

Leanne
Shawler



Rainbow's
Desire

RAINBOW'S DESIRE

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“Lass.” Her captor quirked an eyebrow upwards. “If ye like what ye see, mayhap we may seal a bargain.”

The sudden heat on her cheeks warned her that they had gone the color of bricks. “I am not sure I like the sound of a bargain.”

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“What do you mean by pleasure?” She swallowed, feeling her belly tighten with the idea...

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RAINBOW'S DESIRE

BY

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RAINBOW'S DESIRE
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*To my husband Dan, my editor Laura,
and to Mari who asked the right question*

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Ireland, 1812

How had she gotten into this mess? Blackberry brambles ripped a hole in the puffed sleeve of her spencer and she swallowed a curse. She'd hitched up her skirts in order to crawl into these godforsaken bushes to get the brats their precious little ball and had torn irreparable holes in her stocking in the process. Now, her spencer was ruined.

They yelled at her from the safety of the meadow, wanting their ball back immediately. One wouldn't think they were titled young ladies only a few years away from their debut. She imagined their pouting, red faces and huffed a silent laugh. Heaven help their future husbands.

"I'll get it!" Kate Raselbury called to her charges, doubting they heard her. She didn't want them coming in after her. It was one thing for her to bring the children back in rags, it was quite another if she returned with her gown in shreds. Nobody noticed the governess. Besides, she would sneak in the servants' entrance.

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The leather ball balanced on the verge of the thick undergrowth, poised on a rim of freshly turned earth. Stretching to reach it, Kate's gloved fingertips brushed its edge. She arched her fingers, hoping to gain some purchase on the—She stifled a scream of frustration. The ball rolled off its earthy ledge and into the brambles.

She could admit defeat and have the ball taken out of her meager wages, or she could go in after it and spend the night mending her gown and spencer.

Kate went in. Thorns bit through her kid gloves but she persisted in tearing a hole large enough for herself through the thorny branches, sliding her belly along the mossy ground, wriggling through the small gap.

At last she saw the ball, lying in an open hollow. She fought through the last few yards of thorns. If this is what Prince Charming had put up with to reach his Sleeping Beauty, it had better have been worth it. Personally, she doubted it.

The ball had rolled next to a dark brown lump, squat and round. Kate crawled into the open space. Entwined brambles curved overhead in an almost perfect sphere.

She snatched the ball, tucking it into a spencer pocket. Turning to crawl out, she realized that the ball had bumped against the dark lump, revealing a coppery-green smudge. Curious, she rubbed away more of the grime, revealing a definite copper gleam. Noticing a handle, a round nub, she lifted it, the accumulated dirt falling away. She peered inside.

Gold gleamed. Coins, newly minted. She bent closer. The designs on them looked crude, ancient. Why would someone create coins with obsolete designs?

She reached in to pick up a coin, wanting to examine it more closely.

A hand grabbed hers.

She tugged, trying to free herself. Long slender fingers dug through

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her ruined gloves, nails pressing against her skin.

Kate looked up, breathless with fear. Where had he come from?

He grinned at her, his almond-shaped green eyes afire. "Ye not be takin' what's mine, lass." His lilting musical voice had an edge of huskiness. Thin blond braids framed the side of his face, hanging forward from his shoulders, long blond hair feathered across shoulders encased in a dark woodland green shirt.

He wouldn't let go.

She tugged harder. "How do I know it's yours? I found it."

"Oh, 'tis mine, lass. 'Tis been mine to watch over for centuries."

She frowned. His face was smooth except for a few lines at the corner of his eyes and mouth. He seemed a few years older than she was, no more than that. "Centuries?" she jeered.

An odd glow filled the air, as if it had turned to gold and blue and green. That had to explain the greenish tinge to his skin. He chuckled under his breath, shaking his head. "Lass, and have ye never heard of leprechauns then?"

"Small, old guys who live at the end of the rainbow?" She blinked, disbelieving. "You are not small, or old and this isn't..." Her voice trailed away. The glow, the colors of the rainbow. "It's not possible," she whispered. "Rainbows never stay close enough for someone to actually be in one. Science has proven—"

He clapped his free hand over her mouth. "Doona ever say that S-word, lass. 'Tis death for the likes of us." His palm felt cool and dry over her lips.

Kate pried his hand away, aware that he still held her. Gripping his wrist, she could feel narrow bands of leather encircling it. "But Newton and Herschel—"

"Enough, lass. Let me go."

"Not until you let *me* go." She stood her ground, or rather knelt on it. She expected him to pull free without effort.

His gaze darted down to their joined hands. "I can't do that."

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"Then I won't let you go." It appalled her that she spoke to this handsome, broad-shouldered man like a child, but anyone who believed he was a leprechaun had to be treated with simple, gentle discipline.

She guessed the stalemate would last a few moments more and then he would release her. She would let him have his gold. Perhaps he could give her a few pieces to buy her freedom from drudgery.

He held fast.

Kate shifted, settling into a more comfortable position, a silent indication that she planned to outwait him. She might as well; she couldn't hear the children calling for her any more, so that meant they had gone off to cause other mischief. If she were lucky, they may have gone to fetch help, and then someone could take this poor fellow to an asylum.

She sighed. What a waste. He was a gorgeous figure of a man—lithe and strong, his muscles bunching with tension beneath his tight shirt and moss-green leggings. He had eschewed modern dress for some reason. Bare of linen, his throat seemed oddly vulnerable. He crouched, his groin invisible in shadow.

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"What do you mean by pleasure?" She swallowed, feeling her belly tighten with the idea.

"I mean I'll give you the best tuppin' any woman has ever had." His chest puffed out.

"Don't sheep get tupp'd?" Her eyes narrowed. "And how would I trust that you are even capable of carrying out your side of the deal?"

He leaned forward, falling onto his knees. A slight tug of his hands brought her nearer and he kissed her.

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She'd been kissed before—the sloppy messes of adolescent boys who should've long been sent off to Eton or some other boarding school, the grueling kisses of their fathers who had no qualms about taking a piece of the governess.

This was quite different. He cajoled her lips to part, the tip of his tongue tracing the edge of her lips, flicking and teasing. He pleased her mouth, caressing and tasting until she vibrated with need. The humming throb between her legs was unmistakable. With one kiss he could do this to her? How would she feel if he gave her that with which he had tempted her?

She groaned. What a shame he was stark, raving mad!

He sat back on his haunches. “Well, lass?”

Her brain tried to process the choices, still reeling from his intense, delightful kiss. She took a shaky breath. “Your kiss was...was good,” she allowed, “but I must choose the gold.”

“Good? I'm the best kisser in all of the British Isles!”

“And the most modest, I'm sure,” she rejoined, her mouth twisting with amusement.

“Mayhap ye need more convincin'.” He leaned forward again and she tilted back.

“No, no!” More of his delicious kisses? The very idea of it shortened her breath. “I cannot. I would be ruined!”

He cocked his head to one side. “Ruined? Are ye not in good health?”

“I am. I meant my reputation, sir.”

His smile turned sly. “Lass, nobody'd ever know.”

She raised her eyes heavenward. She denied the temptation. She had to. “That's what they all say.”

The green fire in his eyes dimmed. “Then the gold is yours.” He released her hand, letting it fall limply onto the cold coins.

Her fingers curved about the gold, but her mind was upon the stranger. The golden light had dissipated and he seemed greyer,

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shrunk.

"What happens to leprechauns when their gold is gone?" she asked.

The wolfish grin flashed, then disappeared under a sober mask. "With no purpose, we fade to nothing."

He wasn't a leprechaun, of course. That was just a deluded fairytale. Yet, she couldn't help but feel sympathy for him. Just because she'd gotten to the gold first didn't mean she should be greedy and take it all. She scooped up a handful of coins and handed it to him. "For the kiss."

He squirreled the money away on his person before she even had the chance to blink. His color brightened a bit. "Thankee, m'lady."

She ducked her head, embarrassed. "I am not a lady."

His head tilted. She glanced up to find him examining her curiously.

"Aye," he said at last. "The stuff ye wear is plain. Well, then, yer a miss, plain 'n' simple."

"Miss Kate Raselbury," she murmured. She extended her hand, expecting him to take it in greeting.

He cradled it and gently turned it over to reveal her palm. Pressing his lips against the base of her thumb, he murmured, "They call that the mound of Venus." He looked up at her, his green eyes dancing beneath a curtain of blond hair.

Turning her hand slightly, he kissed the center of her palm. His cool lips warmed, softening and firming as if it was her lips he kissed and not her hand. She felt the flicker of his tongue and snatched her hand away. "What-what are you doing?"

He smirked. "Kissin' you."

"I don't think so." She hefted the partly buried pot of gold out of the ground and clutched it to her. Patting her spencer pocket, she found the retrieved ball still secure. "Good day to you, sir." She felt uneasy turning her back on him, afraid he might take further liberties as she crawled away on all fours.

* * *

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He wanted her. Watching Miss Raselbury's taut little bottom wriggle as she lowered herself into the bramble tunnel only confirmed it. The pert rise of her buttocks seemed made to mold to his hands. He itched to smooth the fabric over those rounds, pull her to him and bury himself inside her.

He shuddered, his body responding to the mental images. By the Lady, why shouldn't he? His fingers gave a subtle twist, a silent spell, and her wriggling haunches stilled. He waited, his lips twitching.

"I am stuck!" Her muffled complaint echoed back.

He stroked her rump, so pert and round. Why did these modern women insist on wearing high-waisted, concealing gowns? "And how can that be?" he replied, laughter in his voice. "Ye made it in right enough."

She growled—yes, growled—at him. This promised to be a lot of fun. "Help me. I cannot move." The last had a small note of panic. "And please stop touching me like that!"

His hand stilled. "Would ye prefer I spanked ye, me little gold thief?"

She growled again. "The gold is mine. Fairly won."

He lifted the hems of her gown and petticoat, revealing white thighs. He grinned at her shocked gasp.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like?" The backs of his fingers stroked her soft skin, trailing higher.

"That you take advantage of me, sir!"

"Advantage? And I'm only givin' ye a taste of what yer missin'."

"I do not want a taste." Her voice shook.

His fingertips brushed over the apex of her thighs, touching a sensitive place, and her indignant words collapsed into a whimper. This was going to be so much fun. Beneath that strait-laced, thieving woman lay a sensual soul. Her reactions to his touch proved it.

He bent lower, pushing her skirts up to her waist, and huffed a

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breath, teasing the dark hairs at the jointure of her thighs. She shivered and he grinned. Putty in his hands, she was. At this rate, she'd return the gold just to get more.

And he'd be happy to oblige the lass.

He allowed himself the luxury of smoothing his hands over her pert, bare behind, tenderly massaging. He'd be gentle and show her no violence, nothing to frighten her, only pleasure.

He pressed one hand onto the small of her back and she bent like a bow, folding forward until her nether lips were visible. With infinitesimal slowness, he stroked his way toward her core. His thumbs brushed over her, one after the other. With her knees slightly apart, he slid his fingers through and there teased her tiny nub until it grew, poking from its hiding place.

Moisture appeared at her opening. He inhaled her arousal.

She hummed with swallowed sounds of pleasure.

He toyed with her clit, longing to taste her, but not yet, not yet. Her hips rocked back to him, her sex unfurling like a morning flower. His finger kept working her clit. He flicked it lightly back and forth, swirling the slick flesh until he heard her sob with building need.

His thumb stroked along her wet slit, burying itself within her, her flesh tight around it. He bit back a groan of his own. The way she pulsed around him, fucking his thumb...he wanted to plunge his thick cock in her, feel her squeeze him. He swallowed. Her body's responses might suggest her longing for it, but her soft cries still held a tinge of desperate fear.

"Doon worry, lass, I won't hurt ye." His probing thumb pressed against a smooth place in her tunnel and she bucked in response.

He kissed one buttock, then the other, his soft kisses peppering her skin, and she stilled even though his fingers continued to strum her toward climax.

She was close, so close. He popped his thumb free of her, smiling at her moan of disappointment. He straddled her legs, sliding one finger

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deep, then withdrawing to return with a second finger. Withdraw and return with a third. She was so wet, so slick, so ready.

His fingers twisted inside her and he cast another spell, one of release. She cried out, her entire body shuddering. He slid his fingers free, a wash of her juices gushing out with them. He longed to lick her, to sup her sweet come, but her rump slid gracefully away, collapsing onto the earth.

Her body still shook, her whimpering moans practically begged him to possess her completely. He couldn't do that. She'd made her decision. She had refused his offer of incredible sex.

Folding down her skirt, he covered her quivering buttocks. "Be off with ye now, lass. Ye've had a taste of what might have been."

He could've sworn he'd heard a choked sob. His Kate lay still, frozen for a moment before scrambling out of sight.

Declan leaned against the brambles, his leather jerkin protecting him from the worst of the thorns. He had to plan how to get back his gold. She didn't need all that money, surely. He touched himself, idly stroking. A smile crossed his face. She'd paid him for a kiss. Had his mini-seduction worked? Would she pay for more of him?

Even if she didn't, was it so awful that he longed to lose himself in mortal flesh for just a little while? That is, if he could convince her to lie with him. He'd sensed pain in her, buried deep, and knew her reactions were caused by unwonted demands. He didn't dare demand.

The smile flitted across his face again. No, a leprechaun's charms oft worked wonders. Maybe he'd even convince her to give back his gold.

He sobered. He had to get it back. The queen would not be impressed with his failure to keep the fairy hoard safe.

* * *

Pushing the pot of gold in front of her, Kate wriggled her way out of the brambles, desperate to escape. Her limbs felt heavy, drained of

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all energy. Her taut breasts strained against her tight bodice. She'd rubbed them against the stony dirt in shameless abandon, needing the friction to add to her pleasure.

How could she have been so wanton? She'd avoided all sexual contact with her employers since that first time, when Mr. Blackmartin had taken her so cruelly, so coldly, leaving her sore, aching and bruised for weeks afterward. She'd sworn, never again.

And yet, she'd begged a stranger to take her. Oh, she mightn't have articulated the words, but her moans and cries had been definite invitations. Still, her intimate parts throbbed, pleasurably this time. Why had he not taken her? What made him hold back?

The memory of that silvery explosion within her made her breathless. Impossible to analyze, it was all sensation, all light, all alive. It had raced through her from groin to breast, to heart to head, like lightning. She was sure she screamed, something a lady would never do.

She breathed in the woodsy air. *Focus, Kate.* Focus on what lies ahead—the gold and her freedom. She could be a gentlewoman once more, instead of a despised, used servant.

Leaving the forest, she headed to the manor, pondering her good fortune. How would she use the coins? Sell them as antiques? But they looked brand new. Have them melted down? Surely the jeweler in town might be able to help her.

Her thoughts did not linger with the gold for long. The image of the “leprechaun” remained with her—his cheeky smile that leered of great sensual pleasures; the size of him, tall for a man let alone one of the faery folk, she guessed, although he'd been hunched in a crouch; his gentleness and charm. She gave herself a mental shake. *And insane, Kate. Remember that!*

* * *

Kate stirred in her bed. She'd spent hours fixing her ruined spencer

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after the little rotters had gone to bed. Heaven knows if she would get all the dirt out of it. At least now she could afford to buy a new one, but old habits died hard. Besides, she'd realized that it might take a trip to Dublin before she could convert the gold into an income she could live from. None of the small country banks in the area would make such a conversion. And how would she explain the discovery?

No, Dublin was blessedly anonymous and any story she came up with would be accepted. She sank into sleep.

A weight settled on her bed, waking her. Kate held her breath, tensing and ready to fight. Her employer had never dared come to the servants' quarters before. She inhaled deeply, forcibly slowing her breathing. If he thought she slept, he might not—She didn't smell the ubiquitous alcohol. Instead, the air smelled...green?

"Lass, I know ye're awake," said a familiar voice.

Her eyes flew open. "What are you doing here?" she hissed, glancing at the other bed. Bessie, the lady's maid, slept soundly.

The over-sized leprechaun perched on the edge of her bed, smiling. "I don't 'ave any gold to guard. I have plenty of time on me hands."

Caught between surprised pleasure and maidenly outrage, she opted for the latter. "If you're caught here, I'll be ruined!"

"Ah, tsh!" The leprechaun dismissed her protests with a wave of his hand. "I still have me powers." Another complicated wriggle of his fingers and a golden-green glow encapsulated them. "Now yer mate won't be disturbed by yer cries of pleasure."

Sitting up, Kate pulled the sheets to her chin. The glow surely came from his eyes or perhaps a lit candle. She didn't turn aside to see if he'd lit one. "My cries of—of pleasure?"

He leaned forward. "If a kiss is worth three pieces of gold, what's a tupp'n' worth?"

Her eyes narrowed over her sheets. "I thought we decided only sheep get tupp'd."

"Ye decided that, lass, not I." He slid closer, wiry and muscular

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arms resting on either side of her. "A kiss then. Surely, ye don't need all that gold?"

She didn't. Not all of it. His kiss had intoxicated her before, and she risked much allowing him to kiss her while in bed. "We-we have not even been introduced," she stalled.

One corner of his mouth upturned higher. "We fae dinna give out our real names, lass. Ye may call me Declan."

"Good Irish name," she murmured, letting the sheets slip. She framed his face with her hands. His cheeks felt smooth beneath her palms. "Who are you really?"

A wrinkle deepened his brow. "Who I've always said, lass." He didn't move, examining her with curiosity. His gaze grew heated, needy, and Kate found it difficult to breathe. "Kiss me, Kate."

She leaned forward, letting her lips brush across his in an innocent, girlish kiss.

"More," he mumbled against her mouth, letting her take the lead.

She gave him more, teasing him with the tip of her tongue, as he had done to her earlier that day. His lips parted and she delved between them with a wantonness that astonished her.

He moaned, deep in the back of his throat. His hands rested at her hips, the grip tightening, not moving.

She broke off the kiss, raising an eyebrow. "If you are getting paid for this, why am I doing all the work?"

He chuckled, his green eyes sparkling. "Release me, lass, and I'll show ye pleasures ye've never dreamed of."

"Release you?" She held only his face. Did her touch paralyze him? Was that how she won the gold? She frowned.

"Ah, lass, ye'll have all my secrets afore we're done." Declan grimaced ruefully. "'Tis how you touch that holds me. Ye hold me face atween yer two hands. I canna move it 'til you release me by word or action."

"I release you to show me pleasure," she murmured.

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He groaned. "Lass, yer too clever with words."

At once, she was rewarded. His kisses dotted the corner of her mouth, along her jaw and down her neck, his gentle persuasion making her recline. Her hands slid from his face and along his corded arms.

What did it matter whether or not he woke Bessie, the lady's maid? With the gold, she would soon be gone from here and it didn't matter how she left—fired or of her own free will. Let him kiss her then. She could afford to be generous.

He lay alongside, half-on, half-off her, his weight oddly welcome. He continued to lave her neck and her earlobe, returning to her mouth to claim it with increasing passion. She responded to his kisses, her toes curling with desire.

His fingertips feathered over her breast, a whisper through the sheet and thin blanket covering her. Inhaling sharply, she breathed in his scent of wood and moss. She arched her back. Whatever he'd just done, she wanted more of it.

He thumbed a taut nipple and she moaned, offering her breasts to him. He reared back, looking down at her, breaking his kiss. "I did no' even—" he blurted, then seemed to think twice about finishing his sentence. He grinned at her, his wild smile making her heart do crazy things, pounding loudly in her ears.

"Didn't even what?" she asked, breathless. His hand still moved over her breast, making it difficult for her to think. She felt hot, her nipples sharp pinpoints demanding more.

"And lass, would ye believe me if I told ye?" He kissed her into silence, his mouth capturing her muffled insistence. He probed deep, possessing her mouth with a gentle experience. Shifting, he straddled Kate's body, her legs between his.

She should feel trapped by him, but his nipple-tweaking had her lost in incredible sensations. Moaning, she closed her eyes, her head tilting back.

A hardness prodded along her rounded belly. He wanted her. Of

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course he did, he hadn't snuck up to her room to discuss the weather. He hadn't pleased her in the bramble hedges for nothing.

"Yer smiling." He sounded confused.

Opening her eyes, she was struck by his open expression, his need and desire written there for her to see. She dared to touch his cheek, hoping it wouldn't force him into stillness. Her fingertip trailed along his high cheekbone. "You please me." It was an audacious thing to say, but in Declan's company, the audacious, the decadent, seemed normal and right.

"Let me please ye more." He slipped from the bed and stood next to it. His fingers hooked on his belt, sliding apart the leather.

He would disrobe for her? She shot a glance at Bessie's bed. The woman slept soundly.

His fingers twitched, once, twice, then danced about his belt buckle. What was he about? What was he doin—Oh!

Declan was gloriously, rampantly naked, the meager bedcovers had gone, and her nightgown had vanished. Kate sought to cover herself with her hands.

"We'll have none o' that, lass." He lifted her arm which concealed her breasts. "There's no need to hide ye beauty so."

She lifted her gaze from the thick length of his sex. "How did—how did you—?"

He grinned. "Ah, lass, I thought the sight of me would render ye speechless, but canna ye not talk of sommat other than me gooter?"

Magic. It had to be. She gulped. "You *are* a leprechaun!"

"And haven't I been tellin' ye that all along?" He straddled her slender body and bent to kiss the tender peak of one breast.

Kate gasped. She should want to claw him away from her, but the warmth of his mouth reminded her of the reason she'd allowed him to stay in the first place...and now that she knew he wasn't insane, that he was telling the truth, there was really no need to worry.

She moaned. "You are the very devil!"

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He raised his head for a moment. "Not quite lass, but I thank ye for the compliment." He bent forward, resuming his kisses upon her skin. She felt the feather-light trail of his hair tickle as he moved over her.

She closed her eyes, sighing. The pleasurable and exciting sensations he evoked were the last things she'd expected with sex. He'd given her a taste earlier, true, but she was certain that had been magic. Was this magic too? This time, this time sex was happening to her with her permission, because she wanted it, magic or not. And if it wasn't quite on her terms, his gentleness made up for it.

Her nipples felt huge, hotly taut and swollen. The attentions of his mouth and hand mined a streak of molten gold to her lower belly. Below that she felt the heavy weight of his thighs and the globular softness of his balls between them.

Her hips twisted as if she could arch up and trap him between her tightly closed thighs. The little nub he had played with earlier that day itched, sought contact with him. Her nether lips swelled as if they already enclosed him within her.

She twined her fingers in his long, soft hair. "Declan," she begged. She wanted him to do what had surely been magic that afternoon. She wanted him to create that golden explosion that had left her weak and shuddering. She felt as if she was on the edge of a crevasse, about to tumble to disappointment if he didn't do it to her, and soon.

"Lass, I promised ye the most incredible sex of your life and to be sure, I'll be givin' it to ye. Patience now."

He abandoned her breasts, kissing his way down her soft, white belly, sliding down her legs. She felt a stickiness dribble against her knee, then her calf, trailing after the hot smoothness of his cock.

His lips paused at her curly mound. He lifted his head. "Open up, princess." His breath puffed over her curls.

She snorted at the name, but bowed her knees until he crouched at her opening.

His fingers parted her nether lips. "Like a rose ye are," he

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murmured, “after a fall o’ rain.” The tip of his tongue brushed the tip of her eager, fleshy nub.

A powerful surge jolted through her. She cried out, jerking away. Too much, too much! She arched her hips for more: not enough, not nearly enough. She sobbed for mercy, for release.

He lapped at her clit, flicking it recklessly. Every now and then, he pressed the flat of his tongue against her and give her one long lick from front to back and returning. He slid one finger in her, then two.

Kate tensed in anticipation.

The pressure his fingertips wrought within her was different than the first time, but no less pleasurable. His fingers twisted inside her, but the explosion of delight didn’t come. She mewed her disappointment, hips straining against his hand and mouth.

He slid along her until his wet mouth found hers. Her nostrils filled with her own scent—soft, musky and raw.

She tasted his lips hungrily, feasting on her own juices.

He moaned into her mouth, his hips jerking against hers, his hard cock butting against her mound, seeking, seeking.

His cock’s blunt head found its home, sliding into her slippery sheath. He filled her, stretched her until she thought she couldn’t take any more of him. Gripping him, she tried to catch her breath.

He retreated and surged forward, filling her, pressing so deep inside she could almost taste his cum.

The idle thought—wondering what he would taste like—froze and shattered into infinite pieces.

She clutched him hard, never wanting the roar of sensation to end, his thick cock pistoning in and out of her, making a squishy slapping sound, like water against a pier.

* * *

Declan felt the call even as he lost himself inside Kate’s delicate form. Truly, she was a beauty. She had a sharp tongue, to be sure, but

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he liked that about her. Few talked back to the faery folk, let alone acknowledged them.

He faded from the mortal world, fingering a brief spell for clothing before he completely materialized.

"Am I interrupting anything?" The Queen of Faeries lacked her usual welcoming expression. Sparkling crystals dotted her black hair; she wore a gown of crimson spider silk.

He bowed low, burying thoughts of Kate writhing with pleasure beneath him. "Not at all, ma'am," he replied, falling into the formal fae language.

"I should be." The ice in the queen's voice chilled Declan's guts. "You have failed in your task, Declan."

The smile drained from his face. He hadn't even had a chance to snatch his payment for tugging Kate and here was the queen demanding it all back. "I be workin' on it, ma'am."

An elegant eyebrow arched. "Then I *was* interrupting." She gave a curt wave of dismissal. "You have until the new moon, Declan. Return here by that time with my gold and all will be forgiven. If not..."

If not, the new moon's great power would be wielded by the queen to exact such a horrible punishment that Declan would wish himself dead. He'd seen it happen to others who had broken their guardianship.

He had to get back the gold.

All of it.

* * *

Kate left the manor for the village, walking down the tree-lined drive before cutting across the Great Lawn to the woods. There the path meandered alongside a brook. In the green coolness, she listened to the soothing, gentle gurgles of rushing water. She felt lighter, happier than she ever had before.

She crossed the brook on a low bridge made of rounded river stone. Her eyes widened. On a large log of fallen oak, Declan waited in his

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accustomed woodsman attire—rough, yet non-threatening.

“Princess,” he said, tugging his forelock.

“That is not my name.”

“Kate then.”

She nodded, deigning to acknowledge him. “Good day.”

Trying not to look at his fine form visible due to the heavy woolen hose he wore, she walked past.

He grabbed her arm.

She spun to face him, but he didn’t release her. “What do you want?”

“Were ye goin’ ta wander right on by without stoppin’ t’pass the time?” He sounded angry.

She shook free of him. “I’ve only a half-day before I need to be back.” She offered a conciliatory smile. “Come to me again, tonight?”

“I might.” He grinned. “I’ve made me mind up that you need another tuppin’ now.”

“I beg your pardon?” She put every ounce of chill and hauteur into her voice. The choice was hers, not his.

“Ye heard me, lass.” His grin didn’t dim.

Kate examined him, her breath coming short. His long blond hair, even partially braided, did nothing feminine to his sheer masculinity. This sharp-nosed fellow was all man. “I heard you, but not now, Declan. Later.”

He shifted his grip and with one arm, pressed her to him. Brushing her cheek, he tucked a loose ringlet of hair behind her ear. He pressed his lips against her neck.

Standing motionless, Kate felt her heartbeat pound against his mouth. His gentle lips kissed the length of her neck until he reached the demure, soft ruffle that encircled her throat.

“Yer too missish by far,” he growled. “Too many clothes.”

Kate opened her mouth to protest. He covered it with his own.

He held her so tight, her struggles to free herself proved ineffectual.

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He devoured her mouth like a wild predator seeking unknown prey.

Her.

She shivered and succumbed to his intoxicating kisses, leaning into him.

He drew her off the narrow track and toward the log where he'd been sitting. His large hand palmed her breast, his mouth plundering hers.

Kate fought to breathe, her limbs tingling in anticipation. His touch was reverent, yet skilled, creating the now-familiar warm ache. Her nipples grew hard, poking against her sober clothing.

She rubbed herself against him, exploring him in turn, feeling his erection hard against her thigh.

His lips sealed over hers, muffling her moans. His hands roamed and yet he still held her squirming body to his.

Kate heard material rip. Air fell upon a bared breast. He ripped farther until her bodice hung useless from the seams.

"I hope you can fix that," she gasped, twisting away from his persistent mouth.

"I will. Hush now, and let me enjoy ye." He pulled back and gazed down at her white breasts crested with dark pink, hardened nipples. She sucked in a breath. His features were awed as if he'd never seen skin untouched by the sun before. His grip grew slack.

She stumbled back a step.

"Yer beautiful," he murmured and cupped one breast, his thumb caressing.

Without even thinking, Kate capitulated, leaning into him. His touch felt good, gentle with the added rasp of work-hardened skin.

"Ah, yer all woman." He cocked his head to one side, then lifted her off her feet, turning her in his arms.

Kate let out an undignified shriek, finding herself face-first over the large log. She flung out her hands to stop her fall and felt a strong draft whoosh up her skirts and between her parted legs.

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With her skirts ruched up to her waist, Kate tried to sit up. "What if somebody passes?"

"Nobody will, sweet Kate. I've made sure of it."

He spread her wider, his knees between her legs and his hand too, sliding up to skim over her nether curls. His finger slid in deeper, finding her small point of flesh that blanked all thought. Sensation raced through her, wild and indefinable.

His teasing, light touch increased her need, but she needed more. She arched her back, lifting her pelvis off the log. Oh God, how she wanted this! It was like yesterday afternoon, only this time she was not trapped in the brambles and she knew he would take her. Her moans and soft panting echoed across the water.

"Ah, yer past ready," he declared, his touch evaporating.

His cock, hot and thick, pressed against her slick opening. It pulsed against her. Or was it her racing heartbeat? He rubbed the head of it against her, then slid in, slowly. Incredible pleasure rushed through her, accompanied by a deepening ache.

He wasn't all the way in yet and he'd stopped moving, despite her squirming.

"Fill me," Kate complained, trying to push herself back onto him with very little leverage. She wanted that release, although surely it had been just hours ago when he'd last taken her.

"Soon, lass, soon." He found that small bit of flesh again, sworling it until she clenched hard around him. Still, he moved not, slowing his touch to just a whisper.

"Please," Kate begged him.

Her world exploded. He thrust in all the way and out, holding her hips as he humped her like a wild dog in heat, their wet flesh slapping and sucking together. Kate lost all trace of everything but the wild singing of her body, reaching a higher and higher pitch until she thought she'd never breathe again.

A savage light burst through her, robbing her of everything and yet

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rewarding her with an indescribable thrill. She collapsed over the log. Not even her arms had the strength to hold her up.

Declan groaned and withdrew. With ease, he helped Kate sit up and the two of them sat on the ground, propped up by the log.

"Here." Still panting, Kate gave him a handful of gold. "It is almost all I have with me now."

He pocketed the small amount away on his person without comment, his features closing.

She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "You are...incredible."

"Aye," he agreed, morosely. "We fae have that knack."

Kate's eyelids grew heavy and even though she fought against it, she fell asleep.

* * *

On unsteady legs, Kate continued her journey to the village. She'd awakened to find Declan gone. Now, she set her sights on the village where she hoped to find an answer to her financial woes.

The village had more than the usual amenities, as a number of peers lived nearby. It contained a cutler, a fine goods store, and an outlet for Wedgewood pottery. A Dublin bank even had a branch there, and that is where she headed.

She looked down at her gown. Declan's magical repair had concealed the tear in her bodice, but her plain gown was still crumpled. She'd wanted to make a good impression on the local banker. Her Declan had had other ideas and now she feared she looked common.

The corner of her mouth quirked. *Her Declan?*

The cool interior of the banking office engulfed her. A clerk dressed in tidy black looked up, his expectant expression turning to one of disdain. "Madam?"

"I need to speak to someone knowledgeable about gold."

"Do you have any?"

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She raised her chin. "I do. I—I found them."

"Found them?"

"In a meadow. I cleaned them as well as I could." Fumbling with her reticule strings, she produced the only coin she had left after that morning's interlude with Declan. "Here's one of them."

He glanced at it, started to return it, paused. "You got this in a meadow?"

"Yes." Her fingers itched to have it back. "What is its worth?"

"Melted down, its worth would lie in its weight." He hefted the coin in his palm, his natural enthusiasm taking over as he pulled out a magnifying glass and peered closer at the coin. "The markings on this are ancient, older than the Romans—no emperor, no Roman numerals. I don't recognize them." He gave her a measuring stare. "This coin has never been used. It is of mint quality."

"It was in a little container." Kate tried to keep calm.

"You have either stumbled across someone's idea of an expensive joke, or something wonderful and rare. I shall have to send this to the Royal Academy to let their experts give a true evaluation."

Kate frowned. "How long will that take? I am rather in need of—" She paused, flushing. "Well, of money," she continued frankly. "If you just considered weight, how much would it be worth?"

"I do not wish to melt it down, but—" He bit a corner of the coin, appearing to be satisfied at its softness, then placed it upon a small weigh-scale. "If all the coins weigh approximately the same—How many are there?"

She'd counted them, astonished that the little pail had held so much and hadn't taken her arms off with its weight. "Over a thousand."

His eyebrows escalated higher. "Then I would estimate a total of a hundred thousand pounds. I would have to send to Dublin for the money. If they're real, their historic value will be worth far more."

"Then consider that your profit. I will bring the rest of them tomorrow." She held out her hand for the gold coin.

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With reluctance, he returned it.

Kate left the building, scarcely able to believe her luck. She would have money enough to buy a cottage and live off the remainder for the rest of her life, if invested wisely. In fact, she calculated, she had more than enough. Perhaps she would give some more to Declan.

Swinging her reticule on her way back to the house, she grinned. The exchange of gold promised to be fun.

* * *

Tonight, Declan thought, already celebrating the victory. *Tonight, all the gold will be mine.* He felt drunk on ambrosia, so close was he to the taste of sweet Kate herself. He'd kept away from her for a whole day, letting her yearn for his touch the way he now burned for hers.

He climbed through her window, pausing on the sill to watch her sleep. His eyebrow quirked and he grinned. She didn't sleep. He approached her bed, sitting on the edge. "Evenin', lass," he murmured.

Her eyes flew open. "Is it safe to talk?" she whispered, gesturing at the snoring maid.

"Aye." He wriggled his fingers on both hands to make sure of it, encasing the two of them in a translucent rainbow bubble.

To his astonishment, she bent over the side of the bed, returning with his pot of gold. "Here," she said, proffering it. "It's yours."

His jaw gaped farther. He'd never expected it to be this easy. "Mine?"

"Yes, I do not need it all."

He took his battered pot from her before she changed her mind. "Ah, but sweet Kate, I do."

She frowned, her pleasure turning peeved. "You are being greedy."

He pawed through the contents. "There's hardly any here!"

Kate folded her arms and pouted. "I am not giving them all to you. I cannot. Woman cannot live by sex alone."

"Ah, but isn't it fun to try now?" His grin faded. "Why can ye not

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give them back? Where have ye hidden them?"

She met his gaze. Again, Declan was impressed by her boldness. "I sold them."

It hit his gut like an iron hammer. "Buy 'em back," he grated.

"No."

Declan stood. "Then there's no' much point in me stayin'."

"There is." She grabbed the corner of his short coat. "We made a bargain."

He halted, muttering fae curses under his breath. Sex for gold. Or was it gold for sex? Either way, he was obligated.

"You could always give back the gold." She said it as if she knew it was impossible for him.

It was an idea. Maybe the loss of a few gold pieces wouldn't be so bad. Maybe he could get out of this alive.

Not likely. He couldn't deny Kate her freedom.

This would be his last chance to experience Kate's sweetness. An ache tugged at his heart, washing him with unexpected regret. He didn't want it to be just this night.

He brushed the crook of his forefinger over her cheek and her scowl vanished. He hadn't uttered a magic spell to charm her into submission. Why had she reacted so? He paused, suddenly uncertain, suddenly more afraid than he had ever been, even when standing before the Queen of the Fae.

Kate snapped her fingers in front of his face. "You do not have to do it if you do not wish. I will not force you."

Declan blinked. Her cynical expression had returned, but he thought he saw sadness in her eyes. He could withdraw now, leave her and face his fate. "Kate." He caressed her cheek again. "Ye've never forced me to make love to ye and will not now. But 'twill be the last time."

"The last time?" Her lower lip trembled and he longed to kiss it.

"Ye've no more gold to give me, my love, and that is our bargain."

"But couldn't you—"

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He couldn't tell her. Not yet, if ever. "I am Fae and no' meant for a mortal life."

He saw her remember tales in which fairies remained undiminished while their mortal lovers aged and faded away. She bowed her head, hiding her expression from him. Even then, he couldn't bring himself to leave her. He sat beside her, waiting patiently.

She looked up. "You know that if I could give you more gold, I would. But I cannot. It—" she swallowed. "It has given me the freedom to leave this servitude, to live an independent life." She touched his sleeve. "But if it could be with you..."

He leaned back, out of her reach. "Impossible," he hissed.

"Then we have one night." She swallowed hard. "One night left to us." She crawled forward and captured his lips with her own. "I am yours, Declan. Use me as you will."

"But yer paying—" Her fingers covered his lips and he stared at her, wide-eyed. Did she know what she said? Such words bound her to him, and him to her. He should probably explain that her declaration was more powerful than any spell. Thunderstruck, he couldn't find the words. More than anything, he didn't want her to take back the words.

"Not this time, Declan, my green man. 'Tis my farewell gift to you." She sat up and peeled her shift off over her head, leaving her naked before him. "Take me."

Her soft-spoken command leapt within his veins like fire and before he knew it, he had borne her back onto the bed. His hands roamed her body, caressing and nipping, a fresh hunger rising from within his groin.

He wanted her. He wanted her now, to lose himself inside of her, surrounded by her mortal warmth. If only he could make it endless...

She squirmed beneath him, her hips twisting against his erection. He sat up. He would not magick away his clothing this time. Let her dream she lay with him as two humans would. He unhooked his belt and pulled his green doublet over his head, taking his undyed cotton

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shirt with it. That left naught else but hose.

Her fingers reached the lacings at his waist first, pulling them apart until his hard cock sprung free. He gasped as she bent over, taking the smooth head into her mouth. Her tongue swirled, making him shudder.

She drew back, glancing up at him and licking her lips. His erection twitched, an echo of the deep vein of excitement running through him. Her mouth closed over him again, her head bobbing.

He held her steady, his gaze drawn by the long, slender line of her back ending in her pert, dimpled bottom. He saw her hand slip between her legs. Her undulating hips and soft moans buzzed his sensitive skin, almost finishing him. His hips bucked, his cock nudging the back of her throat.

Straining to keep himself under control, he closed his eyes. Her mouth jolted him into paradise. He'd never imagined she possessed such a skill and yet, and yet—her attentions were not practiced, but eager and...oh, by the Lady, analyzing his lover's aptitude for going down on him was not helping him keep control.

"Kate," he groaned, his hands convulsing in her soft hair. "Katie, lass." He couldn't catch his breath. His brain barely functioned. He wanted her. Wanted her forever and ever. "Turn over," he gasped.

He guided her with tender hands, positioning himself behind her raised rump. He eased inside her hot core, groaning as she clutched at him. He eyed the long lines of her back, arching to access more of him, the faint flush of arousal tingeing her pearlescent skin. Ah, but she was lovely.

He couldn't hold himself back. Not any longer. He grasped her hips and plunged wildly into her, burying himself until he could go no further. He pounded deep inside her, feeling his loins loosen.

"Come with me," he groaned, leaning forward to tease the sensitive nub between her legs and finding her fingers already at work. He plucked at her stiff nipples instead, rolling them between his fingers. His blond hair fanned out over her back, concealing her beauty to his

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view only.

"Yes," she panted. "Yes, Declan. I am yours. Always!" She shuddered, crying out, squeezing and milking him until all thought was erased.

A wild, white fire coursed through him, burning him, freeing him, centering on his groin. His seared senses felt the fire expel from his body, a liquid rush that sapped him of all energy.

He pulled out from her, spooning his body around hers, holding her gently, but with sure possession. After all, wasn't she now his?

And he was hers.

* * *

Declan left her shortly before midnight. He needed to travel to the Other Country and talk with his half-brother before the queen's verdict came down. He found Caolan waiting for him by the ancient oak near the court.

"Declan." Caolan's folded arms in greeting was little encouragement.

"Caolan." He tried for a broad smile.

"You didn't get it."

"I didn't get 'em all, I got most of 'em."

"Why not the rest?"

"The girl needs 'em."

"Needs 'em? And surely, yer growin' soft in the head, man. It's yer very life we're talkin' about here."

"Aye, I know, but 'tis her life too. I've lived long enough. Kate, she only gets one brief, mortal life."

Caolan's piercing gaze didn't let up.

"Besides, she's sold 'em already."

A high-pitched horn sounded through the trees and Declan felt his blood answer it. Caolan too, had turned to face the source. "'Tis time," his brother said.

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Declan shook Caolan's hand. "'Tis been a pleasure to know ye." He walked off toward the Court, leaving his brother behind.

* * *

Something moist and sticky smeared over Kate's upper lip. She twitched, not wanting to wake, yet wondering at the bitter, earthy scent filling her nostrils. Her eyelids fluttered open. She remembered abandoning herself to Declan's touch, lost in him so deeply she never wanted to be free.

She lay in pitch dark. "Declan?" she whispered.

A sage green glow formed above her head. She blinked, her eyes watering at the light.

"You're not Declan." She started to sit up, rubbing her nose and dislodging whatever it was the strange fairy had left there. "Who are you?"

"His brother. Ye must come with me at once."

She saw the resemblance. "Where are we going?" She swung her feet onto the floor and reached for a robe.

"Ye'll see, lass." His tone was not at all friendly. "It's yer fault he's in this pickle."

She let him drag her out the window. She whimpered as they floated three stories to the ground. "Pickle? What pickle?"

He didn't answer, speeding her across the sloping dark expanse of grass rendered silver by the moonlight slanting over the roof. Their feet didn't crunch the gravel when they crossed the long drive to the house. Kate glanced down and saw she wasn't even touching the ground.

They reached the woods' edge. Declan's brother paused, his grip shifting to her upper arm. "Ye must willingly wish ta go into the Land of Fae, Miss Kate. Do ye?"

"Declan's there?"

He nodded.

"Then I will go."

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He tugged her farther into the forest and Kate had a moment of doubt. She had only his word that he was Declan's brother and he was leading her into a very dark and remote place. What if this was some sort of attack?

The breath whooshed from her. She struggled to breathe. The air seemed somehow thicker, like sweet syrup. She sagged in the leprechaun's grasp. Unsympathetic to her difficulties, he hauled her toward a roiling gray mist.

Kate saw dark gray shapes move within the mist. The shapes gained distinction; sharp-edged features turned toward her as she passed them and their jewel-colored robes.

Declan's brother dragged her to the very inner edge of the circle.

She stared at Declan, horrified. His half-naked form, bound by heavy iron chains, was partially hidden by his long blond hair. He shuddered within the constraints and even from a distance, Kate saw red welts rising around the bindings.

A woman's voice, strong and discordant, rang out across the space. "I have determined your sentence."

In her gut, Kate knew Declan's proposed fate. She had to stop what was about to happen. She had to. That was why she'd been brought here, was it not?

"No! No! Do not kill him!" Heedless of Caolan's attempt to restrain her, Kate ran into the center of the circle, flinging herself at Declan and trying to pry the chains free.

Declan tried to focus on her. "Kate? Am I dead and gone already?"

"Not if I have anything to do about it," she muttered in reply and whirled to face the Queen of Fairies. The woman took her breath away with her sheer, exotic beauty.

"Where is the gold?" the queen demanded.

"I have it. It's—"

"Whisht!" Declan interrupted, grimacing. "A leprechaun's woman never reveals the location of her man's gold."

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"That applies to the Fae, not mortals." The queen reared back, apparently repulsed. "Such pairings between Fae and mortals have proved disastrous for our race. Speak—where is the gold?"

Kate darted a glance at Declan. He shook his head, warning her to silence.

"It's in the bank," she said. "In a vault. Just let him go."

"A vault?"

"It is a large box, made of steel and iron." Kate rather relished seeing the fae shudder as one when she said that.

The queen raised her hand. "Then it is done and gone." She stared at Declan. "Mortal shall ye be, Declan. And to death are ye doomed."

Declan gritted his teeth. "My bones may ache in old age, my queen, but so long as they creak in unison with my Kate's, I care not."

"I have not passed sentence on the mortal yet."

Kate tore her worried gaze from Declan. He still appeared to be in pain. She glared at the queen. "I am not yours to command, Fairy Queen. I gained the gold, fair and square, and have repaid Declan according to our bargain."

"You have felt fae power and yet you defy me?"

" 'Tis a habit of hers," Declan mumbled.

Kate quailed but rallied. "I speak in my defense...and Declan's. No laws have been broken, fairy or human."

"Declan failed in his duty."

"And so you have punished him for that. But in what duty have I failed? What law have I broken?"

"The mortal speaks true," Caolan interrupted. "I brought her, so she is not trespassing. Besides, she's been punished enough in taking young Declan to mate."

Declan grinned. "Ye promised me, Kate."

Her mind whirled, recalling the words she'd said. They had been important at the time but she hadn't realized the depth of their meaning until now. "For all time," she murmured, adding further weight to her

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pledge.

"Words bind," the Queen of Fairies declared, somewhat subdued. "But I would see proof of the strength of their coupling."

"Proof?" Kate darted a puzzled look to Declan. He struggled to his feet, standing bound about the wrists and chest.

"Without words," the queen clarified, sitting back.

Kate trembled. How could she prove it without words?

"Show them," Declan murmured, his magnificent body trussed. He couldn't move, so it was up to her.

"No words," the queen reminded, leaning forward. "That is my final warning."

Quivering, Kate approached Declan. Reaching out, she brushed his chest with her fingertips. His breath quickened, his chest rising and falling with the effort.

The circle of fairies giggled and Kate snatched her hands away. She was doing this all wrong. Frightened, she gazed into Declan's eyes. His expression implored her to act.

Lovemaking had been fun before, not crucial. She reached out to him again, her palms slipping under the curtain of his hair to lie flat against his chest. Warmth streamed from him.

She closed her eyes. *Forget the others. Just love him as if you will never see him again.*

Her fingers feathered out across the planes of his chest. They traced a memory path, smoothing across his shoulders and down until the cold bite of iron chains stopped her.

She bent her head and pressed her mouth against his skin. She inhaled his scent—clean, musky and reminding her of dew-filled moss. She wanted to kiss every part of him, mark him as her own.

Her fingers slipped over the chains, reaching his knotted belt. She laid a slow trek of kisses up his chest, nuzzling at his neck while she worked at the knot.

It seemed stuck fast, escaping her. She growled against his neck,

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nipping him with her teeth. A shudder of laughter washed through him and she felt reassured. He believed in her.

Licking the small mark she'd made on his neck, her fingernails dug into the rope, searching for some give, some purchase. She found it and the rope loosened.

Her hand smoothed over the front of his breeches, searching for the row of buttons. She clung to him, feeling the swell of his erection trapped beneath the thick cotton.

Buttons forgotten, she stroked him, her hips arching against his, trapping her hand between them. He moaned, his head tilted back, straining against his bonds. Her fingertips brushed against the little buttons, reminding her of what she had meant to do, and she thumbed them through the holes.

His breeches fell low about his hips. She opened her eyes, stepping back to view him. His cock sprung free of the concealing folds, his light brown curls surrounding it like a halo.

Hungrily she swooped in, bringing his member fully out of hiding. She worshipped it with her hand, caressing its length with her palm.

She realized they couldn't have sex standing up, not with Declan bound and unable to hold her. Her mouth was the only other option. She was rather certain she couldn't handle his entire length, but then she'd thought that when he'd made love to her the first time.

Kneeling, she brought her lips to the head of his cock and delivered a chaste kiss. He twitched and she steadied him, balancing his thick girth on her forefinger. She licked around the ridge, curling her tongue beneath the tender underside.

She slathered her tongue up and down his cock, making him as wet as she felt. Every part of her was alive, on edge, waiting for the scales to tip her into sweet oblivion. And he hadn't even touched her.

Tugging at her skirts with her free hand, she found her way beneath them and up her thighs. She touched herself, her fingers covered with her arousal. She moaned, kissing his cock and opening her mouth to

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receive him.

Her tongue teased as her lips closed around him. She flicked against his tiny hole as she fingered her clit.

She moaned again, and took more of him into her mouth. She lifted her wet hand and raised it to Declan's lips.

His mouth caught her forefinger and sucked on it. She mimicked his action, drawing him deeper. Her sex throbbed, longing for him inside her.

Their muffled moans filled the silent circle. Declan's hips bucked toward her, driving himself into her mouth. His tongue flicked out and found her other fingers, still steeped in her juices and he gathered them into his mouth also. His head bobbed, fucking her fingers as surely as she fucked him with her mouth.

"Enough!" the fairy queen cried.

Kate mewed in frustration, Declan's cock popping free of her mouth. She looked at the monarch, her cheeks suddenly flaming. What had she done in front of all these people?

The queen's bodice had loosened, and she appeared dazed. "Enough. You have energy sufficient to leave our lands and survive. Mortals ye both be, and I cannot prevent the passage of time outside of these lands, but so long as you love each other with the fiery depths you do now, you will be spared turning to the dust from which you came on your return to the mortal world." She waved a hand and Declan's chains disappeared.

He rubbed his aching muscles and pulled Kate to her feet. He claimed her in a passionate kiss.

She sank into him, closing her eyes and blocking out her mortification. With Declan, she would be safe.

When she opened her eyes again, the fairies had gone. Declan stood before her, the welts vanished from his chest and arms. There was something different about him...

"You're not....green."

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He winked. "Does that mean ye'll not love me?"

"Of course it doesn't." She swatted him, relieved to have him safe.

They stood in a meadow, a strange humming sound surrounding them.

Kate looked at him, dazed. "Bees?"

He took her hand. "Let's see."

A whistle shrieked and a large, cylindrical metal object exploded out of the hillside, followed by squat carriages. Sooty smoke streamed from its head.

Kate and Declan gaped. When it had gone, she turned to him. "Did you see that? It had people inside it!"

He grinned back at her. "Explorin' this world will so much fun. Come on."

She took his hand. "My gold!" she exclaimed. "It's in the bank. I wonder if we can still access it?"

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "We'll find out. But first, me light o' joy, I believe there's a tuppin' needin' to be finished."

LEANNE SHAWLER

Regency writer Leanne Shawler has long had an affinity for the electronic world, having met her husband on the internet back in 1996. Both fans of science fiction's most romantic couple, Clark Kent and Lois Lane, it seemed natural to leave her home country of Australia and move to Southern California, where dreams come true.

Leanne has written for all of her remembered life: from a short story about a monster eating the bully in her third grade class, to the full-blown and unlikely adventure romances she wrote with her high school gal pals. She then graduated to angst-ridden poetry and erotica, followed by a masters in fanfiction. At last she pulled a Regency manuscript she'd written one summer (back in 1990!) out of its storage box and decided to "fix" it. She has since completed four other novels (three Regency-based, one contemporary). Three of her manuscripts have been finalists in RWA-sponsored contests and one, *A Sword for Wellington*, is a 2004 Golden Heart Finalist. She is a member of the RWA Regency chapter *The Beau Monde*, her local RWA chapter, RWASD and the Futuristic, Fantasy and Paranormal chapter "FF&P."

She has short erotica published with Amber Quill Press and now sweeter Regency romances with Zebra Kensington, with the first book tentatively due out April 2005.

An Anglophile, she first became interested in the Regency period over fifteen years ago and has been researching and visiting England ever since. "I enjoy the mannered wit of the Regency, the bright

personalities (Byron, the Duke of Wellington, Jane Austen) and the adventures of the time: wild rides hanging on a bizarre bet, elopements to Scotland, the wars with Napoleon. While they maintained an outward appearance of good society, they are known to have lived life to the fullest.” Frequently, her research takes her to the seedy underworld of the Regency period.

When she’s not writing, Leanne reads, designs websites and enjoys the theater and good food with her husband.

You can learn more about Leanne by visiting her website:
<http://www.leanneshawler.com>

* * *

***Don’t miss **Restrained Hearts**, by **Leanne Shawler**,
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