

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*Seducing*  
THE  
*Stones*

KATHY KULIG

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Seducing the Stones

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# ***SEDUCING THE STONES***

**Kathy Kulig**

## *Dedication*

Special thanks to my editor Helen Woodall and the frogs – the leaping ones and the writing ones.

## **Prologue**

*Quarry the innocent on sacred ground  
Hath suffer the sting of silver arrow,  
And dwell as fair creature, woodland bound.  
May cede the Glamour of faery sorrow  
With dance of bliss on Samhain moon,  
Wee bounty of milk and offer of curds,  
The powers that be will find the way soon,  
To pierce the veil betwixt the worlds.*

Sidhe Curse

Unknown Author

## **Chapter One**

The commotion beyond the cluster of hemlock trees sounded through the forest and advanced closer. Camp axe in hand, Carolyn Moyer stood up from hammering tent stakes and squinted into the dimly lit woods. Whatever was making all the noise continued to move toward her camp.

Exhausted, she sucked in gallons of air, her breasts straining against the sweaty tank top. She had raced against the sun to unload her car, collect firewood and set up her camp before dark. Now at dusk, she'd almost finished and she didn't need the delay of an animal trying to raid her food supplies.

Within seconds the noise escalated but still she couldn't get a glimpse of the animal. She waited, hoping it was a deer and not a bear.

Mother Nature's display of October foliage glowed red and gold as the last sliver of sun slipped behind the Appalachian Mountain range. A breeze chilled the perspiration between her breasts and she shivered.

She glanced at her haphazardly arranged hearthstones and skimpy campfire and groaned. At least she'd had enough sense to gather firewood before she set up her tent but her flashlight and lantern were still unpacked in her supplies. Had Brian been there, he would've berated her for getting to the campsite so late.

As the disturbance approached the dense hemlock trees she gripped her axe, raised it to hip level and took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of pine sap and dry leaves.

From behind a giant hemlock the tawny brown figure emerged, staggering and stumbling every few steps.

A deer. Relieved it wasn't a bear, but concerned by the erratic, jerky movements, she knew that any sick or injured animal should be avoided. Carolyn stumbled over rocks as she stepped behind a tree. Finally, the deer reached the edge of her campsite

and collapsed. A yellow arrow stuck out from its hindquarters and a streak of blood trickled down its leg.

Her hand flew to her mouth. Hunters? No, poachers, if they were hunting in a state park and after dark.

The visitors' center was miles down the road and had to be closed by now. And the thought of maneuvering her car down the partially washed-out fire road in the dark didn't appeal to her. Her mind raced, trying to decide what to do.

Then another sound echoed through the woods. Heart pounding, she raised her camp axe a little higher and stood in the shadows behind the tree. A large albino buck appeared with a rack of antlers so large she wondered how the animal held his head up.

Carolyn blinked and shook her head, wondering if she was dreaming. Deer were common in this area, but not snowy white ones.

The buck stood defiantly between the wounded doe and Carolyn, pinning her with his angry glare. In the twilight, his eyes were crystal blue, hard, calculating and intelligent. Gripping the arrow in his teeth, he yanked it out of the doe.

"Ahhhh!" She never heard of a deer doing such a thing.

The buck looked at her and she held her breath. He snorted, scraped the ground with one hoof, then dropped the arrow.

Afraid to move, Carolyn watched as he licked the wound and prodded the doe with his nose until the animal struggled to its feet, then sprinted off into the woods without a limp.

Gooseflesh prickled her neck and down her spine as the white buck walked toward her. Was he going to attack her? Those antlers could do some damage. She raised the camp axe, praying she wouldn't have to use it. Then a man emerged from the woods with a bow and a quiver of arrows attached to the side of his weapon.

The white deer turned his head toward the man, then charged off in the opposite direction.

Carolyn let out a breath in a rush and sucked in more air. The deer was gone, but now she had to deal with a poacher. She'd never had this problem in all the years she camped with Brian.

"Hey, there! Did you see that albino buck?" the hunter asked, trying to catch his breath. "I've been hunting him for a long time. Very rare. Some trophy he'd make."

"Don't you know hunting is illegal here? This is a state park." The fury was evident in her voice.

"I know where I am, lady. I shot a doe on legal ground and I've been tracking her for hours."

"It's getting too dark to track a deer. You expect to track her by moonlight?" She made sure he saw the axe by using it to point at the moon. Not quite full, the moon shone through bare tree branches.

"I hate to lose that doe. She'll die now. Such a waste of meat," the hunter said between wheezing breaths as he glanced at her axe.

"I don't think she'll die." She pointed to the arrow on the ground.

He picked up the shaft, his eyes not leaving Carolyn. "Ain't that the damndest thing? There's blood and hair on it. I know I got a good shot. Damn." He kicked a stone. Surveying her tent and campfire, he eyed her up and down. "You camping here alone?"

She clamped her jaw tight, trying not to let fear show on her face. She glanced at her car, parked too far away to run to. Her keys were in her tent. What could she do if this guy tried anything, start swinging the axe?

"No, the lass is not alone," said a deep voice behind her with a thick Irish brogue.

She spun around and almost cried out. Stunned, she stared at the tall man, dark hair flowing to his shoulders standing by her fire. Where had he come from? His compelling eyes crinkled at the corners, hinting humor, but his full mouth showed no signs of a smile. With all the confusion, Carolyn hadn't heard him walk into her campsite.



"You'd best be heading home," the man said to the hunter. His piercing gaze glittered in the firelight. He glared at the hunter as if daring him to argue.

The hunter nodded. "Just leaving. Sorry to disturb you folks." He walked into the woods and disappeared into the darkness.

Carolyn stared at the newcomer and placed a hand on her chest, feeling her heart thump.

"I didn't mean to be startling you, lass, but should you be out here all alone?"

She huffed. Just because he chased off the hunter didn't mean she should trust him. "There's nothing wrong with camping alone. Who are you? What are you doing here? I didn't see any other campers set up."

"Well now, as it happens, I live in the area and heard the commotion."

"That hunter was tracking a deer, but it got away. Did you see the white buck?" Nervousness was making her ramble. All she needed to do was thank the guy for scaring off the hunter and he should get the hint to leave.

"Must have missed him." He reached out his hand. "I'm Rory Donovan."

When she accepted his hand, his unfathomable eyes somehow put her at ease and a slight wave of dizziness made her sway for a second. "Carolyn."

Still trembling from the hunter and not wanting Rory to notice, she turned away, collected some dried branches and threw them on her fire.

Rory walked to the opposite side of the campfire and watched her as she arranged the smoldering logs. The flames blazed brighter, illuminating his face. He looked to be in his early thirties.

The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to his elbows and suspenders, attached to brown trousers, were stretched over his muscular chest. Odd outfit, but it suited him.

Although he was tall and broad in the shoulders he didn't seem threatening and he had chased the hunter away. An unexpected tingle threw her off guard. No question

the guy was hot, probably meant no harm, but she didn't know this guy and really should ask him to leave.

"You live nearby?" she asked.

"Just over that mound, not far from the Druids' Circle."

"I found the stone circle on my last camping trip. It's like a mini-Stonehenge. Do you know anything about it or how long it's been there?"

"The site be at least eight hundred years old."

"Eight? So much for Columbus discovering America," she said sarcastically.

He didn't argue, but stared up at the moon for a moment, then stood and gazed into the campfire. "It be a magical place and guarded by the Sidhe."

"She who?" she smiled. Did he think she was gullible or was he just teasing her?

"Sidhe." He spelled the name. "It's pronounced like 'shee'. They're beings of the Celtic otherworld, beyond the veil. They guard the sacred ground for the Druids."

Right, she thought. He was teasing, telling campfire stories. He must be a guide for the park. She could play along. "And what do the Sidhe look like?"

"Only saw one. He be a wee man as tall as my knee with long white hair, clad in a cloak of green and wore a crown of gold."

"Ah, sounds like an important little guy. Can't say I've seen any Sidhe." Or maybe he was crazy. So why was she mesmerized by a total stranger? Not like her at all.

"Glad to hear that." He smiled slowly and his eyes narrowed as if he wondered who was teasing whom? "You only see them if you desecrate their domain."

The firelight flickering on his body made him look almost otherworldly. Something about campfire stories told at night were always more spooky. And now she understood his point. "Domain. Right. Don't worry, I always clean my campsite when I leave."

Rory poked at her fire with a stick, rearranged her burning branches and added another log. Her back stiffened. Her fire was burning just fine without him messing

with it. The whole point of this trip was to prove she could camp alone without Brian, or any man for that matter. This was her test. If she could get through this week without driving herself crazy, she'd book that trip to Italy. There was no reason she couldn't travel abroad alone.

Glancing into the forest, darkness seemed to wall her in. The thought of spending the whole night alone made her pulse surge. "It's awfully dark. How will you find your way back? Do you need to borrow a flashlight?"

"Kind of you looking out for me, but I know these woods. They be my home for many years."

Carolyn thought she noticed his eyes mist over for a moment. "Well, it's a beautiful place to live. You're very fortunate."

He shot her a cold look and gave a bitter laugh, then ran a hand through his hair. He sighed. "Yes, it 'tis a fine mountain. This time of year especially."

"Autumn is my favorite time too. I'm surprised there aren't other campers. Maybe closer toward the weekend they'll come." She was stalling. The rhythmic sawing of crickets echoed over her pounding heartbeat. She willed her breathing to slow and shook out her fists. Relax. In a few moments, Rory would go and she would spend her first night alone. She could do this.

"I don't expect that man to be bothering you again. I should leave you now," Rory said.

"I was making some tea and roasting a couple franks for dinner and have plenty to share if you'd like to join me." Coward, she scolded herself.

He walked over and stood close to her. Her gaze traveled down his straight nose to full, parted lips. Handsome in an outdoors rugged sense, clear blue eyes that could probably detect a field mouse a hundred yards away or read her thoughts. Rory was certainly amazing to look at. He smelled of wood smoke and an earthy scent that made Carolyn want to curl up against his chest.

He glanced up at the clear night sky. "Very kind of you. I've already eaten dinner, but a tea would be grand. You sure I'd not be putting you out now?"

"No, not at all." Carolyn filled a pot with water from her jug in the cooler and set the pot over the fire, while Rory dragged a log over for a seat. When the water began to boil she steeped the tea in large tin cups.

"Do you take milk?"

Rory spun around, his face lit up. "You have milk?"

"Yes, a little. I brought a cooler."

"By chance you have butter?" Rory sat and gazed at her cooler.

"Yes, for cooking. I like eggs for breakfasts."

"Cooking? You are not doing a ritual?"

"Ritual? What do you mean?"

"Milk and butter, bounty of the earth is used for rituals... Never mind. Some folks in this area do rituals." He turned his back on her, facing the fire.

"Oh, I see." She didn't, but it sounded harmless. As long as they weren't sacrificing animals or dropping acid it didn't worry her. "I'm not keeping you from your family, am I?" she asked.

"No, I have no family." He stared into the fire for long moments, then spoke without looking at her. "You not be married then?"

"No." Her gaze shot to the stack of letters tied with a blue ribbon sitting on her cooler. Love letters from Brian when they were in college. She'd planned to burn them this week. Maybe it was her own kind of ritual, a cleansing ritual. "I was."

"Ah, he died then." He glanced at the stack of letters and frowned.

She was surprised at his assumption. "No, he found someone else. I'm divorced."

"Your man was a fool. I was married once too. We emigrated from Ireland to here, but my wife was ill and died on the trip over."

"That's very sad. I'm so sorry." She wanted to ask how long ago his wife died, but didn't want him to dwell on the painful memory.

He took her hand, squeezed it then released it. He studied her for a moment. "It was a long time ago, lass."

Heat rushed to her face. All through her body a thrumming teased at her most sensitive places. Not a big surprise that a simple touch of a man could stir such feelings when it had been almost a year since she'd been with anyone.

Uncertain of what to do with her hands, she gripped the log on either side of her legs, nails digging into the bark.

Rory stood and bent over to stir the glowing coals with a stick, then threw on another log, offering a nice view of his butt. She had to mash her lips together to keep from smiling. When he returned to the log and sat down again, his thigh brushed her hand.

Okay, this was crazy. He was cute, but she didn't know this guy and she should ask him to leave. "Rory, thanks for chasing that hunter away, but it's getting late..."

Raising her gaze, she noticed him watching her.

"Yes?" he asked huskily.

She shivered more from the intensity of his gaze than the briskness of the evening. "What was I saying?" she asked. Her mind had gone blank. Even though she had just met this man, she might let him kiss her if he tried. Her body became fully aware of him. A breath caught in her chest as her nipples tingled and her sex throbbed.

He looked away and sipped his tea. "You were thanking me about the hunter and wanted to know about the Druids' Circle."

"Oh, that's right." Ripples of desire continued to flow through her body. What was she thinking? She knew nothing of this guy. It was like she was in a trance or something.

She needed to find safer ground to cool the heat in her veins. "Well, tell me more. I think I'll go exploring there tomorrow."

He jumped to his feet, spilling the tea in his cup. "Stay away from the Druids' Circle." His calm, friendly tone had become demanding and cold.

"What are you talking about?" Carolyn snapped back.

"It's sacred ground and it's dangerous." His tone was a bit calmer.

She studied metaphysics, so was open-minded to esoteric beliefs, but to believe ancient ruins were dangerous because it was sacred was a little extreme. Changing the subject, she said, "Rory, it's getting late. I'm going to have to call it a night."

He nodded and handed her his mug. "I'm sorry I shouted, Carolyn. But the Druids' Circle is dangerous. Let me explain."

## **Chapter Two**

Rory hadn't meant to shout at the lass. That upturned chin and angry-looking stare sent a clear message and he couldn't afford to lose her trust now. She glared at him. Her pale brown hair blew around her face in the breeze, yet she hadn't made a move to secure it behind her ears or brush it out of the way.

Her crossed arms didn't hide her curvy breasts or hips. Yes, she would be a fine one for the ritual, but she was a willful woman, independent, partly resistant to his Glamour and not one to take orders, especially from the likes of him. He sat on the log.

"I'm sorry, Carolyn. The Druids' Circle is a dangerous place. Best you keep far away."

"And why is that?" She pursed her mouth as if she thought his words were in jest, or he was playing a game.

"The Sidhe, for one. If you not believe in them, then the ley lines are another concern."

"Ley lines? My, Mr. Donovan, don't we have lots of campfire stories? You must entertain many hikers and campers. I think I'm going to need another cup of tea for this story. How about you?"

A puzzling woman. She sounded miffed, yet she invited him to stay. Was she curious, or in need of company? He wasn't using his Glamour now.

"Aye, I'll take another cup," he mumbled.

She filled a pot with water from her jug and placed it on a rack over the fire, then placed teabags in their tea cups.

Crickets and other insects whirred and chirped in the bushes and grasses. Behind a pine tree, he spied the eyes of a raccoon watching them. No doubt, the animal waited to

roam the campsite for scrapes of food. Rory looked up through the tangle of branches swaying in the slight breeze. The moon was almost full. Almost time for the ritual.

He didn't have much time and he needed her help. He didn't like the idea of using his Glamour influence on her, but he would if he had to.

"No milk for me, thank you," he said as he watched her pour some into her cup, holding his breath that she didn't waste any of the precious bounty. He would need that for the ritual in three days.

She handed him the tea, then sat. "Okay. The Druids' Circle is dangerous because of these ley lines. Explain." She crossed her legs, facing him on the log, sitting very close.

He wanted to pull her over his lap into his arms. Better yet, he wanted to taste her mouth, her neck. If dreams were reality, he'd drape her with the warmth of his nakedness. Then savor every inch of her skin, beginning with her breasts moving down her belly to her mound where he'd open her thighs and search out her swollen bud just above the gateway to her feminine core.

*Stop. Do not think of this now.*

Ah, yes, this be the time to break the curse. No wonder his manly drives were getting the better of him. He leaned on his thighs with his forearms to hide the bulge in his pants. No need to scare the lass. She sees that and she would most likely send him on his way.

"Tell me about ley lines."

A serious one, she is. "Yes. Ley lines. They're paths of unknown energy that run straight through the earth. There are cool vortices, the magnetic energy, and the hot vortices, the electric. When they intersect they become a doorway to other realities."

She stared at him for a long moment, blinking. "Is this supposed to be some metaphysical theory, or just a campfire story?"

"It be the truth."



"I think I read about this. I wonder if that's how people disappear in the Bermuda Triangle," she said.

He shrugged. "There are magnetic and electric vortices – very powerful ones at the Druids' Circle. And this is the time that the two intersect, creating a doorway to another place."

"A doorway to where?"

"Don't know – anywhere, any time. The universe is constantly moving and so do the intersections of these vortices."

She nodded. "Then it stands to reason that the places where these doorways lead also change." Carolyn put her tea cup down and straddled the log. "So these people who keep disappearing from the Bermuda Triangle could be all over the universe."

"All over the universe, at different times or different times on Earth too."

"Wow, that's fascinating. Cool theory."

"It's not a theory." He hadn't gotten his point across how dangerous the ley lines were. She was curious about them, not frightened. Not good. The whole idea was to keep her away from the circle until the eve of Samhain. He couldn't risk her going there before then.

"How do you know these ley lines are at the Druids' Circle?" she asked.

"The Druids who built them used dousers or those who had the Sight to find them. The Druids then built their circles along the ley lines. Usually the lines are either hot or cold, but this area has both. Occasionally, the lines cross within the circle and that be when it's most dangerous."

Her leg was touching his now. Did she realize what she was doing to him? Or was she so interested in the story that she wasn't aware? With every stroke of her knee or thigh against his leg, his groin throbbed and hardened. Ah, he could take her to his bed tonight. No. Too soon. He must wait for the ritual if she be the one.

"What about other stone circles, are they built near ley lines?" she asked in all seriousness.

"I think some are. The Druids or whoever built them may have understood how to use the energy safely," he said. "The Sidhe understand how to manipulate the energy to some degree."

"So these ley lines are why the circle isn't safe. So you can't go near it either."

"Oh no, I go there all the time."

She rolled her eyes. "Then it must not be that dangerous." She smiled. "Caught you."

"I tell you no joke. I know the circle. Trust me. In a couple of days, I can take you there myself. It'll be safe then."

Her amusement faded and he feared his welcome had too.

"I know you believe I be playing some prank on you, but I'm not, Carolyn." The wounded look in her eyes crushed his heart. How could he make her understand the dangers without forcing his powers? He'd already used a little of his Glamour to stir her interest, but he felt guilty enough about that. He was desperate enough to force her into performing his ritual, if necessary, and he might have to. With only three days left, he may not have enough time to convince her.

"I believe that you believe it," she said softly.

He smiled at that and the sparkle of amusement in her eyes gave him some hope. Although he was not sure if she was humoring him. She could be a willing participant for the ritual, but did he have the right to place her in such risk?

She was his only hope. After three days, he'd have to wait another eighty years before he would get another chance.

He gently touched her shoulder-length hair. "It's the color of a fawn and just as soft." And smells of sweet citrus and wildflowers. He raised her hand to his mouth and

lightly touched her fingers with his lips. "It's late, I should go." He released her hand and stood.

"Yes." She stood, searching his face as if she wanted to say something more, or do something. Her breasts rose and fell with each breath. Her lips parted. He leaned closer, inches away. With a little nudge of his Glamour, he could make her kiss him. Her eyelids fluttered. She was strong, resistant to his power. He sighed, his warm breath on her neck made her shiver. He could wait.

Standing this close, he could smell her arousal, feel her heat. Good, she was responding to him, but he had to be careful not to scare her off. "Would you mind if I stopped by again, maybe tomorrow?"

She looked away and sighed. For a moment he feared she would turn him down. He could will her to say yes, he could will her to make love to him, to participate in his ritual, but he'd rather she come to him willingly. Although he was desperate, he wouldn't force her, but he could entice her.

"I'll be hiking most of the day tomorrow. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"I'm not around during the day, but I may stop by in the evening if that's all right."

She shrugged.

Was that a yes or a no? He wasn't sure. "Good night, Carolyn." He didn't wait for her to respond, or turn him down. He walked into the dark forest.

"Good night, Rory." Carolyn watched him disappear over the knoll, then thought, *Cute guy, but like hell I'm staying away from the Druids' Circle. Who does he think he is?*

The point of this trip was not to make a new friend or start a new relationship—it was to prove to herself she could go it alone. One week wouldn't kill her.

She rubbed her arms and stared into the forest. Shafts of moonlight streamed down through the swaying trees, illuminating the ground in a bluish glow. Her passion for

the beauty of the woods had suddenly shifted to a feeling of being penned in by the isolation and darkness. A chill snaked up her back.

Creaking branches, the incessant whirl of insects and wind flapping her canvas tent kept her tossing and turning for hours.

She tried to ignore Mother Nature, but finally gave up and looked at the luminous dial on her watch and groaned. Two a.m. No way. She had to go to the bathroom and waiting until morning was not an option.

Irritated, she fumbled around the foot of her sleeping bag for her flashlight. She slid into a pair of jeans and tugged a sweatshirt over her tank top, then stepped into sneakers as she climbed out of the tent. Outside, without the confines of the thin canvas shelter, she felt exposed. The forest was alive with the sounds of night creatures. Insects and frogs filled the darkness with their chatter. She thought about addressing her nature call behind her tent, but quickly quelled that idea. How many snakes hadn't hibernated yet? She speed-walked to the latrine.

On her way back, she caught the scent of smoke and froze, thinking forest fire, but then realized it smelled like a woodstove or fireplace. Her heart did a tumble. Rory's house?

She was up now and insomnia might be cured with a walk—at least that was her excuse for indulging in her curiosity.

She walked in the direction of the charred scent and climbed over a small knoll. The same one Rory disappeared over earlier. Below in the moonlight was a log cabin with a couple of smaller buildings. Plumes of smoke swirled out of the chimney. Lights flickered in the windows. He couldn't sleep either. As there were no other houses around that she knew of, she assumed it was Rory's house.

If he looked out his window, he might see her flashlight up on the hill. Feeling foolish, she scrambled back to her campsite.

Back inside her tent the rest of the night was spent fantasizing about Rory sharing her sleeping bag, his rough hands stroking her heated skin. Exhaustion caught up with her and she eventually drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, the chatter of birds woke her before the sun lit up the green walls of her tent. She fixed breakfast, hiked to the rustic shower at the trailhead five minutes away and dressed in jeans and a tee shirt.

She'd almost expected to hear Brian chopping wood or to turn and see him filling a pot with water for tea. He'd always gotten up before she did. She stiffened. Just because he couldn't remain faithful to their marriage didn't mean she'd have to give up camping—something they'd done for the eight years they were together.

She stashed the stack of letters inside her tent. Tonight she would burn them. At thirty years old, she had plenty of time to start over. By the end of this camping trip, she'd leave the pain and old ghosts behind.

She stuffed her backpack with a sandwich, granola bars, an orange and water, then tied a sweatshirt around her waist and headed for the Druids' Circle, hoping she would run into Rory so she could disprove his doom and gloom stories.

She would also gently remind him that this was a state park and just because he lived around here didn't mean he owned the forest.

Following memories from her last visit, she made a few turns off the path. The ancient site shouldn't be too far from her campsite. She didn't remember seeing Rory when she was up there with Brian over a year ago. How long had he lived in the area?

She followed the path down a hill where it opened out onto a small meadow. At the center of the field, several stone megaliths stood in a circle. At one end facing east, two upright stones were topped with a horizontal stone, creating a trilithon.

Carolyn thought it looked like a gateway or arch. Ignoring Rory's warnings, she walked through the entrance of the circle and strolled under the trilithon into the center.

She waited in anticipation for some peculiar event.

Ah ha. Nothing.

Only the chittering sounds of birds and the creaking branches as the winds blew through the trees disturbed the isolated meadow.

Still here. She laughed to herself. A local's tale to keep hikers from tramping around the ruins. Did he really think people would believe such crazy stories? The image of the white buck pulling an arrow out of a doe flashed in her mind, creating doubts, but she ignored them. Instinct, self-preservation. Stranger things have happened.

She walked up and examined each of the dozen, ten-to-twelve-foot-high megaliths of various shapes arranged in a circle. Gliding her hand over the rough gray surfaces, she didn't feel any cut angles or markings to show they had been carved—just big rectangular-shaped rocks.

She wondered if the original structure was designed for astronomy or religious functions or both. The grouping of upright stones did give off a strange aura or feeling. Chills raced along her back and neck. She slipped the sweatshirt on and zipped it up.

What would motivate people to build something like this and how would they move stones that had to weigh tons apiece? If the site was several hundred years old it held a lot of mystery even without Rory's silly stories.

Satisfied that he was pulling her leg Carolyn left the stone ruins and continued her hike, the marked Appalachian Trail, for the rest of the day.

On her way back to camp, she hiked along the ridge where she had seen Rory's cabin. She peered down into the valley, but couldn't see his house. When she reached her tent and knew she had the right hill, she backtracked and walked over the hill and stared down into an empty valley.

*It was here last night. I'm sure this was where I saw the cabin.*

With an hour left of light, she decided to hike into the clearing toward the area where she thought she saw the house. In the center of tall grass were a few scattered

partially buried stones in a square that could have been the remains of an old foundation. She rubbed her face. She did smell smoke last night and she did see a cabin, didn't she? Or maybe she walked over a different hill. That was the last time she wandered around in the middle of the night except for a bathroom trip.

Later that evening, she decided to celebrate a new beginning. She started a fire, popped popcorn and then opened a bottle of red wine. The stars glittered between bare tree branches and the moon cast crisscross shadows along the ground, but the night didn't seem as ominous as the one before. And her campfire brought a sense of security and warmth.

The collection of papers wrapped in a bow and sitting on the log next to her would soon be a thing of the past. While she was away at college, Brian had written the old love letters to her and now they only represented betrayal and pain.

Grasping the letters in her hand, she stepped up to the fire and held them over the flames. *Now burn them.* They were meaningless kindling. She kicked a hearthstone, frustrated with her hesitation.

She was over him. Even though she hadn't dated anyone since their divorce she was ready to meet someone new. The papers were old and yellowed. Having read them dozens of times, she wouldn't read them again. Her hand heated as she continued to hold the stack above the flickering flames and swallowed hard against the tightening in her throat. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Am I disturbing you, now?" Rory asked from behind her.

She cried out and spun around on the log, sloshing the wine in her plastic cup. "Oh, I didn't hear you."

"You'll not be wanting company tonight?"

"No, company is fine. Would you like some wine? I only have plastic cups, I'm afraid." Her mind suggested she asked him to leave. Her body welcomed his presence. She placed the letters on the log.

"Wine would be grand. Plastic cups are fine." He strolled over and tended her fire and brought it blazing with only a few touches of a stick and an additional log or two.

"Those look important." He sat next to the letters.

"Not anymore. I'm burning them tonight." She handed him a cup of wine.

"There be a story you want to tell me about the letters?" His soft voice and intense eyes tugged at her insides. He smelled of wood smoke and pine.

Large hands grasped the cup of wine. Strong hands that could also be gentle, she imagined.

"Putting the past behind me," she mumbled, forcing a smile.

"You need to be alone now?" he asked with such tenderness it tugged at her heart.

"I'm okay having company. But let me finish this chore." She stood and picked up the stack of letters, hesitated for a moment and then tossed them into the fire. Sighing, she blinked back a few tears, but felt a wave of relief.

She wouldn't cry one more tear for that man. That part of her life was over and she could move on now. The papers browned, curled and charred, then burst into flames.

Carolyn stabbed them with a stick, stirring them into the smoldering ashes. She filled her cup with the wine and brought the bottle to Rory. "More wine?"

He shook his head, raising his full glass and studied her. "You all right, lass?"

She couldn't look at him. Instead she stared into the flames and nodded.

"Here." Putting his cup down, he stood and took her into his arms, stroking her hair. He was a good five inches taller than she was. "Ah, that was difficult. I see it all in your eyes."

She nodded into his chest, breathing in his wood-smoke, musty scent as the tears streamed down her cheeks. Lifting her hand, she tried wiping them away without him seeing, but he pulled back and took her face in his hands.

"You be weeping, Carolyn." Crystal blue eyes shone with such intensity, she caught her breath.



"I'm fine, really."

His lips pressed together as if he didn't believe her. With his thumbs he brushed tears from her cheeks. His gaze searched her face and seemed to settle on her mouth.

Carolyn's hands were on his upper arms, her fingers trailing over hard biceps. She swallowed, licked her lips. The pulse of her heart beating so wildly awakened a hunger inside her. Here she was in the middle of the woods in a stranger's arms. If she let him he'd probably make love to her. She couldn't help but wonder if he was getting turned on like she was. If she rocked her hips forward would she feel his erection through his trousers?

A little self-control? she reminded herself.

"Better?" His gaze held hers and she could barely take a breath.

"Yes, much better. Kind of letting go of the past," she whispered. His mouth, oh, his mouth. She wanted to taste his lips if nothing else.

He nodded. "The past is not easy to let go of." He moved away from her. "You want to sit?"

"No, I'm okay." She was somewhat relieved that he hadn't proved to be a sex maniac and attacked her, but also a little disappointed he hadn't at least tried to kiss her. "I have a lot to look forward to." Her words weren't as confident as she'd hoped.

"There be a strong woman. And what do you want, Carolyn?" He smiled that half smile that pulled at the center of her stomach.

She resisted the urge to step closer, although her hands were tempted to roam his broad chest and waist. "Many things. I plan to take a trip to Europe in the spring."

"Alone?" His hands gripped her shoulders.

"Yes," she said proudly.

"Hmmm. A long trip to take alone. You be brave and adventurous."

She smiled.

"I like that," he whispered. His fingers twirled in her hair, his thumb stroked her cheek by her lips.

Carolyn's knees buckled slightly. When her hand reached out to him, Rory pulled her closer. His gaze searched her face, then his lips parted and came down onto her mouth.

Slow and hot and wet. A moan escaped his lips and he pressed harder. She gasped when she felt the hard ridge of his erection pressing against her mound. Tongues mingled, explored between quick breaths as one hand tangled in her hair.

"Damn, lass. I love your mouth," he said as his lips trailed to her neck and ear. "I'd say you be ready to move on."

"Oh yes." Her hands slid up and down his hips and thighs. No, she wouldn't reach for the bulge in his pants though she was tempted. Could she sleep with a man and not get serious? She didn't have to get serious with him.

She stiffened. One-night stands weren't her thing even with all the precautions. And she didn't need to get swept away with this guy just to have him help her forget Brian. But his kisses were so good, so hot. And it'd been so long since a man kissed her like that. She'd stop in a minute or two.

His mouth moved from her mouth and his tongue teased the base of her throat. Her breath came in short gasps, but her mind still had doubts. In one more minute she'd move his hand to her breast.

Abruptly, he stopped kissing her and stood back. "A little fast, I'm afraid. Sorry, lass. You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." All heated up and not ready to stop yet.

He studied her a moment then looked up at the sky and his eyes went wide. He jumped back. "I need to go."

"Something wrong?" She looked up. Wispy clouds drifted toward the moon and most of the stars were hidden by dense clouds. "It's getting cloudy. We'll probably get rain tonight."

"I need to go, Carolyn."

The panic in his voice chilled her. Something was really bothering him. Did he suddenly have second thoughts about what they were doing? Maybe he had a girlfriend, or worse, a wife? "You're right, I think we were moving a bit fast."

His face softened. "Oh, lass. I didn't want to rush you. I'm sorry. I really need to go." He ran into the forest and in seconds he was gone. The moon was covered by a blanket of clouds so the forest fell into pitch darkness. She wondered how he would make it back to his house without breaking his neck.

## **Chapter Three**

The pattering of rain on Carolyn's tent ended just before dawn when she dragged herself out of her sleeping bag. She wanted to watch the sun rise over the ruins like people did at Stonehenge. From what she'd read, it appeared the ancient people who built stone circles positioned them in a specific orientation to the sun and moon. She wondered if the sun would cast unusual shadows at sunrise or sunset at the Druids' Circle. Since this wasn't Summer or Winter Solstice, she didn't expect much theatrics.

As she hiked along the path toward the ruins, she glanced up through the evergreen trees. The indigo and lavender sky was mixed with a few pink highlighted clouds. The air was cool and had the fresh scent of ozone and damp grass.

She caught herself peering around boulders and looking under bushes for Rory's Sidhe, then laughed at her own foolishness. If she continued to listen to Rory, she'd start believing in the seven dwarfs and the tooth fairy.

Those ley lines could be possible. They sounded more scientific and she worked in a research and development laboratory. How would she know if she was standing on one? Shaking her head, she smiled to herself. "That Rory is good at telling stories." As she approached the stone megaliths, she couldn't help but try to notice a vibration beneath her feet or a change in the atmosphere—something different that would lead her to believe that the ley lines did indeed exist.

Nothing. Too bad.

A sliver of sun appeared over the distant mountains. Spreading her rain jacket on the damp grass, she decided to sit cross-legged directly opposite the trilithon entrance with her back resting against one of the stones. The tall megaliths cast eerie shadows within the circle as the sun emerged over the mountains. She rested her head against

the rough surface of the stone as sunlight blazed through the center of the trilithon and lit up the circle.

She closed her eyes against the glare and enjoyed the warmth. The stone she leaned against quickly absorbed the sun's heat. She tried to imagine the stone's energy flowing into her, healing her body and spirit, washing the pain and sadness of her failed marriage away and giving her the courage to let go and move on.

The megaliths were silent sentinels greeting the sun each day, each season, for how many years? Rory said several hundred. Was it possible the site was that old? What stories these stones could tell if they had stored history for all that time.

The warmth from the stone penetrated her body, easing the stress in her muscles. Thoughts of Rory, nightmares of Brian and the sounds of the forest had kept her awake most of the night.

A wave of nausea hit her like someone tilted the world upside down. Whoa, too much wine last night. She should've eaten breakfast. She closed her eyes and dozed.

The thump, thump, thump of a drum and the sound of ocean waves lapping on rocks invaded her dreamless sleep. The drum didn't bother her as much as the ocean. There was no ocean anywhere near the Appalachian Mountains. Dreaming, Carolyn concluded. Then someone shook her shoulders.

"Wake up, Bree." The woman giggled.

Carolyn's eyes flew open. It was nighttime. The woman crouched before her. The young woman's smile was lit by a large bonfire in the center of the stone circle. "Will ye dance in our power circle tonight or take a wee nap?" she asked, then giggled again. The woman wore a white hooded robe, with green vines embroidered around the hem and sleeves. Wavy red hair spilled out from around her hood.

"Power circle?" Carolyn's gaze swept the area around the Druid Stones.

Within the circle, several people were dressed in similar white robes except for one man who wore a black robe and all were holding green branches in one hand. They

danced in a circle around a fire. She noticed several wooden bowls near the center, but couldn't see what was inside them.

Where did all these people come from? Was she having a lucid dream? One of those very vivid dreams. Her heart pounded twice as fast as the drumbeat.

The woman giggled again. "Bree, do not worry. To be sure I was nervous my first time." The woman grabbed Carolyn's arm and helped her stand. Carolyn looked down and noticed she was also wearing one of the white robes and worn leather sandals on her feet.

She searched on the ground for her backpack, but didn't find it. The hood slid from her head and straight, dark hair fell to her waist. She swayed and shot out a hand to brace herself against the stone. What was happening to her? Her hair was dark blonde and only shoulder-length. A closer inspection revealed the body wasn't hers either, it was slimmer, more petite. And what about this Bree...what happened to her?

The standing stone felt coarse and cool beneath her calloused hand. Damn, what did this woman do to make her hands so rough? She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Okay. Somehow she was transported here, or her thoughts were transported within this woman. Or she was transformed into thought energy that entered this woman. But where did the woman's thoughts go?

*Think, think.* She gripped the stone until her fingers ached.

*Stop being a scientist and trying to create a hypothesis.* If her situation had anything to do with chemistry, she might come up with something that made sense. Carolyn blinked several times, then rubbed her eyes with her fingertips, wishing her vision would clear and she'd find herself back at the Druids' Circle. No luck.

This place was nothing like the Appalachian Mountains. In the distance, beyond the field, was a grass slope leading down to a rocky shoreline. Moonlight glistened on a vast sea. She gasped in shock and began to shake.

Spinning around and studying the stones, she noticed that they were different. This obviously wasn't the Druids' Circle. It was a much larger circle. Beyond the stones lit by

moonlight, was a stark, lonely place—rolling hills of jagged rocks divided by grass fields, a few scrub pines and not much more. Not the lush forest of the Appalachians.

Oh god, was she dreaming? Yes, dreaming, she decided. If she opened her eyes really wide she would wake up by the Druids' Circle or in her tent. She tried opening her eyes, which were already open. *Wake up. Wake up.*

The drumbeats continued while the people danced around the bonfire, swinging their arms. If she was dreaming then why could she smell the salty air from the ocean and the wood fire? A part of her wanted to run, but the logical part said to stay calm, search for clues and find answers.

If the ley lines brought her here, maybe other ley lines were around that could take her back, but not if she panicked.

Beneath the surface of her thoughts was a place she dared not go for the moment, a place so dark like a bottomless pit, that if she attempted to explore the “what if she couldn't get back” thoughts she would start screaming and wouldn't be able to stop.

She twisted her fingers in the coarse burlap-like fabric of her robe to keep her hands from shaking.

The woman glanced down at Carolyn's fists. “Bree? I know this be your first time, love. But do try to enjoy yourself.” Standing next to Carolyn, the woman took her hand. “Do you want to watch for a while?”

Not knowing what else to say, Carolyn said, “Yes.”

“Then stay here for now, ye do not have to dance. 'Tis a beautiful ritual honoring the goddess and god and the deities of nature. Those bowls hold our offering of earth's bounty—herbs, fruit, cream and fresh-churned butter.”

Carolyn nodded while her mind raced. Dream or the ley lines she wasn't sure, but she was going to try to remember everything she could. “What's your name? Where are we?” She wondered if the woman thought her questions were crazy.

The woman stopped smiling and frowned. Carolyn held her breath, expecting the woman to start trouble. Instead the woman's face softened. "Oh, Bree, I will ask Allin if he can do a healing ritual too. Maybe ye are with fever. I'm Fina and this is the Isle of Iona."

"Oh, now I remember. I'm sorry, Fina. I'm just a little fuzzy."

"Fuzzy?" The word didn't seem to mean anything to Fina. "Here, take my mistletoe, join the circle or stay here as you wish. I will ask Allin to bring some herbs to make you well."

"Thank you." Carolyn didn't know what else to say. She held the branch in one hand, then leaned against one of the megaliths as the drumbeat picked up. The men and women moved clockwise around the fire, waving sprigs of mistletoe high above their heads.

Strange words were spoken from the man in the black robe and with each revolution around the circle, he reached in his robe's pocket and tossed a handful of granules onto the fire. The flames flared several feet higher for a few seconds, lengthening the shadows of the dancing couples, then the fire returned to normal. The puff of smoke swirled around the group.

Carolyn inhaled the woody scent of sage and copal incense, she guessed. Similar to the stick incense she had bought at a farmers' market.

That thought sent another jolt of fear through her, reminding her she had no idea where she was or what she was going to do.

The drumbeat sped up and the men and women increased the speed and intensity of their dancing, waving their arms, reaching out to embrace or touch each other's hand, a shoulder, a hip. Men and women giggled, some chanted and continued to move around the circle. A few of the women had shrugged their robes off their shoulders, baring their breasts. And some, including the men, had completely removed their robes, tossing them outside the circle. A quick check confirmed that Carolyn was naked



beneath her robe too. The realization sent surprise and also an excited tug at the pit of her stomach.

Mesmerized, Carolyn watched the ritual, her breath panting and pulse beating faster as the drumbeat quickened and the circle of naked men and women rotated faster and faster. The carefree intimate movements of the people, the burning incense, the drumbeat and complete surreal situation made her head spin.

Carolyn felt she should look away, but she couldn't. Her body stirred to the erotic energy, the sensual scene and desire surged in her veins.

A cool breeze swept across the open land, fluttering the flames and her robe. She had a sudden urge to remove her clothes too. The sexual energy seemed to build and swirl like an invisible whirlwind of consciousness, as her heart thundered against her breastbone. She leaned against a rough stone megalith for support.

The energy of the moving circle changed. The drumbeats slowed, the dancing slowed and the touching became more erotic, though they continued moving. An electrified sensual energy hovered within the circle connecting everyone.

With the slower pacing began a new stage of the ritual.

Allin, the man who was wearing the black robe, stopped and pulled Fina from the dance. Moonlight enhanced every angle of his lean muscles. As he kissed her his dark wavy hair hung into his eyes and his hands roamed her body.

Carolyn's eyes widened, she held her breath, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

She felt her face flush as she watched the men and women touch themselves in intimate ways. The men's bodies gleamed in the firelight, some were slightly aroused, some fully erect. The women's breasts swayed as they walked. The leaping flames in the bonfire matched the leaping sensations surging through Carolyn's body.

The men tossed their sprigs of mistletoe into the fire, then reached out to the woman behind them and gently touched or grasped her hands.

Fina fondled her breasts, her belly and between her legs, enticing Allin, but not letting him touch her yet. He watched her with hunger flaming in his gaze as he stroked his shaft, while his other hand attempted to touch her. But Fina always stayed inches away from his fingertips. She twirled for him, offering every view and undulated and teased. Finally, Allin seemed as though he could take it no longer. His cock was hard and thick, his eyes glinted with madness. With a groan he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. Carolyn longed to have a man look at her with such lust.

Other couples and a few in groups of three and four glided out of the circle and began a similar lustful dance of intimate touching, kissing and exploring with hands and mouths.

Two men gently pressed one naked woman against one of the flat megaliths as they stroked her breasts and slowly their caresses traveled lower. One man rubbed his hand gingerly between her legs, his fingers probed through her triangle patch of dark hair as she spread wide for him and groaned in pleasure.

Then he knelt before her, his mouth at her pussy while the other man suckled her breasts. The woman cried out, her body shuddered. The man on the ground stood then picked the woman up, wrapping her legs around him and plunging his cock into her.

Moaning, she fell back against the other man who supported her against his chest. Both men were lean and not overly muscular, their chests smooth. The one standing behind her kissed her neck and fondled her breasts. He was fully aroused. Would he take his turn after the first man finished? All the other women had been taken.

Carolyn wet her lips, wondering if she would be next.

Shocked, yet compelled to watch, Carolyn didn't move. Her gaze swept the carnal ritual. Surprised at her response she opened the top of her robe so the night air could cool her skin. Immediately her nipples grew taut. Her body hummed with desire, aroused and wet, she was tempted to join in, but she never had been into group sex.

Then the man standing behind the woman lifted his head and made eye contact with her.

A jolt of fear mixed with excitement slammed into her. She felt her face flush and tore her eyes away. She glanced around the fire. Other couples were either standing or on the ground fucking in various positions, moaning and crying out in sheer ecstasy.

Leaning against a ten-foot megalith, Carolyn noticed the man who was fondling and stroking the woman continued watching her. A fluttering in her stomach inched lower. Afraid of what she knew was coming next and surprised that she was becoming aroused, she stepped back into the shadow of the megalith, feeling self-conscious for watching the intimate scene. Would he come for her? And what would she do if he did?

A slight breeze sent a chill across her exposed breasts. Her cleft ached and throbbed. Still in the shadows, she touched herself, feeling wetness between her legs. No, if anyone saw her she'd only encourage them to approach her.

With the corded belt, she cinched the front closed, but her nipples were still taut and sensitive.

Carolyn's pulse quickened, igniting her intimate nerve endings until they began to throb and ache for attention. She should stop watching. She should leave, but where would she go?

The drumming continued slowly, softly by one man sitting on the ground while a naked woman caressed him, kissed his mouth, his neck, his chest and moved lower to his groin. His mouth opened in pleasure as she took his cock in her mouth, but he managed to keep drumming.

Fina and Allin's carnal display had gone beyond caressing and kissing. He roughly massaged her breasts and Fina held his shaft in her hand. She groaned, spreading her legs and bending her knees to grind her mound against his thigh. He grabbed her bottom and was about to lift her and penetrate her, when he tilted his head and looked in Carolyn's direction. He smiled, then whispered something in Fina's ear. She smiled, kissed him and nodded, glancing at Carolyn with a wicked smile.

They walked toward her. Carolyn struggled with the need to run from something so strange and a desire to surrender to the sensual pleasures aching to be released. Allin followed behind Fina.

"Bree, ye look ready to join in the celebration," Fina said in a sultry tone as she took Carolyn's hand and placed it in Allin's, then kissed her cheek. "Celebrate with us. In honor of the goddess."

"No, I don't want to...intrude," Carolyn said nervously.

"No intrusion, lass," Allin said as he stroked her hair, then kissed her cheek. Deep brown eyes studied her with lustful heat. "I know this be ye first time, I be kind to you. 'Tis the most precious sacrifice to the goddess. It will secure the safety of our coven."

His hand massaged her shoulder, her arm, her back. He urged her body against his. His cock, hard and thick, pressed against her clit beneath the coarse robe. A twinge throbbed between her legs and she had to stop herself from rocking her hips into him to ease the need building there. She wasn't sure if she should give in to the craziness of the moment. Was she in a dreamlike trance or was she caught up in the heightened sexual energy? She let out a breath and relaxed as Fina untied the belt and slipped the robe off her shoulders. The robe fell to the ground.

Fina moved behind Allin, but stayed and caressed him while his attentions turned to Carolyn. His hungry gaze ignited the heat inside her.

"Yes," he whispered huskily. He curled his hand around her neck and pulled her into a kiss.

He tasted hot and sweet like cider. Startled, but caught up in the rhythmic drumbeat, the scent of sea and sex, the sensual temptations surrounding her, she willingly lost herself in the kiss. Hands squeezed her breasts, pinching her sensitive nipples and drifted lower to her pussy. Carolyn groaned and pressed herself against Allin. She felt his fingers probe her slit and slip a finger inside.

She opened her legs to allow him access. With the movement of the heel of his hand on her swollen nub, her body shuddered, hovering on the delicious edge of release. She

dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Yes, yes." He took her mouth again, their tongues dancing in circles. Then thoughts of Rory drifted in and a hollowness filled her. She pulled back.

"Oh, Allin, is she wet and ready for ye?"

Carolyn shoved against Allin's chest and stepped back. "Sorry, I...I can't."

She couldn't do this, she had to get away. Grabbing the robe, she ran into the darkness.

"Bree, you'll get lost. Please come back," Fina shouted after her.

"Bree, stop, girl. No man may force ye!" Allin cursed.

She ran along the raised coastline, stumbling over loose stones, slipping on damp grass. She ignored their shouts. Soon the light of the bonfire was out of sight and she didn't see or hear anyone following her so she slowed her pace.

The moonlight shone a silvery path over the ocean. A million crystal stars sparkled in the black sky. What sky, where, when? Tears stung her eyes. Rory. Was she trapped here?

She wrapped the robe around her, crossed her arms tightly around her waist and slowed to a walk. Now what? Where was she supposed to go? She dropped onto a mossy patch several yards from the edge of the cliff and stared out to the ocean.

Along the silvery moon path in the ocean, tiny orange dots bobbed in the water and seemed to be moving closer to shore. She blinked and tried to focus on them. After several moments, she noticed they were boats, about four in number filled with people holding torches. The boats rowed up onto the sandy shore and several men jumped out. More people for the ritual? she wondered.

Then shrill screams from the direction of the stone circle chilled Carolyn's blood. Jumping to her feet, she ran again. First toward the bonfire, then in the opposite direction, then into hills with large jagged boulders. Needing a place to hide.

She ran, her chest hurt and throat burned. A disturbance several yards below made her freeze for a second. Swinging her head around nearly sent her sprawling down the steep hill. A man in a black robe ran toward her. She flung her hand to her mouth to stifle a scream.

Allin? Or one of the men from the boat?

Carolyn wasn't sure, so she ran into the darkness toward the hills of jagged rocks. "Stop!" the man shouted. "Carolyn, stop. It's me, Rory."

Carolyn looked over her shoulder, then froze. "Rory?" The man in the black robe reached her and flipped his hood back.

Allin? In the moonlight he looked like Allin, but something about him...his voice, his eyes were Rory. And he had called her Carolyn.

"Rory?" Her voice still unsure.

He ran up and pulled her into his arms. "Yes, I know. It be me, lass. Thank god and the Sidhe King, I found you. Hurry, we must hide."

## **Chapter Four**

"Hide where? From whom?" Carolyn had her arms around his neck and didn't want to let go, afraid he might disappear. Her body refused to stop shaking.

"The religious fanatics who hunt the pagans. We'll need to get back to the stone circle so the Sidhe can bring us back, but we can't go there now." Grabbing her hand, he dragged her through the fields and up a steep hill between mounds of rocks and scrub bushes.

More screams and loud shouts came far below. "What's happening, Rory? Can't we help them?"

"No. The Sidhe warned me." He stopped abruptly. "You need to take off that white robe, they'll see you a mile away."

"What?"

"Here, no time to argue." He took off his black robe, revealing his naked, muscular body. "Put this over the white robe."

She did and they ran farther away from the screams, away from angry shouts. They stumbled over several other hills, riddled with jagged rocks or steep slopes of loose gravel. On the other side of one knoll, Rory found a dense cluster of boulders and pulled her inside a small cave. "You be shaking, lass. It's okay. We'll be fine." Gasping for breath, they collapsed on the sandy ground.

Carolyn's side ached and muscles twitched from running and climbing. "Fine? Are you crazy? It doesn't seem like everything is fine to me! What's happening to the people at the stone circle?"

He curled his arm around her shoulder and pressed her head against his chest. He didn't answer.

"Tell me. They're going to kill them, aren't they?"

"Yes, lass. They'll be burned."

"Oh my god. Oh my god. We need to get out of here. Can't those Sidhe friends of yours get us out of here?" She was panting again. Her heart thundered in her chest. He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her.

"Not until we can stand by the stones safely. And if we go there now, they'll burn us too."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later golden sunlight streamed into the entrance of the tiny cave. Rory woke with Carolyn in his arms, her head on his chest. She was asleep and he hated waking her. While she slept her fears did not show on her face, but once she awakened those fears from last night would only return.

The screams of agony had died long before Carolyn's whimpers and tears stopped. The sound of oars banging against boats suggested that the executioners had done their deed and left and that was hours ago.

"Carolyn." He shook her.

"Hmmm?" She blinked, stretched, then her body went rigid. "Is it over?"

"I think so. Wait here."

"No. I'm coming with you."

"Not a good idea. And I want to make sure all the boats are gone."

"You're not leaving my sight, so forget it."

"A willful one you be."

"Darn right." She glanced over at him. "Oh, your robe." She slipped it off, tossing it to him and turning away. He didn't miss her glance at his groin and it stirred a hunger inside him, reminding him of his deadline. What day was it? Had the eve of Samhain passed? He donned the robe. "Quietly, Carolyn."



She nodded.

They reached the bluff above the shoreline, but he made her stay back. He looked over the edge at the horrors below. Several poles were staked into the sand, braced with stones. Driftwood, straw and branches must have been used to start the fires from the amount of ash at the base.

His stomach roiled and he tasted bile. Rory squeezed his eyes shut, but the image remained. He expected that image would be etched on his mind forever.

"What do you see? Are they dead?"

"Yes, lass," he whispered, not looking at her, afraid she'd see the horror in his eyes.

She hurried to him, but he held up his hand and shook his head. "Don't."

She dropped to the ground, sitting with her legs crossed, her face in her hands. "They weren't hurting anyone. They were kind people."

"It be a terrible thing, but this isn't our time. We need to find our way back." He pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her.

Her body shook. This Carolyn, the body of the woman she inhabited, felt smaller in his arms, he stroked longer dark hair, but she was still Carolyn and it felt good to hold her. Even though it was hardly the time to be lusting after a woman.

He kissed her hair and breathed in the scent of sweet honeysuckle and incense, then straightened his back and pulled away. "We should be heading to the stones, lass."

\* \* \* \* \*

Carolyn hesitated before entering the ravaged megalithic site. Hearthstones from the bonfire had been kicked out of their circle and a few of the charred logs were tossed several feet from the stone structure. The wooden bowls containing herbs, fruits, milk and butter were smashed with boulders. A few white robes remained, stained with blood – more evidence of the violent raid.

Carolyn's stomach lurched and she thought she was going to be sick. Squeezing her arms around her waist, she took several deep breaths. She watched Rory through tears as he swore, shook his head and kicked stones.

She bent and picked up a sprig of mistletoe that miraculously had not been crushed and held it to her heart.

Rory finally calmed and walked around the circle, touching each stone megalith with his eyes closed, then moving to the next one. He stepped into the center of the array with arms outstretched as if he expected something to happen. But for the next hour, except for a breeze, the chirp of a bird, nothing happened.

"Are we stuck here?" she asked flatly.

He dropped his arms. "I don't know. The Sidhe said to wait by the stone circle."

"For how long?"

"I don't know," he shouted, then ran his hand through his long hair. "I'm sorry. The Sidhe can be...difficult."

"What do you mean difficult?"

"They can be temperamental, to teach lessons for crossing them," he said.

"Great, so the Sidhe are moody and are teaching us a lesson by keeping us here." She strolled outside the circle toward the ocean.

"Stay inside the circle, Carolyn. I don't know when the ley lines will intersect again and we have to stay here or we may not get another chance."

The sun reflected on a few specks floating in the ocean. Carolyn studied them. At first she thought they were dolphins, but she didn't know if dolphins could be found in this area. The specks seemed to be moving toward the island. Then she saw splashing, from oars?

Boats.

Her chest tightened and she pointed, but couldn't suck in enough air to call Rory.

"Carolyn, please come back into the circle," he said. "Mother Mary..." He grabbed her arm and dragged her into the circle. "They be coming back."

"Boats, boats. Can't stay here," she mumbled as panic took over. "Rory, come on. In the cave, before they reach the shore!"

"No, we have to stay here." He gave each word heavy emphasis.

She yanked her arm from his grip. "Are you crazy? You saw what they did to those people. Let's go." She ran out of the circle toward the rocky cliffs.

He caught up, picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. She swore and struggled to make him let her go.

One boat had reached the shore. Several men with torches climbed out onto the beach.

"Rory, they're here."

"I know." He put her down onto her feet. "It's daylight, Carolyn. This be an island, with practically no trees...nothing but rocks and grass. They will find us."

He held her face between his hands and looked into her eyes. "We...can't...leave...the stones."

The note in his voice and the intensity in his cool blue eyes pushed aside any stubborn arguments. She nodded. He pulled her into his arms with a groan.

Over the sound of lapping waves, they heard oars banging against wooden boats.

Carolyn shook and held Rory tighter. Was this how it was going to end?

"Oh, King Nemed of the Sidhe, now would be a good time." He stroked her hair as angry voices rose up from the beach.

"There be two more," some man shouted. "Shall we set them to burn too?"

Rory shushed her when she tried to speak. He shook his head and smiled as if letting her know everything would be all right. She wasn't convinced.

"No, no," said a gray-haired man in monk's clothing. "Latharn does not want them burned. We be saving these two for a sacrifice at the abbey. Tie them to a stone for now."

A young monk with wide brown eyes who looked to be about fourteen years old watched in apparent horror as four other monks used ropes to tie Carolyn and Rory to one large megalith. Was the boy afraid of her and Rory or afraid of what they were going to do to them?

Her heart threatened to pound through her chest. She wanted to scream, to fight, to run, but she noticed that Rory wasn't fighting the men, so she didn't either. What chance did they have against ten men with clubs and swords?

"Bring the chains and drag the other stones into the sea," the older man ordered. "There'll be 'nar more devil worshiping going on here."

"Ow!" Carolyn jerked her hand when then monk tightened the cord. The monk ignored her.

The boy glanced over his shoulder at Carolyn. "What kind of sacrifice, Brother Orin?"

The old monk narrowed his eyes at Carolyn and Rory. "The merrow beast is destroying the newly built walls of the abbey, burying these two alive in the footers will banish the creature to the sea."

The boy's eyes widened, then nodded, stuffing his hands inside his robe.

These people were crazy. Carolyn twisted against her bindings until her wrists were raw. She glanced at Rory.

He was smiling. Did he go mad?

Carolyn swung her attention to the sound of clattering metal. The monks had dropped the chains attached to the stones and stared in astonishment.

Silver sparks like fireflies danced around Rory's head, swirled around her and Rory like a whirlwind. Then she heard a loud crack like a tree branch breaking in a storm as the ground beneath them dropped and they fell into darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

The scent of pine, damp bark and moss invaded her senses when she awoke. She opened her eyes and looked up through branches of massive trees and a night sky crowded with millions of twinkling stars. The tree trunk she lay next to was as wide as a truck and so were the surrounding ones. Giant redwoods? She froze, afraid to move, realizing she still wasn't back in the Appalachians.

Too drained or dazed to grasp her predicament, she closed her eyes. She didn't have the courage to look beyond this moment. Whether dream or reality, she decided not to think too hard, knowing she would panic. Her brain just couldn't process everything. Was she going out of her mind?

"Mmmm. That feels so nice, Carolyn. Touch me lower," Rory moaned in pleasure as his naked form curled against her length. She realized her hand was lazily stroking a man's chest—Rory's chest. His coarse hair tickled her palm.

Then she realized that she was naked too.

She sat up and covered her breasts and sex with her arms and hand. "We're naked." It was her body and Rory's body, not the bodies of Allin and Bree.

"Aye, lass. And you be touching me like that for a half-hour and nearly driving me mad."

"Where are our clothes?" She pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs.

Rory chuckled as he stretched his legs out and rested his arms behind his head. Carolyn felt a tug in her belly. His position showed off his chest and arm muscles. "Back at the Druids' Circle, I should think." He grinned.

"And why aren't we at the Druids' Circle?"

"I don't claim to know how the ley lines or the Sidhe work. Just what is. Make the best of it," he said softly.

She didn't dare look to see if he was aroused, although she expected he was. A shiver raced through her body and then lust and frustration mixed together until she was drowning in lust and ached to have him inside her.

Whether she was beginning to have feelings of love or pure lust for Rory, she didn't know and she didn't care. Making love might give her some sense of control in this crazy situation.

"I won't do anything you don't want me to," he said huskily and was as effective as an intimate caress. "Lie beside me. I've already seen you naked and you be so beautiful."

Sighing, she relaxed. At least they were safe for the moment. She breathed in the smell of cedar and earth and his musky scent. A cool breeze tossed a few strands of his hair over his face. His lips were slightly parted and she bent over and kissed him lightly, then she stretched out next to him.

"Ah, that's it." He drew her into his arms and stroked her hair.

For now, she was warm, safe and his body felt hard and hot. Desire surged in her chest and spread out and down toward her pussy. His forefinger played at her mouth. She parted her lips and licked his finger with the tip of her tongue.

Groaning, he braced himself up on one elbow, leaned over and took her mouth with his. His lips were hot and moist, his tongue forceful and urgent.

His sensual mouth and tongue blazed a seductive trail down her neck to her breasts. So good, so warm, so very good. That was all she would think about now. A heated rush of pure lust, a torturous need, grabbed hold and she rolled against him, arching her back, giving him better access to her breast.

He tugged on her sensitive peaks with his mouth, rubbing the tips with his tongue, making her pussy ache and throb.

"Yes," he murmured as his fingers also pinched her nipples, making them hard and even more sensitive.

"Ohhh. Nice dream," she whispered as his lips captured hers and he pulled her against hard, muscular nakedness.

His blue eyes stared at her with intensity and hunger, heat and need. Her heart tumbled in her chest.

"No dream, just us in between worlds." His hand slid down to her belly and stopped above her mound.

She raised her hips, urging him on. "Don't tease me. Feel me."

He laughed low in his throat. "Not yet." His fingers stroked her thighs, her triangle of hair, but didn't explore her lower. "I told you the Druids' Circle wasn't safe," he said.

"Yes, you did," she whispered. "I didn't listen."

"Ah, lass. I'm so glad you didn't. At least this time."

"I like to explore and this isn't, or the woods around the Druids' Circle isn't, your forest." She challenged him playfully.

"Oh, but it is my forest, love, until the Sidhe tell me otherwise."

She ignored that and decided to explore what lay beneath her hands. Finding the patch of hair on his chest, the muscles there and on his back, she drew him toward her, joining her mound with his hardened shaft. She groaned. How was this happening? It couldn't be real. "Rory. I want you. I want this."

"You're an evil one." His lips rubbed against her moist mouth, parting her lips with his tongue and thrusting inside. He then slipped his hand down between her legs to taunt her swollen bud. She writhed with his delicate teasing exploration. She throbbed and ached for more.

"Hmmm. Beautiful, lass." For a second, he touched her swollen bud, then returned to her thighs. She let out a small cry. The exquisite sensations made her hot and wet.

She had to feel him. She reached down between his legs and took him into her hand, stroking his thick shaft.

She heard the sharp intake of breath. He groaned and flung one leg between hers, straddling her thigh.

"I smell your desire, Carolyn. I want to bury myself inside you."

"I can't take much more." A jolt of sexual electricity ignited every nerve ending. Her inner muscles clenched, aching to be filled. And with the way she felt now, the slightest touch to her swollen center would send her over the edge.

Her gaze swung up to the treetops and another jolt of fear reminded her of their predicament. Were they trapped there? "Rory..."

"Shhh..." He crushed his mouth to hers. His hands roamed her hips, stomach and breasts.

Her fears dissolved as hot breath and warm, wet tongue teased around her nipple, then stiffened between the gentle tug of his teeth.

"I have to have you now," she demanded.

A low laugh escaped his lips while he teased her ear. "I can tell. Let me see how much." He slid his hand down between her thighs, used his fingers to separate her folds and slid a finger inside. "Ah, you're already slick."

She cried out and raised her hips. "Oh god, Rory."

"Yes, lass." The thumb rubbed her clit and she rocked to the rhythm. "I want to taste you."

He slid down her body. His mouth and tongue masterfully played with her most intimate places while his finger probed for her sensitive internal spot. Her body trembled and she gripped his shoulders. He raised his head a moment. Their eyes met. "You okay, love?"

"Yes, don't stop."



He smiled and continued with his mouth. She gazed at his long dark hair fallen over her stomach, his shoulders, then glanced up into the sky at the trees.

The trees were the size of skyscrapers, the air warm like in early spring and smelling like cedar. She tore her gaze away. *No, don't think.* She let go into the realm of pleasure.

Her eyes closed as her body plummeted over the edge as her orgasm coursed through her body and she cried out.

"Yes, lass, yes."

While her body still quaked, she gripped his shoulders and pulled him up to her. "Take me, now. Make love to me."

He knelt beside her, brushing his hair back, while one hand rested on her leg. He swore. "No, lass."

"What?" She sat up.

"We can't make love. The Sidhe are tempting me, trying to trick me. If we make love before the eve of Samhain, I can't break the curse. I want you, but I can't have you. Not yet."

She pushed him away and stood. "What kind of game—"

"No!" Rory shouted as he tried to grab her.

The ground vibrated, silvery sparks danced around them. Then the trees flipped upside down and faded into darkness.

## Chapter Five

“Rory?” She blinked several times. When her eyes finally focused she saw she was sitting against a stone megalith, her backpack at her side, wearing her clothes.

Jumping to her feet, she scanned the area. The Druids’ Circle. But Rory was nowhere around. Carnelian-tinged clouds in the western sky slowly faded into evening. What evening? How long had she been gone? There was no way this had all been a lucid dream.

When she realized she was still standing in the center of the stone circle, she snatched up her backpack and charged out of the border. She stopped several yards away.

A squirrel scampered through the grass and sat on his haunches in the center of the ruins, near where she had reappeared. Nothing happened to him. “Okay, am I losing my mind?” she said to the squirrel.

Power of suggestion? Did Rory hypnotize her last night? Puzzled, she shook her head and flopped down on the grass. *Think. What was the last thing I remember?*

Pulling up grass, first one blade at a time, then by the handfuls, she refused to move. She muttered a curse. She had to remember.

She studied the gray stones illuminated now by the moon. An evening mist had settled in layers along the ground and swirled around the circle. How had she managed to sleep the day away? Something wasn’t right and she was going to figure it out.

All she could remember were images and flashes of emotion—some frightening, some sensual. Some kind of ritual, people with robes, naked bodies and later screaming—violence. Later the images became very erotic.

Tall trees and Rory and she becoming very intimate. Nice dream, but too real to be a dream. Was it the stones like Rory said? Or did he have some hand in it?

She rummaged in her pack and got out water and a granola bar when the sound of crunching leaves made her stomach clench. Listening, heart pounding, she scanned the edge of the forest for the source of the noise.

The white buck appeared and moved into the circle. Not wanting to scare him, she remained still, watching. He bent down, nibbled at the dried grass, then lifted his head toward the moon.

The white deer vanished and Rory now stood in the same place. Carolyn leapt to her feet, her body shaking. "Oh my god," she gasped, her chest heaving, knees threatening to give way. She willed herself to step back.

Rory hurried toward her. "Easy, lass. I'm sorry I startled you." He reached out his hand and grasped hers, but she yanked it back.

"Don't be afraid, Carolyn. I have enough to bear without scaring you away." The moon reflected the pain in his eyes.

She started to back away. "Can't be... What I saw..." She ran from him toward her camp.

When she got to her camp she found her hammer and started pulling out tent stakes. She didn't care that it was dark, she had to get out of there.

Rory stood at the edge of her campsite, watching her scurry around. "What you saw is the Sidhe curse."

She noticed his slumped shoulders and bowed head, but she continued pulling stakes. "I know there are things in this world that can't be explained. I even saw a ghost once, but those dreams or whatever I had today and now this... I'm not even sure I can trust what I saw." She stared up at the sky, focusing on the silver glittering stars and the white misty light from the moon.

The night sky was something she could understand, something she knew was real. When she looked at Rory, he seemed real, but trying to grasp the image of him changing from a white deer into a man, that was too bizarre. She shivered.

Rory touched her arm gripping the hammer. "Stop, Carolyn."

She twisted out from under his hand, casting him a warning look, then picked up her cooler and strode to her car. Muttering a curse, she stowed the cooler by the trunk and stomped back to her tent to search for her keys.

"Isn't it a fine fresh night? A good time for a story, if you'd let me tell it," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him as she passed him, keys in hand, on her way to her car with her arms full.

"Please," he said, "don't you want to know what happened at the island and those people in the robes? Or are you angry about what happened at the redwood forest? I'm sorry, Carolyn, I overstepped my —"

"Those weren't dreams I had today." Panicked one minute and now stunned, Carolyn had stopped halfway between her car and tent, staring at him as she tried to process what she just heard. Her mouth went dry. He reached his hand out for her to sit on the log. "Sit a bit." He stacked logs in the hearth and soon a fire was snapping and crackling. The flickering flames cast surreal orange patterns on the canvas tent.

"Fine." She crossed her arms over her chest and didn't object when he retrieved a blanket from her tent. No way was she going to spend the rest of her life wondering what had happened to her.

Sitting beside her, he took her hand and rubbed it between his. The concern in his face pained her. Her heart leapt to her throat. Did he truly care about her or was she falling for the wrong guy again?

"I am bound to this predicament by me own error. The Druids settled in these mountains hundreds of years ago. They arranged the stone megaliths for the purpose of power and protection, then commanded the Sidhe to guard it."

Rory prodded the fire with a stick and threw on another log. His mouth pursed while he concentrated.

Remembering their intimate scene in the redwood forest and then the sight of the buck changing into him was driving her mad. She shuddered. "There has to be some logic in all this. There has to be some explanation," she said.

"Will ye not believe me?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't believe you."

"I can only tell you what I know." He pulled the blanket around her shoulders and his. "I left New York and settled in these mountains in 1687."

Carolyn's body went rigid. That was over three hundred years ago. A chill crept up her spine, making the hairs at the nape of her neck stand up.

"I farmed and traded furs. I was warned by the locals not to hunt in the area of the Druids' Circle, but I didn't listen. I stumbled upon the standing stones while hunting and I shot a deer there while it stood grazing within the circle. But then a strange thing happened. The Sidhe King appeared and held a bow with a silver arrow notched in its string. He spoke in a musical tone, 'Ye hath defied this sacred ground; the Sidhe curse ye shall suffer.' I laughed, thinking the cold had frozen my eyes and chilled my mind."

"You laughed?" Hysteria rose in her chest and she had to take several breaths to calm herself.

Rory nodded. "Then the Sidhe shot his arrow into me and I changed into the white buck. The Sidhe said, 'Ye are cursed, but ye will have the power to heal the creatures of this forest.' He said that the curse could only be broken during the second full moon in October on the eve of Samhain with a sacred offering."

He leaned back and gazed into her eyes.

She had seen him change. She couldn't deny that. "I believe you, Rory."

He let out a breath and smiled. "Thank you." His face moved close to hers and she felt his warm breath. His fingers slid along her jaw and his eyes became sultry. Tilting her chin up, he brushed his lips lightly over hers. At first she didn't protest and he took her mouth again, more deeply, their tongues gliding and exploring.

Her heart pounded fiercely when he drew her close, crushing her breasts against his hard chest. She clung to him, enjoying his powerful arms around her. She drank in his kisses that made her head spin and the stars blur. But the images of the white buck crowded in her mind and she pulled away. "I'm sorry, Rory. I can't."

"What's wrong?"

She sidestepped his question. "What does this have to do with what happened to me today?" she persisted.

Carolyn squirmed out of his embrace and gave him a dark, intense look that Rory suspected had nothing to do with sex. "The ley lines become more powerful whenever it's time to break the curse," he said. "By standing within the stone circle, you happened upon an intersection and were...moved to another place and another time."

"Twice."

"Yes." She had accepted his explanation, but appeared upset, scared—he wasn't sure. The Glamour was still an option. He could use it to ease her resistance.

He was relieved she hadn't asked how often he could perform the ritual. If he said only every eighty years, she might realize how desperate he was and know that he'd do almost anything to get her to help him.

"I don't remember much what happened after I felt dizzy and saw the sparks or fireflies—just a few details—some unpleasant, some very pleasant." She smiled. "But where did I go...and when?"

"I don't know for sure. I figured we were on an island by the boats. And the people sounded Celtic, so it probably was an island off the coast of Scotland or Ireland several hundred years ago, considering the burnings."

She shivered, then took a deep breath and held his gaze. "Yes, I remember that part now. But I made it back okay, so I wasn't really in any danger, was I?"

He hesitated. He would scare her away if he was honest. "The Sidhe protected us." This time, but there was no guarantee that they would do so again.

"I'm confused. I thought the Sidhe cursed you, why would they help you?"

"Tradition. And it's my duty to protect this area. It's now time for a ritual and with a worthy offering I can break the curse." He straddled the log, inching closer so his legs touched her body. When the stiffness relaxed in her shoulders from his Glamour, he lightly stroked her arm and then her back with his fingertips. She shivered. Yes, finally, she was again responding to him.

Softly, she said as her hand reached out and rested on his thigh, "I just don't know how to take all of this. How do you change form?"

"If I can capture a glimpse of the moon, I can change into a man for a time."

"Do you know who you are when you're the deer?"

He studied her face. Would he need to use more of his Glamour to avoid frightening her? "No, when I'm the deer, that's all I know. I'm aware of the Sidhe and that I'm a protector of the forest. As a man, I only have vague memories of the deer."

She nodded, looking a little sleepy from the push of Glamour. "How do you break the curse?"

He stared into the fire. Was this the time to ask her? "I've not had the opportunity before. I must make an offering during the second full moon of the month on the eve of Samhain—tomorrow."

"What kind of offering?"

"An offering of milk and curds within the stone circle."

"That sounds easy. Curds, you mean butter?"

He nodded. "The Sidhe are said to be descendants of the gods who control the ripening of crops and the yields of cattle. Milk and butter are offered to honor their efforts. But there be another offering." He hesitated again, fearing he'd lose her trust. "I

have to fall in love and pledge my life to a maiden in a dance of bliss—make love to her.”

Carolyn abruptly pulled away and nearly fell off the back of the log, but he caught her arm. She jumped up and shouted, “Oh, that’s slick. And I fell for it.” She perched her hands on her hips and stomped around the campfire. “That was certainly the most creative line I’ve ever heard. All just to get me into bed? Damn, I’m such a fool. I don’t know how you did the magician thing—it must be hypnosis—but it was a good trick.” She shook her head and glared at him. “You should leave.”

The anger in her eyes made his heart drop to his gut like lead. She thought this was all a wild story to get her to have sex. Her lips were pressed together, but he could see that they were quivering.

He looked up at the moon, then stood and walked up to her. If he failed to get her to share in his ritual, he would be cursed to be a beast by day and a man by moonlight for at least another eighty years. A little manipulation couldn’t hurt. He had to get her to help him.

“I regret upsetting you, Carolyn. I didn’t mean to. I won’t visit you here again.” But he would after she calmed down.

“Rory, wait.”

The depth of sorrow in her words stung deeply. He might have a willing partner. There was still time. One more day. Tomorrow he could get her to stand in the center of the circle with the offering...

Carolyn took a step closer and touched his chest. “Wait.” She swallowed, tears glistened in her eyes.

Then the forest darkened, the bluish glow from the moon streaming down through bare tree branches faded. Rory’s gaze shot up as a cloud drifted over the moon.

“No!” he shouted.

“What’s wrong?”



He glanced at her hand resting on his shoulder as his body became diaphanous, then changed into the white stag. Carolyn sucked in air, her knees gave way and she collapsed on the dewy earth.

## **Chapter Six**

The buck stared at the female human creature crumpled at his hoofs. Protect all creatures. That was his charge. He snorted and scraped the ground, she didn't move.

Dead? No, she was breathing.

He spotted the human shelter. The Sidhe King would want her safe. She was a special one. Using his mouth, the buck bit into her outer coverings and dragged her into the square, thin cave. He studied the female for several moments. What was he forgetting? He could see no injury, yet she did not stir. It was important that no harm come to this one, but he did not know why. He would guard her shelter until the Sidhe told him what to do. Moments later, the moon again shone through the trees. He changed form, becoming the man.

Rory stood in front of Carolyn's tent. He remembered dragging her inside as he heard her moaning. She was waking up. He glanced at the mostly cloudy sky. Knowing he could change back at any moment, he waved his hand to put her back to sleep. No point in having her faint again. He placed a blanket over her, collected her cooler, closed her tent and hammered her tent stakes back into place.

Yes, she would do well for the ritual. Only one more night and he'd be free of the curse. He knew that with all certainty. There were risks, but who could blame him? Three hundred and twenty years was more than any man should bear. He'd have to ask her to stand in the middle of the circle where the ley lines might send her off to who knew where. That would be the only dangerous time of the ritual. He tried not to think of that.

She'd be fine. After the ritual began, they'd be safe.

He shook his head. What kind of man would put a woman in danger? The curse was his own doing, his own fate. He didn't have the right to risk a woman's life, especially Carolyn's, to save his own neck. He felt every muscle in his body tense with guilt and shame. If he didn't he'd be trapped as a half man for how long—eternity?

Unable to control his fury and frustration, he roared like an injured bear as he stormed out of her campsite and tore into the forest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carolyn woke inside her tent, lying on her sleeping bag with a blanket tucked around her. Sunlight streamed into the small square windows, bringing reality back to the surreal situation of last night.

How did she get inside? With a start, she jumped to her feet, banging her head on the top of her tent.

Rory.

She had seen him change, felt him turn into a buck beneath her hand. A chill raced up her back and tingled along her scalp. My god, it couldn't be a trick, she was standing right next to him, touching him and she was sure she wasn't dreaming or hypnotized.

What had he endured for three hundred and twenty years under the curse? He was a strong man, yet vulnerable and sensitive. Stumbling out of the tent, she shielded her eyes from the glare of sun and glanced around looking for Rory—or the buck. Instead, the silent, empty forest surrounded her. Most of autumn's glory had fallen, leaving behind a tangle of gray, creaking branches, blanketing the ground with golden paths. But the beauty of the forest did nothing to comfort her.

For the last year, she had been running away from problems, avoiding relationships. In her marriage, she had avoided conflicts, expecting problems to disappear on their own. By steering clear of new relationships, she didn't have to risk the pain of loss or getting hurt again. But lost love was part of life. It was time she stopped running, time she took a risk again. How could she turn her back on Rory?

Her stomach fluttered. She ached to see him again.

Despite all the craziness, she knew without any doubts that she was falling in love. The realization curved her lips, but also worried her. She had to help him break this curse. She wasn't going to run away from a problem, especially one that she could fix.

She had to tell him that she would help him with the ritual and before this evening—Samhain's blue moon—or he wouldn't have a chance to break the curse.

She searched unsuccessfully for Rory's cabin until noon and again came across the remains of the old stone foundation. She never found the new cabin she had seen on the first night she'd arrived.

Did Rory's cabin appear and disappear as he changed form? She decided she would wait for him by the Druids' Circle with the offering—a stick of butter and a cup of milk. Before leaving her campsite, she left him a note on her tent. Intending to spend all night at the circle if she had to, she also brought a blanket and a sleeping bag with her offering and placed everything outside the megaliths.

As long as she didn't enter the stone circle she'd be safe. No need to risk falling into another portal until she found him.

Pacing around the field, she shouted for him, her hands clenched at her sides. Where was he? What time did he need to start the ritual?

The sun drifted toward the western horizon, soon darkness would claim the woods and meadow. The moon hadn't risen yet, so Rory had to be a deer. Would he recognize her in his animal form?

Panic rose in her throat. Would he know she was willing to help? She glanced at the ominous gray stones. Long shadows stretched from each megalith in the low-hanging sun. She cautiously approached the stones, but didn't dare enter the circle, not until Rory arrived. Another trip to that ancient Celtic island was not in her plans.

The ley lines. She remembered the fireflies just before she and Rory left the island and then the sensation of falling, but that was all.

A movement caught her attention and she watched a squirrel scurry across her path, climb up on one of the stones and leap off into the center of the Druids' Circle.

Nothing happened. The squirrel sniffed along the ground, sat up on its haunches, then playfully pounced on a moth that had landed next to it. Finally, the squirrel ran off into the woods.

A moment later, several black birds landed and pecked at the ground. Maybe the ley lines moved or the intersections separated. The animals didn't seem bothered.

Carolyn picked up a dried tree branch and cautiously approached one standing stone, again tapping the ground with her stick. No funny vibrations, no change in the air, no fireflies. Something with the kind of power Rory described would have to give off some kind of vibration or force like magnets.

She felt nothing.

She studied the largest of the stones suspiciously, the one opposite the trilithon where she had seemed to disappear yesterday. Holding her palm a few inches away from the surface, she waited for an electric shock or a buzzing sound.

Silence.

She tapped it with the stick, scraped it. A tiny chickadee landed on the top of the twelve-foot stone, looked at her and flew away. Carolyn chuckled. *She's afraid of a rock and the little bird is afraid of her. Who looks more stupid?*

She stuck her hand out and touched the stone.

It felt rough, like a rock. *Well, what did you expect, genius?* Still, she wasn't confident enough to enter the circle.

A breeze stirred the trees and she caught the scent of pine. The sun had disappeared behind the layered mountain range and no longer warmed her bare arms. She was about to pull out her sweatshirt when she glanced toward the cluster of pine

trees and saw him. The white buck stood, statuelike, at the edge of the meadow, staring at her.

The deer was probably wondering what she was doing. "Hello, Rory, I've been waiting for you," she said to the deer. "I'm doing this ritual with you. I'll just sit here until it's time."

He tossed his head and scraped the ground with his hoof as if disapproving.

"Easy, easy, Rory," she said softly, "the moon should rise soon."

The deer lowered his head and turned to walk into the forest. "No. Come back," she shouted.

He glanced at her for a moment, then headed back into the forest.

"No! I'm going into the circle!" she warned as she turned and marched into the center of the stone ruins, careful to avoid the place where she had first disappeared.

She heard the sound of hoofs racing across the meadow. The buck was running across the field.

When she spun around to face the deer, her vision blurred and sparks filled the air between her and the stones. "No, not the fireflies again." She struggled to run out of the circle, as the trapdoor opened beneath her and a scream was sucked out of her lungs.

Moments later, she opened her eyes, facedown, mouth full of sand. She spat several times to get rid of the grit. Her pulse raced, her breath still gasping. "Oh god, oh god, oh god. Not again."

At first she thought she was back at the same Celtic island.

Not making any unnecessary movements, she lifted her head and looked around. Not the same place. A beach, a tropical beach by the looks of the palm trees and fruit trees and plants. Calm aqua blue waves stroked the warm shoreline and tickled her bare toes. She breathed in the salty sea scent. Rather beautiful, she thought, compared to the stormy cliff and the men who wanted to burn her and Rory alive.

What ocean? What island? She looked up at the sky and her mind whirled. Nausea threatened to make her ill.

A luminous bluish-purple sky was dotted with brilliant stars and two giant orange globes that looked like moons or planets, each ten times the size of Earth's moon. Although it was daylight and perfectly clear, she didn't see a sun. How could that be?

Not Earth.

She started breathing in and out, panting until her hands tingled and her chest tightened.

*Stop it! Breathe slowly. In. Out. Hyperventilating. You'll pass out if you don't stop.* Hand on her chest, she tried to force herself to slow her breathing, then cupped her hands and breathed into them. Inhaling her own carbon dioxide finally calmed her a bit.

Her head ached. Her body felt cemented to the ground. A shuddering coursed through her body and traveled deep into her bones as her mind spun to land on a plan of action, but found none. This was beyond common sense, beyond the levelheaded thinking of even her, as a scientist.

She was alone, thankfully. Sitting up, she noticed she didn't have her backpack. Great. No water or food.

Dragging herself to her feet, she noticed she wasn't wearing her jeans and tee shirt, she was wearing a silky green tunic that came to her knees. Odd material. It was soft and clung perfectly to her curves, but there were no seams that she could see.

And again, not her body. This body had much longer legs and larger breasts. Carolyn kept brushing something tickling her arms until she realized it was her hair—long and blonde. Carolyn's thoughts dropped into another woman's body. She didn't understand the warped laws of physics that retained her physical form someplace in between worlds and at the same time kept this person's mind in between too.

Voices. Shrill voices, screaming or laughing, she wasn't sure. She froze, her gaze swept the beach, her breath rushing in and out. Where was she—when was she—and who lived there?

Then a young boy about four years old, wearing a yellow jumpsuit, scrambled over the dunes and ran to the water a hundred yards down the beach. A woman wearing a green tunic ran behind him, scolding the boy, and scooped him up before he reached the water.

With the boy in her arms, the woman turned and looked down the beach in Carolyn's direction. Stunned, Carolyn fought back panic while her whole body shook.

The woman waved.

Shakily, Carolyn waved back. Thank god. The woman and the boy walked up the beach and were soon out of sight. Now what?

Carolyn strode up and down the beach, contemplating her next move, trying to decide if she should go after the woman. How would she explain who she was without scaring the woman or making her think she was crazy?

Carolyn sat on the beach again. She'd have to do something, hunger and need of shelter would force her into action. She looked up at the sky and gasped. "Oh my god. Don't look at the sky. What planet is this?"

"Carolyn!" a man's voice shouted.

Carolyn's heart leapt to her throat. Running across the beach was a tall-lean man with blond hair wearing a red jumper-thing. She got to her feet and was about to run, when she realized only Rory would know her name – she hoped.

"Rory?"

He nodded.

She ran into his arms. "The ley lines shifted to the center of the circle; they're not at the stone opposite the trilithon anymore."

"They'll remain unstable until Samhain." He gripped her arms a little too tightly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, but the ritual. It's tonight. We have to get back or it'll be too late."

Rory shook his head. "We can't get back."



"What do you mean we can't get back? You got us back the last time." She was shouting at him on the verge of panic.

"I asked the Sidhe to send me to you the first time. This time I don't know how I got here. The Sidhe must have sent me. I don't remember."

"Right. You were the deer. You wouldn't remember. I heard the deer follow me. The Sidhe must know we're here."

"The Sidhe are tricksters. They may not let us come back or they may have decided three-hundred-plus years is not long enough retribution. They could also be testing me."

"A test? What kind of test?" she asked, impatient with his apparent amused appraisal of her body. She glared at him. "What? I know I look different. You have a thing for blondes or something?"

"Ah, no, lass. I prefer your other form. It be a change is all." He smiled.

"Why would the Sidhe test you?"

He shrugged. "To see if I be worthy, ready to be released of the curse."

"So when will you find out? I really don't want to stay here any longer than necessary."

"I'm sure I don't know. I've sent thoughts out to them, but they've not responded. And I don't feel my Glamour. We must be very far away." He gave her a sorrowful look.

"Glamour?" she asked hopefully.

"My power. It allows me to communicate with the Sidhe and has other advantages."

"So we're stuck here?" Her voice became shrill. She couldn't comprehend being forever marooned. The thought left a hollowness the size of a vast crevasse inside her. She could see the devastation in his eyes. They were both trapped. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly to calm herself.

She didn't believe it. There had to be a way. Reaching up, she touched his cheek, then kissed him lightly. "If we do get back in time, I'll do the ritual. I can't bear to see you suffer with this curse any longer."

"No. Don't you understand? We be on our own. I don't know if the Sidhe will bring us back at all."

Her gaze darted around the scenery, looking for a solution, like a trapped animal trying to find a way out of a cage. "But there must be a way."

He shook his head.

She dropped to the sand, pulling her knees to her chest and bit her lower lip. "Any idea where we are?" She forced her words to be steady and tried to sound hopeful.

"None." He sat beside her.

"At least this looks like a nice place."

"You aren't suggesting we try to make this home?" He frowned, shaking his head.

"And what choice do we have?" She tried to keep her voice from going shrill again.

He muttered something that sounded like a curse in a language she didn't understand.

She ignored him and tried another approach. "Look at that sky. Isn't it amazing? It might not be a bad thing. Maybe here you'll be free of the curse. It's daytime and you're human."

He looked up and shook his head. "Because I'm out of the realm of the Sidhe control. You don't know what kind of danger we could be in here." His mouth tightened as he looked around. "With the curse, we were safe. I had some powers."

"What powers?"

He didn't meet her eyes. "Healing, heightened senses, power of persuasion, strength..."

"Oh." By the seriousness of his expression and the otherworldly predicament they were in, she was ready to believe most anything. "Benefits of the curse?"

He nodded.

She swallowed and took a long breath before speaking again. "I guess we're on our own, unless the Sidhe tries to find you and brings us back or the ley lines shift and launch us someplace else. Anyway, by the time we get back..."

"I wish you had heeded my warning." He stood up and strode down the beach.

She stared at him. Bastard. He wasn't going to blame her. She ran up next to him and grabbed his arm. "Wait. Don't blame me. I was waiting at the circle to help you do the ritual. How was I to know the ley lines would shift?"

He raised his hand. "It's all right, lass. Don't blame yourself. Just leave me be now."

She shook her head. Give up just like that? What was wrong with him? "No. If the Sidhe are so powerful, why can't they find you?"

"I don't know the extent of their powers. I don't sense them here."

She moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder. "Well, if we make it back, we can do the ritual next year."

"No, lass," he said softly. "There has to be a blue moon on the eve of Samhain."

"And how often does that happen?"

"Once every eighty years."

## **Chapter Seven**

The blank look on Carolyn's face made Rory wonder if she had heard him or understood what he'd said. But then she finally whispered, "Oh god, I'm sorry, Rory."

He rubbed his face with his hand, feeling even more of a monster after what he almost did to her. She moved her hand to his cheek but he brushed it away.

"What is it?" she asked, hurt shone deep in her eyes.

"Carolyn, I told you I had the power to manipulate. My Glamour. I had planned all along to have you participate in my ritual whether by your choice or not. I was that desperate."

"You mean you would've raped me?"

"No, of course not. But my Glamour could have broken down your resistance if —"

She shoved him away and glared at him. "I can't believe you. I thought I knew you. I'm such a fool."

What the hell was wrong with him? Not only had he ruined his first chance in over three hundred years to break the curse, but he had destroyed the trust in this woman, someone who he just might be falling in love with. He reached for her hand. "I'm sorry, Carolyn."

She jerked away.

He raised his hands in surrender and took a step back.

"A little late for sorry," she snapped.

Could he blame her for being angry? Their situation was his fault, he wasn't sure if he could fix it and fixing their relationship seemed just as hopeless.

He was a little late for so many things. "I know everything looks bad." He took a step closer to her.

"Don't." She shook her head, then spun around and ran away from the beach toward the sand dunes.

He kicked sand. Where was she going? Neither of them knew where they were. In a few minutes, she'd realize this and turn around. Rory waited. But she didn't stop. Stubborn woman.

Carolyn continued over the dunes and disappeared. "Shit." Rory charged after her. "Carolyn, wait. I know you be angry, but this not be the place for either of us to explore alone."

She shot him a hard look and kept walking.

Keeping pace with her, he said, "Sorry, lass. I got you in this mess. There should have been some way to warn you...to make you believe from the beginning..." She wouldn't slow down or look at him. "I wouldn't ask you to do the ritual now, even if we got back in time, it's too dangerous. That's why you saw the albino buck walk back into the forest."

Now she stopped and looked at him, her eyes narrowed. "Yeah, right. You say that now. Maybe the buck left because it wasn't the right time."

Too late, she would never believe him. "I tried to stop you."

She nodded, her lips pressed firm. "Of course, because you didn't want to lose your female sacrifice. Not many women camping this time of year."

He threw up his hands in frustration. It's over, whatever he had with her was lost. "I understand if you can't believe me or forgive me. But we need to stay together in case I hear from the Sidhe. We might still have a chance to get back. If not, we'll have to consider surviving here."

She glared at him. "If you expect me to forget what you almost did and play some romantic survivor game, forget it."

"What?" He needed to make peace with her, since their lives probably depended on it.

"Never mind. Okay, so we'll stay close, but I'm going to check this place out." She stomped off toward a distant orchard, not waiting for him to follow.

She was a brave lass—stubborn, but brave. "Sure to be a fine place," he said with enthusiasm.

She kept walking.

Still angry and rightly so. He groaned as he picked up his pace to catch her. After they had climbed over another hill the terrain changed into rolling hills of fruit trees and gardens.

"Efficient use of space. We won't starve." Rory's gaze rose to the tops of hundreds of spiral poles at least twenty feet tall. Plants grew along the spirals bearing a variety of vegetables or fruits. Some were as small as berries, other as large as melons or shaped like squash. At the base, a delicate netting caught fallen pieces of the harvest so nothing was bruised.

"Before we have lunch, want to check out those buildings?" She pointed toward a cluster of one-story brick structures at the edge of the orchard. "There should be people there."

"Before we go walking up to someone, I'd like to watch them for a while first."

She laughed. "Just like a man to be pessimistic. I saw a woman and a small boy earlier and they waved to me. I think they're friendly."

Rory sighed, she was strong-willed, smart, yet naïve too. He had to admire her though, considering their quandary. "Still, we should watch for a while before—"

"You two shouldn't be here," a man's voice said.

Carolyn cried out and fell against Rory as she jumped back. Rory grabbed her shoulders and held her close.

He could take the bloke. The man was only as tall as Rory's chin and looked to be about mid-twenties or early thirties. He was muscular but not more than Rory could

handle. The man wasn't a vagabond. He had clean short dark hair and wore green work clothes. "Hello, sir, we be new here and I'm afraid we're lost."

The man laughed. "New? Lost? Lost your mind, you mean. Come. Take you back I will before there is punishment."

Rory put out his hand. "I'm Rory, pleased to meet you. And this is Carolyn." Carolyn nodded and smiled.

The man eyed Rory's hand suspiciously, then laughed. "I get it, like new?"

"Excuse me?" Rory looked at Carolyn.

"What's your name, sir? My name is Carolyn and his is Rory." Carolyn hoped this made things clearer.

The man was not smiling anymore. "I do not know name, Carolyn or Rory. I do know that red and green should not be together and you should know that too. Come."

The man grabbed both of their upper arms and began to drag them toward the cluster of buildings.

"I don't think so. Let go!" Rory pulled out of his grip.

"Hybrid alert," the man shouted.

Several men dressed in work clothes of various colors came running from all directions within the orchard and yanked Rory and Carolyn apart.

"Rory!" she shouted and heard him call her name as he fought with the men who dragged him into another building. She was brought down a gravel path to the entrance of another small structure, like a ranch house and similar to the one where they took Rory.

The door opened and women wearing green tunics like hers drew her inside. Would they put her in a jail? What would she do then?

Inside the building, the room looked more like a sterile and efficient living room, not a jail. Couches and chairs made from similar fabric as her tunic and a few tables

were the only furnishings in the room. No paintings or rugs, but the oddest thing of all, no ceiling. Four walls, but no roof. She could see the surreal sky. What did they do when it rained? Maybe a roof slid into place.

The woman led her to another room filled with ten beds, more like cots, neat and dormitory-like five on each wall. Again, no decorations or personal items. "Rest, if you are tired." The woman stroked Carolyn's hair. "I will return later."

Carolyn didn't argue. What good would it do if she did? Once she figured what this place was about, she could go and find Rory. They would leave and find another town until they figured how to get back to the Druid Stones. She could put her anger and hurt aside for now.

The woman smiled and nodded, then left, closing the door. She heard a click. Carolyn checked the door and sure enough it was locked, some kind of electronic seal.

She flopped down on the first bed next to the door and looked up at the open ceiling—too high to climb over. Even if she did, where would she run? Great going, she thought miserably.

An hour later, the woman knocked at the door. "Hello, Nia? It's Keeli, are you rested?"

*Nia? Does she mean me?* Carolyn wondered, sitting on one of the beds. Since she was the only person in the room, she answered. "Yes."

The woman entered, wearing a green tunic. Her blonde, straight hair was tied in a long ponytail and hung in front. Teal green eyes shone with concern as she sat next to Carolyn on the bed.

"It was not your time to work in the garden," the woman said softly. "Why were you with a red male? A mate has not been arranged for you yet and only a green male would be appropriate. Don't you care for the survival of the colony?" The woman patted Carolyn's leg.

"I'm sorry, it was by accident."



The woman frowned, then smiled. "Oh, I see. The red male was there to fix something? The irrigation perhaps?"

Carolyn didn't say anything, just looked at the woman.

"That explains it," the woman continued, appearing relieved. "After your mating, you won't have to worry about punishment if you are seen with the wrong color. One mating and your duty will be done."

"Mating is done only once?" Carolyn asked.

"Rarely twice, as calculated to maintain the optimal number in the colony."

She dared to ask the next question, hoping not to alarm the woman. "I can only mate with a green male?"

The woman rolled her eyes and laughed. "As a gardener, yes. We do not understand all the details. I learned some from Arol, a yellow woman who works in the genetics lab. Your color was typed when you were born. To mate another would risk the genetic foundation."

Carolyn looked up at the open ceiling and asked, "What do you do when it rains?"

The woman shook her head, her forehead creased in a frown. "My, you are not yourself today. It doesn't rain on Merra."

Too many questions. She was making this woman nervous, Carolyn decided. Her thoughts were spinning. Apparently Keeli knew what rain was. Carolyn rubbed her temples with her fingers.

"Are you in pain?"

"Just a headache," Carolyn said. Traveling by ley lines was murder.

The woman frowned. "You should eat, come." She took Carolyn's hand and led her outside. Tables were set in a garden like a picnic with a buffet table set up with vegetable stews and fresh fruits in creamy sauces.

Her stomach growled. She filled her plate, then sat at a table next to Keeli and the other women in green tunics.

Glancing around, she observed that the men and women were separated and sat at tables according to the color clothing they wore.

The only mixing of colors were tables with children and a couple of women who sat caring for them. It didn't look like there were any families or couples in this village or colony.

People didn't marry? Not that she had to worry about that with Rory now, after seeing his true side. Still, the idea of not having a mate disturbed her. She wondered if other towns on this planet were the same.

Carolyn searched the other tables for Rory, but didn't see him. Her heart clenched. She hoped to see him, a familiar face, even though she was still angry.

Placed in a desperate situation for such a long time, could she blame him for what he tried to do? Her predicament was desperate and she'd been lying since the moment she met these people.

She was getting worried. Where was he? Was he being punished like that man in the garden said, locked up somewhere? Her chest tightened with panic. What could she do? She had no idea where he was or what she could do to help him.

Keeli nudged her. "You're not eating."

Carolyn smiled and took a spoonful of the stew. It was quite good, lightly seasoned with fresh herbs. While she ate, she noticed the other women watching her suspiciously. Had the news spread about her being found in the garden with a red male? Horrors.

She smiled at them and they gave her slow smiles in return. Soon they would forget, Carolyn thought, and in time she would fit in or leave and find another place.

While she ate, she glanced at the other brick buildings, around the gardens. Some looked like the dormitory structures, others were much larger and she wondered what they were used for.

Feeling a little more at ease, Carolyn turned to Keeli and asked, "Are there other villages like this place nearby?"

"What?" Keeli's eyes widened.

Carolyn held her breath for a moment. "Colonies. Are there other colonies nearby? Or maybe across the ocean?"

As a few of the women got up and headed toward the green dormitory, they looked at Carolyn oddly.

Keeli stared, her face looked sad.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something I shouldn't have? I didn't mean to offend anyone."

Keeli shook her head and, Carolyn thought she would cry. "You're damaged. You'll have to be examined before you'll be able to mate."

What had she said?

"Don't worry," Keeli continued soothingly.

Something told Carolyn she should do just that. From a large pyramid-shaped building, a door opened and Rory stepped out with several men in red jumpsuits. They walked to the food tables.

"Finished?" The woman touched Carolyn's arm.

"I'd like to have a bit more if I may."

The woman smiled and nodded. "I will sit with you and wait."

*Great, I'm not to be trusted.* She went to the food table, letting Rory casually pass her.

"We need to leave." He picked up some berries, popping a few in his mouth, looking calm, but his eyes shone with concern.

"How? And why?" She stirred a few dishes, acting like she couldn't decide what she wanted.

"The mind link with the Sidhe is very faint. It scares me to think how far away we be. The ley lines will intersect again in about eighteen hours. When one moon slips below the horizon."

"I know the name of this planet. The woman named Keeli called it Merra. Just think, a planet with two moons."

"Three moons. The third one is not visible now. And this isn't a planet. The Sidhe says it's a huge vessel like a sailing ship in space."

"Ship?" Carolyn almost screeched. No wonder those women looked at her strangely. Her interest in science bubbled excitedly inside her. The ship must be in orbit around a planet. Could these people be from that planet? Or maybe one of those moons is the planet. She glanced up at the sky and smiled. Her stomach did a twirl. Too cool.

Then the full reality of drifting in space somewhere unknown slammed into her, every muscle went rigid and a wave of nausea hit her. She looked at Rory, trying to hide the terror she felt. "This is a spaceship," she whispered.

He looked at her like she had three heads. "I be from the 1600s, lass. I only know what the Sidhe told me."

She chuckled dryly. "Sorry and I'm only a gardener, what do I know?"

He blinked at her with a mouthful of orange fruit.

"We leave eighteen hours from now? Where should I meet you?"

"Get yourself down to the beach, at the place where you first arrived, as soon as one moon begins to dip below the horizon. The moment it's gone from this...sky, the ley lines should intersect again. We won't be having much time."

"I'm sure I'll find some way to get away," Carolyn whispered. She noticed Keeli get up from the table and strode over toward her. The woman's face was lined with worry, apparently because Carolyn was spending too much time around a red male.

Rory must have seen Keeli too, because he turned away from Carolyn, but spoke quickly. "Carolyn, you have to be there. The Sidhe sent me urgent images. Not only is this our only chance to get back, but this ship will be affected by other vortices intersecting vital areas of the ship at the same time. The ship will be destroyed by these natural energy forces."

Keeli grabbed Carolyn's hand. "Nia," she scolded, "you must not speak with a red male, until after your mating. A mate has been selected for you, but you'll have to

remain in our residence until your time." The woman was smiling, but Carolyn was beginning to panic.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Carolyn rose from a period of rest with the other nine women in the dormitory house. She washed in the house's community shower, ate at the community meal and was directed to the garden to work.

In the garden, she climbed tall ladders and picked vegetables and fruit along the spiral poles and placed them in a basket as she repeatedly watched as one of the moons slowly drifted toward the ocean horizon.

She hadn't seen Rory since the last meal and hoped she wouldn't wait on the beach alone, or worse, travel through the portal without him.

About a dozen men and women were working the fields. What would they do when she started walking toward the beach? Beyond her work area, she noticed tall, dense orchards. If she had to make a run for it, the orchard would make good cover.

When the moon neared the horizon, she inched her way to the edge of the row she was assigned and several heads popped up.

"Where are you going?" one woman asked.

"I'll be back in a moment. Need a break," Carolyn said, smiling.

"You can't," another said.

"Stop," someone shouted as a few dropped their baskets and approached her.

Carolyn sprinted toward the orchard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the pyramid building, the other men in red clothing handed him a list to check. He was supposed to inspect mechanical things to ensure their proper workings and then mark off the list. He marked the list, but hadn't known if the darn things were indeed working or not.

Glancing out a window, he saw the moon had drifted low in the sky. It was time. He needed to slip out.

He told the other man he had to relieve himself. Before he left, he wrote a note on his maintenance list and wrote another note and placed it in his pocket, then marched out the door. In no time, he made it to the beach. The moon was almost below the horizon.

He searched up and down the beach. Carolyn was not there. "Damn." He kicked at the sand.

Standing on top of the dunes, he scanned the fields. No Carolyn. If he left to find her, he might miss the portal opening.

An explosion shook the ground. He stumbled to remain upright. The Sidhe's predictions were correct. The ley lines would destroy the ship unless the people moved the ship out of orbit.

A plume of smoke coiled above the buildings in the village. Rory scanned the sky over the sea, the moon was out of sight. The ley lines were crossing.

He walked along the beach. She was not going to make it. A whirlwind of fireflies spun in a circle at the edge of the water. *Carolyn, I'm sorry, we're out of time, lass.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Locked in the dormitory, Carolyn could see the darkening sky, telling her the moon was swiftly descending below the horizon, if it wasn't gone already. Had Rory made it? Had he left without her? Probably. A desperate, selfish man would. If he'd use his Glamour to force her into a ritual, he'd leave without her. Could she believe that he had a change of heart and he wouldn't risk her life to break the curse?

An explosion rattled the walls of the dormitory. Outside shouts and screams raced away from her. Where was everyone going? Did they forget she was locked in?

Her whole body was stiff with tension. She had to get out of there. She yanked on the door handle again—it didn't budge. Earlier, she'd searched the room for something

to use to pry it open, but found nothing. Flopping on her back on the bed, she'd wanted to cry but was too angry for getting caught.

She focused at the surreal sky, then an idea hit her. The beds. Another distant explosion rolled through the building like an earthquake. She jumped to her feet. Got to get out of here.

Dragging the mattresses off several beds, she stacked the lightweight frames on top of each other, then piled the mattresses on top of the frames. Huffing and puffing, she climbed up her tower and pulled herself up the wall.

A hand grabbed her. She screamed.

"Carolyn, hush, lass."

"Rory, thank god." Her legs bicycled as he helped pull her over the wall and down the ladder he had on the other side.

"Hurry, not through the garden. Someone will see us. This way." Rory led her through a tree-lined field away from the garden.

"But this is the long way and the moon is gone," Carolyn pointed out.

"If we go through the garden, we'll be locked up. Just run."

They reached the beach long after the moon disappeared. The day turned to twilight and the sea changed from an aqua blue to a deep blue-green. In the distance, she heard more explosions and shouts.

"We're too late? Did we miss the portal?" Carolyn asked as Rory gripped her hand and dragged her along the water's edge.

"We might have. I saw the sparks over here fifteen minutes ago, but they're gone now." He walked up and down the beach holding onto her hand.

They stopped. She couldn't catch her breath. She dug fingers into the stitch in her side. Droplets of sweat trickled down her face. Explosions in the distance echoed over the dunes. She cringed. "You were here when the fireflies started and you came back for me? Why didn't you go through the portal? You could've made it."

He sighed and took her into his arms. "Oh, lass, I'm so sorry I got you involved in this."

"The ship is going to blow up now, isn't it?" Her vision was blurred through tears.

He nodded.

She held him close, anticipating an explosion and then oblivion when several yards down the beach the fireflies swirled in a cloud of sand.

"Rory." She pointed.

He jumped back, then gripped her arm. "Run, lass, run!"



## **Chapter Eight**

Somersaulting though nothingness, she landed on very hard ground. Carolyn tumbled and rolled over grass and bounced against one of the megaliths with her legs up over her head. She scrambled to her feet, scanning the field first to see where she was – the Druids' Circle – then she looked for Rory.

He was nowhere to be seen and it was late afternoon. What afternoon? Was it after Samhain?

"Rory. Rory," she called as she roamed around the meadow, staying far away from the ruins. She walked the periphery of the forest, peering in, searching for the white buck.

He had come back for her when she was locked in the women's house. He'd risked missing the portal, missing his chance at getting back safely. He really did care for her and not just for her part in his ritual. Could she blame his desperation? Trapped on this mountain for over three hundred years, she'd do the same.

She loved him, she couldn't deny it and she'd wait. She'd remain at the Druids' Circle all night if she had to. Rory did make it through the portal. He had to. They were holding on to each other when she first felt the motion. She didn't want to think of the alternative.

Cautiously, she approached her sleeping bag, blanket, backpack and ritual offerings of butter and milk and dragged everything into the center of the stone circle, then sat on the bunched-up sleeping bag. Ley lines or not, she wasn't moving.

Twilight eased into the valley when she heard a noise at the edge of the forest. The white stag crept onto the field and slowly stepped inside the circle. "Rory," she whispered. He stopped at the opposite end of the ruins. She didn't move, afraid he'd run away.

The deer lifted his head, apparently searching the sky. Waiting. The moon hadn't risen yet. Could they have returned on the same day, at the same time?

The snap of a twig startled the white buck. A whistling sound pierced through the trees and a sickening thud followed. Carolyn was horrified as the white buck collapsed on the ground, a yellow arrow impaled his side.

"I got him. Clean shot." The hunter she had seen days ago ran up to the buck with another arrow notched in his bow.

"Stop. Don't touch him." She ran over to the white deer and dropped to the ground, stroking the buck's neck.

"Come on lady, he's dead." The hunter kicked the buck's hind legs, then put down his bow and arrow.

"Murderer. Evil, heartless murderer." The tears streamed down her face and each breath fought through her heaving sobs.

"Leave him be, lady, it's too late—"

The buck moved. He slowly lifted his head, gripped the arrow with his mouth, wrenched the shaft out and dropped it on the ground.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," the hunter whispered.

The full moon hauntingly appeared between the trees and a white haze glowed within the stone circle. The buck became transparent and as the image of the deer faded, Rory appeared.

The hunter, his bow and arrows forgotten, stumbled backward and disappeared into the forest.

"Don't weep, lass. I've wept enough tears to fill the oceans." Rory stood and took Carolyn into his arms.

"But you were shot." She patted his side.

"I told you, this is sacred ground, no creature can be harmed here." He tilted his head, captured her mouth and kissed her fiercely. He pulled away and cupped her face

in his hands. His blue eyes reflected the milky orb of the moon. "Carolyn, can you forgive me for misleading you earlier? I had planned to trick you."

"But you didn't. And I can forgive you. I understand your desperation. Let me help you break the curse. We aren't too late, are we?" She moved into his embrace.

"No, we aren't too late. And it be my promise that I use no Glamour to force you to do this. Though you be a strong-willed one and resisted my power from the start." He smiled playfully.

"I trust you and I've come prepared. Don't go anywhere."

He laughed as she led him across the field to the sleeping bag and offerings within the center of the stone circle, all the time not taking her eyes off him.

He hesitated, then grinned, a wonderful crooked grin and studied her for a moment. "You sure, lass?"

"Never in my life have I wanted another man more."

"Oh, be sure, I have no will to refuse you." His smile faded, his eyes were heavy-lidded as he gazed into hers.

She raked her fingers through his long hair, then ran her thumb over his full lips. Taking her hand, he licked her finger then traced hot, wet circles with the tip of his tongue in the center of her palm. Her body vibrated with erotic sensations that shot to her pussy.

She gripped his shoulder and opened her mouth slightly, begging for his lips, his tongue to take possession of her mouth. Instead, he continued to playfully tease her palm, the inside of her wrist, then moved tortuously slowly to the crease of her elbow, her shoulder. She gasped as he licked her neck. She curved her hand around the back of his neck, then pulled him up to kiss him. He took her hard, opening his mouth and offering his tongue, searching and probing. Carolyn moaned beneath his lips.

He kissed her harder and deeper until she was breathless and had to pull away slightly to gasp for air. "Do we have everything we need for the ritual?" she asked against his lips.

"Yes, love." He grasped her breasts, rubbing her nipples through her shirt with his thumbs and kissed her neck.

"Are we standing in the right place?" she asked as she stroked his back.

"Oh, to be sure," he mumbled.

"What if we've forgotten something? It must be right. Or you could wake up tomorrow and...nothing would be changed."

He stopped kissing her, stopped fondling her breasts and looked intently into her eyes. "What's this all about, Carolyn? What are you trying to tell me?"

She faltered, finding it difficult to meet his gaze.

"No, don't look away from me. Get yourself together, lass, and tell me straight away." He turned her chin with his finger to face him.

She sighed in resignation. "For the ritual to work, do we need to be in love with each other?"

A grin twitched as the corners of his mouth. "Ah, I see." He stepped away from her, crossing his arms and looking up at the moon. Like an intruding beacon, the moon shone from the highest point in the sky, casting no shadows from the stones. "I understand. You not be in love with me then?"

She groaned. "That's not true, I do love you."

He chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Why was he making a joke of this?

"Of course I love you, Carolyn. I was willing to give up the chance of becoming a man because I feared putting you at risk." He roughly pulled her into his arms again. "Yes, Carolyn, I do love ya, lass. Now, any more questions you be having or can I show you how much?" he said huskily.

Her heart swelled with emotion. The knot of tension twisting in her shoulders finally relaxed. She smiled, shook her head and with shaky hands unbuttoned his shirt. Coarse hair tickled her fingers. She slid her hands along his hard chest, but it wasn't enough; she wanted to feel more of his warm skin. Hooking her fingers under his suspenders, she drew them over his shoulders, then yanked off his shirt.

His hands then grasped the bottom of her tee shirt and slipped it over her head. She wasn't wearing anything beneath it and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Ah, lass, you are beautiful." He palmed her breasts and when she moved against his hands, he squeezed and fondled them harder. Her nipples puckered from his touch and the cool night air. Crouching, he trailed kisses from her stomach upward between her breasts, to her neck. His heated tongue then retraced his path, grazing along her neck, to her breasts and teased each peak, sucking and nibbling gently. Sensual delights rippled from deep within her, then surged and inflamed every nerve.

"Yes," she breathed as he continued to tug on one and then the other sensitive nub.

Her hands first gripped his hips, then moved to the swollen ridge beneath his pants.

"Carolyn." His voice was rough, eager. He leaned forward and kissed her deeply.

She quickly unbuttoned his pants and slid her hand inside, grabbing his thick cock. His breath caught and she slipped his pants down over his hips. He kicked them to the side and stood naked before her, his muscular body gleaming in the moonlight. Wet heat moistened her panties and desire surged through her body when she saw his aroused shaft.

She fumbled with her jeans and he helped her ease them off, tossing them next to his clothes on the grass. His hand slid down her body, torturously slowly, touching her over the thin wisp of panties now soaked with her dew. Her body quivered. "Cold?"

"No. Sensitive and deliciously warm."

"Good," he whispered against her ear, as he hooked a finger under the edge of her panties and slid them off.

His fingers spread over her belly, then lower to her mound and rubbed her engorged clit. Her inner depths clenched and throbbed, aching for the feel of him inside her. If he continued to touch her there, she would come soon. She brought his hand up to her breast, then wrapped her hand around his erection, hard and swollen, stroking it up and down.

"Mmmm," she purred.

"Oh, lord," he said, pushing her hand away. "Not yet, lass. We have plenty of time."

The darkness in his eyes told her the moment had turned more potent and gone beyond the ability of either of them stopping it.

"What do we do with the milk and butter?" she asked.

He laughed. "Nothing. It be an offering."

He knelt before her, delicately flicking his tongue over her swollen clit, then gently, so gently sucking her. He had a wonderful mouth. She grabbed his head with her hands, tangling her fingers in his hair, as a wave of pleasure began to rise out of control. "Oh, that's so good."

Thrusting a finger inside her opening, he pushed her over the edge. She cried out as the orgasm pulsed through her with such intensity she feared her knees would give way. He pressed his face against her thighs and wrapped his arms around her legs while her body continued to quake.

"I can't wait. I want you now," she breathed.

He stood, pulling her close, his erection pressing against her belly. A low growl vibrated from his chest, then he lifted her off her feet and gently lay her down on the sleeping bag.

He eased his body over hers. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she felt the wonderful warmth and weight of him, then his thick cock pressed against her moist opening and plunged deep inside with one effortless thrust.

"Oh yes," she said, raising her hips to allow him to move deeper. Snaking her arms around his back, she grasped his buttocks and rocked her body in rhythm to his. The full moon enveloped them with a luminous glow. Passion raged in his face and tension strained the muscles in his neck.

"Tell me, lass, tell me what you want." His voice was low and lustful.

"This... Yes... Like this." Hot pleasure swirled inside her. "Rory." Another release shook her.

The cries of her climax mingled with his groans.

"Ah, yes." His body shuddered as he pumped harder, faster and then found his own release. She gripped his buttocks tighter, writhing beneath him until he was completely spent and collapsed on top of her.

She stroked his back, listening to his breathing slow, feeling his heartbeat pound against her breasts. She was still panting, her body humming.

After a time, he sighed, slipped from her body, then rolled beside her. She clung to him and rested her head on his chest. "Are we safe here, or are we going to be propelled to a strange place?"

"We're safe, lass. Once the ritual begins at midnight, the ley lines part."

A cool breeze blew across her heated, damp skin and made her shiver. Rory pulled the fleece blanket over them and they snuggled close.

Beneath the glow of the moon, surrounded by the dark forest, the megaliths and under the protection of the now-appeased Sidhe, they affirmed their love for each other inside the standing stones.

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning sun warmed the earth and burned off the layers of fog that had settled within the meadow. Brightness behind closed lids stirred Carolyn out of her dreamless sleep. Her eyes popped open and she sat up.

Rory was beside her, still asleep, the blanket draped low over his hips.

She shook him. "Rory, wake up."

One eye opened. He smiled, then pulled her down, cradling her in his arms.

"You won't change back on me, will you?"

"No, the curse is broken, lass. Now you best get under this blanket." His smile was sultry and tempting.

"What about that ship, those people?"

"I left a written message on the maintenance list and in the pocket of the man's body I inhabited. I warned them to move their ship out of orbit or the ship would be destroyed. If they acted in time..."

She nodded.

As they lay together, something bolted through the thick mountain laurel. They sat upright as a white buck burst out of the forest.

"How is that possible?" Carolyn asked.

"The hunter," Rory said sadly. "It's his judgment."

The buck ran across the meadow and back into the woods.

"Now, lass..." He wrapped his arms around her. "I believe there be over three hundred years of loving I need to make up."



## About the Author

Kathy Kulig spins stories with passion and adventure. Her characters enter both paranormal and contemporary worlds with steamy or erotic romances woven in. Gutsy heroines and hunky heroes face the unexpected and overcome formidable odds, because with courage, true love can find a way. These are the stories she loves to read and the stories she loves to write.

Besides her career in writing, Kathy is a cytotechnologist and has worked as a research scientist, medical technologist, dive master and stringer for a newspaper. Propelled by her love of travel and adventure, Kathy has visited a few places not usually considered vacation hot spots-and lived to tell about it. When not writing or dreaming up her next story, Kathy enjoys traveling, relaxing by the beach with a book, mountain biking, movies and dinners out. She lives with her husband in a 100-year-old Victorian house in Pennsylvania.

Kathy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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