

Lifting her head, she glanced at her watch. She had two hours to make the decision.

Heavy footsteps passed by her door, they hesitated and went on.

Then came back.

A light knock sounded at her door. "Hey, sis? Can I talk to you a minute?"

What would she tell him? He would never believe her.

"Yeah, Matt. Come on in."

Matthew opened the door. He'd shaved, his eyes were clear, and he had clean clothes on. He'd even brushed his blond hair.

What had happened here? Was he finally coming out of it?

She smiled. "Hey, look at you." She got up from the bed and went to give him a hug.

He latched onto her like a life raft. He squeezed her hard, and when she would have pulled back, he stopped her.

"Just one more second. I want to apologize to you, for making your life hell this last year. For everything." He pulled back but kept her hands in his and pulled her to the bed. "Sit down a minute. I need to tell you some things, and they aren't going to be easy for me."

Kayleigh didn't know what to think. Something had changed him. He didn't sound angry anymore but just sad. Very, very sad.

Matthew's big shoulders slumped and he let go of

her hands. He took a deep breath and began. "I went to see Sheriff Barnwell this morning about Mom and Dad's accident."

Kayleigh's stomach dropped. "What did you need to talk to him about?" She reached out and rubbed his arm.

"Don't say anything until I stop, okay?"

The bad feeling didn't go away but got worse and a chill ran down her spine. "Okay."

"That night. The night that Mom and Dad had their accident, Jim and I had been out partying by the lake. We'd had too much to drink, but we thought we were okay." He raised his head to look into Kayleigh's eyes.

Her heart twisted painfully at the expression in them. His eyes were haunted and full of pain, full of tears.

"On our way home, we were laughing and listening to music. Not paying any attention. Jim was driving, he said he was fine, but he wasn't, he wasn't fine." Tears welled up in his eyes. "We didn't see them until it was too late. The car came out of nowhere, and Jim had been trying to pass old man Johnson's truck. You know how slow he goes. We swerved to try and get out of the way, but we didn't make it. We hit and both cars spun out of control. The other car went off the road and into a bunch of trees. We were scared. It was so damn dark, we couldn't make out the car. Jim got control of our car, but he didn't stop." Matthew shook his head, obviously trying to clear the memories away. "We saw that old man Johnson had pulled over and Jim just kept going."

He said he wasn't going to jail again. Mom and Dad never had liked him. They'd always tried to get me to stop hanging out with him."

Matthew broke down. Great sobs came from his chest. He leaned over and put his face in his hands. "I killed them, Kayleigh. Me and Jim killed Mom and Dad."

Kayleigh sat there in shock. Anger tore at her, denial, so many emotions, that she couldn't, didn't want to hear the rest. She hit him then, pummeled at his chest as tears ran down her face. "How could you? You took the best friend I ever had away from me? Why didn't you ever say anything? Oh, my God, Matthew." All this time he had carried this guilt. She couldn't tell him it would be okay. Because it wasn't okay. It would never be okay. "Get out, get out right now."

He held her arms, tears running down his face. "I couldn't tell you. I didn't want to believe we had done it. We thought that the people we had hit would be okay. We were stupid drunk, Kayleigh. Young and stupid, and we killed them. How am I ever gonna be able to live with myself now? How?"



Diarmuid waited at the waterfall. His stomach knotted with fear and apprehension that she wouldn't come. He knew now that she would stay. He could feel it in the air. How could he ask his sweet Kayleigh to give up her world for him? It had been wrong to even come. He had been a fool. The worst kind of fool

for thinking that he would be able to overpower her love of this place, but he had never thought that he would fall in love.

Love.

Yes, he loved her. More than life itself he loved her. Loved the way the sunlight played on her hair, the way her lips lifted in a smile, and the way her body felt nestled next to his. He would not ask her this. Would not make her feel guilty for choosing to stay in her own world. How would his Kayleigh deal with being a human in a Fae world? She would die, as he would die if he remained in this mortal realm. He couldn't remain without magic, he needed it for survival.

He heard a sound coming through the brush and lifted his head. She stood on the edge of the clearing. Her eyes were swollen, her fair skin blotched and red.

His heart jumped up into his throat. He went to her, immediately enfolding her in his arms. He inhaled her scent. He would carry the sweet scent of jasmine that was hers alone within his soul forever.

"Don't cry, my love."

She tucked her head into his shoulder. Her silent sobs broke his heart. He knew. Knew what she had decided to do. "It will be okay, Kayleigh. Somehow, some way, I will find my way back to you. If not in this lifetime, then in another."

Kayleigh took a deep breath and reached up to place her soft hands against his face. "No one should have to make these choices. No one. Matthew came and talked to me today."

He raised his eyebrows in question and

encouraged her to continue.

Her words were barely recognizable, slurred with her sobs. "They're the ones who hit Mom and Dad's car. They were drunk, Diarmuid. Drunk."

He tightened his arms around her. By the Goddess didn't this one tiny woman have enough to deal with? "I'm sorry, so sorry." Stroking her hair the only comfort he could think to give.

She hiccupped. "I didn't know what to say to him at first. Then I told him...to leave. To get out. I couldn't say anything. I just sat there and looked at him. I couldn't tell him it was okay, because it's not. He's going to have to live with what he's done for the rest of his life. He went to talk to the Sheriff and they might press charges and he'll go to jail." Her shoulders shook with her grief. "I thought I was over it, that I had come to terms with their death, but now, now I have to live with this, too."

Diarmuid didn't know what to do to comfort her so he held her close and rubbed her back and let her tears dampen his shirt. He looked over her shoulder to see Cathal leaning against the great oak. Cathal, a reminder that he had to go, go and deal with his own world.

His own fate.

But how could he leave her like this? His heart felt like it was being ripped from his chest, that some unknown force cleaved him in two with a mighty sword.

Gritting his teeth against a truth he didn't want to face, he forced the words he had never meant to speak through his mouth. "There is no question now

that you must stay. I cannot ask this of you, even though I may want to be selfish. If it were up to me, I would never let you go."

Never.

Kayleigh looked up at him, her green eyes still brimming with tears. "How is it fair that I have to lose everybody I love?"

He let out the breath he had been holding. He should have already stepped through the gate, but he had waited on her. He didn't want her to see him go, that would only make it harder for her.

"Did you bring what I asked?"

She looked down and pulled a pair of scissors from her pocket. "Yes, I brought them." Her hands shook as she handed them over. "What are you going to do?"

He gave her a smile even as his heart was breaking. He took one of his braids in his hands. "This I do for you. It is what I would have done, had you come with me." And with his words he took the scissors and clipped the braid from his hair and handed it to her. The jewels still remained embedded in the strands. "You will always have me with you, and should you ever need money, sell the jewels. All except this one." He pointed to the one at the top of the braid, a ruby, and the largest of the jewels. "This you must always keep."

With his thumb he wiped away the trail of tears upon her silky cheek. "Will you give me a token of the same?"

Not able to speak, she nodded and took the scissors from him. But first she quickly braided a strand of her

hair and only then snipped it off. "I'm sorry, I have no jewels to give you."

He stepped forward and took her face in his hands. "You have given me something more precious than jewels. You have given me your love, and that is more than I ever expected when I set out on this journey."

Emotion wracked Kayleigh's small form and he wished that he could take this pain from her. But then, he would also take away the joy, and happiness they had found together. And that he could not erase, not from her or from him. She would bear his mark, and he would bear hers. Emotion clogged his throat as Cathal signaled that it was time to go.

He lifted her chin with his finger to look deep into eyes the color of a deep emerald ocean and felt he could fall into them. Never again would he see anything as beautiful as her eyes. He lowered his head, and her lips parted for him.

She tasted of honey and he drank his fill, pulling her so close to him that he could feel the beat of her heart next to his.

A scream ripped through his mind, and he knew it was his own. The injustice of having to leave her nearly brought him to his knees. But he had to go back. Had to fulfill his destiny.

She clung to him as he pulled back and her eyes begged him not to go.

"Shh..." he whispered, putting a finger to her lips. "It will be alright. You will have your home, and one day a family, and I will have the knowledge that you loved me, if only for a short while. I will carry that treasure in my heart always."

"It's can't be time yet. It can't be," she cried.

"Yes, it is time. I'm sorry, Kayleigh. Sorry for your pain. I would do anything not to hurt you. I hope that you know that. Know that I will always love you."

"I do. I do. I'll never regret this, never regret loving you. Never. I love you, too."

He set her away from him. The hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He had killed with a blink of his eye, had changed the course of the weather, but nothing could have been harder than to turn and walk away from her. "The roses at your back step will protect you, Kayleigh. One a gift from me, and one a gift from Cathal. They will watch over you even as I cannot be here." He walked toward the waterfall. He could clearly see the gate with his Fae eyes but turned back one last time.

Kayleigh stood in her simple dress of cotton, her hair floating in the breeze, her haunted eyes loving him even as he left her. He blew her a kiss. "Open your hands and close your eyes," he told her.

She did and he conjured a blood red rose chiseled of ruby and emerald into her hands. "I love you, Kayleigh. I love you, and I'll never love another."

He took a great gulp of air, waded into the small pool and walked through the waterfall.



She watched him leave, her eyes unfocused with tears. Why did she feel like she had just made the worst mistake of her life? Her soul, her heart, and her mind went numb. She could only stare at the spot

where he had entered the falls and disappeared. Gone. Gone forever. A great emptiness suddenly filled the place where her soul should be, her heart a heavy stone that lay heavy in her chest.

Hearing the splash of water, she looked up from the jewel in her hand. Cathal had waded into the water.

"I'm sorry, Cathal. Please forgive me," she whispered.

The silver-haired Fae turned back to her, his expression unreadable. "What is there to forgive?" And then he walked through the waterfall behind Diarmuid.

"Damn it." She cursed out loud. Her stomach ached and burned, her throat hurt from crying. "I couldn't go." She told herself. "I couldn't."

Chapter Twelve

Diarmuid's clothes were wet, his heart sore, and he took a deep breath of his world. It was done. There was nothing more to do but go home and face the demons that haunted him. He stopped to wait on Cathal who had not yet come through the gate. He could see him through the fall of water.

Cathal could have been made of stone. He stood so still, like a marble statue frozen in place.

"Come on! I cannot wait all day on you." Diarmuid yelled. But his heart knew that he would not come. "Leave her be, Cathal. You cannot change it. It is done." His voice trailed off while his best friend looked at him with torment and guilt. It made no difference. Deep in his heart he knew she could not be happy in the land of A Aran.

"I cannot come back to watch you die. Do not ask such a thing of me. I cannot." Cathal's voice cracked with emotion, his eyes anguished by their failure. He lowered his head.

Diarmuid crossed his right arm over his chest, his hand closed tight in a fist, a gesture of respect from one warrior to another. He waited until Cathal raised his head and returned the salute.

Cathal would return home when he felt the time right. If the situation had been reversed he would do the same. He could not watch a friend fall into the field of flowers. So he turned around and looked toward home. The golden city of AAran lay before him, with its bright yellow towers. Only the field of the damned greeted him this day. He would swear he could hear his mother's cries on the wind.

They would know. They would have felt the presence if a mortal had come through the gate. A celebration would have ensued. Great tables of food, the music of the harp and flute would have played had she come. But she had not, and he had been unable to tell her, his voice silenced by the curse of the Sea Witch. Unable to voice the words that could have saved him. Because he knew in his heart if Kayleigh had known she would have gladly taken his hand despite the risks.

Chapter Thirteen

K ayleigh sat in the swing on the front porch, the sky above her bruised and battered as her heart. The sky a dark purple against the dark forest that threatened rain. The wind whipped the higher branches of the trees, forcing them to bow to her majesty. She tried to convince herself that she would survive this, she would heal. The gaping hole in her heart would mend. He'd only been gone a day, and already her soul bled and mourned. Her limbs were numb, her heart broken, and for what? Her mind told her that she had made the right decision, but she couldn't convince her heart.

The roses at the corner of the porch bowed and scraped but didn't break. She wanted them to break. She turned away. She couldn't look at the blood-red roses. A rose while in bloom was beautiful, but soon it would fade and leave only the thorns. Imaginary thorns, the sharp barbs pricking at her mind and body, wrapped around her.

The gusts of air grew stronger, blowing the trees and shrubs into a frenzy. Looking up, her heart stuttered as she saw Cathal stalk toward her. His long silver hair whipped around him, his face set in hard

and unforgiving lines.

A small hope tugged at the back of her mind. If Cathal had remained, could it be that they had tricked and fooled the fates?

The nervous Fae warrior, who always tried to remain unseen and always looked over his shoulder had disappeared. Larger than life, his back ramrod straight, he stood to his full height.

A shiver of foreboding scampered over her spine. What had happened to bring him back through the gate?

Spurred by fear and a hope she couldn't credit she stood up and half ran from the porch to meet him on the drive, not caring how she looked or even if he saw the stains on her face from the trail of tears she'd cried earlier.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

Cathal pressed his lips together as he came to a stop in front of her. He regarded her silently for a moment, and then spoke. "I did not go through the gate. I could not watch him die a wasteful death when you could have prevented it. You were my one hope. You failed him."

"Die?" she gasped. Tremors shook her, and she clasped her hands together in front of her to stop the trembling. "What are you saying? I don't believe you. He's fine. He's safe now. He only went home." She shook her head, not wanting to believe him but in her heart, she knew. The truth had been shining in Diarmuid's eyes while he smiled and held her close for the last time. A sick feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

"He goes back to die." Cathal's gray eyes blazed, the muscle in his jaw clenched, his hands curled into a tight fist.

"I don't believe you." Her mind whirled; pain ripped and tore at her heart. One hand covered her mouth in her denial. Tears burned and blurred her vision. "He is the Prince of A Aran, he told me he would go back and fulfill his destiny," she said, almost choking on the words.

"It is because of me that he will return to the field of flowers. He gave himself to the Sea Witch for my safe return. She tricked me and held me captive beneath the waves of the Lake of Dreams and only until Diarmuid bargained for my release was I set free."

She was going to be sick. "Go on, I have to know all of it."

He looked away. "It matters not now. You made your choice, and he will do what needs to be done to save his kingdom."

Kayleigh grabbed Cathal again and jerked him back around to face her. "You will tell me everything right now, right here or so help me I'll kill you where you stand." Her arms and legs shook with fear for Diarmuid. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"He could not, or you would both be lost within the veil, forever being able to see his ghostly image but never able to speak or touch. He would die a thousand deaths to save you from such a fate." He ran long lean pale fingers through his hair and began to pace. "You see, the Sea Witch made a bargain, but the Fae are ever clever with their promises. She let me

go free on one condition. He had to leave AAran and search for his mate in the human world. Diarmuid had long ago given up hope of finding the one that would complete him in AAran, so he agreed. If he failed, he would forfeit his life. He convinced himself if he could find you, he would be able to persuade you to return with him and fulfill the bargain. But if he failed, his life became forfeit. If he failed to fall into the field of flowers upon returning empty-handed, the Sea Witch would claim his lands and ultimately claim AAran for her own."

Kayleigh's legs went out from under her and she plopped down hard on the ground. It couldn't be. He was supposed to be fine; he was supposed to be alive and well, with his family, his home. Not this.

Never this.

She had failed him, and she hadn't even known what the stakes were. "Why didn't the queen stop this? Why didn't someone kill this Sea Witch? Why would you let this happen to him? Why?" She screamed at him. These people with all their power would just let one of their own die?

"The Sea Witch is powerful and the balance of power is tenuous at best. There could be no other choice. No one but the Goddess could counter or break the bargain. And the Goddess has not seen fit to intercede." Cathal ground out the words behind clenched teeth, anger and guilt shining in his eyes.

"But you stayed?" She looked up at this strange man cloaked in hate and despair.

"Yes. I stayed to tell you. When he walked through the gate, he thought I would follow. I did not. I can

still see his face. He called for me to leave you be, but I could not." Cathal paced back and forth in front of her. "You see, it is my fault. If I had not been careless, none of this would have happened. Now the only person who ever stood by my side will cease to be."

Kayleigh scrambled to her feet. "No. I won't let this happen." She turned to run, but Cathal reached out to grab her.

"It is too late, for all of us. I am sorry."

"Then why did you come here and tell me all this." She struggled in his grip. "Let me go, Cathal, or I swear I'll wring your neck with my bare hands."

His arms tightened. "You cannot go through the gate. Only a Fae can pass through."

"I don't care. I'm going. Now let me go, or I swear I'll hurt you. You can either come with me or stay here and wallow in your grief. But either way I'm going to A Aran."

Taking her hand, he gave her a strange look and he opened her palm. "The rose on your palm has changed. The bud has opened," and for the first time since he appeared, a spark of hope glimmered in his eyes. "All right. Let us hope we are not too late."

They ran together, hand in hand, to the waterfall. Kayleigh jumped into the shallow pool at the base of the waterfall.

"Wait." Cathal called. "We must not take any chances. Do not be alarmed, but get on my back."

"On your back?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I don't have time to worry about your weird ways right now." Kayleigh moved back to

where Cathal stood in the stream.

He cupped his hands at his back for her climb up. "Put your legs around my waist. I hope you can ride."

Ride? But as she jumped onto his back, his hands pulled her legs around him. And then a white light surrounded them. Tiny particles of light seemed to float on the air and then began to swirl. They moved so fast around them she had to close her eyes. She gasped as within moments she sat astride a white stallion.

Grabbing a huge chunk of his mane, she wrapped the silken strands around her hands. "You could have warned me about this."

The horse whinnied and snorted. In one fluid motion Cathal jumped forward and headed straight for the waterfall. Oh, God, she cringed and closed her eyes. They were going to be smashed on the rocks of the cave at the back of the falls. She held her breath, her heart tripping in her chest as she realized what he intended. She knew the moment they were airborne. Her stomach lifted and she waited for gravity to take over and pull them back down to the Earth. But they hung suspended in mid-air. Heat seared her skin, sweat poured from her temples. She tightened her grip, eyes still closed, scared to open them.

Motion took and swept them forward in such a rush that her hair streamed back away from her face and made her shirt ripple against her skin. She opened her eyes in time to see a golden light in front of her that started as a small pinprick, but as the wind pushed against her, the light became bigger until she knew they were in a tunnel of some sort. A gate, like

Diarmuid had said. She lowered her head, unable to withstand the wind that came at her, and wrapped her arms around the stallion's neck, holding on for dear life. Fear pounded at her brain, and she wasn't sure they were going to make it.

They landed with a double thump against something solid. Turning her head, it looked like they had landed in the set from the Wizard of Oz.

Cathal stopped and shook his head.

Kayleigh loosened her grip, her head still spinning. In the distance she could see what looked to be a golden city, the colors of the flowers so bright it hurt her eyes.

Cathal walked with his head hung down. She wished he would talk to her, do something. She swayed on his back while he moved forward. The flowers were so tall they brushed against her knees. Thousands upon thousands of flowers. Yellow roses were mixed in with red, and thorns caught at the denim of her jeans. She ignored the small pricks of pain.

Cathal stopped, and kneeled down for her to dismount. She threw her leg over and slipped to the ground. They were in a small clearing in the center of millions of flowers. The swirling lights shadowed the horse and before her very eyes Cathal returned to his normal form, complete with wings. She stepped back. He looked larger here, or maybe she had become smaller. "Where is he?"

"You cannot go to AAran as you are dressed. They would crush you beneath their heel. If we are too late they will take your very soul, and I will see you back

to your world if we cannot save him."

"Do what you have to do and let's go. I have to see him."

Cathal gave her a regal nod and came to stand in front of her. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Close your eyes." At her raised brow, he shook his head. "Please, this is easier for me to do without your brutal stare accusing me of moving too slow."

"Whatever, just hurry up."

She closed her eyes. There was a draft against her skin, only for a moment, and then a soft material replaced the normal cotton of her human clothes.

"You may open your eyes now."

She peeked with one eye first. He had conjured up a gown of the deepest green, the material so soft she couldn't feel it against her skin. The gauzy material shimmered and changed hues with her every breath. It had to be the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen. The bodice fitted her tiny waist and fell in folds to her feet. Then he produced what looked to be a veil of the same colored material but transparent.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

"You will wear it to shield your face."

"Okay, can we go already? He hasn't been gone that long; do you think he's still within the city?"

Cathal's head dropped before he spoke. "Time is not the same here. Your hours are our days." He took her hand. "Come."

They walked for what seemed like hours. The yellow flowers spread out in front of them for miles. She didn't want to walk, she wanted to run, wanted to scream out Diarmuid's name and force him to

come find her again. But Cathal only shot her a look of warning as if he knew her thoughts. "We must be careful here."

"Would it have been different if I had gone with him?"

Cathal would not meet her questioning gaze. He remained quiet for a moment. "Yes. Different."

"And now? I can still save him, can't I?" She had to believe that she could. Had to believe that somehow her coming to this enchanted place would make a difference.

Cathal did not answer her and would not look at her. The same sick feeling that she had felt before returned with a vengeance. She had to save him. He had suffered enough. No one should have to suffer such a death.

They were well within the walls of the city when he took her hand and stopped her. "Wait here," Cathal whispered into her ear.

Before she could reply he left with strong sure strides headed deeper into the city of flowers. She looked around her, for the first time really noticing her surroundings. He had left her along a small passageway that looked out into a courtyard. There were arches and columns leading to the main structure or some might call it a castle made of rose petals. To the right there were landings and open-air walkways and flowers of every color scattered around and above doors, flowers that hung in mid-air with nothing to support them. The ground was littered with stray petals that gathered in the crooks and crannies of the walls. She'd cringed when they'd

first begun to walk upon streets made of tiny brown and pale pink flowers. Cathal had only rolled his eyes at her when she'd hesitated to take a step forward.

The splendor of the place held her in awe; she could have gone back in time to a land where knights and ladies were commonplace. She knew her mouth gaped, but she couldn't control it. The leaves on the trees looked to be jewels, flowers were everywhere within the city, and one could not walk a foot without brushing against something green and living.

Cathal disappeared into one of the doorways and she held her breath. What would she do if he didn't return? She didn't know where to look for him. And for one moment she knew how Diarmuid had felt when he had come into her world. It now made sense why Cathal had been so nervous. They must have felt exactly as she did now. Totally out of their element.

Finally Cathal returned and she met him halfway. "Can we see him now?"

Cathal remained quiet and she knew it was not a good sign. Her hand found his sleeve and she stopped him. "Where is he, Cathal?"

The Fae only took a deep breath and briefly closed his eyes. "Come with me, but make sure the veil remains in place."

Her heart dropped when he led her back into the field of flowers. But instead of heading back into the middle of the field, he turned and turned left following the wall that surrounded the castle.

She saw the crowd of Fae gathered close into a tight circle. The females all wore veils, and she could not make out one face. The men stood beside the

ladies. A lone harp released a heartbreakingly lonely tune into the air.

"Don't tell me he's at the center of that group?"

"I'm afraid we did not make it. He has fallen." Cathal's words sliced through her heart in one clean swift stroke.

The air rushed out of Kayleigh's lungs. No. No. It wasn't too late. She had come all this way, given up everything to save him. "No!" Her scream rent through the air.

She shrugged off Cathal's arm and ran forward through the throng of people, elbowing and pushing, trying to clear a path to him. Tears ran down her face, and the thorns of the roses tore at her skin. She didn't care. She had to get to him. When she had made it through the last ring of people, she stumbled to her knees at the foot of the burial mound.

He didn't move.

She couldn't get enough air into her lungs. She cursed her God, she cursed his Goddess for allowing this to happen. Moving forward on her knees, she slowly, inch by inch came closer.

His sword lay across his chest, wrapped in a vine of thorns. They had dressed him in an armor of blood red roses, his beautiful eyes closed to her forever.

She screamed. Her shoulders shook. She couldn't see anymore and it was her fault. She had done this to him.

A female voice tore through the quiet. "What have you done, Cathal of Loren, why did you bring this creature here?"

"She came through the Lily gate of A Aran, my

Queen. She thought only to save him." Cathal's humbled voice quieted the murmurs of the beings around them.

Kayleigh turned to look at the Queen.

Hair of flame curled around a heart-shaped face to fall to a slim waist, her cheeks flushed with color. Her gown made of the finest gossamer silver clung to her body and a crown of jeweled roses the color of scarlet sat atop her head. Her beauty was blinding, yet her eyes were cold and hard, unforgiving. Eyes that were the same color as Diarmuid's. The fiery blue of deep dark sapphire, burning with an inner flame. There was no doubt that this was his mother, the Rose Queen of A Aran.

The Queen moved to stand in front of them. "It is you, Cathal of Loren, that put him in this place. You, who should have been more careful, you knew that he would come for you. Would bargain with his very life for your freedom." The Queen turned toward Kayleigh. "And you, the weak mortal who would not leave, condemned him just as surely. So now, you come to try and make amends? Well, my son is...gone. Nothing can save him. Not even the bright shining light of the Goddess. He is lost to us all." Her eyes bright, the Queen took a step toward Kayleigh, her voice like the frost of a winter morning. "Leave this place. I do not want you here."

Kayleigh took a deep breath. She wouldn't leave, not yet, not without trying to save him.

"Let me try to wake him, your Majesty. Please..." she pleaded.

The Queen's face became red, "No. Leave now, or I

will have your life for his. Do you think to bargain with me, mortal? You have taken more than you should." Her hands began to form a circle in front of her and she began to chant in a language Kayleigh couldn't understand.

Suddenly, a young woman rushed forward and grabbed the Queen's hands in her own. "No, Mother. Stop it. He loved her, you cannot do this thing. You cannot. She bears the mark of the rose."

The young Fae woman shielded Kayleigh with her own body and cradled the Queen into her arms. She gave Cathal a look of sorrow. "I'm sorry. Go, and pay your last respects and then leave. Just leave, we have had enough sadness."

Kayleigh ignored the emotionally-laden female voice. She had to get closer to him, had to touch him one last time. The bed of roses he lay upon was thick with thorns.

She climbed, one handhold at a time, pulling herself to his side, ignoring the barbs that ripped her hands. They cut into her flesh as she grabbed the vines to pull herself to her feet.

Tears blurred her vision. Her sweet Diarmuid, what had he done? She took one of his fisted hands and brought it her lips. Looking down, she saw the lock of hair she had given him. Even as he went to his death, he had kept her with him.

She crawled on top of him, stretched out over him and dropped her head to his chest where once she would have heard the steady beat of his heart. But no more.

It was real, and he was gone.

Never again would she hear the sound of his laughter. Never again would see the teasing glint of mischief in his eyes. Nothing, nothing she did would bring him back to her.

She needed a miracle. Prayed for one.

But none came.

She lifted her head and her tears fell to his pale face. She brought her fingers up trace the strong line of his cold jaw and then the line of his full, now pale sensual lips.

"Open your eyes for me, love," she whispered. "Please, I'll do anything if you'll just wake up."

Sobs shook her frame as she leaned down to touch her lips to his. She saw a drop of blood from a cut on her face fall upon his colorless lips and knew she would gladly bleed herself dry if it would bring him back to her.

If she had thought that her heart had broken when he left, she had been mistaken, because now the pain ripped through her. Her hands and limbs shook from the force of her grief. She didn't want to live, she wanted only to lie here with him forever.

Chapter Fourteen

Strong arms lifted her from the bed of thorns. She screamed and kicked and hit, trying to fight against the thing that would pull her from her love. She couldn't leave him here to return to this morbid garden of flowers, because now she knew. He would return to the earth. All the yellow flowers, with the red, and purple mixed in, were fallen Fae. It was a burial ground, but instead of markers where their loved ones fell, flowers grew and continued on. But she didn't want that for him. He'd had so much to live for.

Her heart shattered into a million shards, and she knew that it would never heal. Never fully mend.

A soft male whisper came to her ears. "We must leave now. There is nothing more we can do." Cathal's voice cracked as he spoke the words.

She stopped struggling, and looked back at Diarmuid. Not moving, not seeing, he just lay there with that strange smile on his face with her hair clenched in his grip. He looked like a king, one that was only asleep, and she wondered if she could only stay long enough, if those dark sooty lashes would flicker and he would breathe once again.

He was forever lost to her.

Cathal pulled her away. The other people had long gone. How long had she lain by his side? Hours? Days? And she longed to remain until her body perished and turned to dust by his side. Cathal guided her back through the flowers, away from the golden city, away from the strange creatures who would not glance in her direction. They blamed her, blamed her for his death when in reality they all were responsible.

They had all failed him.

Kayleigh allowed Cathal to pull her away. Her love had not saved him. She had not saved him. It didn't matter that she hadn't known, because somewhere in her heart she knew she had made the wrong choice.

"Come, I must get you back to the gate." Cathal told her in a soft sad voice.

Back to the gate and home.

Home where memories of him would haunt her.

Her eyes were dry, there were no more tears. She had cried them all out. There were no more thoughts in her brain, she didn't want to think. Thinking hurt.

Her body moved in automatic silence, going where Cathal led. Back through the graveyard of flowers, back to the place that would take her home. Only this time she would go home alone.

They came to the clearing, funny how on this side it only looked like an archway of flowers. The arch began with the thick green stems of Lilies. Large white blooms draped and clung over and above the arch.

Cathal stood at her back, quiet and somber.

She remained facing the gate, not able to face him. "You won't come back, will you?" Leaving Cathal, the only connection she had left to Diarmuid, deepened her loss. She heard his indrawn breath, felt his hands come to her shoulders. "I do not think it is possible now. But I promised I would see you safely home.

Cathal turned her around and pulled her into his arms. "I only wish that we had been sooner. He would have liked to have known that you crossed over."

Kayleigh sniffed her throat sore and raw. "What am I going to do now?" she asked him.

He looked down at her, his eyes full of sorrow. "You will live your life as you were meant to do."

Live? Nothing mattered now.

"It is time." He moved closer to the archway until they stood only a foot in front of it. He took her hands in his. She could see the muscle in his jaw clench with unspoken emotion. He lived with the burden as well. They both would have to live with it, but in her mind she heard Diarmuid's voice. *If I only had one hour with you, it would be worth the sacrifice.* His words haunted her. He had known even then.

Looking up at Cathal, she touched her hand to his cheek. "You have been a good friend, thank you for letting me try. If I had only known..." Her hand dropped away and she looked at the tiny pink flowers beneath her feet. It was time to go. She could do nothing more here, and she had to go back.

Back to her world.

She took a step forward, closer to the open mouth

of the gate. She looked over her shoulder at the Faery city of AArán. How grand with its towers of gold and its fields of flowers. But even here, death followed. You couldn't escape it. She took another step.

"Wait," Cathal called.

"Yes?"

He moved gracefully to her side, "He gave you a gift, Kayleigh of Quinten. Be sure to tend it well."

Remembering the ruby rose, she nodded. "I will. I promise."

Cathal, the strong warrior who had braved his own people to bring her here, gave her a half smile. There were no more words to be spoken, but she noticed the lone tear that slipped from the corner of his eye.

"Are you crying, Cathal?"

His smile grew. "I am Fae, we do not cry."

Kayleigh sighed, "Don't blame yourself, he wouldn't want that. He would want you to be happy. And he fulfilled his destiny. He saved AArán. That is what is important. He saved us all, didn't he?"

Cathal only clasped his hands behind his back, but his shoulders straightened. "I will not let them forget, and I will not let them forget your courage and how a mere mortal of a woman threatened to wring my neck if I didn't help her. They may find it comical that you truly frightened me. May the Goddess light your way, and may you find peace in the future." He bent low from the waist and bowed to her.

The gesture stunned her, an act of respect. Touched, she put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed, then put one foot in front of the other and walked through the gate of Lilies back into her world.

Chapter Fifteen

With time, things had worked out, at least for some. Matthew had pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was currently serving out the last of his sentence.

Angela and Steve had had a lovely baby boy, they had named him Carter. He had Angela's lungs and her energy.

But now, she and Angela sat on the old rickety swing. Ten months is a long time. But it had been that long since her journey to Faery. The memory had become hazy and sometimes she wondered if it had happened at all. But then a pang of memory would wash over her. Diarmuid's face, the way she felt in his arms, would remind her that it had been real.

So real.

And he *had* left her a gift. Somehow Cathal had known.

A gift that lay sleeping in the tiny white bassinet beside the swing. Kayleigh peeked over the side to check on her daughter. Yes, he had left her a precious gift. A gift of life.

Aislan, their daughter.

Angela watched her, always concerned. "How are

you doing, honey?" she asked.

Kayleigh pasted a smile on her face. "I'm fine." At Angela's look of disbelief, she added, "Really."

"Look at me." Angela's voice a soft command. "Now tell me the truth."

Kayleigh took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I'm fine, Angela. It only hurts when I breathe."

"Come here, you. I wish he'd never shown up in that bar. Then you wouldn't be going through all this alone. But then we wouldn't have Aislan to hold and cherish either." Angela put her arm around Kayleigh and pulled her close.

Kayleigh put her head on Angela's shoulder, wanting the comfort. She'd never be fine again. Never. She didn't care what anyone said. Time did not heal all wounds. Some wounds never healed, some continued to bleed you dry. She had decided when she knew that she was pregnant, she would take all the love she and Diarmuid had shared and give it to their daughter. It was the reason she remained.

"I'm afraid, Angela." Kayleigh whispered.

"Of what, honey?"

"That I'll forget his face. The sound of his voice. I don't know what I'll do if that happens."

"You'll never forget, sweetie. Never, and Aislan won't let you."

They remained swinging, moving back and forth, like the pendulum of time.



It had to be a dream. His soul floated in space without time or gravity, but still his mind remained on his love. Even now, as death took him, his thoughts remained on Kayleigh. He had expected pain upon death but he only felt the empty space around him.

"You are not dead, Diarmuid of AAran." A voice, sweet and ethereal, came into his mind, the sound so beautiful, so intensely musical, it captured him. He couldn't turn away from the sound, a feminine voice that pulled him back from the dark, empty nothingness.

"Open your eyes."

Diarmuid could not disobey. The voice was so full of compulsion he had to comply. Slowly, he opened his eyes. A white light seemed to permeate everything it touched. The grass and flowers were shrouded in a mist of white fog. A large building with tall white Corinthian columns reached toward the sky not more than a hundred yards from him. Flowers of pink, white, purple, and colors that had no name, grew in large clumps obscuring part of the ground.

A place in between, he thought. Another dimension maybe, but unlike anything his eyes had ever seen. Somehow, by some trick of the fates he had been transported to a paradise. The scent of apples drifted on the air mixed with heady fragrance of the flowers.

This was not AAran, nor was it the mortal world.

He reclined upon a bed of grass and looked down to see that he still wore his armor. His sword still graced his chest. He lifted a hand to look at his palm. The emblem of the rose still remained. He sighed in

relief; to lose the mark would have broken him.

A white light caught his eye and he raised a hand. Looking up he saw a bright ball of light. It grew closer and he was able to make out a form. A female, her gown shimmering around her, the light shining from within her. He closed his eyes, for surely he would go blind at such a sight.

"Open your eyes." The voice commanded.

The light had subsided, leaving a woman of such incredible beauty he knew his mouth gaped open.

The Goddess.

"You have been very courageous, Diarmuid. Forsaking what you could have had, for right and just. You made the ultimate sacrifice, giving your life for hers, because you knew she could not survive in your world. You have given the land of AAran peace again for a time. All of this because of your pure heart. I have not turned a blind eye upon your plight. And your lady love left her home, her world, to try and save you."

Knowledge dawned in a swift blast of fire, burning images into his brain. They came from the Goddess he knew. He saw Kayleigh dressed in a gown of AAran, lying atop his prone form.

Pain seared his heart.

Her hands had bled, her face scratched by the thorns of the burial mound. And her blood had fallen upon his lips. Closing his eyes, he tried to stop the images that flickered quickly one after another. Never had he wanted her to endure such pain.

"Take it away. I cannot bear to see her this way."

The Goddess moved closer. "She came, Diarmuid.

She fulfilled the bargain, and more." She knelt at his side, raised one pale hand to push a stray lock of hair from his face. "So much pain and suffering." Hair of spun silver pooled around her like a mantle, the gentle waves curling around her feet. Eyes of lavender gazed at him in sympathy. "I have been with you both throughout this ordeal."

Diarmuid firmed his lips. "You were with us, but did not stop it."

A soft sigh escaped the creature's lips. "No, there are things that are better left alone. You see, she had to make the choice to follow and needed to know that she could. For even though she suffered, she has learned as well what is important. She learned that true love will never die; not even death can steal such a thing." She tilted her head to look at him with a smile upon her lips. "You are a rose no more, Diarmuid of A Aran. I have heard your call and I have answered."

He sat up his eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

She stood, "it means that I am going to send you back. Back to your love. You will no longer have all of your Fae powers, but your brothers and sisters of the garden will still respond to your touch."

"You are sending me back as a mortal?" His heart skipped a beat.

"A mortal? Yes. For it is the only way you could remain with her. However, I cannot take your Fae sight from you, and there will be times that you will see your brethren and your kin. I could no longer allow your mother and sister to suffer. They rule my

lands well, and I have rewarded your family."

He raked a hand through his hair. "What of Cathal? The Sea Witch will still haunt him."

Mischief played in the swirling purple eyes of the Goddess. "Cathal will not have long to worry about my evil sister. She will have a much bigger issue to deal with soon. She tricked Cathal, seducing him as he drank. He was at no fault other than his own beauty. She thought herself in love with him. She has been gazing at too many of the mortal images. Cathal will find his own way, and soon realize that he was not at fault."

She waved her arms in front of her forming a circle. "Now, Prince of the Rose, it is time to go to sleep. I will watch over you and yours for what you have sacrificed for me."

His eyes began to droop; he didn't want to leave yet. He had so many questions he wanted to ask. Kayleigh's beautiful face came to him with a soft caress of wind and the scent of jasmine floated around him. "Kayleigh."



The morning sun streamed through the windows of her bedroom and warmed her face. Getting up, she checked on Aislan, who'd had a long night and still lay sleeping, her tiny little hands curled close to her face.

The house, so quiet since Matthew had gone, suited her now.

She went to her dresser and touched the ruby rose,

let her fingers trail over the petals. Oh, God, how she missed him. Picking up the baby monitor, she needed to be outside to sit in the quiet of the new morning.

She put on a robe and shoes and slipped the monitor into her pocket with the volume turned up loud. All of the white roses in her garden had turned to red. It seemed they grieved for him, too. Funny how so long ago she should have known that the one rose that Matthew had plucked would have started a chain of events that would change her life. She needed the roses now more than ever. Needed them to keep her sanity for the long days ahead. Last night she had dreamed of him. It had been so real. Like he had been there with her in the rose garden.

Opening the front door, she went out onto the porch. The morning smelled crisp and clean. It would be an early spring. Could it really be almost a year? The new buds on the roses would open soon, and she didn't want to miss it.

Slowly she walked down the steps and rounded the corner following the flagstone path that Diarmuid had helped her make.

"You're late," A voice spoke from the trees. A male voice. A voice she knew. She looked up.

And he was there.

Another illusion or trick of her mind, he couldn't be there leaning against the oak.

But he moved and came forward, still dressed in his rose armor. He stopped directly in front of her.

"You will say nothing?"

It was Diarmuid's voice. But how could it be? She reached up, took a step closer. Her hand touched the

warmth of his cheek.

She threw herself into his arms, tears of joy running down her face. She couldn't speak. Couldn't think. Didn't care how it had happened. Didn't care if it was an illusion.

Strong arms came around her, held her tight.

She couldn't let go and clung to him.

"Let me look at you," he said.

"Look. Touch. Feel. Just don't go away. I don't care anymore if you are a ghost, or a trick of my mind. Just don't go."

"I wish to give you another gift, Kayleigh."

She nodded emotion clogging her throat. No words would make it past that huge lump.

"My gift to you. The last kiss from a rose." He lowered his lips to hers, and whispered, "I'll never leave you again."

Epilogue

The raven-haired child ran happily, weaving in and out of the roses. Diarmuid and Kayleigh watched their child run, her laughter on the breeze. It had been two years, and they were expecting their next child. This time, Diarmuid would be there to witness the birth.

"Mommy, can I go inside and get my Dolly?" Aislan asked, her sweet little cherub face full of light and joy, her violet eyes full of life.

"Of course you can, sweetheart." Kayleigh smiled, she was truly happy at last. All her dreams had come true. Diarmuid came to drape an arm around her shoulders. He watched her like a hawk these days, scared to death something would happen.

"How are you feeling, love?"

Kayleigh rolled her eyes. "I'm pregnant, not sick."

He got that wicked look in his eye as he leaned down to kiss her. The spark between them remained and she sighed into his kiss. "Well, in that case," he began.

"Oh, no, you don't. That look is the one that got me in trouble to begin with!" she playfully scolded.

"So are you saying you no longer want my touch?"

Her eyes went wide. "I'll never get enough of you. Never."

Diarmuid smiled.

The roses had bloomed under his touch, and they now had the farm back on firm ground. And they had named their prize rose yesterday: the Prince of A Aran Rose.

"Mommy, Mommy, come quick and see." Aislan shouted. "Look what I found in my room."

Diarmuid and Kayleigh both went to see what Aislan held in her hand.

"Isn't it pretty, Mommy? It's like your rose, except mine is white and shiny."

Diarmuid and Kayleigh exchanged knowing glances. A tear welled up in Kayleigh's eye. "Do you think he's all right?" she asked Diarmuid.

"I think this is Cathal's way of telling us that he watches over us still. I wish that I could see him, and tell him how grateful I am for bringing you through the gate of A Aran."

"The nice man said that he thought I was the prettiest little girl he had ever seen."

"What man, Aislan?" Kayleigh asked, dropping to her to her knees to be face to face with Aislan.

"The man that comes and visits me sometimes at night. He tells good stories." Aislan looked up at her father. "Not as good as yours, Daddy, but they still good."

"Oh, Aislan." Kayleigh gathered her daughter into her arms and held her close.

Diarmuid put his arms around his women. "Cathal, if you can hear me, know that you are

always welcome here."

"You can't see the man, Daddy?"

"Tell me what he looks like, Aislan." Diarmuid asked.

"Oh, he is really pretty, even more pretty than my dolly. He has white hair and he wears funny clothes made out of flowers. His hair is longer than mine."

"Oh, Diarmuid, it's got to be him," Kayleigh whispered.

"You can see him, Aislan?" Diarmuid asked in awe.

Aislan smiled. "I can see all of them, Daddy. The lady is really pretty. She looks like you."

Diarmuid felt his heart stop in his chest. Aislan had to be talking about his sister. Only Claire, the reigning Queen of A Aran, shared his looks and coloring. "Next time you see them, sweetheart, you tell them that your daddy loves them."

"I will, Daddy."

About the Author

Samantha Reynolds lives in North Carolina with her husband of 14 years, one precious daughter and her two dogs. She loves romances of any type, but especially sinfully sexual stories.

Having written all of her life, this year she decided to take the big plunge and found a home at eXtasy Books.