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Wildish Things

Carolyn Ivey

Dedication

For Mom and Dad. You did everything right.

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Kemberlee Shortland. For generously lending her insights about Ireland. And for literally saving my life in Killarney.

Dr. Raymond Horwood. For my new hips, and my new life. You rock.

Prologue

The Hag turned over onto her pendulous belly in order to warm her craggy back under the near-midsummer sun.

Earlier in the day a pesky bulldozer had approached one of her favorite wells, but she had taken care of that problem with no more effort than it took to sneeze. One well-aimed glob of snot had glommed up the machine's engine and sent its muttering human driver in search of a tow truck. Her work was done for the day.

Yet she found she could not relax and soak up the Irish sun in peace. Her breasts were turgid with unspent sexual energy, her legs restless and rubbing against unsatisfying stone. It had been too long since she'd had a man. Centuries. Of old, few were strong enough to withstand her appetite for more than a few minutes. These days, even the few who remembered her name spoke it timidly.

Bollixless creatures, these new men were.

She heard a noise overhead. Head turned to the side, pillowed on a mountain, she opened an eye to peer at one of the silver-winged beasts and its snow-white vapor trail. These days, few people scratched her back with their traveling feet, muttering prayers for safe passage in hopes the Hag would let them pass unharmed. Oh no, it was all smooth wheels and shiny wings. People with things plugged into their ears so they couldn't hear themselves think, much less hear the cry of a bird, the splash of a salmon in the river, or the very heartbeat of the land as the seasons turned.

Her sounds.

Something about the silver object flying overhead tickled the Hag's attention. She rolled to her back, cracked open the other eye, watery gaze following its path. She expanded her nostrils and took a sniff. Overhead,

the silver bird hit what the pilots thought was a random air pocket. Below, the Hag closed her eyes and sorted through the scents in her nose.

Ah. She smiled and stretched. A woman rode that bird, one who was ready. A wildish thing. She may not yet know it, but soon she would understand. Like the Hag, all she needed was a man. One strong enough to fulfill her every desire without cracking under the onslaught of a woman's true power.

The Hag shook her mossy hair out of her rheumy eyes, opened her full lips, and called.

Satisfied that events would now unfold as they should, the Hag spread her bare arms and legs wide to the sun.

And awaited her pleasure.

Chapter One

“You mean...she’s not coming?”

Beith gripped the telephone receiver and cast a quick glance over her shoulder at the bustling mezzanine of the Dublin airport. The din of mingled languages and accents, rattling luggage trolleys, fussing children and the PA system’s unintelligible reports assaulted her ears. Unfamiliar scents drifted from the food court. Signs in several languages pointed in all directions, adding to her sense of disorientation. She turned back to the wall, plugged the other ear with one finger and tried not to remember the dinginess of the ladies room she’d just vacated.

I will not panic.

“Say again?”

“I’m sorry, Beith. I tried to get a hold of you before you left Cleveland. Kemberlee had an appendicitis attack and had to have surgery. She won’t be able to make the trip.” Kem’s brother’s voice sounded tired and genuinely regretful. Beith closed her eyes and breathed slowly. Belatedly she remembered the slightly sick feeling which had settled in her stomach as she’d boarded the plane and stayed there the entire flight. The same feeling that had sat heavy on her stomach the day of her accident more than a year before.

“She’s going to be okay, isn’t she? What hospital is she in? I’ll call her as soon as...”

“She’ll be fine. It burst so she’ll be in for a couple days, so I’d wait to call her at home. But I promised her you wouldn’t be stranded.”

Beith glanced at her watch, still set on Eastern Daylight Time, and twisted her head this way and that to look for the Aer Lingus ticket

counter. Then she remembered it wasn't on this level. She sighed. "Tell her not to worry, Patrick. I'm catching the first flight back to the States as soon as I can arrange it. I'll fly to New York and help her out for a few days."

"No way! You've been planning this for too long. And seeing as how it's your first big commission since—"

Beith interrupted, determined not to let him go there. "Be reasonable, Patrick. Kem was going to be my guide—" She swallowed a sudden lump in her throat.

"This from a woman who summited Rainier? Since when do you need a tour guide?"

Patrick was clearly trying to make light of the situation, but the words stung nonetheless.

"That was when I had two good legs, Patrick. You know that. These days I need a little help from my friends."

Patrick's voice gentled. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, sweetheart. I've contacted an old friend to arrange for a guide and personal assistant for the trip. We used to work together some years ago. Someone should have met you when you got off the plane, holding a sign with your name on it. You can't have missed it. O'Neill said the guide would be tall and red-haired."

She vaguely remembered a long queue of people beyond the immigration checkpoint, holding signs of various shapes and sizes with names scrawled on them. Expecting that Kemberlee's plane would have landed first, Beith had been too busy searching the crowd for her friend's round, freckled face to notice.

Though now, as she thought about it, her eyes had snagged briefly on one man who stood a bit taller than the rest, broad shouldered and slim-hipped, his thick, dark russet hair pulled back and tied behind his head.

She'd ignored the electricity shooting down her spine when his sea-green eyes had caught hers. His brows had lifted as if asking a silent question and his mouth had widened into a smile that had nearly caused

her to trip over her own feet. She'd given him a brief, shy smile in return before looking beyond him for Kem.

Now, a clear picture of his high-cheekboned face sprang back into her mind, and that inkling of foreboding nudged in the pit of her belly.

"Patrick. Listen carefully. It is just plain foolish for me to be over here alone with no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going. And...and you know darned well it could even be dangerous."

Patrick's chuckle on the other end of the line did nothing to dispel her trepidation. "You'll be fine. Trust me, I'm a doctor."

"As if that's supposed to reassure me. Patrick—"

"O'Neill will take good care of you."

"Patrick—"

"You're not weaseling out of this, Beith. This commission is the chance you've been waiting for to get back in the groove."

"Patrick!"

"Grow some balls, woman!"

In spite of herself, Beith laughed. "I'm *coming home*."

On the other end of the line, she heard Patrick sigh. "You'll regret it, honey."

"Maybe. But it's the smartest thing to do at this point." She squared her shoulders and hitched her carry-on a little higher. She had yet to claim her luggage, and wondered now how she was going to handle the huge suitcase along with the bag on her shoulder, weighed down with a camera and several lenses. She wasn't supposed to lift even this much weight, much less a suitcase. Without any Irish money, how could she even tip a porter? She'd have to find an information booth somewhere.

Fatigue dragged at her limbs.

"At least look around so your guide knows not to wait for you," Patrick put in.

She nodded. "That would be the polite thing to do, though I don't see how I'll find anyone in this crowd, sign or no sign."

She felt a light tap on her shoulder. "Miss?"

She waved a hand and threw over her shoulder, "I'll be off in a second. What did you say, Patrick?"

"...about six feet," Patrick was finishing. "A little tall for the Irish, but it's the Viking blood coming out."

"Can I have a *name*, please, Paddy? I'll have them paged." Her question was met with nothing but static. She sighed in exasperation. Patrick and his mobile phones, she thought disgustedly. You'd think a respected surgeon like him could afford a decent one.

The tap on her shoulder again. "Miss Molloy..."

She turned, sagged back, bumping into the wall and dropping the telephone receiver. The same tall man she'd noticed in the queue now towered over her, much too close for comfort. And what a curious discomfort it was. The fine muscles in her fingers twitched, and she clenched them to stop from reaching to touch his hand, which had shot out to steady her. His palm burned hot even through the long-sleeved knit top she'd worn to ward off the airplane's chill.

She looked up past the collar of his dark green shirt into the face of a Viking. The heaviness in her stomach grew while at the same time her knees turned directly to water.

Up close, her artist's eye automatically absorbed details she'd missed before. His long, strong jaw was lightly stubbled with a day or so's growth of beard, his nose nothing remarkable and looking like it had been broken at least once in his life. His lips, turned down slightly in concern, not too full or too thin, but something about their shape told her woman's instinct he had the ability to drive a woman to distraction with words, or crazy in bed. Whatever the lady would prefer. But it was the eyes that took her breath. Shadowed with fatigue, which told her he'd not had enough sleep the night before; deep sea-green, framed by just enough lines to reassure her he laughed often, contrasted by faint worry lines between his brows that deepened as he regarded her.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and she stiffened her back, raised her chin and let him look. The thread-thin scar on her lower lip and chin was the only one she couldn't hide among the many on her body. If

nothing else, she viewed this little piece of furrowed flesh as her insurance policy against anyone planning to hit on her.

Time seemed to slow as she watched the parade of expressions march across the man's face. Interest. Surprise. Confusion. Compassion. It was the last one that had her clenching her teeth against the emotion in her chest. Then he smiled and all tension diffused rapidly to flush her body with unexpected warmth.

Oddly, time seemed to stretch, and the airport sounds around her faded to an eerie silence in her ears. Except for his voice.

"Are you all right, miss?" He had a voice to match the rest of him. Masculine but not overly deep, with a native accent that made even those five simple words sound like music.

It took her a second to realize she was staring at him, mouth hanging open, surging hormones tightening her lower belly into a knot. The mezzanine noises resumed, almost as if someone had restarted a slow tape recorder. She shook herself and straightened away from the wall. His hands slid down her arms before he stepped back. She saw his eyes widen, then quickly narrow, and his nostrils flare before a pleasant mask slipped over his face, lit by an amazingly sexy half-smile.

"Yes, of course," she said. "You just startled me. I guess I'm through with this, now," she said ruefully as she bent to pick up the phone receiver. Too late she realized the angle of her left leg was wrong, and her hip joint clicked and slid in a rude warning. Stifling a curse, she dropped her carry-on and quickly straightened. She fought a wave of dizzy panic, even though the joint had reseated itself. *Dummy. The last thing you need is to land in a hospital in a foreign country. Pay attention, Beith!*

The man's head tilted as if regarding her for the first time. "Jesus, woman. You're pale as a ghost." The man's hand was back on her arm, offering support as he gently took the phone from her hand and hung it up for her. "Patrick told me you might be needing an assistant."

Travel-frazzled nerves prickled. "I don't need an assistant to hang up a phone," she muttered. Then she blinked him. "How do you know me?"

He grinned as he picked up her carry-on and guided her a few steps away from the phone so someone else could use it. She walked gingerly, and she didn't miss the way his eyes flicked down to her legs and back. She saw the question there, maybe a trace of surprise and confusion. She set her jaw and forced herself to walk with more confidence. After all, Patrick had assured her she had no reason to fear simple walking. Eventually, she'd even be able to return to some fairly long-distance hiking. Just not the heavy-duty backpacking she'd been accustomed to. She pushed aside the twinge of regret that curled in her chest at that thought.

She reached for her carry-on but the man swung it over his shoulder, out of her reach. Irritation flashed through her, but the man was already talking.

"Trough the picture he faxed over. Still, I wasn't sure until I overheard you yelling at him on the phone."

She relaxed, but only a little. "I was not yelling, and you must be the gentleman he arranged for me while I'm here." She realized how those words sounded, and felt her cheeks turn as hot as the palm that supported her elbow. Normally she was as exacting with her words as she was with her brush strokes. She thought she heard him chuckle, but she couldn't be sure as she took a breath and blundered on. "Paddy didn't tell me your name, though, before his mobile phone died. I think he said it was...O'Neill? I don't think I caught your first name."

She looked up and thought she saw something shift in his eyes, but then it was gone.

"Indeed. Kellan O'Neill at your service for the next t'ree weeks, miss." His eyes met hers, sparkling with more than a bit of the devil. His thumb lightly caressed the crease in her elbow, and she felt her knees start to go again. "You can be callin' me Kel, if you like."

Oh, no, this would not do at *all*.

She cleared her throat. "I'm Beith Molloy. It's nice to meet you and I'm glad you're here. I'm going to need some help transferring my luggage to whatever flight I can find to go home." She hated that phrase, "need

some help”, but she choked it out anyway. She was going to have to get used to saying it, she realized bitterly.

His dark eyebrow lifted. “Oh, no. Patrick’s instructions were very specific. Under no circumstances am I to allow you to...how did he say it? Chicken out?” He picked up the pace and tucked her hand into his elbow, a gesture that might have seemed courtly if she didn’t feel as if she were being towed behind a motor boat. Why was he in such a hurry?

Beith laughed in spite of herself. “That’s very sweet of him, but really, I should go home.”

“...and somet’in’ about not letting you be *shouldin’* on yourself,” Kel put in without missing a beat.

Beith allowed herself a smile. “Ah, yes, that sounds like Patrick. My mind is made up, I’m afraid. It isn’t fair to ask you to give up three weeks of your life on such short notice. I’m sure you can’t take that much time away from your regular job just to show me around.” She glanced up at him again but he wasn’t looking at her.

He shrugged affably. “I’m free for a while. It won’t be any trouble, I assure you.”

“Oh, I, uh, I see,” she stammered, realizing he might not have another job.

He lifted a dark auburn eyebrow with obvious amusement. “Do you, now?”

She felt a knot begin to form between her eyebrows, and a dull throb at the base of her neck. She decided to shut up before she said anything else embarrassing or insulting. Inside her stomach, the need to get back on the plane for home warred with the intriguing idea of spending three weeks photographing and sketching endangered Irish wildlife in the company of a native.

Kel led her around clumps of people and careening trolleys. “We’d better be on our way, then,” he said, sounding much too cheerful for Beith’s travel-weary ears. “City traffic is no place to be at any hour, and we have a bit of a drive ahead of us.” He steered her toward the stairs, then, glancing down at her legs again, changed course toward a lift.

Something told her that her life had just changed course as well, but suddenly she was too dog-tired to fight it.

“Patrick sent you our, um, my itinerary?”

The pause was infinitesimal. “That he did,” he said. “You’ll be seeing the best little tern nesting sites in Europe.”

The lift doors whooshed shut, and she found herself enclosed in a small space with Kellan O’Neill. His scent drifted over her, a pleasing combination of freshly showered man and what she imagined Irish turf must smell like. Clean and earthy. She opened her mouth but shut it again, sensing she would only babble if she broke the silence. And one thing she never did was babble.

She glanced up at the numbers changing at the top of the door and felt a warm prickle begin at the back of her neck and travel down... Oh, dear. Was he looking at her? Was that warm feeling at the small of her back his hand, hovering just above her skin? For a brief second a series of images flashed through her mind. Her turning into Kel’s arms. Kel dropping her carry-on, hitting the lift’s hold button and proceeding to press her up against the wall. His muscular arms lifting her off the floor, his broad shoulders sheltering her, one hand cradling her head while the other...

...would never happen. *Could* never happen. Beith took a deep breath and tried to get hold of herself, hoping he wouldn’t notice the light sheen of perspiration which had broken out on her forehead. She closed her eyes and fought a wave of dizziness. Damn those pain meds she’d taken before her flight had taken off from Cleveland.

What was wrong with her? Kel O’Neill was a complete stranger. She’d never been given to wild, hormone-driven flings with anyone. She wasn’t about to start. Especially now. She had a demanding career and had always kept herself in complete control, reminding herself of what was really important.

That accident must have shattered more than her bones.

She shifted on her feet, but he seemed perfectly comfortable with the silence between them, as if he tracked her thoughts and had no desire to

interrupt them. Well, damn it, *she* had to interrupt them. She forced herself to think of the scars, and cold reality quickly reasserted itself.

As soon as I get that suitcase, I'm booking a flight home. Then I'll pop a Flexaril and wake up back in Cleveland as if this had never happened.

He made no comment about the size of her suitcase as he pulled it off the carousel, but the way he handled it easily with one hand while holding her carry-on with the other made her flush all over again. Fanning herself with the scraps of her plane ticket, she looked around and spied a bureau de change and touched his arm. She snatched her hand away as he turned, flapping it nervously toward the counter. "Isn't that where I get cash?"

"No." He took her arm more firmly and steered her down a corridor. "You'll be gettin' a better exchange rate at the ATM down here." He paused and studied her, that smile growing a little wider. "So you're stayin', then?"

Her heart thumped hard two or three times. *Grow some balls, woman.* The words to tell him "no" were poised on her tongue. To tell him, "No thanks, but here's a little something for your trouble." She wondered if he'd be insulted, and inwardly winced at what his expression might look like when she pressed the cash into his hand. Well, there was no help for it. She blew out a breath, opened her mouth.

What came out was, "For now. Chances are I can't get a flight out until tomorrow, anyway." She snapped her mouth shut. *No more Flexaril for me.*

His grin widened and she went a little light-headed at its power. She attributed it to jet lag and the meds. As he turned to pull the retractable handle from her suitcase, she thought he heard him mutter, "*That's long enough.*"

"Excuse me?"

"I said the ATM's over here," he said without missing a beat.

"Oh," she said, then concentrated on rooting through her purse for her credit card and tucking her passport away. As she got her money,

she sensed him standing protectively behind her, shielding her transaction from prying eyes.

“You won’t need a great deal to start out with,” he commented. “Should you decide to stay on, that is.”

She glanced over her shoulder. His back was to her, and he spoke quietly to her over his shoulder. *If you decide...* “Oh, but what if...” She glanced at him to find him giving her another patient half-smile.

“This isn’t quite a t’ird world country, Miss Molloy. Most every town has a machine now. And you won’t be wanting to flash a lot of cash for any unscrupulous types you might be comin’ across.”

Like you?

His scent drifted to her nose again. A strong energy hummed just under her skin, a rush of electricity, here and gone in an instant.

“Oh, um, you’re right, of course...” Feeling her face flush, she turned and punched in smaller numbers.

She was in Ireland, at long last. Jet lagged and tired, but here. A place she had seen only in pictures and films, and just those had made her artist’s soul itch to be here, surrounded by that extraordinary light and that vivid color, sketching and photographing to her heart’s content. Beith Molloy, famed “Mistress of Light”, the rare combination of critically acclaimed talent and marketing sensation, would give her millions of fans something new for their collections of art prints, rugs, wallpaper, blankets and throw pillows. And a good chunk of the proceeds would go to help save the bird she was here to study and paint.

Now that her feet were on Irish ground, a larger and larger part of her was clamoring to stay, to not turn tail and run home to the studio which had become her only world for the past year.

She turned to follow the tall man through the airport, presumably to a car. Kemberlee had reserved a rental, but Beith had no idea where to find the darned thing, much less how to drive it. She frowned at this thought process. The old Beith would have been racing Kem for the driver’s seat.

She glanced over at the Aer Lingus ticket counter, already mobbed with people trying to get any flight out. Any flight at all. The harried manager waved his arms and was calling out to the irate crowd that it would be at least two days. Two days. Weariness washed over her.

I don't have to make a decision right this minute, she reasoned. I can just as easily call from a hotel...

Okay. So, she'd made a decision. Sort of. For now, she would stay.

A sudden wave of panic hit her, so strong she stopped dead in her tracks, one hand pressed over her heart. Kel kept walking and she resisted the urge to grab onto the back of his shirt and use it for a lifeline.

As if sensing she was no longer behind him, he halted and turned in a slow circle, his sea-green eyes searching for her. He singled her out finally, and she waited for the flash of irritation that was sure to follow. Honestly, freaking out in the middle of the Dublin airport. This was not the old Beith at all. This was the post-shattered-bones Beith. The afraid-of-everything Beith.

She didn't like this Beith.

Kel's eyes softened in what she could swear was compassion, and one side of his mouth lifted in that half-smile. He held one big hand out to her.

Damn it, she needed this chance to rebuild her career. Her life. Her self. *Grow some balls, woman!* Paddy had barked at her.

"Are you ready, Miss Molloy?" O'Neill's voice, though quiet, carried through the din around them as if borne on some bit of magic.

Her eyes stung, and she told herself it was the jet lag, the fatigue, the mild pain meds she'd taken. Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded jerkily, stepped forward and took Kel's hand.

Chapter Two

“I’m telling you, the girl must have left the airport on her own.”

“But she said she was catching the next flight home,” said Patrick. “Are you sure—”

Declan O’Neill held tight to his patience. “I checked the outgoing flights—what there were of them. There’s a baggage handler strike going on. She wasn’t on any of them. I also checked the car hires, taxi services and local hotels. Nothing. She either left on foot or with someone else.”

Dead silence on the other end of the line. Then, “I think you’d better talk to Kemberlee.”

Declan winced. “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“Is this Declan O’Neill? You’d better start talking to me.” Despite having just had abdominal surgery, Kemberlee Shea’s voice cracked over the phone line like a whip.

He blew out a slow breath and did his best to sound calm and reasonable. Fat lot of good that would do him—he almost expected the woman’s clawed hand to come at him through the receiver at any moment.

“As I was telling your brother, the woman I assigned to be her guide called to tell me she was delayed. By the time I got to the airport to collect Miss Molloy, she was gone.” Even as he spoke, he scanned the baggage area, hoping to find some trace of the woman who resembled the faxed photograph tucked in his pocket. That blonde head of hair should stand out like the silver flash of a salmon’s belly in a dark lough, but nothing stood out among the sea of red, brown and black-haired heads.

"Think carefully, Mr. O'Neill. I'm aware that you're one of Patrick's, well, friends from his past. Is there anyone from your...well, before...who might still have it in for you? Is there a possibility—"

"No. That part of my life is over. As it is for your brother. You know that."

"I do know that. In my drug-induced state, that's why I let Patrick..."

Declan heard a solid smack and Patrick's muttered "Ouch!"

"...call you in the first place. Because you'd know someone who could show her the island like a tour guide pro and keep her safe."

"The only one over here who knows about my past is my wife and my—oh, sweet Jesus." Declan walked carefully over to the nearest bench and sat down. He let the mobile phone drop to his side and took a moment to rub his suddenly throbbing temples. Fury pounded through him, spiced with a healthy dose of annoyance. "That little bastard," he muttered. When he trusted himself to speak again, he picked up the phone. In the background, he heard Patrick telling his sister to calm down

"Get your hands off me, Paddy. You may have three more college degrees than me, but I'm still bigger and meaner. Declan!"

"Kemberlee, it's all right. I think I know what's going on. My brother was in the office with me when Patrick's call and fax came in. He must have overheard our conversation." In his mind, he replayed the scene now. His brother, fresh from assignment providing security for an ambassador's trip to a politically sensitive African country, walking over and casually retrieving the faxed photo and other documents and handing them over with barely a glance, then returning to sprawl in the nearest chair. Or had it been a glance? With this brother, one could never tell. Despite his laid-back demeanor, the boy had a keen mind and a photographic memory. Traits that had kept him alive in some very, very bad situations.

He heard Kem take a deep breath, then a short scuffle and suddenly Patrick was back on the phone.

"Which brother, Declan? Tell me it wasn't Kel."

Declan sighed. "Okay, I'll tell you it wasn't Kel, if that's what you want to hear."

"Shit."

"Well, you said you wanted her to have the adventure of a lifetime," Declan said lamely. "She's certain to have it, now."

Patrick groaned. "Yeah, but I'd also like her to live through it!"

Kellan was within minutes of pulling this caper off.

Beith Molloy bore little resemblance to the fuzzy faxed photo he'd glimpsed in Declan's office last night. The same one Declan had snatched out of his hand and into a concealing file. As if his big brother didn't trust him around a beautiful woman.

He'd known if he wanted to meet her, he'd have to take matters into his own hands. Luckily he'd gotten enough of a look at her flight schedule to know when she would arrive in Dublin. The hard part had been acting completely uninterested while his mind had churned with plans to whisk her out from under Declan's very nose.

She was thinner than in the photographs he'd looked up an hour later on the Internet, the last of which had been taken two years ago. Those had showed a woman with the solid, long lines of an athlete, skin glowing with health as she put herself in more than a few challenging positions in order to hunt her artistic quarry.

The woman before him now had a carry-on almost bigger than she was. Her hair was darker, her skin still creamy but with a translucent quality, as if she'd been cooped up indoors too long. He'd pictured a tall, willowy American blonde, but he hadn't been disappointed by this woman who barely reached his chin, travel-rumpled hair twisted up behind her head and held in place by what looked like chopsticks.

His first prickle of conscience had come when she'd looked up at him, fearlessly displaying her scarred mouth.

As if she knew it would scare him off.

But something in those chocolate-brown eyes... The challenge in them had softened to complete trust as she'd accepted his story without question. He'd completely forgotten about her mouth once the eyes had softened. Where had she been living that she'd willingly walk off with a stranger without demanding so much as an ID card? In a cave?

Then she'd bent to pick up the dropped telephone, and she'd straightened with a face so gray he'd come close to calling a halt to plans he was still working on even as he guided her out of the terminal. His doubts faded as he surreptitiously glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and saw she walked with a sure, even step. Must have been a cramp from the long flight. The way her faded jeans hugged her hips and outlined her long thighs had him picturing the way she'd look completely bare, on a bed, sweating as he drove her crazy.

Outside on the sidewalk, he stopped and pretended to adjust his load of baggage, using those few precious seconds to scan the area. Good. No sign of Declan.

Fionna had slipped him Beith's itinerary; the first thing he'd noticed was that it wouldn't take Beith anywhere near the prime nesting grounds of the endangered bird she was seeking in order to fulfill a commissioned art work. He'd take her to the places she needed to be in order to complete her contract.

Along the way, he planned to enjoy her company, tease her, make her laugh and smile, and, if things went as he planned, she'd be inviting him into her bed before the trip was over. Preferably *long* before it was over.

In the few hours he'd pulled this plan together, he'd managed to do some homework on Beith Molloy. Despite her diminutive size, she had been known to trek far into back-country wilderness to capture on canvas rare glimpses of wildlife or a single, endangered flower. There had been a relationship, but that had ended about a year before, at which time she seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth. Key to his research was that Beith Molloy was a woman with a ferocious focus on her career, with neither the time nor the inclination to settle down.

That was just fine with Kellan. He wasn't interested in forming permanent ties, either. But a little summer fling would be good for both of them. He was certain of it.

Declan would have snorted at Kellan's apparent lack of logic. But Kel prided himself on his ability to read people. He'd known, from one glance at her picture, that she would be open to any adventure he saw fit to entice her with. He'd always followed his instincts, and though they'd sometimes led him into trouble, they'd also led him out again, free and clear. Every time. This time would be no different.

He detected a slight shiver in the arm he'd tucked into his. He'd felt the coolness of her flesh from the first time he'd touched her, and attributed it to the jet's air conditioning. The Dublin morning was damp. He was comfortable in his long sleeved, button-down shirt. But for a foreigner it took some adjustment. She continued to follow him willingly down the row of compact cars, approaching his vehicle. He let a smile widen his lips.

She was going to love this. He was sure of it.

"Have you a jacket?" He kept his tone casual as he tipped her suitcase to stand on its end and let her carry-on slide to the ground.

"In my suitcase. Why?"

He watched her face as her eyes centered on his vehicle, and waited for it to break into a smile.

Instead, it went curiously blank. She swallowed audibly.

"Is this...is this your, um, vehicle?"

Kel gazed fondly at his pride and joy. A midnight-blue-and-silver Harley-Davidson Softtail.

"Indeed it is. She's beautiful, isn't she?"

He thought he heard Beith make a noise, but he was busy glancing at his watch, and caught a shiny red flash out of the corner of his eye.

Right on time. *Don't squeal the tires, Fionna.*

The boxy Honda van pulled up strategically between them and anyone who might be in the terminal looking for them.

Fionna unfolded out of the car, all six feet of her, vivid red hair tucked up under a battered baseball cap. She slid open the side door, then turned to smile warmly at Beith. Like all people exposed to Fionna's smile, Beith smiled back, partially if not thoroughly disarmed. Kel had always thought Fionna possessed more than a bit of Fae blood in her veins.

"Offloading?" said Fionna cheerfully.

"A bit," he replied, swinging Beith's suitcase into the opening and unceremoniously unzipping it.

"What are you doing?" Beith squeaked.

Fionna and Kel stood staring into her suitcase, momentarily stunned.

"She has no clothes," murmured Fionna.

"Yes, I do," protested Beith. "Everything's in there. Lots of thin layers. I know the drill. There's just a few other things on top."

"A few other things?" Kel began lifting bubble-wrapped parcels out of the suitcase. Through the wrap he recognized thick sketch pads, colored pencils, and...heaven help them...an easel?

"I'm an artist," said Beith, apparently reading his expression. "These are the tools of my trade."

"Well," said Kel cheerfully. "There's nothing for it—they'll have to go."

"What?"

"They won't fit in the bike's panniers. Besides, if you're going home tomorrow, you don't need all this, now, do you? Fionna will keep it all for you until you're ready to go. And," he shrugged offhandedly, "if you decide to stay, there's nothing here we can't purchase on the road. If you need it."

Beith looked up into his eyes, and Kel met her gaze squarely, hoping not a trace of urgency showed. He could see in the dark circles under her eyes that all she wanted was to find a bed and sleep. He felt a prickle of remorse when she shifted her gaze to the car.

"I'd almost rather leave my clothes behind than my art supplies," she said absently.

The word “Brilliant!” was on the edge of his tongue, but he managed to hold onto it.

“Why don’t we just trade vehicles?” suggested Beith. “If you don’t mind, of course, Fionna. Then, if I end up staying, I’ll have everything I need.”

Um...

Fionna didn’t miss a beat. “I’d be happy to, but me cousin needs it for his pizza delivery route.” She reached out and touched Beith’s arm, and that Fae magic did its work.

Kel watched in growing fascination as Beith took another long look at his Harley, lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. “All right. I’ll just need my camera, and...” She reached between Fionna and Kel, grabbed a sketchpad and a package of pencils, then turned away to unzip her carry-on. If possible, she looked even paler.

Kel didn’t miss the look of interest Fionna gave Beith. He mentally rolled his eyes. *Here it comes.*

Fionna lapsed casually into Irish, keeping her voice cheerful as she pulled what little clothing there was out of the suitcase and handed it to Beith to tuck into one of the panniers.

“I dreamed of the Hag last night, Kellan.”

“Did you now?”

“You’re taking her to the Burren?”

“Of course. She’s to go to the prime little tern nesting sites.” He snorted. “Whoever set up her itinerary hadn’t any idea what they were on about. I know where the best ones are.”

“Just be careful. The Hag is restless, which doesn’t bode well for a man like you. Whatever you think this woman needs...” She hitched her chin toward Beith.

“Oh, I fully intend to give her what she needs, have no fear about that,” he said, smiling wolfishly.

Fionna regarded him briefly, not a trace of amusement in her blue eyes.

“Her needs have nothing—and everything—to do with what you intend to ‘give’ her, you fool. Stop for a minute and think what you’re doing. If the only reason you’re carrying on with this is to pull something over on Declan, back out now.”

Kellan reached out and tapped the end of her nose. “Been scrying the bottom of a whiskey glass, have you?”

She gave him a look that brought him up short.

“Whiskey doesn’t touch my cauldron, and that scrying once saved your life, if you recall. Last night I saw the Cailleach, and she is no one to be trifled with. You know that. The Hag will have what she requires, and if you deny her, she will twist off your wee balls and have them with her tea.”

The Cailleach. Kellan zipped Beith’s suitcase shut and shoved it deeper into the car, then slid the door shut with more force than was quite necessary. Trust Fionna to ruin his day with talk of the Hag. Yet he knew Fionna had never been wrong about things unseen. And she was also right—her timely warning had once saved his life. He owed her at least a moment’s attention.

Even if he planned to ignore her advice. Hag or no Hag.

“Then why did you agree to help me with this?”

Fionna tilted her head as if it should have been obvious. “Because I dreamed of Beith Molloy, too. The Cailleach wants something from her. And it’s the only reason I’m letting you do this.”

“And what would the Old One want this time?”

“What she wants for every woman, Kellan. To be whole.”

To his surprise, Kel’s heart did a funny little flip in his chest. He turned his head and looked at Beith, and whatever expression was on his face, Fionna laughed at it.

“You’re a chancer, Kel. Just do me a favor and be careful. With luck, all three of you will get what you need.”

Chapter Three

Kel's dark shirt stretched across the long muscles of his back as he leaned into Fionna's car. In spite of herself, Beith's mouth went dry and her hands turned all thumbs as she tried to fit her clothing and a few essentials into the panniers.

Lulled by the singsong cadence of Kel's and Fionna's conversation, she distantly observed that all feelings of panic had subsided. For now, anyway. Her heart beat slow and steady in her chest, and breathing in the cool Ireland morning seemed effortless. Maybe a little of the old Beith, the brave Beith, still remained. For now, she would cling to this feeling as long as she could.

She allowed herself the pleasure of anticipating a ride on the back of a Harley with her legs wrapped around Kel's amazing butt. The mental image set off a rush of blood to her belly that nearly had her groaning out loud.

Well, no wonder, it *had* been over a year since she'd had any.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught Kel watching her. Stomach flopping, she looked away and finished folding, trying not to think about how that gleam in his eye would change if he—or any other man, for that matter—got a look at the scars on her skin.

Yet, instead of mortification, she felt an almost forgotten sense of excitement. A tightening of her lower belly, a heaviness in her breasts. She looked up and her gaze locked with Kel's. He looked down and a wicked grin spread across his face. Her gaze followed his.

The article of clothing she held in her hands was her bra. The red lace one. Matching panties hung from her pinky finger.

Instantly she crushed the garments between her hands and turned away to roll them up and stuff them between two of the camera lenses she'd transferred to the pannier. She caught Fionna's knowing smile, but didn't have time to wonder about it before she and Kel broke back into English, maintaining the same light tone of voice.

"She'll be needin' a sweater, then," said Kel. "Got anything to fit her?"

Fionna leaned into the back and rummaged around in a cardboard box, emerging with a cream-colored Aran sweater. "This is a little big, but it'll keep out the chill. Here, Beith, it may seem warm now, but you'll be wantin' to put this on under your jacket. Especially once the sun goes down."

Beith drew in a breath and fingered the richly knit sweater. "I can't just take this, Fionna. It's gorgeous."

Fionna waved a hand. "It's one my little sister has outgrown. These Arans are meant to be used, not stored away. Wear it in good health."

"Thanks." Beith rolled up the sweater and stuffed it into the last remaining space in the pannier. "How far are we going?"

"Not far. But we'll be takin' some side roads."

Fionna seemed to have a sudden coughing fit as she reached across the driver's seat to produce an extra helmet. Kel took it and stepped closer, propping the helmet on the bike's seat and reaching for Beith's head. Before she could blink, he slipped the sticks from her hair and ran his fingers through her hair, lifting it and pulling it back away from her face.

Caught off-guard, Beith could do nothing but stand still and drink in the sensation of his fingers sliding over her scalp, his clean, earthy scent wafting to her nose. His broad chest seemed to block out the rest of the world, sealing the two of them in this one moment.

Once again, as it had in the terminal, the noise of the bustling airport parking lot faded to nothing, leaving behind—not exactly silence, but a feeling like an inheld breath, waiting for the deep sigh to follow. She closed her eyes for a moment, and from somewhere in the dark recesses of her brain, a voice whispered.

Welcome, daughter.

Oddly, the voice didn't startle her at all. Instead, she held her breath and strained to hear the voice should it speak again. But she only thought she heard a deep chuckle that echoed into nothing.

In short order—too short—Kellan had her hair gathered and twisted up behind her head again. The ever-efficient Fionna produced two large, flat clips and secured it.

"To keep your hair from getting' knotted up in the wind. Now on with your jacket and we'll be off."

All the good feelings Beith had been building on for the past few minutes almost vanished in irritation as Kel lowered the helmet over her head, and Fionna slipped the jacket up her arms and reached around her to zip it as if she was a small child.

"Take Brian's helmet, Kel."

"Don't need it, I've got one."

"Take *Brian's*," said Fionna firmly, then their next words were lost in the muffling helmet. It didn't matter, it sounded like they were speaking Irish again, anyway. In the end, Kel exchanged his deep red helmet for a black one.

Kel took her hand and guided it up to the side of her helmet, where she found a small knob. A click, a crackle, and Kel's voice sounded in her ear.

"These helmets have two-way radios," he said. "Mine doesn't have one—don't normally carry passengers."

Suddenly Fionna reached out to tap Kel's shoulder, then hitched her chin in the direction of the terminal.

"Better get moving," she said placidly. "I'll drive you out."

Before Beith had time to think about why Fionna wanted to shadow them out of the car park, the Harley gave a throaty roar that startled her two feet out of her shoes. She whirled and found Kel already on the bike holding out one hand toward her.

"On you get."

Heart suddenly thumping hard, Beith took his hand and concentrated on not letting her bad leg shake with nerves and physical strain as she planted her left foot on the peg.

I can do this. Lightning couldn't strike twice.

She stepped over, straddled the bike and let her rear settle on the cushy leather seat. She shifted experimentally. Good, no weird pains or instability. Her seat was slightly higher than his, and their bodies spooned together, her knees fitting neatly under his elbows and her hands resting naturally on his wide shoulders.

I will do this.

Kel's voice flowed into her ear from the in-helmet speaker.

"Budge up and hang on to me," said Kel.

I can definitely do that.

A morning breeze lifted his auburn ponytail to brush her neck, so soft she had to resist the urge to run her fingers through it.

"And you may want to close your eyes—traffic is pretty tight and we've a ways to go."

"What's the hurry?" she started to say, but the words were sucked back down her throat as Kel put the bike in gear. It surged smoothly forward with a throaty growl. Swallowing a squeak, she hitched forward and plastered herself to his back, hands digging in to grab two handfuls of his shirt. Nearly all her tenuous self-confidence fled and she fought not to hold her breath.

You're okay, Beith. It'll be okay.

She twisted to one side to get a last look at the terminal—why, she wasn't sure, maybe to look in vain for a break in the crowd at the Aer Lingus counter. But Fionna kept her van between them and the terminal at all times as Kel maneuvered out onto the roadway.

Once clear, Fionna honked and waved at them, then veered off the roundabout they had entered and shot away down a narrow road. Beith couldn't help but think that with Fionna's parting, her last link with reality was gone.

What an odd thing to think about.

It didn't get any more reality-based than sharing a roaring city street with, oh, about a thousand other honking, fume-belching cars and trucks.

It was probably a good thing that she didn't remember any details of the terrible crash that had almost taken her life—and her leg. But she knew the story, even if she had only read about it in the newspaper. And she had lived every painful moment of the aftermath.

She fought to keep her breathing steady, and forcibly removed her nails from where they were embedded in Kel's shoulders. Inside the helmet, she heard Kel chuckle, swear at a driver who passed too close, then resume chuckling.

He wasn't kidding about the traffic. She remembered Kemberlee talking about it. *"If you hesitate or show fear, you're toast."*

Kel certainly showed neither of those traits as he accelerated and decelerated smoothly, weaving in and out of slower traffic, somehow managing to never come to a complete stop at any traffic signal.

If traffic laws were anywhere similar to those in the States, Kel clearly had little regard for any of them.

"Little roundabout coming up," came his voice. "Hold on and just lean with me."

Beith had only a second to register that they were approaching what looked like a four-lane-deep whirlpool of cars and trucks before Kel leaned the bike left and they were sucked in.

Incredibly, she felt the muscles in Kel's arms, torso, and thighs contract and release as he accelerated the bike into the maelstrom.

Holy shit. Breathe. In. Out. In...

Beith closed her eyes, lowered her head and pressed her helmeted forehead into Kel's shoulder, praying as hard as she could as one, two, who knows how many cars and trucks set up a chorus of honking.

A cramp seized in her left thigh and she ruthlessly quashed a whimper before it escaped her throat. The muscles tightened, threatening to lift her off the seat with pain.

If she didn't straighten out her leg in about three seconds, she felt sure the cramp would pull her leg apart, or break what little bone was left in her femur.

Something hot settled on her thigh, centering on the cramping area halfway between her knee and her hip. She cracked open one eye and found Kel's hand casually resting there, steering the bike effortlessly with the other hand.

"We're out of it," he said, laughter evident in his tone. "You can relax now."

She laughed, because although they were now on what a sign whizzing by told her was the M50, they were still going at a dizzying speed on what appeared to her American brain as the wrong side of the road. The lanes looked narrower, too, with barely room to allow cars to squeeze past each other, much less that tour bus looming ahead. The sound that came out of her chest must not have sounded much like a laugh to Kel, for his hand began to stroke.

Surely he only intended to soothe what he thought were nerves, but the sensation of heat through her jeans made her want to stretch against him like a cat. Again the sounds around her faded to nothing but a distant echo, the world grinding into slow motion as his hand moved back and forth. Back and forth.

He turned his head to glance back at her. "You've got a cramp, haven't you? I can feel it."

Um, yeah, but that's actually a hunk of scar tissue you're rubbing there, bucko...

Something else clutched deep in her belly, and she forgot about the pain in her thigh as another long-denied pain reared its needy head. Her helmet earphones picked up the faint sound of an old woman cackling. Afraid to let go of Kel's shoulders, she shook her head a little in an effort to knock out the encroaching channel.

“Stretch it out,” said Kel. “Once we’re out of the city, we’ll stop for an amble to get the blood going again.” He unceremoniously slipped his hand under her knee, lifted it and straightened her leg until it extended so her ankle rested his thigh. Her leg curved around his waist, forcing her groin even tighter against his lower back. Between the delicious, relieving stretch in her thigh, the heat of his body against her pelvis, and the vibration of the machine...

The roar in her ears now had nothing to do with the growling Harley. She wondered if she might be able to quietly enjoy an orgasm without him noticing. Then her leg threatened to cramp again.

“I need to get horizontal,” she ground out between her teeth, to no one in particular.

“Do you now?”

Too late, she forgot he could hear her over the helmet radios.

“So I can elevate my legs,” she said lamely.

“You’ll have a bed soon, darlin’, but you’re better off awake for now.” A quick glance to the rear, a lean to the left, and they zipped around the slow-moving tour bus as if no other cars existed on the crammed highway.

The green, rolling landscape flowed by as if they were a drop of water running unimpeded down a drainpipe.

“Enjoy the scenery,” he continued. “We’ll stop for tea in a bit. There’s a little place I know.”

“Where is it?”

He laughed. He seemed to do that a lot, now that the airport was behind them. “Just a mile or two up the road.”

Abruptly his hand left her leg as he reached up and switched off his helmet mike, dug into his back pocket—brushing the *inside* of her thigh in the process—and extracted his mobile phone.

The conversation was short, but she felt his body tense between her thighs.

He put the phone away, causing her to bite back a groan, and switched his helmet back on.

"That was Fionna. Apparently there's an accident up ahead. We'll need to take a detour. Can you put your leg back down for just a bit?"

She stifled her disappointment. "Yes, I think so."

"Put your arms 'round me, then."

"What?"

"Do it now—here's our turn."

Startled by his sudden command, she snaked her arms under his and clutched his shirt, feeling like she was going to catapult over his head as he braked the machine, leaned hard, dodged between two cars, then took off at full speed down an exit ramp. Something wild awakened in her chest, the urge to whoop with excitement warring with the fear-of-everything that had been her ever-present companion the past year.

O'Neill will take good care of you, Beith. That's what Paddy had promised.

For a wild second she thought, *I don't want to be taken care of.*

I want to fly.

Chapter Four

A mile or two up the road, indeed, thought Beith hours later, when Kel finally pulled the Harley over in a tiny village, in front of a row of stone buildings with brightly painted wooden doors.

The ride had gone by in a flash, and not only because of the blinding speed at which Kel drove the bike. Though there was barely a tree in sight, the stark beauty of the stony, rolling countryside had mesmerized her, and she found herself mentally photographing each land contour, thatched cottage, ruined abbey and stone fence they flew past. If she had dared let go of Kel's shirt, she would have whacked his helmet more than once to stop and let her get her camera.

But Kel had not let up on the throttle the entire ride. It was almost as if he thought someone was chasing them, by the way he had fractionally turned his head every few seconds to look in his rearview mirror.

Kel hit the kill switch, engaged the kickstand and pulled off his helmet.

"A mile or so, eh?" she said wryly as she struggled to get her own helmet off without taking the tip of her nose with it.

Kel slid off the bike sideways, leaving her front feeling cold and bereft. She wondered how his skin stayed so hot, when despite her layers, she felt a little chilled. She heard him laugh again, and then his hands brushed her neck and ears as he helped get her helmet off, back side first so that it slid forward over her face and off without taking any extra parts with it.

"I should have explained the concept of the Irish mile." His gaze darted up and down the street, then his shoulders relaxed.

“Looking for something?” she asked as she shook out her hair.

He shoved his keys into his pocket. “Just checking. I’ve had my share of run-ins with the Gardaí for speeding.”

“No, really?” she said, mouth quirking.

His gaze fell on her scarred lip and once again that odd expression passed over his face.

She busied herself with her hair, reminding herself that it didn’t matter what Kel thought of her face. He was hired to be her guide and her face was all he was ever going to see. A twinge of regret curled in her belly at the thought she’d probably never get to see any other parts of him, either.

Taking a silent breath, she looked up and found the sparkle in his eye, the half-smile and the accompanying dimple firmly in place. Her heart thumped.

“You must be hungry.”

Her foot slipped off the peg and an involuntary squeak escaped her throat as she lurched sideways. Cobblestone rushed toward her face. *This is gonna hurt*, she thought, a split second before she landed on rock-solid arms. She found herself clutched close to Kel’s chest, looking up into green eyes.

“Thanks,” she murmured. “Klutz. I mean me. Klutz.”

“Low blood sugar,” he replied, the dimple on one side of his mouth reappearing, like a north star. “When’s the last time you ate?”

Someone brushed past them on the sidewalk, a blurry figure in grey, indistinct out of the corner of her eye. The figure chuckled, low, husky, like rocks scraping together. The sound rolled lazily around her head and settled at the base of her skull, tickling an ancient part of her brain that was nothing but pure impulse.

Kiss him, daughter. Mark him as yours with your own mouth.

As if in a dream, she lifted her chin toward him.

Her stomach growled.

She shook herself and flicked her gaze to the left, but the figure had vanished. Shifting subtly, she made to ease out of his arms, and he set her on her feet without resistance. But with that half-smile firmly in place.

“Nothing solid since I left Cleveland,” she replied, straightening her jacket. “Was that the Burren we passed through?”

He took her change of subject in stride. “So you recognized it.”

“How could I not? Kemberlee described it as a place with ‘not a tree to hang a man, not enough water to drown him, and not enough earth to bury him in’.”

He laughed, scanning the street again. “That would be it. After I feed you, I’ll take you to the heart while the light is still good.”

“Then let’s get lunch to go and get out there,” she suggested, eager to begin photographing—and stop imagining what Kel’s body looked like naked.

He cocked his head. “We could. I would. But I have the feeling that if I let go of you right now, you’d fall down.”

Realizing she was still standing in his arms, she pulled free of his grasp and stepped back. Praying that her left leg would hold up. It did, without a wobble. By sheer force of her will.

Walking, she could do. Sitting for hours astraddle a motorcycle was something she hadn’t planned for.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are,” he said without a trace of rancor. Which somehow irritated her. “But I’ve friends in here and I’ll be stoppin’ in to say hello, at least.”

“Oh.”

“Take a breath.”

“What?”

He leaned forward and tapped her nose. “Close your mouth and inhale t’rough your nose.”

What is with this guy? Mentally rolling her eyes, she obeyed. *Ahhh...*

“Smell that, do you? That, my darlin’, is the best Irish breakfast in the west of Ireland.”

Mouth watering, Beith allowed herself to be led toward a red-painted door. “Will there be blood pudding?”

He raised an eyebrow in obvious surprise.

“My grandmother came from County Cork,” she said, feeling her scarred mouth stretch as she aimed her first genuine smile in his direction.

Kel’s foot missed the step up and he fell head-first through the pub’s half-open door.

Beith followed the sound of hearty guffaws and colorful insults toward her long-overdue breakfast.

The next time Kel stopped the bike, Beith slithered off the right side on her own. She had her helmet off, pannier open, camera out and a lens attached before he could even shut the engine off. He took his time securing the bike, enjoying the view of her bum as she leaned over the drystone fence by the side of the road, snapping pictures of a large dolmen about a hundred yards distant.

The mobile in his back pocket vibrated. He pulled it out and checked the number before he answered

“Fionna.”

“You feckin’ owe me for this one.”

“Where are you?”

“Right now? I myself am at Hook Head, enjoying the first real sunny day of the summer. Everyone else is spread out over County Wicklow.”

Kel grinned. “I do owe you.”

“Why am I doing this for you again?”

“Because once, a long time ago, I made you scream like a *bean sidhe*.”

“Because you stepped on my foot and *broke* it, you oaf.”

Kel grinned and snapped the mobile shut.

Walking up behind Beith, he slipped one arm around her waist, another under her legs, and unceremoniously lifted her over the low stone fence, setting her feet on the solid granite face of the Burren.

“What are you doing? Isn’t this someone’s private property?”

“As long as we don’t disturb the sheep, no one will mind.”

“What sheep?” she said, looking over the empty, desolate landscape.

“Exactly.” He climbed over the fence and joined her.

She smiled in delight and set off, picking her way uncertainly along the rocky ground.

“Funny. The ground sounds hollow,” she called over her shoulder.

In a few strides he caught up with her, his own boots ringing bluntly on the rock.

“This whole region is basically a giant granite shield, cut by millions of fissures, thanks to the wind and water. If you look at it from the air, the earth looks like the wrinkled face of the Hag.”

“You’ve seen it from the air?”

“Oh, absolutely,” he said offhandedly. “I’ve flown my chute over it hundreds of times.”

“You mean like a parasail?”

“Something like that. Like an ultralight, only with a chute instead of a wing.”

She stopped in her tracks and stared at him. “What is it that you do when you’re not taking defenseless artists on joy rides across the country?”

“I work for my brother. In security.”

“Security. That’s rich, the way you drive that bike.”

“Some very important personages stake their lives on my driving ability. Trust me, darlin’, you’re safer with me than driving yourself.”

She tilted her head. “What kind of security?”

“Let’s just say it’s the kind that keeps heads of state from coming to harm when visiting less than friendly ground.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

He grinned, amused at the lines that formed between her eyebrows. “Worried about me, are you?”

She snapped her mouth shut and moved on, cheeks flushed in a way that told him she was, at the very least, intrigued. This woman was different. Most women he met, when they learned what he did for a living, well, suffice to say he had no trouble finding company when he wanted it.

This one, she was timid. It would take time, but she’d come around. They all did. Even before they learned about his second love, extreme wilderness racing.

They reached the dolmen, a three-sided structure made up of solid stone slabs. Another slab perched precariously on top, held in place by nothing but gravity. To the uneducated eye, it looked like something out of the Flintstones.

She walked around it, touching the walls with tentative fingers, as if afraid she’d accidentally knock it down. “What is this?”

“It’s said to be a tomb of kings. At some point, it was covered with a mound of rocks—a burial cairn. There are some tombs not far from here, still buried. I can take you there if you like. They say this one could be older than Stonehenge.”

“How does it stay standing up? I don’t see any mortar.”

Kel couldn’t resist. “Hag spit. Stronger than any mortar.”

Beith’s mouth quirked. She swung her lens toward him and quickly snapped his picture.

“The Hag,” she prodded, continuing to circle the dolmen, taking pictures from every angle.

“She’s also called the Cailleach.” Fionna’s Guinness-fueled lectures came back to him as if she were speaking in his ear. “She’s said to inhabit the very bones of this land.”

“Who is she? This Cailleach?”

“The mother of all other gods and goddesses. The most ancient of all. The most primal. The most...” He gestured, looking for a word, taking a second to study a car passing by on the road.

“Feared.” Beith ducked inside the dolmen. “I wonder if this place is a shrine to her.” Her voice echoed from inside the chamber.

The car rolled on by without slowing down, and Kel relaxed.

“Hard to say.” He followed her inside, finding it was tall enough for him to stand almost upright. “She’s older than this place. So old, no one knows her true name. She’s at least as old as the world itself. We don’t even know how she was worshiped, what rituals they used.”

“So she’s been forgotten.” Beith angled her knees wide and did a strangely balletic move to the floor to dip her fingers in a small pool of collected rainwater in the dim back of the structure.

“And that makes her a little wild. Unpredictable, because no one knows what will displease her. They say she’s a lustful goddess and no man was safe walking the roads alone at night. About a hundred years ago, near this very spot, they found a man. Or what was left of him. Just a bag of bones—but by all reports he died with a smile on his face.”

Beith shot him a look, and he almost snorted out loud at his own words. He was starting to think like Fionna, believing in these antiquated tales. Yet, in this vast, empty space, he felt smaller than he’d ever felt in his life. Odd. He’d been coming here since he was a child and knew it like the back of his hand. Every dolmen. Every tomb. Every contour of the land.

Somehow, he felt like the land was watching him. Watching what he would do next. Judging if he was worthy. Of what?

He shrugged it off.

“This is amazing.” Beith wiped her wet fingers on her jeans, then rose and exited the dolmen. She walked in ever-widening circles around it, stopping every few feet to snap a picture. Of a tiny flower. Of rocks. Of the landscape. Of the miniature dolmens that tourists had built with splintered-off chips of rock.

“There are tern nesting sites here?”

“No, closer to the coast, where we’ll be staying. Tomorrow’s soon enough to start scouting them out.”

She nodded and switched lenses to begin shooting the stony horizon.

She’s hiding behind that camera.

He watched for a few more minutes, irritation growing as she continued to look at the Burren only through her lens. Finally he could take no more.

In a few strides he caught up with her. Coming up behind, he reached around and caught hold of her hands.

“Stop. Look with your eyes, not your lens.”

Her body stiffened in his arms. “I work from high res photographs. The more I take, the better my final product.”

“Give me the camera.” He didn’t know where his words were coming from, but he suddenly didn’t know what he would do if she didn’t obey.

She shifted, releasing the camera, and he slung it over his shoulder. She made no move to step out of his arms. Did he detect her trembling?

“Okay, now what?”

What indeed? He wasn’t sure, himself. All he knew was, he’d spent the last several hours with her warm body up against his back, trying to concentrate on the road and making sure they weren’t being followed, all while battling a raging hard-on. He’d never felt this with any woman, ever—never this close to losing control.

And now she was in his arms, her soft body pressed against him. Her sweet scent filled his nose. The sounds around him went silent—no wind, no birds, no passing cars. Nothing but a faint noise in his ears, like someone taking a deep breath and holding, holding it. A tension that needed release. His body took up a slow throb, a drumbeat he felt from his feet to the crown of his head.

Keeping hold of her, he walked her back inside the dolmen, took her hands and placed them on the stone wall.

His better sense warned him she was going to think him completely insane.

After almost a full minute, she spread her fingers out on the stone slab.

“Do you feel that?” she whispered. “What is that?”

He felt it. The low, insistent vibration, the pulsing, like the flow of electricity along a wire.

He felt her breath quicken and realized he had a hard-on pressed against the small of her back. He cursed silently, but nothing on this green earth was going to make him move away from her. She turned suddenly in his arms, backing up against the stone. Her eyes were huge, her pupils dilated, her breathing fast. His gaze fell to her mouth, and he wanted to cover it with his, scar be damned.

For a weird second a strange weakness swamped him. He wanted to lie on the ground and beg the Hag—something. What? Release him. To let him leave this place with all his parts intact. Especially his heart, which thumped like it wanted to leap out of his chest.

Beith’s hair came loose and blew about her face. Her expression was one of a woman who wanted him. All of him.

She blinked once and licked her lips. Her brown eyes turned deep gold.

Somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard an old woman laugh.

As if an unseen hand shoved him from behind, he leaned forward and took her mouth.

Her first thought was that Patrick had chosen her tour guide well.

Her second was that she was standing in broad daylight, pressed against a millennia-old stone dolmen that might at any moment tumble to the ground, trying to put her tongue down a near-perfect stranger’s throat.

She felt cold stone under her hands where they were pressed flat at her sides. She commanded them to move so she could push Kel away, delicious as he tasted in her mouth. She didn't know what had driven her to allow herself to stand in his arms like this. She'd heard Ireland was full of magic, but she'd attributed it to the fanciful tourist brochures. In any case, this had to stop.

Her hands didn't move.

She whimpered into his mouth and struggled to raise her hands, but they stayed stuck fast to the stone as if glued.

Her heart began to pound, but strangely, not in panic. She tore her mouth away from his and turned her head to one side, gasping for air.

"Kel."

His mouth roamed down the side of her neck. His labored breathing filled her ears.

Even as she arched her neck to give him better access, she yanked and tugged at her hands, but they refused to move. He misread the writhing of her body and unzipped her jacket.

Before she could gasp her next breath, his hands dove under the two thin layers of shirts she wore and sought her breasts.

Oh God.

"Kel!"

Cool air beaded her nipples, and she found herself arching her back into his touch. His fingers tugged at the hard peaks, and he swallowed her raw cry as he took her mouth again.

It had been so long. But this was different. Although she couldn't move, it was she who controlled the ravenous power spiraling up from her feet through her spine, to explode with sensation along every nerve ending. She found that wherever she centered her spinning thoughts, the energy followed and created pools of almost unbearable pleasure.

Push him away? *Hell* no.

Why couldn't she move her hands? She wanted those hands on Kel, in his hair, to pull his mouth down to her aching breasts. Why were her

feet planted just as solidly on the rocky ground below? She wanted to wrap her legs around him and pull him inside. Yet she could do nothing but stand there, compelled by some unseen force to do nothing but feel.

Something wild pounded in her head, exultation razor-edged with sheer panic. The same kind of panic she'd felt when she'd woken up in the hospital, weighed down by casts, IVs and miles of wire, a tube down her throat. Only this time she had no desire to break free.

His hands left her breasts to slide down her torso, and just the knowledge of where his hands were heading was enough. The energy that surged up from the ground, centered in her groin.

She tipped her head back and screamed as she came, but his mouth followed hers and swallowed the sound.

Suddenly, her hands were free.

She wasted no time in grabbing two handfuls of his glorious hair and plundering his mouth as she rode out the waves of pleasure on his marauding hand. Finally she pulled his face away from hers. His hair had come loose from its ponytail, and the wind whipped it around his face.

"What is this place?" she gasped, the last echoes of her orgasm still shuddering her body.

Kel blinked and yanked his hands away, his face pale, but his eyes still burning with desire. His lips moved. He was saying something, but no sound reached her ears. No sound but the laughing woman. Nearer. Louder.

She wanted him right now, down on this hard stone earth, any way she could get him. The mental image of the two of them naked on the land shortened her breath.

Curving her fingers under his jaw, she pulled his face to hers and sucked his lower lip between hers, watching his eyes. His low growl vibrated against her lips, but instead of reaching for her again, he planted his hands on the stone on either side of her head and let her have her way with his mouth. His breath came faster, his erection pressing against her belly.

She let her hands slide down his chest, down his belly, which contracted at her touch, to stroke him through his jeans.

This Beith was like no Beith she had ever known. Old or new. But she could learn to like this one, the one who held this man captive with only the power of her touch.

The land changed and shifted around her. Grass growing in the rock fissures at her feet became millions of strands of mossy hair. Long, rounded slopes became thighs; the cairn-topped hills, breasts that swayed in the sharpening wind. Stony ridges, arms that hemmed them in. Rainwater pools became eyes that shimmered with lightning-hot life force.

Ah, rasped a voice, unseen, coming from somewhere below her feet, winding up her spine like a serpent to vibrate in her ears. Long have I waited for such a man to lie on my belly.

Beith swiveled her head around, Kel's breath hot on her neck, and found a dark shape lurking deep in the back of the dolmen. Burning yellow eyes peered out at her from the dark shape. No, not at her.

The eyes were on Kel.

Thank you for bringing him to me, daughter. He should fill my needs nicely. For a little while.

Something inside Beith shifted from apprehension to fury. "No. No, you can't have him." Kel didn't seem to hear the snarl that emerged from her throat.

A low grunt was her answer. Now that's what I wanted to see. A moment ago you would have pushed him away if I hadn't held your hands and forced you to use your own power. Take him and enjoy him—for now. Whatever's left of him after tonight belongs to me.

The black shape and burning eyes faded away, leaving only the little rippling pool of water on the floor. She felt Kel's hands on her shoulders.

She turned toward him. Her vision blurred and her knees buckled as she caught her left foot in a crack and her leg gave way. She found herself scooped up and on her way back toward the Harley.

"Did you see that?"

"I saw something," he said tightly. He lifted her over the fence and stood her on her feet. "We're getting out of here."

She leaned against the stones and surprised herself by laughing drunkenly as adrenaline left her limbs. "It was the Hag. The old woman of the land. The Cailleach."

He climbed over the wall and stood before her for a long moment, saying nothing, his face unreadable. Then he set his shoulder in her belly and hoisted her up like a sack of potatoes, which only set her off laughing again. The logical part of her brain observed from a distance and *tsked*.

"Can you ride, woman?"

She snorted, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said dryly.

"She wanted you. I told her—" she paused to gasp and she kicked her feet as she laughed harder, "—told her she couldn't have you."

"Did you, now?" He sounded amused, but he didn't slow his pace. In one strong motion, he swung her off his shoulder and onto the back of the bike.

She looked back at the dolmen, and her laughter died. Suddenly, all she wanted was to get herself—and Kel—away from here.

"I need a drink."

"We need that bed." He brought the Harley to life, put it in gear and accelerated down the track without even pausing to put their helmets on. He said something else, but the wind sucked his words away.

Beith slid her arms around his shoulders, tilted her head back, and let the cool wind tangle her hair. For the first time since her accident, she felt fearless.

Take him and enjoy him, the Hag had said.

Oh, yes, she thought. *The old Beith is back and there'll be nothing left of him for you, old woman, when I'm done.*

The Hag let her fingers trail through Beith's streaming hair as the midnight-blue-and-silver wheeled beast streaked past in a pitiful effort to get away.

This land was her body, and anywhere they touched land, they touched her. She knew exactly where they were at every moment. She felt the pulse of their pounding hearts in her own breast. The throb of their excited bodies in her own center.

Yes. These two were exactly what she had been waiting for.

She lay back and reveled in the delicious tension between her mountainous thighs, an itch she would not scratch. Not yet. She would let it build until the ripest moment. When the time came, their cries and hers would echo in tandem.

Their release would merely shake their hearts.

Hers would take the tide that crashed against the Cliffs of Mòr and turn it back upon itself.

The Hag shifted so that a shimmering stream flowed over her aching breasts and throbbing center, letting the wetness stimulate her dreams and cool her ardor just enough to allow her to wait.

Coiled. Impatient.

And ready.

Chapter Five

The poorly maintained cattle tracks and fire roads leading to Inisnagowan Castle were not for the faint of heart nor weak of vehicle suspension, but Kel barely slowed the bike.

His heart pounded in a way that he'd never felt, not in any of his extreme sport activities. Not even when he'd launched his chute off the Cliffs of Mòr—illegally, which was the most fun—or hung upside down in a tangled rappelling harness in New Zealand with only Fionna's quick hands to keep him from falling to his death.

His mother had told him he had the sight, but he had never felt it nor believed it. Until he'd seen the primordial black creature with the runny yellow eyes crouching at the back of the dolmen, and Beith talking to it in gut-deep syllables that bore no resemblance to English.

The energy that emanated from it was female, but felt like no female he had ever known. Its power would have sent him backward several steps—he who never retreated from any challenge—if it hadn't been for Beith standing her ground between it and him. When Beith had turned and tripped into his arms, that same fiery light had burned in the back of her pupils. Then she'd blinked and it had disappeared.

In that split second, he had been afraid.

He remembered the old tales from childhood, and from Fionna's late-night bardic ramblings. Of how the Cailleach would walk among the people every so often in the guise of a ravishingly beautiful woman, luring young men into a forest. There, she would rut with them all in a vain attempt to slake her lust. Taking each one over and over again, tossing aside one lifeless body and leaping upon the next. Until they were all dead.

He shook it off. *Those were just tales. Myth.*

Beith said nothing during the ride, her breath warm and coming fast on the back of his neck as the Harley bounced over the rough roads. Her hands scrambled for purchase on the shirt covering his chest, looking for something to hang on to. He risked a few seconds with one hand off the handlebar to move her hands down to the waistband of his Levis. But instead of gripping the waistband, she slipped her small hands under it to press hard against his lower belly, nails digging in. A groan vibrated his throat. Her cold flesh and the sting of her nails only made the pressure in his groin increase. He set his jaw and tried to concentrate on the road while his imagination conjured up erotic images of her naked skin in his fire-lit bedchamber.

As the tern flew, it wasn't many miles to the castle, but there was no direct way to get there. The shadows of the late midsummer day grew long as the castle's single stone tower loomed into view. Evening mists already gathered around its base. Urgency gnawed at his gut, to get her far away from the Hag—and in his bed—as quickly as possible. Fionna would have laughed at this. Even now, they rode on the Hag's back and no doubt the Old One knew exactly where they were. Nevertheless, the quicker they got behind the walls of Inisnagowan, the quicker he would draw an easy breath.

From the outside, Inisnagowan looked like any one of hundreds of abandoned stone castles and abbeys that dotted the Ireland landscape. That was just how he liked it.

Inside...he smiled to himself. Well, Beith would soon see.

He leaned the bike into a blind curve that disappeared over the crest of a rise. He'd traveled this road enough to know exactly how it dropped off on the other side. *Too fast*, he realized, and throttled down as he crested the rise. To come face to face with a knot of about a half-dozen sheep loitering in the middle of the track.

Beith made a sound as he reflexively hit the brakes. The rear wheel skidded sideways precisely at the same moment the front wheel hit a fresh pothole. Beith screamed as she came off the bike and sailed into

the steep embankment beside the road. Kel managed to jerk his right leg out from under the bike as it went down in the mud. "Bugger!" he yelled, frightening the sheep back through the break in the fence.

He killed the engine and left the bike on its side, jumping over it to get to Beith. The bank was soft, thanks to thick layers of turf, moss and grass, but he'd heard her hit it with a solid thump. She lay flat on her back, eyes huge, mouth wide on a gasp she could not take.

She reached for him, grabbing two handfuls of his shirt as her lips moved in a silent litany of *oh shit oh shit oh shit...*

He pressed her back against the slope. "Try not to move your head, darlin'. Hold on a few more seconds. Your wind'll come back. You're all right. Easy now." He knew well how agonizing those ten to twenty seconds were before the diaphragm re-engaged. He passed the time cursing himself, brushing her hair away from her face and probing the back of her head for bumps.

Finally she got one word out. "*Leg.*" Followed by several long, relieved breaths as air flooded back into her lungs. But none of the anxiety left her eyes as her hand went to her left thigh.

"Hurt?"

A quick, jerky nod. Fear in her eyes. Her throat working convulsively as she fought some strong emotion. Kel cursed himself again, looked at the leg and gently ran his hands over it, but everything seemed to be in proper alignment. Nothing moved or crunched. He grasped her ankle and carefully bent her knee. "How's this?"

"No, I think that's fine. It's...*oh shit* I cannot go through this again..." She passed a shaky hand through her hair.

"Through what again? What's wrong?"

Angrily she dashed tears from her eyes. "I was in an accident not too long ago. My left thigh bone is pretty much nothing but plates and screws."

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "*Shite*, woman, why didn't you tell me?" He put up his hands. "Never mind that now. I'm going to press on your belly. Tell me if anything hurts."

She parted her jacket and lifted her shirt, but he put her hands aside. "Don't move anything if you can help it, especially your head."

"My neck's okay. It doesn't hurt."

"Humor me," he said more curtly than he meant to. He closed his eyes and pressed the flats of his fingers around the four quadrants of her belly, feeling for anything that wasn't supposed to be there.

She laughed shakily. "You've done this before."

He nodded and kept probing her soft flesh. "In my line of work, a certain level of medical training is required."

"Is it, now?" She raised one eyebrow as her wobbly voice mimicked his Irish lilt.

"Tis." He offered nothing else. "All right. Let's stand you up and see what we've got."

She swallowed audibly, rubbing her leg.

"Better to find out now, darlin'." He gentled his voice as best he could, what with the adrenaline surging in his veins. "Then I'll know whether to take you on to the castle, or to Galway to hospital." *At which point Declan will find us and I'll be a dead man, brother or no.*

She was just scared, he told himself. If the bone were truly broken, she'd know it.

"Castle, huh?" she said, as if glad to have a different idea distract her from her leg.

"Castle. That's where we're staying the night."

She nodded and pressed her hands against the embankment to lever herself up.

"Let me do the work," he said gruffly, sliding his arms under hers and lifting her to her feet. For a long moment she clutched his shoulders, then let her weight come down on both legs.

She shifted, testing. Then wiped her nose on her sleeve and lifted her chin.

"I think I'm okay."

Just like that, the wildish Beith who'd offered herself up to him with abandon on the Burren, who practically had him coming in his jeans on the bike with a simple touch, reverted to the Beith he'd met at the airport. Stiff and distant. The one who didn't want help, didn't want to be touched.

His heart did something else it had never done before. It ached.

The sun slipped behind the hill and she shivered in the gathering evening fog. Shock would be setting in right about now. "Don't move," he commanded. "Just stand there and I'll bring the bike to you."

"It's three steps. I can do it."

"Tree steps you don't need to take, girl. Stand there."

I'm going to feel this in the morning. Every bone and muscle in her body began to ache as Kel pulled up in front of the imposing square tower, which was perched in a glen between two long slopes that led down to the sea. She craned her neck to peer up at its four stories of sheer stone walls, punctuated here and there with arrow-slit windows.

He reached back and laid a firm hand on her knee. "I'll be right back."

She was getting a little tired of being ordered around. She scooted back a few inches to give him room to get off the bike, and just that small effort set off a Greek chorus of twinges and pains. Kel opened a concealed panel in the stone wall and set about punching a series of buttons. Other than that, there was nothing on the outside of the stark edifice to indicate anything other than bats lived here.

A movement at the corner of the building caught her eye, and she leaned slightly to look beyond where Kel was standing.

She was back. The shadowy, yellow-eyed figure that had spoken to her in the dolmen. Somehow she had followed them here. The Hag said nothing, just squatted in the lengthening twilight and gathering fog,

fondling one of her own pendulous breasts as she stared at Kel and licked her full, shiny lips.

Breath coming fast, Beith tried to get off the bike, her only thought to get to Kel. But her leg shook as it met the ground and she was afraid to move any farther for fear of tumbling to the fog-wet turf. "Get away from us, old woman," she gritted under her breath. "I told you, you can't have him."

There is no running from me, daughter. I will have what I desire. This one may live long enough to satisfy me. But alas, none of them ever does. The yellow eyes looked her up and down. *And you are not woman enough to keep me from what I want.*

"Watch me, Old One."

Oh, indeed, I shall.

Kel's broad chest loomed in her line of vision. Two strong arms wrapped around her as her left leg seized up in another spasm. "Dammit," she hissed through her teeth as he picked her up yet again to cradle her like a child. "Stop *carrying* me everywhere. It's getting annoying."

"It's quicker than standing around arguing with you," he shot back, shifting her so that her arms fell naturally around his shoulders. "Besides, you're so..."

"Easy?"

"I was going to say portable."

Even as he spoke, she looked over his shoulder at the Old One grinning with green, algae-covered teeth. Rubbing herself as her yellow gaze roamed Kel's broad back.

Beith narrowed her eyes at the Hag and tightened her arms around Kel's neck. To the core of her being, she sensed his life was in danger. To save him, she would have to overcome every demon clinging to her soul

She had no time to admire the interior of the castle as Kel carried her through an anteroom with stone walls adorned only with iron hooks, on

which hung heavy yellow rain slickers. Several pairs of wellies were marshaled neatly along the wall.

Through one arched doorway she caught sight of a dimly lit great room and a fireplace big enough for her to stand up in, before he whisked her on by and up a narrow spiral staircase. He paused only to hit a light switch with his elbow. Two landings swept by her vision, each with doorways leading to cozy bedrooms and sitting areas, all simply furnished.

“All right, I take back my statement about you being ‘portable,’” he puffed as he stepped sideways through a door at the top of the stairs. He elbowed on the light, and she gasped in wonder.

The large bedchamber was a study in medieval splendor, all stone walls and shadowed alcoves, rough-hewn wooden tables and sturdy caned chairs. The soft light of midsummer evening filtered through what had to be modern windows installed in an alcove, falling on an unadorned canopy bed loaded with pillows and tartan blankets. The bed was arranged next to an enormous carved-granite fireplace, with an iron stove set inside it and a basket of peat ready to burn.

She looked down at the floor as he set her on her feet, and laughed.

“Sheepskin rugs. You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Nearly a dozen of them, pools of wooly cream against the coffee-colored wood-plank floor.

“You’ll come to love them in the morning when you get out of bed and your feet hit this floor,” he said, sliding her jacket down her arms and depositing it in a muddy pile in a corner.

She looked down at her feet. “Kel, I’m covered in mud.” She made to step off the rug he’d set her on, but a fresh ache in her back stopped her cold.

“Even with your muddy shoes, I daresay it’s cleaner than when the sheep was wearin’ it.”

She laughed and looked up into his face, and the laugh died in her throat. The Kellan O’Neill before her bore little resemblance to the care-free, ready-for-anything man who had raced off with her on his

motorcycle that morning. This Kellan's face was tight with an emotion he was clearly uncomfortable showing.

Tenderness bloomed in her chest, and she reached up to stroke his lower lip with her thumbs, seeking to ease the tension there. After a moment, he released a breath, took her hands and kissed each of her palms. Then he drew them up and around his neck, slid his palms down her sides and pulled her close. She went without resistance, the trace of surprise in the back of her mind melting away with a rapidity that left her wondering at how quickly and easily this land had changed her back to something resembling her old self.

"I have to know something," he rasped.

"Anything," she agreed, ignoring the soreness in her shoulders as she sifted through his thick, glossy hair with her fingers.

"If what happened on the Burren was real."

He lowered his head, and she met his parted lips with her own.

This kiss was gentler than the first, but no less charged. His taste filled her mouth, entered her bloodstream and spread fire clear out to her fingertips and toes. His hands roamed her back, gently, finding the bruised places and soothing the hurt away with his heat.

He pulled her hips in to his, pressing her throbbing belly against his erection. *Mmmmmmm.*

She wanted him. Right now. On the sheepskin rug, clichéd as it was.

He took one of her hands and moved it to the bulge in his jeans. "I've had this since the first moment you wrapped your legs around me on the bike," he said against her mouth.

She curved her fingers around him and felt moisture gather between her own legs. *Oh no, Old Woman, I will have this all to myself.*

She took a step back to gain access to his jeans buttons, but took a swift breath when her leg threatened to cramp yet again.

Her stomach tightened, knowing now what the Hag meant when she said she'd be watching. She'd be watching for Beith to weaken, to give her an opening to get to Kel.

Kel closed his eyes and with an effort, regained control of himself. “I think we’d better assess the damage,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“I’m going to damage *you* if you stop,” she muttered, shivering now that he had stepped away, robbing her of his body heat.

He lifted her chin and appeared to be reassessing her pupils. “Fixed and dilated,” he pronounced, making her laugh again despite the combination of aches and unsatisfied desire warring for space in her body.

“Only because you’re killing me,” she whined.

“Your clothes are going to have to come off. But not until I warm this place up a bit.”

She had a retort, but she forgot it at the echo of an old woman’s laughter drifting up the spiral staircase. She shivered again and wrapped her arms around herself, moving gingerly to sit in one of the cane chairs near the iron grate. Kel knelt there, lighting some blocks of dried peat. Within minutes, an aroma somewhere between burning leaves and smoldering coal accompanied heat radiating from the fireplace. Against her will, her eyelids drooped. After all, it had been nearly forty-eight hours since she’d left Cleveland.

She shook her head. *If I sleep, the Hag wins.*

She opened her eyes and found Kel gone.

She lurched out of the chair, turning in place to look for him. She’d only closed her eyes for a second!

Behind a wide wood-and-wrought-iron door that stood partially ajar, she heard water running, cabinets opening and closing. She grasped the back of the chair and sagged in relief. A moment later he appeared, his own muddy shirt already off, feet bare. His Irish skin was by no means tan, but it was all sun-kissed, solid muscle.

“Let’s get you taken care of,” he said quietly, making to scoop her up again. Beith made an impatient sound.

He raised his hands in a peace gesture, and she walked into the bath without his help.

More rustic stone, which cleverly disguised all the accoutrements of a modern bathroom, greeted her eyes. A playground-sized tub, full of water, steamed gently under a stone arch, its brass rim just visible above the rough granite sides.

He sat her on the edge of the tub, cushioned by a fluffy folded towel, and began peeling her clothes off, layer by layer.

Since her accident, there was no part of her body that hadn't been seen by myriad clinical specialists, but none of those people had been a half-naked hardbody like Kel.

Bare from the waist up, she followed his soft, murmured commands to move all the joints in her upper body and lift her arms so he could run his hands over her ribs. At every tender spot, he apologized and kissed it.

Her nipples beaded and she fought the urge to squirm against the desire pooling in her groin, knowing nothing was going to happen until he was satisfied she was nothing more than bruised.

His hands went to the front of her jeans, and her skin went cold. She closed her eyes and lifted herself a little off her seat so he could slide the fabric down her legs.

She turned her face to one side, feeling raw and exposed under the bathroom's too-bright lights. The silence stretched. She crossed her arms over her breasts and sighed, feeling defeated.

"Jesus, woman, how did this happen?"

She swallowed and cleared her throat, refusing to look at his face, which she was sure must be twisted in horror.

"Riding my mountain bike in the Hocking Hills in southern Ohio. The trail was steeper than I expected and I couldn't brake before it crossed a park road. I got T-boned. By a motorcycle. He was speeding. But then again, so was I." She laughed at her own weak attempt at a joke.

"Holy *shite*, and you got on the back of mine? Look at me."

She couldn't quite bring herself to do it. He touched her face and turned it toward him where he knelt before her on the cold floor.

"You trusted me. I'm humbled."

Tears blurred her eyes, and she waved a hand. “Well, I figured I had to get back on the horse sometime, so to speak.” She dashed away one tear that escaped down her cheek, caught sight of her mangled leg and quickly looked away.

“I know this is my leg, but I haven’t quite gotten used to looking at it yet.” She tried for a lightness she didn’t feel.

“It’s not that bad.”

She smiled at the hint of laughter in his voice, then caught her breath as he smoothed his hot hands over the roadmap of scars on her thigh. She glanced down to find him looking at them with nothing but wonder on his face.

“I’d kill to have a look at your x-rays.” He ran his fingers along the longest scar, a thin pink line which disappeared under her underwear and curved into her buttock.

She released a long breath, one she realized she had been holding for over a year. Ever since her alleged boyfriend had taken one look at her battered body in the hospital bed, the scar on her face, and had turned on his heel and left.

“I have miniaturized copies in my wallet.” She tilted her head in amusement at the way Kel’s eyes lit up. “It’s for when I set off airport security alarms. It proves I’m not a terrorist.”

“Where’s your wallet?” he asked eagerly.

For the next several minutes, still perched on the side of the tub with a towel wrapped around her body, she took Kel on a tour of her reconstructed femur and pelvis. What kind of man got excited about a picture of bones held together with plates and screws?

Only a special one, she thought. Or a weird one.

“Ah, so that’s why you did that pliét move in the dolmen.” He turned the picture sideways to study her mended hip socket.

“That’s right. If I bend over like a normal person, the joint might pop out.” She was surprised at how matter-of-fact her own voice sounded. It had to be the way he was sitting cross-legged on the rug at her feet, the hot skin of one shoulder casually rubbing up against the puckered skin

on her thigh. She felt her shrunken heart grow a little bigger as admiration—and maybe even a little affection—crept in.

“I have bigger copies of these at home,” she said as she slipped the pictures back into her wallet and dropped it in the open carry-on bag on the floor. She extracted a clip and quickly twisted her hair up on top of her head.

Then she surprised herself by adding, “You’ll have to come visit and I’ll show them to you.”

He turned his head and looked up at her. For a long second, the off-hand invitation hung in the air between them. Almost long enough for her to think she shouldn’t have issued it.

The corner of Kel’s eyes crinkled.

“Want to see mine?”

“Your what?”

“My scars. Here, look.” He rose to his feet, turned his back on her and dropped his pants.

For the next several minutes Kel enjoyed her shrieks of laughter as he pointed out every ding, dent and scar on his well-used body from head to toe, including what he claimed was a bullet hole in his bum.

This woman, he concluded, hadn’t had near enough laughter in her life. At least not for the past year. His decision to sneak her out from under Declan’s nose had been the right one.

His decision to drop his pants in front of her was also the right one. Even though he had surprised himself almost as much as Beith when he’d done it. If he’d gazed into her soft eyes, filled with something akin to gratitude, for one more second, he might have started feeling for her what he’d never felt with any woman before.

So he’d broken the tension by doing the first thing that came to mind. Compare war wounds. While she had many scars but only one story, each mark on his body had its own tale. The more tales he told, the brighter the sparkle in her eyes, a sparkle that looked like it belonged

there. Like it had been lost for a long time, but had finally found its way home.

She showed no hint of embarrassment as she leaned close and squinted at the round scar on his right butt cheek.

"There's no way that's a bullet hole," she declared.

"Tis," he replied, pretending offense that she'd doubt him.

"I bet it's from a piece of rock salt."

"On my mam's life, it was a shotgun pellet. If you don't believe me, ask Fionna."

"Oh, Fionna was there for this one, as well?" Beith raised an eyebrow.

"She's the one who put it there."

Beith laughed. "Now *that* I don't doubt."

They grinned at each other, and once again Kel had the sensation of everything in his life clicking into place. He wasn't sure what to make of that feeling. He wasn't a man who was big on comfort. He liked things fast and loose. On the edge.

Still, things had never moved this fast with any woman. Sure, and he could go out and find someone to warm his bed for a night. And had. But that had been years ago and he'd quickly grown tired of it. These days, he enjoyed the chase. The game. Choosing a woman and dancing the dance of seduction. For a few weeks. A few days, at the very least.

But Beith, she'd taken to the game more quickly than he would have hoped.

Trouble was, he wasn't sure he wanted to play it this time. And that worried him.

He cleared his throat. "The water's going to get cold."

Beith covered her mouth and made a coughing sound that sounded suspiciously like "rocksalt".

"That's it."

She giggled madly as he swooped in, scooped her up and made as if he was going to simply drop her into the water.

"Okay okay okay! It's a bullet hole! I give!"

“Good choice,” he grumbled, stepping into the steaming tub and lowering both her and himself into the water.

She let out a sigh of pure enjoyment as she settled in and leaned forward to give him room, scooping hot water in her hands and sluicing it over her shoulders. The tub was plenty big enough for them both to sit in it without touching.

At the sight of a few tendrils of hair curling at the tender nape of her neck, something in his throat seized up and the urge to keep her laughing died. He busied himself with a wash cloth, lathering it up and reaching out to gently wash away the travel grime and road mud from her body.

She stilled at the first contact, but then relaxed as he rubbed the nubby cloth across her back. His fingers brushed smooth skin and glided over the ridges just under it. Her ribs. He made a mental note to feed her again after their bath was finished.

“You know,” she said hazily, “twenty-four hours ago I was in a flying tin can, trapped in a window seat by two football players on my left. Drinking warm diet Coke and wishing they hadn’t stuck me in front of a screaming infant.”

“Mmm.”

“Planning ahead on how I was going to get back home with my sketches intact.”

“And now you’re naked in a tub being felt up by a strange man.”

“Strange just about covers it,” she said wryly, and from behind he could see by the curve of her cheek the exact instant her smile faded. The muscles in her neck stiffened. “Like what happened at the dolmen this afternoon.”

Kel’s hand stilled. Fionna’s warning echoed in his head, and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell Beith what his friend had dreamed about the Hag.

“Ours wouldn’t be the first strange experience out on the Burren,” he said instead. “Whatever it was, even if it was the Hag herself, it can’t get to us in here.”

Her shoulders lifted an inch toward her shoulders. "I don't know about that," she said slowly. "I...I think I saw it again just outside the castle."

She doesn't think. She knows.

Kel dropped the cloth into the water, took her tense shoulders and eased her back against his chest. He folded his arms around her and felt a fine tremor under her skin.

"There's iron on the doors," he said, as much to reassure himself as her. "They say the other crowd won't cross it."

She was quiet a long moment.

She doesn't believe me.

With each breath, her skin moved fractionally against his, friction eased by the warm water. His cock responded, but he found himself loathe to set her away from him.

Before, out on the Burren, the Hag's magic had overwhelmed them. Some part of him wanted to know if what had happened between them out there was all the Hag—or something more.

He let his erection press against the small of her back. And waited.

A soft, shuddering sigh escaped her mouth. He closed his eyes and hoped like hell it meant what he thought it did. She shifted a little, arching her back against the pressure. He couldn't contain his low groan.

He felt her muscles relax, and she turned her head and lifted an eyebrow.

"So...is that a shillelagh in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

Kel rolled his eyes. "That was probably the worst line I've ever heard."

She shrugged and levered away from him.

"I've always wanted to use that word in a sentence," she teased, smiling despite the fatigue shadowing her eyes.

The huge tub let her turn around with ease, and once she was facing him she picked up the cloth to return the favor of a bath. He watched her

breasts float in the water, and his mouth went dry. She passed the cloth over his skin, cleaning mud off his arms, face, and chest, leaning forward to playfully flip his hair aside and scrub at his ears and the back of his neck.

Eventually the hot water seemed to sap her energy, and he reached for her and laid her against his chest again. This time she melted into him, her too-thin body almost disappearing when he put his arms around her.

Something fierce reared up in his soul, a wholly unfamiliar emotion so strong he closed his eyes against it.

Kellan O'Neill loved women. No doubt about that. But until this moment he had never felt so certain that if anything threatened to harm *this* particular woman, he wouldn't hesitate to kill in order to protect her.

Careful, boyo, warned a voice in the back of his head. You only laid eyes on the woman a few hours ago. This is supposed to be a casual summer fling, remember?

He watched his own hands move over her skin, as if they had minds of their own. He let them do what they would. She writhed slowly, graceful in the water, raising her arms over her head and running her fingers into his hair as he traced slippery circles over her breasts. He avoided her nipples, torturing her until she groaned and arched her back so that the aching tips finally brushed his fingers.

He kissed the tender, sensitive skin on the side of her neck, just under her ear. She smelled of soap, and of the wind that had whipped through her hair all day on the Harley. He closed his eyes and drank in the scent, and let his hands wander down over her soft belly and between her legs.

She opened her mouth on a soft, breathy "oh" and let her thighs drift apart in the water. He slipped his fingers under her panties, parted her swollen, sensitive flesh and let his fingers stroke in and out of her cleft, one thumb zeroing in on her clit.

She gasped and arched, and he opened his eyes to the incredibly erotic sight of her own hands on her breasts, teasing her own nipples,

while his darker hands worked the flesh between her legs. His cock grew harder and he pressed one hand against her belly to tighten contact with her back.

Her hips bucked once against his hand, and her vagina pulsed around his fingers.

“Yes,” he whispered in her ear.

Her head thrashed restlessly from side to side.

“No,” she groaned.

Shuddering, she turned and lay with her breasts pressed against his chest, sucking his lower lip into her mouth while her hand closed around his hard cock. He feasted on her mouth for a few moments, then let his head fall back against the tub rim. Her lips trailed down his neck as she stroked him.

She closed her lips over his flat nipple and flicked the nub with the tip of her tongue, then gently set her teeth on it. His breath hissed as he ran his hands into her hair, removing the clip and letting the sunlight-colored strands fall into his hands. He held her there, lifting his chest out of the water to give her better access. His hips began a slow, involuntary pumping against her hand.

Through slitted eyelids he enjoyed the primal scene—the two of them surrounded by ancient stone, her head moving over his chest, hand disappearing below the water to alternately stroke his cock and cup his balls.

Sweet Jesus, she’s beautiful.

She grasped his shoulders and pulled her buoyant body through the water over him, sliding along his skin until her face loomed over his and her slightly parted legs allowed her swollen flesh to settle over his cock.

It leapt against her satin-covered opening in response, and with a groan she slid up and down, up and down along its length.

Desperately needing something to distract him from the agonizing need to come right then and here, he lifted his chin and caught her lips with his.

Their tongues dueled as Kel grasped her hips and pulled her tighter against him, bringing her clit in white-hot contact with the head of his cock. An involuntary keening sound rose from her throat and she rocked urgently against it.

He slipped his hands under the waistband of her panties and helped her slip them off. Opening her legs a little wider, she sought and found the head of his cock with her opening. She threw her head back and bit her lip as she took just the first inch of him into her body.

He filled her ear with urgent words in Irish as he slid his hands over the wet skin on her buttocks and pulled her down farther.

A warning bell went off in the back of his head.

“Wait, darlin’, I have to put on a—”

But it was too late. With a second to spare, he let go of her delicious rump and lifted her away, ignoring her cry of protest, and pressed his fingers against a spot under his balls.

Keeping his hand there, he reached for her with the other, pulling her close as he sat up straighter and set his mouth over the tip of her breast. She wrapped her arms around his head, threw her head back and cried out as he suckled her. Her breast, pressed against his mouth, muffled his growl as his orgasm rumbled through him.

Crisis averted, he released the pressure point and stroked the wet flesh on the inside of her thighs. She shuddered and looked down at his face, and he met her gaze even as he continued to lave her nipples.

“What was that?” she asked, breathless. “What did you do?”

With a last lap at her nipple he released her and lay back in the tub, pulling her with him.

“A delay tactic,” he said. “I forgot the condom.”

“Oh.” A smile curved her lips. “Are you okay?”

“Brilliant.” He guided her hand down to his still-hard cock to prove it to her.

“Good. Because I want you in my mouth.”

In an explosion of water, Kel came out of the tub, somehow carrying Beith with him. He carried her through the now-warm, peat-scented bedchamber, detouring only once to retrieve a condom from his jeans and toss it on the bedside table. He laid her out on the bed, following her down, parting her legs with a muscled thigh.

Reality hit cold and hard in her belly. She'd been told she could walk, but no one had mentioned anything about the rigors of healthy sex.

Because she'd never been good at keeping her face from revealing every thought, every emotion—and because Kel was Kel—he pulled back and looked down into her eyes.

“Don’t worry, darlin’. We’ll figure this out.” He laughed. “God, we’d better figure it out or it could be fatal.”

Oh, Kel, if you only knew.

After a few abortive attempts looking for a position that didn’t press on her bruises or risk putting her leg at an extreme angle, they wound up on their sides, facing each other, her good leg draped over his hip.

By this time their bodies were slick with sweat, not water, and Beith was nearly crying with need. The head of his cock nudged her flesh, and he closed his eyes and set his jaw. “God, Beith, I can’t wait. I’m sorry.” With one hand at the small of her back to steady her, he entered her in one smooth thrust. He pressed his forehead against hers and groaned with a sound almost akin to relief.

She cried out at the sweet sensation of being filled with Kel. God, it was so *good*. She flexed her leg around his waist and tilted her hips, thrusting to meet him. Low sounds she didn’t recognize as her own erupted from her throat as her walls clenched around him.

At the edge of orgasm, she shut her eyes and breathed hard.

No, not yet.

“What’s wrong?” His warm breath in the delicate curve of her ear nearly pushed her over the edge.

She bit her lip and shook her head, gripping his hips tighter with her leg and stroking him with her flesh. If anyone was going to drop nearly dead from orgasmic overload tonight, it was going to be Kel, not her. She

knew he could probably make her come until she passed out, but not this night. Not now.

“Shite,” he muttered. “I feckin’ did it again.” Abruptly he pulled out of her without coming and rolled her to her back. She looked down, confused, and found his dark head between her legs, his powerful shoulders parting her thighs. In one hand he grasped the condom he’d forgotten to put on. Again. She started to laugh at that, but at the touch of his tongue to her clit, she gasped. She couldn’t help it; she surrendered, tangled her fingers in his hair and rolled her pelvis against his mouth.

He kept up the onslaught until she offered up her orgasm, sweat beading her body and strands of her tangled hair sticking to her face.

The ancient scent of the peat fire drugged her senses. With strength she didn’t know she had, she pulled him to her, rolled him to his back and scooted down to take his hard cock into her mouth. She tasted the bead of liquid at the tip, tasted herself on him, and moaned. The vibration of the back of her throat against his tip had him groaning and sifting his hands through her hair, muttering something low in his throat, in Irish. She didn’t need to understand the words to know what he wanted. She took him deep, reveling in her ability to keep this powerful man helpless beneath her touch.

His cock grew rock hard in her mouth and he gripped her hair to pull her mouth away from him, but her quick fingers found the same spot she’d seen him pressing before.

“What the hell—” he gasped.

She let him slide out of her mouth and sat up, maintaining pressure on that spot while stroking him with her other hand.

“I learn fast,” she said huskily.

“Jaysus, woman, are you tryin’ to kill me?” He groaned, uncharacteristically flailing his hands until he found a spot on the ironwork in the headboard to wrap his fingers around.

No, Kel, I’m trying to save you.

She made him suffer through another release that wasn't quite a release, watching in fascination as he came, his tortured groans grinding out from clenched teeth. It was the biggest turn-on she'd ever experienced, controlling this big man's pleasure with just the tips of her fingers. Her breasts grew heavy, and she released his cock to touch them as she lazily watched him ride it out.

Finally his jaw relaxed, and he breathed heavily as he watched with hooded eyes as she toyed with herself, exulting in the power flowing through her body. Power she'd never felt, even before the accident.

"Enough," he ground out, reaching down to lift her and settle her on top of him, pausing just long enough to roll the condom on. With one hand he supported her weak thigh while his other hand, on her hip, urged her to ride him.

No longer caring if she cracked every bone in her body in order to have him, she guided his cock to her entrance and sank down on him, slowly, carefully stretching her thighs apart until she had him seated within her to the hilt. Her breath quickened as she felt another release building within her body. She rode him in excruciating slow motion, enjoying every second of it, every inch of him.

She opened her eyes and found him watching her, his green eyes dark and glistening.

"Hold still." He grasped her waist, lifting her just an inch or two. She braced her hands on his shoulders as he began to thrust. Slow. Strong. Deep. His breath rasped out on her name, pronounced in soft Irish syllables.

Beh-yeh, Beh-yeh.

"Kel!" Beith shuddered and cried out, her orgasm rolling through her in long, intense waves of pleasure that seemed to have no end in sight. Seconds later, Kel's back arched and she felt him pump deep inside her, his groan driving her to yet another peak.

She collapsed onto him, and he rolled her to the side. They lay in the darkness, breathing hard, arms and legs tangled together.

"Check my pupils," he mumbled into her hair.

Barely able to move, she lifted her head and peered into his eyes, just visible in the midsummer evening light sifting through the windows.

“Yep. Fixed and dilated.”

He sighed in contentment. “I’m officially dead, then.”

Beith smiled and closed her eyes. Just as she drifted off, she thought she heard hands clapping in a slow rhythm, and an old woman’s voice whispering in the darkness.

Well done, daughter.

Chapter Six

Morning was bright in the sky when Kel padded into the first-floor kitchen, intent on brewing coffee for himself and Beith. He grinned to himself, thinking of how she looked with her hair spread out on his pillows. Snoring.

“You’re getting sloppy, Kellan.”

Kel pivoted and banged his hip into the stove, already annoyed with himself because he knew that voice.

“Declan, you feckin’ shite hawk! How’d you get in here?”

“I can’t be givin’ away all my secrets, now can I?” Declan removed his feet from the kitchen table and rubbed his dark-circled eyes. “I ought to be givin’ you a dig in the snot locker. Where is she?”

Kel leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. “Sleepin’. I’ll be thankin’ you not to wake her up just yet.”

Declan’s mouth twitched. “Long night’s ride, eh?”

“None o’ your feckin’ business.” Inwardly he cursed himself for not closing the bedroom door behind him. No doubt their voices were echoing right up that spiral staircase.

He spied his Harley’s panniers sitting by the kitchen door. “What’s this?” He pointed at them.

Declan leaned back in the kitchen chair and clasped his hands over his flat belly. “She’ll be needin’ to pack her things—”

Kel’s eyebrows slammed together. “No, she won’t.”

“—as soon as Fionna and Airdinn get here.”

“Airdinn is on holiday.”

“Not anymore.”

“Then why is Fionna—”

“I’ll be collecting her keys and her security badge. I’m sacking her. And I’ll have the distinct pleasure of doin’ it in front of you.”

“What! Fionna had nothing to do with—”

“Airdinn will take Miss Molloy on her tern tour,” Declan went on. “She has a job to do.”

“Wait, you can’t fire Fionna. I own half the business and I have a say—”

“Fionna let her friendship with you compromise the safety of a client. She’s gone,” Declan declared, never moving from his chair.

“Beith was never in danger,” Kel roared, then snapped his mouth shut, irritated with himself for letting Declan’s studied calm get under his skin. Again.

Declan cast a pointed glance at the shiny blue panniers, one of which was crusted with fresh mud. “So you *didn’t* lay the bike down sometime in the last few hours?”

Kel rubbed his hands down his face.

“It’s clear you learned nothing about her. You missed the little details—like her medical condition. Like I said, Kellan. Sloppy.” He got to his feet. “Plus, you wasted the time and resources of the search team looking for you. That’ll be coming out of your earnings for this quarter.”

Kel shrugged. “Keep it all. I quit.”

Declan narrowed his eyes at him. “You can’t quit, you’re my feckin’ brother.”

“Fionna and I will start our own business.”

“And Miss Molloy’s to be your first client, I suppose? Stolen from your own brother?” Declan stuck out his jaw.

“If that’s what she wants.” Kel set his own jaw.

Declan’s gaze moved to the kitchen doorway, and his lip curled in a half-smile. “Why don’t we ask Miss Molloy?”

Kel looked at the door and cursed roundly under his breath.

Beith stood there, hair rumpled sexily around her face, a pair of his clean socks sagging around her ankles and one of his shirts hanging from her slim shoulders. Eyes wide, she clutched it closed at her throat with one hand and tugged the hem down over her scarred leg with the other. The vulnerability that once again shadowed her eyes nearly killed him.

He took a step to move between her and Declan, but his brother, ever the courtly one, stood up and inclined his head toward her. “Miss Molloy.” His gaze slid back to Kel, murder written clearly in the grey depths of his eyes. “Aren’t you going to introduce us, brother?”

I am so dead.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Beith’s gaze bounced between the two men, her eyes widening even more when she caught the resemblance between them.

“I’ll leave you to explain, Kellan, while I wait outside for Fionna. Excuse me, Miss Molloy.” With that, Declan left the room and exited through the anteroom door.

“Kel?”

He sighed. “Maybe you should sit down.”

She stayed where she was. “No. Tell me what’s wrong.”

No point in softening the blow, not now. Not with Declan right outside, ready to take Beith out of his life. *Shite*. She was already gone. And he had no one but himself to blame. He took a deep breath.

“Fionna was supposed to be your tour guide, not me.”

“What?”

“Declan and I own the security business together. I was in his office when Patrick faxed over your schedule. And, um, I saw your photograph. I...” He spread his hands. “Just wanted to meet you. Show you the real Ireland—and have a bit of fun. And I knew Declan wouldn’t have let me within a mile of you. So I, um...talked Fionna into—”

“Letting you kidnap me?” She gasped and went pale. “You mean, people have been *looking* for us for two days? Thinking I was *missing*?”

Now she did sit down. “Oh my God, Kem and Patrick must be worried sick.”

Kel, his knees strangely weak, pulled up a kitchen chair and sat facing her. “I’m sure Declan has already called them.”

She swept one hand over her head, dragging hair away from her face and hanging onto a handful of it as she propped her elbow on the table.

“I should have found a way to let them know I was all right. Found a pay phone and used a credit card. Something.” Her eyes darkened, haunted with some memory that had Kellan clenching his fists to keep from reaching out to hold her.

“They’re the only family I have, the only ones who stood by me when my leg and my life was in pieces. They helped the deputies look for me while I lay in a ditch for almost eighteen hours...”

Kel winced.

“...and I ran off like some irresponsible teenager with more hormones than sense.”

“The mobile won’t work out here. You can use my land line—”

“Did I hear your brother say he’s going to fire Fionna?”

He felt his face redden and he nodded. “She agreed to help me with my plan.” He made a helpless gesture. “Said she had a dream about it. About us. And the Cailleach. She actually tried to talk me out of it, said it was dangerous, but I wouldn’t listen. Not once I laid eyes on you.”

Beith straightened and rubbed her arms as if cold. “It *was* dangerous. We could have been killed, racing around on the Harley like that. And the Hag—she wanted *you*. Your life. I made love to you until you collapsed, to protect you from her. Because in one short day, somehow I actually started to care about you. But the truth is, I don’t know you. And you don’t know me. All along this was nothing but a game....” As if aware she was babbling, she snapped her mouth shut and swallowed hard.

Something within him cracked. He reached out and took her hand. “No. What we experienced was real, Beith—”

Beh-yeh.

She pulled away, brow knitted. "I have to go. I have to think." Tears filled her eyes, and she again tugged the edge of his shirt down over her scarred thigh. "Where are my clothes?"

"I'll help you," he said, his voice strangling on the wholly unaccustomed feeling of being completely helpless.

"No," she said firmly, getting up. "Let me know when Fionna gets here. Maybe I can talk Declan into letting her keep her job."

She opened her mouth to say something else, and he braced himself. Nothing came out, but her conflicted emotions were clearly written in her eyes.

How could you do that? How could I do that?

And Kellan O'Neill experienced another new stab to his heart. Shame.

Fionna had been right—he should have backed out when he had the chance. He had underestimated the fragility of Beith's battered spirit. Suddenly afraid of doing more damage than he'd already inflicted, he resisted reaching for her and kissing her senseless in an effort to change what he knew was coming. He could sense the progression of her thoughts behind her pretty brown eyes.

She turned to open a pannier and the first thing she pulled out was Fionna's sweater. She stared at it a long moment, the emotions of the last two days playing across her face. "Hopefully she won't mind if I keep this."

"She won't," said Kel softly.

Beith hung up the phone in Kel's bedroom and remained still for a moment, perched stiffly on the edge of the bed where just a few hours before she had thrashed like a wild woman underneath Kel's straining body.

Who was that woman?

At the remembered relief in Kemberlee's voice, Beith allowed the pain in her heart to overshadow the physical aches the last twenty-four hours had bestowed.

Something about this land had swept her out of her good sense as much as his ability to give her mind-bending orgasms.

Her stomach felt hollow, that afraid-of-everything quiver that had been her comfortable, constant companion for far too long. She thought of the regret she'd seen in his eyes, and for one wild second all she wanted was to run down the stairs and still that trembling thing in the pit of her belly with his intoxicating scent, the warmth of his arms. She clamped down hard on the impulse.

No. Too easy. Things had happened too fast. She needed time to get her spinning emotions straightened out. They both did.

You disappoint me, daughter.

Beith closed her eyes and leaned one hand on the edge of the bed. Her flailing thoughts gladly latched onto the reason she had come to Ireland in the first place. The terns. The endangered birds who needed her talent to help them survive.

She shut out the Hag's voice, finished putting on her clothes and left the bedchamber.

But not without one wistful glance back.

Chapter Seven

Four months later

Kemberlee Shea stood at the back of the exhibit hall in the Cleveland Museum of Art, watching the charity auction in progress. And sighed.

Sure, she'd be getting her cut from the sale of Beith's newest wildlife paintings. But Beith herself had refused to take more than a token amount for the project, insisting the conservation organization that had commissioned the paintings needed it more than she did.

Kemberlee had almost been shamed into giving up a chunk of her cut, as well.

Almost.

But when she'd gotten a look at the collection, she knew instinctively how much they were going to fetch when they hit the auction block. Only a fool would give up that big of a chunk of change.

Okay, okay, so she'd donate a portion of it. But hell's bells, she also liked to eat. And pay her rent. When the mass market designer collection hit the stores, they'd all be eating better. A lot better.

The lush, passionate canvas on the block at the moment nearly took her breath away, she who never lost her breath over anything that didn't have a dollar sign sitting in front of it.

Steady, girl. Don't be going soft, now.

The door next to her eased open, and a dark-haired man slipped quietly through it, catching it before it clicked shut behind him. The moment his grey-eyed gaze found the painting at the front of the room, an eyebrow went up in appreciation and he switched his numbered auction paddle to his right hand.

Good. I hope your wallet is as big as I think your package is, she thought, letting her approving gaze pass over his custom-tailored grey slacks and crisp white shirt.

She snagged a champagne glass from a passing waiter and watched the man out of the corner of her eye. He bid unobtrusively, without hesitation, seeming to have an almost telepathic connection with the auctioneer.

Kemberlee had hand-picked the auctioneer herself for his uncanny ability to sniff out the bidders who had the real money. This guy, whoever he was, had it in spades.

Yep, eating regularly was looking real good this year.

She turned to the far back corner of the room, caught Beith's eye, and gave her two thumbs up.

Beith, sitting in a folding chair, chicly dressed in black and her hair pulled back smoothly from her disgustingly make-up free face, smiled back and raised her own champagne glass. Then her gaze moved past Kem, and her expression went blank.

Abruptly she set her glass down on the floor, bolted out of the chair and left the room.

Kemberlee, brow furrowed, set her own glass on a table and went after her friend. Just as she reached for the door, the gavel smacked down and the auctioneer declared the work sold to a Declan O'Neill.

Declan O'Neill?

Kem did an about-face, but the man was striding through the door, mobile phone to his ear. Making a frustrated sound, she about-faced again and went after Beith.

She found Beith in the interior courtyard, staring at a small water fountain tucked in between some towering potted plants. She moved to stand beside her friend and client, reached into her handbag and brought out a small silver flask. Unscrewing the top, she offered it to Beith.

Beith's eyes, which weren't really seeing the fountain, shifted at the flash of silver. She snorted a breath out of her nose, accepted the flask and took a swig.

"You miss him."

Beith shrugged and contemplated the flask in her hand, saying nothing.

"Your work is done for now." Kemberlee poked Beith with an elbow. "Take a break. Get on a plane."

Beith shook her head and handed the flask back to Kemberlee. "It's been too long. He's not the kind of guy to wait around."

Aha. So she has been thinking about him. "You know this for a fact?"

"He's reckless, and irresponsible, and..."

"Name one reason why you shouldn't go to him right now."

She threw up her hands. "Oh, I don't know, Kem. How about the fact that I knew him for maybe twenty-four hours. Oh, yeah, then there's that little thing about kidnapping me—"

"Please. Like that's not every woman's wet dream."

"Almost got me killed on that motorcycle—"

"Mmm," Kem said dreamily. "Harleys."

"And...things happened, Kem."

"What things?"

A long silence. "You'd think I was nuts if I told you."

Kem leaned in, squinting at Beith. "He made you scream like a banshee, didn't he?"

Beith blushed.

Kem pumped both fists in the air in a silent *yesssss!*

"Shut up."

"The man's brother shows up to buy your painting. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

Beith's eyes rounded. "Declan bought it?"

"Hell yes, he did. What he paid for it will keep me in Jameson for a friggin' decade." She watched as a new light ignited in Beith's eyes, then just as quickly faded.

Beith shrugged. "So maybe it's Declan's way of apologizing for his brother's bad behavior"

"Shit, Beith, when did you become such an old lady?"

Beith's mouth snapped shut.

Bull's eye, thought Kem. She took a deep draught from the flask and took her time putting it away, planning her next words carefully.

"I think that for a little while, Kellan O'Neill made you remember who you were before the accident. The woman..." Kem ducked her head and cursed herself as her throat tightened. "My friend who was not only my partner in crime, but knows where all the bodies are buried. Hell, even helped me bury some of them."

Beith laughed, a strangled sound.

"I miss that friend," Kem said simply. "I want her back. And if knocking her in the head with a baseball bat and forcibly sticking her on a plane back to the man she loves is what it takes to bring her back, I'll do it."

If possible, Beith flushed even redder. "I don't—"

"You can lie to me all you want, dearest. But for god's sake, stop lying to yourself. You have all the signs of wanting that bad boy back. And can I tell you something else?"

Beith waved a hand. "Don't hold back now, Kem."

Want warred with caution behind Beith's eyes, and Kem wracked her brain for the words that would give "want" the edge.

"Look. If Declan O'Neill is the kind of man who'd fly three thousand miles to buy your painting as an *apology*, maybe his bad-boy little brother isn't as bad as all that. Maybe—and if you tell anyone I said this, I swear to God I'll take out a hit on you—maybe he's worth another chance."

Beith shrugged a shoulder, and Kem grinned to herself. Her friend was fast running out of excuses.

Beith tilted her head, deep in thought. “Maybe I—”

“Miss Molloy.” From across the courtyard, a soft, Irish-accented male voice floated.

Both women nearly jumped out of their shoes and peered through the dim light at the figure standing in the door.

“Declan,” Beith breathed.

“May I speak with you a moment?”

Kemberlee squeezed her friend’s arm and stepped away.

Maybe she wouldn’t need that baseball bat, after all.

Beith focused on the man as he approached, then wished she hadn’t.

Declan’s smooth, athletic stride reminded her so much of Kellan, she suddenly felt as if something solid was lodged just under her breastbone. Something wild that had been stuffed down tight for four long months.

Oh yeah. Kemberlee was right. She still had it bad.

She caught sight of her friend lingering at the door, blatantly checking out Declan’s backside and fanning herself with one hand.

“Goodbye, Kemberlee.”

Kem winked and slipped out of sight.

Declan, startled look on his face, turned sideways in mid-stride, as if he didn’t want his back to the door Kem had exited. Beith couldn’t help but smile—Kem had a way of bringing out the deer-in-the-headlights in any man.

“That was Kemberlee?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, you’re safe with me.”

Relief relaxed his features. “My apologies, Miss Molloy. I didn’t mean to chase you away from your own celebration.” He slid his hands into his pockets, as if he wanted to offer one of them to her, but thought better of it.

Beith lifted her chin and stuck out her own hand. With a glint of respect in his eye, Declan shook it.

“Just caught me by surprise. What I should have done is thank you for buying the painting. The money’s going to a good cause.”

“You’re welcome. It was the least I could do.”

Beith crossed her arms. “For...?”

“You did what I’ve been trying to get my little brother to do for a very long time. Grow up.”

A bark of laughter escaped her before she could stop it. “I knew him less than twenty-four hours.”

“Whatever happened in that one day, well...” His mouth lifted in an enigmatic smile and he let the sentence drop. “But to buy your painting is not the whole reason I came.”

“Oh?”

“I’m here to offer you a job. If you’re willing to take it on, that is.”

“Uh...” It was the only sound she could make.

“Five minutes. I will consider it a favor if you just hear me out.”

For the first time, Beith noticed the dark circles under his eyes and the weary lines around his mouth. The cocksure CEO who had dealt summarily with his wayward brother in the castle kitchen was gone. The man who stood before her now looked like one who wanted a chance to make amends, but who wasn’t accustomed to coming right out and admitting he was wrong about anything.

Much like a certain Kellan O’Neill she knew.

The wild thing trapped under her breastbone stirred.

“I’m listening.”

Chapter Eight

Kel and Fionna stood back to admire the brand new lettering over the door of their office. Granted, the hole in the wall on the back streets of Galway was a bit spare, compared to the plush offices he'd shared with Declan in Dublin, but it was a start.

"The web site is up, and we're getting calls already," she said. "With luck, we should be solvent within a year."

"I hope so. I have payments on a castle to make."

"So, you're no longer a renter, now you're the landlord?" She poked him with her elbow.

He grinned and bumped her back. "We all have to grow up sometime."

But the grin didn't quite reach his eyes. No smile had, not since the day Beith Molloy had walked out of his life.

A FedEx truck pulled up to the curb, brakes wheezing. The delivery man got out and opened the side door. "You Kellan O'Neill?" he called, hauling out a large, flat, rectangular crate.

"That would be me." Kel signed for the package and peered at the return address.

"What's this all about?" he muttered.

She helped him maneuver it through the office door and found a screwdriver to pry the crate apart. Inside it, they found something wrapped in brown paper. Kel held it while she tore the paper off.

"I believe you'd call it a peace offering," she said. It was a canvas, an original. A flock of endangered little terns in flight over the Cliffs of Mòr. In the lower left-hand corner, small, slashing brush strokes spelled out

Beith Molloy. Fionna watched Kellan's expression with growing tenderness as his gaze devoured the painting, as if looking for something of the woman who had created it.

"Here's a note." She handed him an envelope that had slipped out onto the floor.

Kel opened it, and Fionna unabashedly read over his shoulder.

Every new business should have one brilliant piece of art. Makes clients think you're respectable. Good luck. —Declan.

PS—Close your mouth and look at the back of the painting.

Kel snapped his mouth shut and tilted the canvas. A large manila envelope was taped loosely to the frame.

"What's that?" said Fionna.

Kel opened the flap and looked inside.

For the first time in months, she saw a smile that reached his eyes.

He pulled out an x-ray film and held it up to the light. And laughed.

She peered at it. It was of a long femur bone, patched together with countless plates and screws. She gave a low whistle and stood back to watch as he angled his head to look at the Post-it note stuck on the top right corner, which he read aloud.

"Fionna told me about the alleged bullet hole in your ass. Get over here before she puts another chunk of rock salt in the other side."

He turned to look at Fionna, who stood ready with his Harley keys dangling from her finger.

"Get out of here, ya wee chancer," she said, silently thanking Declan for listening to reason when it came to his little brother. And the dreams that had told her that bringing Beith back into Kel's life was the right thing to do.

Kel's smile froze. She squashed the urge to laugh out loud. He had the look of a man caught cold between sheer joy and sheer terror.

“Where the hell am I going—and what do I say to her when I get there?”

Fionna rolled her eyes. “You, at a loss for words? That’ll never happen. And if you can’t find one wee woman, we might as well close these office doors right now.”

“But—”

Patience wearing thin, she gestured toward the painting. “Look at the evidence.”

She waited while he crouched in front of the canvas, and knew the exact instant he figured it out. Without a word, Kel grabbed her shoulders, planted a solid kiss on her cheek, snagged his keys and charged out the door.

Fionna smiled.

Kellan O’Neill would shortly have all he’d ever needed.

If he didn’t wreck his feekin’ bike on the way.

The Cailleach stretched and smiled as a familiar set of motorcycle wheels raced across her curved back.

The magic stirred, growing ever stronger as he closed the distance between himself and his love. A magic that had lain cold for a while, but sparked anew the moment the woman had made the decision to set herself free.

She shuddered, pressing the long, smooth mountains of her thighs together in anticipation of the night to come.

Smiling indulgently, she flicked one bit of fingernail casually in the direction of a speeding lorry approaching the motorcycle at a right angle from a blind curve. Its tire flattened, and the vehicle shuddered to a stop just before the Harley streaked by, missing it by mere feet.

The Hag closed her eyes and whispered to the wind, knowing it would carry her words to the right ears.

Prepare yourself, daughter. It’s your time to fly.

Kellan stood at the top of the rise, looking down past the cottage he had seen in Beith's painting. She had obviously counted on the fact he knew this land like the back of his hand. She had been right.

She stood at the tip of the headland, her back to him, wrapped in a green ruana. The fringed edges of the garment whipped in the wind, echoing the way it lifted her hair, which was lighter than he remembered it.

She must have been spending more time out in the sun. She had been eating better too, he noted as he ran his appreciative gaze over the fuller curves of her body under the tightly wrapped shawl.

The he frowned as she leaned forward a little, letting the strong sea wind support her body. She was too close to the cliff; one wrong step would send her tumbling into the waves below. He opened his mouth to call to her, but the words died in his throat.

Best not to startle her, he reasoned. If she jumped at the sound of his voice, her bad leg might trip her up. That was the reason he'd parked his Harley on the other side of the rise. So he'd not startle her.

Yeah, he'd go with that.

He refused to consider that she might have locked her door at the sound of the Harley's growling engine. That he might not want to see the look on her face should she catch him coming down the fells toward her. That it might be better to wait until the last moment—like ripping a plaster off quickly instead of peeling it in slow, painful increments.

He wasn't sure what to make of the hollow sensation sitting in the pit of his stomach.

This must be what fear feels like.

He quashed the feeling, shoved his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket and stepped off down the long slope, boots swishing through the thick, tall grass.

A grazing sheep raised its woolly head to look idly at him as he strode by. He narrowed his eyes at it.

"What are you lookin' at?"

The sheep belched and went back to grazing.

Beith leaned into the cold October wind as it bit at her ears and carried a faint whisper to the back of her mind. She let a smile lift the corners of her mouth.

I hear you, Old One.

A delicious shiver ran over her skin, and it had nothing to do with the chilly air. The scent of the ocean, crashing far below at the base of the cliff, seemed to fill her entire body. She drank it in and sighed deeply. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the late afternoon sun, which held little warmth, but lit the back of her eyelids with red and gold.

Without looking, she knew the thatched-roof cottage behind her would be glowing like a dollop of new snow on the still-green slope, so bright as to hurt the eyes. She knew, because in the short week since she'd rented the place, she'd photographed and painted it as it stood bathed in all kinds of light. Even at this time of year, Ireland was rich with colors she could find nowhere else.

If Kellan never showed up—and there was a distinct possibility he wouldn't—she wouldn't regret a thing. Not her decision to return here, and not the short time she had spent with him. She curled her toes toward the earth and silently thanked the Cailleach for the magic that had brought them together. Those electric twenty-four hours in his arms had stimulated more healing within her body and soul than an army of therapists could have achieved.

Her bones were stronger. *She* was stronger.

If she was lucky, she might get another session. If not, she would live.

Oh yes, she would *live*.

In her next breath, the hard wind supporting her body abruptly died. Her eyes flew open and Great Blasket Island reeled past her eyes as she lurched forward. Intellectually she knew she had a good six feet of solid ground between her feet and the cliff's edge, but still her heart rocketed into her throat.

What felt like two hot bands of steel coiled around her body and pulled her backward. She heard a muttered “Whoops” and the world tilted again. His scent—remembered, cherished—enveloped her, augmented now with the rich aroma of a leather jacket.

Laughter bubbled up in her throat before the two of them even hit the ground.

“Oof!” Kel grunted as he sat up, one arm still around her and the other hand rubbing his stomach. “You’re not nearly as portable as you used to be.”

“Now there’s a fine greeting after all this time.” She leaned back on his supporting arm, her gaze devouring his face. The north-star dimple on one side of his mouth was the same, as was the sparkle in his eye. But the devil-may-care air he’d always carried about him had been subdued by a steady, quiet confidence. Her mouth watered.

“I’ve got a better greeting.” He levered himself up off the ground and brought her with him, pulling her several more yards from the edge of the headland.

“I’m not going to fall, you know. I’m stronger now.”

“Humor me.”

She rolled her eyes, but let him lead her, her lower belly tightening at the sight of his jeans hugging his butt. She hadn’t realized how much she missed that until just now.

He turned to her and took up both her hands in his. But instead of speaking, he looked at her with such concentration it brought a smile to her face.

“About this alleged greeting?”

“Hold on now, I’m thinkin’.”

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

He stuck out his chin. “I’ve been working on this every blessed second since I got your note. So will you be quiet, woman?”

She wasn't sure if the tears forming in her eyes were from emotion, or from mirth. She ruthlessly squashed them, pressing her lips together to keep a laugh—or was it a sob?—from erupting.

Less than one minute in Kel's presence, and she'd already smiled more than she had in the last four months. Tenderness welled up in her chest.

He let one of her hands drop and pressed the other one between both of his.

"I'd like to introduce myself, miss. My name is Kellan O'Neill. You can be callin' me Kel, if you like."

Her voice strained with suppressed emotion, she managed, "Pleased to meet you Kel. I'm Beith Mol—"

"Wouldyouliketogoouttodinnerwithme?"

She let her hand swing his back and forth playfully, pretending to think hard.

"No."

At the look on his face, she finally let go of the giggle she'd been holding down. "I've got a better idea."

She marched up the slope, towing him behind her. When they reached the cottage, she led him around back to an outbuilding, opened the door and led him inside. Then she stood back and watched his expression.

He stood still for a minute, then pointed at the machine in the middle of the storage room.

"This is my ultralight."

"Tis." Her heart pounded at what she was about to ask him to do.

"What's it doing...did Fionna do this?"

"The one and only. But Declan loaned her the lorry to get it here."

"Um..."

"I'll go out to dinner with you, Kel. After you take me for a ride."

"In this?"

"It carries two, last time I checked."

"But it's cold. It's dangerous. And—"

She approached him and slid her hands up his leather-covered arms. "Illegal? You're damned right it is."

His set his hands on her waist and pulled her close. He was hard under his jeans, pressing against her belly. The heat of his body made her shiver with anticipation.

His gaze burned down onto her face. "I know we just met, Miss Molloy, but I have to say I think I could love you."

She leaned back and grinned up at him, her heart skipping a beat.

"Could you, now?"

He began to sway back and forth, grinding his erection against her. She moaned at the contact.

"Do you think..." he lowered his head and grazed her lips with his, "...we could...fly later?"

She opened her mouth and took him deep, nearly weeping at the taste of him in her mouth. She ran her hands into his hair and released it from its tie. It flowed over her fingers, remembered silk. She broke the kiss only to grab a much-needed breath.

"It's really good to see you, Kel."

He lifted his head and stared down at her, his eyes dark with regret. "I'm sorry for what happened before."

She framed his face with her hands. "I'm sorry I didn't stick around long enough to get the whole story. I let fear get the best of me. What we had was magic. *Is* magic. I should have fought for it."

His expression relaxed, and the dimple reappeared.

"There you go shouldin' on yourself again." He grasped her rear and lifted her. With a gasp, she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her out of the storage building and made a beeline for the cottage's red-painted front door.

It had one room. The bed wouldn't be hard to find.

His strides were quick and long, one hot hand caressing her scarred left thigh as if in wonder at the new strength he felt there. She wiggled in delight, adjusting herself to cradle his erection between her thighs.

He groaned and staggered to one side, bumping both of them lightly against the cottage's outer wall. She squeaked then snorted in a very unladylike laugh.

"Be careful, woman. You're treadin' dangerous ground."

She dipped her head close to his ear, smiling at the way his whole body shivered at the touch of her lips, her breath.

"Oh, I'm counting on that."

About the Author

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Journey to the heart of Celtic legend.

Love and Lore

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Samhain is pleased to celebrate its second anniversary with three novellas that will lure you into the labyrinth of Celtic myth and legend.

In *Wildish Things*, Carolan Ivey brings together an artist who is wounded in both body and spirit, and a sexy Irish bad boy on a Harley. Their whirlwind fling across Ireland takes a dangerous turn when their sexual chemistry awakens the deadly lust of an ancient goddess.

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Avalon reborn...

Hidden away on a misty island off the Irish coast all her life, Abhainn has no idea she is the last of her Faery race—until a troll tries to kill her.

The Gloaming: Abhainn's Kiss

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Her peaceful world shattered, she has only days to fulfill her destiny. She must defy a curse that dooms her to hide from the sun, and take her rightful place in the Great Circle on the Isle of Avalon. Only Abhainn can restore the balance of Dark and Light, and heal the rift between humans and Fae. That's a tall order for a one fragile Faery.

Michael Craig is on a quest of his own, one grounded in cold, hard reality. Fairy tales? They're for children and dreamers. But when he rescues Abhainn from certain death with an accidental kiss, he finds himself thrown into a very different reality. One he's reluctant to accept, even as it unfolds before his eyes. Only one thing holds him there—Abhainn will die without him.

Abhainn's life depends on Michael's kiss, his sword arm...and his ability to believe.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Aibhann's Kiss:

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it on without buttoning it. He was halfway to the caravan door before he realized the taste on his tongue wasn't just part of the dream. She must have kissed him in his sleep before slipping out. Still, she had no business being out there alone, no matter how many friendly Fae surrounded them.

The familiar tinkle of her laughter drifted in through the caravan's half open door. He stepped quietly outside and settled on the driver's seat to watch the scene before him. The horse, unhitched, grazed nearby; Eoth lay draped across its back, sound asleep. Michael's gaze swept the stone-littered meadow, and at last he found her.

She sat on a boulder, legs folded beneath her, arms thrown wide. Unabashedly naked as the day she'd been born. His groin tightened as, unobserved, he let his gaze pass over her body. Tiny as she was, there was no doubt that Abby was a full-grown woman, all slender curves and high, firm breasts. The morning light glowed on her pale skin, so fair as to be translucent, traced with river-maps of blue veins, flawless from the tips of her toes to the delicate points of her ears.

All around her flitted a cloud of tiny, winged Fae, who tended to her as if she were a queen in waiting. Which, he realized suddenly, she was. As the last of her kind, she by default was the Queen of the Asrai.

Humming like a swarm of honeybees, the Faeries combed and braided her white-gold hair, washed a smudge of dirt from her nose, handed her damp handfuls of moss with which she cleaned herself, rubbing it over her skin—all her skin—in slow, sensual delight.

More Faeries brought her sips of water and a sticky substance that looked like nectar, cupped in spring flowers. She tipped her head back and accepted their offerings on her tongue, smiling and licking her lips after each taste, catching stray droplets on her fingers and licking them, too.

The ache in his groin hardened into a painful knot. Blood pounded in his ears so hard that for a second he couldn't trust himself to move. Despite the lust that roared through his veins, he remained conscious of the delicacy of her small, fragile body. *She's like porcelain. Like one wrong touch could break her.*

Yet for that second, he understood what had driven Blaen of CraighMhor to risk everything for one night with a Fae.

And he lost it all, Michael reminded himself.

As if she sensed his eyes upon her, she turned her head and looked at him. She blinked once, slowly, and the smile on her face grew brighter. She held out her hand.

Abruptly, the attending Faeries screeched and scattered. Only one stayed, hovering above and just behind her golden head. Its buzzing grew into a snarl, and before Michael's eyes it changed from a thimble-sized

thing to a fox. It bared its fangs and bunched its muscles to spring at Abby's unprotected back.

With a sickening lurch that took him back to his combat days in the Marines, time slowed to a crawl. Every detail of the scene sprang into sharp relief. Before Michael could do more than shout a warning, Abby's face went blank.

Then, as the fox sprang, she changed into a statue of clear, hard ice.

The fox yowled in frustration as it clawed and bit at the back of her neck, but managing no more than a few superficial scratches.

Michael took advantage of the time she had given him by lunging into the caravan to retrieve the rusted sword. He lay hands on his rucksack and threw himself out of the caravan, pulling the sword out and dropping the bag on the ground as he ran, spilling the contents.

He sprinted the few yards that separated him from Abby, a hoarse cry in his throat and the sword raised to strike. The fox saw him coming, issued a series of short, harsh barks, then shapeshifted *again*.

Michael found himself looking up into the face of what could only be described as a vampire-like woman, complete with glistening fangs and black wings sprouting from her shoulders. With a hiss she flew at him, driving him back. He let her come, knowing it would draw the creature away from Abby.

"Come on, come on, bitch! What ya got? Come on!" he growled, goading her with the sword.

The vampiress closed in, and with moves too quick to see, she knocked the sword away then hit him square in the center of the chest with the leading edge of a black, leathery wing. Michael caught his heels on the rucksack and landed on his back, flinging his arms wide to break the fall.

His hand fell on his grandmother's precious stone, which must have rolled out of the rucksack when he'd dropped it.

Wrapping his fingers around it, he waited, heart speeding to dangerous levels as the vampiress closed within striking distance.

Waited, sweating, until her hot breath blistered his face, until he could count the veins in her bulging eyes. Then he swung at her head.

Instead of spurting blood, the broken skin on the side of the creature's face erupted with huge horseflies the size of golf balls. In moments, the thing had completely dissolved into a cloud of the droning black bugs. Abby's attending Faeries chased them all away, leaving the morning eerily quiet, as if nothing amiss had happened at all.

Panting, Michael hauled himself to his feet.

"Well done."

He spun and found a tall, Tolkienesque elf lounging against the side of the caravan, idly examining his fingernails, longbow thrown casually over one shoulder.

Michael relaxed and straightened. "Thanks for the help," he said dryly.

The elf raised an eyebrow, as if he were actually offended. "You did well enough on your own. Had you needed it, I would have intervened. The Lady chose well." With that, the elf sauntered away into the trees.

"I will never get used to these people," he muttered, turning toward Abby as thunder rolled overhead.

Abhainn still hadn't changed back from the block of ice. It was a perfect replica, captured just as she had been sitting on the rock.

He crouched by the rock, afraid to touch her. "Abhainn. Abby, can you hear me?"

Huge, fat raindrops began to splat the ground.

Maybe she can't change back.

His mind kicked into gear, looking for a way to keep her from melting and running in rivulets down the side of the rock. But as the first drops of rain struck her head, she shifted back into normal form and fell, shivering and blue with cold, into his arms.

"Jesus, you scared me, woman," he said, gathering her closer, rubbing her arms. The bare skin under his hands felt like the ice from

which she'd just shifted. He quickly lifted her hair to examine the back of her neck. Relief flooded through him. Her skin remained unbroken.

"I...I...knew not...I c-c-could do that," she managed through clattering teeth. "I-I-I sensed the Mei was behind me and-d-d it j-just happened!" Then, incredibly, she began to laugh. "I wonder...w-w-what else I can do?"

Before he could stop it, anger flared white hot in his chest. How could she laugh? She had come within a hair's breadth of death, and yet she laughed!

Shaking, not trusting himself to speak, he scooped her up in his arms and strode toward the caravan.

"Mícheál?" she gasped between giggles and shudders of cold. "W-what is it?"

"The fate of your people depends on you," he gritted out. "And you sit there laughing when your quest almost came to nothing."

She leaned back in his arms, her laughter fading to a gentle smile. "But it did not," she said simply. "I have you to protect me. All is well. And I have found that I have powers I knew not I had. Why not enjoy the moment?"

He stopped dead in his tacks, light rain tapping on his head. He had no answer for her.

"Mícheál," she said gently.

He shook his head, surprised at his inability to speak, jaw clenched tight. *She could have died. She could have...*

"Mícheál." This time her lips touched his ear.

At the touch of her breath on his skin, he drew her to him tighter still, buried his face in her hair, inhaling the fresh-rain scent of her. He could find no words to say other than her name.

The skies let loose with a torrent of rain.

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