

A man with long brown hair and a beard, shirtless, holding a sword, with a fiery background.

April
Reid

Sidhe
Warrior

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...She studied him with the intensity of an art critic.

“Good muscle definition.” She traced the bottom curve of each pectoral muscle.

His skin twitched. Invisible sparks followed the path her hands made. His dick grew painfully hard.

“Excellent use of light and dark to enhance detail.” Her fingers strayed higher and spiraled around each nipple—forging a sensuous path without touching the taut buds aching to be stroked.

“Get on with it,” he muttered, curling his hands in fists to keep from touching her.

She raised her chin in fake haughtiness. “My good fellow”—her eyes gleamed with laughter—“expert art appraisal cannot be rushed.”

“This Goodfellow,” he said in a low tone, “is losing patience.”

“It is written, ‘All things come to he who waits.’” She brushed two fingers against one nipple and then the other—and he wanted to explode.

“Finish the damned inventory,” he growled, “before I embarrass myself like a fuckin’ teenager.”

“Oh?” Her hand slid down his chest and abs to the hard-on bulging against his jeans. “Is this an object lesson in good muscle definition?”

“It’s an object lesson in the dangers of teasing an aroused

male.” Cautiously, he unsnapped the jeans, lowered the zipper and his cock sprang out.

“You’re awesome.” She cradled his meaty member in one hand and brushed the warm fingers of her other hand up and down its length.

His heart rate sped up. His breath came hard. The world narrowed down to Rowan; to her scent of sweet musk and female mystery; to her delicate touch with the power to move him beyond space and time...

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SIDHE WARRIOR

BY

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SIDHE WARRIOR
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To my husband with love.

CHAPTER 1

1507 A.D.

Cullen, son of the great *sidhe* warrior, Ansgard, stood behind the waist-high parapet on the open wall-walk surrounding the highest tower of Garvey Castle and looked out across the moonlit Hibernian countryside. The Balefires of Beltane, heralding spring, burned in the village square of Garvey, set at the base of the steep hill holding the castle. The bodies of ritually killed animals, and one unwilling prisoner, who'd first suffered the triple death, added their stink to the flames. Three bowers of love and lust, fashioned of oak, willow, and apple wood, had been erected in the night

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shadows away from the festivities. There human couples, matched by sexual hunger, spread their offering of love juices and seed to honor the gods and goddesses of fertility.

His foster brother, Phelan, had his choice of many human women—sowing his *sidhe* seed between willing thighs in fertile wombs. He'd claimed to be strengthening the human tribes, but Cullen sensed the dark joy his "Little Wolf" brother took in knowing those women would never again find a lover to match the pleasure and pain he gave them this one night.

As warrior bard for his race, the *Tuatha de Danann*, Cullen dispassionately memorized each part of the Beltane ceremonies celebrated to assure an abundant harvest. Later, he would construct a screen of mist and spread the scene, in every detail, across its surface for all to see, as he spoke and sang the narrative.

This has always been my role, he mused, to stand on the outside—ready to defend and remember—but never be a true part of others' lives.

At the chiming of invisible bells, he looked to his left and watched the goddess, Danu, glide down a moon path to him. Her red-gold hair lifted and fluttered—alive with lights that combined the flash of pure gold and fiery rubies. Her fine cloth-of-gold robe, embroidered with the purple and hunter green of Beltane, swirled around her ankles just above jeweled sandals. She brought with her the wild energy and passion that marked this great celebration of fertility.

He went down on one knee as was the correct manner to greet Danu, the leader of *Tuatha de Danann*.

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“Rise, warrior bard, and greet me with the touch of your mouth, for I would feast on your strength and passion this night.” Her voice held the sensual promise of erotic delights. Her silken skin emitted the heady fragrances of rose and jasmine mixed with the musk of her arousal. Another fainter, more male aroma told of her multiple partners earlier in the evening, as they’d paid tribute to the season.

Suddenly, the rebellion that had been quietly building in his soul flashed to the surface. His mother and father had been faithful to each other, according to the oldest tenets of *sidhe*, even before the race had stepped out of the clouds and onto this sweet green land. In his coming of age, he’d embraced the newer tradition of multiple sex partners. Now, a greater need arose—the unattainable desire for a partner with mutual total commitment.

He pressed one hand over his heart and bowed. “Great Danu, Goddess of Wind, Wisdom, and Fertility, you honor me with your attention.”

“Your words are designed to fall sweetly on my ears, but I hear a silent, ‘No.’” Danu’s smile didn’t change, but her fingers closed on his shoulder. “It is not wise to reject me.”

Her eyes had turned molten gold with power. Cullen’s better judgment warned him to obey or suffer her dangerous anger. The reckless, independent side of him said to tell her his true answer.

Straightening with all the pride of a *sidhe*, he said, “Great Danu, I do not reject you as my ruler. By your hand and your will, plants and animals grow, and the earth sustains both the

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fey and man.”

“Then come, join your body with mine here on the sweet grass of spring under a Beltane moon.” She trailed her fingers across his lips and down to his chest, where she lingered to brush her fingers back and forth across his nipples. The abrading of cloth on his coppery nubs heightened the impact. Her sensual potency crackled from her hands as she stroked her fingers lower and lower to his engorged cock, rising to greet her lush body.

Her lips curved in a smile of satisfaction. “Your warrior’s cock is eager to pleasure me.”

Silently, Cullen cursed Danu’s erotic power over his body and mind. All choice was stripped from him by her potency and her will—but no more.

With a determination that could shift rivers, he took one step—then another—away from her physical reach.

“Mighty Danu, ruler of the *Tuatha sidhe*, Goddess of Beauty, our race was created with the will to make choices.” He quickly fashioned a mist screen and spread a scene of multitudes prostrate in worship to a glorious Danu. “By our god-given will, we honor you—I honor you.”

He caught his balance against the blast of hot wind streaming from the goddess, but continued. “The next time I make love, it will be with a woman whose desire for me is genuine and not a way to reflect her own glory.”

Danu let out a screech of anger. Her hair rose and crackled with power. Her anger pierced him in daggers of heat. As she raised her left hand of gathering, palm upward, to the sky, the

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night wind held its breath. “Cullen, warrior bard of the *Tuatha*, firstborn son of your father, warrior Ansgar and your mother, jewel of the sea, Ula, I bind you to the stones of this castle until you have completed three tasks—one for earth, one for wind, and one for fire.”

His mind raced, searching for ways to undo the full binding before it was completed. Daring her greater anger, he asked, “If I am bound to the castle, how may I accomplish the tasks?”

She gestured with her right hand—her power hand—and his muscles froze. “First, at the behest of a female shaman, you will move the earth and bring peace to the humans you seem to honor more than your own race. To accomplish this, you will be released for twenty-four hours.”

Cullen’s mind spun. *Move the earth in twenty-four hours?*

Danu pursed her lips and blew. From the breath, a column of whirling air raced through the center of the festivities, scattering burning branches. “For your second task, you will command the winds and stop a war. For that, I will allow thirty-six hours away from the castle rocks.”

She gazed at him while a globe of fire formed in her hand. “Third, you will kindle the flames of desire in the heart of a human woman. When you fall in love, she will teach you the pain of knowing each day with her brings her closer to a mortal’s death, while you continue to live and mourn her passing.”

Danu studied the glowing ball in her hand, smiled, and tossed it at his paralyzed body. It exploded against his throat.

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Each fiery tendril seared his nerves, without leaving a mark on his flesh.

Helpless to even curse, he glared at her as she walked seductively toward him. With a gesture, her clothes floated away. Her full mouth promised long, slow kisses anywhere he wished. She caressed her full, uptipped breasts, and lifted them, offering her large, tight nipples to him. Smiling seductively, she stroked her naked pubis and slipped her fingers into her own pussy, plunging them in and out, until love juices flowed down her legs.

Lifting her hand, glistening with woman's honey, she brushed one finger across his motionless lips. "Tonight we would have fucked until we burned up the night in the psychic realms. When all your tasks have been fulfilled in the physical realm"—she pointed to the quarried granite where he stood—"burn up these stones in a cleansing fire. Then you shall be released from my curse."

CHAPTER 2

2007 A.D.

Rowan Alicia Bradley stood behind the parapet on the open wall-walk surrounding the highest tower of Garvey Castle and looked out across Castle Valley set high in the Chiricahua Mountains of southeast Arizona. With her artist's eye, she studied the scene beyond the gray castle walls. Bright orange Mexican gold poppies, mixed with the azure of blue lupines, bloomed in sweeps across the valley floor and up the slope of Lost Gold Peak to the first line of trees.

Across the valley to the east, the burnt sienna sandstone cliffs were in shadow, with only their tops glowing in the

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morning sunshine.

Colors and even the shapes of shadows changed with each passing hour.

She inhaled the cool springtime air, filled with the sweet scent of wildflowers and the resinous scent of the balsam poplar trees growing beside the narrow stream at the castle's edge.

"I love this valley," she murmured. "I could do a new painting of it every day for a year and still find fresh scenes to record."

Great-Uncle Charles Shamus O'Neil told me this was a beautiful place, Rowan mused. I wish I'd come here while he was alive.

She still found it difficult to believe he'd left her this castle, the surrounding land, and the portfolio of investments for its upkeep, including wages for Daisy and Frank.

She brushed the pads of her fingertips along the cool gray granite of the chest-high parapet wall that guarded the outside of the wall-walk. The workers who'd taken apart the castle, stone-by-stone, in Ireland seventy-two years earlier and reassembled it here had done a beautiful job of placing each numbered stone in the exact place it had been originally set. They'd even left a three-foot section of missing blocks in the parapet guarding the wall-walk. Time and the fierce mountain winter storms had crumbled one block at the edge of the breach.

Attracted by a piece of granite on the walkway beside the break in the guard wall, she picked it up and studied the darker

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weathered side, then the clean sparkle of the section newly broken from the crumbling block.

Intrigued by the history of the castle, she shifted to her other sight, waited for the flash of cold and dizziness to pass, then gazed into the heart of the fusion of quartz, feldspar, and mica she cradled in the palm of one hand. The vision opened to show the shadowy form of a warrior in loose-fitting pants tucked into boots, a full-sleeved swordsman's shirt, and a long sword in its sheath nestled against his back, held by the baldric crossing his muscular chest to a leather belt.

At the sound of footsteps, she turned—the vision fading into reality—and she stumbled backward. She would have fallen if he hadn't moved so quickly she didn't sense his motion until he gripped her forearms and held her steady.

"Cullen," she gasped, not just from surprise. Seeing him—having him so close—made her heart beat faster.

He drew her farther away from the breach in the wall. "Careful," he said in a deep voice that sent shivers down her spine.

"Thank you," she said working to regain her composure. "I didn't hear you."

From the first moment two weeks earlier, when she'd seen him strolling along the castle's battlements, with the wind tossing his dark-as-night hair and plastering his ordinary clothes against an extraordinary body, her fingers had itched to paint his portrait. But self-protection had held her back from asking permission; not that she feared him or his refusal. She feared her own gift—or curse—of the ability to see deeper

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than the surface, to see the true reality of a person.

Her instincts said Cullen was okay, but she just didn't want to chance him becoming more than a friend. During their short marriage, her ex-husband, Jeffrey, had taught her caution. Even three years after the divorce was final, he'd sued her on the false charge of stealing an unfinished painting titled *Sidhe Magic*, from one of his clients, and completing it as her own work for Zankle Publishers as a book cover.

In the meantime, Cullen's presence as a welcome guest in the castle brightened her days, the way it must have enriched the time he'd been with her great-uncle. Why else had Charley left her a note asking her to honor his invitation to Cullen Goodfellow to stay as long as he wished?

Goodfellow. She wanted to laugh. *Dangerfellow or Sexyfellow* was more likely.

The short-sleeved, dark blue cotton T-shirt Cullen wore tucked into faded blue jeans did little to conceal the male power and strength of his body. The clothes may have been ordinary, but his strong features and firm, sensual lips were far from ordinary—enough to set her dreaming. And the brilliance of his silver-blue eyes when he stared into hers sent heat rushing through her veins.

She felt the strength of his hands where they still clasped her arms. If only she could fully trust herself to those hands...to his embrace.

In your dreams, Rowan, she chided herself.

Cullen said, in his lovely, melodious voice, "You didn't hear me approach because you were lost in sweet thoughts."

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“Guilty as charged.” By the Blessed Lady, if he didn’t release her immediately, she just might drool all over his boots.

His smile flashed, briefly, dazzling against his sun-bronzed skin. “Daydreams are often the sweetest kind of thoughts.” With that, he released her arms and moved back a pace. “Daisy said to tell you Frank is back from town with the mail, and there’s a thick Priority Mail envelope from your agent.”

She sighed. “He’s probably asking for more paintings, or setting up another gallery showing.”

She slipped the small chunk of granite into her jeans pocket and headed for the outside staircase added by Charley during the reconstruction to give better access to the second level from the castle yard. “I may as well see what he wants so I can call while he’s in his New York office.”

After reading his letter, she marched into her home office, telephoned him immediately and protested. “Nathan, you know I have two important commissions to fulfill without taking time to dash off to a convention. Mr. Van Tassell was very clear on the completion date he set. He wants the portrait of their daughters completed in time for his wife’s birthday.”

“C’mon, Rowan, babe. You’ll have time to spare for painting after the Ages of Romance convention.”

“I don’t have ‘time to spare.’ Jeffrey kept me tied up in court long enough with his false charges to put me seriously behind in my work.”

“How would you like to give him a poke in the eye—metaphorically speaking?”

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“Poke in the eye?” she asked cautiously. “What are you up to, Nathan?”

“Well, babe...” She heard his lighter click as he lit a cigarette, followed by the squeak of his swivel chair when he leaned back. “The timing couldn’t be more perfect. You and your attorney just proved the *Sidhe Magic* cover is totally your work.”

“Of course it is. The judge and jury practically laughed my ex-husband out of court for trying to prove it was done by another artist.”

“Then you ought to jump on this chance to go to the Ages of Romance convention and accept the Golden Spire Award for Best Overall Cover.”

“But...”

“Wait. Even better, the convention theme is Realms of Mystic Romance, and you’re featured on the program to give a talk titled, “A Glimpse into *Sidhe* History.””

“Nathan, you rat! I’m no expert on the bright people. Besides, you know I hate giving talks.”

“Hey, babe, you’ll be great. Gotta run.” He disconnected and left her staring at the phone.

* * *

Cullen watched Rowan stride out of her office looking troubled. Quietly he followed her through the stone hallways, past the tapestry depicting the *Tuatha De* exiting from the city of Falias, carrying the *Lia Fail*, the stone of knowledge, which gave a shout when touched by the rightful heir to the throne of

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Erin.

Many brave warriors, including his comrades in arms and friends, had died to protect the sacred stone.

He remembered when the tapestry was first hung in Lord Rogan Garvey's castle to celebrate its completion. Centuries later, the *sidhe* spell of preservation woven into the heavy fabric still cast a protective shimmer around and through each thread.

Cullen gave a quick salute to those who had been lost in battles to protect the *Lia Fail*, and later this castle, where its woven image hung. Then he strode after the current heir in time to see her cross the great assembly room, tug open the heavy plank door, and slip outside.

Even though Danu's curse would stop him past the outer wall, he continued, determined to keep watch over Rowan as long as possible.

What if she asked him to join her away from the castle, how could he explain without revealing himself as a *sidhe*—and breaking his word to Charley?

He'd face that problem when it came. In the meantime, he stepped out into the mountain air and strode across the inner yard, still following Rowan. She paused for a moment, rubbed one finger on the stone wall, then stuck her hand into her pocket, smiled, and withdrew it, before she continued. Sunlight poured over her dark auburn hair, coaxing glints and strands of mahogany and red. Her vibrant force drew him. He couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to hold that simmering energy in his arms. He'd taste her tight, lush

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nipples, bury his nose in the fragrant valley between her breasts, then slide down her silky body and lap at her secret honeyed cunt.

Apparently unaware of his presence behind her, she passed through the inner and outer castle gates, and turned toward the trail up Lost Gold Peak. Cullen followed, drawn both by curiosity and desire.

With each step away from the wall, Cullen expected to be stopped by the choking pain and paralysis from the curse's binding.

Nothing. Had Danu lifted the curse? He smiled grimly. That would never happen.

All he felt was the faint resonance of the psychic connection that had bound him to the stones since that fateful night when he'd rejected the goddess's seduction.

Ahead of him, Rowan moved farther up the trail. He increased his pace to keep her in sight. For a moment, there was a brief disorientation. Then, with a silent snap, the psychic connection shifted from the castle to...Rowan. Not questioning his good luck, Cullen strode after her, aware of the growing force between them as the gap narrowed.

By now, she'd reached the drift of mountain oak and pine trees that marched down from the thinner forest on top of the peak. A squirrel cursed him from a tree branch before scampering out of sight in a thicker cluster of leaves.

"The same to you, my furry brother," Cullen called, amused by the small animal's antics.

Rowan turned and waited for him to join her. "Trading

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insults with our forest folk?” she asked, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

Cullen tucked his hands in his pockets, like a lad caught at mischief. “Would it help to say, ‘He started it’?”

She grinned at him. “How do you know it was a male?”

He cocked his head to one side and pretended to study the branch from which the squirrel had challenged him. “Sure, and a sweet, young lady would not have lowered herself to use such language.”

Rowan laughed. “It’s obvious you haven’t been around many teens lately.”

“You’ve caught me out,” Cullen said, thinking of earlier centuries, and the past three hundred years when he’d been bound to the castle since he’d performed his second task by sending a great wind to blow away the sailing ships of Saxon invaders.

No longer trapped in the castle—at least for now—he was determined not to examine his good fortune too closely.

With a lighter step and heart, he followed Rowan up the trail. Birds chirped and sang in the trees. The cheeky squirrel’s friends and family called more insults or chattered to each other. As Rowan and he climbed higher, the trail grew steeper and the layer of leaves muffled their footsteps, slipped under their feet, and filled the air with the aroma of rich humus.

Off to one side, he heard the splash and gurgle of a narrow stream cascading down the mountain.

Rowan stopped at a break in the trees where the trail overlooked the grass and flower-strewn valley. At one side,

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the castle gleamed in the sunshine. The stream they'd heard tumbling down the mountainside flowed across the valley floor—a precious gift to the plants and wildlife.

“This valley is my refuge.” Her voice vibrated with a complex of emotions.

Apparently lost in the view, she rubbed the flat needles of a young, aromatic incense-cedar tree between her thumb and forefinger, releasing a sharp, spicy scent.

When she turned back to him, her eyes brimmed with tears. One drop slipped down her cheek. His gut clenched as he wiped away the glittering tear. “Sad, Rowan?”

She gave him a faint smile. “Not sad—happy. Charley’s castle is the first place where I’ve truly felt at home.” She shook her head. “Listen to me rattle on, and we haven’t reached the top of Lost Gold Peak. As an old cowboy I know once said, ‘C’mon, we’re burnin’ daylight.’”

Minutes later, one last scramble up a cap of sandstone and granite brought them high above the trees.

“We made it!” Rowan called, lifting her arms high in victory.

The pine-scented mountain wind whipped her hair away from her face. Closing her eyes, she turned her face to the sky and shouted, “I feel so free.”

He studied her, from the flecks of sunlit fire in her dark auburn hair to the sensual curves under soft cotton. “You look ready to fly.”

She gazed at him, her eyes shining. “I wish I could swoop away, far from Nathan with his demands and Jeffrey with his

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false accusations and harassment.”

The need to protect her rose in his heart. “Who are these men who torment you?” he asked in a tight, controlled tone.

“Nathan is my agent. He’s just doing his job.”

“And the other? The one who brings shadows to your eyes?”

“Jeffrey. My ex-husband.” Her expression grew troubled. “When I think of the two years I believed he loved me and was trying protect me from users, when all the time he was the one stealing from me, I get so angry I could scream.”

Surprised by the kick of jealousy when she mentioned her former husband, Cullen moved closer and touched her cheek with one fingertip. “If this Jeffrey comes near you again, let me take care of the annoyance.”

Her lips parted in surprise. Her emerald green eyes darkened. Tentatively, she placed a hand over his. “Cullen, you don’t have to protect me from him.”

“It will be my pleasure,” he murmured. “And this will be my delight.” No longer resisting his desire to taste her, he pressed his lips against her mouth, cherishing her wind-blown beauty. Wrapping his free arm around her waist, he drew her comely shape against his body. She made a soft humming sound, but didn’t try to pull away, so he brushed another kiss across her mouth, forcing himself to go slowly when his hunger urged him to plunge his tongue into the dark, tempting heat. He didn’t want to frighten her or turn her away from his touch.

There was magic in her blood, he realized. Not only the

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sensual magic that bound two people together, but a deeper magic flowing through her skin, bones, muscles, and nerves. He sensed many paranormal gifts had been locked away. Did she knowingly use any of her other gifts other than the artistic ability?

CHAPTER 3

Cullen's kiss still simmered in her blood as Rowan wandered into the study. Not even holding the key to Charley's secret journal could erase those moments when her heart and mind had been totally focused on the heady sensation of Cullen's mouth on hers. His strong hands had held her with power and exquisite tenderness. For a few flashing moments, she'd experienced a completeness she'd never before experienced. Then they'd separated, and something within her mourned the loss of a connection that had been deeper than just physical.

She could almost hear Grandmother Hedda Schaefer scolding her for unnatural thoughts.

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Unnatural? The attraction flowing between her and Cullen felt right—natural, as if his kiss had unlocked a closed-off part of her being.

A soft rap on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Miss Rowan, may I enter?” Daisy O’Dell called.

“Sure. Come in.” Still caught in the memory of Cullen’s touch, Rowan turned to see what her housekeeper wanted. As Daisy entered, she seemed to fade for a few seconds, replaced by a younger woman wearing blue robes embroidered with the emblems of a Celtic priestess, then flickered again, and it was Daisy in her usual print cotton dress covered by a ruffled bib apron.

Rowan’s mind reeled over what she’d seen. A deep certainty told her both aspects of Daisy were real.

The middle-aged woman nodded as if confirming some thought. “Sit down, child, before you fall. Coming into a new or greater gift takes a toll on your body.”

Rowan fumbled for the desk chair and fell into its padded seat. “How? Who?” She gaped at Daisy.

“Do you think you’re the only one with past lives?” Daisy asked tartly. “Or did that stick-up-the-butt Hedda Schaefer convince you all paranormal gifts are evil?”

“She was trying to protect me.”

“From what? The truth?” Daisy plopped her hand on one hip. “Hedda distrusted anything she couldn’t see, hear, taste, or touch. If it smacked of the supernatural or paranormal, she did whatever she could to eradicate the source.”

Even try to scare it out of her own grandchild, Rowan

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mused, recalling the days and nights when, as a child, she was locked in a dark closet to “correct her wicked thoughts.”

“You’re right.” Rowan gave a rueful laugh. “No Disneyland or fairies for me.”

“It’s a sin and a shame that woman got custody of you when you were six and your blessed mother died. If I know Hedda, she tried to mold you into a straight-laced copy of herself.”

“She failed, much to her dismay.” Then Rowan realized the full meaning of Daisy’s words. “Did you know her that long ago?”

“My mother was the housekeeper for Hedda’s parents until I was eight years old. Hedda was a few months older than me, but I saw her a lot until Master Charles Shamus O’Neil offered my parents the positions as housekeeper and butler. Knowing he was a good and fair man, they accepted.”

Daisy looked around the study. “This was Master O’Neil’s favorite room. He never invited anyone in here, and only reluctantly allowed my mother—and later me—to clean in here once a week.”

“You’re welcome to clean in here whenever it fits into your schedule.” Rowan slid her fingers along the carved loops on the edge of the rich mahogany desk. “You’ve kept this room and the whole castle in beautiful condition.”

“It was the least we could do for Master O’Neil.” Daisy’s lips curved in a fond smile. “He was always ready with a compliment or a kind word. He even paid for my four years of college and a graduation trip to Ireland, so I could see some of

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the world before deciding on my future.”

“Did you see more of the world in addition to Ireland?”

“I saw my future. Dublin is where I met Frank.”

“I’ve never been to Ireland. I remember Mother saying my father had relatives there, but Grandmother never told me who they were.”

“The more shame to her.” Daisy frowned. “On the other hand, it makes sense. Hedda was bitter because Master Charles didn’t ask her to marry him.”

“Marry Uncle Charley? Wasn’t he a lot older?”

Daisy nodded. “Didn’t matter to Hedda. She loved him, but he was never anything more than polite to her. She was pretty wild in those days. When Master Charles didn’t shine up to her, she went out and suckered in one of his younger friends—Henry Schaefer.”

“Grandpa?”

“Yes. Kind soul that he was, he consoled Hedda and ended up with a rushed marriage. Seven months later, your mother was born.”

“It sounds like Hedda seduced my grandfather, but still loved Charley.”

“Oh, she was never anything less than proper in her behavior, but I heard she nagged at her husband until he stopped visiting Master Charles. As the years went on, that woman turned more sour than lemons, and that’s an insult to lemons.”

“Poor Grandmother,” Rowan said, suddenly filled with sympathy. When I called and told her about Charley’s death,

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she said, 'Forget him. The world is better off without fools.' Now I see the comment was her defense against showing her true feelings."

Daisy nodded. "Even when she was a child, Hedda worked hard to be in control, whenever possible.

Rowan sighed, filled with regret. "If anyone was a fool, it was me for allowing Grandmother's biases to keep me from visiting Charley's castle years earlier."

She looked up at the full-length portrait of her mother on the wall opposite the desk. "If Grandmother was so much against Charley, how did he come to meet my mother?"

"He was a friend of your father, Trevor Bradley, who often visited with him here at the castle."

"It's a small world," Rowan said.

"Not so small." Daisy took a step closer. "Your father had relatives in Ireland. In fact, he and Master Charles were distant cousins, many times removed. Lord Garvey, who built the castle, was your father's direct ancestor."

Rowan fingered the small chunk of granite in her pocket. "That must be one reason I feel so comfortable here." Recalling the early photographs of the numbered blocks of stone and the reconstruction in this valley, she wondered aloud, "Why would the people in the area where the castle was located allow it to be moved?"

"Two things," Daisy explained. "Money and jobs. When Master Charles heard about the plans to tear down the castle, a rich developer had already acquired it. The developer planned to raze the castle and put up a hotel and resort. Master Charles

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bought the castle to preserve it.”

She started to leave, then turned back. “I nearly forgot why I came. One of our friends in town said a stranger had been showing your photograph to people and asking where he could find you. One of the busybodies directed him out here.”

“Did your friend know his identity?”

“No, but she did say he was well-spoken, beautifully groomed, and drove a late-model Mercedes Benz.”

Apprehension coiled in her stomach. “That sounds like Jeffrey.”

“Don’t worry your head about him. My Frank will run him off the moment he comes sniffin’ around.”

Rowan had a quick flash of the short, sturdy, red-headed Irishman, attired in formal clothing, accosting the taller, athletic Jeffrey Von Finster. “Please tell Frank I appreciate him guarding my privacy, but confronting my ex-husband is my unpleasant task.”

Daisy’s mouth tightened in displeasure. “You don’t have to put yourself through any more irksome contact with that man when you have Frank and me here.”

“If I don’t face him now, he’ll take that as a sign my resolve to lead my own life is weakening.” She gave Daisy a half-smile. “We’ll compromise. I’ll meet him outside the front door and send him away. If he does finagle his way inside the castle, then Frank can toss him out with my blessings.”

Daisy’s face softened. “Bless your heart, Miss Rowan. My Frank will count that a pleasure.”

An hour later, Rowan looked out the window of her

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second-floor bedroom and saw the cloud of dust along the narrow road from town. It quickly resolved into a Mercedes heading toward the castle.

She shrugged into a light wool sweater against the late afternoon spring chill and clattered down the outside stairs to the outer courtyard. If it was Jeffrey, she wanted to intercept him before he parked and reached the broad steps leading up to the front entrance.

As the black car drove through the open gates and into the courtyard, one look at the driver's dark-blond hair and classic profile confirmed it was her ex-husband.

Rowan took a deep breath, reminding herself he no longer had any say in how she lived her life. She'd learned that lesson the hard way, even resorting to a restraining order—one still in effect. Jeffrey, in his typical arrogance, had apparently decided to ignore the legal constraint.

The moment he opened the car door, she said, "Don't bother getting out. We have nothing to say to each other, so you can turn around and head back to town before you violate the restraining order more than you already have."

Instead of following her request, he stepped out of the car and faced her with a smooth, ingratiating smile. She could swear his eyes sparkled with good humor, even though she knew it was only a façade. "Rowan, dear, surely you don't hold a grudge against me."

He ducked back inside the car for a moment, then straightened, holding a bouquet of stargazer lilies and pink baby's breath. "Here's a peace offering." With a confident

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stride, he rounded the front of the car and came toward her.

She started to step back, but stopped her action, determined not to give ground to him. "That's a nice thought, Jeffrey. However, as pretty as they are, I'm allergic to the pollen in stargazer lilies."

"Nonsense." His eyebrows rose in amused contempt. "That allergy is all in your mind. You always did have a creative imagination."

He thrust the flowers at her and this time she did step back. "Leave, now, Jeffrey Von Finster. You'll have plenty of time to reach town and find a nice motel for the night."

"Motel? After all we meant to each other?" He tossed the bouquet to one side and studied the castle. "I'm sure you have room to put me up here for the night—for the sake of happier times."

Ignoring her gasp of annoyance, he strolled past her and paused at the foot of the broad stairway. "You fell into clover here. What did you give the old man to leave you this castle? It must have been more than sex. God knows you were a cold fish in bed when we were married."

Holding her temper, she stepped around him and started for the heavy, brass-bound wooden door.

He moved to the side, cutting her off and reaching for her. "C'mon, dear girl, you know you want me."

"I'd rather kiss a goat." She shoved suddenly, using every ounce of strength she'd developed in the self-protection lessons.

Jeffrey apparently hadn't expected her to resist. He

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sprawled on his ass on the cobblestones paving the courtyard.

“That’s it, bitch,” Jeffrey shouted. “It’s time you learned you belong to me and your place is on your back under me.”

Wordlessly, she spun away from him and ran for the front entrance, only to collide with something warm and hard. *Cullen*. His sudden appearance shocked her. She hadn’t heard him approach, but there he was, as solid as the twenty-foot-thick outer castle walls.

He lifted her, turning to place her behind him, then faced Jeffrey.

Cullen said nothing. He just stood, waiting, as calm and unyielding as the great mountains surrounding the valley. There was an inexpressible assurance about him that both excited her and made her feel safe and protected.

Jeffrey took two steps toward her before he stopped and shot a vicious look at Cullen. “You her new fancy piece?” He spat on the cobblestones. “She’ll use you the way she used me, then steal your possessions and sic the law on you.”

She saw the smooth change in Cullen’s stance. Jeffrey must’ve seen it, too. He stumbled back with a crude curse.

“Last chance, Rowan,” he said, sneering, “or I’ll smear your reputation in the art world.”

She gave a harsh laugh to cover the chill sliding down her spine. “You’ve already tried that. It didn’t work. Now get off my property.”

Warily, he glanced at Cullen, then glared at Rowan. “This isn’t finished. When you least expect it, I’ll be your worst nightmare.”

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Cullen stepped toward Jeffrey, menace a palpable force in the air. “The lady said to leave. Get into your dusty machine and go before I give you the drubbing you richly deserve.”

When Jeffrey hesitated, Cullen made a curious gesture with one hand. As if summoned out of nowhere, a sudden gust of wind whirled across the courtyard pelting Jeffrey with leaves and stinging sand until he dove inside the shelter of his car.

She stared at the unnatural action of the dust devil as it targeted Jeffrey, but only brushed her clothes with its fringe and left a faint smell of dust in the air. *Am I seeing things? The wind-blown rubble is real, but how could Cullen be the cause?*

At that moment, Jeffrey lowered the window and shouted, “You haven’t heard the last of me, bitch. If you think the court case screwed up your life, just wait.”

He started the engine, turned, slinging dirt and sand under his tires, and sped away.

Once his car was out of sight, a wave of cold and fatigue swept through her body. Her knees felt wobbly. She shivered, filled with dread for what might happen.

“Rowan?” Cullen gave her a searching look. “Are you all right?”

“No.” She gave a bitter laugh. “Not as long as I let that jerk upset me. You’d think I’d have learned my lesson after two years of marriage to him when he constantly undermined my self-esteem, but, damn it, I fell right back into the same old pattern of fearing him.”

“He didn’t look so fearsome when you knocked him onto

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his butt.” Cullen lifted her right hand to his lips. “Warrior lady, this time you’re the winner.”

“Winner?” she murmured, entranced by the tingling excitement that raced down her arm and through her blood at Cullen’s touch.

“You conquered the demon Jeffrey.” Cullen’s voice flowed across her senses like the richest perfume. “As a warrior bard, I salute you with the chaste kiss of victory.” He drew her closer and dropped a light kiss on her cheek.

“Ah, but for myself”—his lips brushed her mouth—“I want your taste, your fire.”

His tongue slicked across her lips and an anticipatory shiver trickled down her spine. She heard a low moan of need and realized it had come from her.

“You taste of cool winds and the timeless mountains you immortalize in paint,” he murmured as his warm breath bathed her face. “Now for the fire.” His mouth came down hungrily on hers and she gasped. His tongue swept into her mouth. His hold tightened on her waist, bending the front of her body against his muscled chest, stomach, and thighs.

Flames swept through her blood. Her hands, already on his shoulders, clasped the back of his strong neck under his thick hair. She hung on tight, riding the whirlpool of emotion as he taught her the erotic power of lips, tongue, and the gentle pressure of his teeth.

She felt his hand slip under her cotton top and cup one breast. The warmth of his fingers penetrated the silky fabric of her bra and sent ripples of desire along her nerves. With his

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thumb, he circled her nipple—each stroke building the sensual flames higher.

His other hand still cradled the back of her hand, while his lips and tongue continued to gently ravish her mouth.

A crisp wind, filled with mountain spice, flowed around them, but, somehow, a cocoon of warm, liquid silk wrapped them closer—sheltering them against the cold.

Raising his head, he stared at her with a hot, hungry gaze in his silvery-blue eyes. “Sweet lady, I want more.”

“Cullen...” It took three attempts before she could say anymore. “I’ve wanted you from the moment I first saw you, but...”

“You feared your own desires.”

“Yes.” She looked into his eyes and saw his hunger for her held in tight check by his willpower. Jeffrey had always taken what he wanted and when he wanted it. Cullen was waiting for her decision.

She took a deep breath—

* * *

She’d agree.

Cullen swept Rowan into his arms and carried her—two steps at a time—up the outside stairway, through the door, and down the short hallway to her bedroom suite. He sent magic winging ahead to open each door the moment before he touched the wood.

It had been five hundred years since he’d lain with any female—*sidhe* or human. Now he held a woman whose

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presence had stirred his blood and roused his cock from the moment he'd seen her high on the wall-walk two weeks earlier with the wind blowing her auburn hair and the look of distant memories in her emerald eyes.

"Rowan, *miurnin*," he murmured, tenderly laying her on the high, canopied bed in a room filled with the golden glow of sunset.

"What?" Slowly she raised one hand and touched the side of his face.

"*Miurnin* means sweetheart." He turned his head to kiss the palm of her hand and breathe in her intoxicating scent.

She gazed at him, as if searching for a different truth.

Gently, in spite of his raging hard-on, Cullen said, "Did that bastard, Jeffrey, make you doubt terms of endearment?"

"He calls every female 'sweetheart.'"

Cullen nodded. "A lazy fucker."

Rowan's eyes widened. "Lazy?"

"Sure." Cullen traced her lips with one finger, wondering how soon he dared to kiss her again. "He can't be bothered to remember the name of every woman he screws, so he calls all of them 'sweetheart.'"

Cullen felt the impact of her gaze as she studied his expression. "And you call me, *miurnin*, sweetheart, because...?"

"Because of this..." Kneeling on the bed beside her, he lowered his head and took her mouth in another long, hungry kiss.

After a moment's hesitation, she returned his kisses with

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growing passion. While her lips and tongue tangled with his, she slid her hands up his skin inside his T-shirt and gripped his bare waist.

“Do you want my shirt off?” he murmured against her lips.

“Let me.” She pushed against his chest. Obliging, he sat up, wondering what was going through her female mind.

She rose, going up on her knees. Silently, she gathered the bottom of his cotton shirt and drew it slowly over his head, as if unveiling one of her paintings for a favored client’s approval.

Carefully, she folded the T-shirt and set it aside, then lifted her eyes and studied him with the intensity of an art critic.

“Good muscle definition.” She traced the bottom curve of each pectoral muscle.

His skin twitched. Invisible sparks followed the path her hands made. His dick grew painfully hard.

“Excellent use of light and dark to enhance detail.” Her fingers strayed higher and spiraled around each nipple—forging a sensuous path without touching the taut buds aching to be stroked.

“Get on with it,” he muttered, curling his hands in fists to keep from touching her.

She raised her chin in fake haughtiness. “My good fellow”—her eyes gleamed with laughter—“expert art appraisal cannot be rushed.”

“This Goodfellow,” he said in a low tone, “is losing patience.”

“It is written, ‘All things come to he who waits.’” She

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brushed two fingers against one nipple and then the other—and he wanted to explode.

“Finish the damned inventory,” he growled, “before I embarrass myself like a fuckin’ teenager.”

“Oh?” Her hand slid down his chest and abs to the hard-on bulging against his jeans. “Is this an object lesson in good muscle definition?”

“It’s an object lesson in the dangers of teasing an aroused male.” Cautiously, he unsnapped the jeans, lowered the zipper and his cock sprang out.

“You’re awesome.” She cradled his meaty member in one hand and brushed the warm fingers of her other hand up and down its length.

His heart rate sped up. His breath came hard. The world narrowed down to Rowan; to her scent of sweet musk and female mystery; to her delicate touch with the power to move him beyond space and time.

She closed her fingers around his cock “I could do a painting and call it *Essence of Life*.”

“By the gods,” he groaned, “One more squeeze and I’ll spew my ‘essence’ into your hands.”

“Really?” She slipped one hand inside his jeans and cradled his tight balls. “How...intriguing.”

“Rowan...” His voice rose on a pleading note. “Either stop or let me inside you—now.”

“Now?” She tugged off her cotton top and reached around to unsnap her bra. “Yes, goddess, yes. Now.”

In moments their clothes were off. Cullen lifted Rowan to

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straddle him, reaching between their bodies to guide his cock into her damp vagina. She made a soft sound of surprise. “I’ve never done it like this.”

Fighting to keep his body in check, he said, “This way you can control how fast or slow I enter.”

“Mmm, nice,” she murmured—slowly settling on him.

Her soft, wet folds tightened around his dick. His balls squeezed up. He felt the pressure of impending release at the base of his spine.

She rose on his cock and settled again, drawing him deeper into hot flesh.

Through his sensual haze he watched her cheeks flush and her eyes grow darker with arousal.

She leaned forward, pressing him farther inside, and took his lips in a fiery kiss. Her breasts brushed his chest. He caught them in his hands and kneaded them while their tongues tangled.

Cullen”—she rose above him, her auburn hair lit with the fires of sunset—“now!”

“Ride me, sweet lady. Ride me as deep and as hard as you want.”

CHAPTER 4

Rowan stretched in the soft morning light, then closed her eyes again and drifted in the gentle state of half-asleep, half-awake as she brought back the hot, sweet memories of making love with Cullen.

Cullen. Just the thought of him made her breasts swell and pressure coil low in her body.

“Last night,” she murmured and brushed her fingers over one sensitive nipple.

“Last night was magic,” a male voice said, and the bed dipped as he sat beside her.

“Cullen!” Suddenly fully awake, she realized the object of her sexy thoughts was sitting beside her fully clothed and she

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was naked. She never slept in the nude.

She started to draw the blanket up, but he laid one masculine hand over hers. "Don't hide the pretty sight," he said in a warm tone that set her tingling.

Suddenly shy, she scrambled for an excuse. "I...I'm cold."

He gave her a knowing smile. "Ah, now that I can solve." He cupped a warm hand over each breast, while his busy thumbs brushed her nipples.

"Better?"

"Yes—no." Her mind was turning to mush, but her body hummed for more.

"Will this help?" Leaning forward, he continued to stroke one nipple, but settled his mouth on her other breast and gently sucked.

Help? More like destroy all her feeble defenses. Memories of last night flooded her mind and her body.

He switched to the other breast, leaving the damp one to chill in the air. Each soft brush of his thumb raised that nipple's sensitivity. Sensual shocks raced along her nerves. Each pull of his mouth drove her higher. She arched back, lifting her chest, silently pleading for more. Now her body was too hot. Making a low, incoherent sound, she pushed down the covers and slowly twisted her hips.

He murmured, "You're beautiful and so responsive you fill my heart with joy."

"Fill me, too," she cried in desperation. "I need you—inside. Fuck me the way you did last night."

His warm hand slipped under the covers and cupped her

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between the legs. “Nothing would please me more, sweet lady, but we rode each other too often last night for your tender flesh to be ready again this morning.”

Wild for release, she gasped, “I can bear it. Damn it, I need you.”

He yanked the covers to one side. “There’s another way, if you wish.”

“Anything.”

“I want to kiss your clit and taste your woman’s honey—here.” He cupped her mound.

Just the feel of his fingers between her legs set off sparks of anticipation. Her thoughts whirled. She clamped her legs together, trapping his hand—needing the pressure. “Yes. Touch me. Now.”

“Thanks be to all the gods,” he said in a vibrant tone, and gently parted her legs.

Another thrill coursed through her blood. Everything seemed brighter, sharper. The morning birds sang more sweetly. The fresh breeze whispering through the open window carried magical scents, and her room was bathed in a golden light, even though it faced away from the morning sun.

His strong, male hands cupped her buttocks.

Everything in her tightened, waiting...

Gently, he placed his warm mouth on her tender flesh. She sucked in her breath and felt the gush of warmth flow between her legs.

“Ah, my Rowan, you’re so sweet, so responsive,” he murmured, the dark tones resonating in her bones.

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She felt his hot breath; felt the texture of his hair brushing the inside of her thighs as he explored her most female part. The gentle scrape of his teeth—something she'd never before experienced—sent her soaring like the wild eagles.

She gasped and looked down, watching him touch her more intimately than anyone else had ever done. She felt the careful pressure of his teeth on her swollen labia. His lips and teeth and tongue swept her higher, softly tortured her, then licked and soothed her sensitive flesh, only to start all over.

“Cullen.” His name spilled from her lips. She scrabbled at the sheet, searching for a fixed point in world of pure sensation.

Guiding her hands to opposite edges of the pillow, he murmured, “Hold this and don’t move your head. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Safe?” Is that what she wanted? “Not too safe,” she ordered. “Make me fly.”

“Fly, it is.” He chuckled, and his breath flowed around her clit as desire coiled tighter.

He tasted, teased, and suckled, using his tongue to send her higher, faster, in a rush of lights and splintered color. The musk of lovemaking swirled around them.

She was beyond speaking. A hungry, erotic sound welled up from her depths.

At that moment, her muscles tingled and the hot coil of desire in her womb twisted tighter, tighter, until she shattered into sensual flames.

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* * *

She returned to awareness wrapped in a blanket in Cullen's arms.

"The sleeping beauty awakes," he said and touched his lips to her forehead.

"What? What happened?"

"You experienced *la petite mort*—the little death." Cullen brushed back a loose strand of hair caught in her eyelashes. "Some women, and even a few men, pass out from ecstasy."

"I never have before." Reaching up, she dusted her fingers across his mouth. "You taught me how to fly and it was awesome."

"Sweet lady." He seemed to struggle with some unknown emotion. "Sweet Rowan, I've never known a woman like you."

"Cullen," she said on a long sigh, "your words make my heart sing."

As she finished speaking, he seemed to shimmer before her eyes. Superimposed over his face and body was another Cullen, this one dressed as the warrior she'd seen on the wall-walk, complete with a sword in its scabbard on his back. Only this time he carried a small lap harp of the type a wandering bard would have carried in ancient times. Behind that figure stood another Cullen—jaw tight and expression fierce—with his sword raised as if in battle.

She blinked to clear her sight. The warrior and the bard disappeared and the man she knew gazed down at her once more.

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* * *

By the time she bathed, dressed, and wandered into the kitchen, the morning sun had cleared the mountain peaks and painted its radiance across the wildflowers in the valley floor.

Daisy smiled at her before turning back to the oven. "Coffee's done and the cinnamon rolls will be ready by the time I section the grapefruit."

"I'll do the grapefruit," Rowan offered. "I'm still not used to someone waiting on me."

"Bless your heart," Daisy said, cracking eggs into a bowl. "I'd love your help this morning."

Rowan worked beside Daisy companionably. There was something about the soothing aroma of coffee and cinnamon that prompted her to confide in the older woman.

To compose her thoughts, she placed a sharp knife on one grapefruit and prepared to slice it in half. "Daisy, remember the other day when I thought I saw you as two different people and you asked if I thought I was the only one with past lives?"

"I recall you had a hard time believing paranormal gifts are real, in spite of your own ability to see beyond the surface of the people you paint."

"Most people would say that's just concentration and paying attention to details, not some woo-woo gift." Rowan neatly sliced the yellow fruit and ran the blade between the sections to separate them.

Daisy turned off the oven and gazed at Rowan. "If you don't believe in special gifts, then why ask?"

"I do believe in my gift to see beyond the surface of the

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people I paint, but this morning, I thought I saw Cullen as three different people, and sensed an otherworldly power blocking him.”

“Did I hear my name?”

Startled by Cullen’s sudden appearance, Rowan jerked. The sharp knife slipped. She looked down in disbelief at the blood welling up from a cut across one finger.

“Here now, what have you done?” He crossed the room in three strides and gripped her hand.

“It’s nothing.” She ripped a paper towel off the roll and pressed it on her finger. “I’ll be right back.”

She hurried toward the bathroom and the first aid supplies, cursing the effect Cullen had on her composure.

* * *

Cullen cursed his growing attraction to Rowan.

Attraction? Hell, it was more than that. No other female—human or *sidhe*—had caught his mind and stirred his body like the auburn-haired artist seated across from him at the table. In Rowan, he’d found a woman who could fulfill his desire for a partner with mutual total commitment.

For the first time, he’d come to understand why his parents had remained faithful to each other through countless centuries.

But Rowan was a human with a brief lifespan when measured against his. If they did bond as life mates, would it be fair to her to grow old, while he never changed?

As these thoughts flitted through his mind, he watched her

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expressive face and the way the morning sun lovingly sparked glowing red in her dark auburn hair.

Did she know or even suspect his feelings for her?

Rowan had seemed deep in thought all during breakfast. She certainly didn't behave like a woman who only hours earlier had responded to him with such passion he was still semi-aroused.

She pushed back from the table and rose. "Great breakfast, Daisy. I hate to eat and run, but I need to work on my commission for the *Spirit of the Chiricahuas* series before I go to the convention."

Daisy gathered Rowan's used plate and cutlery while she asked, "Is a model coming today?"

"I haven't reached that stage. First, I'll do some sketches of potential backgrounds in the valley."

"You be careful," Daisy warned. "That snake, Jeffrey, might come slithering back." She gave Cullen a meaningful look. "Better take some protection."

Rowan shook her head. "I'll be perfectly safe. Cullen took care of that when he made Jeffrey leave."

She walked out of the room, and Cullen heard her go up the inside stairway quickly and hurry to her studio.

"Bard Cullen, isn't it about time you told her you're a *sidhe*?" Daisy asked.

He didn't try to disguise his surprise. "What makes you think I am *sidhe*?"

"I've known it since I came here as a child with my parents. Master Charles took me aside soon after we arrived

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and asked me to keep your secret. I did.”

Looking deeper into her, Cullen saw the shadows of past lives. “You’re an old soul, but were a child in this time.”

“With a touch of fey blood in my ancestors.” She nodded. “Master Charles said he knew all children saw more than most adults.”

She set the plates down and folded her arms. “I’ll ask again—when will you tell her you’re a *sidhe*? She already sees and senses you’re different from other men.”

“What good would it do?” All his frustration exploded. “Besides, I can’t tell her. When I first met Charley, I promised, on my honor, to keep my identity a secret from all visitors.”

Daisy pursed her lips and gave him a look that said, “Get a brain.” “For a brilliant bard who, according to legend, can charm birds out of the trees, you forgot one important fact.”

“That is?”

“Rowan isn’t a visitor. She owns the castle. It’s her right to know your secret.”

He gaped at Daisy, overwhelmed with a rush of emotions. “By the great spear of Lugh, you’re right.”

In the silence that followed, he heard Rowan’s footsteps clatter down the outside staircase.

Daisy gave him a nudge. “Go on. Follow her. You never know what can happen to an attractive woman alone in an isolated place.”

“Yes, ma’am, but don’t be surprised if she tries to send me packing.”

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“You’ll find some way to keep her safe. Try telling her the truth.” Daisy swept out of the room.

Tell Rowan the truth, he thought. Even if he could get past the castle walls with its potent curse long enough to explain, would she accept his true identity?

He had to catch her before she got beyond the gates.

While he raced toward the opening, he watched Rowan hurry through the inner gate. As he passed out of the second gate, she was already yards away.

Desperate to talk to her, he called her name.

At the moment she turned, the curse seized him. He fell to his hands and knees. His muscles locked. Pain ate through his nerves and seared his blood. Every breath cost him agony.

“Cullen, what’s wrong?” Rowan’s worried tone reached him through the roaring in his ears.

“I can’t...leave the castle.”

“You did the other day.” She made an annoyed sound. “Forget I said that. How can I help?”

“Have to...touch wall.” He closed his eyes. Each word sapped his strength. If his *sidhe* friends could see me now, he thought wryly, they’d laugh at my foolishness in defying the goddess.

He felt Rowan’s hands slip under his arms. Her touch eased the pain from the curse, but his muscles remained locked.

She tried to tug him in the direction of the quarried blocks framing the outer gateway. He didn’t move, but he heard the rapid beat of her heart and her labored breathing as she tried

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again and again to drag him to safety.

“Stop,” he gasped. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Shut up! I can do this.” She released her hold long enough to wipe her damp hands on her jeans. He sensed her tapping into deeper reserves.

Once more she slipped her hands under his arms. He felt her set her feet and lean backward.

“Bright Lady, help me.” Her words came out in a tight voice.

In an achingly slow slide, his body moved across the sandy dirt, collecting pebbles and stones along his sides. As they moved closer to the wall, Rowan’s breathing grew more labored. He heard her heart thud louder with the effort.

“Rowan...”

“Don’t...talk. Nearly...there.” Her tone squeezed higher.

With one more heave, she stumbled and fell beside him, but that last surge of effort left him braced against the rocky wall.

His strength rapidly returned. He drew her across his lap, propped her upper body across his chest with her head against his shoulder.

Her eyes were closed and her face was flushed. Her breath still came in gasps. Her blouse clung to her body, damped by perspiration. Ignoring the temptation of her tight nipples, he brushed the wet hair away from her forehead and murmured, “*A chailín mo chroi.*”

“What?”

“My darling girl.”

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“Oh...” She drew away from his chest and speared him with her gaze. “Sweet talk or real?”

Annoyed by her doubt, he snapped, “You decide.”

“It’s natural for you to be thankful for my help,” she said in a prim voice that set his teeth on edge.

If he hadn’t been watching her eyes, he’d have missed the fleeting vulnerability he saw in their shadowed depths. Did she sense his own doubts about taking their relationship deeper? The gods knew she’d suffered more than her share of pain and disillusion with Jeffrey. But, no matter how painful, he had to tell her the truth about his identity—after one more kiss—before she consigned him to the devil.

He rose and drew her to her feet. They stood in the cool shade cast by the wall. A warm breeze, scented with the perfume of wildflowers, wrapped around them, rippling their clothes.

“Rowan, I have a secret to tell you. It’s the reason I became Charley’s permanent guest.”

She looked up into his face. “Are you afraid I’ll ask you to leave?”

“Something like that.” He rested his forehead against hers and inhaled her unique scent enough to set his head spinning.

“I don’t know of any reason to toss you out on your ear.” She laid one delicate hand on the side of his face. “Will you forgive me for growling at you?”

Lifting his head, he cradled her face between his palms. “It may take a kiss or three to persuade me.”

“Please.” She raised her mouth to him.

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Tenderly he touched his lips to hers as if she were a shy, untried miss sharing her first lover's kiss. The sweet gentleness between them brought a sigh to his lips—and hers.

"That's one," he murmured and pressed his bottom lip into her mouth. Her lower lip fluttered against his, and the forgotten emotions of a young man—a young lover—swarmed through his heart.

She made a low sound in her throat. Her tongue slipped across his lip, sending sparks of heat in its trail.

He carefully flexed his fingers on her delicate cheekbones and tipped her head slightly, as he bent his to carry the kiss to the next level.

"That's two." His lips vibrated against hers.

"Two," she agreed, and took his lower lip between her teeth in a gentle grip that flashed like fire through his blood.

The tenderness turned to heat. He cupped the back of her head with one hand and slipped his other hand down to the swell of her butt. All that lovely, well-toned flesh in thin cotton blouse and fuck-me tight-fitting jeans was enough to drive a saint mad.

"Rowan," he muttered, fighting to keep his hunger in check. "We have to stop. My good intentions to kiss you and no more are melting like butter in the Arizona sun."

She slipped her arms around his neck, bringing their bodies tighter together. "Then don't stop."

Muttering curses, he untwined her arms from his neck and stepped back. "We can't go any further until I tell you my secret."

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By silent, mutual consent, they followed the path inside the wall to the flower and herb garden planted years earlier by Charley.

Rowan led the way across the cool, lush lawn to the wood-slat bench shaded by an arbor twined with fragrant climbing roses in shades from deep to pale pink tucked in glossy green foliage.

She patted the bench beside her. “Okay, Cullen, what’s this big secret?”

Shaking his head, he stood, his legs apart, shoulders squared and hands fisted at his sides, as if preparing for a blow. “My name is Cullen, son of Ansgar. I’m a *sidhe* warrior bard, and I was fully grown before this castle was first built on the green and rocky cliffs of Hibernia.”

She couldn’t help it. She grinned. “Give me a break, Cullen. You can’t possibly be that old.”

“I fought beside other warriors to protect the *Lia Fail*, the Stone of Knowledge—and, aye, I sang of its heroes in many crofts and castles before the coming of Christianity.”

Rowan frowned. “Are you feeling all right?” Rising slowly so as not to startle him, she rested the back of her hand on his forehead. “You’re a little warm. Are you running a fever?”

Cullen gave an impatient shrug. “I met your father, Trevor Bradley, when he came to visit Charley.”

“My—my father?” She felt the familiar sense of loss. “I never knew him. He died just after I was born, but Mother said he held me in his arms and named me Rowan after his mother.”

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“He was a fine man.” For a moment, sadness flitted across Cullen’s face, then it was replaced by an impassive expression. “Trevor was filled with praises for Keara, a young woman introduced to him by Charley. The couple planned to wed as soon as they could gain her parents’ permission.”

“My grandmother never did agree. She wouldn’t allow any mention of my father in her presence.”

“Yes. Charley told me.” Cullen fingered a loose tendril of hair on her cheek and a lovely warmth slid through her blood.

He snapped his fingers. A rose drifted down from the arbor into his waiting hand. He tucked it into her hair, where the fragrance teased her senses.

* * *

Even while she reveled in the lush scent, she recalled how Cullen, with a gesture, had summoned a miniature dust devil to drive Jeffrey out of the castle grounds. Added to that were the times she had seen Cullen in the images of both warrior and bard.

As impossible as it sounded, Cullen must be telling the truth.

He cupped her chin and brushed a soft kiss across her lips. “I see conflict in your eyes. Here’s one more bit of evidence. The last time I saw Trevor, he’d come to tell Charley his wife, Keara, was expecting their first child—you. And he brought a puppy he’d bought for his little family.”

“A puppy?” Suddenly a long-suppressed memory flooded her mind. She remembered coming to the castle as a three- or

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four-year-old and holding her mother's hand while they waded through the fragrant fields of wildflowers. Their Australian sheepdog, Skipper, had run ahead of them—chasing away snakes, her mother had explained.

Rowan gripped Cullen's hand. "I remember now. We did come to the castle for a visit, but I didn't see you."

"Charley asked me to remain out of sight." Cullen folded both Rowans' hands in his. "Did you know Charley offered your mother a suite in the castle for you and her to stay as long as she wished?"

"She never mentioned it. Looking back, she may have sensed Charley's affection and didn't want to take advantage of his feelings."

"Charley said Keara and Trevor were deeply in love."

"They were." Remembering the times her mother had talked about Daddy Trevor, Rowan smiled. "He burned like a warm flame in her mind and heart."

"A flame that was snuffed out too soon," Cullen said in a surprisingly grim tone.

"Too soon." Rowan shook off the uneasy sense of deeper hurts and dangerous truths behind Cullen's few words. She took a breath and prepared to face those truths. "I'll accept that you're a *sidhe*, but it doesn't explain why you want to dump me."

His head came up. His eyes flared with anger. "Dump—get rid of you? Is that what you think?" He lurched to his feet, muttering what sounded like curses in some unknown language.

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She watched him run a hand through his hair in a gesture of frustration, and somehow that, combined with his subdued swearing, eased her fears. “Cullen, if you don’t want to pitch me out of your life, then what do you want?”

“Want?” He paced back and forth in front of the rose-covered arbor twice before facing her. “I want to be with you, hike the mountains and valleys with you, and spend your mortal lifetime with you.”

Suddenly the word “mortal” took on a new significance and her heart sank. “Is that what it’s all about—me being mortal and you a *sidhe*, with centuries more to live?”

“Yes!” He sat beside her on the bench and took her hand. “Our different life spans and a curse that chains me to this castle until I’ve completed three tasks.”

She looked up into his silvery-blue eyes, now swimming with emotions. He blinked and the impenetrable mask was back.

“We can’t do anything about the length of our lives, but maybe we can find a way to complete the tasks.”

“I’ve already completed two tasks. I’ll show you.” He stood and raised both hands, sketching a rectangular shape that hovered in the air. With another gesture, a silver mist formed within the boundaries.

Rowan caught her breath. “*Sidhe* magic,” she murmured.

“A *sidhe* bard’s way to illustrate his words.” Cullen’s appearance underwent a subtle change. Once more he was garbed in warrior dress, but this time the lap harp rested at his feet.

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He caught her gaze and smiled. "I'm the same guy who ate eggs and bacon with you this morning."

"Not the same to most mortals."

"Ah, but you know more—understand more than most mortals." He turned back to the mist screen. "The first task—at the request of a female shaman—was to bring peace to warring humans by moving the earth. I had twenty-four hours away from the castle to accomplish the work."

"Move the earth? How?"

"Behold."

On the screen there appeared a broad, grassy valley with a river winding down the center. While she watched, the scene went into fast-forward with water alternately surging down the river, flooding both sides, and then slowing. With each change, the river gradually shifted, eating away at the bank on one side and building up on the other. Small farms lost or gained land and stone boundary markers were often swept away.

Cullen said, "The river marked the boundary of two clans who fought back and forth over the land lost or added by the flooding. Over the years, many were killed or crippled."

"But how could you bring peace in twenty-four hours?"

"By straightening the river so it runs smoothly, but still overflows its banks each year to enrich the fields on both sides."

"That's..."

"As impossible as calling the rose to my hand?" He gestured toward the mist screen. "Look."

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Rowan stared at the images of a miracle unfolding against the silvery rectangle. She saw Cullen, with his great sword in its scabbard on his back, stride to a low rise of land cut by the waterway on one side. He held both hands, shoulder high, palms upward in invocation, as he spoke unknown words in a powerful voice that carried easily to the crowds on both sides of the river boundary.

The sky was clear, but a low thunder rolled through the ground. Drawing his sword with both hands, he held it high for all to see. Lightning crackled up and down the long blade.

He shouted, “Gods and goddesses, bring justice and peace to this land. As I command, so must it be,” and he plunged the blade into the ground at the water’s edge. The very air, wind, and water seemed to hold its collective breath. Then the ground at the edge of the blade exploded.

People on both sides of the watercourse scrambled and ran for their lives, away from the great gouts of earth and liquid erupting in the air. Through it all, Cullen stood among a rain of rocks and mud, his sword held firmly in place.

Suddenly everything stopped. The once-winding water boundary flowed straight.

Cullen fell to his knees, still gripping the sword.

An invisible force scooped him up. He disappeared from that valley and reappeared on the wall-walk at the castle on the Hibernian coast.

The mist screen went blank.

CHAPTER 5

Cullen went down on one knee in front of Rowan where she sat staring at empty space. Her face had grown pale beneath its tan. He didn't dare touch her. Had the scenes of him using his powers been too much for her to absorb? Once she did understand, would she have a disgust or fear of him? Other mortal women, after learning he was a *sidhe*, had tried to seduce him, or fled, or made it clear they didn't want to be soiled by even his presence in the same room.

She blinked like someone coming out of a long sleep. Her eyes had darkened to a deeper shade of emerald.

Slowly her gaze sought his and connected.

"Rowan?" he murmured, not daring to move. "Are you..."

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She inhaled, then let out a long breath. “Cullen?” Her hand trembled. She reached toward him and gripped his hand. “Cullen, that was...”

He froze.

“You were...” She shook her head. “All I can say is, wow.”

“Wow?” He stared at her face filled with excitement—and a great relief swept through his heart. “I didn’t know how you’d react.”

“You thought your *sidhe* ability would frighten me off?” She gave his hand a tug and he obediently joined her on the bench. “Silly, did you freak out when you learned of my special gifts?”

“Silly? Nobody’s ever called me silly.”

Positively giddy with relief, he drew her into his arms and held her close. “Rowan, your ability to see beyond the surface is a true gift—one to treasure, not fear.”

She sighed and buried her face against his throat. “Do you know how rare it is to be truly accepted?”

He chuckled, “Sweet *miurnin*, I do.”

She pulled away enough to look up at him. “Cullen, kiss me.”

“Gods, yes.” He plunged his hands into her hair to steady her head. She parted her lips, and he took her mouth hard, fast, hot. Their tongues tangled and dueled, while he fumbled with the tiny buttons down the front of her blouse.

With a muttered command, the blouse parted and slipped away, leaving her breasts confined behind dainty lace. He

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stood and raised her to her feet on the cool grass. Another command stripped away their clothes and shoes.

“Hurry. Love me,” Rowan gasped. I want you here, now.” Her mouth slipped down to one of his nipples and teased it with her hot tongue. His mind whirled. His balls pulled up and tightened. His cock ached to plunge into her slit.

“Put your arms around my neck,” he said in a tight voice. “Lift your right leg for me.”

“Sounds kinky,” she said on a breathless laugh. “Good kinky.” Her fingers brushed his shoulders, then connected behind his neck. Her leg came up. He cradled her warm thigh in his hand, and she slid one arm around his neck, drawing herself higher, and opening herself to his heavy cock.

Bracing his legs, he probed the opening of her hot, wet *yoni*, fighting his need to plunge in too soon. But she was ready, and he slid into the honey-and-musk scent. Her internal muscles rippled against the broad head.

He stroked in and out—opening her channel more. The scent of lovemaking flashed between them. He drew up her other leg, cradling her neat butt in both hands. His *sidhe* muscles easily held her as he plunged deeper and deeper.

With each stroke, she gasped, “More—more.” And he gave her more...probing, twisting, and taking them both to a higher level of pleasure.

One more thrust sent them over the edge. His heart pounded. The edges of his vision darkened, then flared.

Holding her damp body close, he went down on his knees, then laid her on the thick grass and came down on top, still

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connected, and braced his upper torso on his elbows.

“Rowan,” he murmured, gazing into her deep emerald eyes. “Sweetheart.”

She lifted a smooth hand to his cheek, and he turned his head to kiss her fingers.

“Cullen,” she murmured, “*Miurnin*.”

* * *

Rowan wandered along the shadowed wall-walk. Across the flower-strewn valley, the mountains blazed with the crimson, orange and gold of sunset. But amid that glory, the contrast of deep violet crevasses reminded her of hers and Cullen’s lives. His was like the mountains, standing through ageless days and nights—the turning of the seasons and centuries. Compared to his life span, hers was more like the flowers—a short time to grow, bloom, fade away, and die.

She turned at the sound of his feet crunching on the crumbled rocks from the nearby broken section and held out one hand. “Come and enjoy the sunset.”

He inclined his head in a courtly gesture that sent a whirl of hunger and delight swirling through her blood. Her body still ached and tingled from their last bout of making love only an hour earlier.

“My lady of the castle,” he murmured and drew her hand to his lips.

“More kisses?” she asked lightly in an attempt to get her raging hormones under control.

Gazing up from where his lips hovered just above her

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curled fingers, he said, “As many as you want,” in a rich, deep tone that promised endless delights.

She retrieved her hand and crossed her arms, setting up a silent barrier. “Cullen, the goddess knows you tempt me to lose myself in your lovemaking, but we still have the problem of why you were able to leave the castle grounds with me one time and not the other.”

“Well, *miurnin*, since we’re going to be practical, I should wait until later to give you this.” He held out one broad palm cradling a delicately etched gold locket on a dainty chain—open to show a miniature photograph behind a glass cover on one side and a snippet of reddish gold hair on the other.

She stared at the picture, slowly realizing the man’s identity. “My father. Where did you get his photo?”

Cullen slipped it into her hand. “From happier times. He’d planned to give it to your mother on their anniversary, and asked me to keep it safe until then.”

“Safe? Why?”

His enigmatic expression and hyper-alert body language told her he wouldn’t answer any more questions about the picture—at least for now.

“Thank you. I’ll treasure this gift.”

She’d known him long enough to see his tension ease at her response.

She traced the frame surrounding the face she’d only remembered from other photographs. With a sigh of regret for the years she hadn’t known her parent, she closed the locket and tried to fasten the chain around her neck, but the double

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clasp was difficult to open.

Familiar fingers brushed her neck. "Allow me."

"Thank you." She held her hair to one side, leaving her neck bare. The warm slide of his fingers against her skin generated small jolts of pleasure.

When he stepped back a pace, she mourned the loss of that small contact.

He leaned against a solid section of the wall and gazed at her. "The gold locket suits your sun-kissed skin."

She fingered the gift. "Grandmother destroyed all the other photos of my father. Now I have this one."

Cullen nodded silently. Rowan knew it was time to change the subject. "You haven't told me about the second task you completed and the third one still to come to gain your freedom."

"The third task has not yet been accomplished, so I won't talk about it, but the second task was finished eighty years after this castle was built in Hibernia."

"So long ago," Rowan said, still awed by the hundreds of years Cullen had lived.

"It passes," he said with a shrug. "The goddess, Danu, said I had thirty-six hours to command the winds and stop a war."

"What happened?"

"Lord Rogan Garvey's grandson, who'd inherited the castle and the title, came to me for help to repel an invading fleet. He'd received reports of a hundred-and-thirty sailing ships loaded with troops coming to seize control of the country and set up their own ruler."

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“How many ships was Lord Garvey able to send against the invaders?”

“He and his allies had gathered sixty ships of various sizes to battle the invaders.”

“Over two to one,” she said, picturing the wind-driven fleets sailing toward each other. “A desperate time for the people living in Hibernia.”

Grim-faced, Cullen nodded. “Lord Garvey’s people were peaceful, hard-working, and—for the most part—honorable. They didn’t deserve to have their lives disrupted.”

Rowan settled one hand on his forearm, feeling the play of muscles under her fingers. “You protected them.”

“I called a great wind, scattered the invaders, and pushed them back toward their homeland.” Cullen’s eyes met hers. “What remained of the battered fleet struggled home and never again threatened Hibernia.”

Rowan sighed. “I feel sorry for the sailors and troops who died following orders.”

Drawing her into his arms, Cullen kissed her forehead. “The gods bless you for your compassion.”

Silently, they stood together and watched the blaze of sunset colors slowly fade from the mountains. The shadowed valley grew darker. A spice-scented mountain breeze snatched at their clothes.

In the last vestige of reflected light, Rowan murmured, “I wonder how many others have stood on this walk and watched the sun rise and set?” She idly trailed her fingers on the rough stones of the wall. “How many centuries did you walk here,

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wondering when you'd be released from the curse?"

"Too many before you came." He caught her hand in his. "Didn't you cut you finger this morning?"

"My forefinger. It bled all ov—" She stared at her hand. At some point, the bandage had fallen off and the cut was gone, with no trace it had ever been there.

"Impossible."

With a growing sense of wonder, she examined both hands—no cuts on either. Then she had the answer.

"Cullen," she said in awe, "you did it. You healed the cut."

"Not me. You."

"Me?" She shook her head in denial. "How?"

"Blood will tell." Cullen gently curled his fingers over her shoulders and gazed at her solemnly. "Your father, Trevor Ian Bradley, son of warrior Nightstar was a full *sidhe*. Your mother also bore *sidhe* blood generations removed, but strong enough to make you more than half-*sidhe*.

CHAPTER 6

Was my father really a sidhe? The question haunted her through the next day as she began planning for the Powerpoint presentation at the Ages of Romance convention. What proof did she have, other than Cullen's words? And why would he lie? He never had before—as far as she knew.

When she'd questioned him, he'd told her to study the ancient tapestry hung in the hallway near her office. She had intended to do that anyway and use the story of the tapestry for the talk, "A Glimpse into *Sidhe* History."

With her digital camera in hand, she walked briskly down the stone hallway to where the tapestry had hung for centuries—both in Ireland and in the now-reconstructed castle.

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The thought of the giant quarried stones being disassembled, transported to a new land, and reassembled reminded her of the crumbled rocks on the wall-walk. She'd had a small, broken chunk in her pocket when Cullen had followed her on the trail up Lost Gold Peak. Yesterday she hadn't carried the small piece of castle granite, and Cullen had been frozen in place the moment he'd left the shadow of the wall.

Elated, she realized the stone was the key to Cullen's temporary release from the curse. Now he could travel with her to the convention.

The mental picture of a real warrior bard *sidhe* in the midst of a swarm of wannabe elves and *sidhes* made her grin.

The levity disappeared as the ancient tapestry came into view. For the first time, she truly appreciated the story told in the woven threads. Something whispered to her that she was looking at a snippet of her own ancestral history.

She found herself fingering the locket containing her father's photograph. The chain was long enough for her to open the locket and gaze at the smiling image and the lock of hair. She'd seen that same shade of reddish gold in her own baby pictures, before her hair had darkened to the current brown with reddish highlights.

Sighing, she closed the locket and cradled it against her heart as she studied the rich and intricate weaving. Today it looked brighter, the colors more vivid—and did she imagine the slight shimmer surrounding each thread?

Aware of the damage the oils in her skin could do just by

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touching the thick fabric, she braced one hand on the stone as close as possible to the edge of the hanging and narrowed her gaze to one small corner.

Shifting to her other sight, she waited for the flash of cold and dizziness to pass. The clarity of the scene from the distant past stunned her with its wealth of detail and it became clear the shimmer was there, woven into the cloth.

Mentally she drew back a short distance and studied the high-ceilinged wood-and-stone room. Flames leaped in a great fireplace in the middle of one wall, but no smoke escaped to taint the bobbins of wool heaped in baskets to one side of the loom. Globes of light hovered in the air. Rich carpets underfoot softened the gold-and-cream marble floor.

A *sidhe* priestess, in a flowing purple robe and wearing a wreath of magical flowers on her reddish-gold hair, stood in front of the completed tapestry still attached to the tall loom.

A *sidhe* priest joined her and together they lifted their hands in supplication. As the pair invoked the blessings of the goddess, Rowan sensed the presence of others standing nearby.

Widening her view, she saw *sidhe* warriors—some wearing loose-fitting pants and swordsman shirts; others in supple leather pants and bare-chested. All carried tall, two-handed swords, point down, strong hands resting on the *quillions*.

Impossible as it seemed, one warrior apparently sensed her presence. His emerald gaze met hers, and she caught her breath. She was looking into the face of her father.

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His mental voice filled her mind. *::Welcome, daughter of my heart.::*

::How can this be happening? I've never had any mental telepathy ability.::

He gave her a warm smile. *::Your sidhe gifts are blossoming.::* He lifted one hand from the sword and held out a delicate gold ring with an emerald set in the endless knot Celtic design. *::This was made for you at your birth. Now you're ready to wear it.::*

Before she could ask anything else, the vision dissolved and left her standing with a million unanswered questions, the ring clutched in her hand, and tears on her cheeks.

She turned at the sound of a faint footfall and saw Cullen waiting a few paces down the hallway. Unconsciously, her fingers closed over the mystical ring.

He drew close enough for her to feel the welcome warmth radiating from his great frame. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how much her body had chilled—a side effect of using her extra sight.

"You saw Trevor," Cullen stated.

"My father. Yes." She closed her eyes, trying to recapture those brief precious moments.

Cullen brushed away her tears with his thumbs and gently kissed her cheek. "He gave you your birth ring."

She searched his face. "How did you..."

"You had to accept your heritage first." Cullen tapped her fingers guarding the gift. "The ring goes on your projective hand—in your case, the right one."

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“Projective hand.” She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“You release your personal power through your projective hand and gather it through your other—the receptive hand.”

Confused, she said, “Power? What power?”

“That’s something we each have to learn for ourselves.”

He gestured toward the green-and-gold magical gift. “Go ahead. Your father wanted you to have it.”

Rowan slipped the ring onto the third finger of her right hand. It slid on loosely, but suddenly grew snug. The emerald flashed green fire and hidden words appeared on the band circling her finger.

Cullen’s warm hand cupped hers as he studied the glowing letters. “Trevor had the jeweler inscribe the words and spell of protection. He can’t be here, but his love remains.”

She watched the words fade, but she knew they were there for her.

Quietly, Cullen slipped one arm around her waist and drew her to his side. “You’re exhausted. Come back to your room and rest.”

“The Powerpoint presentation isn’t finished.”

His hand slipped up to the back of her neck and he kneaded it with his strong, gentle fingers. “Complete it tomorrow. We won’t leave for two days. By that time, we’ll find a way for me to leave the castle.”

“I already did.” She heard the slurred note in her voice. “Gods, your hand is magic. I’m getting so relaxed I may not make it to my room.”

Chuckling, he swept her up in his arms. “Come on, little bird. You need to sleep. It isn’t every day you meet your father for the first time and come into a deeper psychic gift.”

CHAPTER 7

They checked out of the motel in Oceanside before sunrise. Thick fog bathed everything in a heavy mist. Water droplets condensed and dripped off the cars and buildings. Each intake of breath smelled like a fine rain shower.

Working under the misty illumination from the parking lot lamp, Cullen stowed the suitcases in the back of the blue Saturn SUV, fighting his desire to lift Rowan into his arms and carry her back to bed—to hold her sleek, naked body in his arms, to bury his face between her silken thighs and taste her woman's honey to taste and touch paradise.

Because he wanted to slam something to take the edge off his frustration, he clamped his lips together and instead very

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carefully spread the thick packing quilt across the luggage in preparation for the crate holding the painting. They'd made the long detour north to Oceanside to pick up this work from the Seaside Gallery and had promised to deliver it, unscathed, to the convention coordinator.

The detour had been a boon. The extra days together had given them more time to learn each other's bodies.

Turning, he looked into Rowan's eyes and saw memories of their previous night in the depths of their dark emerald fire. His balls tightened. His cock rose, seeking to once more slide into her hot, slick cunt. Did she see desire tightening every muscle in his body?

Swearing silently, he retrieved the crate from where it waited on the narrow strip of grass beside the pavement. After setting it securely in place, he added a spell of protection.

If only he could regain his composure that easily. What was it about Rowan that had slipped under his dispassionate view of the world and stirred emotions he'd kept in check for thousands of years?

* * *

Rowan gripped the steering wheel and peered through the misty windshield past the intermittent sweep of the wipers, on hyper alert.

Early morning fog covered the road like a thick, damp blanket and swirled around the cars moving on the four lanes of freeway paralleling the Pacific coast. The beams from her headlights penetrated only a few feet. The red taillights of cars

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and trucks ahead were fuzzy, instead of sharp and clear.

Rowan's uneasiness grew—more from a sense of impending tragedy than from any of the four streams of cars rushing south on the San Diego freeway.

Beside her, Cullen stirred. "Something is not right," he said in a troubled tone.

"I feel it, too." Flipping on her turn signal, Rowan worked her way across lanes to the right hand strip of concrete closest to the paved shoulder.

She couldn't switch to her other sight while driving, so she did the next best thing and lowered her window. A faint sound, from the direction of the ocean, caused her to pull over to the side of the road in the emergency parking strip and turn off her engine.

She heard it again—a woman's faint cry for help and the crack of splintering wood. Scrambling out of the car, she switched to her other sight and stared in the direction of the sound.

Her hand sought Cullen's, linking her fingers with his to show him what she was seeing. A large sailboat had run aground on a reef of boulders barely above the waves. Someone had launched a yellow life raft and filled it with passengers—mainly children, but more people floundered in the ruthless waves. The sails had been furled, but the tall mast leaned at a precarious angle, threatening to tip the boat over onto its side.

Rowan found herself sliding down the bank to the chain link barrier. "We have to get over this fence and help them,"

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she said to Cullen as she curled her fingers around the rough, cold wire, planning to climb the metal web.

Wordlessly, he moved her aside, seized two fistfuls of chain, and tore the fence apart as easily as she could tear a paper doily. While he rolled the metal aside, wide enough to go through, she opened her cell phone, called 911, and reported the accident. They were both in motion down the steep, narrow trail by the time the operator assured her help was on the way.

The thick, misty fog closed in around them. Without using her extra sight, she could only see the ragged shadow of the wreck. So much moisture in the air made it difficult to breathe. What she did inhale carried the tang of the sea and the dusty scent of packed droplets. The rocky trail had become slick. One foot slipped, then the other.

“Look out,” she said in a choked voice, worried she’d sweep Cullen down the trail with her.

With one hand braced against the side of the trail, he caught her in a hold as unmovable as the water-carved cliffs and clasped her against his chest.

“That was close,” she said looking up into his silver-blue eyes. “It’s a long way down to the rocks.” For one dizzy moment, she saw his usual emotional control slip. His arms tightened around her. Then he released her and resumed the climb down—this time close below her and ready to help.

The moment they reached the bottom of the trail, they headed toward the sound of waves breaking against the rocky shore.

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A shadowy figure crawled out of the water onto the narrow section of sand and collapsed. Cullen raced ahead. Crouching beside the lax form, he pressed his long fingers against the figure's throat.

"He lives," Cullen said as she reached him. "More struggle out there in the ocean."

Standing, he raised both arms, hands open, palms up, as if in prayer. Words in an ancient language tumbled from his lips.

They sounded familiar to Rowan, but she had no idea of their meaning. She felt a great stirring on the psychic plane. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. His words took on greater power and she felt the heavy gathering of forces around them on the physical plane.

She looked up into his eyes. They glowed with a silver light. Sparks flickered up and down his arms and legs. Soon his whole body was bathed in cold fire. The fog began to swirl like a great whirlwind, drawing the heavy gray clouds into a single mass. With one last shout of command, he clapped his hands together—once. The gray mass rose straight up, still spinning, and disappeared. Sunlight flooded down on the wreck and the survivors struggling in the water.

Rowan waded into the surf toward a young girl clinging to a floating cushion from the boat. If the child had started out with a lifejacket, she wasn't wearing it now. The sand and rock bottom fell away from Rowan's feet and she moved into a sidestroke. A few kicks brought her to the child's side.

"The boat broke," the terrified girl whimpered. "Help me."

Gently, she checked to see if the child's grip was secure on

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the side straps of the cushion. “Keep holding tight,” Rowan said. “You did a smart thing to grab the flotation cushion. I’ll tow you to shore.”

As she took the child to safety, she saw more people climbing down the steep bluff and entering the water to help with the rescue. Cars were parked behind hers. It was apparent that once the fog had been cleared, the drivers had seen the accident and pulled over to aid the victims.

She passed the little girl to one of the rescuers and—standing waist-high in the cold, churning waters between wave sets—turned toward the boat. The boom with the waterlogged mainsail had sunk lower in the water, dragging the mast even deeper into the ocean.

A man clung to the boat’s railing with his body draped over the side and part of the exposed bottom. Blood and saltwater trickled down his face. He gestured frantically to Cullen, pointing toward the cabin. Cullen reached for him, but the survivor shook his head and again gestured emphatically toward the cabin.

Quickly, Cullen swarmed up over the side and onto the slanting deck. He ducked into the cabin just as the dying boat gave a shudder and settled deeper into the cold, surging waves.

Someone touched her arm saying, “Come on ashore, lady. You’re chilled and the paramedics have arrived with warm blankets.”

“Not yet.” She turned and dove into an oncoming wave. She might be cold, but Cullen, in spite of his *sidhe*’s ability to

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survive near-fatal damage, could still be crippled and suffer like any mortal.

She made her way through the churning, salty water and clawed for a handhold on the water-slick hull beside the survivor still clinging there. She swept her dripping hair away from her eyes and scanned the curved planks above for a way up to the railing and slanting deck.

Over the crash of waves, the survivor shouted, “He’s gone for my son, Timmy, and my wife. Can you help?”

At that moment, she saw a heavy rope tumbling back and forth in the water, but still attached somewhere above her. Timing the movements, she seized it on the next roll, gave it a tug, and used it to walk up the side the way she had in rope climbing up rocky peaks.

In spite of the exertion, she shivered in the cool air, but she had to keep going. One more foot and she climbed over the railing, then clung to the round metal to keep from slipping down the teetering deck as she oriented herself to the layout. Sunlight touched her back and left side, and glittered off the cabin windows and closed door. Cullen must have shut it after entering to delay the waves from entirely swamping the dying boat.

Slipping and scrambling for handholds, she made her way to the door, opened it, and slipped inside, once more closing the fragile barrier.

“Cullen,” she shouted, “where are you?”

“Rowan, get the hell out of here. Head for shore.” His orders were emphasized by the low groan of wood slowly

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yielding to the pummeling waves.

"I'm coming down," she called, following the sound of his voice.

Deep inside the sinking boat, she saw Cullen working through a tangle of wooden beams to reach a trapped and bleeding woman. She lay halfway on her side, sheltering a jeans-clad child with her body. The little boy patted the woman's face, sobbing, "Mommy, wake up."

"Why can't you..." Rowan stopped. Cullen couldn't use his great strength to tear apart the tumbled knot of wood and metal. One wrong tug would free the jam and crush the woman and child.

Once more, the hull groaned and shuddered. Water rose higher around her ankles and sloshed against the trapped pair. The sharp odor of diesel fuel from the auxiliary engine joined the smell of wet wood and fabric.

Aware of the added danger of fire, and of poison to the child if he swallowed any of the fuel, she crouched beside Cullen, bracing one hand on a bunk still bolted to the wall. "Timmy, we're trying to help you and your mommy, but you must be very brave and not move or talk until one of us says it's okay." To forestall any questions, she hastily added, "The stinky water will make you sick. Nod your head once if you understand."

He studied her with wide, brown eyes and then gave one sturdy nod.

"Good for you. You're a smart cookie."

In spite of his awful situation, his lips curved in a small

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grin. He held up four fingers.

“You’re a big four years old?”

He nodded, then hid his face in his mother’s neck.

In the meantime, Cullen had carefully shifted his position closer to the trapped pair.

Rowan glanced at the boy, then said to Cullen, “The kid’s a champ. Now how can I help?”

“If I lift this mess up and hold it, can you drag the mother and child free?” He didn’t bother to add the probability he’d be crushed to death if the weight fell on him.

“I’ll do it. Just tell me when.” Slipping to her stomach, Rowan crawled on elbows and knees through the rising water—finally wriggling under a slanted beam to a position touching the mother’s shoulder. Timmy had watched her movements, with his mouth firmly clamped shut.

Rowan gave him an encouraging smile. Lifting her head enough so she wouldn’t get a mouthful of diesel coated water, she said, “When Cullen tells me he’s ready, he’ll make room for me to pull you and your mother out of this mess. Nod your head if you understand you should hang on tight to your mother.”

Timmy nodded while his chubby arms folded around his mother’s neck.

Cullen said, “Get ready.”

Rowan focused her attention on where she could slip her hands under the unconscious woman’s shoulders.

Slowly the tangle of wood, metal, and wires rose. “Now,” Cullen said in a tight voice.

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Rowan adjusted her hold on the unconscious woman—turning her onto her back with Timmy on top and clinging to his mother. The boat heaved under them, and dropped away—mirroring the surge and flow of the wave action.

The stink of diesel fuel was stronger. Mixed with water, it made slick footing. Bent over to hold her burden and avoid Cullen's deadly burden, Rowan scrambled for traction as she dragged the mother and son along the narrow path opened by Cullen.

Each inch, each foot, gained was a victory. Rowan's lungs ached. Her mind screamed, *Hurry, hurry*, but she was forced to a much slower pace by the drag of the mother's body and her own limited strength. At each dip and roll of the boat, the boards creaked and shuddered, and the trickle of water down the stairs increased to a heavier flow.

It seemed like hours had passed before she reached the pool of sunlight at the foot of the stairway.

Only nine stairs separated her, Timmy, and his mother from the door leading out to the deck. At the moment, nine might as well be nine hundred. Already her legs trembled and all her other muscles twitched from exhaustion and cold.

Leaning against the wooden railing, she said, "Timmy, go up the stairs to the top, but *don't open* the door. Wait for your mother and me."

Timmy slipped off his mother and went up the heaving stairs, clinging to the railing. Freed of his slight weight, it was easier to handle the limp woman.

At the sound of a loud crash in the depths of the cabin,

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Rowan called, “Cullen, are you okay?”

He didn’t answer. Fear gripped her heart. Even a *sidhe* was vulnerable. Her father’s death proved that. There was nothing she could do until the woman and child were safe.

She reached the top landing where Timmy waited, one hand clutching the railing. His eyes were wide and dark with fear, as the door shuddered behind him, but he hadn’t panicked and tried to open it.

A quick look out the window confirmed her worst fears. The boat had settled deeper into the water. Waves pounded across the deck and broke against the closed door. She’d need to time it so she opened the door between the waves, got both mother and son out, and closed it to avoid greater flooding below decks. If Cullen had been pinned beneath the rubble and still lived, she wanted to prevent him from drowning before help arrived.

Once more she looked out the window to wait for the next wave surge to retreat, and saw three men in wetsuits bearing the US Coast Guard logo climb over the outer railing. Behind them, a large, bright yellow zodiac boat waited with more rescue crew.

Quickly, she crouched to the child’s level. “The Coast Guard is here to help us. When I open the door, hold my hand and go out quickly. I’ll take you to one sailor, and get your mother to another one. Okay?”

Mouth still clamped shut, he nodded.

Straightening, Rowan smiled. “You’re face isn’t in the stinky water now. You can open your mouth. Just don’t drink

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any salty water.”

While she spoke, she had watched the waves advance and retreat, and the sure progress of the rescuers. Already two of them were lifting the child’s father into their inflatable boat.

“Now,” she said as she gripped Timmy’s hand, braced her feet against the surging water, and opened the door.

One of the rescuers spotted her and must’ve alerted the others on his headset because they converged on her and the boy. She passed him to one man, then turned to get the mother. A second and third rescuer slipped past Rowan and lifted the woman away from the door.

One of them bent his face close to her and said, “Hang onto me until more help comes.”

“There’s one more person below,” she shouted.

Another wave broke across the sinking deck. Icy water surged through the open door and cascaded down the stairs.

Beyond frantic with fear, she found herself in an altered state where everything moved slowly. Even as she slipped and struggled down the waterlogged stairs, her mind moved at a clear, rapid pace.

Ignoring the rescuers’ demands to return, Rowan waded on through the rising water. Where was Cullen?

She pressed aside heavy timbers, took a deep breath and sank under the polluted water, searching for any sign. *There. Just past the third bunk.*

She surfaced between two tangled beams long enough to gulp in air, then submerged again, half walking, half swimming through the tangle until she reached Cullen. His

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shoulders and torso were pinned by beams wedged under a sturdy bunk. His eyes were open. He stared at her and shook his head as if to warn her off.

No way!

Her lungs ached, demanding another breath, but she had to get Cullen loose first.

This time, the water helped as she pulled one heavy beam after another loose and let it bob to the surface.

On the last two, Cullen added his waning strength to hers, and they popped up to the narrow airspace below the cabin ceiling.

Rowan raised her mouth high enough above the water to gulp air. Her eyes stung. Each breath seared like fire.

It was obvious from Cullen's labored movements he'd been badly injured, but they had to get out of below decks before they both drowned.

CHAPTER 8

Cullen drew in a breath of the diesel-fouled air and choked. Gods, what he wouldn't give for a breath of crisp mountain air, or the rain-scented winds of Ireland.

Beside him, Rowan treaded water, struggling to keep her nose and mouth in the air pocket.

She gripped his shoulder. "We have to get out while we can still make it through the door."

The boat gave a low groan and tipped farther over. Water swirled higher. Floating wood crashed into Cullen, even as he fought to shelter Rowan between his body and the cabin wall.

He cursed the injuries that had taken a toll on his strength.

Another shudder rocked the sides and the stairs leading to

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freedom collapsed.

Until now, sunlight had filtered down from the upper windows and the open door. That illumination disappeared, leaving them in a watery gloom.

He cradled Rowan's face between his hands. "*Miurnin*, trust me."

"Always."

He left her treading water, sucked in a deep breath, and dove down to section of the hull pushed inward by its collision with the rocks.

Bracing his feet, he gripped one jagged board along the edge where it had popped up, and tore it loose. While his lungs ached from the growing pressure to breathe, he tore loose four more boards before the overwhelming need for air forced him up beside Rowan to the dwindling air pocket.

He touched her cheek. "I made a hole. Let's go."

"Anywhere."

Gripping her hand, he dove down to the jagged opening, watched her wriggle through and then followed. They climbed the rough, underwater boulders and swam toward the surface, while the unstable boat loomed overhead, threatening to roll and crush them with each wave.

Once more the gods were with them and he saw a wider space between the boat and rocks. He drew her in that direction, and together they reached the surface.

Suddenly a human—dressed in what Cullen recognized from television programs as a wetsuit—appeared at Rowan's side.

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With well-practiced coordination, both Rowan and he were helped over the side into an inflated boat, and their rescuers turned toward the beach and safety.

* * *

Hours later, after police interviews and assuring the paramedics that treatment at a hospital wasn't necessary, Rowan and Cullen stood in the bright sunshine at the top of the steep path.

Thankfully, the news helicopters and news vans had all left.

Still wrapped in blankets, they looked below at the once-proud schooner, now broken on the rocks.

Rowan shivered both from cold and from recalling hers and Cullen's desperate struggle in the sinking cabin.

"Cold?" Cullen wrapped an arm around her, drawing her close.

She'd read about a *sidhe's* ability to heal quickly, but the reality took her breath away. "You nearly drowned," she burst out. "I didn't know if I could drag you up to the air pocket in time. Even though you're standing here alive and well..."

"Another minute or two trapped under water and I'd be battling water demons," he said with a careless grin. "You saved me, much to their disappointment."

"It's no joke." She pulled away from him and started through the ice plant groundcover toward the blue SUV on the emergency parking strip.

He easily caught up with her and walked at her side.

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“Dearling, I didn’t joke about you saving me.” He cupped her elbow to help her up the steep bank.

His touch and the tenderness in his tone melted her anger. “Being a *sidhe* didn’t prevent my father from dying.”

“It took another *sidhe* to do that,” Cullen said harshly.

She whipped around to face him so quickly the blanket twisted around her legs. “Do you mean he was murdered?”

“By a rogue *sidhe*.” Cullen’s expression grew hard. “I can’t tell you more.”

“You know.”

He stared at her for a moment, then put out one hand. “Here’s the Saturn. Give me the keys. I’ll unpack some dry clothes while you get in out of the wind.”

Rowan decided it was useless to question him any further—for the time being. She’d run up against his stubbornness other times.

She slipped inside the back passenger compartment, shaded from the sun’s glare by tinted windows.

Cars raced past them, southbound on four concrete lanes. Beyond the divider barrier, more raced north.

In the meantime, Cullen had the back hatch open and was moving things around to reach the suitcases stowed flat under the crate.

Rowan took off her soaked walking shoes and socks, and then tried to keep the blanket in place around her shoulders while she struggled out of her wet clothes. Just as she decided to hold two points together with her teeth, Cullen opened the side door and handed her some clothes.

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Standing where the SUV screened him from the passing traffic, he calmly began shedding his clothes. The only problem was—he was in full view of the handful of people remaining on the beach.

Holding the blanket together where it had slipped down just above her bare breasts, she opened the door and hissed, “Get in here before you’re arrested for indecent exposure.”

“Gladly.” He dropped his briefs and slid in beside her, while his cock rose to salute her.

Drawn by curiosity and desire, she touched the swollen crown and felt it throb against her fingertip. “Umm...didn’t the cold affect you?”

He tunneled his hand inside the blanket and cupped one breast in his sword-roughened palm. “Only until I saw these pretties.”

At his touch and the heat in his eyes, her whole being clenched and moisture spilled from between her legs.

In spite of the cars speeding past them—with only tinted glass hiding them from curious eyes, Rowan dropped the blanket. “Cullen, I want you—need you more than I need my next breath.”

“Gods, sweet lady...” Gripping her hips, he raised her, touched her throbbing clit and slid his cock partway in, before he drew back, muttering, “You’re ready,” then slammed in deep, thrusting and plunging, while she lifted her hips to match his rhythm.

Her heart thudded in her breast. Sexual heat chased away the last vestiges of cold. Fire blazed through her blood.

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She planted one foot on the floor and the other on the seat, and spread her knees—opening herself wider.

He pushed in deeper, muttering in an ancient language, and she realized he was chanting, “Mine, mine, mine,” with each thrust.

He paused—staying deep inside—and sucked on her full, sensitive nipples. She screamed, heedless of the passing traffic. The possibility of being discovered in this most vulnerable position added an extra kick of excitement. And then he rotated his hips and sent her over the edge into a blinding orgasm.

Rowan’s body still hummed with pleasure an hour later when she drove into the portico of the convention hotel and parked behind another car disgorging its passengers.

She turned off the ignition as a bellman hurried out to them, pulling a shiny brass luggage cart.

It took only minutes for their suitcases and the picture crate to be offloaded, then a valet handed her a claim check and drove the car away, while she and Cullen strode through the automatic sliding doors. He carried his long sword concealed in a narrow black canvas bag.

Rowan soon realized a sword that would’ve appeared out-of-place in other environs would be easily accepted here when they passed a sign reading, All swords and knives must be peace-tied.

Another sign read, Combat in the hallways is forbidden.

By the time they reached the check-in desk, it was evident by the variety of luggage shapes that most people attending

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the Romance Through the Ages convention would have many opportunities to go in costume.

Late that afternoon, Cullen strolled beside Rowan through the main convention hall. He'd left his great sword behind, but wore a long dagger, peace-tied, albeit with the type of knots he could release at one tug. Already many convention-goers wore costumes with weapons, and he sensed a growing danger in the air.

Danger—not only a physical threat to Rowan—but he'd become the target of hot-eyed women who seemed to think he was a male model out trolling for votes. Some thrice-bdamned person had included his photograph in the display of models, and headlines in the local newspapers and on television screamed:

SIDHE WARRIOR TO THE RESCUE; REAL OR PUBLICITY STUNT?

The danger soon appeared when a familiar, bright-haired *sidhe* approached them with an easy smile.

Cullen stepped in front of Rowan to shield her and fingered his knife, calculating how he'd protect her and nearby crowds if his foster brother attacked.

“Greetings, warrior bard,” Phelan said in his smooth-tongued way. “Will you introduce me to your lovely lady?”

“And why, pray, would I allow you that close?”

The traitorous *sidhe* raised both palms chest high. “As you can see, my suspicious foster brother, I am not armed.”

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“Your magic is a weapon.” Cullen sketched a quick spell of security around the three of them. The transparent barrier would protect the people wandering through the convention.

Phelan quirked an eyebrow and tipped his head to one side as if examining him. “Same old suspicious Cullen.”

“With good reason.” Cullen launched a preemptive mental probe, only to have it bounce off Phelan’s shields.

He countered a mental strike from his foster brother. For now, they were too evenly matched.

Rowan complicated the situation by moving up beside him. “Cullen, introduce me to your brother.”

“Foster brother.” Cullen wanted to curse all the newspapers and television stations. When he’d seen the reporters hovering around the shipwreck survivors, he’d realized Phelan might trace Rowan and him to this place.

Phelan placed one hand on his chest and inclined his head in an elegant bow. “My lady, Rowan, you’re as beautiful as our dear, departed Keara Moreen.”

“You knew my mother?” she asked in a wistful tone.

“Not just knew, but courted her, until Trevor came along and swept her away.”

Cullen heard a woman in the growing crowd sigh and say, “How romantic.”

Rowan apparently shared the same opinion. She said gently, “It must have been difficult for you to love her and then lose her when she chose my father.”

“Trevor Ian Bradley was a fine warrior. He would’ve made a good father if he’d lived. He even put aside his weapons to

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marry your mother.”

Cullen made a mental note to find where Phelan had hidden Trevor’s sword.

“Thank you for telling me about my father.” Rowan smiled.

“Anything for the daughter of my beloved Keara.” Phelan’s expression radiated concerned interest. “Anytime you’d like to arrange a private meeting, I’d be delighted to tell you more about both your parents. I’m in room three-ten.”

He glanced at Cullen and then stepped forward to clasp Rowan’s hand. Raising the back of her fingers to his lips, he said in a low, seductive tone, “Enjoy the convention. I look forward to seeing you later.”

Cullen banished the spell of security and watched in frustration as Phelan strolled away—unscathed.

A sudden round of applause reminded him of their impromptu audience. People dispersed in every direction chatting about the free show.

Rowan punched him on the upper arm. “How could you be so impolite?” she said through gritted teeth. “He’s your foster brother, for God’s sake. If that’s not enough, he was a friend of my parents. He even dated my mother before she met my father.”

Riding on a wave of anger, frustration, and fear for Rowan, Cullen snapped, “That friend of your parents falsely accused Trevor of stealing an ancient goblet of power from my father and challenged him to a duel to the death—a duel your father lost.”

CHAPTER 9

Rowan slipped the silken cord over her head and fingered the small, gold-embroidered velvet pouch containing the piece of granite she'd found at the castle. The fragment had been mixed in with dried rose buds and a hint of cinnamon and cloves, just like women had carried in ancient times. She wore the pouch in plain view against the jeweled neckline of her long brocade dress. Her precious locket was tucked out of sight, with only the slender chain showing. Cullen carried another chunk of castle rock on his person.

Cullen... Her mind replayed the scene earlier that day between him and his foster brother. The revelation that her father had dueled with Phelan and been killed still cut deep

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into her heart.

She had to put aside her sorrow and concentrate on tonight's event.

Leaning closer to the mirror, she nervously checked her makeup. In less than an hour she'd be onstage to give her Powerpoint presentation.

"Sure, and you look like a princess." Cullen's reflection joined hers in the mirror. "I'll be the envy of all the men."

She smiled. "And I'll have to beat off the women who make a play for you."

"Thanks to those damned reporters."

She turned and pressed her hand to his cheek. "It wasn't because of the reporters. One look at you is enough to set a woman's heart aflutter."

"*Miurnin*, sweetheart." Tenderly he carried her hand to his mouth and slowly kissed each fingertip—lingering to carefully bite the fleshy pad below her thumb. The brush of his warm lips tightened things low in her body, but the sensual nip weakened her knees. She gripped his arm for balance.

With a deep masculine chuckle, he steadied her. "Tonight," he promised in a husky tone. "Tonight."

* * *

Rowan stood off to one side of the stage, waiting to be introduced. Members of the audience were seated at round tables, each covered in a white cloth and decorated with candles and flowers set on a mirrored holder in the center. The overhead chandeliers had been dimmed and the lit candles

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added a touch of mystery and glamour to the room. The great projection screen was suspended behind and slightly above the stage. Her painting *Sidhe Magic* was displayed on an easel at the far side.

Cullen, wearing his great sword sheathed between his shoulder blades, had chosen a place hidden in the shadows nearby, but she felt his presence and encouragement.

As she took her place and began her presentation, the first scenes of the tapestry filled the screen. She must've passed it in the castle a hundred times, but knowing her father had been *sidhe* and that her mother carried *sidhe* blood made the weaving more precious.

She began, "Of all the great stories of Ireland, the history of..."

The room lights flickered and died. Only the lit candles provided illumination. The projection screen went blank, and Cullen was suddenly beside her as a woman screamed and others called questions about the lights.

Cullen raised both arms and paused as a globe of light formed in each hand. "Gentle folk," he said in his deep, smooth voice, "even though the electricity has temporarily failed, the tale will continue."

He sent the globes floating over the audience and added three more until their cool beams illuminated the faces turned toward him.

With each new ball of light taking its place, the murmur grew. Camera lights flashed from points all through the hall.

Facing the projection screen, Cullen made a series of

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gestures.

Sidhe magic flowed from him. It raised the hair on the back of Rowan's neck and vibrated in the gold ring on her right hand. She watched a giant mist screen shimmer into being—both longer and higher than the physical screen.

The image of the tapestry filled the solidified mist with colors brighter and clearer than they'd ever been in her digital camera or on the laptop monitor.

Cullen swept one hand toward the screen. "Gentle folk, behold the bright people of the *Tuatha de Danann* as they march out of the city of Falias, carrying the *Lia Fail*, the Stone of Knowledge." At his words, the shining *sidhe* warriors and shamans moved in a glittering procession with those carrying the heavy magical stone walking in the center for their protection.

"Look now at the power of the *Lia Fail* as it chooses the rightful heir to the throne of Erin."

Like everyone else in the audience, Rowan was caught up in the storyteller's spell, mesmerized by the scenes unfolding in color, movement, and sound.

A muscular arm circled her throat and a hand across her mouth muffled any cries for help. Her back was hauled against a hard, warrior body. "Do not move or make any sound," he said in a voice so soft only she could hear—or so she thought.

* * *

Cullen had heard. He spun on one heel to face the *sidhe* who held Rowan, one hand already on his sword. "Phelan

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Argus Torrin, warrior of the *sidhe*, release the daughter of Keara Bradley.”

His foster brother’s jaw tightened. “What will you do, banish me to dwell forever inside the faerie raft far away? Do it while I hold Keara’s offspring. She’ll go with me as long as I touch her skin. The mother rejected me, but I’ll have the daughter or end her life.”

Tamping down his anger, Cullen studied the malicious gleam in his foster brother’s eyes. “Has the great warrior of the battle of Falias become a coward?” he asked contemptuously. “Step away from the woman and meet me in combat—sword against sword.”

Phelan shrugged one shoulder and a knife appeared in his hand—held against Rowan’s throat. “First give me the piece of castle stone you carry.”

Rowan said in a tight voice, “Don’t give it to him.”

“Garvey Castle has nothing to do with the feud between us.” Cullen watched Phelan’s sharp blade pressed to Rowan’s tender skin. Above all, he had to keep her alive and save her from what amounted to a living death for mortals inside the faerie hills.

“Your answer now, warrior bard.” A quick motion of Phelan’s blade drew a gasp from Rowan. A slender line of blood trickled down her neck.

The determination on Phelan’s face and his obvious willingness to harm Rowan left Cullen no choice. “You have won, foster brother, and dishonored the father who raised us to be honorable *sidhe* warriors.”

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“Do not speak of Ansgar Nightstar and yourself in the same breath.” He glared at Cullen. “Danu has shown me what I must do. Toss the stone close to my feet, and I’ll release this woman.”

Slowly Cullen retrieved the chunk of granite from inside his tunic and tossed it to land close to the traitorous *sidhe*.

Phelan switched the knife to his left hand, still holding Rowan. A quick flare of magic in the air warned Cullen moments before his foster brother sent a ball of fire to incinerate the stone.

In that brief moment of distraction, Rowan rammed an elbow into Phelan’s stomach, kicked backward at his leg, then dropped out of his grasp and rolled away—barely missing the magical fire.

Somehow, the cord holding the pouch broke. Phelan swept up the velvet container with the other stone, and put it into his pocket.

“Now we fight.” He drew his sword and closed with Cullen.

Sword in hand, Cullen conjured up a transparent wall of protection between the audience and the stage. He and Phelan faced off, balancing on the balls of their feet. They’d fought their enemies side by side, but never against each other, except in practice.

As they moved and feinted, Cullen saw an opening and charged in, but ducked and danced backward, barely missing a crippling slash. The deadly magic on Phelan’s blade glowed a sulky red.

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Phelan laughed. “Blood’s Bane almost got you. We practiced together enough with regular swords so I know all your moves.”

Ignoring the taunt, Cullen changed his grip on his sword and went at his foster brother with a random pattern of attack. “You used a bespelled sword to fight Trevor.”

“Why not? He bespelled the woman I wanted and took her for his own.”

“Keara went to him willingly, and he gave up much to bond with her as life-mate.”

Phelan launched another vicious attack.

Cullen knew it took only a nick from the blade of Blood’s Bane, the ancient sword of power, for the spell to begin its work. On the other hand, Phelan’s *sidhe* ability to heal his own wounds gave him the fighting advantage.

Moments later, in a flurry of thrust and parry, a slash from Blood’s Bane caught Cullen’s sword arm. The cut from any other sword would have quickly sealed, but even while he beat back Phelan’s reckless assault, the spell began poisoning his blood.

His vision wavered. His sword grew heavy in his hands and his movements slow.

“I have the other piece of stone that binds you to this place and time,” Phelan jeered. “Once you fall, you’ll become an easier target for Blood’s Bane. As you fade and die, you’ll have just enough time to watch me ensnare your lady in my power.”

“She has done you no harm.” Despite his best efforts,

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Cullen sank to his knees.

He heard Rowan call his name, and the sound of her steps hurrying to him. If she moved into Phelan's circle of power, she'd be lost forever.

He gasped, "Stay back...please."

"Cullen?" He could almost feel her confusion and worry, but at least she'd stopped moving toward him.

As his heartbeat slowed, and the poison's fire burned through muscles and nerves, he formed a last, desperate spell. It only needed the words and fresh blood to be complete.

"Phelan Argus Torrin, born of Lynet and Gorsedd"—he saw Phelan's eyes widen in surprise at the naming of his birth parents—and the power that such knowledge invoked—"as a bard of *sidhe*, I banish you."

He watched the first shimmer of binding flow around Phelan, and continued, "By the rights of *sidhe* succession as the eldest child of your foster father, Warrior Ansgar, I banish you."

Cullen's vision narrowed down to the edges of his great sword. Each breath, each tiny movement stabbed him from the inside. Poisoned blood ran from his nose and mouth, but he needed blood freshly drawn by a blade to complete the spell. Closing one hand loosely over the sharp blade, he gazed at Rowan for the last time.

And, with his last bit of fading strength, he closed his fingers over the blade—felt its searing bite—and said, "Phelan Argus Torrin, by my life's blood, I banish you from the world of humans forever."

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* * *

Rowan raced through the night, driving east toward the castle.

The moment she'd realized what Cullen's disappearance meant earlier that evening, she'd called home.

Daisy had answered and sent Frank out to look for the wounded *sidhe*, while Rowan threw clothes into her suitcase with one hand and held the phone with the other—praying they'd find Cullen still alive.

By the time Frank returned from his search, she was ready to go.

His usually cheerful tone was subdued as he said, "I found your man in the walled garden on the grass, unconscious, bleeding, and barely breathing. I took a wool blanket out and covered him. That's what delayed me."

"He may need to touch the castle's bare stones. Do that and whatever else needs done. I'm on my way."

Now, hours later, she'd driven from the shores of the Pacific Ocean, across the mountains and high desert plateaus from California into Arizona on fast interstate freeways. East of Tucson, she'd turned onto state Highway Eighty going south. For miles, only the moon and her headlights had illuminated the night. As she'd slowed to drive through Tombstone, home of the legendary shootout at O.K. Corral, her thoughts had flashed back to the duel between Cullen and Phelan.

She'd watched in horror—helpless to do anything—as the *sidhe* who'd killed her father tried to kill Cullen, the one she

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loved.

Even while he lay bleeding on the floor, Cullen had gathered the strength to weave a triple spell of banishment against Phelan. Both *sidhe* had disappeared in a flare of light. The mist screen, walls of protection, and globes of light had dissolved and the electricity had flashed back to life.

As the audience had applauded and cheered, she'd left the stage in tears, afraid of what she'd find back at Charley's castle.

From Tombstone, she continued south, negotiated the narrow sleeping streets of the old mining town, Bisbee, and then on to Douglas, where she'd found an all-night gas station near the U.S. border.

Reeling with fatigue, she filled her tank. After paying for the fuel, she stood in the warm, dry, high-desert winds coming out of Mexico to shake the cobwebs from her mind. This last leg of her trip would test her endurance, driving on twisting mountain and graveled roads.

Hours later, she turned the final curve on the way home as the sun rose above the jagged Chiricahua peaks and illuminated Charley's castle.

The high gates were closed and bolted. She pressed the button on the intercom and was answered by a suspicious-sounding Frank. Had something else besides the sudden appearance of an injured *sidhe* happened since her last call?

Frank welcomed her home. She drove past the opening gates and heard them close behind her—another unusual precaution.

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Daisy and Frank met her with hugs on the front steps. Then Daisy explained the extra security saying, “Jeffrey was seen in town yesterday.”

“He’s the last thing I want to worry about.” Rowan hurried up the stairs and through the open door. “How is Cullen?”

Frank took her jacket. “His breathing is better, but he’s still unconscious. We carried him into the study. That’s in the oldest part of the castle, and was the first section rebuilt here.”

Rowan quickly made her way to the study.

Daisy followed, saying, “We moved the desk and made a pallet for him against the wall.”

The moment Rowan entered the study, her eyes went to Cullen’s motionless form. The lights had been turned off except for a dim lamp across the room, but flames dancing in the stone fireplace illuminated him.

She went down on her knees at his right side. Frank and Daisy had propped up his head and shoulders and pressed his left shoulder, arm, and hip against the stone.

Gently, she cradled his right hand, careful not to move his heavily bandaged shoulder. A blanket covered him from his feet to under his arms. Only the faint rise and fall of his chest showed he still breathed.

“Cullen,” she called softly, “wake up. I’m here.”

She studied his dear face, alarmed by its gray pallor. Had she come to realize how deeply she loved him only to have him slip away because of a bespelled sword used by her mother’s traitorous admirer? Cullen was *sidhe*—one of the immortals, except in a few rare events. She was mortal with a

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lifespan measured in the blink of an eye when compared to one of the bright people.

She tried again to rouse him. “Come back to me, dear heart. Open your eyes.”

Still no response...

Her knees ached and she shifted into sitting at his side.

She heard the soft footfalls of Daisy or Frank passing by the study, going about their morning duties. Here, in the quiet study, time was measured by flames crackling in the fireplace, the steady tick of the ancient wood-and-brass grandfather clock, and Cullen’s measured breathing.

The longer he lay unresponsive, the more difficult it became to keep up hope for his recovery. Finally, a raw and primitive grief filled her and made her throat ache from suppressed tears.

Looking up at her mother’s portrait, she asked, “What can I do?”

A soft inner voice, filled with all the comfort and loving she’d known as a child, said, ::*Kiss him.*::

“Yes,” she murmured, bending her head to touch his mouth. As their lips met, the room filled with the scent of wildflowers.

“Cullen, come back to me,” she cried. “I love you.”

A rush of power raised the hair on the back of her neck. Once more, she pressed her lips to his—licking, tasting, doing everything she could to spark him with new life.

Just when she was ready to give up, his fingers moved in her hand, and his eyes slowly opened.

“Rowan,” he whispered, “you called me back.”

CHAPTER 10

Cullen left Rowan sleeping, tucked a piece of stone from the wall-walk into his pocket, and slipped out of the castle. As his feet followed the familiar trail to the top of Lost Gold Peak, the warm night wind carried the sage, creosote, and wildflower scents of the high desert that lapped at the feet of Castle Mountain. The air was not like the soft, cool, misty-green fragrance of home in Ireland, he mused, but he'd come to appreciate this harsh, wild land.

When he reached the top, he turned and studied the stone castle slumbering in the moonlight. Five hundred years earlier, he'd been bound to that structure by the curse of a goddess. Earlier today, a mortal woman had offered him the peace and

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freedom of her love.

He hadn't told her the only way he'd be truly free of the curse binding him to the castle would be to burn it to the ground.

Rowan loved the castle. It had become her only true home. As long as she was happy, he would be content living out her life span with her in this place.

He turned at the sound of tinkling bells and watched the goddess, Danu, walking down a moon path to him. Her red-gold hair lifted and fluttered—alive with lights that combined the flash of pure sunbeams and fiery rubies. Her fine, cloth-of-gold robe swirled around her ankles just above jeweled sandals.

He went down on one knee as was the correct manner to greet the leader of his *sidhe* race, *Tuatha de Danann*.

She stopped close enough for strands of her long hair to brush his body. He trembled at the power crackling through his bones and nerves.

The second it was correct, he rose and stepped back from the circle of her influence.

She gave him a practiced pout. "Am I so ugly you must step away because you can't bear the sight of me up close?"

He bowed, careful to keep his face expressionless. *Damn her need to always look for admiration.* As long as Danu was here, Rowan was in danger of the goddess's well-known mercurial temper. "Great Danu, your beauty outshines the sun and the moon."

She raised her chin, archly, and smiled. "Well spoken,

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Cullen. Are you ready to come willingly to my bed?"

"By your spell, I am bound to yon castle. Your bed is in the shining lands or in a faerie raft under the hills of Ireland."

She trailed her perfumed fingers down his cheek, then pressed a hand where Phelan had slashed his shoulder with the magical sword. "It appears this mountainous country has healed your wound—or is it the orphaned writer, hmmm?"

"Perhaps the healing is because I have completed two tasks and have begun to solve the third."

She laughed—a sound so achingly beautiful, he wanted to compose an ode to its sweet power.

"Oh, Cullen, Cullen, still a fool for women in trouble." She glowed even brighter, generating strong lights and crisp shadows that rivaled those of high noon. "Don't worry. The curse binding you to the castle will dissolve when the supporting beams and floors within the castle burn away and the very rocks collapse into rubble."

She whirled in a slow, sensuous dance, then paused. "Thanks to the jealousy of the woman's discarded husband, your deliverance has begun."

"Deliverance?" And then he realized what she meant.

"Jeffrey! That Bastard!" Cullen vaulted down the trail covering yards with each bound. Rowan—Rowan was in danger, and he'd left her unprotected.

Before he reached the base of the mountain, he saw the smoke and heard the crackle of flames fueled by pungent gasoline. *No time to quench the flames...* He had to reach Rowan before she was overcome by smoke and flames.

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As he drew closer, he watched the wooden, vine-covered trellis fastened to the windowsill of her sitting room go up in flames.

Where were Frank and Daisy? Why hadn't one of them smelled the fire or been awakened by the smoke alarms?

Another tongue of flame flared up—this time towering above the peaked roof of one stone-and-timber tower.

Ahead, the huge gates were closed. They'd been open when he'd left. Jeffrey again, he was sure. It was just another tactic to delay rescue.

With all the power of a *sidhe* warrior, he smashed through the thick wood and sent the heavy bar that had locked the gates flying across the courtyard.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the shadowy figure slip through the demolished gate, pursued by a thin line of flames.

The wooden front door was blazing. Without breaking stride, Cullen headed toward the outside stairway. It offered a direct route to Rowan's suite.

Taking the steps three-at-a-time, he crashed through the outer door and quickly made his way down the smoky hallway to Rowan's rooms.

He opened the door, slipped through, and closed it behind him to keep out as much smoke as possible. Through the gathering haze, he saw the open door into her bedroom and heard her cough.

Thanks be to the supreme goddess and consort, Rowan still lives. "Get down on the floor," he shouted.

Moments later, he stepped into the room and saw her in a

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robe and kneeling beside the bed with the in-house telephone in her hand.

“Daisy and Frank aren’t answering,” she said in a hoarse voice. “We have to get them out.”

“You first. I’ll come back and find them.”

“That might be too late.”

Cullen recognized the stubborn set of her chin. “All right, but we have to go out and around to their quarters. The front door’s ablaze.”

He dampened a small towel in the adjoining bathroom and gave it to her saying, “Breathe through this. Keep low.”

They crawled across the rugs under smothering clouds of gray smoke. Windows shattered. Flames shot into the room and clung to the thick drapes.

Cullen heard Rowan’s tight wheeze as she struggled down the smoke-filled hallway. How much more could she take without succumbing to the poisonous clouds?

Once outside, he swept her up in his arms and raced back the way he’d come, leaping down the stairs, and around to Frank and Daisy’s apartment.

They found both husband and wife staggering out the rear door.

“The saints be praised, you’re both safe.” Frank put a protective arm around his wife. “The smoke alarm worked, but our way into the main part of the castle was blocked and the phone system didn’t work.”

“The only way to reach your room was the outside staircase,” Daisy added.

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Frank nodded. "That's where we were goin'."

While Daisy and Frank talked, Cullen had withdrawn a few steps to weave a rain-calling spell.

He uttered a few words of power. Instantly heavy, dark clouds boiled overhead, blocking out the moon and stars.

His heartbeat raced with the consuming need to extinguish the fire before it reduced Rowan's beloved home to an unlivable shell.

As he smelled the heavy moisture in the air and felt the gathering power, he said, "You'd better find shelter in the old stone stables. It's going to rain."

"Let 'er rip," Frank said.

With a shout of command, Cullen raised both hands high, flinging crackling bolts of energy into the sky.

Lightning bloomed in the clouds and played across the tower roof. The sharp, acrid scent of ozone filled the air. Thunder shook the ground, and rain drenched the castle and surrounding area.

He directed water across the whole structure and through burning doors and broken windows until the last bit of flame was doused.

* * *

Wearily, Rowan stepped outside the row of undamaged stables where she'd been sorting clothes and artwork salvaged from her suite. Thanks to Cullen's spells, once the fire was completely out, he'd called a warm arid wind to hasten the drying process.

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“Cullen,” she murmured, recalling the heart-stopping minutes when he’d stood apart from them, hands raised, calling the clouds, the lightning—the rain.

That drenching downpour had saved her home. Then a thought struck her. *Does Cullen truly have a home other than the castle?*

Not that he’d mentioned. He was bound to the castle stones by a curse, not by choice. Is that why she’d sometimes seen loneliness in his eyes?

Other images came to mind—times when they’d made love. She smiled. He hadn’t looked lonely when their hearts, minds, and bodies were locked together.

Her musings were interrupted by the distant call of a coyote. As the eerie sound died, another coyote answered. She liked to think they’d soon be together.

The sweet power of that image brought tears to Rowan’s eyes and she knew she’d do anything—everything to save Cullen from ever again being lonely.

Thinking of her beloved warrior reminded her of his tireless efforts to make sure the castle hadn’t suffered any permanent damage.

After he and Frank had walked through the halls and rooms to check the soundness of the beams and floors, they’d gone outside the wall surrounding the castle looking for signs of the intruder Cullen had glimpsed.

Worried by their long absence, she walked through the moonlit night past the splintered main gate.

A few yards away, she saw Cullen and Frank, illuminated

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by hovering globes of light, standing over a dark shape. Beyond them sat Jeffrey's car.

They turned at her approach. Cullen said, "You don't want to be here, Rowan."

She stared at the charred figure. "Is that Jeffrey?"

"Yes," Cullen said in a grim tone. "We found his wallet on the driver's seat. It appears he was killed by an explosion of fumes in the empty gas can he still carried."

"We didn't cover him," Frank added. "That's for the sheriff to decide after he looks for evidence."

"Of course." In spite of her horror, she drew closer and gazed down at the man she'd once believed she loved.

Frank brushed her hand, saying, "I'm sorry." And then he went to call the sheriff on his cell phone and to help Daisy.

A light breeze skipped across the quiet night and danced around the shape that had, until tonight, been a living human. Her heart squeezed with pity for the man he'd once been, before greed and a desire to control and abuse had taken over his soul.

Cullen touched her shoulder. "Do not mourn too long for him. He meant for you to die."

"I know. He threatened to kill me often enough."

Rowan crossed her arms tight against her chest and walked a few steps away. She heard the crunch of Cullen's footfalls on the dry, sandy soil as he followed.

She turned to face him, but before she could speak, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Just tired of all the turmoil these last few days."

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To her shock, he fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands. "Forgive me for not protecting you."

Kneeling in front of him, she laid her hand on his thick, dark hair. "You did everything you could to protect me."

He shivered under her hand. "I nearly let you drown in the sinking boat."

"Weren't you the one trapped? Besides, you got us both out."

"Phelan wounded you, and I stood helpless."

"You tricked him into releasing me." She fingered the place where the bright-haired *sidhe* had cut her, but the wound and even any scar was gone.

"The fire..."

She cupped his face in her hands and lifted his mouth to hers. "All that's in the past. The true fire is here. Now. Between us." She placed a tender kiss on his lips. "Above all, I love you."

The chiming of unseen bells was the only warning Rowan had before a dazzling female stood in a ring of moonlight.

Cullen tensed and looked up. "Hail, Danu." He bowed his head to her.

"Bard Cullen, why have you wasted the opportunity I gave you to break the curse?"

Rowan felt the seductive power of the goddess' voice, even when her words lashed at Cullen like a whip.

She saw his hands tighten into fists, but he kept them at his sides. "Great goddess, as I have said before, the *sidhe* were created with the will to make choices. I chose to not let the

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castle be destroyed.”

“You chose? You chose?” Danu screeched. “You reject my gift of freedom the way you rejected my body? And then you fuck this mortal female?”

A wild wind whipped up around the goddess—snuffing out the globes Cullen had set above Jeffrey’s body.

Rising, Cullen pulled Rowan to her feet and muttered, “Get out of here, Rowan. Run like hell, while I distract her.”

“I won’t leave you.” Struggling to stay on her feet against the hot blasts, Rowan pasted a look of defiance on her face.

The wind sent her staggering backwards and Cullen clasped her elbow to steady her. Another blast tore her from his hands and sent her to the ground, pinned as if by invisible knives.

She breathed a silent plea. *Bright Lady, help me—help us.*

Suddenly Danu held a ball of fire in one hand. “Son of Ansgar and Ula, denounce this whore and come to me.”

Cullen gazed down at Rowan with such sadness in his eyes, and she knew he’d made a terrible decision.

He pressed a hand over his heart, bowed to the goddess, then he stood straight, with his shoulders squared like a warrior facing a battle. “Great Danu, if I come willingly to your bed, will you promise to release Rowan and allow her to live in peace? For that boon, I will pledge to stay at your side and do your will as long as you wish.”

Rowan struggled to break free of Danu’s power and go to Cullen. She begged, “My love, don’t pledge yourself to her. It’ll kill your spirit.”

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Danu gave her a poisonous look. "Slut, I tire of your presence." Laughing, she threw the fiery globe at Rowan.

With a cry, Cullen intercepted the magical fire and fell to the hard, cold ground.

Fear and fury had been building inside her. Now it erupted into a scream and she struggled to go to him.

Slowly one hand and arm, then the other, came loose from the earth. She felt a hundred knives tear at her skin, but she fought to get free of the magic pinning her legs and body.

She glared at the goddess. "You can't have him. He's mine. Somehow I'll stop you."

Danu stared at her in surprise, as if one of the mountain rocks had spoken. "How odd. A weak mortal like you think to defeat me?"

"My father was *sidhe* warrior Trevor Ian Bradley, son of Nightstar." She tugged at her legs and felt them come free.

"Handsome Trevor," Danu said, musingly. "He left our lands to marry a mortal woman."

"Yes. I'm human and proud of it, but I'm also proud to know my mother's ancestors carried *sidhe* blood."

As she fully embraced the *sidhe* blood flowing through her, Rowan's body came free.

"So, little pepperpot, you bear *sidhe* blood. I will allow you to go to Cullen." The goddess laughed. "Then we'll see who wins."

A sudden breeze surrounded her with the scent of wildflowers, and the sweet voice Rowan had heard before whispered, *∴Among the sidhe, two are greater than a god or*

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goddess, when there is love.::

When there is love. Rowan clasped the truism to her heart.

With an aching effort, she rolled over to her hands and knees, declaring, “I love Cullen.” She crawled across the hard, rocky soil gasping, “I love him desperately—completely,” to where he lay watching her.

Danu clapped her hands and chortled. “It has been many centuries since I have been so entertained.”

Ignoring her, Rowan gripped Cullen’s hand. The moment they touched, a stream of energy and power renewed her strength and flowed through her into him. Her palms began to sting.

He rose to his feet, drawing her with him.

As his fingers clasped hers, the sting rapidly changed to a hot pain, but some internal knowledge told her to cling to Cullen’s hand.

Together they faced the goddess. “This time I shall not bow,” Cullen said.

“You would dishonor me?” she screamed. Her eyes turned molten gold with power. A glowing fireball appeared in her hand and she heaved it at Cullen. She rapidly sent another one at Rowan.

At the moment the goddess formed her weapon, Rowan had raised one hand, palm facing outward. She’d watched in amazement as a rainbow of colors shot from her fingertips and spread in a shimmering wall between them and Danu.

Both fireballs struck the barrier and dissolved.

As her hair rose and crackled with wild energy, the

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goddess called the winds. They flared into life with a howl and surrounded Rowan and Cullen, but he'd already constructed a solid dome of protection scintillating with Rowan's rainbows.

Danu sent blast after blast at the impregnable shield. In spite of the battering and the gout of flames flaring across the outside surface, inside it stayed cool.

Rowan snuggled in Cullen's arms.

His warm, strong hands stroked slowly and seductively up and down her back. He murmured close to her ear, "Do you think she'll ever get tired of wasting her energy?"

"She may as well stop." Rowan nibbled on his ear, then licked the outer rim, delighted to feel him shudder. "Your shield has defeated her."

"Our shield." He curled one finger under her chin and tipped up her head so their gazes met. "*A chroí*, my heart, will you be my mate forever?"

Her heart ached to say yes, but she had to warn him. "Are you sure? Our years together will be limited to my lifespan."

He cupped her face tenderly between his warm hands. "My heart, I love you too much to let you go. I want you in my life, in my arms, in our bed, and in my soul, where you'll live as long as I draw a breath."

Gazing into his eyes, she told him, "Yes, my darling. Always. Forever," and watched the loneliness leave.

APRIL REID

April Reid is the pseudonym for award-winning author Barbara Clark, who wanted to stretch her writing skills into the romantica genre. Readers will find the same quality in stories by “April,” as they have come to expect in stories by “Barbara.” The only difference is the stories will be more steamy and over-the-top. Always, they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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