

TRINITY MAGIC

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

To Donna and Laurie, the other parts of my personal Trinity

To Kenny, who put up with the three of us

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Prologue

Caindale Castle, Ireland 1235

A deafening boom echoed in the stone chamber, ricocheting through the bower with the power of the most terrible thunderclap. Caitlyn's head snapped up. Trembling, she closed the manuscript. The candles sputtered and the unmistakable odor of sulfur flooded her nostrils. Her stomach lurched.

She glanced at her sisters. No reaction. Honora's face pressed inches from the codex she devoured with her eyes, and Fallon appeared to be day-dreaming, her fingers caught in a strand of straight black hair. The clamorous echo faded, and only the sounds of the crackling fire and Fallon's slipper tapping against the table leg drifted through the room.

Caitlyn reached across the table, closing the book in front of her oldest sister. Fallon glanced up, the twirling motion of her finger still.

"Cait?"

"'Tis happened."

Fallon straightened, riveted. "What didst thou hear?"

Caitlyn glanced toward the casement. What would create unnatural thunder? She knew little of earthly turmoil, but she knew one who did.

She touched her sister's shoulder. Honora jerked on the bench, tossed dark tendrils of hair away from her face and blinked, her finger poised on the line she'd been reading.

Caitlyn drew in a deep breath, her gaze on the dark sky beyond the casement. "Be there any disturbances brewing? A thing to cause the air to shudder with an impossible sound?"

Honora tilted her head. "Impossible?"

"Twas a tremor that echoed and burst through my body, and after the clap, a stench of sulfur, as though the bowels of the earth had opened and the chamber had been swallowed by hell itself. Didst thou hear anything? Smell anything?"

"An impossible sound," Honora murmured. "Tis happening."

Her face drained of color, glistening with a pearly sheen, and she pressed a shaking hand against her lips. Fallon rushed around the table and pushed Honora's head down, but her sister fought her, grabbing a piece of parchment and reaching for the goose feather across the table.

"Off me, Fallon," she breathed. "Impossible sounds. A new alchemy. 'Tis in my head. I must write it down. Saltpeter, sulfur, charcoal. What is the mix? What is the measure? What kind of potion?"

"Stop thy nonsense," Fallon ordered. "Put thy head down. Thou art going to swoon. Do not get sick. I cannot stand that."

"Nay, I am fine," Honora said. "What must I write? I have forgotten."

"Nonsense," Fallon said. "Mere words and naught important. We must prepare."

Honora's muffled voice drifted from the cloth of her skirt. "How dost thou think to prepare? 'Tis not possible. I have explained. 'Tis time, space, and not within our power."

"I will hear none of that," Fallon snapped. "We have discussed this. Hold to the strength of our bond. I cannot do this alone."

"So thou hast told us again and again, Fallon," Caitlyn said, "but we cannot know for certain we can change anything."

"This family will endure," Fallon said. "I will it so."

Honora glanced up, her sapphire eyes now flashing with determination. Caitlyn nibbled at her lip, glancing between her sisters. Honora demanded order and rationale for all things and a clear plan of action from which to launch their magics. An argument brewed, and Honora's susceptible

constitution offered no match for the strict censure of her mind. She would fight, pale and shaking or not. If Fallon pursued her irrational scheme, Honora's mind would close, and even Fallon's determination would not open it again.

"Fallon," Honora said, steady and firm. "Thy visions art messages of what might be, not the truth of the world. They certainly art not a blessing to fashion the world to thy liking. Thou wilt breed chaos, and I'll have none of it. A natural order controls our world. All events follow a course, and time makes the decisions of our lives."

"Time be damned," Fallon muttered.

Honora dropped her head to the table and pounded her forehead against the wood, her muttered words lost in a cloud of dark hair. "Proud, vain, reckless, stubborn, pompous harpy."

Caitlyn ignored Honora's grumblings and peered at Fallon through the fringes of hair shading her eyes. Her oldest sister looked unpredictable, a restless animal trapped in a cage. She stalked the stone floor, pursuing her own shadow cast by the flickering fire, and even the shadow ran from the fury in her eyes. Caitlyn gathered her courage and caught her sister by the arm. Fallon whirled around and tried to shake her off.

"Do not think to dissuade me, Cait. I must have thy favor. She's going to be difficult." Fallon glared at Honora. "Cease, Honora! Thou wilt ruin that mind, and I need it."

"If it be mush," Honora mumbled, "thy plans are miscarried before conceived."

Caitlyn tugged at Honora's hair. "Enough. Stop thy struggle. She will win. She always does." She shot Honora a stern glance then turned on Fallon. "If thy visions hath merit, the unraveling has begun. A roar hast heralded the end of the Trinity. 'Tis what thou foretold, Fallon. The Keeper is gone, the Leanan sidhe is alone, and the family will cease to be. It cannot be changed."

"It will be changed, Cait," Fallon said. "I have seen it all."

"Tis but illusion," Caitlyn whispered. "Tricks. Magic."

"Oh, 'tis indeed magic, but hold no doubt in thy heart. 'Tis real. Our powers will make it so."

Honora rose unsteadily from the bench. A tired smile touched her lips.

"Fallon, we doubt not our powers, but there art limits to what we can do. We have chosen to live in the natural world, within the flow of time, of space, of reality. Thou might will it, but even we cannot tamper with the forces of reality."

Honora glanced to Caitlyn for support, and Fallon smiled. "Thou speaks logic, but thy face betrays thee, Honora. Thou believes my mind is shaded in madness."

"Nay, Sister," Honora said, "but..."

"Do ye wish proof I speak truly?" Fallon asked. "Well, Sisters, look with thine own eyes."

She swept her arm, and a dusty blue haze shimmered in the disturbance. Her fingers dipped gently into the fog, and sparkling crystals formed in the air at each touch, spreading through the haze like fiery gemstones of sapphire, emerald, and ruby. The crystals caught the dancing light of the hearth fire, and perfect prisms shot dazzling ropes of colorful lightning through the air.

The colorful arcs spread throughout the bower. Honora and Caitlyn laughed. The light skimmed their bodies and a warmth followed.

"Tis wondrous." Caitlyn sighed. "Thou hast such talent, Fallon. I am so envious of thee. How dost thou create such things?"

"Magic," Fallon whispered. "Hush now. There be more."

Fallon breathed into the fog, and the crystals vanished, evaporating into the air like snowflakes touched by the sun. The mist responded to her breath, swirling, creating rosy eddies that twisted and spiraled until forming a circle that wavered tenuously like a cloud holding onto a stormy sky. A reddish smoke ring hovered in the air.

Caitlyn edged closer to the mist and reached toward the circle, her fingertips grazing the rim of the aura. She snatched her hand back. "Tis hot!"

Fallon laughed. "Oh, aye, energy creates the heat. 'Tis necessary to stir reality."

Honora huffed. She flipped through the pages of her manuscript. "Stir reality? Thou hast surely gone daft, Fallon. Nothing lies in any of our volumes..."

Caitlyn lost track of Honora's mutterings and focused on the circle of haze that pulsed and shimmered, glowing now with a shade of the darkest

rose. Tiny filaments of blood red fog curled along the edge of the circle, threading the indistinct ring to the invisibility of the air. The center darkened, transforming from dusty gray to slate to black.

Caitlyn peered into a small tunnel, a black hole that gaped into a stream of violently swirling nothingness. She glanced back to her oldest sister.

"What hast thou done, Fallon?"

Fallon tilted her head, and an amused smile played on her lips. "'Tis the After. I have given us hope. And others."

Caitlyn studied her sister. Fallon's visions were disturbing enough without the loss of her reason. She needed to find Remy and put an end to this nonsense. Only their brother could deal with Fallon. She gave Fallon a final glare and had turned to leave the room when Honora's tortured voice broke her stride. Her sister backed against the table, her horrified gaze fixed on the threaded circle.

"Tis the mouth of hell itself," Honora gasped. "Close it now. Hope dwelleth not in the devil's lair."

"Oh, but, Sister, hope does indeed lie within," Fallon said. "Move closer, but do not touch it."

Honora peeked into the black tunnel. Her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open.

"Tis me! Years ago."

"Nay," Fallon said. "'Tis Hope. She exists in the After, many, many years from now. I have seen her often. And her sisters."

"But 'tis me," Honora insisted. "How can that be?"

Fallon caught Caitlyn's glance with a victorious wink. "We are eternal, Sisters. We will move through time, existing in different centuries. The visions have always been clear to me, but now ye can both see. 'Tis our future. We are forever."

Honora huffed again. "Nothing is forever, and thou art dealing with forces of unimaginable power. The passage of time cannot be stopped or changed."

"Perhaps not," Fallon said, "but gentle persuasion may sway its course." Caitlyn planted her fists on her hips. "Will a Trinity be needed for this persuasion?"

"Well, of course," Fallon said. "We are one."

"But the end has come," Honora cried. "Thou hast said a roar will herald the end of the Trinity. Thou cannot change what has already happened."

"We must," Fallon said. "The Leanan sidhe and the Keeper art linked through memories and lifetimes, through faery spells and reality. Without each other, their souls will wither, and their lives will hold no meaning. We will see the consequences in Remy. Our poor brother will lose the happiness in his heart, but the consequences are further reaching still. We will cease to be."

"Tis called death," Honora grunted, "and even thou can not cheat death, Fallon."

"I have found a way."

Caitlyn laughed. "Thou art stubborn and strong willed, but even thou hast limits. How dost thou think to change destiny?"

"I do not seek to change destiny," Fallon said. "I seek to create it."

Honora shuddered. "'Tis the devil's work. What other powers art strong enough to create destiny?"

Fallon gazed into the dark tunnel and smiled.

"Faith, Hope, and Charity."

Caitlyn smiled. "Thou seeks to change destiny with myth?"

"Not the Virtues," Fallon said. "Real women, real sisters. A trinity of souls, entwined for all eternity. We art the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. We art linked to each other, to the Keeper and to the spirit of the Leanan sidhe that wilt begin it all. I shall not allow fate to sever all I love from reality. The Keeper will be moved to serve his purpose, to find his heart and his destiny."

"Tis madness thou speaks," Honora whispered.

"Madness? Nay, 'tis magic. Once thou hast seen the joy of pure magic, thou wilt not be looking at me with such eyes. 'Tis a promise."

Honora dropped onto the bench. "Thou cannot tamper with the forces of eternity and fate merely because of a wish to cling to the earth, Fallon."

Fallon laughed. "Tis not my wish. Tis the will of many. We art merely the instruments of power, and all will be well, Honora, I promise thee. Benefits shall be gained by all, but 'tis really the message of love we preserve, the tale of the Leanan sidhe and the Keeper and the promise of their future and ours." Fallon shot a glance to the casement and clapped her

hands together. "Now prepare the chamber and gather what we need to perform a binding spell. And bring your amulets!"

Caitlyn's mind swirled. She would need thread, the black candle, the chalice, the obsidian Honora had found, her own sprig of lavender. Where was Fallon's flint? A poppet! She turned to Fallon, poised to speak.

"Hurry!" Fallon said. "We have much to do this night. There art elements to summon, offerings to be made, and rifts to open. Time is short, and the moonlight wanes. Meet me in the tower."

Caitlyn glanced at Honora from the corner of her eye. Honora looked nauseous again but moved in the direction of the open doorway. Once again, their oldest sister had drawn them into something beyond their ken. Fallon shooed her hand in Caitlyn's direction.

"Go! Gather! I will make the poppets."

Caitlyn snapped her mouth closed and ran off to do her sister's bidding. Fallon never offered a choice. It was so much easier just to do what she said.

Chapter 1

Stone Cottage Trinity Island, Virginia The Present

Ryder Kendall, Keeper of the Caindale legacy and its trio of witches, tucked his hands into the pockets of his battered overcoat and stared into the muddy water of the James River. The Jack provided a pleasant buzz, but the last thing he wanted to do was go back into that house. Faith had the recipe book out, a sure sign dinner would be inedible. Hope had arranged the good china and fresh flowers, and Charity had last been seen digging through the music collection. A bottle of wine chilled in the crystal bucket. It could only mean his sisters were matchmaking again. They wanted him married, and they wanted a nephew, another Keeper to hold the legacy. He had no interest, but they continued to parade women through his life.

His self-imposed celibacy played havoc with his mood, but it was hard to date while wallowing in guilt. Damn it, his dad had wanted him to fly to the Keys, and if he had been on that plane, he could have done something. Now his dad was gone, and he'd been forced to deal with the aftermath. The girls seemed okay most days, and it had started to get easier, but he couldn't let it go yet.

A car pulled into the driveway. If a woman existed on Trinity who could get him back into the game, it was Natalie Wolcott, and the girls knew it. Blond, blue-eyed Nat could model for Victoria's Secret and in bed had the instincts of a wildcat. He wondered what Nat was doing on Trinity. This time of year she should be in New York, raiding and plundering corporations with her usual piratical legal skill. Nat was great—she had everything a man could want—but death had a way of rearranging priorities. He'd grown tired of sleeping with every woman he knew, simply because he

could. He wanted to play for keeps, and Nat wasn't what he wanted permanently.

With hiding on his mind, he headed toward Stone Cottage, his refuge and sanctuary, the only building left on the property from the original Caindale plantation. Faith would attempt to drag him out by his hair, but he could try.

He strode up the path and, as he opened the gate, a deafening boom burst through the quiet night, ricocheting through the garden with the power of thunder. Ryder tensed, preparing himself for another blast. The unmistakable odor of sulfur flooded his nostrils and clung to the muggy air.

"Christ, that sounded like gunfire."

Ryder glanced toward the main house. A cluster of women stood on the porch, their laughter drifting through the night air like a reprimand. They hadn't heard anything, but something was wrong. He whirled around on the path, not sure what he searched for, but what he saw shocked the hell out of him. An eerie, blood red mist swirled a short distance away, rising from the ground between the cottage and the house.

The cloud shaped itself into a rough circle and Ryder took a hesitant step forward. Another sound swelled now, rising and falling, caught in the evening air, a baying sound. The soulful keening wail echoed heartache, pain, and shattering grief. What the hell made a sound like that?

Ryder kept moving, following a tendril of mist that beckoned him across the yard. The baying increased, winding through his body and stabbing at something very near his heart. It was the saddest sound he'd ever heard, and for some reason, it made him want to cry, but that would never happen. He'd closed those feelings off months ago, killing them with countless bottles of Jack.

He stared into the circle of fog, and something shimmered there that looked disturbingly like the figure of a woman. The closer he got, the more vivid she became, until he stared at the most beautiful woman he'd seen in his life.

His breath whooshed out of his lungs, and he raked his hands through his hair. "Oh, man, what the hell is this?"

Dressed in a long pale yellow skirt and a shirt that might have been white in another century, she gazed into the rosy lavender of the darkening sky. The loose linen fell off her creamy shoulders and dipped low across her

chest, displaying an enticing amount of cleavage, generous mounds of aching temptation pushed up by a seductive leather corset that hugged her small body tightly. A riot of burnished curls surrounded her face and fell down her back, rich lustrous strands, and exactly the shade of red that had turned him on for the last fifteen years. He'd always been a sucker for a redhead.

Wow. Natalie had nothing to offer next to this little wench. For the first time in months, his dick stirred in his pants.

You're an idiot, Kendall, and you're drinking way too much. She's some kind of hallucination you conjured from a bottle, and a figment of your imagination should not give you a hard-on. There's a perfectly good woman, a real woman, standing on the porch. Close your eyes and keep moving.

He couldn't do it. Real or not, he took a step closer and studied her face.

Lush lips, a soft natural pink that did not come from a tube, the kind of lips a man could suck on till the end of time. That firm jaw could mean a stubborn streak. This little beauty might want her own way and, with a few concessions on her part, he wouldn't mind giving it to her. He knew her pale, luminous skin would flush in anger and passion, and by the way she moved, he thought there would be lots of passion locked in that tight little bundle. His dick twitched again, growing so hard he had to shift it in his pants. Things were looking up.

The entire package was hot, but her eyes held him spellbound, dark green, filled with an anxiety that made him want to wrap his arms around her, cradle her against him, and run his hands through her hair. Something had frightened the hell out of her. She cocked her head, and a visible shiver ran down her spine. When her voice drifted into the air around him, he heard the trace of an Irish accent. He was having one freaking, real hallucination.

"Oh, no, please," she whispered. "By all that's holy, not a banshee." *A banshee? What the hell?*

A spasm of pain flickered across her face, and the woman clutched her stomach, doubling over. Her hair swung forward, sweeping the long, irregular blades of grass that surrounded her. Ryder wondered what had happened to his perfectly manicured lawn, but when she began to heave and gag, he rushed toward her. He tried to pull the hair away from her face, but

his hand trailed through her body and caused her image to shimmer and waver. He panicked when she dissolved into nothing.

He snatched his hand out of the fog, and she reappeared, coalescing from an indistinct fog into a shape once again. For one second, the warmth of her body shocked him.

You're in serious trouble here. There's nothing real about this, but you're starting to feel it. You've lost your freaking mind.

When she stood, Ryder took a step backward. He feared she'd disappear but, more than that, he felt uncomfortable because things seemed to be shifting. The woman wiped her apron across her mouth then turned slowly in a circle. Reluctant to take his eyes off the girl, he followed her gaze into the distance, and he couldn't reconcile his surroundings. He found himself in a foreign landscape.

The main house simply vanished. The road that circled past his property and led to the tidy little village beyond disappeared, replaced with vast fields filled with wildflowers and towering forests long since harvested. The rush of the river water sounded louder, bursting with force and power. He glanced toward his cottage, which stood sturdy and welcoming, but his fence had melted away, and the lights blazing through the windows earlier had been replaced by the glow of a flickering candle. His gaze snapped back to the girl.

Come on, baby, clue me in here. What the hell is happening? Who are you? Where are you?

His mind seemed filled with her, but she had no thoughts of him. From the terrified look on her face, thoughts he couldn't imagine filled her head. The wail continued rising and falling with pain and shattering grief. The mournful song punched a hole in his gut.

The woman searched the mist, and Ryder searched with her. Meeting a banshee, even in some kind of fantastic vision, could not be good. The woman spoke softly, and it twisted something inside of him.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said. "There is nothing you can do to me that's naught been done before. Do you sing for Stephen? Is it the price for my selfishness?"

A tear slid down her cheek and her eyes hardened into slices of deep emerald. She forced words through a clenched jaw.

"Bloody saints, Cameron, you could not leave us alone? You've left me no choice."

She lifted her face to the sky, hair tumbling along her back. She spread her arms toward the coming night. Droplets of rain fell now, splashing against her skin.

"Children of the sky, I call you to return to me. Bring the blessed protection I seek, not for my own self, but for the three within. Time unravels, and we will be together again. The once forbidden is now allowed. Return to me."

Confused, Ryder watched the girl. Her glance swept the landscape, resting on the river where the fog covering the water undulated among the small whitecaps. Tiny twinkling lights appeared within the gray landscape, darting and flitting like lost fireflies. He twisted his head toward the meadow and the fields that now stretched across Trinity Island. Moving through the wildflowers and the crops in the distance, more lights raced toward her, pouncing randomly among the vegetation, twisting and dancing in the breeze.

"What the fuck?" Ryder whispered.

The glittering lights spiraled into columns, like birds in flight, their random movement now full of purpose. The intensity of the lights glowed brighter, flickering faster to match the rhythm of his escalating heartbeat. Shining colors appeared in the lights, a palette that swelled with blues and greens, pinks and lavenders. The sparkling iridescence of the lights was wondrous.

It's a brain tumor. Or alcohol poisoning.

The dance of the lights reached them, flying around her, reaching into the sky, circling the cottage. A smile of lights, the happy radiance of children at play.

You are one sick mother, Kendall. You've either punched a hole through reality or drunk yourself into one hell of a coma.

The lights skimmed along her body, caressing her, landing on her hands and face and tumbling into the waves of hair. They skipped along her flesh, and jealousy consumed him. He wanted to touch her flesh, put his hands in her hair and take advantage of the pounding erection he'd managed to conjure from nothing. If he could just get his hands on her, he knew there'd be magic. He could feel it.

The lights pulled back and hovered in a circle around her, pulsing with anticipation, and a collective sigh of small, happy breaths filled the air and shimmered in the rainy mist. Ryder couldn't stay away from the girl. He moved closer so he could hear her.

"Tis gladness I have in my heart to see you again. I've a need to protect the cottage and three within—little lasses of fire, earth, and air."

The lights glowed eagerly, a symphony of radiance. Small arching rainbows spread through the darkness. The prisms twinkled and spread, disappeared and reappeared, moving across the air in colorful streams of fiery brilliance.

She whispered something, and the rainbow prisms died. The lights blinked furiously. One of the lights darted toward her, and the woman spread out her hand. Ryder edged closer. The light nestled in the cup of her hand, sparkling in a pale pink aura. It was some kind of tiny creature.

Oh, sure, let's take this hallucination one step further into actual dementia. Now you're seeing things from a Disney movie.

A gossamer veil hid the creature's body, and her golden hair swept the length of her frame, curling around her limbs. Tiny pinpoints of blue flame danced in her eyes. The fury of a hushed whisper disturbed the air around her. The woman smiled, and her finger skimmed across the pearly sheen of the gauzy fabric.

"I see the concern, Adelina," the woman said, "but 'tis hope I have you will come to love the lasses as I do."

Doubt flickered across the creature's face, and she frowned, her forehead furrowing. She peered at the woman through the blue flame of her eyes and cocked her head. "The banshee cries. What has happened?"

"'Tis my fear Stephen is dead," the woman said, "and the Ganconor has done the deed. 'Tis why I need you."

The tiny creature huffed. "Tis not what we expected. We have defied time and space for you, not your passel of mortal brats." She paused, and another huff escaped her rosy lips. The creature was pretty darn cute and seemed to have much on her mind regarding mortal children. The woman waited patiently while the pink thing struggled with her next words, nearly choking on them. "Love a human? Three humans at that!"

Ryder smiled, enjoying his little delusion. He'd always been a fan of Disney films.

"Tis wonderful children they are," the woman said.

The creature rustled her iridescent wings in a splash of magenta. She tucked her head, refusing to look at the woman "Loving a human can be very tiring."

"I know, faery mine, but hush now, you must hide. Someone comes."

Faery? Christ, when you conjure delusions out of thin air, you go all the way.

The faeries—sure, why not?—darted into the tall grasses, and their lights vanished. A group of men emerged from the mist, carrying a bundle that held the shape of a man. Ryder stood silently with his perfect hallucination. The woman did not seem surprised. Not surprised at all.

"Oh, Cameron, what mayhem have you done?" she whispered.

She wiped the traces of tears from her face and walked toward the men. When she vanished into the fog, Ryder tried to follow but stumbled into the fence that surrounded his cottage. Faith called his name from the house.

"No more drinking. You had one too many tonight."

He stared into the fog for another minute, thinking of the little beauty. He wanted that one. Too bad she was a figment of his imagination.

He shook his head, and a drop of water slid down his face. Glancing at the clear, dark sky, he ran his hands through his shaggy hair, puzzled at the dampness. Plunging his wet hands into the pockets of his overcoat, he headed toward the house.

Chapter 2

Trinity Island Virginia Colony 1639

The needle bit into Arleigh Donovan's skin.

"Bloody hell," she muttered.

She inspected the wound, leaning over the table toward the single candle that sputtered in the gloom of the corner. Large beads of blood welled from the puncture and dropped onto the cloth she sewed. She stuffed her wounded thumb into her mouth, gagging at the foul taste of the blood. Anger, bright and hot, pounded through her.

"Bloody hell."

She settled back onto the bench, pressing her apron tightly against the injury, waiting for the sting to subside and the bleeding to stop.

"I will ne'er get this done. I hate you for making me do this."

A single tear dropped from her eye. Reaching out with a trembling hand, she caressed the cloth spread upon the table, moving along the hills and valleys created by the body wrapped within the rough fabric. Anger roared through her again. She didn't know if she was angry with Stephen, with herself, or the world.

"You confronted him, didn't you? Why did you think you could change anything?"

She lowered her head. Hot brutal tears began to fall, tears that sprang from nowhere and poured unabated from a well that seemed limitless. She simply let them fall. She couldn't make them stop, and when she tried, her head nearly burst. She brushed wearily at strands of tear-dampened hair.

Her hand caught in one of the curls crossed over her shoulder, and she lifted it, watching it wind around her finger. She wanted to take a knife and

cut it off, sever the memory and the bond she had with the family that had forced her to this place. She wanted to cut every strand of the dark red hair that had, for centuries, threaded through the Donovan clan and bound her to a family across an ocean. They had banished her, forgotten her, and driven her to this distant land. Why hadn't they loved her? Why couldn't they accept her?

"Cursed. They were right. I am cursed. But it still hurts. Why didn't they love me enough to keep me?"

For years she had fought against the truth. As she looked at the cloth containing the corpse of the only ally she had in this despicable land, she knew everything the Donovans had said was the truth. She could no longer deny what she knew in her heart.

"They pushed you out and exiled you from the village. Arleigh Donovan is a cursed woman, a pariah. They all said it, all felt it, and here is the proof."

Arleigh shivered and pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders. She could not seem to get warm. What made her shake uncontrollably? Was it the thoughts that tormented her mind or the night breeze blowing through the open window? Or could it be that high, keening wail she heard all the way to the marrow of her bones, that cry that seemed part of the fabric of the night air?

The song of the banshee had grown softer, almost a whisper of grief in the autumn night. Arleigh shivered again. She moved to the window and gripped the sash, ready to lower it, but the breeze was not cold at all. In fact, it held warmth and comfort and brought with it the scent of a cleansing rainstorm brewing in the western hills. Her fingers tightened on the sill and bit into the splintery wood.

"The chill is inside of me, inside of me where there is nothing but darkness."

She stared at her reflection in the hazy imperfection of the glass pane. She saw a small oval face nearly lost within the cloud of deep russet hair that tumbled around it. She looked so pale, so fragile, so helpless. She met the eyes of the frightened apparition, dark green eyes caught somewhere between reality and death. Tears dried on the cheeks of her ghostly counterpart, and the eyes seemed haunted and desperate, so unfocused

Arleigh felt a flash of terror. Heart hammering, she grabbed at the thin curtains and yanked them shut with a sob. She dropped back on the bench.

"The curse is real, Stephen. You doubted me, but here is the proof. You lie dead in a shroud, and my meager talents cannot even sew a decent burial cloth. Why didn't you believe me? I knew what the outcome would be. Oh, aye, I certainly knew that. They whispered about my bond with the dark world all my life. I must pay for my thefts forever, and those who love me must pay, also. I'm sorry, Stephen. So sorry."

Although her hands shook, Arleigh picked up the needle and resumed her task. She pushed the needle through the rough fabric, winding it through again and again until her fingertips numbed. She wished she had something softer, more elegant, but in truth, she was fortunate to have what she had.

The firelight scattered around the room, nipping at the shadows in the corners but bringing no warmth to her. The tears felt like slivers of ice cutting her face. She choked back the sobs that rose from her chest, refusing to express her grief.

Stephen's girls had offered to help, but she wanted to do the sewing as a last gift, her final gesture of love and respect, so she told them to rest. She'd not exactly lied, because they needed to be strong for what they must do later, but she'd not told the truth either. She wanted them to sleep because she could not stand to look into their eyes and see their broken hearts. Her own courage would fade even faster if she had to see those three sets of dark blue eyes filled with such sadness.

Her fingers resumed their task, but her eyes continued to glance at the sleeping forms spread upon the floor. They had refused to be separated from her, choosing to sleep on the floor of the keeping room to be near her. Curled within quilts, Stephen's daughters looked peaceful, but their eyelids fluttered against the dreams and their fingers curled around their blankets. Every so often, a sigh rustled the air and rose to meet the breeze.

A strong bond held them together. The three sisters shared everything—their land, their hearth, and their dreams. They shared joys and sorrows and all the emotions in between that fate decreed. Today had been a day of sorrow, and even in sleep they shared their grief. As their minds spun dreams, their hands reached for each other. As their agitation grew, their fingers entangled and the glossy strands of black hair spread across the pillows merged and became indistinguishable. Their lovely faces were

flushed from the heat of the hearth which spread a soft glow across their fair skin. Between them, they possessed enough beauty to twist the heavens into a jealous frenzy.

At thirteen, Fiana was caught between the last moments of childhood and the beckoning call of womanhood. Headstrong and impetuous, Fiana still wore her beauty as though she had no knowledge it existed and no interest in the impact it might have on others, but Arleigh knew that would soon change. Even stubborn Fiana would not be able to stem the passage of time. When womanhood finally captured her, Fiana would become a force of nature.

Ten-year-old Hannah grounded herself in the world, eager for new experiences and curious about everything. Steadfast and practical, she moved through life with the power of a cleansing rain. A satisfied smile perpetually curled her lips, like she herself was responsible for the beauty she saw around her. The smile echoed the contentment she felt, and she wore it for the world to see.

Corliss, blossoming like an early bud of spring, had recently turned seven. Her eyes reflected her happiness, and she moved through her young life as though she heard music in the wind. She carried the music with her into the lives of those she touched, sharing her enthusiasm and joy and spreading it to all.

Would their laughter still echo in the stone cottage, and would their bodies still quiver with the excitement and promise of all life had to offer? Arleigh knew they would be different now that death had visited their home.

"What have we done to them?" Arleigh asked the dead man on the table. "Danger will come to our island now, and I am the cause."

Arleigh continued to sew and ignored the tears that dripped onto the table, leaving a stain of despair. The girls could never be the same. She knew she wouldn't be. Life had changed for all of them, and she had yet to discover how much or what path they would be forced to take.

She finished her last few stitches and tied strong knots. Her hands once again roamed across the fabric. Tucked within the fabric offered the only hope she'd once had of a future in this land. Now hope would soon be buried in the earth with Stephen, and every happy moment had disappeared into the past. She couldn't stay in this place any longer, not when her presence could cause more disaster, not when her fate held what she feared.

She would have to find a way to leave the island before they came for her. The people of Jamestown would know what she was. Somehow they always knew. The expanse of the sea had not offered her peace, or sanctuary, or a future. The curse had found her once again. Cameron Flynn had seen to that.

"Tis not fair," she whispered, "to you or to me, but especially not to them. What are we going to do without you, Stephen? What will happen to this family?"

Arleigh rose and walked to the open window, her hands balled into fists. She slowly tugged at the curtains until the window once again revealed her reflection. She stared at herself, but the woman in the window had no answers for her.

Arleigh glanced at the form of her dead friend on the table. Stephen had no answers for her, either. She would have to find her own. Looking at the little girls on the floor made her heart ache. She knelt beside Fiana's sleeping form, gently placed her hand on the girl's shoulder, and shook. Fiana's amazing blue eyes fluttered open, instantly alert.

"'Tis time," Arleigh said.

Chapter 3

The pile of books in his arms smelled musty and old. Ryder Kendall loved that smell more than anything, even the scent of the deep, rich earth of Trinity Island and the waters of the James River that flowed around his home. He breathed in deeply, capturing the book smell and relishing the images that flooded through his mind. Dark rooms filled with leather and wood, high ceilings filled with shadows. Warrens of shelves full of adventures waiting to be discovered, and pages crackling with history, telling tales of people who had come before and lived their lives as vicious undertakings.

Balancing the tower of books, Ryder used his foot to slam the door of the Jeep and turned toward the sidewalk. He peered around his lopsided stack and sidestepped quickly in the growing darkness of the early evening, nearly colliding with a wooden signpost that marked the entrance to his yard.

Beware of Witches Beyond This Point

He laughed and readjusted the weight of his books. He mounted the porch steps, and his laughter died. He stared for a moment at the boxes piled on the wooden planks then put his books down on the porch swing.

"This can't be good," he said to one of the small ghosts hanging from the porch rafters. The smiling ghost caught the breeze of the autumn evening and swayed cheerfully.

Ryder hunkered down and reluctantly pulled open the lid on the first box. The box held yards and yards of mangled Halloween lights, twisted into unrecognizable lumps of cords and bulbs. He already knew who would be drafted into detangling them. The second box brimmed with black bows and orange ribbons filled with tiny skeletons, dancing in a nightmarish conga line, and mounds of soft, fluffy webs with tiny, plastic spiders caught in their threads. He had seen enough.

He stood and ran his hands across his face.

"Christ, they're planning the Halloween party."

Glancing through the gauzy white curtains of the bay window, he saw his sisters hunched over another box on the coffee table. The three young women all had glossy strands of straight ebony hair that flowed around their shoulders with a touching elegance. Their deep sapphire eyes spoke of eternal knowledge, deep emotion, unbound passion. All small, their petite frames hovered around his bulk like darting fireflies. They were a set—the Trinity. He was the outsider. If any doubt lingered he didn't belong in their world, he had the adoption papers to prove it.

The Weird Sisters but nothing like those in *MacBeth*. Oh, no, his sisters held enough beauty between them to twist the heavens into a jealous frenzy. When he envisioned them around their smoking cauldron, he did not see women dressed in black rags flowing around stooped bodies like evil shrouds. He saw girls in tight jeans and tiny t-shirts, young women whose bodies radiated health and sensuality, whose silky black hair fell to their waists, and whose gorgeous faces held pouty lips and flashing sapphire eyes. Witches meant beauty, and beauty meant his sisters.

Ryder watched them through the window, stealing moments of their lives without their knowledge, getting even with them for every moment they had stolen from him with their little Trinity tricks. The girls looked so happy, and he could hear their laughter. He didn't know if he had the heart to tell them no, but he would find a way.

He picked up his stack of books and pushed open the front door. A gust of autumn leaves swept onto the hardwood floor of the foyer and settled into the corners like early Halloween decorations. The girls swiveled toward him, and three bright smiles met him.

"Someone moving?" he asked, setting his books down on the circular table by the staircase. "Could I be so lucky?"

Charity laughed and ran toward him. She still wore her uniform from the Trinity High cheerleading squad. She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the living room.

"What took you so long? School's been out for hours and hours."

"And still I don't smell dinner cooking."

Charity slapped at his arm. "Faith's ordering pizza."

"Faith's buying pizza? She got a job?" he asked, turning his eyes toward the oldest of the three.

"Oh, you're very funny today," Faith said, moving another box onto the coffee table. "We've been busy, and I didn't have time to cook. Besides, Malcolm's coming over tonight. We still have a few details to go over before he leaves on assignment."

Hope pulled her head out of a box. "You'd think they planned the invasion of Normandy."

"Hope knows about the invasion of Normandy?" Ryder asked Charity. "When did this happen?"

"Oh, you're right," Hope said. "He does think he's funny today. You must have had a good day."

"A great day," Ryder said. "At least it started that way. How it's going to end is still up in the air."

They ignored him as usual. He picked his way through a minefield of boxes, gingerly sidestepping the rolls of crepe paper and black ceramic cats that littered the floor.

"Anyway," Hope continued. "It's a simple wedding and—"

"Simple!" Faith cried. "Do you have any idea what goes into planning a wedding?"

Hope frowned at her sister. "Unfortunately, yes. I'm glad for a little Halloween diversion."

Ryder dropped into one of the cushioned chairs by the fireplace and let it envelop him in its haven of safety, the only lifeboat he could find in the storm. He surveyed the chaos that had previously been their living room. Once again, the Weird Sisters had managed to forget they had a brother and had barreled through planning and into action.

They resumed one of their everlasting squabbles. These three lovely girls could turn into banshees at a moment's notice. This particular ruckus seemed to focus on the color of the bridesmaids' dresses. Dark hair swung around their shoulders and words tumbled from their mouths. Three sets of hands gestured with their arguments. Their bright blue eyes snapped with an ardor and tenacity that set off the warning bells in his mind. How could such beautiful girls turn into such harpies? Ryder had seen it so many times, that their instantaneous transformation seemed almost natural to him.

Faith was the worst, the head harpy. Hope and Charity could hold their own in almost any argument, but not against Faith. Faith barreled through each argument in her usual succinct and hard-headed style, and his two youngest sisters ran out of steam. Finally it came to an end when Faith put her small hands on her hips. She wore the Faith expression that clearly defined someone was in charge, and she knew who.

"Whose wedding is it?" she asked.

"Yours," the girls chorused.

"And who makes the decisions?"

"You do," they echoed.

"Fine, then," Faith said. "We're all agreed on the blue dress. Hope, order the pizza. Get the usual. Ask Mr. Money-Bags for his wallet. And, Charity, put those musty books in his study. They're stinking up the living room, and Mal is coming over."

She turned to Ryder with a bright smile and went into the kitchen to set the table.

* * * *

They polished off two medium pizzas, loaded with everything, in relative peace and quiet. The argument over dresses, shoes, flowers, food, whatever, had ceased momentarily. Hope rose from the table and began to clear the plates.

"Honey, sit down for a second," Ryder said. "I have a couple of things on my mind."

Hope lowered herself back into the chair and glanced at her sisters. Charity shrugged, and Faith, never inclined to apologize for anything, offered a small smile.

"Sorry about the squabble," Faith said. "I'm a little tense right now. Mal will be gone for awhile, and I want everything to be perfect."

Ryder reached across the table and took Faith's hand.

"It will be. A spring wedding will be perfect. You will be perfect, and I'm sure the dresses... What color?"

"Sky blue," Faith answered.

"They'll be perfect, too."

"I know everything costs a fortune," Faith said. "I'm trying to be economical, but the world is conspiring against me. Everything costs so damn much."

"I'm not worried about the cost, honey. You order whatever you want. This isn't about the wedding."

Charity leaned forward. "Something wrong at school? Are you in trouble with Mrs. Thorpe? You didn't get fired, did you?"

Ryder shook his head. "No, no, everything's fine. In fact, I'm thinking of a new project we could do in advanced history."

Charity moaned. "I'm in advanced history. What torture have you come up with?"

"Torture is my middle name, but we'll talk about that later," Ryder said. "I wanted to talk about the decorations. They're kind of everywhere. What are you planning?"

Hope glanced at Faith, who poured coffee.

"The Halloween party," Hope said. "It's a tradition."

Ryder sighed and leaned back in his chair. He picked up the cup Faith laid in front of him and took a sip, glancing at his sisters over the rim. The peace had lasted exactly twenty minutes. He would have to be grateful for that much. He felt a headache coming on and suspected it would get a lot worse. No way around it. There would be a fight.

"Things are different now," he said. "Don't you think it's time we changed the tradition?"

Faith dropped into the opposite chair and looked at him hard. Ryder tensed, waiting for the storm to begin, but Faith took a sip of her coffee and remained quiet. Christ, this might be worse than he expected. All three girls stared at him, and panic fluttered in his gut because they were too quiet. The Weird Sisters had stared into their cauldron and weren't pleased. The clock on the kitchen wall counted off the moments he had left. The ticking and tocking drilled into his head. Finally he sighed and plunged ahead, saying the one thing that would start the harpy fury, but he might as well get it over with.

"I don't think we should have the party," Ryder said.

"We're having the party," Faith said. Case closed. It was that simple for Faith. She rose and walked to the sink and began to run the water.

Ryder glanced at the two younger girls then turned in his seat to face Faith. "Was this your idea?"

"Kendalls have a Halloween party. It's what we do. People expect it. It's how we fit in on this island."

"But Mom is gone and now Dad. They held the parties. It was their tradition."

"It's a Trinity tradition, Ryder," Faith said. "It has nothing to do with Mom or Dad. When one generation is gone, the next continues. Dad was the Keeper, holding the tradition, but it belongs to *us*."

Ryder's jaw clenched. "Just because I'm not one of the Trinity doesn't mean I don't have a say in this."

"Don't pull your I'm-not-part-of-the-Trinity crap on me," Faith said. "You want me to say it, but I won't."

"Go ahead and say it," Ryder said. His glance touched on each of them. "I'm not part of this. You have your little Trinity, and in the Kendall family, only the Trinity matters. I'm the outsider. Hell, I'm not even a real Kendall."

A small rumbling of anger roared through him, but it had nothing to do with them. Well, maybe a little to do with them.

"Damn it, Faith," Ryder said. "I don't want a party!"

"Too bad, because there's going to be one, and you will be there. Think about your costume now, because it's in a couple of weeks. We're doing Colonial this year. The girls and I will be the first American Trinity. We already have our costumes."

Ryder sighed. He had left the school in a great mood and entered the library with high expectations. Mrs. Cargill, the unofficial town historian, had unlocked volumes of old records from the vault. After grilling him on the care he would take with her treasured documents, she had allowed him to bring them home to scan. He had lists and ledgers, receipts and court records. He had begun to formulate an exciting project for his students, but his good mood had vanished when he saw the boxes. To top it off, the Weird Sisters now stared at him like he'd left his brain at work. An ache drilled through his head and lodged in front of his eyes.

"Look, girls," he said gently, "when Dad's plane went down in June, things changed."

"Why?" Faith asked. Why was she so damn belligerent all the time? "Mom and Dad never wanted things to change. They trusted you to make it right. They *chose* you. Why can't you make it right?"

"I'm trying," Ryder said. "You're in grad school. Hope's going to college. Charity's doing well in classes."

Faith's mouth dropped. "School? Is that what you think makes everything right? We're going through the motions right now to make them proud, to show them we can go on without them. But do you know what, Ryder? We're dying inside. I don't know about you, but the three of us are dying. Hell, we might already be dead for all I know. I know I feel that way."

Fuck. Don't let her start crying. I can't handle it when she cries.

He started to rise from his chair, but Faith flung her hand in his direction, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"We don't want things to change, Ryder," Faith continued. "We are still a family. Our family has a Halloween party. We're going to have it."

"We want the party," Charity said. "I can't let go of everything, not even for you."

She pulled her hair back with her hands and dropped her head to the table, trying to hide her tears. He hadn't seen Charity cry in over a month, and now it was his fault. He turned to Hope, calm, wise Hope. She would help him talk some sense into them. But Hope, his bastion, his cool sister of reason and common sense, wiped at her own tears. He had lost.

"We knew you wouldn't like it," Hope said. "We know how hard it's been on you, and we know it's your house now, but—"

"It's *our* house," Ryder said. "It belongs to all of us. It's just in my name."

"We know the drill," Hope said. "The house goes to the Keeper. It's happened for generations. We don't mind. It's tradition, like the Halloween party. We have the party to celebrate that we are Kendalls, to celebrate the first ones. It doesn't matter that Mom and Dad are gone."

"But it's been only four months, Hope."

"Four months, four weeks, it doesn't matter."

"She's right," Faith said. "We all miss them, and it's going to hurt to have the party without either of them, but we're going to do it, Ryder. We

won't let you throw everything away because we've lost them. We have to remember everything. Kendalls remember everything. It's who we are."

"It's who you are," Ryder said.

"Don't," Faith snapped.

Ryder stood up. What good would it do to argue with them? They had made up their minds, and as usual, he'd been outvoted. He looked at their faces—three small, perfect faces that had surrounded him since he could remember. Three girls who held between them every good quality he could imagine. He envied them, and it tore him in two to think he was not part of them, but he loved them.

"Okay," he said. "A couple of weeks. The Kendall Halloween party. I'll be there."

Faith turned toward the sink. He thought he heard her crying when he left the kitchen, but he didn't have the guts to turn back.

Chapter 4

The clouds moved across a dark sky, and the light of the moon, released from its gauzy prison, fell upon the land. Four saddened shadows moved across the ground, pushing and pulling a handcart over the sodden earth. Breathing heavily, their feet sinking in damp ground, they ignored the mist of rain that dripped into their faces. Each footstep carried them farther into the future and away from the security and comfort they had come to know.

Arleigh still heard the high-pitched wail of the banshee. The griefstricken howls broke her heart, moving on the air like a melody of pain. The death spirit followed them, and the banshee's need to see Stephen buried swept over Arleigh and made her body ache. The cries would stop only when the body had been covered with dirt, and Arleigh was as eager as the death faery to have it done. Arleigh felt the fierce pain of the banshee all the way through her bones.

"How much farther?" Corliss asked. "There is a scary sound in the air. I want to go home."

Arleigh lost her grip on the card and stumbled. Corliss could hear the banshee. She shot a glance toward the woods, but the creature hid in the shelter of the trees. Only her black cloak was visible, an inky stain on the air.

"A little farther," Arleigh said. "The grave is next to your mother's. I dug it earlier."

Fresh tears pour from Arleight's eyes and ran down her cheeks. She tasted bitter salt on her lips, a taste that reminded her too much of lost hope and lost lives. She struggled over the sodden ground, pulling the cart slowly. She glanced over at Fiana. The girl stared straight ahead into the thready moonlight. Quiet tears flowed on Fiana's cheeks, and the sniffling behind Arleigh confirmed that Hannah and Corliss were crying again.

She had no choice but to keep moving. She didn't think any of them could stand the sight of Stephen's body for another night. The rain fell harder now. If the ground got wetter, they would have a hard time shoveling the dirt back into the grave, and they risked sickness if they stayed out in the rain too long. If one of the girls became ill, Arleigh had no idea if she could take it.

Arleigh's heart hammered in her chest. They had perhaps a matter of days in which to share their sorrow and prepare for the worst. Flynn would come for her.

In the scattering moonlight, the freshly dug mound of dirt emerged. She knew the girls had seen it, too, because a ragged sigh escaped from Fiana, and Corliss began to sob. A small wooden cross marked the grave of Sarah Caindale, who had died giving birth to her youngest daughter.

They pulled the handcart to the edge of the grave and struggled to lift the bundle, finally laying it as tenderly as they could on the damp earth. Fiana put her arms around her little sister, and Corliss sobbed against Fiana's chest.

"What do we do now?" Hannah asked. "Now that Papa is dead, what will happen to us?"

Hannah's restless hands plucked at the folds of her damp cloak. Between the wet strands of hair plastered across Hannah's face, Arleigh saw the terror reflected in her eyes. Arleigh closed her own eyes for a moment. Thoughts tumbled through her mind and random images flooded her. She didn't know what to tell them or how to comfort them. She sighed and prepared to say something, anything, but Fiana released Corliss and moved toward her.

"You don't know, do you?" Fiana asked.

Arleigh hesitated for a moment. Fiana deserved an answer, and the look on her face demanded one. Oh, she didn't want to make it worse. She would have given anything to put her arms around them and tell them their lives would stay the same, but she knew they wouldn't accept any lie that came from her lips. Even in their childish minds, they knew fate would not be kind.

"I don't know what will happen," Arleigh said, "but I suspect we won't have much time together."

Fiana nodded. She moved toward her sisters and went to stand behind them. Her arms encircled them both. Hannah and Corliss pressed against her, and Fiana's hands went to their dark hair, stoking calmly for what seemed a frozen moment in which their love rose into the pallid moonlight. Once again Arleigh's strength weakened, and she wondered how she could protect these three children in a place where mercy and comfort were hard to find. The banshee's cry pierced the darkness, as if to steal any hope she might have.

Anger surged through her that Stephen Caindale had placed himself in jeopardy for *her*. He had left these three girls defenseless in this place, and she could offer them nothing—not protection, not hope. Her indenture might soon be bartered for by another, and the girls might become orphaned chattel, scattered into the Virginia colony to whichever families would take them. What could she say to these girls when she knew she was the cause?

Fiana's curt voice cut through her thoughts.

"Arleigh."

Arleigh's head snapped up, and she met the younger girl's eyes. Even in the shadowy light, she saw the questioning look in Fiana's glance and looked down to avoid the girl.

"What are you thinking?" Fiana asked.

Nothing. Nothing...everything.

"The thoughts in your head will not help us," Fiana said. "You are not to blame. Our father had his own mind."

Arleigh gasped. Fiana's eyes held dark pools of midnight in the pale glow of the moon. There were no answers there.

"Fiana, do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Now is not the time to place blame. Now is the time to ask God to keep our papa safe and help us prepare for what is to come."

"What do you know?" Arleigh asked.

Fiana blessed her with a tired smile. "Nothing...and everything."

Arleigh's head ached, and she feared she might faint onto the wet ground. She struggled to keep her balance and, for one small moment, actually felt a trickle of anxiety snake its way down her spine.

"There is no need for fear," Fiana said quietly, "at least not of me, but there will be plenty of fear to come in the next few weeks. For now, we need to say goodbye to Papa."

A small blink of light flitted through the woods beyond the gravesite. A warmth spread through Arleigh and she thanked Adelina for keeping watch over them. She nodded and folded her hands in prayer, listening to the banshee wail in the deepness of the forest.

Chapter 5

Ryder sat at the desk in his sanctuary. It was the only place on the property he could escape from his sisters. Even then he wasn't always successful. They continued to parade down the glass hallway connecting the main house to the cottage and thought nothing of intruding into his privacy. He had managed to get through dinner last night and away from Natalie's groping hands, but he knew now his sisters planned to resume their mission to find him the perfect woman. If they only knew he'd already found her in his demented mind, they'd call Dr. Maxwell and have him back at the shrink before you could say "Ryder has issues."

He continued to pore through his library stash, enjoying the texture of the pages and the small details of daily life the old ledgers held, but there would be hell to pay for his enjoyment. Mrs. Cargill would kick his ass, because getting the documents back to the library in time to meet his deadline had become a moot point. He hadn't even begun the scanning.

"Couldn't hurt to bribe her."

He thought a nice dinner at Trinity Inn might do the trick. He reached for a pen to jot himself a note, and a scrap of parchment tucked in a ledger caught his attention. Discolored and stained, yellow with age, its edges crinkled when he touched it. He gingerly lifted the cover of the ledger and brought the parchment into the light of his desk lamp. The tight, painstakingly written script captured every inch of the crisp paper.

He poured a glass of whiskey from the bottle in his drawer. There was nothing worse than a closet drunk, but if Faith saw it, there'd be trouble. She'd been popping in unannounced for weeks, keeping her eye on him. And of course, her little mind-reading trick didn't allow for much privacy.

He began to read.

He'll be coming for me soon. 'Tis the lasses I must protect, no matter the cost to myself. 'Tis a debt I owe their father. Stephen gave me security

and a home when I expected none, and 'twas a hope for the future, possibly a lifetime.

'Tis silly to dwell in the past. Stephen is gone now, but the lasses remain, and the only hope lies in me. They can't survive alone and, sure, they'll not be permitted to do so. 'Tis fear in my heart they'll be separated and bartered to the highest bidder to cause me more pain.

When he comes I will go, but 'tis promises I'll demand or deny him what he wants. I'm the small token he dreams of conquering, and 'tis lifetimes he has waited.

All my life I've tried to hide from this curse and understand why it haunts me. Will the curse follow me to Cardew Manor, as it has followed me every day of life and across the sea? I pray to the saints that it does. My heart feels his power is real and then 'tis certain doom.

I long for love. 'Tis all I want. He says love has been both life and death to me, the reason I now live trapped within this form, but no matter. The time's come to heal the wounds. 'Tis a champion I need, but my needs have ne'er been answered. My life is a borrowed one, and if I must relinquish it, I'll do so. What happens to me no longer matters.

"You are so wrong about that."

The cool air leaking through the drafty window brushed past him and swirled temptingly around his face, even fanning the pages that littered his desk, but sweat poured from him. Perspiration dotted his hairline and leaked down his forehead. He noticed the fire had gone out, and he shouldn't be sweating in the middle of a cool room. He downed the glass of whisky that sat on his desk then stared at the empty glass in his hand. How many had he had?

He closed his eyes and rubbed at them with the heels of his hands. When he opened his eyes, the page still lay in the center of the mahogany desk, like a precious jewel amid lumps of coal. He reached out and traced his fingers along the fading ink, feeling the soft rise of the letters on the parchment, long dried and losing their vitality. But had they? Emotions rose from the page, burning into his skin like hot flame. The desperation felt tangible.

Stephen. He thought of the dead man carried in the arms of strangers. "It's Stephen Caindale," a voice said from the doorway.

Ryder's head jerked up. Faith leaned against the door jamb, wearing her stupid cow pajamas. The soft glow of the hall light haloed around her. She looked like an angel, but even her prettiness could not temper his sudden anger.

"Quit doing that," he snapped.

"Sneaking up on you?" she asked with a smile.

"No, reading my mind. You know I hate that. It's an invasion of my privacy."

"You can usually block me," she said, stepping into the room.

"Forced to after twenty-odd years of your knowing my every thought and feeling."

"Exactly," Faith said. "So what's with the open mind? What's got you spooked? And why are you thinking of Stephen Caindale?"

"Well, a lot has me spooked, but what makes you think it's Stephen Caindale?"

"Well, it seems logical, doesn't it? You're thinking of a Stephen, and he was the first Caindale in America. Had three daughters, remember? The first American Trinity. We're descended from the Caindale family. Come on, Ryder, you're the historian."

"Right. Some historian. But it doesn't mean I'm thinking of Stephen Caindale because he's related to you."

Faith shrugged. "Think of all the Stephens you like. Is there something you'd like to tell me, a reason why you blew Nat off last night? Care to make any confessions?"

Ignoring her attempts to bait him, Ryder continued to stare at the scrap of paper held carefully between his fingers. Faith sat on the edge of the desk. Scores of little cow faces smiled up at him. Faith reached down and poured a shot of whiskey into the glass and downed it in one swallow.

Ryder tore his glance away from the parchment and met his sister's eyes. "Can you tell me any more about the Caindales?"

Faith laughed. "I don't have room for history in my head. That's your thing."

"What are you doing in here anyway?"

"Woke up 'cause I had a dream. It's kind of fuzzy around the edges, but it had something to do with three little girls. I guess it was us, but for some

reason, we all slept in the same bed." She poured another shot into the glass and held it out. "You look like you need this. What's wrong with you?"

Ryder downed the amber liquid without a thought.

"I was reading, and I came across this letter, or diary page. I don't know what it is, exactly." Faith reached out and snatched at it. "Be careful. It's very old."

"I'm not going to hurt your musty, old diary page," Faith scoffed. "What kind of girl do you think I am?"

Faith read the page, her feet swinging from the desk. When she had finished, a pained expression crossed her lovely face. She reread it, and her fingers began to fold the edges of the page. Ryder saw a small speck of charred parchment drop to his desk. He reached out and took the parchment from her before she could ruin it. She made a face at him and tucked her hair behind her ears.

"So what happened to her?" Faith asked.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Ryder said.

"She sounds so—"

"Perfect?"

"Well, I was going for desperate," Faith said. "You're such a romantic, Ryder. What about this curse?"

Ryder sighed. "We're dealing with a different mindset. People are products of their times."

"Stupid times," Faith said. "Okay, she's not so perfect if she really believed she's cursed, but something bad was going on. Do you think everything worked out?"

"If she's talking about Stephen Caindale, something must have worked out since you're here, right? At least one of the girls survived, but the letter doesn't say how many girls there were. It could be two, five—"

"There were three," Faith said, hopping off the desk. She started toward the door.

"Wait," Ryder said. "How do you know that?"

Faith swung around, wearing the expression she reserved for idiot brothers. "Because I dreamed of three, Ryder."

"You said you could have been dreaming of yourself and the girls."

"I know what I said," Faith grumbled, "but I was wrong."

Ryder's eyebrows lifted, and a smile leisurely spread across his face.

"Could you repeat that?" he asked.

"No," Faith said. "I won't repeat it. I dreamed of three. There were three girls. A Trinity. The man is Stephen Caindale, and the girls are his daughters. Fiana, Hannah, and Corliss."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. Am I ever wrong?" She tossed her hair back and spoke to him over her shoulder. "Get some sleep, Brother. You have bags under your eyes. *Not* attractive."

The door closed. His hands roamed over the dozens of books that littered his desk.

"There has to be something else here."

A light flickered in the corner of his vision, and he suddenly felt dizzy. For one moment, he laid his head down on the desk and closed his eyes. When he opened them and lifted his head, he stared at the shadowy area in the center of the room. And it happened again.

Oh, no. You passed out, an actual blackout this time. This can't be real. Women don't materialize out of nowhere, especially women like that. Ghosts don't exist, and they certainly don't visit because you pick up a sheet of parchment.

Dressed in a tattered nightdress, his dream girl stared into the hearth that now flickered with a gentle fire. The glow from the embers cast enough light to outline her body through the thin fabric, revealing slender limbs and gently curving flesh. His heart stuttered at the sight of her, and the beginnings of another erection stirred in his pants. Part of it might have been the sheer surprise of seeing her suddenly manifest in his quiet room. The rest, well, what he saw hidden beneath that nightdress confirmed what he already suspected. She had the most enticing body he'd ever seen. If he imagined her, his imagination was working overtime, giving him glimpses of everything he had ever wanted.

He wanted to run his hands through the wild strands of deep red hair tumbling down her back, and linger in the intoxicating curve of her lower back, where her body molded into a rounded swell. He could easily cup her small ass in his hands and—

She turned toward him.

Spying unnerved him, but he studied her anyway. She was hot, and he loved watching the way her body moved. Her breasts swelled above a bit of

wrinkled lace, and her nipples hardened, straining against the confines of the flimsy linen. His gaze lingered on the pale flesh of a shoulder, where the strap of the nightgown had slipped. He saw the russet shadow between her legs. Damn.

She tossed her hair away from her face. The scent of violets flooded the room around him. Guilty, embarrassed that his eyes had focused on the shadowy V between her thighs, his glance shot back toward her face. Beautiful. Pale. Vulnerable. Heavy, dark lashes blinked away unshed tears. Her eyes, a deep, dark green, the color of clover, were bright, filled with hurt, pain. A heavy, wounded sigh filled the room.

She sat on a bench that materialized out of nowhere and hunched over a battered table. She scribbled with a quill on a piece of parchment that looked amazingly like the one he now held in his hand. The scratch of the quill and the raspy sound of the parchment rustled the quiet.

That cloud of hair obscured her face and shrouded her small body like a protective shield. He willed her to look at him. His heart stuttered again when she raised her head. Their eyes met, hers widening. He had half-risen from his chair when he realized she hadn't seen him. She'd heard something, and the sound caused the tears to fall from her eyes and spill across her cheeks. He glimpsed something unsettling in her face. Hopelessness.

Furiously wiping her hand across her face, the hopelessness dissolved, and determination flashed in her eyes, a courageous spark that nearly broke his heart. She rose from the table, and hope flashed through him. He skirted the desk. He grabbed the edge as three little girls emerged from the narrow stairwell and careened into the room. They rushed straight through his body, and the touch of them filled him with a spasm of grief. Such sadness overwhelmed their little hearts that tears flooded his eyes.

The woman held out her arms, and the four of them fell to the floor. The sounds of their sobbing tore through him and the sight of them... It wasn't possible. The girls looked exactly like his sisters had looked ten years ago. As he wondered how that might be possible, he studied the oldest one. He stared at Faith in her preteen years. The girl's thick black hair fell in a straight line past her waist. Her small, fragile body had begun to blossom and held the promise of Faith's petite but lush frame. The girl's gestures were so familiar, he knew the exact moment she would touch the youngest

girl's face. The girls began to fade, and the Faith-clone glanced over the head of his red-haired beauty. Her deep blue gaze locked on his, the brilliance enhanced by the tears that sparkled there, but her alert, clever eyes filled with a knowledge that stunned him. She offered him a gentle smile, and when her lips moved, he leaned forward eagerly.

He heard no words, but he knew what she said. "We need you."

He took a step forward, and the woman and children vanished.

They didn't vanish, Kendall. They were never there. What is wrong with you?

The vision had seemed so real. Filled with sight, sound, smell and, if he'd had another few moments alone with his dream girl, touch.

Who were these children that seemed to be his sisters' twins? And who was this woman that had managed to tug at his heart?

He fell back into his chair, picked up the page, and reread the words.

He glanced toward the center of the room. Was there enough strength and emotion in the words on the page to manifest four ghosts? Or had his heart merely conjured what he wished he could have—a strong-willed, spirited woman with courage, determination, pride, and a wounded heart only he could mend? Ryder traced the words again with his fingertips. She wanted a champion. He suddenly felt a desire to be a hero, and with any luck, the little wench might be grateful.

You going to make love to a ghost, Kendall? This figment of your imagination will only lead to trouble or rehab. Stick with real women.

"She is real, or was real. And she's mine. I can feel it."

This specter fulfilled the criteria his heart demanded. He felt an intense need for this exact woman, as though he had been dreaming of and searching for her all his life. Beautiful. Desirable. Spirited. She was almost a gift.

The trouble was—

"She's probably dead, but that's not going to stand in your way, is it? A ghost? Trapped in the past? A different dimension? All minor problems. You'll deal. Your life isn't exactly normal. You live with three witches. Compared to that, finding a dead girl should be easy."

But her identify could be a problem. The only clue was Stephen Caindale and Faith's rather dubious beliefs.

The little hottie with the gorgeous hair could not be Sarah Kendall. Sarah had died giving birth to the youngest, as his own mother had died with Charity. She was not the girls' mother, but this could be a perfect opportunity for her to be the mother to his.

"Jesus Christ, are you seriously thinking of finding this girl? This dead girl? That wasn't a window into the next room. Oh, no, that was a window into some other time. A time that's gone."

Then how did the Faith-clone see you? She looked right at you, talked to you.

Faith was right. History was his job, and the history of his adopted family, his hobby. They were Fiana, Hannah, and Corliss Caindale—the first American Trinity, the Kendall lucky charms, the Kendall witches—and exact duplicates of his Weird Sisters. Faith, Hope, and Charity.

"How is that possible?"

He glanced across the room, willing the four girls to return. A trinity of girls who were dead ringers for his own sisters, and one beautiful redhead, the most fuckable woman he'd ever seen. He thought he might be falling in love.

He pulled a leather volume toward him. The Keats. He flipped it open to his favorite poem, the one that fulfilled his dream and seemed to offer him the most promise. He skimmed through the lines he knew by heart.

I met a lady in the meads,

Full beautiful - a Fairy's child,

Her hair was long, her foot was light,

And her eyes were wild...

She looked at me as she did love.

And made sweet moan...

And sure in language strange she said, I love thee true...

And this is why I sojourn here

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,

And no birds sing.

He never thought he'd find a love like that. He doubted it could be healthy to love like that, oblivious to everything but the woman in your arms. It sounded dangerous, but it also sounded right. What would be the point of loving at all unless it enveloped your entire soul? Ryder picked up

the parchment and folded it gently. He slipped it between the pages of the Keats and stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans, a lucky talisman to hold onto until he found a way to resolve this situation. His hands wandered over the lists and ledgers Mrs. Cargill had loaned him.

"They're in some kind of trouble," he muttered. "Hell, I can be a champion. I'm not the Keeper of the Trinity for nothing. I'll talk the girls into doing me a little favor. Maybe I'll have them work a little magic, and I'll take a trip. I'll find some way to get to you, baby, and when I do, you're going to be mine. You can't fight destiny."

That was the last thing he remembered.

Chapter 6

Caindale Castle, Ireland 1235

The man wound his fingers around her hand and tugged her through the thick wooden door and into a rounded chamber. The castle keep was dark and cool even after a day of blistering sunshine, and though she cared little what environment surrounded her, she relished the sensation. She took a moment to inspect the room, noting the heavy tapestries that covered tall, narrow windows, the rushes upon the floor and the wide hearth spread with a thick cover of ashes. She turned to the man.

He was as beautiful a man as she'd ever seen, though beauty mattered little to her. She was the Leanan sidhe, a faery wisp, and mortal men existed only to sustain her life. She lusted for the soul within and this man, with his youthful face, his wonderfully hard body and his love of life, held a soul worth hundreds of ordinary men. He was young, but she cared not. His soul was strong.

And if and when she chose, pleasure could be found in the strong arms of this man. At her bidding, his mouth would spread kisses over her flesh, his tongue would lick her pussy and slide over her clit and she would revel in the shudders that racked her body. When his cock pushed between her pussy lips and touched the spot within, she would soar to the heavens while waiting for his essence to flood the hollows of her body, bringing with it the glorious sustenance she craved. More importantly, she would live for another length of time.

His face held a boyish charm that thrilled her and that dimple in his chin would be her undoing. She would spend more time in this man's arms than necessary. But that was her prerogative after all.

"What name shall I call thee?" the man asked.

She turned to him and smiled. His mane of honey blond hair tumbled over his shoulders in shaggy disarray. She brushed at several locks that had drifted into his face. Even in the gloom of the keep, his hair glinted with streaks of gold. "I rarely need a name."

"Perhaps not, but 'tis well to know the name of your one true love. Ye've captured my heart, lass."

Why do some of them always insist on talk?

She rose on tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Tis but a fantasy, a small piece of time that will belong only to us. Then 'twill vanish as quickly as a summer's rain. No need exists for names between us, but you may call me Aislynn."

"Thy name means vision, dream. Is that what thou art?"

"I am whatever thou wishes me to be."

He touched her face, his finger blazing a path of fire across her cheek. She sighed as her pussy clenched, needing his cock to fill her, wanting to feel the pounding of his heart against her breasts, already swollen, tender and aching for his touch. Her heart fluttered with anticipation as his hand slid behind her back and began to tug on the laces of her dress.

"I wish to see all of thee," he whispered.

Aislynn—she rarely thought of herself that way but often they insisted on a name—smiled. "And I wish to see all of thee."

He slid the dress down her body, and it fell into a lavender puddle at her feet. She loved the way he looked at her. The power of his gaze infused her with strength. Everywhere his glance touched created a heat that simmered beneath her skin, waiting for the spark that would catch it ablaze. She knew how she looked to his eyes. She looked the same to all mortal men. Perfect.

His gaze traveled over the soft glowing texture of her shoulders, moved to the full swollen breasts, and over the smooth line of her waist which curved into gently rounded hips and long legs. His stare focused on the dark russet V between her legs. The place he wanted to be. Her pussy pulsed and a tiny shiver ran beneath her skin.

Touch me. Love me. Die for me. Give me the sustenance I must have to survive.

He reached behind her and pulled the pin from her hair. Glossy red curls spilled over her shoulders and down her back. They tickled her skin and she laughed, but her laugh was for the fire that burned in his eyes and the

anticipation of all it would bring. He couldn't take his gaze off her hair. That didn't surprise her in the least. Her hair made men want to lose themselves in the silkiness of the strands, smell the aroma of wildflowers and green hills, revel in the warmth, the texture, the fire.

He took one step backward and began to shed his clothes, yanking at the laces of his shirt and ripping it over his head. He toed off his boots, trying to keep his balance while tugging at his hose. He nearly tripped over the growing heap on the floor. She smiled as she watched because the exuberance of youth held a special elixir, and she could not wait to drink from his soul.

Aislynn had never felt an aura like this man possessed—so vibrant, healthy, intoxicating. Something else hovered around him that filled her with slight apprehension though she had no idea why. She struggled to determine what it was but could think of nothing substantial. Was it his age? Was he the youngest man she'd ever enchanted? Perhaps that was it. He certainly wasn't the most handsome because that honor belonged to a warrior named Cameron Flynn.

She'd just left Flynn to languish into death. She'd fought hard to win his soul. She almost laughed because the man Flynn had very little soul to win. He was a hard man, cruel, sometimes vicious. Months had passed in this mortal world while she waited for Flynn to pledge his undying love. She grew stronger, draining from him every meager scrap he had to give. It hadn't been much but, as she absorbed what life he possessed, she had become more powerful. The strength came from the challenge, and she had gained great strength from Cameron Flynn. She still felt the effects of that theft. It had left her with a giddy euphoria that lasted days.

She'd come across this man, this Remy Caindale, quite by accident on a nearby road. His wide smile, friendly eyes and strong, muscled body had attracted her attention immediately. It hadn't been hard to gain his. It usually only took a smile. Remy Caindale was a dream, a vision, a—

He was completely naked. She felt the smile dissolve from her face.

The man's cock held her spellbound. That surprised her somewhat because she did not usually care about the physical details of the prize. Her gaze focused on the length of cock jutting toward her and swaying with an erotic rhythm. Its dark purple veins pulsed in sync with the pounding of his

heart, its swollen head plump and juicy. A drop of his essence clung to the tip and she wanted to lick it away.

The man—she really must try to remember his name was Remy for a short time since he insisted on names—held out his arms and she went to him.

His mouth came down hard against hers, his lips searching hers with an urgency that caught her off guard. They loved her. They always did. But the spell held them bound to her desires, her needs, not their own. He should wait for her kiss, die with need until he received it.

Fear sliced up her spine. Something was wrong.

But his mouth brought such wonders to her. His lips pushed hard against hers, demanding a response, forcing sounds from her body that seemed foreign, unnecessary for the theft. Pleasure was something she took at her will but not always part of the game. She'd not yet opened herself to the enjoyment. She hadn't taken them to the Between Times. His mouth roamed across her lips, nipping, tugging, teasing, tasting. His tongue slipped inside her mouth against her will and she sucked it in with a strength and greed that scared her. She raked her hands through those glorious strands of honey hair and pulled him closer. He felt so wonderful.

His lips slid across her face, touched her ear, kissed her jaw then moved down to lock on her throat. She forgot to breathe.

Aislynn panicked. For the first time in thousands upon thousands of year, kissing and fucking hundreds upon hundreds of men, something coursed through her that she'd never felt before. The man's soul nudged at the edge of her sanity, trying to steal its way into her heart, trying to touch the soft spun fabric of her own tattered soul.

He's stealing pieces of me! A mortal man cannot steal pieces of the Leanan Sidhe. 'Tis unnatural.

His mouth covered hers again, slanting across her lips then forcing hers open as his tongue pushed inside once again. She struggled for a moment, but he would not release her mouth. His kiss went on forever, longer than forever, until Aislynn thought she would be drained of life, drained of sustenance, wither and die without his mouth.

"My beautiful vision, my perfect dream," he murmured. "My Aislynn."

He lifted her in strong arms, cradling her like a child, and carried her across the room and fell with her to the bed. The mattress sank with their

weight. The soft fur of the bedclothes brushed against her skin and enveloped her. The hard length of his body covered hers—breasts to chest, hips to hips, cock to pussy. His legs fell between her thighs and pushed them open. She surrendered willingly and opened her legs wider, enjoying the feel of the tight, well-used muscles of his thighs, the dusting of coarse hair on his skin.

She angled her pussy against his cock, rubbing her clit hard, feeling the tension spiral through her. Her heart thundered in her chest, matching the beat of his. Her lips parted with a moan when he shifted and ground his hips into hers. Her swollen pussy flooded with moisture and ached with an intensity she'd never felt in her eternity of existence. If he didn't fill her with his cock, she would die.

."Fuck me, Remy."

"Not yet," he said. "I fear thou will disappear as thou appeared. Promise thou will stay and be mine."

A wimper escaped her lips. "I will stay. I will grant any wish to thee. But I need your body in mine. Now."

His dark gaze locked on hers, his face close, his breath fanning her cheeks. His hand stroked her hair, tenderly, gently, his big hands reaching to cup her face. She closed her eyes. It stole her soul to look at him. She had none to spare.

His cock grew larger, lunging against her. He possessed such willpower. *'Tis impossible. How is it that he resists?*

His body slid down hers. She clutched at his hair, trying to hold him, but he continued down until his face nestled between her thighs. She jerked when his mouth touched her clit. He dropped gentle kisses against the throbbing flesh and an ache roared through her.

'Tis not happening. I've fallen into my own spell. I've created an illusion out of want, need. It cannot be real.

Oh, but it felt real.

His fingers parted the lips and he buried his face into her flesh. Remy's tongue lapped at her pussy, licking the cream that slipped from her body without her permission. She threaded her fingers through his hair and tugged him closer, holding him to her as her hips thrust up with an urgency she'd never felt before. The tension in her body spiraled higher and higher. The muscles in her thighs clenched and released.

Remy sucked on her clit, and her body convulsed, her back arching upward, her head flinging back. Her neck muscles strained and Aislynn gritted her teeth. She tried to control the shudders that rippled under her skin.

"Oh, Remy. Stop. 'Tis a gift I cannot accept."

Her voice sounded strange to her ears.

He didn't stop. His mouth continued to drink its fill. His tongue continued to drive her to madness. She held her breath, hoping it would end, willing it away and yet the sensations grew stronger. Her body quivered as if it too waited with bated breath.

His tongue speared into her pussy and he touched her clit with his finger. One tiny touch and her body exploded. She cried out with a sound she didn't recognize. Her hips jerked upwards and every inch of her shook with a force she couldn't control. Still Remy did not stop. His lips sucked and licked. He pulled her pussy lips into his mouth. He fingered her swollen, vibrating clit, forcing her to accept wave after wave of grueling, torturous sensations that burst through her and shattered her thoughts. She could think of nothing but her pussy and the delicious swell of ecstasy. It went on forever, for a lifetime, an eternity.

Her body melted into the furs, limp, exhausted. Her limbs felt heavy. She could not raise her head. Remy finally stopped and worked his way back up her body, dropping kisses on her feverish skin.

"Thou art mine now?" he whispered.

Aislynn sighed. "Oh, aye, my lord. For now and ever after."

His cock slid into her wet, swollen pussy and she clenched her muscles around him, holding him tightly. He kissed her mouth and brushed the hair away from her sweaty face.

He stared into her eyes. "Thou wilt stay here. With me."

She barely had the strength to speak. Her voice was a tiny whisper. "Aye, my lord. What magic doth thou possess?"

"Tis not magic," Remy said. "Tis love."

She wrapped her arms around him, cradling him close. She would never let him go.

He began to move, his cock sliding in and out of her pussy with a wondrous rhythm. As the pleasure crested within her again, Aislynn fell into the magic of love, willingly, blissfully and with her whole heart.

* * * *

The birds woke her, cheery and optimistic, and Arleigh Donovan pulled the pillow over her head to shut them out. Usually the sunrise songs of the robins and swallows renewed her in the morning. But this morning, heartsickness rolled through her.

The sweet sound that usually hung in the air—the gentle breathing of the girls as they slept—was missing. There would be no soft stirrings of the quilt, no rustling of bedclothes. Hannah would not reach out and pull aside the curtain of the window to peek at the day before she rose. Fiana would not grumble when her youngest sister climbed over her to be the first one up, and Corliss would not laugh at the complaint.

Arleigh sat up and pulled the hair from her face, looked around the empty room, and burst into tears. Even the soft glow of the faeries in the timbers could not console her. She had failed Stephen. She had not been able to keep the Caindale girls from Cameron Flynn. She would not be able to hold Trinity Island.

How could she have been so wrong about everything? She would have gone with Flynn. She had been prepared for all of it, but not for this. Alone, empty, unloved. He had sent men to her cottage in the dead of night to kidnap the sisters and carry them away, kicking and screaming. Their cries had been heartbreaking, but the men had no mercy. They carted her lasses to the waiting boat and dumped them into the bottom like cargo. She hadn't even been allowed to pack them a bag.

She pled with Master Allen, who had been a friend of Stephen's, but he remained rigid, unyielding. He refused to look at her tearstained face and shook off the hand clutching his arm. When the boat pulled away from the dock, her heart broke into ten thousand pieces, and each one of those pieces dropped into the dark water of the James as tears.

How could she fight a man—a creature—like Cameron Flynn?

Anger boiled up inside of her because he was a constant reminder of her past, a warning that, no matter what she did or where she went, she bore a curse—to remember, to atone, to pay the price for selfishness. She had already spent twenty-two years in this ludicrous mortal shape, trapped in a body that remembered freedom but clung to the earth because there was no

other choice. Stripped of family, of home, she'd been denied love again and again, and pushed to the boundaries of the known world as punishment for past sins. Now Cameron Flynn's presence guaranteed her life in this new world would be as wretched as every other miserable hour she had spent upon this earth in her human form. His presence in this new place indicated he had no intention of allowing her any chance of happiness.

She'd had no illusions about what kind of life she might be forced to lead on this side of the sea. She hoped only to retain a small amount of dignity and self-worth, but she swore she would make it through the five years no matter what fate decreed. If her new life involved what she feared most and she left a trail of dead men in her wake, so be it. They would get what they deserved.

When the ship had anchored, her worst fears were confirmed. The same lascivious glances that had followed her across an ocean had found harbor on land. The men who lined the docks to inspect the cargo and make their choices were as eager asthe sailors to possess her. Stares raked across her and burned her skin. Their hands spun her around and poked and prodded her flesh, stealing liberties when the broker was occupied and her body trembled.

She struggled to accept her strange, new environment. One man frightened her more than those who wore their greed so comfortably. This one managed to keep his need hidden from his face, but his stare roamed over her dirty skin and matted hair, licking at her skin. She had wished with all her heart that she looked more like the other women, hopeless and destitute, ugly and worn, but wishing had never helped Arleigh Donovan. She knew, even disheveled and filthy, her beauty could not be veiled. Her luminous skin shone through the dirt. Her deep red hair tumbled about her shoulders and down her back in strands that begged to be touched. Her body, despite the unhealthy conditions and poor nutrition on the ship, was still lush, ripe, achingly beautiful.

She hated herself and willed her body invisible, but of course, that was impossible. She was human now. Or at least as human as she ever could be.

That spring day, the stranger had stared at her, and she had avoided his gaze because something both familiar and disquieting stirred around him, something that shot fear through her nerves. Finally she could stand it no

longer, and through strands of dirty hair, she found the courage to really look at him.

He smiled at her, flashing white teeth like a hungry predator, not a smile of friendship but one of chilling certainty. Recognition pierced through her, and she gasped. She nearly fainted on the dock and had to clutch at the older woman standing next to her. She pushed her lips against the woman's ear.

"Do you see that man?"

Nell Potter had furiously tried to shake her off and growled at her, "Get away from me, Donovan. No man will look at me if you're standin' so close."

"Do you see him? Is he real or an apparition?"

"I told you off!" Nell grumbled. She gave Arleigh a shove.

When Arleigh gripped Nell's face and twisted her head around, the woman squinted her eyes toward the handsome figure. She whistled. "Christ Almighty, but he's a fine one."

"So you see him? He's real? Not a specter?"

"Should be more specters like that one," Nell said. "I'd be willin' to go to the afterlife now and not cling so to this miserable existence. I'd sell my soul to belong to that one. Is he lookin' at us? Tell me. You know my eyesight's not the best."

"Aye," Arleigh said miserably. "He's looking at us."

Nell fluffed her scraggly locks of mousy brown hair and cupped her breasts, releasing more of her ample cleavage. Nell continued to talk, something about what she would do to the dark stranger if she could get her hands on him, but her words became lost in the din surrounding them. It was enough to know the man on the dock was real. She had the worst possible luck.

It couldn't be Cameron Flynn.

Arleigh lowered her head and studied him through a veil of hair. Nell had been right. He was a fine one. Long strands of ebony hair curled against his neck and down his shoulders. The dark stubble of a beard shadowed his face, hardening the handsome features and giving him a dangerous, gritty countenance. He was tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in elegant clothes that emphasized the tight, muscled grooves of his body and, though he looked to be a nobleman, perhaps one of the King's cavaliers, his body seemed more

suited to killing an enemy in hand-to-hand combat. He looked strong, violent, and unpredictable.

No, it can't be him. You're tired, anxious, imagining things. It can't be Flynn because...

Her breath caught for a moment. Her resolve wavered. The doubt flickered through her again then her hopes disintegrated as his eyes locked on hers.

I am doomed. An ocean away, and I can't escape what I am. Bloody hell. What forces are controlling my life? Who is so bloody angry with me that I can't get one shred of luck?

The man's eyes were sapphire blue with glints of silver, a melding of brittle metallic with the luminous beauty of a rare jewel. Cameron Flynn's eyes. Beautiful, but that spark of malice, that hint of something that spoke of brutality and pain, lingered there still. His eyes had burned in her memory because she had once fought hard to win the soul that lay within.

Nell had continued to leer at the stranger, but Arleigh averted her eyes, looking at him from beneath her lashes. She studied each inch of his body. She *had* to be wrong. It couldn't be Cameron Flynn, because Flynn was centuries dead and buried in the green hills of Ireland.

The man had finally approached them. Nell had hissed at Arleigh and knocked her away. Arleigh fell to the ground, a lifeless bundle of rags. The man who couldn't possibly be Flynn continued forward. She cringed and yearned for the strength she had possessed in the past, anything to keep him at bay. He motioned toward Nell, and another man took her by the arm and led her away. Nell gave Arleigh a little wave over her shoulder, bidding her good riddance and better luck. For one moment, Arleigh thought she was safe, but a shadow crossed her body and a chill swept through her. A hard grip enveloped her arm and hauled her to her feet, her hair flying across her face. The man brushed it away with a lover's touch and leaned very close. The heavenly scent of clean skin washed over her.

"I've been lifetimes waiting for you," he murmured.

"Cameron?" she whispered.

"Aye, lass, in the flesh. Isn't this is a wondrous new world? A suitable place for our meeting, don't you think? New beginnings for both of us. The stars have aligned, the gods are smiling, or whatever it takes. I have very

little interest in the cosmic realm. I'm more interested in earthly delights. In you."

"How can a dead man live?" Arleigh gasped.

"I have a better question," Flynn whispered. "How is it possible a faery of immeasurable power becomes a dirty heap of rags, stinking of humanity?"

His hands had moved around her back, and he yanked her toward him. His hard body pressed against her, and his fingers dug cruelly into her skin through the tattered dress. His mouth came down on hers in a brutal kiss that seemed endless. She struggled against him but could do nothing. His mouth plundered hers, forcing her to respond even as her mind sought any explanation for how Cameron Flynn could possibly be *alive*. He forced her mouth open, and his breath flowed into her. She moaned under his mouth and finally found the strength to push at his chest.

Laughing, he loosened his grip but still held her against his body.

"I've waited centuries for your kiss, lover," he said.

She wiped her trembling hand across her mouth. "Centuries weren't long enough."

"Did you feel anything?" he asked.

"My hatred of you."

Cameron Flynn pulled her closer. Once again he kissed her, a deep leisurely kiss that tugged at something within the frail body she inhabited. Her heart began to beat faster, and her arms rose and circled his neck against her will. His hands became lost in her hair. She melted against him and nestled into his body. She was powerless to stop it. When he pulled his face from her, impossibly, he winked at her. She took a step back, and her eyes widened.

"You're *Ganconor*! What have you done?" she demanded. "How is this possible?"

"Power's for the taking, lover."

"Stop calling me that!"

"But you were my lover once. You will be again."

"Ne'er will I be your lover," she said.

He caught her arm and yanked her toward him. "Stow your pride, lass. Do you think you have any control over what is about to happen? It's obvious from your arrival on this particular ship, your ragtag appearance,

and your rather," he paused and sniffed at her, a look of displeasure on his face, "gamey aroma that you haven't chosen to be here. You're here as punishment. Still killing innocent men?"

"I didn't kill anyone," Arleigh snapped. "It can't be helped if men die and I am blamed for it."

"Poor, poor you," he murmured. "You are cursed in this life, aren't you, lassie?"

Arleigh snatched her arm away. "Stay out of my life, Cameron. I don't know what you've done. I don't know how you stole a ganconor essence, but I want you to leave me alone."

Flynn cocked his head.

"They're asking a high price for your indenture papers, lass, but I know for a fact you're worth the price."

Arleigh's heart had lurched, and for a brief moment, her body swayed. Oh, he wouldn't; he couldn't. Why had she thought for one solitary instant she had any power or control at all? This man could steal her life and soul as easily as he crushed an insect beneath his boot, and he had every reason to seek revenge against her. If he had managed to cheat death and live beyond the confines of mortality, he could control the very breath she took. He could kill her or worse.

"Shall I buy you?" he had asked.

"Please don't," Arleigh whispered.

"I like it when you beg, lass. It stirs something inside of me," He paused and pulled her tightly against him, "and outside. Can you feel what you do to me?"

His cock swelled against her, and Arleigh shuddered. Flynn brushed his lips across hers, softly, tenderly, but his hand swept over her body with a hunger and tenacity that made her heart beat wildly. When he pulled away, he winked at her again as though he knew a delightful secret.

"I could take you now," he murmured. "Would you like that, lass? Shall I find us a place for a moment alone? No one would question me."

"No. I want your hands off me."

Flynn laughed. "We have all the time in the world to become reacquainted, but think of me every day until I come for you, faery mine. Have no doubt you will belong to me. When I take you, the wait will make the possession all the sweeter. You will be aching for my touch."

He had released her, and Arleigh had dropped to her knees, quivering on the dock. When he vanished into a crowd of people, Arleigh burst into tears.

That was how Stephen Caindale found her, a trembling mass of dirty rags, tears running down her pale face. He had lifted her to her feet, cradled her in his arms, and led her away from the dock. She had seen something in his face even then, a kindness she knew she didn't deserve and she knew she shouldn't accept. Even though she risked everything to go with him, she let Stephen Caindale rescue her. And now Stephen had paid the price, and the girls were gone.

She would visit Cardew and throw herself at his mercy. She would do anything to make sure the girls were safe.

But first she needed to get that dream out of her head. Or the memory. She'd ceased to know the difference because dreams and reality blended together until she could no longer tell what she'd lived and what she desired. But one thing remained. Her body throbbed. It ached for the touch of a man's hand, though that would never happen. She'd determined that long ago.

Was it a memory of Remy Caindale again? She didn't remember what Remy looked like. She remembered only the feelings that had led to the ether. But for Remy, she'd do it all again.

She shrugged off the quilt, and Adelina swooped into the attic, swirling around her face. Her pink aura pulsed chaotically, and flashes of magenta shot from her small body. The brightness shone unbearably, and Arleigh covered her eyes.

"Get up!" Adelina commanded. "There's something you have to see."

Adelina swirled up and flew toward the staircase. Arleigh peered through her fingers.

"Now!" Adelina said.

Arleigh stumbled out of bed and reluctantly followed to the staircase. She paused because a noise rose from below, something unusual.

"Is that snoring?"

"Aye, a man! Downstairs on the floor. Come!"

"You must be mistaken. It can't be a man."

Adelina folded her arms and rolled her eyes. "I know a man when I see one, Leanan sidhe. A light flashed then a man appeared."

"Where are the others?"

"Hiding!" Adelina cried. "It's a man."

"I called you all here for protection," Arleigh mumbled. "Can you not protect me?"

Adelina winked and circled, a frown creasing her face. "You called us for protection against a faery. This is a man! A man changes everything. The laws do not apply."

Arleigh shook her head. "Aye, of course, you're right. My thanks for not hiding with the others."

Adelina swooped away, her annoyance forgotten, and Arleigh moved into the darkness of the staircase. Each riser creaked on her way to the keeping room and she grimaced.

She darted about, opening the shutters to let in the rising sun. She glanced toward the hearth and saw no sign of the faeries. Cowards. Adelina winked at her several times then flew to the safety of a jar on the hearthstones.

Adelina had been right. A man lay on the floor of the cottage. Sprawled on his back, one arm flung out, he snored quietly, his chest rising and falling with long deep breaths. He appeared to be under some kind of spell.

As the Leanan sidhe, the most beautiful, most favored, most cherished of faeries, she recognized a spell when she saw one.

You were the Leanan sidhe, Arleigh Donovan. Now you're nothing but a pitiful human in a frail shape, bound to the earth, paying for thousands of years of sin.

Sin came in many sizes and shapes, and she had been close to countless men throughout her many lifetimes. Her choices had been limitless, but she knew when a man possessed beauty.

The man on her floor was beautiful. And he smelled—she leaned closer and inhaled deeply—so tempting and somehow familiar. She had an overwhelming desire to lie beside him and curl in his arms. He stirred memories somewhere within her.

His angular face held high cheekbones and a strong jaw, framed by long hair the shade of new honey, streaked in places with shades of gold. His clean-shaven face could have been labeled hard, stern, but a dimple marked his chin, and it gave him a hint of boyishness she found appealing. Something about that dimple made her heart ache, but she ignored it and continued her inspection.

Tall and muscular, his body took up a great deal of space on the floor. He looked strong and healthy. Most of the men of Jamestown did not. They were worked to death before they had a chance to live their lives. This man seemed blanketed in an aura of vitality.

He wore a pair of light blue breeches made of material she had never seen before. The fabric looked rugged yet soft. She wanted to touch it but feared he would stir. His shirt shone as white as the first snowfall, with tiny buttons down the front and the smallest collar she had ever seen. The long sleeves had buttons, too. Very odd. But his footwear held the most interest.

His shoes were battered white leather. She had heard of white leather but had never actually seen it because of the cost. Elaborate stitching intricately wove through the leather and laces that threaded through holes. An unusual substance coated the bottom of the shoes. The letters on his footwear spelled out NIKE. The Goddess of Victory? Had someone sent her a champion?

A champion was what she needed. She could no longer handle Flynn on her own. What she wouldn't give for a tenth of the power she had once had, anything to control the helplessness that roiled in her gut. She would wake the stranger and find out who had sent him. Perhaps powerful allies in the fae world had heard her pleas. She leaned over to touch his shoulder and immediately jumped back.

'Tis a hoax. Flynn has sent him. He's from elsewhere, an enchantment. His garments are strange. Prepare for the worst.

She needed a weapon. There were knives on the table, but she didn't know yet if she would need to actually kill him. Stephen had other weapons, but they were all in the lonely, silent room behind her. She had not allowed herself to go in there yet. She grabbed the skillet laying at the edge of the hearth which was heavy and familiar.

She hefted it in her hand. She could not stand and wait for the enchantment to wear off. Some enchantments lasted weeks, months, even years. If this man planned to be in her house for that long, she would rather he be awake and of some use.

She kicked out with her bare foot and struck him in his blue-covered leg. He mumbled something and rolled over on the hard floor, moving his arm to cradle his head. His odd blue breeches molded to his skin. It disturbed and pleased her at the same time and left nothing to the

imagination. She hadn't been with a man in this human life, but she had many memories of what lay hidden beneath a man's breeches. This one looked like he had more than enough to satisfy any woman. She circled his body and let her eyes linger on every part of him. Aye, definitely pleasing.

She leaned down, reaching to brush the hair from his face, but bolted upright.

Don't touch him. Remember the others.

Surely no harm could come to him with one touch. The desire to put her hand on his arm burned inside of her. Beneath his sleeves, his arms rippled with muscle, and light brown hair peeked from beneath the cuff at his wrist. She wanted to see what the snowy white cloth of his shirt concealed and tug at the curious little device that held his breeches closed. The metallic clasp intrigued her, and she wanted to know whether the bulge was real or a part of his clothing. If she lifted that little tab, it looked like it might slide on some kind of groove, and when it parted she would have a clear view of—Oh, what thoughts floated through her head? She couldn't risk a man's life to satisfy her own curiosity.

The little voice in her head seemed to think it worth the risk.

You don't know him, Arleigh. He'll ne'er know. Run your fingers across that blue cloth, lift that little tab and touch what you like. And if he's a cause to die because you touched him, so be it. You didn't invite him here. But if he lives and you've determined every inch of him is real, you can wake him and—

No, no, no, that could never happen. The man sighed and snuggled into his arm. He looked so peaceful, so content and, for some reason, it irritated her. She kicked out again, and this time her foot connected with his shoulder.

"Stop it, Charity," he mumbled. "It's Saturday."

"Oh!" Arleigh cried. "Wake up!"

She kicked him again, and the man jerked and sat up, his hands smacking against his forehead. He moaned for several moments, then pulled his hands away from his face and looked around the room, squinting in the pre-dawn gloom. In the glow of the fire, his eyes were a beautiful, warm shade of brown—friendly, curious, and very charming.

She blinked then swallowed thickly. Heat blazed through her body as something at the edge of her consciousness nipped and gnawed at her

memories. A drop of sweat slipped between her breasts. There was something in his eyes, something that made her want to swoon. She clenched her hand tighter around the skillet handle.

This man was trouble.

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Hi. I had the most incredible dream. I think you were in it."

When he started to rise, she hit him over the head with the skillet, and he dropped to the ground.

"What an odd champion," she muttered.

Chapter 7

Ryder rubbed the top of his head and struggled to his knees. He shook his head, trying to clear away the fog, but made it worse. Little white dots of light flashed at the edges of his eyes. "Was that really necessary? I'm not here to hurt you. Christ, my head hurts. Got any aspirin?"

The woman backed up a step. Ryder managed to get to his feet, but the floor swayed slightly and he nearly lost his balance. She reached out to steady him but the moment her fingers touched his arm, she yanked back her hand like she'd been burned.

"This isn't exactly how I envisioned our first meeting," Ryder said. "When I saw you the night of the shotgun blast and later sitting at..." He glanced behind him, and the sudden movement made him woozy. "...this very table, I was hoping you'd throw yourself into my arms."

The woman's face changed. The puzzled look, mixed with a little fear, dissolved. He had said the wrong thing. Anger now glittered in her eyes. If looks could kill, this would be the one. He had pissed her off.

This is going to be interesting.

She sputtered for a moment, unable to form a coherent sentence. He wasn't surprised. He felt the same way.

"'Tis why you look so familiar. You've been to this cottage? You've been *watching* me?"

Red hair. Creamy skin. She tried to disguise it, but he discovered he hadn't been wrong about that lilt, and now the infamous Irish temper reared its ugly head. He'd seen the spectacle before in his three harpy sisters, but this woman might have been the inventor. She certainly looked the part. Her hair practically spit fire.

She rampaged up and down the plank floor, swinging the frying pan like a tennis racquet. Ryder ignored the temper tantrum. Perfection. He now had to convince her they had a date with destiny. He wanted to grab her and

convince her now, but he thought she might hit him again. He ran his hands through his hair and felt a huge bump on the top of his head.

"I'm not really sure what's going on, but I have a bitch of a headache. Now, I might have a concussion, which I don't need. I'm having a hard enough time with the fact that this is all real, that you're real."

The woman stopped dead in her tracks. She peeked at him through the web of fiery hair. Anxiety shadowed her glance now. What a quick change artist she was.

"You think I'm not real?"

"Could be another hallucination or a dream. Maybe even a Jack coma. I've been drinking a little too much lately. One minute I'm standing in front of my desk and the next, bam!" She jumped. "I'm lying in my own study, being whacked on the head with a frying pan. Except it isn't really my study, is it?"

"'Twas ne'er your study," she said with a funny look. "Whatever that could be. You think you're dreaming?"

"I must be. Maybe if I touch you." He reached toward her, and she scooted away.

"Don't you dare!"

"I need to know if you're real. Beautiful women don't appear out of nowhere unless I'm drinking. I'm not that lucky. I actually did have a couple drinks but—"

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"Hell yeah."

She nudged a little closer to him. He had the feeling if he moved a muscle she would dart away, but the few inches of movement gave him hope. He could tame this little wildcat inch by inch. She was worth the investment. She peeked at him again through the riot of curls.

"Do you find me irresistible?"

"You're definitely hot."

"I don't understand a thing you say," she said, swinging the skillet/weapon/tennis racquet. "I'm asking you a simple question."

Ryder took a step backward. "Didn't I give a simple answer?"

She hefted the skillet in her hand. "I'm going to be using this on you again. Stop talking nonsense."

Ryder held up his hands. "I could probably think better if you'd stop hitting me."

The girl glanced at the skillet, sighed and lowered her weapon. "Aye, true enough. 'Tis sorry I am."

"I wish I had my laptop. We could search for spells, or time travel, or pixie dust. We could go to www.I'm-trapped-in-the-past.com and see what pops up."

"What are you talking about?"

He frowned, his glance roaming the room. A veritable museum dedicated to life in the early Colonial days. Not an electrical outlet anywhere. No heating ducts. Oh, yes, this would be a swell time.

"Scratch that idea. You don't have any electricity, and the battery would never last. Do you have any Jack?"

"Jack Kensington? Do you know him? If you need—"

"No, I don't know him."

"Then which Jack are you talking about?" she huffed.

"What do you know about witchcraft? Hopefully something, 'cause I'm out of ideas. Did you bring me here? Or did the girl do it? I sure hope someone knows what's going on."

The woman peered at him, her eyes slits of hard emerald. "Are you mad then? 'Tis enough trouble I have without that."

"No, I'm not mad. At least I don't think so. Probably soon though."

He offered her a smile, but she wasn't buying it. He was trying to converse, really trying, but the only thoughts in his head seemed to revolve around her. A definite need burned inside of him. Touch her. Kiss her. Make sure she's real. But she looked ready to jump out of her skin, and one move toward her might result in more damage to his skull. So instead of doing what he really wanted—touching her—Ryder moved around the room, touching everything else.

It seemed like his cottage, but different. The hearth was newly masoned, the wood pristine. He rubbed his hand across the intricate carvings and over the rough bricks. Stephen Caindale had been a master craftsman. He opened the cupboards, but his fiddle, flute, books, papers, everything had vanished. In their place were wooden bowls, spoons, jars of spices, and things he didn't recognize, some of it very unappetizing. He realized, after ten years

of studying history, he had been totally ignorant of what life had been like. He thought he had been prepared.

"What an idiot I am," he mumbled, and the girl nodded enthusiastically. "I should have studied more. What kind of teacher am I? I don't know shit." She gave him a funny look, but he was getting used to her funny looks.

His leather sofa had absconded. Ditto the mahogany desk, the bookshelves, and antiques he had collected over the years. The irregular planks of the floor lay with exacting precision, and though they were rough and untreated, he recognized them as his own. The more he examined his surroundings, the more he admired Stephen Caindale.

The large table flanked by benches dominated half of the room. A work table leaned next to the hearth, and a cabinet holding a washtub stood nearby. A spinning wheel now occupied one corner, but dust coated it. Two chairs sat near the windows. One looked uncomfortable, and the other was a rocker. He gave it a tentative nudge, and it moved with an annoying squeak.

"Have to take care of that."

A small table nestled between the chairs, piled with mending in a tidy little stack, a sewing basket, some pieces of parchment, a quill, and a solitary book. One book? How did these people survive? He picked it up and ran his fingers across *The Bible's* leather cover. He turned to her.

"You don't read much, do you?"

"Of course I can read!"

He held up his hand. "No, wait, sorry, I meant there's only one book. The printing press has been invented, right? What year is this?"

"I knew it!" she cried. "Could my life get any worse? You are mad!"

"Not yet," Ryder reminded her. "Just tell me what year it is."

She huffed, rolling her gorgeous green eyes. "Tis the Year of Our Lord Sixteen Hundred and Thirty Nine." She took his breath away, and his concentration level bottomed out. "I don't know much about this printing press you speak of, but, aye, 'tis sure I am there is one. Probably not here though."

Ryder tried to focus. "So you should be able to buy books."

"We can't afford books." She flashed him that look again, the cute one that implied insanity might be his middle name. "Only the wealthy can obtain them in Jamestown."

"Oh, Jamestown, right. I keep forgetting I'm actually home. I know this. Okay, 1639." He ticked off the list on his fingers. "So, I've managed to miss the typhoid epidemic, the starving times, the Indian wars. I can't think of anything else especially horrible, except the fires, and they come much later. Anything else coming up that you know of?"

"Mysterious disappearances?" She tapped the skillet against her thigh and her eyebrows rose.

He shook his finger at her. "You're quite funny. Did anyone ever tell vou that?"

"Not recently." She blew out a tired breath. "What did you say about fires? Are you a seer, then? 'Tis a dangerous thing to be in this colony."

"You mean a psychic? No, the Trinity got all the power. I got jack. Speaking of the Trinity, where are the little girls? Do you know they look exactly like my sisters?"

The way she looked at him made him feel a little crazy, but she was cute as hell. "The girls?"

"I know they have to be here somewhere. It's kind of early for chores, right? Still sleeping?"

The woman watched him very carefully, her fist gripping the skillet. He stayed a safe distance away. She squinted, and the look would have scared him if she hadn't been such a tiny thing. She wasn't any bigger than Charity.

"How do you know about the lasses? Have you been watching them, as well?"

Ryder drew back. "Christ, don't say stuff like that! I'm a freaking teacher. Are you trying to get me fired? Do I look like that kind of guy to you?"

"'Tis unsure I am what kind of...guy, did you say? Did Cameron Flynn send you here?"

Ryder cocked his head. "The name's kind of familiar, but no. I have no idea how I got here. But the oldest girl said she needed me."

"So the sisters contacted you? How?"

Ryder laughed. "It was all a little creepy. I started seeing things and questioned my sanity because of the stress. My dad died recently, and we've had some trouble at home. The girls have been so sad, and I've been drinking a little too much, and—" Her murderous stare focused his thoughts. "Sorry, anyway, when the little Faith-clone looked at me, I felt a little better.

So I'm here now, and the two of us can protect the girls and get to know each other—"

She held up the skillet. "I'll be using this again if—"

"I haven't done anything!"

"You're annoying me," she said. "'Tis simple we need. Who are you? What is your name?"

What would she do if he gathered her face in his hands and kissed her? He imagined she would be soft against him and would melt against his body. He wanted to get straight to business and show the woman why he was really there, but she still tapped the skillet against her thigh. Her eyes were hard green stones. What had she asked him? Oh, yeah, something simple.

"Kendall. My name is Ryder Kendall."

"So you're a Caindale?"

"No, Kendall. Well, yes, Caindale. We changed the spelling."

The woman cocked her hip and blew out another exasperated breath. She was a huffy little thing. "The spelling? Knowing how to write is rare, spelling rarer still. What possible difference would the spelling make?"

"Someone liked it better, I guess."

"You're a very odd man. Are you related to Stephen?"

"Stephen? Yes, I..."

How old was Stephen? Should you be a brother? A long lost son? Do you want to be related to Stephen? Was he a mass murderer, a child abuser, a rapist? The answer is D, none of the above. This woman saw a future with him, so Caindale had to be an okay guy.

He took a shot, hoping he hit the target. "Of course I'm related to Stephen. I'm his brother."

She tapped her bare foot against the floor. Her gaze swept across his face, scrunching with displeasure, lingering on the hair that fell into his eyes. Okay, he needed a haircut, but at least it was clean, and it probably wouldn't stay that way long. Her glance roamed over his shoulders, down his chest, and fell to the bulge in his jeans. He had no control over his dick. It had been hard since he woke up and had a mind of its own. Her glance shot back to his face, and he loved the flush that spread over her face. She pursed her lips in an obvious effort to cover her embarrassment. Her clipped tone chilled him a little, but it was damn cute with that accent.

"Do you know about Stephen? What happened to him?"

"Not exactly, but I'm guessing the bundle I saw didn't hold Christmas presents. Things around here seemed pretty grim."

He decided not to mention the banshee. He thought she might be coming around.

She sidled a little closer and seemed to be trying to smell him. Her eyes fluttered closed for the briefest of moments. "You look so familiar. Have I seen you before?"

"The visions seemed to be one-way. I don't think we've met in person because I'd sure remember it. You're not a lady a man would forget."

He smiled at her. For the first time, she offered a tentative smile in return and became even more beautiful. So small, pretty, perfect. She placed the skillet on the table but didn't move far from it.

"'Tis odd Stephen ne'er spoke of you."

"Black sheep," Ryder said with a wink.

"I still think you might be mad."

"A distinct possibility."

"Madness or not, 'tis complicated things have become. The lasses aren't here."

"I'm too late?" he asked.

"Too late?"

"To save them," he said. "I know you're going to think this is crazy, but I came here to be a hero. To be your champion."

He smiled again, and the woman rolled her eyes. Damn, she was cute.

"Are you going to tell me your name?"

She tapped her foot against the floor. "Arleigh Donovan."

"That's beautiful," he said. "It suits you."

Arleigh sighed wearily. "Master Kendall, does your mind stay on a thought longer than a moment?" She sounded like Mrs. Nielson, his kindergarten teacher, who thought Ryder Kendall might need special education because he had a hard time learning his shapes.

"Rectangle, square, what's the difference?" he muttered. "Slow, my ass. I'd like to see Mrs. Nielson land *here* and deal."

Arleigh cleared her throat. "Cease talking to yourself. 'Tis not confidence I be having in you. Why do you think I need help?"

"I saw you crying. I wanted to—"

Sure, Ryder, tell her you want to fuck her. Get it out in the open so there won't be any surprises later. She'll probably throw herself into your arms and beg for it.

"—to help you." It sounded lame, and he knew it, but there wasn't much he could do about that now.

She frowned. "Has Stephen spoken of me?"

"No, not exactly," Ryder said. Her foot tapped that haphazard rhythm again. She glanced toward the frying pan. He reached into the pocket of his jeans, sliding the parchment from the book. "I have this."

She reached out for it, but he pulled it away.

"The woman I met in this piece of paper had passed crying and moved to decision. It should have been intimidating, but you're a tiny thing. A little scary, but—"

"'Tis my letter! 'Twas not meant to be read by anyone. How did you get it?"

"I found it in a book."

"You have books?"

"Lots of books. I have one here." He dug back into his pocket and pulled out the Keats, holding it toward her. "My favorite."

She held it in her hand like a treasure, running her fingers across the leather. She flipped to a page that had been turned down at its corner.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci," she read.

"That means The Beautiful Woman Without Mercy."

"I know what it means," she snapped.

"You speak French?"

"I speak many languages," she murmured.

She held up her hand and began to read. He recited the words in his head, standing silently and patiently, he might add, while she read. She took a long time, but perhaps she read it twice or translated it directly to French. How many surprises would this woman have in store for him? When she looked up, her eyes were wide.

"Tis about me," she whispered. "I've not heard of this Master Keats. When were these words written?"

He reached out and retrieved the book, stuffing it back into his pocket. "Don't change the subject. If you didn't intend the letter to be read, why did you write it?"

She looked down at her hand, fingers clenched as though holding a quill. He studied her face, and that look he had seen in the vision overshadowed her face. Heartbreaking, hopeless, melancholy, fragile. She stood in her bare feet, in a threadbare nightgown any of his sisters would have thrown in the trash, and yet she seemed almost regal, like a fairy princess.

Arleigh was the most petite woman he had ever seen. His eyes dipped toward the neckline of her sleeping gown. Quickly, he glanced back at her face, guilty for inspecting her so thoroughly, but she had no idea he studied her. In his world, she would have been in shampoo commercials. Her hair hadn't been brushed yet but it was hair women would kill for. He wanted to put his hands in it.

She raised her eyes to his, and no anger lingered there, though tears had begun to sparkle.

"Tis hard to hold secrets," Arleigh said. "Writing them down is pretext I'm an honest person instead of the liar I am."

"We all have secrets," he said.

"Not like mine."

She lowered her lashes, and they cast soft shadows on her cheeks. He wanted to reach across the space that divided them and take her in his arms. He thought she would fit perfectly and tuck right into the space—

"Why are you looking at me like that? 'Tis not secrets on your mind.' Tis a look like you mean to kiss me." She reached out blindly toward the table and her fingers skimmed along the edge of the skillet.

He held up his hands. "We have a no-hitting rule, remember? I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude or anything, but you're adorable."

She clenched her hands. Adorable? Hell, yes, but he thought she might also be schizophrenic. He had never known anyone who could switch gears as fast as she could. She took a very deep breath. Her breasts rose and fell, and Ryder wondered what they would feel like under his hands.

"Tis clarification we need here, Master Kendall."

"Ryder," he said, peeling his gaze away from the soft skin. "Call me Ryder."

"Impossible. We're not going to be that personal with one another."

He couldn't stop the grin. "I'm planning to get very personal with you, Arleigh. It's one of the reasons I'm here." He took a step toward her, and

she backed up. "And we're already beyond that awkward getting-to-know-you phase. You're standing here in a nightgown that leaves very little to the imagination, and I'm eager to see more. We can do the flowers and candlelight if you want, but I'm thinking all that crap might not be necessary between us. I'm pretty much fixating on what happens later."

Arleigh clenched her tiny fists and stomped her foot. "Stop looking at me like that!"

He took a step toward her, and she scurried backwards. "I keep forgetting all this is just happening for you and very painful. You were probably in love with...my brother, and you're in mourning. My comments are inappropriate, and I apologize."

Arleigh blinked. "I wasn't in love with Stephen."

The grin seemed to have control of his facial muscles. "Good to know."

"And I'm not going to be in love with you, either. But 'tis more important to know you aren't going to be in love with me."

"You're a cocky little thing. Does insanity run in your family, too? Look, I read the letter. All about curses and love and some man coming to claim you. *That*, by the way, is going to happen over my dead body."

"A real possibility," Arleigh said.

Ryder shook his head. "The letter read like something out of a fairy tale, and I found it downright enchanting, but we're in the real world here, at least I think we are. I'm still debating that. You're cute as hell, but you have issues."

"What exactly are issues?"

"You're egocentric for one thing, maybe even a little narcissistic. You have a rather erratic temper, which makes me think you might be prone to violence. And you have all the classics. Power issues. Sex issues. Commitment issues. Psychiatry isn't my thing. We'd need my sister Faith for that. She's getting her masters right now, but she'd be pretty handy around here."

"You have a sister? I ne'er knew that. Stephen said naught about a family."

Ryder waved his hand. "Now you're getting off the topic. We were talking about you. If I reevaluate that letter based on reality and not delusion, it's not quite as romantic as I'd thought. I'm sorry to say it, Arleigh Donovan, but I think you have some serious problems."

"Aye, 'tis serious problems I have and you be one of the biggest. Cameron Flynn is another. When are we going to talk about him?"

"Who the hell is this Flynn? Look, I'm probably here for a couple reasons and, irresistible as you are, you're starting to distract me from the real problem. If you're having trouble with this Flynn guy, we'll deal, because there's no room in my scenario for a boyfriend."

She cocked her head and a frown settled on her face.

"Lover, then," he said, "whatever you call them here."

"Cameron Flynn is not my lover!"

"That's a sex issue," Ryder said.

Arleigh flew across the room and struck him hard across the face. When she pulled back to hit him again, he grabbed her wrist and yanked her against him. Her hair smelled like violets, and he couldn't help himself. He breathed in deeply and found it intoxicating.

She struggled in his grip, but he held on. "Don't do that again. I don't think this is a vacation for me. Someone obviously has a plan here. They yanked me out of my life for some reasons, but since I'm on my own, I've decided what they are. Help the girls. Have you. If I have some time left, we can delve into whatever traumas you've had in your life. I'm always willing to help a damsel in distress. But right now those are priorities, and I'd appreciate if you would keep your psychological problems to yourself. They have nothing to do with us."

Arleigh gasped. "Master Kendall, there's ne'er going to be an us."

"Don't doubt it for a minute, Arleigh. There will be an us. But before I can get personal with you, I have a mission that isn't quite so selfish, and, like I said, you're distracting me. Where are the girls?"

A hard rap struck the door, and Arleigh froze. Her glance darted toward the door then flew back to his face. She shoved her arms against his chest and pushed him across the room.

"Hey, we're in the middle of something here. We have to talk. What—"

"Stop your yapping. Upstairs."

"Arleigh, come on, whoever it is—"

"Go upstairs," she growled. "'Tis more complications I don't need right now. Do what I tell you!"

Ryder backed through the open door and stumbled on the staircase. He opened his mouth to protest, but she closed the door in his face. Fine. He would wait while she took care of her boyfriend problems.

Chapter 8

Arleigh dashed across the room and grabbed her shawl from the bench. The door swung inward and Cameron Flynn appeared in the doorframe. In any other place, at any other time, to any other woman, Cameron Flynn would be considered a gorgeous man. But Arleigh knew better, and she knew Cameron was much more than a man.

But looks could be deceiving, and as masculine specimens went, he was a fine one. Cameron exuded pure masculine strength and raw sexuality. A Ganconor held a very well favored place in the fae hierarchy. Cameron Flynn was a prince among his peers, and he took full advantage of his power. Though so much more than mortal now, he had always been a very dangerous man.

That Flynn lived at all was a miracle, a wonder. It made her head spin because Cameron Flynn would never be a miracle. He was a bane, a malignancy that had appeared to infect her life, a curse fulfilled. That day seemed a lifetime ago, so much longer than half of a year since she had been abandoned on this distant shore.

There would be no hope for her, no help from anywhere, certainly not from the strange man in her house. Cameron Flynn would use his power to get what he wanted, and she was the thing he desired most. She might be doomed but, despite waking with an overwhelming sense of dread, now that he'd come to her home, she realized she couldn't possibly submit and let him win so easily.

She lunged against him, and they stumbled across the sill. Flynn pulled her tight against him and his hand roamed across her back.

"Not exactly how I expected to be greeted this morning. I expected you to come at me with a knife."

"I would have," Arleigh mumbled, "if I'd a thought 'twould do any good."

Despite her anxiety, she forced her head up. He yanked her toward him, hard body pressed against hers, while his fingers dug cruelly into her skin through the nightdress. His mouth came down on hers in a brutal kiss that seemed endless. She struggled, but his grip tightened. She had no choice but to endure his mouth plundering hers. When he pulled away, he stared into her eyes, a devilish grin on his face.

"I like the nightdress. Did you have something more than a kiss in mind this morning, love?"

"I could have done without the kiss."

She pulled back and struggled in his arms, but he laughed and closed his mouth over hers again. She fell limply against him. When he pulled away, his glance flickered across the stone cottage.

"I'd love to stand here and take advantage of your pliant flesh, but I have to get away from this house. Your damnable little faeries have spread their protection thick. It's nauseating. We have some unfinished business between us, unless your enthusiasm this morning is a sign of consent."

"Ne'er will I consent," she said, wiping her hand across her mouth. "What do you think you can do to me, Cameron? I'm attached to this property by papers. I belong to Fiana."

Flynn laughed. "Is that what you think?"

"What in bloody hell are you talking about?" Arleigh snapped.

"I'll know more in a few days. We'll talk then."

"You're here. We'll talk now," Arleigh growled.

She spun on her heel and stalked toward the river. When she reached the bank, she took a deep breath and turned to see him sauntering toward her. She tapped her foot against the grass and wanted to shriek to the heavens. The man, the creature, whatever he was, was so damned infuriating, she would have struck him dead again if she had the power.

"Spit it out," Arleigh snapped.

"You're a little bitchy this morning, Leanan sidhe," Flynn said. "Too many dreams last night?"

"My dreams are ne'er your business. Is this about Trinity? I know you want this land, but you'll be getting it o'er my dead body."

Flynn shrugged. "I could arrange that, but let's save it for another day, shall we? Today seems to be all about you. Why am I not surprised? What's in that little mind of yours?"

"I want to talk about the girls."

"They're safe, warm, and well fed. Why are you so worried? You know I can't hurt them. They're bloody *children*, Arleigh. There are strict rules against harming a child."

"I want them back!"

"You'll have them back, but don't push me on this or there will be consequences. We'll do this my way. Are we clear?"

"Why are you doing this to me, Cameron? Why are you taking your revenge on me through them?"

"A necessary evil. I needed your complete attention."

"Tis my attention you have, then. What are you planning in that demented mind of yours?"

A feigned shock pulled at his face. "Why, faery mine, you've hurt my feelings."

"You have no feelings, and I'll not be living the faery life any longer. And I'm not *yours*! Why did you come here?"

"I missed your boundless charm," he said.

"Find the point, Cameron."

Flynn shrugged. "Fine. I've spoken with the governing council about your papers."

She glared up at him. "You had no right to do that. Fiana should have been consulted."

"I don't consult children," he snarled, "and I don't consult indentures, but for some reason I'm feeling generous today. I don't care what happens to those girls, but I do have a reputation in this colony, and I would like to appear magnanimous."

"Your chivalry is overwhelming."

His brow rose

"Do you have any idea how much Caindale owed to me?"

When she didn't answer, he gripped her chin with his fingers, forcing her head up.

"Answer me, Leanan sidhe."

"Stop calling me that. You know the Leanan sidhe exists no longer. I am Arleigh Donovan now. A human. A mortal. Why do you even waste your time with me? 'Tis nothing I should be to you."

"You are everything to me. I planned to buy you that first day you arrived, lover, but Stephen Caindale seemed determined to have you. Almost obsessed. I can't imagine why. Can you?"

She tried to pull away, but he cupped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her closer. "I don't like to think on that," Arleigh whispered.

"Alas, your powers are gone. The Leanan sidhe, the most beautiful and desirable of all faeries, exists no longer. Magic shown in your smile, seduction in your glance, and so many died of love for you. And yet I think they still pine for you, faery mine."

"Tis human I am now," Arleigh said, quietly.

"Human, and yet so much more. There's talk about you in the faery circles, lover. Even in this hellhole, I hear from the ethereal plane, and they still have an interest in you. Your passing seems to have left a wake of dead men across the Isles of Britain. They still die for your beauty. Do you still offer them heights of ecstasy in exchange for their souls? Does this mortal body work as well as the faery one you possessed?"

Arleigh swung her arm toward his face, but he caught her wrist and laughed.

"I've offended you. Poor, poor you. You are cursed in this mortal life, and Saint Stephen has paid for it."

"Leave Stephen out of this," Arleigh said. "How much does he owe you? I'll sell something, I'll—"

"Not possible. He owes me more than you can imagine, more than the profit he would have seen in three years of planting. Do you think his tiny daughters can manage to squeeze that much from this island?"

Arleigh's stomach heaved.

"You have proof?" she asked. "Documents?"

"Signed, sealed, and on file with the council. All legal and tidy and extremely official. I could destroy the Caindale girls and leave them destitute and homeless to recoup my losses. I have a more charitable solution. You want me to be charitable, don't you?"

Arleigh nodded, her stomach in knots.

"Then you will probably agree with my proposal." Flynn caressed her palm with his fingers. Small shivers ran up her spine. He leaned toward her

and whispered in her ear. "Do you have any idea how much you're worth on a piece of paper?"

Arleigh shook her head, cringing.

"A great deal, actually," Flynn said. "The broker asked a bloody fortune for your indenture, but Caindale seemed determined to have you. His pockets were empty, but that wouldn't dissuade him. I hope you fucked him before his unfortunate demise. A man deserves something for such a sacrifice."

"You're vile, Cameron."

He laughed. "You have a way about you, lassie, and men will pay anything to feel the passion inside of you. The broker knew that and set his price accordingly. On paper, you're worth more than five women. I know from personal experience that's a real bargain for someone like you. Such beauty. Such fire. I remember the taste of your skin, Leanan sidhe. I remember the fire inside you."

Flynn smiled, and when he reached out and cupped her breast, she smacked at his hand.

"You're—"

"Aye, vile, I know, you've said that."

"So you loaned Stephen the money to purchase my indenture?"

Flynn sighed. "Aye. Such a determined man I'd never seen. I wanted you myself, but with Caindale jumping so easily into my pocket, I could hardly refuse his request. You're worth a damned fortune in this hellish colony, Arleigh." He leaned closer and whispered in her ear. "But that's still not as much as I'm willing to pay for you."

Her pulse quickened and the ground seemed to shift beneath her feet. Arleigh shook her head, her fists opening and closing, trying to regain control.

"You can't do that," she whispered.

"Oh, I can do anything I like. The council is considering my proposal. I am willing to pay all of Caindale's debts in exchange for your indenture papers. To be extended, of course."

"They won't allow you to buy me!"

"I think they will. There are three lives at stake. Stephen held some respect here, and you, my love, are nothing but an indentured servant with a questionable past and a history of violence. You mustn't forget you were

sent here for a reason. To be punished. There was a dead man, love, or have you forgotten?"

"I'll go to them. I'll explain, I'll—"

"Protest all you like, darlin', but they don't care what happens to you. For some reason they do care what happens to Caindale's daughters. I don't understand it, but that's the way it is." Flynn gathered her against him. "Are you totally oblivious to what happens around you? Open your eyes. You're a smart girl. Would it be so bad being my lover again?"

"I was ne'er your lover," she snarled.

"No? I distinctly remember fucking you, Leanan sidhe. I'm fairly certain that made us lovers."

"You ne'er touched me," Arleigh said.

"Perhaps not in this incarnation, but we will remedy that soon enough. Look at you, dressed in this rag. Your beauty is wasted here. I can give you a better life, at least for awhile. It will certainly be better than taking care of a pack of brats and working yourself to the bone. Of course I will expect certain things from you. Undying love, unending passion. Eventually, your life. It's a small price you will pay willingly, but I can keep you alive for a very long while."

"I will ne'er let you have my soul," Arleigh said.

He tipped her chin up. "You keep forgetting the very real truth between us, love. The Leanan sidhe exists no longer, and the choice does not lie with you. Have you forgotten what I am?"

"No," she whispered, "you be the Ganconor."

"So the choice lies with me. You chose me once. To love, to torture, to kill. I choose you now."

She pushed at his chest. "The choice to kill was ne'er mine. 'Twas survival."

"I never had a choice, either." His face moved closer, and while he searched her eyes, she saw confusion in his. "You've haunted my thoughts for centuries, and still I find the choice doesn't belong to me. What kind of power do you still possess?"

"Tis no power now. I am mortal."

"If you were mortal, you would have begged me to take you by now. My essence is strong, and it takes no effort to capture a soul. And yet somehow you're resisting me. How is that possible?"

"I'll not be knowing the answer to that. Forget about me, Cameron." Arleigh gathered her courage and pushed him away. "I should mean nothing to you. 'Tis not possible."

"How would you know what is possible?" Flynn said.

Arleigh spread her arms. "Am I to teach you now? You've lived centuries as the Ganconor and don't know what the life of fey is? Why are you living as a mortal man, in the entrapments of humanity? You could be anywhere in the world, in any plane of existence. Why are you living in this godforsaken place?"

Flynn stared out over the water, refusing to look at her. "Jamestown has suited me. It has been fresh, exciting. There were possibilities here, though I must admit now, I am beginning to see changes. I don't like the tide of progress, but I can do nothing to stop it."

"Then leave."

"Oh, I may." He turned to face her. "I've been waiting for the right time, lass. There have been many women in my life, but you're the only one I ever wanted to keep."

"'Twas enchantment!" Arleigh cried. "You were incapable of love when I met you as a human. I wrapped you in a spell, Cameron. I wove it around you like a blanket of lies, and you slept in my arms and believed all my words. You didn't choose to love me. You were forced to love me."

"It may have started that way," Flynn said, "but that's not how it ended. When you betrayed me with Remy Caindale, I *hurt*. I tried to kill for you. Why would I do that?"

"Jealousy. Anger. Revenge. Imagining what goes through your twisted mind is beyond me, but you should not have been hurt. You were unraveling and half-dead when I left and should have continued to wither. 'Twas a sorry mistake I made in Ireland that year. I walked away without being sure you would die, and the Caindale family paid for it."

"I don't want to talk about that bloody family." Flynn looked at her curiously. "You found love with Remy Caindale. A love true enough you were punished for it." She lowered her head and ran her hands across her eyes. "So perhaps my feelings are real."

She sighed and forced herself to look at him. "Real feelings come with belief and purpose, with care for others, with passion that gives life but does

not take it, but you ne'er had any of that as a human. And even if you had, it wouldn't change how I feel."

He came toward her, his arms spread. Her arm shot out, grabbing the knife that hung on his belt. She pointed it toward him, and it trembled in her hand. A surprised smile spread across his face, and he laughed.

"I'm immortal, love. I may not have lived thousands of years of faery life, lassie, but I'm fairly clear on that."

"Tis on myself I'll be using it." She brought it near her throat. "I don't love you. No matter what you do, I will ne'er love you."

"That presents a problem, then. I had decided to leave the Caindale maids alone if you came with me of your free will. I'm trying to be the kind of man you might want. I wanted you to remember, to love me again."

"'Twas ne'er love! 'Twas a trick, magic, deception. You didn't give your love to me. I stole it so I could exist. But the Leanan sidhe exists no longer. I'm Arleigh Donovan now, a real woman living in the real world. Why are you so desperate to be part of the real world when you could have the worlds of many? Why don't you leave here and go where you belong and forget I exist?"

Her body shook with tremors. The knife in her fingers slipped and nicked against her skin. A drop of blood trickled down her throat. His eyes widened, and he snatched her wrist, twisting it. Arleigh cried out, and the knife dropped from her fingers. His face came very close to hers, so beautiful she wanted to kill him.

"You won't kill yourself," he said. "You're stronger than that, and it won't save the Caindales. I will have my revenge on them now whether you are in this world or not."

He bent and picked up the knife, stuffing it back in the sheath.

"You weren't worthy of love as a mortal man," she snarled, "and as the Ganconor, you're incapable of giving it. If you want my love, you will have to *take* it."

Flynn shrugged. "Not a problem. It's what I do best. We can play it that way, but there will be destruction and pain, and eventually death. Is that what you want?"

"Tis the way of my life," Arleigh said.

"Then prepare yourself, darlin'. You are mortal now. You cannot win against me."

He grabbed her hips and yanked her body roughly, lifting her against his pelvis. His cock pressed through the thin fabric of her nightdress. His hand swept around and splayed across her bottom, pulling her closer.

"Power, lover," he said. "It belongs to me now, and you are the one who bleeds. You've already paid the price once. Can you stand it again?"

His mouth fell on hers, forcing her lips apart. His tongue raped her mouth and her head spun. Though every ounce of will in her body fought against it, her body stirred by the feel of his. Such power moved through this man. When he finished toying with her and decided to use it against her, it would be hopeless. She would never be able to withstand the assault if he used his magic, and she knew the Between Times would kill her. His hand roamed again, lower still, moving between her legs, pulling her up, and cupping the part of her that throbbed. She moaned, and her knees buckled beneath her.

"Hey! Get your fucking hands off her!"

At the sound, Flynn smiled against her lips. His fingers pressed against the fabric of her nightdress and smeared the moisture dripping from her body across her soft folds. That he should stir any desire in her body foretold serious trouble. He released her, and she lost her balance.

"Your body responds, Arleigh. You can protest all you want, but you want to fuck me."

Trembling, Arleigh wiped her hand across her mouth and watched as Ryder Kendall barreled across the grass toward them. Her day continued to go from bad to worse.

Chapter 9

Angry voices assaulted him the moment he stepped out of the cottage. Arleigh argued with a bearded man, the dark, brooding type packaged in a physique even the best trainer couldn't mold. Clad in black, skin-tight breeches, stockings that looked painted on, and a leather doublet stolen out of a superhero's closet, the clothes accented every ripple of muscle and every line of his body. The scarlet cloak tossed casually over his shoulder reeked of power and money, and the sword at his hip was a little daunting.

Christ Almighty, how could he compete with that? Obviously, Arleigh was frustrated with the stranger, perhaps even borderline murderous, but no woman would let a man like that get away without a serious reason. Ryder knew women and every woman's tall, dark and handsome fantasy had merged into this man.

When the stranger wrestled the knife from Arleigh's hand, Ryder silently thanked the man and, for a brief moment, thought he might have an ally. But the stranger clutched Arleigh against him, and the situation went downhill fast. The kiss was way too much, and when the man's hands began to run intimately over her body, Ryder went over the edge. The stranger touched her in places that made Ryder's body tighten and harden, made his stomach twist in a jealous knot, and one thought reverberated through his head: Arleigh would be his, and the man needed to know it. He edged closer to madness with every moment he stayed in this place.

As Ryder stormed toward the river, the man proved a formidable rival. Unperturbed and expressing a curious interest, the stranger took several steps forward, hauling Arleigh with him. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and Ryder wanted to deck him on the spot, but the man's eyes were hard, a brilliant blue fire.

Ryder kept moving, coming up less than a yard in front of the man. "Are you deaf, buddy? I told you to get your fucking hands off the lady. I want to know who the hell you are."

The man laughed and glanced at Arleigh. "A lover so soon, Leanan sidhe? Have you no shame at all? I thought you were in mourning. Where did you find this strapping boy?"

"Arleigh, go to the cottage," Ryder said. "I'll handle this intruder."

The man tightened his grip. His gaze slid across Ryder with disgust, and a puzzled look creased his brow while he inspected Ryder's clothes.

"If anyone is intruding here, my ragtag friend, it's you. The lassie and I have business and personal issues to discuss."

"Your discussion is over. I asked for a fucking name."

"Flynn," the man said. "Cameron Flynn."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? Your name keeps popping up in conversation and not in a good way. So you're the infamous boyfriend?"

Flynn's dark brows drew down. "Boyfriend?"

"Lover, then. Whatever you call them here."

Arleigh screeched.

Flynn laughed. "You look familiar. Who are you?"

"Ryder Kendall, Stephen's brother. So, you can probably guess, you're not welcome here."

"Another Caindale? How did I get so lucky?"

"It's Kendall," Ryder growled.

"I see you're taking advantage of everything your inheritance has to offer, Master *Kendall*. I assume the wench here is included in that?" His hand swept down Arleigh's body and cupped her bottom possessively. Arleigh jerked under his questing hand. "She's a magnificent lay, isn't she?"

"Now, that," Ryder said, "was the wrong thing to say."

In one stride, he shoved Arleigh away and plowed his fist towards Flynn's face, catching him on the jaw. Flynn rocked on his feet but barely flinched and, much to Ryder's disgust, he didn't drop. Arleigh, however, flew backwards and landed on her ass.

Flynn burst into hearty laughter. "A knight in shining armor?" His glance darted toward the sprawled woman but only grazed her. The hard stare locked on Ryder with an undeniable challenge. "Arleigh, did you find yourself a champion?"

Ryder took his eyes off Flynn long enough to see Arleigh was fine. Muttering and cursing, she yanked her nightgown down her legs. She struggled to her feet, blowing out her breath in an exasperated sigh that made her hair fly around her face.

"Tis thanking you I am for the help, *gentlemen*. And for the record, Cameron, I didn't find him. He found me." She dusted off her nightgown and rubbed her hands across her bottom, feeling for dirt.

"Would you like me to do that for you, love?" Flynn asked.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Flynn," Ryder snarled.

"Well, Master Kendall, you're getting a prize. Do you know the truth about this lovely woman?"

"I barely know her yet, but I think I have more of a future with her than you do at this moment. She doesn't seem too happy with you, Flynn."

Flynn turned to Arleigh. He cocked his head, tapping his finger against his lip. "Does he know what you are? Did you tell him what a lovely future lies ahead of him?"

"I'm going to hit you again," Ryder warned, "and the next time I can guarantee I'll knock you to the ground. Why don't you shut up while you're still standing?"

"Oh, I'm not here to spill secrets. They'll all come out in time."

"I don't give a shit about your secrets. It's obvious the lady doesn't want you here, and neither do I. You're trespassing on private property."

"Aye, well, obviously I didn't expect to find *you* here," Flynn said. "Your timing couldn't have been more inopportune, and your behavior...I find it baffling someone would actually care about her, considering her dubious past. But you'll be sorry, my friend, when you discover all the secrets she's keeping. I know them intimately. Arleigh and I have a rather intriguing history together. She'll have to tell you the story one day."

"Looking forward to it," Ryder said, "but for now, I'd say the lady has lost interest in you, Flynn. Can't say I blame her after what I've seen here. Why don't you do yourself a favor and leave before I have to do some damage."

"Damage? With your fists?"

"If necessary," Ryder said.

Flynn backed up and raised his hands. "I have no interest in fighting with you, Kendall. At least not today. I came to Trinity for a little pleasant conversation with Mistress Donovan."

"Grabbing her ass is considered pleasant conversation?" Ryder asked.

"Let's call it persuasion," Flynn said.

"She's not persuaded. Get back in your boat."

"You've complicated things for me, Kendall. I hope you realize that."

"Glad I could be of service," Ryder said. "Now get the fuck off my island."

He took Arleigh's hand and pulled her back to the cottage. He pretended he didn't see her glance over her shoulder at the perfect stranger.

* * * *

Ryder tried hard not to think of Cameron Flynn and tried even harder not to start an argument. Arleigh seemed very tense, and he suspected, if he broached the subject of her ex-boyfriend, she would fly at him with another kitchen utensil and this time it would be sharp. He stared into his bowl, concentrating on his breakfast. It looked like something out of a Dickens novel. He stirred the oatmeal, gruel, chum, whatever it was, with his wooden spoon. He thought he might be able to make it more appetizing, but it just got worse. He lifted some out of the bowl, and it plopped off his spoon and back into the dish with a dull splash.

"What exactly is this? It looks like—"

"Just eat it."

"You're not a very good cook, are you? Faith is a terrible cook, and she's never given me anything that looks like this. It's hideous."

"Then I guess you won't be staying for supper," Arleigh said, spooning the concoction in her mouth. He couldn't believe she actually managed to keep it down.

"Supper? Jesus, I hadn't thought of that."

"'Tis obvious you don't think much at all," Arleigh said. "I know you think you were helping me, but you've probably made things worse. I don't think you realize..."

She rambled on and on about Cameron Flynn. He had no interest in Mr. Perfect. Ryder didn't care if Flynn was king of Jamestown. Arleigh had

issues with her ex-lover, but he would find a way to deal with that if Flynn stayed away from them. He had already decided somewhere in his demented mind that Arleigh would be his. Flynn could go to hell.

Somehow he had managed to be transported—was that a real thing?—out of his safe little world and into the seventh level of Hell. He thought he might be in for a rough time. He didn't fit here. The way the Donovan woman looked at him made that clear.

Flynn's inspection had proved he couldn't walk around in what he wore. Ragtag? His clothes were conservative and practical, but ragtag? Hell, they obviously weren't good enough in this Colonial utopia. After seeing Flynn's elaborate outfit for a morning of island-hopping, he realized his clothes would have to go. He couldn't continue to wear an Oxford shirt, a pair of Nikes, and jeans, even if they were good old American Levi's. Levi's wouldn't be invented for another... Christ, he hadn't majored in math. Leave that problem to someone else.

Where would he sleep? The little beauty across the table had made it abundantly clear he wasn't welcome and had complicated her life. Sex issues. Power issues. Commitment issues. He would figure out her major problem later. She didn't like him and didn't trust him. She would probably murder him in his sleep. That would severely hamper his courting ritual, but he would deal.

And it seemed he would probably starve to death. Or, at the very least, lose a lot of pounds he couldn't really afford to lose.

He brought the spoonful of gruel to his mouth and took a tentative bite. He waited for his body to reject it but found it surprisingly okay. A little bland, but he doubted she could run down to the store to get spices. She probably had to grow her own. He took another bite, then another.

"Not too bad," he said.

"I'm sorry if 'tis not what you're used to eating in... Where did you say?"

"Virginia," he said, spooning more mash into his mouth.

"Tis in Virginia we are," she said.

"North," he mumbled.

"Tis nothing north of here, except for the savages."

"I came on a ship. Stranded after a terrible storm. I haven't seen Stephen in years, but hey, family's got to take you in, right?"

"Master Kendall, you be a most unusual—"

"Arleigh," he said quietly.

She stopped talking and tilted her head in an incredibly adorable way. She made it hard. Shrew one minute, beautiful fairy princess the next. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her for long.

"Call me Ryder."

She nodded and offered him a very small smile. He would take it. He smiled back.

"Not to bring up a bad subject," he said. "I don't know exactly how long I'll be here. I realize now I wasn't very prepared for this."

"No one is e'er prepared to be...what did you say? Stranded?"

"Right. No preparation at all. A horrible shipwreck. No survivors. I lost everything. Walked for days and days. I'm lucky to be alive."

Arleigh nodded. "You look amazingly fit and healthy. And very clean. After walking days and days."

Ryder stirred his mash. "What I'm trying to say is—"

"You can stay in Stephen's room. You're his brother, and 'tis probably your property 'til Fiana comes of age. The cottage and the island belong to you. Seems I might belong to you, as well."

Ryder's head snapped up. A smile spread across his face. "Hey, he barely flinched."

"Tis not what I meant," Arleigh muttered. "I appreciate your chivalry, but I meant you own me. Legally."

Ryder laughed. "Oh, come on, what do you mean I own you? Oh, wait I keep—"

Arleigh tilted her head, but she peered at him with suspicion. She opened her mouth and leaned closer, poised to ask a question.

Great, Kendall, just great. Keep up the charade. You've almost blown it. He held up his hands, shaking his head. "I meant I could never own anyone. I don't believe in that sort of thing."

He thought maybe he'd pulled it off. She closed her mouth and leaned back on the bench.

"You may want to reevaluate your value system, Master Kendall. You be in Virginia now, and people own people. 'Tis the way of it. I'm your indenture. I belong to you, whether you want me or not."

Oh, I want you, Arleigh. If you only knew the dirty thoughts running through my mind right now.

He shook his head. Had he said that out loud? No, she had gone back to eating, so he couldn't have said it out loud, not without some kind of comment from her. She had an argument for everything. She couldn't keep her mouth shut. In fact, she still talked.

"You have every right to ask me to leave. Perhaps I won't fit into whatever future you see for Trinity. You could sell my indenture." She peeked up at him, and her voice became soft, almost a whisper. "If that's what you wanted to do."

"No." His heart beat faster. She sucked all of the strength out of him. He felt like a high-school boy again. He couldn't take his eyes off her. "That's not what I'd want to do. Not even close."

Her brow furrowed, but thankfully she shrugged it off, thinking him plain odd. Better she thought him odd than know how much she affected him. A small smile touched her lips.

"Tis not certain how much longer I'll be with you in either case. Cameron has other plans."

"Look, Arleigh, I don't know what kind of relationship you two have, but I can keep him away from you while I'm here."

"'Tis not possible now. I'm an indentured woman, and though your being here might help, 'twill not solve everything. You may find Cameron's solution the only one."

"I'm pretty sure Cameron and I wouldn't see eye to eye on anything. Including you. How long will I own you?"

"Your brother purchased my indenture for five years. 'Tis six months I've been on Trinity, and I've been happy here. Stephen was a kind man, but you know that. He treated all of us well, but 'tis raise his daughters I have and cared for his home and own self."

Ryder nodded. He wanted to know what kind of care she had provided for Stephen. He didn't know where the frying pan had gone, but he didn't want to take the chance of another beating, so he kept quiet. Curiosity also raged through him about the relationship she had with Flynn, but that wasn't his business, at least not yet. She was a grown woman and had made some seriously bad choices.

Arleigh shifted uncomfortably on the bench. She seemed unable to meet his eyes. When he'd left the cottage and seen her locked in another man's arms, an insane jealousy had flooded through him. In one instant, he had wanted to pulverize the man and grab Arleigh for his own. Craziness. He'd known her only a few hours. Yet even now something about her made him feel like he'd known her and loved her forever. He thought he knew exactly how to touch her to make her come. He'd like to get her into the bedroom and check his instincts. He wanted to reach across the table and take her chin in his hand—

"So you see, 'tis wrong I was about everything," she said.

He blinked stupidly and found he had half-risen from the table. Arleigh gave him one of her looks. He dropped back onto the bench and tried to focus.

"When Stephen died, I assumed Fiana would be inheriting everything and my indenture would belong to her. But she's still a child, and Cameron says we've no control o'er what is to happen."

"Did he threaten you?"

Arleigh nodded and chewed at her lip. "Stephen owes him a large sum of money. Cameron has offered to cancel those debts. 'Tis his solution to extend my indenture in his service."

"That's never going to happen."

"'Tis Cameron's way to make things happen. He's been to the governing council. Even before he decided to make it legal, I expected him to come to claim me. But instead, well, 'twould seem he wants to break me and punish me by taking everything I love."

Ryder's gut twisted. The concussion had stolen his concentration. Or was it the girl? While he had been punching strangers and lusting after a girl he barely knew, he had forgotten his altruistic purpose for being in this primitive paradise.

"Taking everything you love," Ryder mumbled, thinking, wondering how he could have missed it, wondering how he had allowed himself to become so enamored he'd forgotten entirely about the three little girls with broken hearts who might be in desperate trouble. "Arleigh, where are the Caindale girls?"

"Flynn has them," she whispered.

Ryder jumped to his feet "God damn it! Is he dangerous? Will he hurt them?"

"Oh, he's very dangerous, but I don't think he'll hurt them. People respected Stephen and love the girls. Cameron won't jeopardize his station here by risking the wrath of the community, and he gave me his word. Certain behaviors aren't acceptable in his world."

"In any world," Ryder said. "You said he's taken them to punish you. Why would he want to punish you, Arleigh?"

She hesitated only a moment. "I killed him twice."

Chapter 10

Ryder paced around the room. Arleigh tried to make eye contact, but he couldn't do it.

"You killed him twice. If you kill someone, they're dead."

"Aye, you would think so, but 'tis not always the case. This happened years and years ago."

"And you killed him *twice*? Either someone is alive, or someone isn't. Besides, you would have been a child years and years ago and hardly accountable."

"No, my memories sometimes blend together and become hazy o'er the long time. But when I killed Cameron, I was something else."

She needed some good counseling sessions, maybe years of psychiatric evaluation. Flynn had done something to her that talking wouldn't fix. He hoped Stephen's door had a strong lock on it.

"Something else, like what? Do you have multiple personality disorder?"

Her brow furrowed. "I don't think so."

"Are you obsessive-compulsive? Manic-depressive? Do you have a panic disorder?"

"You be speaking words I don't understand. What language do they speak in your homeland?"

"We're not getting anywhere. When you say you were something else, what you mean is you weren't yourself, right?"

"Aye, 'tis the meaning. Not myself."

Ryder nodded. "Temporary insanity. We use it all the time at home in defense cases. He probably drove you to this killing, or whatever we call it. He deserved what he got, and you came out of the relationship alive and intact, well, virtually intact, and he's obviously okay now. He's leaving a

trail of misery and creating havoc, but he's alive, and you're off the hook. You shouldn't feel guilty, and he shouldn't continue to punish you."

Arleigh stared at him. She looked so young. What could she be? Early twenties? There were worry lines on her face, though, and a slight darkness under her eyes. The poor kid had not had an easy life.

"He's not really alive," Arleigh said softly.

He shook his head. "What do you mean by that?"

"He does not have a life as you know it."

"But he's alive enough to hurt people, to stalk, to kidnap, and God knows what he's done to you."

"Aye, he does many things, and he has the power to do worse."

Ryder smiled. For some reason, the girl made him want to smile, delusions or not.

"You're talking like he's a super villain in a comic book, Arleigh. What is he? Lex Luther? The Crow? A Klingon?"

"Tis a Ganconor he is. He is *the* Ganconor. There can be only one."

"Like *Highlander*?"

"A highlander! Bloody saints, no! We are both from Ireland."

Ryder laughed. He went around the table and tugged her to her feet. She held back for a moment but allowed herself to be pulled against him. He had been right. She fit perfectly against his chest, nestled there like a soft pillow. That violet scent overwhelmed him again. He wrapped his arms around her, and she snuggled against him and sighed.

"You're a treasure, Arleigh Donovan. A nut case, but a treasure."

She leaned back in his arms, and something unfathomable flickered across her face. Her hands curled and toyed with the cotton of his shirt. He bent his face closer to hers.

"I could kiss you now."

Arleigh nodded. Her hair spilled across his arm.

"But I won't. Not until you tell me what a Ganconor is."

She didn't answer. Instead, she lifted herself higher and planted her mouth against his. Surprised, he almost pulled away, but then his arms tightened around her. Her lips moved against his, pulling and tugging until his own tingled. He stood very still, afraid she would stop if he moved. Her lips moved from his mouth, across his cheek, and against his jaw. She nipped at his skin with her teeth, setting his face on fire, and his body caught

right up. His cock hardened in his jeans, an excruciating pressure that throbbed with each touch of her lips.

When her mouth came back to his, he returned her kiss hard. She yielded, and her mouth opened under his, filling him with warmth. Her tongue sought his eagerly. His head began to spin. Her hands ran up his back and twisted in his hair, then trailed down his arms, clutching him above the elbows, clinging as she pulled him closer.

The kiss deepened, taking his breath away, making his heart pound. He groaned.

When her hands left his arms and reached between them, his breath caught. Her hands fluttered, unsure but determined. She yanked at his shirt, and her hands roamed the bare skin of his torso, her fingers skimming the hair on his chest. Her mouth burned hot and wet, her tongue exploring with a determination. She searched the front of his Levi's, fumbling with buttons and zippers. He tugged the sleeve of her nightdress and bared her shoulder, dipping his head to kiss her skin and trail his lips along the side of her neck. Her sigh sent a flood of need through him. She pressed against his body, rubbing, seemingly eager, filled with the same lust that consumed him. He could barely get the words out of his mouth.

"Where do you sleep, Arleigh? Show me."

He snatched at her mouth again and pulled her hard against him. Her fingers had found the zipper tab and pulled it down. Her hand slid inside and rubbed his cock. It swelled harder at her touch.

"Oh, you feel so right," she murmured. "And your smell...'tis making my head fuzzy."

"That makes two of us."

Ryder swept his arms under her knees and lifted her. He headed toward what he assumed was the bedroom door. Arleigh looped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his throat. Her lips roamed across his skin, inflaming the slow burn sizzling beneath his flesh. His cock struggled against the thin cotton of his boxers. Suddenly her hands slid down to his chest and she pushed hard.

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"Stop!"
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[&]quot;I don't think we can, Arleigh."

[&]quot;We must! Stop!"

Slowly he set her on the floor. She backed away from him with a soft cry of despair. Confusion flooded through him. Her eyes were wide, her face pale and she looked terrified.

He reached out to touch her face, but she thrust her hands out, pushing at his chest.

"I knew it!" she cried. "'Tis not o'er. I thought, oh, I don't know what I thought. I hoped you would be different. You felt *different*."

"Arleigh, come here. Whatever it is, we'll fix it."

"No." Her entire body trembled. "You need to stay away from me."

He moved toward her, but she backed up, quickly, fearfully. She clutched her nightgown, her hands crushing the fabric in frustration to control the trembling of her body. Her glance swept over him, and he felt the heat that boiled within her, the need, the yearning, the passion. She'd started the whole damn thing. How had he frightened her?

"Look, there's something here, something between us. I knew it before I got here. I've never felt this way before. I want you. I want you more than I've wanted anything in my entire life."

Arleigh choked back a sob. "I know what you're feeling. 'Tis not real."

"Of course it's real! Come here, baby."

"No, I can't."

"Don't run from me. Whatever you're afraid of, I'll help you. If I pushed you, I'll stop. We have to work this out. I know you feel something, too."

"I feel nothing. 'Tis an illusion. A torment. Punishment. And I can't stand it!"

She whirled and fled toward the staircase. Her footsteps pounded up the risers. A bed creaked, then silence. He went to the bottom of the stairs and heard her crying. He wanted to go up, to talk to her, to touch her again, but he had no right. She wasn't his. She didn't belong to him yet.

She does belong to you legally. Go ahead and take her. It's been done before. She's your property. You inherited her from your dead brother.

"Christ, I'm starting to believe my own lies."

She belongs to you physically. This is the one you've been waiting for. Are you going to let her fear stand in your way?

"She doesn't want me."

Oh, but she does. You were brought across centuries to find her. It's only right she becomes yours. Take her. Make her accept it.

"Get a grip, Kendall, you can't just take her."

He ran his hands through his hair and stared at the open door to the attic. He had materialized out of nowhere and surprised her. Any woman would be shell-shocked. Hell, he felt shell-shocked.

Better not press it now. Give her time. Let her think. She'll realize she belongs to you. She has always belonged to you.

"I am losing it."

He didn't know what to do. He knew he could locate Jamestown. He was in his own backyard. He could probably also find Flynn. If Flynn had as much power as Arleigh implied, everyone would know Mr. Perfect. But then what? If he needed allies, where would he find them? Who could he trust? Arleigh was the only person he could depend on, his only link with the girls, with Flynn, with the island. He didn't know if he could even leave Trinity. He didn't know how this time-travel stuff worked. He had managed to get to 1639, but someone had overlooked the details. Someone had bypassed planning entirely and barreled into action. A typical Kendall trait.

Arleigh thought Flynn wouldn't hurt the girls. Could he assume they'd be safe because a lonely, frightened girl told him so? Maybe not, but he had no choice. He'd have to trust her instinct because, of all the problems Arleigh Donovan had, he had no doubt she loved those girls, and their welfare came first.

His head still hurt. He probably did have a concussion, but he would die of a brain hemorrhage before he went to any of the quack doctors in this brave new world. He would drink the hideous stuff in Arleigh's jars before he let a blood-letter look at him. He ran his hands through his hair. Exhaustion hit him like a ton of bricks. He felt like he hadn't slept in weeks, decades, centuries. His head pounded like a hangover, without the fun and the exhilarating head rush of his buddy, Jack.

Arleigh had invited him to stay, so he if took a nap, her privacy wouldn't be violated. He opened the door to Stephen's room. Same dimensions, same windows as his own room in his own time, but there the similarities ended. His bedroom now held an uncomfortable-looking mattress slung across a bed frame that had seen better days, if it'd ever had a good day. Hooks lined the walls, holding pants, shirts, and jackets. A table

that held parchment, quills, and ledger books stood under the window, with a battered chair tucked beneath.

Accounting records. He'd have to look at those and see how far into debt Stephen had actually been. There must be assets he could sell to keep Arleigh from Flynn. Would he have time for all that? Well, he knew the answer to that question. He'd make the time.

Ryder continued his inspection. Several small trunks crowded the corner, filled with shoes, boots, cloaks, and lighter-weight clothing. A larger one stood open, spilling weapons of every kind imaginable.

"What, no flamethrower? Probably could use one if I'm going to deal with a Ganconor. Whatever the hell *that* is."

He looked around. No bathroom door.

"Great. Welcome to 1639."

He peered through the window, gauging the time. Stephen Caindale apparently had no need for clocks on his island paradise, but it felt around 9:00 in the morning. The sun had risen and blasted through his aching head like a pneumatic drill. A sharp pain pierced the top of his head, like someone had shoved a railroad spike through his skull.

Should have brought a bottle of Advil with me. Extra strength. A bathroom, too.

He saw the outhouse about a hundred feet from the cottage, nestled in some trees. A line of planks led around the side of the house. Very convenient. Just enough to keep someone from sinking into the mud on a rainy day.

"Well, here is where I find out how far I can get from the cottage. Then I'm going to take a nap until the lady of the house feels like talking."

* * * *

1235 Caindale Castle

She squealed with girlish delight as she hugged his neck. Remy knew he was the luckiest man alive. He'd found the woman of his dreams, the most beautiful woman he'd ever beheld and she loved him.

Aislynn jumped from the bed and twirled in the wavering strands of the early morning sun. She danced, her body swaying, her eyes closed, whirling round and round until he grew dizzy watching her. She pulled the pin from her hair and the red strands cascaded over her naked skin like sheets of red fire, wrapping around her as she spun.

"I am to be thy wife!" She giggled again and twirled faster. "Remy, Remy, my heart shall shatter with happiness."

She stopped suddenly and leapt at him. He caught her easily, her small frame nestled tight against him. His hands drifted over the smooth skin of her back.

"I love thee so," she whispered.

"And I love thee."

She tilted her head. He wanted to kiss her, so he did. She smiled against his lips. "Thy sisters hath no doubts?"

"Nay. They art pleased, though they desire us to leave this chamber. They hath a wish to know thee."

She sighed, her body rising and falling in his arms. "I cannot. I hath fallen under thy spell and I wish to be nowhere else." She planted tiny kisses on his collarbone. His cock grew, rising toward her heat.

"We shall be forced to leave the chamber to meet the priest."

"But 'tis not today," she murmured.

Her hand wrapped around his cock and she pressed her palm tight against him, rubbing gently. The friction made him groan and the head of his cock pulsed against her skin. His skin caught fire and he captured her mouth with his. Her mouth was sweet heat and stole his breath.

She straddled his hips and pushed herself up, resting her hands against his chest. Her fingers toyed with the hair there, tickling him, coaxing him into tiny shivers. She leaned down and licked each nipple and he reached for her breasts, cupping them in his hands and tweaking her nipples.until she sighed deeply.

"Tis never been like this," she said.

"Nor for me."

He pulled her breast into his mouth, his tongue swirling around her peaked nipple, a wet luscious bud that grew larger and harder with each taste. When he nipped at her skin, she gave a little cry then pushed harder

against him. His hand strayed between her thighs, spread wide over his body. When he touched her clit, she whimpered and sat up straight.

"Touch me again."

He pushed two fingers into her, hard, fast, and she sucked in a breath. Her pussy lips swelled around his fingers and her inner muscles clenched against them. He wiggled them slightly and she squirmed against him.

"Not enough," she said.

He withdrew for only a moment and shoved three fingers into her. Her pussy spasmed around them, pulsing with the beat of her heart.

Her clit was a hard, tiny bud peaking with a need for attention. He pressed his thumb against it, circling. Her head fell back, and her thighs tightened around him. A shudder swept her body, and her pussy locked around his fingers, throbbing with a hard, chaotic rhythm.

His cock drummed a beat of its own.

She trembled violently, her magnificent body shaking above his. He never grew tired of watching her face when she came. Her lips parted and a long trembling breath escaped.

Aislynn lifted slightly and gripped his pounding cock, sliding it between her pussy lips. She rubbed it up and down, teasing him with her moisture and heat. Each time it swiped against her clit, she smiled and shivered. She took a deep breath and pushed herself down. His aching cock slid inside her to the hilt, and she released the breath with a giant sigh that burst from her as his cock swelled harder and filled every crevice of her pussy.

Her whispered voice tore at his soul. "Oh, my lord, only thee can stop the madness."

He gripped her hips, pulling her tight, lifting her, pounding her body against his. He watched as his cock, covered with a glistening sheen, a melding of their fluids, slid from her body, then as it plunged into the moist haven that answered all his desires.

Her head fell forward, the glossy strands of her hair drifting like silk against his skin. Her body trembled beneath his hands as his own trembled beneath hers.

Her pussy clenched around his cock. His balls rose high against his body and tightened with an excruciating pressure, wanting to pour into her. She reached behind to cup them in her hand and he released, bursting, flooding her with his seed, his promise, his love. She tensed for a moment

then her pussy spasmed, gripping him, milking the fluid from his body. She fell against him as her body shattered. He cradled her as his cock pulsed within her and she quivered with her own release.

When his body was spent and her trembling had begun to subside, he lifted her chin and captured her mouth.

"My beautiful Aislynn. I pledge to thee my heart, my soul, my very breath."

"My Remy," she whispered. "I pledge the same to thee."

He held her as she drifted to sleep against him, feeling the beat of her heart in sync with his, and wondering what perfect magic had brought her into his life.

Chapter 11

Arleigh bolted upright in her tiny bed. Her pussy throbbed. She pressed her palm against her mound, trying to stop the ache. She shook her head.

What madness is this? That dream was too real.

Now that Stephen lay in his grave, men were seemingly falling from the sky and invading her dreams. She had dreamed the night before of Cameron. With the power of the Ganconor, the possibility existed that Cameron had woven himself into her sleeping life. If he had done that, things would soon become more desperate than she'd feared.

And now there was the new man. Ryder Kendall. He had woven himself into her dreams too. The man in the dream had looked like Kendall with his warm brown eyes and that dimple in his chin, but she wasn't sure it had been a dream. It seemed more like a memory—the stone chamber with rounded walls, dark tapestries covering the high narrow windows, a large bed spread with the softest of furs. And that man who had pledged his heart to her.

She shook her head. It wasn't possible. She could not have known this man before.

Her mind reeled as thousands of years of memories flooded through her, back when she had been something else, something she sometimes remembered, sometimes begged to forget. The Leanan sidhe, lover of men, thief of hearts. The soul taker.

Wherever the dream had come from, Ryder Kendall had invaded her life and appeared to be staying, which opened another problem. She wanted to keep Ryder Kendall for herself, and that would be the worst possible thing she could do. The kiss had proven it.

She had kissed him to see what might happen, to see if the curse that shimmered around her would affect this man. Her answer came faster than she expected.

His immediate response proved it. The passion of his kiss and the hardness of his cock left little doubt he would never withstand the repercussions of whatever still hovered around her. Without a doubt, Ryder Kendall would fall under her spell, and he would fall hard. But something far worse flickered in her thoughts. His kiss confused her because it had caused such an immediate reaction inside of *her*. The hunger she felt within him had flowed into her and filled her with the same longing. And the moisture that leaked from her body indicated she would not be able to resist him. Her body wanted him.

The desire to kiss him again had been strong. The need to touch him had been overwhelming. For one moment, she would have given him anything, and the simple idea of more between them had spread a paralyzing fear through her. She had become careless and, if it happened again, she would forget. She would forget curses and consequences, dead men, and heartache. She couldn't kiss him again, and she couldn't allow him to think there would ever be anything between them. Too dangerous.

Passion in Arleigh Donovan's world meant death. Death followed her and took what she touched, without warning, without remorse, without mercy. Death had claimed men of Rosscannon Quay, Dublin, and scattered more throughout the greens hills of Ireland. Death would not hesitate to take a man who claimed to be her champion.

Ryder Kendall possessed some kind of power of his own, something that disturbed the deepest part of her where she hid her human emotions. Ryder Kendall would steal her soul as she had stolen others. She thought he might have already snatched pieces and tucked them into himself because she felt something *missing*. How much had he stolen from her? Could she get it back?

Arleigh needed to speak to Adelina. She tiptoed down the stairs and peeked into the empty keeping room. She stirred the fire and stacked bits of kindling into the burning embers. Smoke curled lazily around the wood, and lights began to spark and flash as a mass of small creatures poured from the hearth and swirled around her.

"Oh, 'tis sorry I am, loves. I didn't know you still hid there."

The faeries, her beautiful little guardians of light, gathered at the edge of the hearth, waiting patiently for the smoke to clear. She swung the kettle

over the fire and settled down onto the bench to watch the flames. Adelina perched on her knee.

"You're not wearing your wings," Arleigh said.

"I don't need them," Adelina said.

"Aye, but they are lovely."

The lights on the hearth whispered questions, so many that Arleigh's head threatened to explode. She put her hands over her ears, and the voices stopped.

"One question at a time. 'Tis well. Cameron didn't hurt me."

"But he can," Adelina said. "He can hurt you very much."

"I'll not be worried about myself, at least not much. I'm worried about the lasses. He could purchase my indenture, and I'd have to go. 'Twould be safer for the girls if I did."

"That cannot be the answer," Adelina said. "Can you resist him?"

"I'll not be knowing. 'Tis hard to deny he has some power o'er me, but whether he can take my soul is unknown. Some resist, but they fail. Other than Flynn, I ne'er lost a chosen one. I don't expect he has, either. 'Tis part of the power. If you can't win, you will die."

"You should not have relinquished your power," Adelina said wistfully. "You would still be safe, and we would not have these problems."

"I did not," Arleigh said. "They took it."

"Who told you that?" Adelina asked.

"No one told me. I drifted in ether for what seemed an eternity. I tried to atone. I pleaded, but no one listened. My next memories are of a human childhood, of a mother who...loved me for a short while. Until she realized what I was."

Adelina's face puckered in a sneer. "Humanity. I have no use for it."

"Humanity is a wonderful thing," Arleigh said. "Tis a gift I was glad to receive after the ether. I expected to live my eternal existence there as punishment."

"You were not punished," Adelina said. "You made a choice."

"I didn't choose to relinquish the fey."

"You chose love," Adelina said. "With the choice, comes the sacrifice. You gave your heart and soul to a mortal when you should have taken his, thus betraying the ways of the fey. They revoked your immortality because elemental laws that must be obeyed. You were not granted free will in how

you nourished your existence. You could not exist without the sacrifice of man. When you refused to take the love of Remy Caindale, a sacrifice had to be made. That sacrifice was you."

"Oh," Arleigh whispered. "You are very wise for one so small."

The pink aura shimmered around Adelina. A rainbow of rosy tones spilled from her, circling and winding through her golden hair. She glowed, and her small body lifted gently from Arleigh's knee. A small pleased smile spread on her lips. Arleigh reached out, and Adelina settled on her hand.

"Yet 'tis still a curse upon me," Arleigh said.

"Aye," Adelina said. "The curse still stands, because within your heart are still pieces of the Leanan sidhe. We can never forget our true selves. 'Tis wiser not to try. Who is this new man?"

Arleigh glanced at the closed bedroom door. "Stephen's brother. He makes me uncomfortable. 'Tis his help I need, but part of me wishes he had ne'er come."

"He is very handsome for a mortal," Adelina said. "And he seems to hold some power over you."

"He's a human, Adelina. He can't hold power o'er me."

Adelina tilted her tiny head and studied her friend. "I watched you, Leanan sidhe. I saw your desire for him and the allure of his flesh. He is different from the others here. This one is special."

"I will resist him," Arleigh said firmly.

"He stirs something within your body and tugs at your heart. This one may test the boundaries of your willpower."

"The curse is linked to love, to my feelings for another, and possibly to the joining of the flesh. I won't be responsible for his death. I can resist him."

"He has a power over you," Adelina repeated.

"I will resist him. I promise."

Adelina sighed and offered a tiny smile. "You said you will resist him three times, Leanan sidhe, and yet I am still not convinced. However, if you do not, we will have a dead body to explain. Think well on that."

She flitted to her jar, and the other faeries followed their friend back to their nests. Soon, tiny snores filled the cottage, rustling the air like the stirring of autumn leaves.

Arleigh tiptoed toward the bedroom door. If Adelina had noticed the attraction between them, Ryder Kendall posed a more serious problem than she thought. She would take one peek at him to gauge her reaction, and if Adelina's fears were confirmed, she would tell Ryder Kendall to sell her indenture. Once inside, she found she could not leave the room, and the resolve fled from her mind.

She sat on the chair and watched him sleep. Tucked under Stephen's quilt, he looked peaceful, his breathing even and soft, lying on his side like a child. An exposed bare shoulder peeked above the quilt, and his arm stretched across the bed. His body was well defined, well used, but not worn out. Stephen had worked the land hard, and his arms had been nothing like this man's. Ryder Kendall did not look like a farmer or a laborer or a seaman. In fact, he looked like he hadn't worked a day in his life. He looked perfect.

His odd assortment of garments littered the bottom of the bed, and his shoes had been dropped on the floor. She realized he wore no clothing under the quilt. Curious, she left the chair and leaned closer. Her hand touched the blanket and tentatively lifted. One tiny peek and—

"Are you going to kiss me again and finish what you started?"

She snatched her hand away and lurched backwards, colliding with the chair.

"Finish what?" she squeaked.

"Breaking my heart. I still have a little left."

"I thought you were sleeping."

"Well, I was, but suddenly I smelled a field of violets. And here you are. Beautiful as ever."

Ryder yawned. His teeth were perfect. It amazed her he still had an entire mouthful. Some of them were flecked with small silver dots. Intrigued, she would have loved to ask about them, but Ryder's voice broke her thoughts.

"I had a great dream. You inspire my imagination to work overtime." His gaze raked across her and she smoothed her hands down her skirt.

"In what way?"

"I don't know where we were, but it seemed like heaven. Stone walls, a big bed. Your hair was a little different. It was—"

She lifted her hair and twirled it against her neck. She tried to swallow, but her throat seemed to have swollen. She could barely get her breath.

"Just like that. How did you know?"

"A lucky guess. Perhaps 'tis how it was when you spied upon me."

"No, that's not—" He frowned. "Hey, I never spied on you."

She dropped her hair and huffed. She needed to get out of this room. He made her feel funny things. It wasn't possible they'd shared the same dream unless he had powers like Cameron Flynn. She peered at him. Was it possible Ryder Kendall was not human? He seemed human.

"I've seen that outfit before."

"Outfit?"

"Your clothes."

She sighed. "And yet you never spied."

His gaze traveled over her body and heat swelled through her, making her sweat.

"That corset is very Goth, very hot. It really shows off your assets. But that skirt's gotta go. You look like a serving wench."

Arleigh glanced down at her clothing and smoothed her hands down her apron.

"Tis all I have. We can't afford the finery you wear. Besides, I *am* a servant." She tossed her head. "But you needn't be insulting and rude. I'm not a wench. I conduct myself with propriety."

"Sorry. Is wench a bad thing?"

Ryder sat up, stretched, and the quilt fell away, pooling in his lap. The muscles she had seen in his arm apparently covered his body. They started in his shoulders and ran the entire length of his torso down to the edge of his flat stomach where, to Arleigh's dismay, the blanket covered the rest of him. She had an insane desire to snatch the quilt away.

His skin glowed like he'd spent his time outdoors. What kind of work did this man do that his body had felt the kiss of the sun and yet had not destroyed his health and vitality? He ran his hand through his shaggy hair and looked around the room like he had forgotten something, or perhaps remembered something. Arleigh backed up another step.

"So what do you think a champion does?" he asked.

He tossed back the covers, and Arleigh yelped. She clapped her hands over her eyes and spun around to face the window. He rose and the bed groaned with his movement. She flinched when he brushed against her skirt.

"You don't have to be so damn skittish." She flinched again at the harsh sound of his voice. "I'll try to keep my hands to myself."

She inched away from him, but he grabbed her elbow and spun her around.

"Look at me," he said.

She slid her hands down her face. The brown eyes that had seemed so warm, so full of amusement, had turned hard. What had happened to him while he slept? Had he been thinking about the situation and realized what a disastrous future awaited him on Trinity Island? Was he sorry he had come to claim his brother's property and family and found her thrown into the bargain? She needed him. He offered the only protection from Cameron Flynn, and an estranged brother might not be enough. What if he had decided there were too many problems on Trinity and refused to stay? Even the small amount of hope he offered her would vanish. What would she have to do to convince him to help her?

His grip on her arm tightened, and he stared at her with an expression that made her uneasy. He had picked up his shirt from the bed, but now he tossed it away.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

She could think of nothing to say but kept her eyes locked on his. They frightened her a little with their hardness. Nothing stirred there for her, no help, no comfort, no friendship, and she needed all of those things desperately. She needed Ryder Kendall on her side.

"Nothing," she said softly.

"Then why are you so jumpy around me? Is it bare skin? Men in general? Me in particular? I'm not like Flynn. I'm not going to take what you don't offer, but the woman who kissed me this morning had experience and seemed interested. What happened?"

He gave her a little shake, and she blinked. She had so little experience with men in this human life. What had she done? Did his anger stem from the kiss? Had he expected more from her? She couldn't possibly give him more, especially not now. The kiss had proven it. How could she tell him they would kill each other with their longing?

She needed to make him understand, but the look in his eye said he would never understand anything she might tell him because something inside of him was hurt and confused. And she had forgotten the most important thing about Ryder Kendall. He might be mad.

She vaguely wished she had her skillet, because he had been so much more agreeable when she threatened him with physical pain.

He shook her again, and she tried to focus, but she found it so hard. The man frightened her and yet moisture leaked between her thighs. Even though he glared at her with a barely controlled fury, she couldn't tear her glance from his eyes. She loved looking into them because, when she saw herself reflected there, she saw herself as she could be with the love of this man. She felt like they shared one soul and one heart. Hers beat very fast, and she glanced toward his chest. Did his heart beat in the same rhythm? Some kind of power connected them. His harsh voice startled her.

"What is the problem? Talk to me, Arleigh. We'll fix it."

"You're naked, Master Kendall," she whispered.

"My name is Ryder. Look, you're a grown woman with a growing collection of exs. It doesn't surprise me, because you're gorgeous, and I don't hold it against you, because I've laid so many women I've lost count. But my body shouldn't scare you, and I shouldn't scare you. I'm really a nice guy."

He moved a few more inches toward her. She had to tilt her head back to keep her eyes on his face. He made her nervous, with his words, with the way his body seemed to crowd her, taking away her space, taking away her thoughts. He lifted a strand of hair from her shoulder and caressed it with his fingers. His voice softened when he spoke, and his eyes held a trace of understanding now. She breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps he had finally seen there could be no future between them.

"I know what your life's been like around her. History is my job."

"History can't be a *job*," she said. He changed the subject so often, her mind whirled when he talked.

"It's obvious you and Flynn have something. I'm not even sure I want to know, so we'll forget about him for now. But you're indentured, and I know what that could be like for women, especially one that looks like you. You probably had certain...responsibilities."

"I did many things for Stephen, and I work hard. I'm still learning some things, but I manage. I clean, cook, sew, care for the children, keep the garden—"

"That's not what I meant."

His eyes filled with a gentleness she latched onto. His tone had softened, and he talked slowly, explaining a complicated task to a child. She had heard it all her life from men. She waited patiently for him to continue.

"You lived in Stephen's house," he said.

"Aye, he thought it best."

"That implies certain expectations. I doubt Stephen was a saint. The Kendall men aren't known for their restraint. We have a thing for women. What Stephen did isn't admirable, but it was common. Everything must have been okay, because you were thinking of a future here. You were lucky Stephen was a nice guy, because it could have been much worse."

"Stephen treated me well."

"I'm glad to hear he was at least a gentleman about it," Ryder said. "I'd hate to have to crawl in his grave and kick his ass. I don't blame him for wanting you. I want you. You're very hard to resist."

Her heartbeat escalated. "Hard to resist?"

"Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately? Stephen could not have kept his hands off you for six days, let alone six months. I wanted you before I even met you and now—"

He grabbed her hand and brought it to his chest. He pressed his own over hers when she tried to pull back. She felt the coarse hair spread across his flesh, the muscles that moved under his skin. The rhythm of his heart matched her own. It beat fast.

"I'm not a saint, Arleigh, but I'm also not like the men here. I know how to behave myself. Feel my heart? It doesn't beat faster out of lust. It beats faster because I think there's something between us. I felt the kiss you gave me, and I know you felt it, too. But if I'm wrong, or you've changed your mind, I'll accept it. I'm a big boy."

She tried to pull her hand away again, but he put his arm around her back and pressed her closer. The hardness of his entire length pressed against her. The lower half of his body stirred and she remembered the all-too-familiar thrusts, the shifting and erratic pushes that spoke of his desire. The pulse of his cock sent another flood of moisture between her legs. She

wanted to pull him down onto the bed and accept what rose between his legs.

It's too dangerous. Do you want to kill this man?

She could move a mere inch closer, one inch to show him he pleased her, that she wanted his arms wrapped even more tightly around her, that she wanted the taste of his mouth on hers. But that could never happen between them. Showing him how she felt would be the worse possible thing she could do. She could not be responsible for killing another Caindale brother. Instead of pushing against him, she pulled back in his arm and left the hard need of his body behind and forced the words from her mouth.

"You were wrong. I can't give you what you want."

He dropped his arms, but she found she couldn't move.

"I'm not out to steal my dead brother's property," he said with disgust.

She lowered her eyes. She couldn't look at him any longer. His eyes filled with hurt and anger again, but she wanted to explain.

"I'm your property now, Master Kendall, and I will work hard for you. Stephen and I had a good relationship, and—"

"That doesn't surprise me. Things seem pretty cozy around here. Tell me about your relationship with Stephen."

"I don't know what you're thinking, Master Kendall, but your brother was a decent man."

"Decent men have needs, too. And so do women. Especially a woman like you."

Arleigh huffed. "A woman like me? What does that mean? "'Tis obvious you have some opinion. What are you trying to say?"

"Come on, look at yourself! From what I've seen around here, men crawl all over this island trying to get into your pants, and I've no doubt they succeeded. That kiss this morning came from an experienced woman, and believe me, Arleigh, a man couldn't walk away from a kiss like that and forget. You wanted more. I wanted more. I thought for a split second there would be more. You seemed to want me, but if I'm not your type, I'll deal with it."

"Master Kendall, I don't understand the way you speak. What exactly are you talking about?"

"This vocabulary issue is royal pain in the ass," Ryder muttered. He raked his hands through his hair. He took a step closer, and his body pressed against hers. "Fucking, Arleigh. I'm talking about fucking."

The blood left her face and Arleigh jerked backward. She knew the word, had heard it in the Quay, on the ship, and around the village of Jamestown, and had used it in her other life. But each time she heard it now, she felt shame, and memories flooded through her of men whose dirty, grimy hands clutched at her skirt, tugged through her hair, and grabbed parts of her body like only their needs had merit. Each time she heard it, her heart clenched and her stomach roiled and she fled in fear. She wanted away from Ryder Kendall, but for some reason, her feet refused to move.

"Oh, no," Arleigh murmured. "I can't—"

"What I don't understand," he said, studying her face, "is why you've willingly accepted a man like Flynn and can't stand to be near me."

"Is that what you think?" she whispered. "You think I've bedded these men? That Flynn and I, that Stephen and I, I haven't!"

The kindness vanished from his eyes. The merriment that seemed to shine around him like an aura dissolved. She had ruined him in such a short expanse of time.

He stared at her for a moment then shook his head. "Whatever you say, princess."

"I was the Leanan sidhe," she whispered, "not a princess."

He stopped listening to her. He discovered she wouldn't bed him, and he lost interest in her. Turning, he picked up his shirt from the bed and slipped his arm into it.

"If you didn't sleep with my brother, he got screwed in this bargain. And if you treated him like you treat me, he's probably glad he's dead."

Something caught his attention. He dropped the shirt back onto the bed.

"Why are you being so mean?" she asked.

He ignored her and went to the pegs that hung on the wall.

She swallowed hard and let her gaze sweep the length of him. He wasn't completely naked. He wore a small pair of breeches that were incredibly clean and rested on his hipbones. They hung loosely around his thighs, but she saw the thin fabric did very little to conceal the bulge that tugged against the cloth or the dark shadows that pressed against the breeches. The bulge she'd discovered belonged to Ryder Kendall and not to his odd clothing. His

cock was big and probably pleasurable, but that didn't matter now. Not at all, because his mean and hurtful personality had shown through. She'd not kiss him again. Ever. And she certainly wouldn't let him make love to her. If he had such a low opinion of her, she would stay clear of him. She wouldn't need a curse to do that. She could keep her promise to Adelina. Resisting him would *not* be a problem.

But it wouldn't hurt to look. The golden brown hairs that spread across his chest moved in a pattern down his body and merged to reach the shadows that rose from his breeches. Heat flared in her face. Her tongue passed over her lips. Maybe it *would* hurt to look.

She glanced toward his face, but he was occupied and mumbling to himself, so she continued her inspection. Like Ryder, Stephen had been tall but not powerfully built like this man. Ryder's back and shoulders were broad, tapering to a slim waist and narrow hips, with healthy taut muscles spread across all the areas of his body. His legs were most attractive. In fact, every visible inch of him glowed a beautiful golden shade that made her want to run her hands across his flesh, to dip her fingers into the band that held the breeches around his hips, to— No! She reminded herself he was mean and hurtful.

He searched through Stephen's clothing.

"Underwear?"

"What?"

"What did Stephen wear under his pants?"

"I wouldn't know that," she said.

"You washed his clothes, didn't you? Christ, be a prude, it doesn't matter to me. Never mind. I'll wear mine until they fall apart. And in this place, that probably won't be very long."

He pulled a pair of breeches from the peg, dropped to the bed and pulled them over his legs. He went to the small trunk in the corner and began to rummage through Stephen's things, tossing stockings and shoes into a growing pile. What did it matter? Stephen was dead, and everything in the house belonged to this strange man.

She cast a lingering glance toward him. Oh, this would be trying. Why did he have to be so bloody beautiful, and why couldn't she forget the way his mouth had felt on hers? She would have to find a way to deal with Ryder Kendall, because once their lives were back in order, and if he chose to stay

on Trinity, she would want to kiss him again. And the next time he offered more, she would accept. There wouldn't be a choice. Looking at him made her body throb. Her pussy swelled and ached, wanting desperately to embrace the cock that still pulsed in his snowy white breeches. And that moisture flooding between her legs could *not* be good. She decided she would keep the skillet within reach at all times.

"I'm not going to be able to do this," she whispered. She left him to dress, closing the door behind her.

Chapter 12

Ryder breathed in the crisp afternoon air. Late October, he thought. The colors of the leaves seemed to indicate autumn, and a vitality hovered in the air only the fall could bring. Winter still lay a small distance away. Same place, same time. Kind of the same time.

The cottage looked the same, but everything else seemed foreign. His tiny herb garden was gone. So was the picket fence. His neatly cut lawn had developed into an overgrown expanse of tall, irregular grass, choked with weeds. All his hard work gone. It made him sick to look at it. A circular fire pit dug at the side of the house held charred debris, and a kettle hung on a tripod. Nearby, a rope for laundry had been strung between saplings.

A large vegetable garden stretched out with rows and rows of corn stalks, and leafy bushes that might be carrots, but could be spinach, lettuce, or cabbage. Damned if he knew. Large patches of pumpkins and squash littered the distant edge, but he doubted they would be carving jack-olanterns for fun around here.

Beyond a stand of trees that seemed to mark the boundary between the house and the farm, tobacco fields spread across acres. In the distance, several barns and stables, chicken coops, storage buildings, and what he assumed were living quarters for the laborers sprawled across a clearing. He smelled the animals from where he stood. Cows and horses, pigs and sheep. He may not have been a farmer, but he recognized manure when he smelled it.

"Glad I missed summer. This place must smell god-awful in summer."

Four men worked in the nearest field. Stephen had been a pretty successful man, yet the matter of his debt still remained. He needed to study those ledgers. He wished he had taken an accounting course.

The beauty of Trinity Island stretched before him, more perfect than he could have imagined. The cottage and plantation were flanked by a forest filled with enormous trees.

On his trip to the outhouse, another great pleasure of 1639, he had seen the creek that ran behind the cottage. Fuller and deeper than the one in his time, it rushed and capered over rocks and stones, making its way to the river. The crystal clear water tasted sweet and pure. If he had time, he wanted to explore the entire island.

The James River coursed beyond the trees, and he glimpsed the rushing water through the autumn trees. It looked different, stronger than the one he walked to every evening. He was eager to walk its bank, because the river had always been his favorite place.

He ran his hands across his chest. The clothing he had borrowed from his new brother fit pretty well, loose and easy to move in, but the fabric itched. He hoped he had managed to put everything on in the right way. He wanted to fit in, blending into the landscape like he'd always been there. No reason to bring more suspicion on himself than he already had. The door to the cottage opened, and Arleigh came out carrying a basket.

She still wore her grumpy face, and he was sorry he had been the cause of it, but the girl had secrets, and the secrets stood in the way of his heroic deeds. He probably shouldn't have pushed her. Her personal life was none of his business, but damn he still wanted her. That spelled danger. He would have to find a way to talk himself out of what his heart wanted and find a way to convince his body nothing would happen. His body seemed pretty determined. Just looking at her...

Forget what you want, Kendall. You're here to be a hero. Small talk. Make peace. Be friends. You need Arleigh's help to get the girls back. Focus. You're not here for romance. Romance would be a bonus.

He walked toward her, and she stopped dead.

"Stephen owns this whole island?" he asked.

"You own it. Stephen is dead."

Curt. Cold. She turned and started to walk away. His eyes raked across her back. Okay, so she resisted. Maybe he deserved it. Maybe he had been too hard on her. A woman had a right to change her mind. Maybe he'd been wrong about the kiss. Maybe she hadn't felt what he felt.

She did feel it.

Arleigh whirled around. "What?"

He shook his head. She rolled her eyes, hefted her basket, and stomped away from him. Damn. He'd never had a problem with women before. They practically threw themselves at him. Okay, so it had been only half a day, but in Ryder Kendall's world, time didn't matter. One kiss, one touch, and sex became a nonissue. How many women had he slept with? More than he could remember. Nothing to be proud of, but true.

And then this little wench comes along and totally blows his doors off. The problem was he wanted this one, and he thought they would be spending the rest of their lives together. He could feel it.

Court her. Woo her. Convince her. Try, Kendall. For the first time in your life give an honest effort. Resort to flowers and candlelight if you have to.

He could do that. Talk to her. Listen to her. Ask about her life, hopes, dreams, fears. Easy. How long would it take to *make* a woman fall in love with him?

She's already in love with you. Can't you feel it?

"Would you please stop that?" Arleigh snapped.

"Stop what?"

"Talking to yourself."

"Then I'll talk to you."

"Tis busy I am," Arleigh said. "And must you follow me around like a puppy?"

"I can follow you anywhere I want. I own you. You work; I'll talk. You'll never know I'm here."

Arleigh glanced over her shoulder. "You're very intrusive, Master Ken—"

"I can't get over this place. In my time, we're not farmers anymore, but we've tried to keep the property as true as possible. Caindale Cottage is on the National Register of Historic Places."

"Indeed? How thrilling for you."

Ryder smiled at her back. "We still own quite a chunk of the island, but when the plantation grew, craftsmen moved in and wanted to stay and bought land piece by piece. Nick Kendall made a killing. There's a town now. Stores, churches, schools, a hospital, the works. We even have our

own zip code. We still feel like it belongs to us, but it doesn't really. We just act like it does. First Family and all."

She gave him an odd look over her shoulder. He shut up. For a minute.

"It must have been something, owning this whole island."

"Stephen kept busy," she said. "We rarely saw him, but I miss him. He took care of us, kept us protected. He was kind."

"I'm kind," Ryder said.

"So you've said."

"I've also said I'll help you. That's what I came to do. Shouldn't you tell me how I can find Flynn?"

"He won't let you near them."

"That's not going to stop me. I hoped for a little help on your part, but you don't seem too concerned. Aren't you worried?"

Arleigh whirled around. He had finally struck a nerve.

"Of course I'm worried, but Cameron made it very clear I'm not to try to get them back."

"So you're going to let three little girls be held against their will? That doesn't sit right with me."

"He said there will be consequences."

"Oh, there'll be consequences all right, but Flynn's the one that's going to pay. I'll talk to him. Somewhere inside of that psychopath has to be a rational man. I'll go to the governing council. See the governor. Whatever it takes. They're my kids, damn it!"

"You don't know him like I do. He has power you couldn't imagine."

"I'm a smart guy. I'll think of something." He put his hands on his hips and glanced around. "So how do I get off the island? I can't believe how big the river seems. In my time, there's been a lot of erosion, and the river's changed its course. We have a causeway now. I have a feeling you don't have one of those."

Arleigh hefted her basket and continued to walk toward the garden. He followed behind her, his glance roaming everywhere. He actually loved it. Peaceful, idyllic, no traffic, no noise, no airplanes overhead. There were no car engines, no stereos blaring music that abused his taste. The birds were singing, and the river water roared in the distance. The tranquility amazed him. The autumn leaves crackled, drifting to the ground and—

He crashed into Arleigh. She had stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face him. He tried to take the basket from her, but she pulled away.

"What now?" he asked.

"You are still talking nonsense. I don't know what you're going to say from one moment to another. How do you think you can help me when you talk like the village idiot?"

"I'm trying," he said.

She dropped the basket on the ground and put her hands on her hips.

"Then what is a causeway? A car? An airplane? What is a stereo?"

He seriously had to watch himself with his bad habits. "Was I talking out loud?"

"Aye, unfortunately. You don't seem to e'er stop talking. But I would feel more comfortable if you talked about things that were *real*. All the good intentions aren't going to help me if you don't stay in this world."

"I will stop. Immediately."

She pursed her lips. "Are you a witch?"

"Right family, but, no, I'm adopted."

She waved her hands around, babbling about crazy people. Her patience had reached an end. And he had business here. He kept forgetting that. In the past, for a reason. He had to remember his mission. But damn it, look at her.

She looked like something out of a movie. Women didn't look like her on his Trinity. Her face looked flawless without makeup. Her hair rioted over her shoulders, gorgeous without a stylist. She had perfect features and clear skin. Her cheeks flushed when angry, as she was now, but the charm and nostalgia of her appearance overwhelmed him and, he had a hard time taking her seriously.

Even her clothes were romantic and sexy as hell. Her pale yellow skirt blew around her legs. Her breasts peeked over the edge of that leather corset, revealing creamy skin that made him want to suck on her nipples until she moaned. And he wanted to feel that hair graze across his bare skin. It tumbled around her face, free and—

"Shouldn't you be wearing some kind of hat?" he asked.

She stopped talking in midbabble. "What?"

"For some reason, all that hair, it seems like you should be wearing some kind of hat. I thought it was pretty common."

She ran her hands over her hair, smoothing down the wild strands. She frowned, but the anger had dissipated. "I look common?"

He reached out and snatched a strand of her hair. He moved closer. "No, you look very *un*common. Beautiful."

He couldn't help himself. He leaned down and kissed her gently. Her lips parted beneath his. He wanted to reach up and run his fingers across the creamy swell of her breast, gather her in his arms, lift her skirt and feel the heat he thought her little pussy would hold. He wanted to keep her for himself, forever. Instead, he pulled away and bent down to pick up the basket.

"Truce," he said. "I'll keep my thoughts to myself."

He held out his hand, and she looked at it strangely. Finally, she placed her fingers in his palm, and he shook her hand. His fingers twined around hers and she glanced up at him.

"Tis a promise I be needing," she said.

"Anything."

"Don't go to Jamestown. Don't try to find him, and don't try to get the girls back."

"I can't leave them there, Arleigh. I think I'm here to protect them."

"If you go against his wishes, he'll...well, he doesn't have to physically hurt them to ruin their lives. There are so many things Cameron can do, things you couldn't possibly imagine. We have to wait a little while. He's already so angry with me, and he'll use you as an excuse to hurt me and them. Please promise."

She squeezed his hand.

"Okay. I'll give it a couple of days. But no longer, Arleigh. After that, I'm going to cause him more grief than he's ever seen. Now, what's the basket for?"

"We have to eat. 'Tis for the garden."

"Couldn't we get Chinese take-out?"

Her eyes flared for one moment, and he laughed. He made the sign of the cross on his chest.

"Last time. I swear."

Chapter 13

"Don't you think it's time you told me what's going on around here?"

Arleigh glanced up. He had finished his supper. She had hoped to keep him occupied a while longer. She didn't know where to start.

"Can I get you some more?" she asked.

"No, I'm probably dying right now of cholesterol overdose, but it tasted pretty good. I take back what I said earlier. You're a better cook than Faith will ever be. What the—"

He stood up and walked toward the hearth. She jumped to her feet so fast the bench tipped over with a loud crash. A flurry of lights flickered in the hearth, and the jar sent out a splash of color. He picked up the jar and peered inside. Arleigh knew it would appear empty and dark, but she couldn't take any chance with Adelina's welfare. She tried to take the jar from his hand, but Ryder held tight. Panic shot through her.

"Please don't," she said. "You'll scare Adelina."

"I hope an adelina is not what I think it is."

"She's my friend," Arleigh said.

Ryder's face paled. "Oh, man, please tell me you have an imaginary friend that lives in a jar, 'cause the alternative is too strange."

She didn't like the look on his face. He looked like he might swoon on her floor.

"Adelina is not imaginary," she said. "She's a...a faery."

"A faery, sure. But she couldn't possibly be imaginary. Please tell me what I saw the other night, what I thought I saw—"

Ryder peered into the jar, but his hands shook. Arleigh took the jar and put it on the table before he dropped it.

"Adelina, you can come out. He won't hurt you. No, no, he won't. I promise."

Ryder watched the jar, his face pale, his mouth dropping like a hooked fish. A shimmering pink glow rose above the jar and rode over the lip like a fog. Ryder backed away from the table.

"This is a little too much. First the booze. Then a one-way ticket to paradise. Now a concussion. I knew you hurt me with that pan."

Adelina rose above the jar and hovered. Her wings fluttered gaily. She didn't like human men, but Adelina obviously wanted to impress him. Her golden hair wrapped around her body, and her blue eyes twinkled.

"Adelina is very happy to meet you."

"Likewise," Ryder mumbled.

Ryder dropped to the bench. He looked a little sick, like he had eaten something that didn't agree with him. Adelina's light flickered. Arleigh turned to Ryder and looked him up and down. His face grew more ashen. Afraid he would swoon, she shoved his head down, forcing it between his knees.

"Adelina wants to know if you're a warrior."

Ryder shook his head and glanced up. Arleigh shoved him again. He talked to the floor. "I've never been in the military. Thought about the Air Force once because I've flown a lot. My dad and I are both pilots. Well, my dad was a pilot. He's dead now. His plane crashed."

Arleigh tapped her foot. "I'm sorry about your father. Sorrier still to hear you've *flown*, but I can do nothing about your delusions. Remember the question?"

He raised his head and nodded slowly, his eyes locked on Adelina. "No, I'm not a warrior. I've never been in a war."

"You don't have to have been in battle to be a warrior," Arleigh said. The man was so incredibly dense! "Adelina wants to know if you can fight. If you're strong. Brave. Valiant."

Ryder shrugged, preoccupied with inspecting the faery. He reached out and tentatively touched Adelina. The pulse of her light beat brighter, and she wrapped one of the strands of her hair around his finger. Ryder smiled and glanced toward Arleigh.

"I'm basically a pacifist. I took karate for years, but karate isn't really about fighting. It's about discipline. I did get some trophies, though. I run track and play basketball sometimes. Coach at the high school. Work out at the gym. I'm pretty strong, I guess."

"She doesn't understand any of that," Arleigh said. "And neither do I. You promised."

"Sorry," he mumbled. He grew bolder and tickled Adelina in the belly. She giggled, the sound stirring the pink aura into swirls of fuchsia. "Am I having a conversation with a faery?"

"Aye," Arleigh said.

"Okay, just wanted to be sure." He leaned closer. "She's so tiny. And pretty, in a *Lord of the Rings* kind of way. What makes her glow like that?"

"She's a sprite. Most sprites glow. 'Tis how they move, how they communicate."

"It's very pretty. I seem to remember other colors."

Arleigh laughed. "Aye, there are many colors. Would you like to see?" Ryder nodded and started to stand. Arleigh put her hand out. "Don't get up. 'Twill be a shock."

Ryder nodded and lowered himself back down. Arleigh went to the hearth. The fire glowed softly, so she poked her head inside. At her whisper, the room flooded with brilliant light that flashed and sparked with dozens of colors. The lights flew around the room, darting low to the floor and back to the ceiling. They circled near Ryder, hovering and gliding on the air like butterflies trapped in a current. None of them touched him. He sat very still, but his head turned rapidly, trying to track the lights.

"Beautiful," he said. "Are you sure they're real?"

"Aye," Arleigh laughed. "Very real."

"Are leprechauns real, too?"

"Aye, but I've not seen one here in Virginia. Did you want to meet one?"

Ryder shuddered. "No, I've seen the movies. Scary. I'll pass."

The lights settled into a comforting rainbow glow. Adelina perched on the lip of her jar and watched Ryder intently then her little head swung back toward Arleigh, who watched the pulses that flickered through her body.

This could be the one that ends our problems, Leanan sidhe.

* * * *

They spent several hours entertaining her little faery friends. For the entire evening Ryder felt comfortable because Arleigh seemed happy and

exhibited none of the tension he had felt pouring from her in waves. She smiled and laughed, introducing each one of the tiny creatures to him. How she kept them straight in her head amazed him. Each had a name more complicated than the one before, and other than the colors of their auras, they all looked the same to him. The only two he could keep straight were Adelina and a little purple one called Idaera, particularly cute and very shy.

He thought maybe for the first time he saw the real Arleigh Donovan. She had a natural exuberance, a radiant happiness that filled the room and touched everything around her. Her laughter infected everyone and, though most was at his expense, he reveled in her humor and delighted in the pure joy that sparked between her and her little friends. Her beauty shown when she was happy.

She touched him throughout the evening, small caresses across his shoulders, her body leaning toward his each time she giggled. She ruffled his hair when he said something particularly stupid, and once she fell across his lap in laughter and pulled his face to hers, kissing him with an exuberance that made his cock hard without his consent. When he wrapped his arms around her, she had nestled against him like she had always belonged there. He fell even harder for her, and for a brief moment, his hopes soared. He wanted to get her in his bed and thought she might say yes.

But when the faeries settled into the hearth, Arleigh changed. She nodded while he talked, but she barely listened. She stared into the fire until he wanted to get up and shake her or perhaps hold her and beg her to be happy. He didn't know which one. When she rose from the bench and leaned over to bank the fire, he followed her and tucked his hands around her waist. She stiffened slightly, but finally she turned in his arms, refusing to look at him.

"Let me go, Master Kendall."

"I'm not going to hurt you, Arleigh. Why are you so nervous around me? Don't you like my touch?"

"No," she murmured.

She shivered slightly under his hands, shaking her head to prove how much she meant it. A woman didn't vibrate under your hands unless she wanted more.

"May I go to bed now?" Arleigh asked.

He cupped her chin and forced her head up. He smiled, but her glance darted away from him.

"I hoped you'd come to my bed tonight."

Her jaw clenched, and her entire body froze. When her eyes snapped to his, he saw he had made a serious mistake. A tremulous sigh shuddered through her. For a split second, her eyes filled with such panic he would have given anything to take back his words. He drew in a breath to apologize, and her eyes flickered with something he couldn't fathom. She yanked herself from his arms and took a step backward.

Her fingers tugged at the laces of her corset, wrenching with such force one snapped in her hand.

Ryder stared in confusion. "What are you doing?"

She raised her face. "Do you mean to have me, Master Kendall?"

"Well, yeah, it's on my mind, but I can help you with that. I planned more than a quickie. Hell, Arleigh, I'm not much for romance, but I know how to take my time."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I would as soon get it done. I assume you want to see all of me to make sure I'm worth keeping."

"Honey, I already know you're worth keeping."

She tossed the corset to the floor and pulled her shirt over her head in one violent snap. One of the straps of her chemise slipped off her shoulder. His glance swept over her, lingering on the swell of her breast, the glimpse of a taut pink nipple above the edge of the lace. The sight of her nearly naked breast made him hard. She snatched off her apron and began to yank at her skirt.

He took a step toward her, his finger skimming the swell of her breast. Her skirt dropped to the floor. She stood in a puddle of yellow fabric. His hand cupped around her breast and the soft weight of it made his body tighten. The hard press of her nipple skimmed against his palm, and when he touched it with the tip of his finger, she gasped.

"Don't," she whispered.

He ignored her. He had about figured out that what came out of Arleigh Donovan's mouth had no bearing on what she might actually want. He took her nipple between his fingers and rubbed gently, watching her face. Her jaw clenched and she squeezed her eyes closed, but her lip caught between her teeth.

"Do you like it?"

She shook her head violently.

"I think you're a liar, Arleigh. Relax, honey. You're allowed to enjoy this. No one's going to know but you and me."

"No, no, I can't." Her eyes fluttered open.

"Yes, you can."

He bent his head to kiss her, but she twisted her face away.

"Do you want me here or in the bedroom?" she asked.

"You get straight to it, don't you? You don't want a little foreplay?"

Her hard, angry gaze focused beyond him. Her voice dripped with contempt.

"You mean to have what belongs to you. I'd prefer you just take me."

The tone of her voice stopped him cold and poured through him like ice water, dousing the fire she had stirred in him, but he had no plans to stop. Ryder nudged closer, and she visibly cringed. He tucked his hands around her shoulders, and her body trembled.

"Did I miss something here?" Ryder asked.

"I know what you want."

"Honey, you've misunderstood. I offered an invitation, not an order. I thought you—"

She tossed her hair again, practically spitting at him.

"You thought what? I'd fuck you willingly? I'm not a whore, Master Kendall. If you're claiming your rights to me, do it. Don't try to make it pleasurable."

"It should be pleasurable. I think you'd loosen up a little if you let me touch you first. I know the first time between lovers is sometimes awkward."

"What makes you think we'll be lovers, Master Kendall?"

Ryder smiled. "I don't think I've come all this way to watch you from afar, Arleigh, and I want more than a fast fuck on the table. We're going to be lovers, and the sooner the better. If you're nervous, tell me what you like."

"I won't like anything you do."

"Oh, I think you're wrong about that. Do you like when I kiss you?"

"I don't want you to kiss me at all."

"I didn't ask if you wanted it. I asked if you liked it."

She tried her huffy little noise on him, but when he shook his head and told her to answer the damn question, she grudgingly forced an aye from between her lips.

"What else do you like?" He wanted to lift her shift and get right to it, but he thought she might have a meltdown, so he used the fabric as a buffer. He reached between her legs. She wanted to stop him. He could see it on her face, but she didn't. The thin fabric offered no deterrent, and his finger slid over her clit, circling slowly. When her knees buckled, he smiled. "Do you like that?"

Her shuddering gasp was enough of an answer, but she managed to choke out some words. "Oh, Holy Mother of God." They were making progress.

"I already know you like this." He reached out and captured one of her nipples between his fingers. When he squeezed gently, she pulled in a quick breath. "Would you like to feel my mouth on you?"

She shook her head furiously, but he ignored her. He tucked his arm around her, drawing her to the tips of her toes, and dipped his head toward her. When his mouth locked on her breast, a tiny cry escaped her, and her hands rose, twisting in his hair. He sucked on her, drawing her flesh into his mouth, teasing the nipple with his tongue. His teeth nipped at her skin and she moaned. He licked the entire breast, dropped a kiss on her nipple, then moved to the other and repeated the process. By the time he dropped another kiss, she quivered in his arms and strained upwards, trying desperately to keep his mouth on her.

He gently lowered her back to the floor and moved his hand between her thighs. Her moisture had leaked through the fabric and soaked her shift. For all her protests, the little beauty was hot for him.

"You're wet," he said.

"Tis not something I can control," she whispered.

"You're not supposed to be able to control it, honey. When your body reacts like that it means you want something." He paused and waited for her eyes to come to back to him. When they did, they were filled with defiance.

"I want nothing."

"Then how do you explain this?"

He grabbed her and devoured her mouth with his. His tongue pushed between her lips, and she sucked it into her mouth with a greed that

surprised him. Her body smashed against his, and her arms wrapped so tightly around his neck her body lifted from the floor. The intense heat that blanketed her flesh made Ryder sweat, and the groan that ground through her spread an ache through his chest. When her teeth bit into his lips and he jerked in her arms, she loosened her grip and dropped to the floor, nearly stumbling. He touched his mouth, and a spot of blood flecked his skin. He licked his lips, and a coppery taste filled his mouth. But a little blood wasn't going to deter him. He wanted to get her to the bedroom.

"Christ, you're a little hellcat." He crooked his finger at her. "Come here. Can you deliver on all this fire? You're quite the temptress."

She backed away, agitated and frightened again. "No, no. I'm not a temptress. I'm the Leanan sidhe. I can't help it. I didn't mean...I'm sorry. I couldn't stop."

"I don't want you to stop. I want you to take it all the way. Believe me, honey, you can't surprise me. I've seen it all. Do you like it a little rough? You didn't seem the type for that, but I'm more than willing to do it any way you like. Do you want me to pretend to force you, Arleigh? Make a little game out of it? Is that what this is all about?"

She sputtered, trying to find some kind of answer now that he had guessed her little secret. She was a woman with no choices in her life and yet somehow had learned to compensate for that. She obviously chose to use her subjugation to her advantage and turned it into a sex game. He gave her credit for her ingenuity. He intended to use it to his advantage.

"Come here, wench. I'm tired of talk."

She backed away, and he grabbed her, pinning her arms behind her. When he bent his head to kiss her, she squirmed.

"I like to kiss," Ryder said. "You're going to have to get used to it."

"I don't want you to kiss me. I just want you to take me."

"We'll play your game another time. I'd like our first time to be more memorable. I'm planning on having a future with you. We've lots of time for sex games."

"There is no future with me," she whispered.

"Oh, believe me, honey, there's a future. For all your protests, you want me pretty bad. I've never seen a woman get so hot so fast."

"It doesn't matter what I want," Arleigh murmured. His lips tried to find hers again, but she twisted in his arms. "Don't make it harder for me. I've

no way to stop you and no way to change things. If you want me, take me. Don't make me want you. Don't make me *miss* you."

A choked sob tore from her, and she clenched her fists, her body stiff against his. He would have to pry her thighs apart with a crowbar. He would have laughed if the situation hadn't gone from bad to worse. Tears streamed down her face, and it broke his heart.

"I'm not just taking you, Arleigh. I'm not a rapist."

"No one will see it as rape."

"You will. That's not how I want to begin our life together. Nothing is going to happen between us without your consent. I want to fuck you, but it isn't enough."

"There will ne'er be more, Master Kendall," Arleigh whispered. Tears pooled in her eyes and slid down her cheek. "If you want me, take me, but there's a price to be paid."

"I'm sure you're worth any price," Ryder said softly. He gathered her chemise and pulled it up over her shoulder. His hand followed the curve of her arm down to her hand, and he twined his fingers around hers. "I'm not going to lie. I want you. I've wanted nothing else since you materialized in the middle of my front yard."

A small moan tore from her lips, and her body trembled under his hands.

"I want to lick every inch of your flesh and kiss that mouth of yours until you can't breathe. I want to slide into your pussy and fuck you until neither of us can move."

Her body swayed against his, and her voice exploded in a violent whisper. "Oh, God, don't talk like that."

He pressed his mouth against hers. "It's going to be damn good between us, Arleigh, but I'm not going to take you against your will. I can wait till you're ready. Till you want it, too."

She stiffened, and her stare snapped with a sudden viciousness. "Can you wait 'til the end of time, Master Kendall?"

The little fairy princess had a royal bitch inside. "Oh, I can pretty much guarantee you're going to beg for it before that," Ryder snarled. "You don't need to be so surly. We're trapped in this house together, and I think we should try to get along."

"We'll get along fine if you leave me alone and keep your hands to yourself. Getting along does not give you a license to touch me."

Ryder stared at her hard. The anger that roared through his body surprised him, but the words that shot from his mouth shocked him.

"I don't believe I need a license to touch you, Arleigh. I think that pretty much comes with my ownership. You've conveniently pointed out no one will see it as rape."

Arleigh's eyes widened. Her little nasty streak suddenly took a different turn, and her fear resurfaced. Too bad. She should have kept her bitchiness to herself.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "I think I will take you tonight. With or without your consent."

"You can't change your mind!"

"I do it all the time. As your master, I've decided to take advantage of the fringe benefits. Take off that rag you're wearing."

A horrified look sparked in her eyes. He wondered what the hell was wrong with him and how he could so blatantly frighten a young woman, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. And he never stopped her.

Arleigh caught her lip between her teeth. Her eyes fluttered downward. The sight of her sudden surrender made his heart stutter. When she began to unlace the strings of her shift with shaking hands, he wondered how long he would let her suffer. She shouldn't have been so bitchy. He had been going to let her off the hook, but now, well, now he was pretty much going to make her pay. He'd let her go in a little while but enjoy her discomfort while he had it. His dick rose in anticipation of the sight of her. He would pay for it later.

She shrugged the shift off her shoulder, and her gaze darted to his. "Keep going," he said.

"You'll die," she whispered.

"We all die."

"I mean tonight," she said.

"Is that a threat, Arleigh? Planning to kill me in my sleep?"

She shook her head. "I won't need to. You'll just die."

"I'll risk it. Take it off."

The shift slid downward and dropped to her hips. Ryder sucked in a breath. One breast, pert with her youth, tight, the rosy nipple hard and

swollen, jutted toward him eagerly. The other breast was hidden by a veil of hair. He swept it over her shoulder and took a step away. She wouldn't look at him. He reached toward her, and she flinched when he hooked his finger into the fabric at her hips. He counted to ten, prolonging her agony, watching her face twitch in anticipation then gave a little tug. The chemise fluttered to the floor. He was glad her eyes were closed. The sight of her nearly overwhelmed him. She was the most breathtaking thing he'd even seen.

"Christ, you're beautiful," he whispered.

She was a small woman, but the curves sweeping her body were sensuous, pure female, gentle swells that enhanced the fragility of her tiny body. The perfect globes of her breasts rose high and firm above a tight abdomen and the contours of her hips. Her flesh held a girlish innocence that had nothing to do with her youth. Her pale skin had a rosy tint, perfect, not a blemish, not a scar. It amazed him to find such perfection, considering the life she must have led. He silently thanked Stephen for taking such good care of her. Her hands clenched against her thighs, long, lean muscles that tensed in her fear. Between her thighs a small thatch of russet curls glistened with moisture.

He struggled to keep the awe from his voice.

"Turn around, Arleigh."

She didn't argue. She turned slowly, and his gaze wandered over the long strands of deep red hair, down to where the curls swept the curve of her lower back. Her ass swelled taut and firm, not overly generous, but still full and rounded. He would be able to cup it in his hands. He moved closer and placed one hand on her. Her skin was so smooth. He ran his hand over the soft swell, cupping her for a moment then he swept his finger slowly between her cheeks. She clenched her muscles against the invasion, and her breath hissed from between her teeth.

He laughed softly. "Nice butt, Arleigh, but I'm sure you've heard that before."

Her fists flexed. The little wench wanted to deck him. She trembled with fear, but her feisty nature still had a little control. He was glad he hadn't made her cower. She was a brave little thing. He circled around her body, inspecting every inch of her, watching her face and the way each muscle in

her body tensed, clenched, or otherwise tried to repulse the touch of his stare.

"You're quite the package, a nice piece of ass. Almost everything I've ever wanted, all wrapped into one woman."

"Almost?" she whispered.

"I could do without the bitchiness."

"I wouldn't be that way if—"

"And the backtalk. You have an argument for everything. I'm beginning to think you had Stephen wrapped around your little finger. Those days are over, honey, so you better get used to it. I'm in charge now. Look at me."

Her gaze drifted up to his.

"Do you want to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is what you get out of it," he said. "I can take what I want, or I can take you to heaven. It's your choice."

"I don't want to do it at all," she murmured.

"Objection noted but overruled. Here or the bedroom? I'll give you the choice."

Arleigh's gaze drifted around the keeping room then closed wearily. "Here is fine."

"The wall, the table, the floor? Have any preference?"

She shook her head.

"Unlace me."

Arleigh's eyes shot open filled with horror. She shook her head furiously and darted away from him. He grabbed her arm and spun her around, pulling her tight against him.

"You don't take orders very well, do you? We'll have to do something about that."

"Please, Master Kendall."

He dropped his arms and took a step away. "Unlace me, Arleigh."

"I don't want to." A glimmer of fire flashed in her eyes. "How far do you intend to take this charade?"

"All the way, baby. And for your information, I don't play charades. I'm more of a Scrabble man. Better get down to business. I'm growing impatient with your dawdling."

She tossed her hair over her shoulders. Her eyes filled with a lively spark, and a haughty superiority flashed in the green depths.

"And I'm growing impatient with your arrogance. What makes you think you can inspect me like chattel? Who do you think I am that I will allow this pitiful attempt at lovemaking? You're a swaggering overbearing tyrant, and I want you to leave my house."

"The hard way then," Ryder said.

He swept her up in his arms. The feel of her bare skin in his hands was intoxicating. "I've changed my mind. We're going to the bedroom. And it's still an invitation. The way I see it, Arleigh, you want it as much as I do." He slid his hand between her legs and ran his fingers across the soft moist folds. "Your pussy is wet. Hard to deny you want me."

"You're wrong!"

"I've been wrong from time to time, but not about this."

He slammed his mouth over hers and forced her lips apart. When he pushed his tongue into her mouth, Arleigh moaned and pulled it deeper, sucking on him with a need that turned his erection into a rock. He took advantage of her preoccupation and carried her into the bedroom. He dropped with her to the mattress.

He listened to her sputter and fume while he unlaced his pants. She tried to scramble from the bed, but one push and she fell back. If her strength matched her determination, he would be in serious trouble.

"You've got a lot of balls for a woman in your position. I admire that. Another woman would have spread her legs and accepted it. I'm going to forgive your impertinence and sassiness tonight because—"

"You're going to forgive me? That's the most ludicrous thing I've e'er heard!"

Ryder laughed. "You haven't heard my story yet. Shut up and lay down, Arleigh. You're going to like it. I'm good at this."

"I can't. You shouldn't. You don't understand—"

"I understand this."

He pushed her down again and stretched out beside her. He slid his hands between her legs, and Arleigh gasped. She was hot and damp, ready and eager for him, but she froze under his hand. Her pussy was so wet she could not deny she wanted it. He simply had to get around whatever blockade she'd built in her own mind.

"You want it," he said.

"No," she breathed.

"Don't lie to me."

He put his knee between her thighs and forced her legs apart. He pulled his cock out of his breeches and swept it over her soft folds.

"Open your legs farther, Arleigh."

She moaned and clenched her thighs around his.

"Look, I don't want to hurt you, but you need to loosen up."

"I can't."

"Well, the hard way got harder," he said. He spread her legs apart, and she moaned. When she tried to pull them together, he squeezed her thigh. "Stop. We'll pretend you don't want this if it makes it easier for you, but I don't want to bruise you, and I sure as hell don't want it to hurt. I want you to like it, Arleigh. Kiss me, honey. Say anything you want if it makes you feel better, but show me how you really feel."

Her hands slid up his arms, digging into his flesh. Somewhere in her mind, Arleigh may have wanted to stop it, but her body definitely had other ideas. Her arms draped over his shoulders, and one hand curled around the back of his neck. When he bent toward her, she wet her lips in anticipation, and when his mouth touched hers, a blaze of fire shot through him. Her tongue plunged between his lips and swept inside eagerly. Her hips lifted toward him.

He nestled against her, and his cock reveled in the feeling of her soft hair and the smooth wet skin that seemed to swell at the pressure of his body. Their kiss deepened and her tongue reached toward his throat. Her hips pushed against him, and she wiggled. He ran his hand beneath her and touched the smooth mounds of her bottom. She tore her mouth from his and pushed her face against his shoulder.

"Just take me," she whispered.

"You're an impatient wench. Stephen must not have been a very good lover."

"He was nicer than you are," she said.

"You're in my hands now, Arleigh, and sex has nothing to do with niceness. We have all night. Do you want to touch me?"

She shook her head against his shoulder.

"Don't go shy on me, wildcat. Give me your hand."

When she tightened her arms around his neck, he reached up and pried her hand loose. He pulled it between their bodies and flattened it against his cock. He searched her eyes in the darkness. The clear green glittered in what small amount of light filtered in from the other room. She looked a little scared but also filled with something that looked like curiosity. When her fingers curled around him, she sighed, and he thought he might explode.

"You're very soft," she said.

"Not exactly what a man wants to hear."

"I mean the skin." A blush stole over her face. "Softer than the finest velvet. The rest is very big, very hard."

Ryder laughed. "Much better for my ego." He nuzzled his face into her neck and heard his name drift toward him on a soft sigh. "What, baby?"

"I can't do this any longer. Please finish it."

"Are you scared of me, honey?"

"No, but I don't want to enjoy it. I don't want any memories. I want it o'er. Take me, Master Kendall. I can feel what you want."

"What do you think I want, Arleigh?"

She sighed. "You want to drive into me, hard, fast, deep. You want to feel my heat surround you, slide your cock into the moisture that fills me. You want to revel in the pleasures of the flesh, in the ecstasy that comes with the motion. And when the pleasure reaches its peak, you want to spill your seed into me in a flood of spent desire. What are you waiting for, Master Kendall? I'm hot. I'm ready. I'm wet. And I'm willing."

Ryder gulped. She seemed to be playing a new game with him, but he wasn't going to win.

"Christ, Arleigh."

"Are you waiting for an invitation? Then take me, Master Kendall."

She wrapped her legs around his and pushed her hips up. She pulled his face down to lock her mouth against his, and he snuggled between her legs. His mouth lingered on hers for a moment then he pulled away. He watched her face tighten and her eyes close. When he pushed into her, he got the surprise of his life.

"Fuck!" He rose up on his elbows, and her eyes flew open. "Jesus Christ, Arleigh, why didn't you tell me you're a virgin?"

"I told you I'd not bedded them."

"Next time be more specific!"

He yanked himself out of her arms and struggled to the edge of the bed. He raked his hair back and shot a glance toward her. The hair spread on the mattress looked like a ribbon of fire. Her breasts were swollen, the nipples peaked, and before she closed her legs, he saw the moisture that glistened on her thigh. He didn't know if it was his or hers. It didn't seem to matter, because whatever was going to happen between them had now been put on hold. He tossed the quilt over her naked body before he made the biggest mistake of his life.

"I didn't think you'd care about my virginity," she said softly.

"I care! Christ, what's happened to me here? I'm not into forcing women, and I'm certainly not stealing a girl's virginity without her consent."

She sat up, and the quilt fell away, exposing her breasts, dropping to the soft curls between her legs.

"I gave my consent."

"'Just take me' is not a sign of consent."

"But it wasn't going to stop you, Ryder."

Oh, she was nothing if not logical.

"I thought you were being coy! I thought you didn't want to seem promiscuous. Hell, I'm used to a little protest. No woman wants to look like a slut."

Arleigh edged closer to him, and the smell of her wrapped around him. Could he take a virgin with her consent? His body seemed to think it might be possible.

"You no longer want me?" she asked.

"Of course I want you. I just have to figure out a way to get around this. Maybe if you initiate it. Maybe if you ask me."

He glanced at her hopefully, and she shook her head. "I'll not ask."

"Maybe if you kiss me. Maybe if it looks like your idea, we can get swept up in the moment. We won't talk about it. We'll let it happen."

Arleigh looked doubtful, but she licked her lips and leaned toward him. Her breath fanned his face, and he tried very hard not to grab her. Suddenly she lurched backwards.

"I can't be responsible. Are we finished? Can I go now?"

He threw himself down on the mattress and waved his hand in the direction of the door. His cock and the entire lower half of his body

throbbed. Arleigh jumped from the bed and couldn't get away from him fast enough. She paused for one moment, her hand on the door jamb, and glanced over her shoulder. Her gaze fluttered the length of his body, and she bit down on her lip. When she raised her eyes to his, he thought he saw a trace of disappointment. Wishful thinking.

"Sleep well, Master Kendall," she murmured.

Ryder raised himself up to his elbows. "Not likely, Arleigh, but I'll try, to make you happy."

The most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen in his life slipped through the door leaving him alone.

"A virgin. Fuck."

Chapter 14

Ryder dropped the ledger back to the scarred table and reached for another. He glanced at the girl across the room. She had avoided him all day. He could barely get her to look at him.

He had lain awake for hours during the night and several times had actually walked into the keeping room with the definite intent of sprinting up the stairs to the attic. Muddy thoughts of slipping into her body while she lay half asleep pounded in his head. Was it rape if the woman never had a chance to say no? He decided he couldn't risk his sanity on semantics.

In the morning, Arleigh had breakfast ready, but she ignored him. She offered a quiet good morning then moved around the cottage, completing her chores like an unobtrusive servant, but her very presence intruded on his sanity. He left the cottage fast. He'd wandered around the island all day, inspecting the buildings, checking out every inch of the land to see how it differed from his world. The answer couldn't have been easier. This Trinity was nothing like his own, but he felt more at home here than he'd ever felt in his other world. And the woman? Christ, he still wanted her. Virgin or not, he needed to convince her.

Now her presence stymied his concentration on Stephen's finances. His mind couldn't relinquish the conversation they'd had the night before. How had he read all of her signals so totally wrong? He knew she had felt that first kiss. And the rest? She had responded to him. A woman didn't cream her pants if she had no interest.

Concentrate. Forget about the girl.

Easier said than done. Once he had caught her staring at him, but the stubborn little thing had quickly lowered her eyes.

He snapped the ledger closed and pulled another toward him. He could find nothing in the books to indicate Stephen had been even close to losing Trinity Island. In fact, over the last fifteen years, Stephen had turned a

profit, albeit small at times, year after year. Evidence of the farm's productivity filled the ledgers. Not only did Stephen grow tobacco, he grew excess crops each year and had one of his indentures go into Jamestown several times a week to sell produce in the marketplace.

He also raised chickens and sold their eggs, charged a seemingly large fee to stud out his bull and, because the other side of the island had a sheltered harbor, rented small parcels of land to several merchants to berth their larger boats. He had even invested some capital in a small shipbuilding business in Jamestown. All in all, Stephen's finances should have been fairly secure.

He saw several bills requiring attention, but nothing outrageous and nothing that caused him concern. Stephen had been pretty self-sufficient, paying only for services he could not provide himself. One bill came from a dressmaker for alterations on women's clothing. Had Stephen dressed Arleigh in his dead wife's clothing? Would any man dress such an obvious treasure in castoffs?

There were bills to individual merchants in Jamestown for staples such as sugar, tea, parchment, ledgers, and ink. Normal everyday items. But all of these bills had been paid. Stephen had been meticulous in his documentation. The man had been an accountant at heart, like so many real Kendalls. Ryder had a meltdown when tax time came, could barely balance his checkbook, and made sure he had overdraft protection because he consistently forgot to write things down.

He ran his hand through his hair. Should have had a haircut before the trip. A couple more weeks and he'd have to tie it back. Maybe Arleigh would trim it for him. He glanced up and watched her across the room. She tried to darn a little stocking. The way she struggled with the needle gave him little hope she would be able to cut his hair without butchering it or harming herself in the process. She tackled the sock as though it possessed something that needed exorcising. He'd tie his hair back, which was easier and less painful than being stabbed through the jugular. With Arleigh, he wouldn't know if it was accidental or on purpose.

"Does Stephen have anything to drink around here?"

"Damn it!"

Arleigh's head shot up. She stuffed her finger in her mouth. She muttered something at him, but he couldn't understand a word she said. He

thought maybe she blamed him for her own lack of skill, but he heard the word whiskey. She nodded toward the hearth cabinet, so he got up to have a look. He rummaged through the cabinet and found several dark, dusty bottles stoppered with corks. He rubbed a bottle against his pants and pulled out the stopper. His eyes began to water. Powerful stuff.

"You're not very good at that, are you?" Ryder asked.

"I'm learning."

"For an indentured servant, you don't seem very good at a lot of things."

"I wasn't always an indentured servant, you know." She tossed her hair over her shoulder, lifted her chin, and gave him a defiant, challenging look. She had the princess act down pat.

He poured a shot into a glass, sniffing tentatively. When he took a small sip, the liquid scorched the inside of his mouth and sent a tongue of fire down his throat. He couldn't get his breath.

"Jesus!" he gasped. "Where did Stephen get this swill?"

"He made it himself."

"It goes down real smooth. Like battery acid. Very potent. Wow." He took another sip and found the second went down a little easier. Any port in a storm. He filled the glass and settled back down at the table.

"So what were you?" he asked.

She developed an intense interest in inspecting her wounded finger. Her brow furrowed, and she glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "What do you mean?"

He'd play along. Nothing bored him faster than numbers. He really wanted to toss her into the sagging bed and spend the rest of the night there. But since she hadn't spread her legs willingly, he'd have to talk to keep his mind off the perfect virginal body across the room.

"I mean what were you before you took a one-way, all-expenses-paid cruise to the New World? From the looks of things around here and that body of yours, I'd say you've led a pretty sheltered life. There's not a mark on you. Where are you from?"

"I'm...from...Ireland," she stammered.

"Yes, I know. I can hear it in your voice. Where did you live? What did you do there?"

"I lived on a sheep farm, near the village of Rosscannon Quay."

"Sounds picture perfect. Very quaint. So you're good with animals? You've harvested wool?"

"No, not really."

"Your father ran a successful farm? You had servants? Money?"

She shook her head.

"A slacker, huh? Lazy, irresponsible—"

"Ne'er!" she cried. "My mother—"

"It's pretty obvious you didn't help your mother with household chores because you can't sew, you're not the greatest cook, and your garden needs weeding. And your clothing, well, not exactly the cleanest. By the way, did those clothes belong to Sarah Caindale?"

"I...don't...know," she stammered. "I think so. Why are you asking me these things?"

"I'm interested in your life."

"Tis not very interesting," she said softly.

She grew antsy, twisting and turning on the rocker. He found he liked making her uncomfortable. He enjoyed watching her comfort zone drop several levels. *How does it feel, princess?*

"Let's talk about what I do know," Ryder said. "You come from a farm yet apparently know nothing of farming or animals. You weren't wealthy yet were taught no skills. You can read, write, and know French, so you've been educated. Were you a nun?"

The laughter shot from her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stop it. When she pulled her hand away, he relished the smile on her face. "A nun?"

Good. She was lightening up a little. Maybe he could catch her off guard.

Ryder shrugged. "A wild guess. You're a little old to be a virgin in this day and age. How old are you?"

Her eyes fluttered around the room. Come on, baby, it's not a hard question.

"Now?" she asked.

"Yes, Arleigh, now."

"I'm twenty-two."

"You're practically an old maid in this colony," Ryder said. She rolled her eyes at him. "So were you a princess in a tower? Daddy's little girl? Wearing a chastity belt for the last five years?"

Arleigh shook her head.

"You weren't remotely prepared for a life here. Why would you sign up for a gig like this, Arleigh?"

The smile vanished, and her gaze dropped to her lap. She toyed with the little sock. "I didn't."

Ryder raised an eyebrow. "You were sent here?"

Arleigh's lip trembled.

Condemned felons had been sent to the colonies in the early days because transport offered the only way to escape the gallows. She had been sentenced to an unknown future in an untamed wilderness. She could never go home, or they would hang her. What on earth had she done to deserve that? He should have let her off the hook, but suddenly it seemed very important he know. He'd have to force it out of her.

"Okay," Ryder said. "Wrong track. I should have been thinking of more illicit pursuits. Want to tell me?"

Arleigh frowned and straightened in her rocker. She clutched the stocking, practically shredding it in her fingers. Her stare roamed the room as though the answers were going to drop from the ceiling on cue cards. For some reason, he enjoyed seeing her anxiety, although part of him wondered why. He'd never had a mean streak before. Maybe the primitive conditions had brought it out. More likely it was the girl. The new part of his personality liked to see her squirm. Her gaze finally darted back to him. His hands folded around his glass. Had he worked for the Spanish Inquisition in a past life?

Would she use her usual tactic and run?

"I don't want to talk right now," she said.

"Would you rather have sex with me?" When she flinched, he shrugged. "Didn't think so. So why were you sent here?"

I'll take Hidden Secrets for \$400, Alex.

"Twas a mistake," she said.

"I know. You were framed. Everyone says that."

"I didn't do anything."

Ryder ignored her. "Did you hijack the crown jewels? Plot to kill the king? Perhaps kill your husband on your wedding night?"

Arleigh shook her head slowly.

"It had to be pretty bad for such a punishment. They sent only the most dangerous here in the early years." He planted his chin on his fist, watching her squirm. "Perhaps something more clandestine, something that might have brought shame to a nice Catholic family living in a postcard village like Rosscannon Quay. I imagine everyone knew you there. Not many secrets in Rosscannon Quay."

"Please stop."

"You've obviously been coddled for a very long time. Even little girls learn some of the skills you don't possess. Did you catch the eye of a prominent local, Arleigh? Maybe even a nobleman? You're certainly pretty enough for a nobleman's bed. Did he choose you out of all the comely Irish lasses and take you to his house? Did he educate you? Train you? Force you to his bed?"

Arleigh paled. "No. Why would you think that?"

Why are you doing this to her, Kendall? Stop now before you force her to really hate you.

For some reason he couldn't stop. Now that he had started, the determination to make her confess overwhelmed him. If he rattled her enough, she would break down.

"You can be quite charming and witty and seem to have knowledge unavailable to most women. You have a certain air about you that suggests a life of comfort, and you're very attractive to men. There's promise in your eyes, Arleigh."

She inhaled sharply. "Promise?"

"Oh, yes. A man's heart can beat faster at your glance, and your touch, well, you've seen the consequences of that. You, princess, are what every man wants. You have a sensual grace about you that beckons a man. You're quite the femme fatale when you rein in that shrew inside of you." He waited for that exasperated huff she loved to make then continued. "So what happened? Did he try to rape you? Did you have to kill him?"

She literally crawled out of her skin and clutched the arms of the rocker, ready to bolt.

"You can't escape it, can you? You caught the attention of another powerful man here, didn't you? Would Cameron Flynn have the answers I need?"

Her lips clamped tight, and anger roared through him. He wanted the answers. What had started as a game, something to end the tedium inspired by volume after volume of the mundane existence of life on Trinity Island, had now evolved into something more important. He wanted to know every secret she had buried inside of her. Until he knew what she hid, he would never have her.

He finished off his mug of rotgut and poured another. She put her sewing down on the side table by the rocker, poised to run. Her glance darted to the attic stairway, and she half-rose.

"Sit, Arleigh. We're not finished."

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"Not until I say so. Unless you're planning to go to my bed. Then by all means go. I'll join you."

She stood up and blew out her breath. She tossed her hair over her shoulder, a gesture he found both endearing and irritating. It seemed to be the signal to release that Irish harpy she harbored inside. He would have to give her a little attitude adjustment.

"You can't tell me what I can and can't do," she snapped.

"No?" He raised his glass and stared at the amber swirls in the light of the candle flame. When he raised his drink, the wavering image of her body shimmered through the cloudy glass. Real. Tangible. Everything he wanted. He raised the drink to his mouth and looked at her over the rim of his glass. "I own you, remember?"

"Well, I-I know that, but I didn't think you'd—"

"Boss you around? I didn't intend to, but sometimes you seem a little disrespectful, considering I've inherited not only this island but you. You get argumentative, surly, and downright bitchy at times. You don't think that's inappropriate, considering I hold your future in my hands?"

Arleigh refused to look at him. She stared at the ceiling, obviously thinking of some pithy retort to put him in his place, something that would make him doubt his own words. He knew how this one operated, and he knew how to handle her because he sensed what frightened her.

"You want to stay on Trinity, don't you?" he asked softly.

Her gaze fluttered down to his in defeat. Her teeth tugged at her bottom lip. He was sorry to see that glint of anxiety, but he wasn't in the mood for her abuse.

"Aye," she whispered.

"Then come over here, sit down, and let's continue our talk. Join me in a drink. Let's pretend we're friends."

"Friends?"

"I'm not sure what else to call us...yet."

Arleigh glanced around, seeking a diversion. He reached behind him and grabbed another glass from a shelf. He poured some of the whiskey and slid it across the table while she tentatively hovered near the bench. He nodded his head, and she sat reluctantly. Ryder downed his drink while Arleigh took a sip of hers, trying very hard to control her reaction. She wanted to appear nonchalant. Very brave, but impossible considering the strength of Stephen's brew. She choked the liquid down, trying not to gag. Her eyes teared and she wiped her mouth with her apron. He waited for her to find her breath, a smile on his face.

"It's not exactly Jack Daniels," Ryder said, "but it has a certain appeal."

Actually, Stephen's whiskey had a lot of appeal. His head already felt lighter, and the instantaneous buzz offered an illusion of comfort. The liquor burned a hole straight down his throat and into his stomach, taking the edge off his obsession with Arleigh, but now he obsessed in different ways. He had questions, lots of them. They were burning a hole in his brain while the rotgut burned a hole through the lining of his stomach. Did they have gastroenterologists in the New World? Doubtful, but he'd look into it. He'd need one.

"So, are any of my theories correct?"

Arleigh favored him with her very best scowl and tossed the rest of her drink down her throat. She gasped, her eyes wide and teary, but when she slammed the glass down on the table, she glared at him. Tougher than she looked, a nasty little kitten with sharp, dangerous claws. Her eyes narrowed, inspecting him like he couldn't find a decent theory with a flashlight and map.

"Not even close, but very imaginative."

"Oh, I thought I'd hit on something. I'll have to do more thinking and let you know what I come up with."

Arleigh stood up and untied her apron. "I'd appreciate it if you'd stop thinking about me at all. We've had our drink. May I go to bed now?"

"Mine?" She scowled at him. "Then I have more questions."

Arleigh planted her palms on the table and leaned closer. She had obviously been counting on his being too drunk to continue, but she didn't know what his hobby had been in the last four months. "I'm getting tired of you and your questions."

He poured another shot into her glass. "Have another drink. Perhaps I'm easier to take that way. I know you are."

Arleigh slid the glass toward him. "I don't want another drink, Master Kendall. I don't think any of my obligations include being your friend. Why are you asking me these things? None of it matters. Stephen had no interest in my life. What happened before I came here means nothing. You own me now. I do the work I've been purchased to do. I'm not a danger to you or to the girls, and I certainly—"

"You're a convicted felon, Arleigh. That dictates a certain amount of caution on my part. Why did Stephen buy you?"

She snapped her mouth closed. He had finally found something that could render her speechless, a fucking miracle. She sighed and sat back down on the bench, pulling the drink toward her.

"He needed someone to watch after the girls."

"It doesn't make sense. Why would a devoted father like Stephen put his children in danger by buying the contract of a woman with a suspicious past? You must have a history of violence, Arleigh, or you wouldn't be here." Ryder paused and peered at her intently. "Does the incident that sent you here have anything to do with Flynn?"

She surprised him by not reacting at all. "No."

"So Stephen chose you out of all the women that arrived on that particular day? Don't get me wrong. I would have chosen you, too. Hard to resist *that* package. But why would Stephen buy a woman at all? His wife died seven years ago, Arleigh. There wasn't another woman on this island until you."

"How do you know that?"

He ran his hand across the binding of a ledger. "Because I've studied these books. I've found every other indenture on this island listed in the records. Payments. Time served. Work records. Bond release and items

received. He even purchased small plots of land for each. There were no women. Only men. Stephen apparently took care of the house and the girls by himself after Sarah died. He seemed to have his domestic life under control. So what changed? You were purchased by a fairly simple man with a fairly simple life. Why would he do that?"

She studied the whiskey. She looked like she tried to decipher the debris that floated within it like tea leaves.

"Do you know what I didn't find in these books, Arleigh? There is not one mention of you. Don't you think that's odd, considering how precise he was about his records?"

"Maybe he didn't have time."

"Stephen would have made the time. I think you were left out of the records on purpose. I think you were Stephen's dirty little secret, the one thing he couldn't bear to write down."

She peeked at him. "Why do you think that?"

Ryder leaned forward. He meant to speak gently, but when the words left his mouth, they sounded like an accusation. "I think he loved you, Arleigh. I think he thought of you as his wife."

"He didn't," she whispered.

"He never made love to you?"

"You saw I'm a virgin," she said irritably.

"There are lots of ways to make love," Ryder said.

She gave him one of her bitchy looks, but he ignored her. He ran his hands across the ledgers. "Until you came, Stephen held his own here financially, not exactly rolling in dough, but pretty prosperous. How much did Stephen pay for you? Where did he get the money?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

Ryder slammed his fist down on the table. Arleigh flinched and leapt to her feet, struggling with the urge to run. His sudden temper abated, but a more quiet rage moved through him. His hand curled around the glass, and it cracked. He forced himself to relax, fighting the desire to scream at her and demand to know why she didn't want to be near him. He ground his teeth in an effort to control his own voice. His dentist would not be pleased.

"Sit. Down."

She warily lowered herself to the bench and clutched the edge of the table, spying at him through the veil of hair that covered her face. He could

barely look at her. The need to reach across the table and shake her overwhelmed him. She was either extremely naïve or impossibly defiant.

"It keeps slipping your mind who's in charge here, princess. Have you forgotten I'm the one responsible for finding a way to keep you on Trinity?" "No," she whispered.

"You'll tell me what you know, Arleigh, and you will be completely honest with me, or I won't lift a finger. We'll let Flynn take your contract. With you out of the picture, my life might be easier." He paused and stared at her, giving her time to make her decision. "Are we in danger of losing this island, this farm, and those girls because of some insatiable craving Stephen had for *you*?"

"He ne'er touched me!"

"A man does not purchase a woman like you for altruistic purposes, Arleigh. Do you know what I found in these records? I found a frugal, methodical, detail-oriented man who never wanted anything for himself beyond a new pair of work boots. I saw Stephen as a better man than I could ever hope to be. But when I found no mention of *you*, I realized Stephen did want something for himself. He wanted you so much he risked everything he owned to have you. He never even tried to get you in his bed?"

A tear slid down Arleigh's cheek. "No, but he wanted to."

Ryder's brow shot up at her sudden confession, but he let it go. Thinking of Stephen hurt something inside of her. Stephen must have been a very decent man if he had kept his hands off her. Caindale had gotten a raw deal.

"You told me Stephen was in debt to Flynn. He didn't write any of that down in these ledger books, either. Did he borrow money from Flynn to pay for you?"

"Aye!" She furiously wiped at her face, and a sob caught in her throat. "Are you satisfied now? Are you happy to know Stephen wasn't so perfect, so you can feel better about yourself?"

"How much?"

"I don't know," Arleigh said miserably. She pushed her hair back from her face. "Cameron said 'twas more than...more than the price of five women."

Ryder dropped his head into his hands. "Fuck."

More than five women. It sounded like a fortune. Ryder stood up, and the whiskey slammed through his head. An immediate pain flared behind his eyes, and he wobbled slightly. He had to plant his hands on the table to hold steady. Stephen had missed his calling. He should have been a distiller. He could have made a fortune, and they wouldn't be in this mess.

"Go to bed," he muttered. "I have some thinking to do."

"I didn't ask him to buy me," Arleigh whispered.

Ryder peered at her through the strands of his hair. He didn't even have enough strength to brush it back.

"You didn't have to. He couldn't help himself. He was a Kendall. Kendalls are fucking idiots when it comes to women. Go upstairs."

Chapter 15

Arleigh moved down the dark staircase and pushed open the door. Peeking through, she saw Ryder had finally gone to bed, more likely fell into it. After she had fled the room at his insistence, he stayed up for hours. He roamed around the room, tossing logs into the fire, digging through the cabinets, searching and spying, like he had every right in the world to go through her things. From the look of it, he had been drinking the entire time. The bottle on the table said it all. He would be of no use in the morning. She knew what Stephen's whiskey could do to a man. She'd seen it many times.

The ledgers lay on the table in an untidy stack. All Arleigh saw was a tower of blame. Parchments filled with ciphering scattered across the planks. She lifted one and held it up to the light of the hearth. Arleigh didn't understand much about ciphering, but Ryder had been trying to come up with a certain sum. An incredibly large sum. There were columns with items, columns with numbers. So far, he hadn't had much luck. The amounts scribbled across the pages came nowhere near to equaling the large number he had circled over and over again at the top of one page. The large, dark, viciously circled number pointed at her like an accusing finger.

She glanced toward the bedroom door. He thought to sell Stephen's belongings, stock and tools? How would they survive on Trinity? What could he possibly gain from that?

He would have you free and clear.

Why would he do that? She knew the answer to that. He simply couldn't help himself. The same obsession that dwelled in Stephen had found a nesting place in Ryder. The curse. The need to have her no matter what the consequences. She couldn't allow him to destroy himself and the future of Trinity. She put the parchment on the table. She would have to convince him she wasn't worth the sacrifice. Now would be the best time, before she lost

her nerve. She listened at the bedroom door and heard him shift on the mattress. She lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

She closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, trying to gather her courage. Slowly her eyes adjusted to the darkness. His shadow sat up on the bed, propped against the pillows. Her heart hammered, and she regretted her decision. Her hand fumbled with the latch, but the sound of his voice caused her to freeze.

"Stay," he said.

"No, I can't."

"You can't do a lot of things, Arleigh. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you." His shadow legs swung toward the floor, and she pawed the latch again. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees.

"Don't run from me."

"I wanted to talk to you, but I shouldn't have come in here."

"You're here now, so talk. What's on your mind?"

Arleigh kept her eyes locked on his shadow. Her nerves were on fire. What had possessed her to come in here? Dealing with an emotional and unpredictable Ryder was touchy at best. Stephen's spirits were not going to make him more rational. But he didn't seem angry with her any longer, so she plunged ahead. She didn't seem to have a choice.

"I saw the parchments and ciphering."

"And?"

"If you're thinking to sell some of the stock, Trinity won't have much of a future."

"Uh huh."

He didn't seem the least bit concerned he would have nothing left. The curse played havoc with men's minds. She'd seen it before.

"Is this something you truly plan to do?"

"It's an option," Ryder said. "Perhaps my only one."

Arleigh took a hesitant step toward the bed. "Are you doing this for me?"

The shadow Ryder ran his hands through his hair. He didn't seem to be able to think unless he touched his hair. When he stood up, Arleigh lurched backwards and came up against the door. Ryder kept moving toward her, but she had nowhere to go.

"I don't want you to sell things for me," Arleigh whispered. "It won't change anything."

"Change what? The fact that you won't come to me willingly? I've accepted that. You're pretty determined to ignore what's happening between us, but that doesn't mean I'll let you go."

"Ryder, you don't understand. There are reasons, problems, risks, real dangers."

"The only danger I face is losing you. I'm willing to take the risks."

"Don't say that. You have no idea what might happen."

"I think I have a pretty good idea what might happen."

He moved closer, and his warm, naked flesh brushed against her arm. She closed her eyes when his hands tucked around her face and forced her head up. He pressed against her, trapping her against the door. When his mouth covered hers, she had a moment of suffocating panic and tensed, but his gentle kiss allowed her time to think, to accept, to want. Ryder Kendall's mouth was magical.

She struggled to keep her arms to her sides. Everything within her wanted to touch him. Finally she clutched at her nightdress to keep her hands still, but she returned his kiss because she couldn't help herself. When her lips parted, his kiss became greedy and demanding, forcing her head up, his tongue pushing into her mouth with a speed that took her breath away. But he didn't move his hands. They stayed around her face, holding her mouth to his. He finally drew away slowly, his lips pulling at hers for one last taste.

A whimper escaped her parted lips. She was filled with an unfathomable need to pull him back. His hard body caused hers to turn soft. She wanted to cuddle against him and let him do anything he wanted. She wanted everything he had threatened and promised. Her hand skimmed across the tight muscles of his waist, and they clenched under her fingers. He peered through the slit of darkness between them and found her eyes.

He slid his thumb across her lips, and she shocked herself by wrapping her lips around it. When she sucked on it, he laughed softly.

"Is that what you came in here for?" he asked.

"No, I came to tell you I'm not worth the price you'll have to pay."

"Oh, you're wrong about that." His finger continued to trace across her lips. "You're worth every penny. Stephen knew it. I know it."

"There are prices beyond your understanding. I can't let you do this." Ryder dropped his arms and moved away. "Can't? Or won't?" "Both."

"I think you've forgotten once again who's in charge here, Arleigh. My farm, my assets, my decisions." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I found your indenture papers by the way. Stephen stuffed them into a pair of old boots in the bottom of his trunk. I have proof now that you belong to me. You're a valuable piece of property, and I'm not willing to let you go. I can't."

"Can't or won't?" she asked.

"Both."

"You'll be sorry, Ryder. 'Tis a bad decision."

Ryder laughed. "No worse than the one that brought me here in the first place."

He moved toward the bed. Arleigh lost his shadow in the darkness. She heard the snap of the quilt and the groaning of the bed.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Wh-What?"

"Get your ass over here and get in bed. It's what you came for, isn't it? If you're ready for the time of your life, the invitation is still open."

"No! 'Tis not what I came for at all. I ne'er intended—"

"At least be honest with me and with yourself. You're standing in a man's bedroom in the middle of the night, dressed in a charming little rag. And that kiss made it pretty obvious you're trying to get into my bed. You don't have to ask. I'm inviting you again. It seems to be a bad habit with me. Come here."

He patted his hand against the mattress.

"No, you're wrong. How can you think...you're wicked, Ryder Kendall. And you're stupid. You're a stupid, stupid man!"

She clutched at the latch, and the door spilled open. When she slammed it behind her, his laughter drifted through the hard wood. She screamed into the quiet of the keeping room and stomped off to the attic staircase. She could still hear him howling in the other room.

* * * *

The next morning, he still laughed at her. He watched her as she cooked, his lips curled in a smile, his eyes dancing with amusement. She wanted to smack that smug look off his face and pummel him for using her discomfort for his own entertainment.

When she put his breakfast plate down in front of him, his hand caught her wrist and pulled her across his lap. She struggled for a moment but realized Ryder Kendall was the type of man who always got his own way. And he did whatever he wanted to do. How she felt about any of it didn't matter to him.

His hand slid around the back of her neck and tugged her forward. So warm, so firm, so irresistible. When his mouth neared hers, her lips parted, waiting for his kiss, but he surprised her. He licked her bottom lip, a sinuous caress of his tongue that swept across her skin and dipped into her mouth for one excruciating second. Arleigh groaned, and her body liquefied.

"Do you want to kiss me good morning?" he asked.

"No. Do you want to kiss me?"

"With every molecule in my body," he said.

His words meant nothing to her, but it didn't matter because she understood what he meant. His cock pressed against her bottom, growing harder, stretching, eagerly rising under the thin breeches. One of his hands lay behind her neck and the other trailed up her body and curled around the side of her breast. His face buried into her hair.

"You wanted to stay with me last night," he said.

She refused to answer. She didn't want to lie. There were enough lies between them.

"You wanted me to fuck you. I could feel it."

His mouth felt heavenly against her ear. His lips were warm, and the soft breath of his voice seemed so seductive, so natural, whispering to her. She closed her eyes, glad she did not have to look into his.

"I wanted to do it," he said.

His tongue circled her ear, and it made her want to squirm on his lap, but she kept still. Instead, she tipped her head back. His lips roamed down her throat.

"Why didn't you, then?" she asked.

"Because I'm waiting for you," he said.

"What do you expect me to do?"

His fingers clutched her skirt, pulling it up, reaching underneath to touch her thigh. His warm palm slid up between her legs.

"I'm expecting you to ask me," he said.

"Tis not something I can do."

She felt hot, itchy, aroused. She'd been feeling this way for days. His tongue traced a trail of fire back to her ear.

"You want to ask me, though, don't you, Arleigh?"

"Aye," she said softly.

"Tell me how much you want me. I want to hear it."

She squeezed her lips closed, but she couldn't help herself. His hand moved higher on her leg and slipped against her pussy. She arched into his palm.

"Tell me," he insisted. He turned her face toward him.

She couldn't answer. She raked her hands through his hair and dragged his mouth to hers. If he kissed her, he couldn't talk; he couldn't badger her with questions; he couldn't force her to admit things she couldn't possibly admit. He accepted her kiss and seemed to enjoy it, but that didn't stop him. When he pulled away, he continued his relentless quest to make her pay.

"Tell me how much you want me."

She wanted to simply melt in his arms and allow him to do whatever he wanted to any part of her body he chose. She especially wanted his hand between her legs again. Finally in desperation, she grabbed his face, captured his mouth, and whispered against his lips.

"I want you to fuck me, Master Kendall. I want it more than anything I've e'er wanted in my life. My body is screaming for yours. My breasts hurt. My insides are quaking. I ache and throb and my pussy is swollen with the need to be filled by you. If this were my last moment on earth, all I would ask for is the taste of your mouth and the feel of your body in mine."

His mouth fell on hers. His lips devoured hers until her mouth felt bruised. She pulled her mouth away, gasping, trying to get her breath back to tell him what she had to say.

She caught his face between her hands. "Look at me, Kendall. I want all of that. I want our bodies to be one. I want it so much I hurt. But there are consequences. If it was your last moment on earth, I would beg you to take me. But 'tis not your last moment on earth, and I will not be responsible for making it so."

She pushed his arms away with shaking hands. She stood up, and his hands trailed down her body. She covered her mouth with trembling fingers.

"I'm sorry, Ryder."

"Not as sorry as I am."

She ran from the cottage, leaving him to his cold breakfast.

Chapter 16

Ryder stepped out into the evening. The sun dropped behind the forest. He headed toward the river. He could not believe the way the water sparkled. The James was as beautiful, clear and unspoiled as he'd imagined in his mind a thousand times. The center rolled with a turbulent purpose, lapping against the pristine bank overgrown with a riot of vegetation. Other than the small dock in the cove, no boats, no pylons, no moorings cluttered its shore. There were no houses, no lights, no people enjoying games and barbecues in backyards that did not exist in this place. The river offered complete solitude and isolation. Perfection. He thought he could possibly live here forever.

Arleigh had avoided him most of the day. He had approached her several times, but she kept finding excuses to get away from him, trying to look busy. He had no idea what her usual day entailed, but she never seemed to accomplish much. He watched her doing laundry for a few minutes, but it was almost painful the way she labored over such a task. He had a desire to push her aside and do it himself, but he'd be damned if he'd do her work for her. Let her struggle.

So he took off and left her at the cottage. He still thought he should go into Jamestown and find Flynn, but Arleigh flew into a panic when he broached the subject. She teetered on the edge of a nervous breakdown. He didn't want to be the cause of her complete meltdown. The physical struggle between them took its toll on both of them. He had a perpetual ache in his balls, and Ryder thought he could hear the erratic beat of her heart when she neared.

He spent the day with the indentures, four men of varying ages, who all seemed content with their lives. Stephen had treated them well, and they worked hard for him. They informed him two had taken advantage of the situation to flee, and their whereabouts were unknown, but the four that

remained had a loyalty to the Caindale family. They assured Ryder they were willing to work for him or for Stephen's daughters. The little girls had a fan club.

They showed him around the property, pointing out various fields and the crops planted there. They knew a great deal about farming, and Ryder thought to leave the day-to-day operation in their capable hands. He kept his own garden at home but purely for aesthetic purposes. He had no idea how it stayed alive and growing. He needed the help of these men. One of them seemed particularly knowledgeable. Ryder tried to give Jack Kensington a field promotion, but a frown creased Kensington's ugly face, and he held up his hands.

"Nay, Master Kendall. Not me. I pay attention to all, but I be the smithy. 'Tis Philip Keegan ya want to be yer man. A farmer born and bred."

He took Kensington at his word and promoted the quiet Keegan to foreman instead. Keegan, a tall, skinny man, beamed with the honor, and he informed Ryder all would be ready for winter within the next few weeks.

A winter in 17th century America? Ryder didn't know if he was tough enough to do that. A winter without central heating? Without trips to the grocery store? Trapped in a cottage without the diversions of books, television, music? How could he prepare for an entire winter filled with unknowns? And how did he prepare to be confined with three children, a swarm of faeries, and a woman like Arleigh? He would be insane before the first snow fell. The children and the faeries were probably tolerable. But Arleigh? They would either kill each other or, if luck held and eventually he got his way, never come out of the bedroom.

He smiled at the thought. The cold hadn't hit yet, but Kensington had predicted it would in another few weeks. Jack Kensington seemed to be a man in the know. And Jack had told him Arleigh was special and what a lucky man Ryder was.

"Have ya seen the way she looks at ya, laddie?" Jack had asked.

"You mean the look that wants me dead?"

Jack laughed and winked. "Nay, lad, the other look."

"Sure. I've seen it, but it doesn't last long."

"She'll come round, Master Kendall. Give her time. Stephen was ne'er the one for her. A good man, an honest man, but not man enough for Arleigh Donovan. She's been bidin' her time on Trinity, waitin' for *you*."

"What makes you think that?"

"Don't think it," Jack said. "I know it. Feel it. Been watchin' her. Been watchin' you. Only you can stop it."

"Stop what?" Ryder asked.

"You'll be findin' that out soon enough," Jack said. "Be ready."

He had continued to press Kensington, but the man only grew more cryptic and frustrating. Ready for what? The inevitable explosion each time he talked to her? The turbulent emotions that poured from her each time he touched her? No amount of preparation seemed enough when dealing with a woman like Arleigh.

She barreled toward him now, her cloak flapping around her shoulders in the steady breeze that blew in from the west, pissed off as usual. Where did the woman get her arrogance? He owned her, for Christ's sake, and yet she treated him like a husband who forgot to pick up his dirty socks or wet towels. What would it be like to be married to this little spitfire? The answer to that was easy: a living hell. She stopped in front of him, eyes blazing, hands on hips.

"Were you talking with Jack Kensington about me?" she snapped.

"It's my island, Arleigh. They're my men. I can talk about what I like."

"I don't want you discussing me."

"Afraid I'll discover some of your secrets?"

"Aye! No!" She shook her head in frustration. "Don't talk about me. Should I not have some privacy?"

"No. If I'm going to be stuck here with you, I need to know everything about you. For my safety."

She sputtered. "If anyone should be concerned about safety, 'tis me. You can't keep your bloody hands off me."

"You like my hands." When she opened her mouth to protest, he put his fingers over her mouth. "Don't bother denying it. You said it earlier. What were your words again?"

"Ne'er mind my words. You make me say things I can't believe are falling out of my mouth. But you have no reason to be concerned with your safety."

"You're a self-confessed killer. The fact that the man is still alive causes some confusion, but you're here for a reason, even if you won't tell me. I'm still leaning toward the—"

"Stop making up bloody stories about me."

"I don't know if I can trust you. Are you ready for another battle of wills between us? You won the last round, but I'm feeling lucky tonight."

He reached out and caught her hand. When he tugged, she spilled across the distance between them and fell into his arms. She struggled, pushing at his chest.

"This is a bad habit with you, Kendall. Why are you always grabbing at me? Don't you realize I don't want your advances?"

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

Arleigh gasped. "You know Shakespeare?"

Ryder tightened his arms around her. "You are becoming more intriguing by the moment, Mistress Donovan. And no matter what you say, you do want my advances. I have it on good authority."

"Your own delusional mind?"

"No, Jack Kensington. He seems to know a lot about this island and what's been happening around here." When she started to protest, he kissed her quickly. "But I want to hear it from you. You have too many secrets. Let's get some of them out into the open."

He released her and searched for her hand tucked in the folds of her cloak. She didn't pull away, and he relished the warm feel of her skin in the crisp autumn air. He began to walk along the bank of the river, and she came with him willingly.

"You gave Flynn some kind of title the other day. What did you call him?"

"The Ganconor."

"So what is that?" Ryder asked.

"Another kind of faery."

The laughter shot out of him before he could stop it.

He swung her around to face him. Her lips were tight, her eyes solemn. Dead serious. Okay, so he'd seen some faeries. He still had some trouble with that, but the lights in the cottage and the darting little creatures had convinced him they were probably real, or he suffered from some dementia he refused to consider. Thinking about faeries was easier, but no way in hell could Cameron Flynn be a faery.

"How is that possible? He's very masculine. Besides, he's kidnapped three little girls, and he's very physical. Can you have sex with a faery?"

"Oh, aye," Arleigh breathed.

"That sounds a little kinky, especially after what I've seen. Those little creatures are like tiny children. So innocent."

"They wouldn't know the meaning of that word. Faeries just are. They know no right or wrong. They have no motivations for anything they do other than their own existence. They can be charming. They can be dangerous. They can perform good deeds and harbor great malice."

"You know a lot about faeries," he said.

"Too much."

"So Flynn's a faery, huh? Can't do much for his ego. No wonder he's such a prick. But Flynn hides his handicap well. No one would ever know what he is. He's a good-looking bastard."

"He is very beautiful on the outside. I thought him the most beautiful man in my memory," she twisted her face toward the river, "until I met you."

Ryder pulled at her hand, and she turned around to face him, her soft body colliding with his. She tipped her face toward him, and her hood fell back. He smiled.

"If you like the way I look, why do you keep—?" He shook his head. "Never mind. That's a start. We can work with that. Tell me more about Flynn."

Cameron Flynn, a user and abuser of women throughout his human lifetime. He sounded like the evil villain in every exploitation film Ryder had ever seen, a quintessential bastard, and though Ryder knew a lot of bastards in his world, Flynn sounded like he could win the contest hands down. The fact a man like Flynn could regard women so callously and cruelly made Ryder's blood boil. The longer Arleigh talked, the angrier he got. Finally, he dropped down on the river bank and pulled her down next to him.

"Too much information, honey. I wasn't crazy about the guy to begin with. Now I find I might need to kill him."

"You can't kill him."

"It wouldn't be much of a loss. He's a prick."

"I don't know what that is, but I'm sure you're right." She paused and looked at him with that serious expression. "But you aren't going to be *able* to kill him. He's an immortal."

"He's going to live forever?"

"In his manner of living, aye."

"Like a vampire?"

"He is a bit like a vampire, I suppose, but vampires are not faeries. Cameron is fey."

"Vampires are real?"

"Oh, aye, Ryder. How can you be such an innocent?"

"Well, too bad he isn't a vampire, because I could handle one of those. I've seen the movies. But if he's like a vampire, he has to have an Achilles heel."

"The Greek warrior?"

"Shakespeare, French, and Greek? Did you have a classical education?"

"At times. I have known many kinds of people."

"If you know about faeries, you must know something about him that would hurt him, his form of kryptonite. Everyone has something."

"Cripto...what?"

"His weakness. Something that makes him powerless."

"I will think on it," Arleigh said. "What is your cripto...your weakness?"

He ran his finger across the top of her hand. She stared at him with those clear green eyes. He brushed at a piece of hair that blew into her face.

"You," he said.

"I don't want you to say that. 'Tis not real."

"Why do you think it isn't real, Arleigh? You can trust me."

"Tis not your sincerity I be doubting, but you have no idea what I am. You don't know the reason behind what you're saying or even feeling."

"I'm a grown man and understand my own feelings. I've had trouble committing to women, but I've never met a woman like you before."

"There are no other women like me."

He laughed. "I'm beginning to believe that."

He touched her face and ran his finger across her lips. His body ached for her, had been since he saw her ghost materialize in his yard. His fingers loosened the tie that held her cloak, baring that leather corset. He plucked at the laces, staring into her eyes.

"I want to apologize for last night," he said. "I do want to know about your past, but not for the reasons you think. I want honesty, trust, and openness. I want things right between us. I can't stay away from you."

"I've noticed, but there may be reasons—"

He leaned down and caught her lips with his. She tensed, her body rigid, holding her breath. She released a shuddering breath, and her body melted beneath him. He raised his head and ran his finger across her mouth and her lips closed on the tip. Her tongue touched his skin.

He laid his hand on the swell of her breast, his fingers lightly grazing her skin. Her eyes widened. He brought his face closer to hers and let his lips trail across her chin. Her hand came up and curled around the back of his neck, pulling his lips down to her throat. Her head fell back.

"Let me love you, Arleigh. It would be good between us."

"Oh, I want to," she breathed, "but there are reasons, circumstances, and I just can't—"

"Tell me why. You respond to me, your body opens, and when I think we're going to have the most magical moment in both our lives, you shut down."

"Magical moment. Is that a jest?"

"No jest, baby. What happened to you? Is it Flynn? Or another man? Are you in love with someone else?"

Her head shook violently. "No, there's no one."

"You want me. I can feel it. You've said it. And I want you, Arleigh. I've never wanted another woman the way I want you."

A moan tore through her with aching intensity. A sign of surrender.

Something about Arleigh touched a part of his heart. He wanted to protect her, share his thoughts with her, comfort her and allow her to take the piece of himself that he never dreamed he would be able to share with anyone. He didn't understand it, but this woman was the only one he wanted.

Desperate to make her understand how he felt, he grabbed her face in his hands, pushing his fingers through her hair. She blinked, and he thought he saw tears, but her eyes locked on his, wide, innocent, hopeful.

"Arleigh, we need to be together. Can't you feel it?"

She nodded. Her arms circled his neck, and she shoved her face against his throat. The small, irregular breaths that flowed across his skin made his

heart flutter. Filled with a need he could never explain, he cupped her face and forced her to look at him. Her eyes were a dark, dusky green that reminded him of stories he had read in childhood. They were the color of a soft, grassy mound of a faery ring at twilight. A magical time, a time when endless possibilities existed, when dreams could come true. Surrounded by twilight, he breathed it in along with the scent of her skin.

Arleigh watched him through a thick veil of dark lashes. Her eyes filled with promise, and he drank it in, pulling it down into the depths of his heart where he had secretly feared he would never find the magic he had so desperately sought his whole life. Arleigh's eyes held everything he had ever dreamed of, wished for, wanted, filled with the beauty of her soul. A slight apprehension lurked there, a tiny flicker of ambivalence, but also something very close to lust, to passion, to a fire she couldn't control. Her body burned with that fire. The heat shimmered around her, enveloping him and fanning something inside his soul.

"Please kiss me," she whispered. "I need to feel you."

He lowered his face, and she crushed her lips against his. In that one moment, he thought his heart had stopped. A rush of power, a lightning bolt of passion, spiraled through him, and he thought for a split second he had died, and he didn't care. His cock hardened inside a dead man's breeches, pressing against her, painfully swollen and ready. The fleeting thought of Stephen entered his mind, and he wondered how this woman had existed here in this place with another man when she had always belonged to him. How had they been born almost four hundred years apart when they were meant to be together? The thoughts flickered in his mind, but died when her mouth consumed his, and suddenly, all thoughts vanished but her. There had never been anyone but her.

Arleigh's mouth pushed against his. Her teeth scraped against his, rough, greedy, demanding. Her tongue found all the soft spots in his mouth, sucking the moisture from his mouth and filling it again with a voracious need to taste her more thoroughly. Her lips continued to torture him as they sucked and pulled, devouring him. His heart beat thunderously, pushing the blood through his body with lightning speed, and stealing all the reason from his mind.

He could do nothing but kiss her back. He had never felt this allconsuming hunger that seemed to possess him. He drowned in her essence, and it was the most satisfying experience of his entire life.

She tugged at his clothes. Her fingers grazed his dick through the fabric of his pants. He groaned. He couldn't stop. He had no control over his body. It belonged to her, responded to her, wanted her. Arleigh's mouth continued to work its magic, finding places on his neck that sent shivers through him. He wanted to take her on the riverbank, fill every part of her, claim her. She belonged to him, and he needed her to know.

His fingers were caught in fabric, and he realized he'd pulled up her skirt, roughly yanking at the cloth, higher and higher, until his hand found bare skin. Her hand fumbled with the tie of his breeches then slid inside, searching eagerly. She grasped his cock, and he shuddered.

Ryder paused, thoughts ricocheting through his mind.

He was on the verge of fucking a woman, a virgin he had known only days, a woman in clear mental distress, a woman who needed his help, not his sexual prowess. The most beautiful, desirable, sensual creature he had ever laid eyes on.

You may be yanked out of paradise tomorrow. You can have her now. She wants it too.

He groaned and pulled back.

You're a goddamned idiot, Kendall.

He gathered her face in his hands. "Honey, Arleigh, wait." He raised his head and stared into the darkening sky. "Damn it."

He reached down and pulled her hands away. Arleigh moaned, and her head tilted back.

"Make it stop. You are the only one who can make it stop."

"God, Arleigh, please," he groaned. He leaned down and kissed her neck, pressing his face into her hair. "You're making this so freaking hard."

Her mouth searched for his again. This time he kissed her hard and pulled away.

"You said you wouldn't take what I didn't offer," she said. "I'm offering, Ryder. 'Tis what you want."

"But it's not what you want."

"It is. What else do I have to do? I'm offering."

"Honey, I get that, really I do, but I put some pressure on you, and I didn't mean to. I can't do it here."

"Can't or won't?"

"Both," he said. He gathered her against him.

Her heartbreaking voice promised tears would fall, proving to him he had made the right decision. "You don't want me?"

"Oh, Arleigh, you have no idea how much I want you."

"But you won't take me?"

She pulled away and bolted to her feet. Lips pursed and fists tight against her sides, she peered into his eyes for explanation. She took a step back and tossed her hair. He waited, watching her fight her disappointment, her embarrassment, and her disbelief. When she spoke, he got the tone he expected. The little princess wanted a reason.

"You've been pawing at me since you got here. You acted like this was what you wanted. And then I practically throw myself at you, and you say no? Why? Why won't you make love to me?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this." He raked his hair away from his face. "I want to wait."

"How long? Why? There's ne'er going to be a good time. The risk is *not* going to go away. And the longer I wait, the harder it will be to *lose* you. I can't believe I offered myself and you don't even want me!"

She turned to flee, but he jumped to his feet and tugged her back.

"This is a bad habit with you. Stand there and listen."

She cocked her head and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm listening. Make it good."

"I want you, Arleigh. Don't have any doubts about that. And some day soon I'm going to have you. But it's not going to be today, and it may not be tomorrow. I want it to be *our* choice. Together. And when we do finally make love, Arleigh, I know we're never going to let each other go."

"We won't have a choice," Arleigh said softly.

"No, we won't. I think you've already stolen my heart, Arleigh. Once we're together, you'll have my soul."

"Please don't say that. I don't want your soul."

"That's why I want to wait."

"Tis that easy for you?"

"Oh, believe me, baby, it's not easy at all. In fact, I think it might actually kill me."

Arleigh's eyes widened, and her lip trembled. She burst into hot, wet tears, sobbing so hard her body shook. She buried her face in her hands. Ryder stood for a moment, his hands reaching toward her, pulling back, reaching again. When she threw herself against him, he caught her against his chest and steadied himself before they both slid down the embankment to the river. He pulled her face up, forcing her to look at him.

"What have I done now? You're angry with me for wanting you and sad when I turn you down. How am I supposed to win this?"

"I think you just did." The tears ran down her cheeks. Her mouth covered his with a salty kiss.

Chapter 17

Her kiss deepened, and he found himself falling back under her spell, like being caught in a tidal wave that crashed over him, again and again, until he could no longer get his breath. He needed to get her to the house. Though not much safer, at least it would be more private if something happened. He'd never be able to say no again if she kept it up. His body had reached the point of no return. He couldn't take it twice.

"I don't want you to come to hate me because I forced you. But there are things that can be pleasurable for both of us. If you come to the house with me, I'll show you."

Her swollen lips beckoned him irresistibly. Her eyes shone bright in the growing darkness. He pulled his hands away before he touched her again and they didn't make it to the house.

"What a spectacle."

Ryder stiffened, and Arleigh gasped. Ryder turned slowly to see Flynn walking toward them. Ryder thought of Arleigh's bare leg, her hands roaming over his body, her hands reaching into his breeches, the groans. He thought of Arleigh's tears. She moved closer, and her fingers caught in his shirt.

"You seemed to be having some kind of spat. Is someone displeased with the lovemaking?"

"Keep it up, Flynn. Hitting you again would give me such a rush."

Flynn laughed. "Aye, that worked so well for you the first time. Are you inept in lovemaking, as well?"

"I told you to stay away from here."

"I came about the little girls. Quite a handful, I must say. More trouble than I bargained for."

"Are they here?" Excited, smiling, Arleigh moved toward Flynn, and Ryder grabbed at her arm, pulling her back.

"No," Flynn said. "They aren't here, and they won't be coming home. They're all settled in quite nicely. There is a ban-tee taking care of them. You see, Arleigh, I *am* concerned for their welfare, so I captured a faery nurse for your peace of mind. I would never harm a child. But your new lover certainly complicates things."

"Sorry for that," Ryder said. "You can thank me later. Have I spoiled your little takeover? Where I come from, people have way more finesse. We don't steal kids to show our muscle. We have high-powered attorneys for that."

Flynn glanced at Arleigh. "Is he daft?"

Ryder ignored him. "Why don't you send the girls home before there's trouble?"

"So you plan to make trouble for me," Flynn said, shaking his head. "Not good, not good at all. I intended to purchase this property and send the girls packing, maybe even back to Ireland. I don't really care what happens to them. But I never intended to harm them."

"Keep it that way," Ryder said. "And this property is not for sale."

"No, I'm beginning to think it won't be as easy as I thought. I will have to rethink my entire plan."

"Why are you here, Cameron?" Arleigh asked, her voice tired and weary. It hurt Ryder to hear it.

Flynn stepped forward, but Ryder's hand shot toward him. Flynn backed up with a smile, holding up his hands.

"I wouldn't dream of touching your property, at least not until it all belongs to me. The plantation, the island, the woman. It will all belong to me in time. There's just a tiny detail that needs taken care of before all that can happen and I'm hoping—"

"I am seriously going to kick your ass," Ryder said.

"You are a very violent man, Kendall. But tell me, did her kisses make you feel like you were caught in the tides, like your heart would burst through your chest? Did you want to drown in her eyes, devour her, pour your soul into her when you buried yourself between her thighs?"

Ryder's stare wavered. Arleigh bowed her head, and she pulled her cloak more tightly around her body.

"Was her skin softer than Chinese silk?" Flynn asked. "Her mouth like honey fresh from the hive? Did you feel as though you hadn't been alive until that moment you slid into her pussy?"

"You smug, superior son of a bitch," Ryder said.

Flynn laughed. "So you felt it! Delightful! I hope you enjoyed it, because it may be your last earthly sensation."

Arleigh's head snapped up. "We didn't make love."

Flynn frowned. "No? Pity. You must be very strong, Kendall, and you must have a certain amount of integrity if you didn't take her. She is very hard to resist. The heat of her mouth, the moist flesh of her body, the taste of her skin. I know how hard it is to resist, and she probably threw herself at you. She's that way. She can't help herself."

Ryder glared, and Flynn's eyes grew serious.

"I am right, though, aren't I? The feelings were there, weren't they? My friend, you've had a only small taste of what Arleigh Donovan can do to you. You may not be alive the next time I see you."

"Is that a threat?" Ryder asked.

"Oh, no, I don't threaten. If I wanted you dead, you'd already be dead. That's the way I work. I have no grievance with you. I suppose that will change in time, because the Caindales and I have never really been friendly. For now, though, I'll let her take care of you. It will be my gift. To both of you."

Ryder pulled Arleigh close to him. "Get off of our property."

Flynn nodded and glanced at Arleigh. "I came by to give you an invitation. Do you still want it?"

She stepped forward eagerly. "Can I see the girls?"

"Aye, they've whined for three days straight. Arleigh this and Arleigh that. I get no peace. But don't try to take them from me. There will be consequences. They need to stay where they are for now."

"You know this is kidnapping, don't you?" Ryder asked. "Kidnapping is pretty frowned on where I come from. Jamestown may not be on the New World's Top Ten List, but I imagine stealing little girls is still a serious nono."

"I own Jamestown, Kendall. Don't expect help from that quarter. The lasses will stay where they are for now. I have my reasons and, if you

persist, I can find others. In the eyes of this colony, I am, at this point, providing the Caindale lasses a measure of protection."

"From their own uncle?"

"Why, from *her* of course. She's told you, hasn't she? She's a convicted felon, either indentured servitude or the gallows. She actually arrived on one of my ships. I'd hate to see her beautiful neck stretched in such a manner, but she still presents a danger to the girls."

"What a bunch of bullshit, Flynn."

"Do you need another reason? I can provide more. Are you aware your nieces are witches? That they can perform spells, read minds, feel things other people cannot feel?"

"Yeah, it runs in the family," Ryder said. "Sounds like you're threatening us again."

Flynn shrugged. "Not a threat but a word of caution. I have no intention of harming the children, but that doesn't mean harm can't come from another source. I think I should point out the consequences of witchcraft, Kendall. Surely there are consequences for witchcraft in whatever part of the world you are from."

"Living proof," Ryder mumbled.

Flynn gave him an odd look. "I'll send a messenger."

Whistling, he turned and sauntered leisurely along the riverbank. He did not look like a man who had destroyed the good feelings Ryder had inside. He looked like a man who'd had the happiest day of his life. Arleigh headed back toward the cottage, but Ryder watched Flynn until he vanished into the darkness.

* * * *

Ryder slammed the cottage door, and Arleigh nearly jumped out of her skin.

"What the fuck was that about?"

She held out a book. Ryder recognized the leather volume. He had practically worn his fingerprints into it.

"You know this poem by Master Keats?"

"I don't want to talk about poetry right now," Ryder snarled. The tone of his voice shook him, and he clenched his fist. He took a deep breath. "I want to know what Flynn was talking about."

"I'm trying to explain," Arleigh said. "Please, do you know the poem?" "By heart."

"Tell me what you think it means. What images do the words conjure for you?"

Ryder snatched the book from her and rubbed it in his hands. She spoke as though the words had magical properties and power. The blood boiled inside of him, and he wanted answers, but Arleigh seemed determined they were going to have a damned poetry reading. He tried to shake off the anger and find a civil tone. It didn't work. His voice shook.

"The image in my mind is something I've been searching for all my life. Now that I'm here, I think, I *thought* the words had led me to you. But after that little fiasco outside, I realize I was wrong."

Arleigh flinched.

"I don't freaking share, Arleigh. I know you had a life before I got here, and I thought I could forget, get past all of it, but I can't. Wishing doesn't make it real. Poetry or not."

Arleigh grabbed the book from his hands, shaking it in his face. "Stop being so difficult. Just answer me. What do you think the words *mean*?"

"It doesn't make a difference." She stood and stared, holding the book in front of her like a shield. Maybe she needed a shield. He didn't know. She drove him nuts, but she had something on her mind she wouldn't let go. She held onto it like a pit bull. "Okay!"

He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. He didn't even know what had upset him. He knew Flynn had never fucked her, but the idea that he knew her well enough to know how he would feel seemed almost worse. Arleigh watched him cautiously.

"It's about love and passion, about finding a soul mate to share your life with, about loving someone until your life loses meaning without her."

"Do you know the story behind these words? The legend?"

"Keats was a poet," Ryder said. "I don't know what drives a poet. Maybe the bastard ran out of luck and hooked up with a woman like you."

Arleigh watched him with something he couldn't quite fathom. Flynn's visit had pushed her over the edge. She looked a little wild. He felt a little

wild himself and spoiled for a fight. Fuck the consequences. With any luck, they'd kill each other before the sun came up and stop the misery they inflicted on each other.

Accept it, Kendall, you're bad for each other. Too much passion. Too much want. Too much anger. It's a recipe for disaster.

"This poem is based on the legend of the Leanan sidhe," she said. "Do you know who the Leanan sidhe is?"

Ryder shook his head while Arleigh paced the floor, the book clutched in her hands.

"A faery," Arleigh said. "A beautiful, desirable faery with the power to steal the life force of men. She loves them to death, Ryder."

"Not a bad way to go."

"It may sound pleasant to you, but believe me, when a man withers and pines away to nothing, 'tis not a pretty sight. I know because *I* was the Leanan sidhe."

"You're trying to tell me you think you're a faery? Come on, Arleigh, live in reality."

She dropped the book on the table, shrugged off her cloak, and tossed it onto the bench. She ran her hands over her body and threw her hair back. She turned to him and lifted her chin with a challenging glare.

"You like this body?"

"It's sexy as hell."

"And you want it?"

"Christ, Arleigh, cut the bullshit. I already told you I don't share. It doesn't—"

"And the face?"

Ryder clenched his jaw. "You're beautiful."

"But I'm not as beautiful as some. The Caindale girls are far more beautiful than I. But you will ne'er see that because you're under a spell."

Ryder ran his hands through his hair and didn't stop pulling until he felt pain. "A spell. Well, that explains everything. I couldn't possibly have any feelings of my own. I'd have to be under some kind of spell to want a woman like you. I'm glad you cleared that up."

Arleigh put her hands on her hips. "Did you listen to what Cameron said? Did you hear his words?"

"Every nasty one of them. He's a prick. I don't care about his words. I care about what happened between the two of you. He implied—"

"Did you have those feelings?"

"He's a sick, twisted son of a bitch. You've had a relationship, and he's jealous you're with me." Ryder glanced at her. "Or he concocted a bunch of lies because he has demented fantasies about you. It's your call. You're the only one who knows the truth."

Arleigh sighed and looked toward the floor. "He did not concoct lies. There's been more between us."

Ryder's jaw dropped. "Christ, Arleigh."

Something snapped inside of him. He slammed his fist down on the table. The slam echoed through the room, and Arleigh jumped. The echo wound around him like a chain of anger. Adelina's jar shook, and pink streamers shot from the edge. Arleigh gasped, and Ryder grabbed the jar before it could topple over the edge. The streamers winked furiously, and Ryder rubbed the jar to calm Adelina down. He didn't know if it would work. He thought it might be used for genies, but hey, it's all he had. When the pink fog swirled back into the jar, he took a deep breath, but his fists clenched at his side.

"Why do you keep lying to me?"

He peered at her, trying to read her mind. The anger lurking inside of him poised, ready to pounce, and he was afraid of what he might do. He could think of nothing to say that wouldn't result in more damage between them. She could have screwed every man in the colony, and he would have forgiven her, but she seemed to lie with no compunction, and that disturbed him.

"You toyed with him, tossed him away, and he's righteously pissed. Now you've got the nerve to tell me what an evil man is, making up stories about faeries and highlanders, or whatever the hell he is. Did you treat my brother this way? Are the Caindale brothers pawns in one of your sick fantasies?"

He had to get out before he did something he regretted. He moved toward the cottage door and glanced over his shoulder. "When I get back, don't be in this room."

She started toward him, but Ryder put his hand up to stop her. He backed away, agitated, angry. The blood roared through his head, and he

couldn't look at her anymore. Her silky hair, the swell of her breasts, the smooth curves of her hips, the full lips quivering now with some kind of feigned emotion were all part of a beautiful package designed to lure him into hell. But inside? He'd never known a woman like this. She would kill him. Her lips parted, and she took a breath.

"Ryder, please, you don't—"

"I've had enough of the lies that fall from your mouth. I understand everything. Flynn killed Stephen to get rid of the competition, and the girls were kidnapped because you dumped his ass. It's ludicrous! I came across almost four hundred years to fight for a girl who hooked up with the wrong guy and now won't take her medicine. You're on your own, kid. I'm out."

Tears ran down her face again, not quite so charming this time. He wanted to strangle her and thought, if she didn't get out of his face, he might do it.

He yanked the door open. He turned when her hand clenched around his arm. Her face was heart wrenching, but his guts had been ripped out, and he wasn't in the mood for her. A hole opened somewhere inside of him, and every feeling he had poured through it.

"You're wrong," she whispered, "about everything."

He shook off her arm and stepped over the threshold.

"Get fucked," he snarled and slammed the door.

Chapter 18

Ryder sat in the dark and watched her tiptoe across the floor, dressed in that piece of crap nightdress. Didn't she have anything else to wear? He could practically see through the damned thing, and it left nothing to his imagination. He still wanted to wrap his hands around her throat, but that didn't mean he was over her. All the harsh words between them weren't going to quench his desire for her. The erection in his boxers proved that. Though difficult to sit still with a rock in his pants, he managed. He sipped at the drink in his hand. What the hell was she doing now?

"Adelina?" she whispered.

A faint pulse of light flickered in the jar. Ryder would have missed it if he hadn't known what to look for.

"Please wake up," Arleigh said. "I need to talk with you."

A tiny body rose from the jar, and her wings fluttered wearily. Adelina grumbled, but he couldn't hear her words.

"I know you're sleepy, but I need advice. What am I going to do? He won't stay away from me, and I want him so much."

Ryder held his breath, trying to hear. Flynn. He should have known. Arleigh was in love with Mr. Perfect, the King of the Jamestown Faeries. Okay, Flynn was a sick mother, but Arleigh obviously fell hard for men with problems. The twisted little mind games they spun between them probably gave their quirky relationship an edge. What kind of kinky little notions did Arleigh Donovan think of while her lover toyed with her? Obviously they enjoyed making one another jealous, tempting each other with forbidden desires.

Ryder couldn't figure out where he fit into her scenario. Arleigh obviously enjoyed being taken to the edge, torturing herself until she could be in Flynn's arms again. The idea that a man like Flynn had touched Arleigh at his gut like acid. And the idea that Arleigh had let him made

Ryder want to squeeze the life from her. He needed to get those girls away from Flynn and get the fuck home.

"It's so hard," Arleigh wailed. "Ryder can't stay here. He's so angry all the time, and I can't hold him off any longer. 'Tis getting too dangerous. I need him to leave. I want him to leave."

Ryder slammed his glass down on the table. Arleigh spun around, and the naughty little nightdress slipped from her shoulder. He rose unsteadily.

"You want me to leave my own home?" he growled.

She tried her haughty, superior look on him. He gave her the dirtiest look in his arsenal, and she backed toward the stairs. Her voice started to shake.

"You've been drinking again. We'll talk about it in the morning."

"We'll talk about it now," he said quietly.

He stalked across the room and grabbed her arm. He hauled her toward the bedroom and kicked the door open. Adelina swirled around them, casting a beautiful blush across Arleigh's face.

"Back in your jar, Addy, or I'll have a talk with you, too."

Adelina's tiny little mouth dropped then she flew toward her jar and safely tucked herself inside. Ryder pushed Arleigh through the door. She stumbled and fell against the bed. Ryder slammed the door and leaned against it.

"What's on your mind now, princess?"

Arleigh jumped to her feet and strode toward him. She gave him a hard shove. "Get out of me way. I'll talk when you're sober. Have you any idea when *that* will be?"

"Nag, nag, nag. You're as bad as my sisters."

"You drink too much."

"My own business and none of yours. There's nothing else to do around here, except lust after you. Maybe I need to get you out of my system. It might be the booze talking, but I'm beginning to think fucking you might be enough after all."

Arleigh's jaw dropped when he slid his boxers over his hips and kicked them away. His arm shot out and circled Arleigh's waist, spinning her around and slamming her against the door. She cried out, but he laughed at her pitiful attempt to push him away. If she couldn't make up her mind about him, he would have to help her decide. There hadn't been a woman

yet who had been satisfied with one taste of Ryder Kendall. They always came back for more. Once he thawed her out, he had no doubt she would want more, too.

Let her go, Kendall. Stephen's swill has gone straight to your head and killed every ounce of reason and sanity you had. This isn't what you want. Don't ruin it.

He chose to ignore the compliant whipping boy trapped in his head, who offered nothing but trouble. Listening to him had gotten Ryder nothing. The drunk seemed to have better ideas. His hands trailed down her body then slowly worked their way back up, scrunching the fabric of her nightdress in his fists. His eyes never left her face. Her lashes fluttered and her teeth bit down on her bottom lip.

"I'm not falling for it again, baby. This coy act you've perfected works only so long."

Her hands coiled around his, pushing against his upward movement. But she never told him to stop.

"I'm stronger than you are, honey. You're going to have to try a lot harder than that."

When he scooped his hands beneath her ass, she let out a tiny shriek, but he ignored that, too. She had pretty much gotten on his last nerve and would pay for it. He lifted her up and cradled her legs around him, driving her against the door. He angled his pelvis and pushed. She gasped when his cock slid along her bare skin of her pussy. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, and her head fell back on the door.

"Do you feel that?" he asked.

Her whisper tore through him. "Not fair."

"This is what you do to me. Every minute of every hour. Do you think that's fair?"

She wouldn't answer him.

"Do you know what this ache will do to a man? It takes away his reason, his common sense, his conscience. No one will see it as rape, and since you've driven every sane thought from my head, any guilt I have won't matter. Maybe if I get it over with, I can be a little more reasonable and not so angry all the time. Maybe slipping into you will fix everything between us. You might even like it."

He shifted slightly. The heat of her pussy burned him.

"Have I done something wrong? Missed some clues? I'm freaking out of ideas, and if you don't tell me what you want, I'm going to take it."

"Just take me then! You'll find the truth."

"You don't even know what truth is. The only truth between us seems to be between our legs, Arleigh, and I intend to find it."

He inched closer, sliding along between her pussy lips, barely grazing her flesh, but the heat of her lured him closer. The sight of her hair trapped between their bodies and that flash of quiet passion in her eyes made his heart pound. The smell of her made his head spin. The warmth and wetness of her body blazed a path of fire through him that incinerated the last shred of his restraint. His control was marginal. He had almost slipped inside of her without thought. Maybe he should. One thrust, one cry, could solve everything. Trying to drive her crazy could make him insane.

"If you fuck me, Ryder, you're going to die."

"I doubt you're that good, honey. But I can probably take you a little closer to heaven."

She squirmed, trying to rise in his arms, to escape the hard prod of his cock. "Not like this."

Her voice brought him back to reality. He cursed himself for allowing his body to be in charge when so much seemed at stake, but the woman stole every bit of common sense he had and left him with insane, primitive pieces that crippled his ability to think.

"Are you telling me to stop?" he asked quietly.

"I've told you what will happen."

"Yeah, I know. You'll be the death of me. You're probably right, but I'll take the risk."

"You said there should be more."

He tilted his head. "Are you worth more? I'm beginning to wonder. Maybe I should take you for a test drive. Make sure I'm really interested before I make a commitment."

He dipped his head and found the soft hollow of her throat. Her hair brushed his face, and his lips traced a trail across her neck. Arleigh released a shuddering breath before his mouth covered hers. Her fingers skimmed lightly across his jaw, and her mouth opened beneath his. He kissed her with all the skill he could muster in his drunken state then pulled his mouth away and whispered in her ear, pressing hard against her.

"Is that enough lovemaking? Are you wet? Are you ready for me, princess?"

She twisted in his arms and shoved her hands between them. "Put me down, Kendall!"

He positioned his cock so that she could feel exactly what he had for her.

"Oh, dear merciful God," she whispered.

Her body melted against him, but her pelvis pressed hard against him. She lifted slightly in his arms, rubbing herself against him. He moved his hands under her body. His fingers brushed against the wet folds.

"You like that, don't you, baby?"

Her moan was enough of an answer. "What are you doing to me?" "Other things."

"So soft, and 'tis making me feel tingly. Are you feeling the same?"

"Yes, baby. Keep rubbing against me. I want to watch your face when you come."

"Come where?" Her voice was slurred, dreamy. Her thoughts might be unfocused, but her body moved with a determination, a rhythm that told him she was close. Her body quivered. "But this feels very nice, almost too much. It makes my skin feel hot. I feel like I need something else. I'm melting. I've ne'er felt anything like this. I'm losing my willpower. Are you a magician?"

"No, baby, I'm adopted."

"I'm throbbing inside," she whispered. "I need something else. Something to make it stop."

"It's going to get a lot better before it stops. You need to finish this."

"Then finish it," she said.

He arched against her, slowly penetrating a fraction of an inch into her body. Arleigh froze. A soft whimper escaped from her lips, but her mouth found his, and the kiss she gave him almost made him forget what he was doing. He wanted to bury himself in her flesh, ram into her hard, but she was so tight he didn't want to hurt her. Arleigh's body smashed against him. Did she really want him, or had her body succumbed to her need to orgasm? He would never take any woman, let alone this one, for his own pleasure. He tried to concentrate, to remember he had control. Was he in control? He suddenly didn't think so.

"Open up, baby. Relax. I'm not going to hurt you. Should I keep going?" He raised his face and stared into her wide eyes. "Tell me. What do you really want?"

"I don't know. The feelings have confused me. You said there would be more between us, and you wanted to wait. Why are you tempting me? Why are you making me feel like this?"

"I need to exorcise you, Arleigh. I can't think of any other way."

"You don't want more? You changed your mind?"

"I wanted your heart without reservation and fear, but I'm beginning to think those are things we'll never have. Maybe if I fuck you, I can forget everything else I wanted. Maybe the lust is enough."

He snatched at her mouth, and she twisted her face away from him. "Tis not enough! I want you to *believe* me."

He gripped her legs and lowered her to the floor. He backed up, and she stood still, her back still pressed against the door, obviously afraid to move a muscle. The anger boiling within him looked for some kind of release.

"Believe what? This ridiculous story that I'll die if we fuck? Is this the story you told Stephen for six months? Should I love you from afar until it becomes an obsession? And when someone shoots me in the back, will you grieve for me? Is it easier to love a dead man, Arleigh?"

"I didn't ask Stephen to love me."

"Stephen was an idiot. He didn't have a clear view of what you are, but I'm beginning to understand." He paused and stared at her hard. "You're a liar who gets her kicks using men for her own amusement. You're a cock teaser, Arleigh. Believe me, there's one in every crowd. Usually I can spot them a mile away, but this time I actually fell for it. My mistake, but I'm learning from the experience. I'm tired of being your whipping boy."

"You feel this way because of the curse, Ryder."

"You can walk around in that trampy little see-through number, but when I react to it, it's the result of a curse? What kind of perverted defense mechanism is that, Arleigh? You're deluding yourself, kid. Calling it a curse does not give you license to screw with my mind. Do you think it's okay to string me along if it's not your fault?"

"There is a curse, Ryder. It has followed me for hundreds of years and across continents. It has left a trail of dead men across Ireland to this colony."

"So what you're saying is, touch Arleigh Donovan and die?"

"Aye," she said softly. "That's what I'm saying."

Ryder yanked on his boxers, grimacing as he once again stuffed his frustrated dick back into his pants. He paced around the bedroom, casting furious glances toward the ceiling.

"Sweetheart, you are seriously messed up. Who did this to you? You might be more dangerous than I thought." He dropped down onto the bed. "I can't take much more of this. What is it you want from me?"

"I can't have what I want. 'Twould be better for both of us if you left Trinity."

"You've forgotten again who owns this island. If anyone leaves, it's going to be you."

"But I've nowhere else to go."

"You've far more options than I have. Go to your boyfriend's. He still has the hots for you, not that I blame him. Go back to him, Arleigh. He can put up with your bullshit, and it will save me a lot of aggravation. Financially I'll be free and clear. The girls can come home, and we can all get on with our lives."

Arleigh finally moved from the door. She came toward him, a wraith spun on the shadows of the room, so small and helpless. She did not look like a woman who could break his willpower, but she seemed determined to try. She moved closer to him, and the smell of her cream drove him crazy.

"But I don't want to go to Cameron. You told me you'd fight for me."

"So you want me to leave, but I'm still supposed to fight for you? What would I get out of that scenario, Arleigh?"

"Me."

Ryder laughed and went to the door. "According to this curse of yours, I die. Sounds very tempting, but I planned to live past thirty. Talk's over, honey."

He started to open the door, and she rammed her body against it, slamming it closed.

"Why are you being so stubborn? Why are we always fighting and hating one another? I don't want to hate you. You might make it stop if you give in."

"I don't give in, princess. You're going to have to do a little giving, too."

He opened the door. Arleigh watched him with disbelief, her mouth open. He took her hand and guided her over the threshold.

"Good night, Arleigh. Sleep well."

"Not bloody likely," she snarled.

When he closed the door, her palms slapped against the wood. "Stop slamming doors in my face, Kendall!"

He leaned against the door and blew out his breath in a heavy sigh. He rubbed his hand against the throbbing in his groin.

"Christ, I can't take much more of this."

* * * *

When Ryder woke up from what might have been an unconscious state, she was out in the keeping room, banging and slamming. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, immediately sorry. An invisible sledgehammer nailed him in the head and knocked the breath out of his body. He thought he would hurl right on the floor. He drank too much, and the whiskey good old Stephen had brewed would kill him. He thought that if he had some time, he might take another look through Stephen's books and see if he could find the recipe. Maybe even improve on it.

He needed another argument like a hole in the head, but he had no choice, because hunger grumbled through his body and the queasy sensation in his gut demanded food. Once he walked into the other room, she'd jump all over him because she hadn't gotten her own way. He didn't know what she wanted, but she hadn't been happy when he closed the door.

She didn't see the all the plot holes in her little story. Her tale of curses and the Leanan sidhe must have worked on some of the boys she had known, boys who found her adolescent beauty nearly irresistible. It had probably even worked on some men. But it obviously hadn't worked on Flynn, and now her little mind spun loopholes to explain why Flynn still lived. Flynn was immortal? Fuck that. Someone had really done a number on her. Ryder couldn't figure out where he fit in. In her little fantasy, sex with Arleigh Donovan was a death sentence, yet she had offered herself to him, and every signal she sent his direction proved she wanted him.

He couldn't think. The whiskey fumes played havoc with his mind. He almost believed her. He shook his head and took a deep breath, trying to get

some oxygen through his system. What he really needed was a blood transfusion.

He pulled open the door, and at the sound, she whirled around. She gave him a surly look. The little princess pouted, and she wouldn't do it quietly. He couldn't get that lucky. Arleigh rampaged around the room, muttering and mumbling, clanking every metallic utensil she could find. At each bang and clatter, his head throbbed. Ryder leaned into the doorjamb and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"Is all the noise necessary? I have a slight headache."

Arleigh rolled her eyes. "I'm surprised to see you alive."

"I managed to survive the night, despite our near collision. I'm glad one of us thought straight. Wouldn't want to become the victim of a curse. How would that look on my gravestone?"

Arleigh swung around, tapping the skillet against her leg. "I don't have a problem providing something to write on your stone."

So predictable. She had her skirts all in a bunch. He had offended the little Leanan sidhe's sense of omnipotence. Hard to have power over a man if you couldn't control him. He could have stopped, but he loved that fiery look in her eye. He would take it anyway he could get it.

"Last night you told me to 'give in.' What the hell was that about? I offered you the sexual experience of your life, and you totally blew me out of the water."

"The sexual experience of my life? Try lifetimes, Kendall, and in thousands of years, no man has taken me against a door. You could have been a little more romantic. What kind of man are you?"

"Obviously not your type," he said. "Hell, if you need flowers and candlelight—"

"I do not plan to lose my virginity plastered against the door with one thrust from a drunken man."

He started to back up into the bedroom, and sure enough, she followed him. So predictable.

"You promised me more, Kendall, and you're going to give it to me. You said you'd fight for me."

"I don't fight for things I can't win. And what would be the point? Touch Arleigh Donovan and die. You said it yourself."

"Maybe you're the one that will make it stop," she murmured.

Ryder shook his head. The woman barely made sense at times. She paused inside the door. He glanced at her, and found her watching him. He searched the floor for his clothes, her gaze following the movement of his arms, running across his bare legs, over his chest, and pausing for the slightest moment on the shadowy area of his boxers. His cock twitched without his permission. She played with a strand of hair, twisting it around her finger.

That's what she wants to do to you. Wrap you around her finger until you have no thoughts of your own, no will of your own. Quit watching her, damn it. Get dressed and get the hell of out of this cottage.

She made him nervous. She seemed to have a lot on her mind, and he couldn't squeeze a thought through the pain. He knelt on the floor, looking for his lost boot, and her fingers grazed across his back.

"So you're not a champion?" she asked softly. "You came to be a hero, remember?"

Ryder laughed and didn't like the sound of it. He sounded rattled, caught off guard. He should have been used to it around her, but for some reason, it kept surprising him.

"That was before I met *you*." He found his boot and stood up, putting his hands on his hips. "I didn't know I would be fighting a losing battle."

She came very close to him, and when she spread her palm across his chest, he sucked a long breath into his lungs. Her fingers began to toy with the hair that curled there. He told himself to move her hand, but he couldn't raise his own arm.

"Knock it off, Arleigh," he said. Something was wrong with his voice. The harsh tone he aimed for sounded less than firm. "Don't start this again."

She herded him, moving him inch by inch. He felt the edge of the bed nudge the back of his legs.

"I need you to fight for me."

"Why? I heard you last night. You said you can't resist him. Why don't you go to Flynn now and get it over with? You can live unhappily ever after."

Her hand slid along his chest, across his stomach, and touched the waistband of his boxers, her fingers caressing him. Parts of his body obviously did not suffer the aftermath of a massive hangover. He was

grateful there was any feeling in his body at all, but the timing was very inopportune. Firm is what he needed here.

"I wasn't talking about Cameron," she said. "If you hadn't been so drunk, you would have known I was talking about you."

Ryder tried to laugh. "Me? It sure didn't sound—"

She ran her hands down his arms and linked her fingers through his. "I shouldn't want you, Ryder. It's too dangerous for both of us. But for some reason, I can't resist you. Being near you makes me ache. It would be so much safer if you left, but part of me can't let you go. Have you wrapped me in a spell? Are you under a curse of your own?"

"No," he said softly. "No curse. I'm not even a real Kendall."

Her hand dipped inside his one last defense and curled around his hard cock. He practically jumped out his skin.

"You feel very real to me," she said quietly. Her hand ran along the length of him, and she smiled. "I know what happens when we're near each other. You get hard and swollen, filled with need and want. I understand how frustrated you get. I get frustrated, too."

"You do?"

Perfect. Just perfect. He couldn't hold onto his anger once she touched him. His voice sounded husky, still intoxicated, and he cleared his throat, ready to defend himself, to make up some story, but he couldn't come up with a single thought. His brain had taken a leave of absence and had left his body in total control.

"You were very angry with me last night," she said, "because you think I've lied to you."

"You have."

She put her finger over his mouth. "I haven't. There is so much you don't know about me. But I don't want to talk now, Ryder. When we talk, we fight, and I don't want to fight. I have other things on my mind."

She squeezed her hand around his dick, and he shuddered.

"Have you had this all night?" she asked.

"I've had it for days," he growled. "It's a perpetual ache that eats at me like you do, a nagging consequence of being in your presence. Don't worry about me. I'll survive."

"I'm afraid you won't. That's what frightens me."

She edged closer, although there wasn't an inch between them. Her shirt rubbed against his bare chest, and he realized how thin the material was when the slight friction made her nipples hard. They pressed into his skin. He wanted to wrap his lips around them and suckle her.

"It's so dangerous," she murmured, "but this indecision is going to kill us."

"Are you offering yourself to me again?"

"Aye," she whispered. "Are you accepting?"

She was playing a very dangerous game with him. He didn't know if she toyed with him for amusement, was innocently unaware of consequences, or plain stupid, but it was time to find out.

He shoved her onto the bed. She gazed up at him, innocent, trusting. Did she have any idea what she was doing?

"What happens when I don't die, Arleigh? What will you do with me then?"

"I'm hoping you don't. I'm risking your life and my sanity, but I can barely stand being near you."

She stretched out her arms, and he lowered his body on top of hers. Her hand was caught between them and had dipped inside his boxers again, her fingers caressing him, stroking him, making him swell harder. If he wasn't careful, he was going to lose this battle.

"There's something inside of me that needs you," Arleigh said. "I know you feel it, too."

"I feel it. But what are you doing here? Is this for real?"

"Aye. It's what you want, isn't it?"

"Are you going to change your mind? Demand a change of venue? Cry or faint? Scream bloody murder? Lecture me on poetry?"

"Why would I do any of those things?"

"Because inside of you is a temptress, Arleigh, and I think she enjoys seeing me in torment."

"It's a part of who I am. I can't change it. The Leanan sidhe spirit is inside of me."

"I want to be inside of you. You've got me in your hand, Arleigh. Can you feel what I want?"

She nodded, and her hand tightened around him.

"Tell me what you feel," he said.

A blush stole across her creamy skin, and he wrapped his hands around her face, forcing her to look at him.

"Tell me."

"It feels silky, soft, smooth. Firm, hard, swollen with pressure. It feels hungry. I can take the hunger away. All you have to do is take my body."

"That's not what I meant. Do you know what I feel, Arleigh?"

"No," she whispered.

"I feel power. I feel control. With one small movement," he pushed himself against her, nestling between her thighs, "with one push, I could own you. I stopped before, but I may not stop again. Do you know how dangerous that is? Do you feel how much power you've given me right now? Do you understand what could happen here?"

Her breath caught in her chest. She shook her head, a tiny shake he felt in his hands. He hated himself for being such a prick.

"Your mind games may have worked on some kids in Ireland. Hell, they might even have worked on some superstitious men here, including my brother, but I'm a different breed, Arleigh. I don't believe in curses, and I sure as hell don't believe that if I fuck you I'm going to die."

"You should," she whispered.

"What happened in your past, Arleigh? Was it so bad you have to bury your passion in a death curse? Are you going to deny yourself love for the rest of your life? Who took your control and did this to you? Why did you have to create this Leanan sidhe to protect you?"

"Why won't you believe me? Why are you asking me questions?"

He pushed against her again. "I'm trying to make you understand. This isn't a game. This isn't about a time long ago when you say you had power, and I'm not buying into superstition. You're not in control right now. I am. We can get rid of your virginity right now."

He yanked at her skirt, drawing it up her legs, and Arleigh stiffened beneath him, clutching his hand. He stared at her, waiting for her decision, waiting for her to say no. Her hand loosened a little. She looked suspicious. Not of him but of something else. She released his hand, and when she made no move to stop him, he lifted the skirt higher. Her fingers traced a line across his cheek.

"I'm frightened. If we do this, I could lose you."

"You're not going to lose me. I'm not going anywhere. But you will lose your virginity if you keep this up. Make your decision, Arleigh. Is this what you really want?"

He didn't give her time to answer. He slammed his mouth against hers, and his lips swallowed hers, lightning fast. Her lips opened, willingly, breathlessly. Her hips rose to meet his and she gripped him tighter. Her heart thumped erratically beneath him. He kissed her hard, his tongue sweeping through her mouth, and she whimpered. He pulled at her shirt, and his mouth sought out her breast, tasting her, savoring the sweetness of her body. He pulled the nipple into his mouth. Her arms twisted around his neck.

"Be sure," he whispered. "I don't want to force you, honey. I don't want to own you."

"You already do."

"There are other ways to own a person." He pressed kisses against her fluttering pulse. "It has to be good for both of us."

She breathed against his neck, and his pulse raced. "It will be."

He lifted his face and studied her. "Someday it will be, but you came in here to seduce me because of last night. Right now you're moving on instinct, swept up in this power you claim you had. You see a man to conquer. I want you to see me."

"I do see you," she whispered.

"Not yet," he said, "but you will. I want the choice to come from your heart, Arleigh, not from your insecurity."

He pressed himself harder against her. The gauzy barrier between them stretched, allowing him closer. A rush of moisture leaked from her pussy, and he felt the wet stain of it against his boxers. Damn, he was a fool. It would be so easy to slide inside, to make her his, to fill this woman and bind them together.

"You don't have power over me, Arleigh. Right now I have the advantage, and if you're not careful, the choice will be taken from you. I won't mean to take it, but I will, because I'm losing control around you."

He tore himself away from her and pulled her to her feet. She reached for him, but he took a step backward.

"I don't want control. I want us to be lost in each other. I want it to be real."

"I want it to be real too," Arleigh said. "But I don't know if that's possible."

"Then we have a real problem," Ryder said, "and living in this house together is going to get very uncomfortable."

"You won't change your mind?"

Ryder shook his head.

"Not even to get rid of *that*," Arleigh asked. Her gaze fluttered down between his legs.

"No," he said. "Sex isn't enough, Arleigh. Whatever this is goes beyond sex. I'll live with this ache until you decide. I want everything or nothing at all."

"Nothing?" she echoed.

"I want all of you. When you think you can give it to me, we'll talk again."

Arleigh sighed. "Great. Just great."

Chapter 19

Arleigh nearly dropped the buckets when she struggled through the door of the cottage. He sat exactly where she'd left him, at the table with Stephen's little shaving glass and razor. He meticulously dipped his razor into a bowl of warm water and sliced it across his face in smooth, even strokes. She liked the new growth of beard on his face, but he said it itched.

"Are you e'er going to do any work around here?" Arleigh asked.

"Master, remember?" he muttered around the razor.

"Stephen did work around here, and he ne'er had time for such frivolous things. 'Tis a natural thing to have a beard, Ryder. Most men have them."

"Not me."

Ryder ran his hand across his cheek, sighing, enjoying the feel of the smooth skin. She wished she could feel it. He peered into the foggy little glass and swiped the razor across his chin. Arleigh carried the buckets to the hearth while he ignored her.

"Have you done something to your hair?" Arleigh asked.

He had tied it at his neck with a piece of ribbon. Had he been going through her things? She planned to set him straight about that right now. What right did he have—?

"Do I question you about your grooming habits?" Ryder asked. "For instance, when did you last take a bath?"

"I wash up every day. Do I look dirty?" She bent her head and sniffed under her arm. "Do I smell odd?"

"No, just curious. You always smell great."

Ryder dipped his hands into his bowl of water and splashed it on his face. He held out his hand, blinking drops from his lashes. "Towel."

Arleigh grabbed a cloth and hurled it toward him. "Am I your personal maid now?"

Ryder dried his face and gave her a smile. "We have to find some sort of compromise between us, Arleigh. I told you that living together in this cottage would be uncomfortable. I've decided the best thing to do is train you to do your job."

"I've been doing this job for six months."

He leaned back and folded his arms. "Frankly, you suck at it. Lesson One. Don't question me on everything I ask you to do. Lesson Two. Don't presume I don't do anything around here. It's not your business. And Lesson Three." He nodded toward the hearth. "You should be heating up that water so I can have warm water to bathe in. I'm master of this little piece of heaven. I'm entitled to a hot bath, don't you think?"

"Stephen washed in the river."

"I'm not Stephen. Start heating the water, and I'm going to need a lot more than that." He gestured toward the buckets. "I'm a big guy. Where's the tub?"

When she waved her toward the bedroom, muttering, "under the stairs," Ryder rose from the table. "I'll get the tub. You finish with the water."

Arleigh dumped the water into the large pot and swung it over the hearth, snarling and grumbling. Who did the man think he was? Giving her orders. Making her his own personal servant. Stephen had never treated her this way. Stephen had never interfered in anything she did, never offered advice on how to complete a task, never even suggested what tasks she should perform.

He came out of the bedroom and dropped the tub to the hearth stones.

"I don't mind your talking out loud, Arleigh, but I'll remind you again. Stephen had you on some kind of pedestal. I'm not Stephen."

"Stephen was *nice* to me," she muttered.

He untied the string of his shirt and pulled it over his head. Arleigh watched him from the corner of her eye.

"I'm nice to you. Sometimes nicer than you deserve."

Arleigh grunted. Ryder kicked off his shoes, pulled off the stockings, and had begun to unlace his breeches when she spun around, hands on hips.

"Do you have to do that now?"

He paused. "Do you have a problem with it?"

"Numerous problems," Arleigh snapped. "You could have the decency to wait till I've left the room."

"You've seen it all before."

"No, 'twas dark."

He stared at her, waiting for her to continue. A nearly naked man stood in her keeping room, in broad daylight. It was not the same as touching him, holding him, yearning for the intimacy between them, and wringing moans from a mouth that stirred her with kisses. It was not the same as feeling his muscles beneath her hands, wanting those strong legs to cover hers, or running her hands across his flesh. He tossed his clothes about cavalierly, like the beauty of his body would have no impact on her whatsoever. He treated her like a servant who should have no thoughts of his body at all.

"Tis not the same," she repeated.

He moved toward her, his breeches slipping down his hips. In another few steps, he would lose them entirely. She ran her glance down his body, and when he spoke, her eyes darted to his.

"It could be the same." His hands reached out and plucked at the laces of her bodice. "We could have a much more intimate relationship."

Arleigh wrapped her hand around his. "As your property?"

"No, as my lover."

"But I've already offered."

Ryder dropped his hand and took a step back. "You know what my stipulations are. No excuses, no delusions, no reservations. Real emotions between two people. When you can do that, you won't be able to keep me away."

He let his breeches drop to the floor. The smile that spread across his face ripped through her, and tiny dimples appeared in his cheeks. Did Ryder Kendall get everything he wanted in life with that smile? Oh, she had no doubt he did.

"Until then, honey, you'll have to deal with it."

Arleigh gulped, and a furious heat spread through her body. Bloody hell. Seeing every inch of him unnerved her. The man was impossibly beautiful. He planted his hands on his hips, his pelvis cocked at an angle that was disturbingly sensual. With the hair falling across his eyes and that childlike smile on a smooth face, he looked like a little boy with a delightful secret, but that stance...oh, definitely all man. Seductive. Suggestive. Provocative. A challenge sparkled in his eye, a dare she wanted to accept. What did he

want from her that she hadn't offered? What words did he need to hear? She wanted that body. She wanted him.

He waited for her to say something. That amused glint in his eye would soon turn into a roar of laughter at her expense, because she now blushed and stammered, at a total loss for words. She could think of nothing to say except, "Please, Ryder, end this. Take me to the bedroom. Make me yours." But to do that, she would have to admit something she could never do. She would have to tell him everything she had ever said had been a lie. So she stared and held her breath against the flood of longing that raced through her.

What kind of hold did this man have over her? What did she have to do to make him hers?

"Get your own damn water," she snarled.

She grabbed her collecting basket from the table and fled through the cottage door. When she slammed it behind her, he roared with laughter.

* * * *

Preoccupied all through supper, Ryder ate his stew over a sheath of parchments that were now covered in gravy stains. He scribbled sporadically, like his problems could be solved by the mere application of ink at regular intervals. Ryder appeared to have been educated, yet his awkwardness with the quill amazed her. And he was messy. Column after column of undecipherable words covered the pages, smearing with blots of ink. Each time a drop splashed onto his illegible handwriting, Ryder snarled and cursed as if the world had ended. His fingers were covered with ink stains.

When he emptied his bowl, she refilled it, and he ate. When she put some bread down in front of him, he wolfed it down, all the while scribbling and pawing through the ledgers stacked in front of him. A man on a mission, he didn't even seem to know she occupied the same room.

She cleaned the table around his mess, washed the dishes, and had hauled in four buckets of water before he finally glanced up at her. He fumbled through the stacks and pulled one out from the bottom. The ledgers tumbled to the table with a loud thunk, nearly knocking over the ink well. He cursed some more then went back to scribbling.

She waited impatiently while her water heated, trying to make small talk, to get him to say anything, but after three "uh huhs" and one "okay," she gave up. When she had the tub ready, she undressed, slowly. She made a great deal of noise, but she couldn't get his attention without tossing her clothes onto the table or hitting him over the head, which she was very close to doing. She couldn't win this battle with him if he ignored her. Finally she gave up. She grabbed the soap and stepped into the tub.

"What are you doing, Ryder?"

He continued to write, the scratch of the quill furious and purposeful. "When I see Flynn, I want a game plan."

"Are you still trying to find a way to pay him back the money?"

Ryder pulled another sheath toward him, muttering, "I'll find it. It's here somewhere. I have to decide what we don't need."

"Believe me," Arleigh said. "If we have it, we need it. 'Tis the way Stephen was."

Ryder paused, his hand poised over the parchment. A drop of ink hung precariously at the tip of the quill then splattered to the page, warranting some kind of complaint.

"Damn it!" He grabbed at another sheet of parchment and blotted his page and finally tossed his answer over his shoulder. "He didn't need you."

Arleigh gave a little sigh. "Oh, I suppose you're right. 'Tis no earthly reason anyone would need *me*. What could I possibly offer any man? But he was your brother. You must have some idea what motivated him."

"Not a freaking clue," Ryder said absently.

The man was bleeding impossible! Arleigh wanted to jump from the tub, fly across the room, and hit him. Oblivious, dense, blind! Would he ever look at her? She sat in a tub of water that hid nothing from his view, and he didn't even want to see her naked? She had seen every inch of him, and it had been absolute torture. It seemed only right he be forced to see every inch of her again. How long should she freeze to death in a lukewarm tub of water, waiting for him to open his bloody eyes? She tried to keep the impatience out of her voice.

"You should probably give my indenture papers to Cameron. 'Tis what he wants."

"I don't give a shit what Flynn wants," Ryder snapped.

A reaction? From the oblivious Ryder Kendall?

"Twould solve all your problems. The debt would be gone, and you wouldn't have to deal with me any longer. I'm not the easiest person to get along with."

"You're right about that."

"I'll go willingly, if that's what you decide."

He twisted on the bench and glanced at her. Arleigh ran the soap along her shoulder. His eyes widened, and she got the reaction she'd been hoping for. He nearly choked on the brandy he had dumped into his mouth. His voice sounded raspy, raw.

"Jesus, Arleigh."

She blinked. "What's wrong?"

"What are you doing?" He seemed to be choking, and she couldn't have been happier.

"Taking a bath. Remember?"

"No," he said softly. "I think I'd remember something like that."

She laughed, waving her hand toward him. "I'm sorry I interrupted. Continue with your work."

He nodded, but he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. His stare followed the soap, tracing a path across her shoulders, down her breasts, and along her torso into the water. He licked his lips then swept the back of his hand along his mouth, his eyes locked on the movement of her hand in the water. When she splashed water over herself and swept the foam from her skin, he watched her hands.

"You're not working," Arleigh said.

"You're a little distracting."

Arleigh smiled. "Think of me as another item in your ledger book, probably an unnecessary one. I'm a servant. Pretend I'm not even here."

"Impossible," he whispered.

She rose from the tub and swept her hands down her body, tossing water droplets into the air. She peeked at him to gauge his reaction. Oh, he watched, Good, Let him suffer.

No reason on earth a man should need me, Master Kendall. No reason at all. I hope you choke on your control.

Ryder stood up slowly from the table. He nearly stumbled into the bench. He moved toward the hearth, but his eyes never left her, and she almost laughed when his boot hit the brick. He reached out blindly to pick

up one of the cloths that lay on the stones and knocked the pile over. He never even noticed. He held the cloth out, opening it so she could step into it. She climbed out of the tub, gave him a smile, and pushed her wet hair away from her face. When she stepped toward him, he pulled back a step, his glance sweeping over her with such ferocity she thought for a moment she might have gone too far. He seemed angry with her. His stare moved slowly across every inch of her, and the cloth dropped to the floor.

She held her breath.

"Turn around," he said.

She did then waited. He swept her hair over her shoulder, and when his hands went around her waist, she leaned back against him. His hands slid down, cupping between her legs, up across her stomach, to gather her breasts. He squeezed her tight against him.

"Do you know what you're doing to me? Do you have any idea what kinds of thoughts go through my head when I look at you?"

"Wicked thoughts?"

"They're so wicked I'm ashamed to say them."

"I find that hard to believe," Arleigh said.

He thrust his pelvis against her bottom and leaned down to whisper in her ear. What she thought she heard sent a rush of heat through her body, and a blush rose in her cheeks. She had to be mistaken. She twisted her face toward him.

"Really?" she asked.

His brow rose, and a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "Really."

"Is that even possible?" she asked.

"More than possible. It's a certainty."

"No, no." She shook her head. "I could ne'er let you do that."

His hands reached down to cup her bottom. His palms caressed her skin while his fingers dipped lower. The words he whispered in her ear sent a shiver down her spine. He continued to whisper, and her entire body caught fire. She stood wet and naked and should have been cold, but the heat that poured from her should have made him burst into flame. His hands roamed across her skin, finding pieces of her that were hidden, pieces of her that shouldn't be touched, pieces of her that made her want turn in his arms and beg him to take her on the floor. His fingers slid between her pussy lips and

softly stroked her skin, coming to rest on the knob of flesh he'd touched the first night. Holy Saints. Her body trembled.

Her entire plan had turned against her. She had set out to drive him crazy, and now he breathed into her ear, telling her things beyond her imagining, and God help her, she wanted to do them. She wanted to pull his cock into her mouth. She wanted him to bury his face between her legs and lick the spot he touched. She wanted his cock to slide—

"Have you ever done any of those things?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Have you?"

"Some of them. Others, well, I've been waiting for the right woman."

She hesitated a moment, swallowing hard. "Am I the right woman?" she asked.

"Arleigh." He caught her chin and turned her face toward him. "You're the only woman."

She twisted in his arms and he kissed her. She would tell him anything. If he wanted her to say she'd lie, she would tell him so. If he wanted to ignore her warnings, she would let him. Her only thoughts lay in the sensation of the mouth on hers and the hard cock under her hand. She wanted it, and she wanted this man. If she had to bribe God to keep him, she would. If she had to sell her soul to the fae, she would. She would find a way to keep him alive.

He pulled away from her and bent down to pick up the cloth from the floor. His glance darted past her, and he ran a hand through his hair. She wondered if she'd said something out loud, murmured something against his lips, something she should not have said.

"Fuck, Arleigh," he said softly.

He pressed the cloth into her hand and backed away toward the cottage door. He grabbed Stephen's cloak from the peg and turned to her.

"This isn't going to work," he said. "I'll talk to Jack Kensington tomorrow. There must be an empty cottage on the island. I'll move. I can't do this."

He opened the door and stepped into the dark night.

* * * *

She brushed out her hair and the tears started. One moment she was fine, thinking of Ryder ambling along the banks of the James, his cloak flapping around him in the autumn breeze, and the next, a tear fell from her eye and slid down her cheek like an icicle.

She didn't want him to move out of the cottage. She didn't want him to sell her indenture to Flynn. But one of those two things would be necessary, because she didn't want to be the cause of his death. If she had to spend one more day, one more hour in his presence, she would beg him to take her.

And, after that, he would die.

Arleigh wiped at her face. She couldn't deny it or change it. The inevitability of it rolled through her painfully and raced through her mind on the faces of the men she had known. The boys who had kissed her, the men who had touched her. Sean McClintock, dead of a bee sting. Liam Duffy, drowned in a still pond. Owen Murphy, lost in a winter storm. Declan Bergen, broken neck. Jamey Finnegan, unknown causes.

And the worst part of it all was that none of the men had ever come closer to her than furtive embraces, hurried caresses, feverish kisses stolen in quick moments. She had given herself to none of them, and yet death had still claimed them. The banshees had sung over the Irish hills for these lost boys and men.

Stephen Caindale had managed to stay alive for six months, but Stephen had never touched her, never kissed her. She couldn't deny he'd wanted to. She could try to delude herself into thinking Stephen had wanted her in his home for the sole purpose of raising his daughters, but she had seen the way his eyes touched upon her, and his rigid back when she came near. She had sensed him trying to control his very breath in her presence. She had heard his footsteps on the staircase many times and had felt him watching her while she lay in bed. How long would Stephen have stayed away from her? She would never know the answer to that.

Ryder's escape was a miracle, but not all the prayers in the world, not all the promises she could make to God, and not all her hope would keep him alive. If she didn't insist he stay away from her, he would join the growing collection of dead men who had loved her. And if they made love? Then surely the retribution would be quick and fierce. She would never be able to keep the banshee from returning to Trinity Island.

She thought a chance existed that Ryder could be the one, the one that could end her nightmare. But to test her theory, she would have to risk his life.

The cottage door opened, and Ryder moved around in the keeping room. She hurried and tucked herself under the covers when she heard footsteps on the staircase. She tried to stop the tears, but the moment she saw his shadow flicker in the corner, a dam seemed to burst somewhere inside of her. A ragged sob tore from her.

He stood at the top of the landing for a long while, listening to her tears. Finally, when her tears subsided and she wiped her face on the edge of the sheet, his voice wound through the darkness.

"We're killing each other, Arleigh."

He sat on the edge of the bed, and the weight of his body pulled her across the lumpy mattress. He caught her against him, and his mouth moved softly against hers, kissing her gently, moving across her eyelids, her forehead, her cheeks.

"What do I have to do?" Ryder asked.

"Just believe me."

"I can't," he said.

"Then we'll continue to kill each other, but at least you won't be in a damp grave with the others."

He yanked her against him and found her mouth in the darkness. This time his kiss was hard, filled with urgency and desperation.

"We'll work something out, sweetheart. I promise."

"Please don't make promises you can't keep."

"I don't," Ryder said.

The weight lifted from the bed, but as she reached for him, he vanished. She heard his footsteps on the stairs, and she was alone.

Chapter 20

Another night of drinking did nothing to improve his mood. Why he thought he could find answers in Stephen's brew eluded him, but he kept looking for them there. When he yanked open the door to the keeping room, Arleigh was singing, and for one moment he was sorry he had interrupted her. She positively glowed with happiness. She took one look at him, and the singing stopped. He doubted anyone could put Arleigh Donovan in a bad mood faster than he could. His weary glance fluttered across her, too tired and aching to do anything else.

"Mornin', princess," he muttered.

"Ryder, why do you keep looking for solutions in that bottle?"

"I asked myself the same question." He grabbed the pitcher near the washbasin, poured some water into his mouth, and rinsed. He spit into her washbasin, and she frowned.

"Must you be such a barbarian?"

"My head hurts likes hell, Arleigh. Lay off."

"Are we going to have this same conversation every morning? If so, I have to tell you—"

"I know, blah, blah, blah, same shit, different day." He grabbed her cup of tea from the table and downed it in one swallow. She gaped at him. "You're a regular Chatty Cathy. There are times when I think I should fuck you and let this curse of yours swallow me whole. It would save wear and tear on my ears."

"Oh, some day I'm going to prove how right I am, Ryder Kendall, and when you're lying in your grave, you can eat every one of your insults. You're beyond a doubt the most—"

What he had in mind must have showed on his face. Arleigh's mouth snapped closed, and she suddenly backed up. Her eyes widened. He

followed her. He did have a headache but not one so bad that he couldn't torment her.

"I've a mind to eat other things this morning, Arleigh. Looking at you and that fiery little spark in your eyes, I'm beginning to think we should go back to the bedroom for round three. Or is it four?"

"You can eat at the table like a civilized man," she snapped. "I don't need to clean crumbs from every room in this house."

He pressed his body against hers and bent her over the table. "I wasn't talking about food, honey. I'm talking about other things. *Wicked* things."

"Other things?" she squeaked.

"You liked rubbing against my cock. You almost came. We could try something else."

"What?" she whispered.

He put his hands on her waist and lifted her onto the table. When he tried to raise her skirt, she caught his hands.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to go down on you, baby. Eat every inch of your pussy until you scream with pleasure."

"You're going to what?"

He began to tug on the laces of her corset. Arleigh watched his hands. Each time one of the laces dropped to the table, her eyes rose to his with a look of confusion.

"I want to see your breasts." He tossed the corset to the table. "And so there are no surprises, I'm also going to touch them. Thought you should know."

He winked at her, and she blushed furiously. He opened the laces of her shirt and bared her breasts. She sat frozen, seemingly unable to move. He left her for a second and kicked a low bench toward the edge of the table. He hunkered down and peered up at her.

"So here's what's going to happen, Arleigh. You're going to lie back. You don't have to do a thing, and you don't have to watch me."

"What are you going to do?"

Ryder raked his hair back and gave her a smile. "I'm going to lick your pussy. Every inch, inside and out. I'm going to suck on your clit. I'm probably going to put my fingers in you. We'll see how many you can take. And while I'm doing that, I want you to touch your breasts. They seem

pretty sensitive, and you seem to like them squeezed. Don't be shy. I may reach up from time to time for a quick squeeze myself, because I have to confess that your nipples drive me crazy. Rosy buds of perfection."

"I can't let you do any of that," Arleigh cried.

"You can and you will," Ryder said. He tossed her skirt up to her lap, and before she had a chance to protest, he had spread her thighs apart. He whistled, and Arleigh tried to close her legs, but he put his hands in the creases of her legs and held her open, spreading her outer lips.

"Damn, Arleigh, you have a beautiful pussy. Pink. Ripe. You're swollen and wet. Been thinking of me?"

He ran his thumb across the moist folds and she trembled. She reached down and tugged at his hair. He glanced up.

"The curse," she whispered.

"What about it?"

"It shouldn't make you want to do *this*. No one has e'er done this to me unless we go to the Between Times. I don't understand what's going through your head. I don't understand how this can be happening. No one ever tries to steal pieces of *me*."

"I told you I'm not buying into your curse, honey. And I'm stealing pieces of you only because you won't give them to me. Now lie back. You're going to like this."

She sat stock still on the table, her hands clenched in the wad of fabric at her waist, her back straight. He wrapped his hands around her hips and pulled her to the lip of the table. She uttered a tiny little noise that he ignored while he tucked his arms under her knees and lifted her legs. He held the edge of the table and gave her another wink.

"No curses, baby. I'm doing this for my own personal enjoyment. Takes my mind off the pain."

He leaned forward, and his tongue licked the entire length of her pussy. Arleigh groaned and fell back on the table with a thump.

"You taste good, honey. This is a great cure for a headache."

He started with the swollen lips that hid the hollow of her body. His tongue lapped across the flesh, pulling them one at a time into his mouth and sucking very gently. When he finished, he spread them with his fingers and lapped her in circles, lightly licking her inner lips and letting his tongue

press against her clit. She bolted upright. He raised his eyes and met her startled glance.

"You're not relaxing," he said.

"That was...intense."

"It's going to get more intense," he said. "But you can watch if you want to."

He licked her clit, and she thumped back to the table, her fingers clenching the fabric of her skirt. He moved his tongue from her clit to her folds, lapping at the juices spread over her soft skin. He settled his mouth against her and pushed his tongue into her, scraping it across the top of her vaginal wall. Her hand wrapped in his hair, tugging him closer, and he plunged his tongue deeper and began to suck. Her ass wiggled and moved closer, and her legs tensed against his arms. She whimpered, and the sound of it was music to his ears. He sucked harder, and when she cried out, he smiled against her.

He withdrew his tongue and locked his mouth over her clit. She trembled violently, and her hips surged against his face. He sucked on her again, and her body rose from the table. He took advantage of it and reached for her breast. He snatched one of her nipples between his fingers and squeezed hard, rolling it until he felt it grow larger, elongating under his brutal caress.

"Oh Holy Saints, Ryder, what are you doing?"

He pulled his mouth away but didn't answer. He began to torment her with his tongue, sweeping it over her clit again and again until she gasped and fell back again. Her body arched upward, and her ass lifted off the table. Her hand tentatively touched her breast, and the sight of it was very arousing. His cock hardened, but he had already decided this wasn't about him. He tried to ignore what his dick wanted. He tossed one of her legs over his shoulder and reached between her legs, plunging two fingers into her while he licked her clit. Her body surged toward him, burying his fingers deep. He moved his tongue lower and licked the cum that flowed from her. The taste of it spurred him to want more. He covered her clit with his mouth and fucked her with his fingers until her small pants filled his ears, and her body thrummed with tension.

"Let me go," she pleaded. "I can't take this."

He tore his mouth away but moved his thumb to her clit, circling the swollen nub with a constant pressure to keep her at the edge.

"I'm not letting you go until you come. I can do this all morning. I love the taste. I love the smell. I love looking at your pussy, and seeing you touch your breasts makes me want to come in my pants like a kid. But most of all, I love proving to you that you're not in control. There is no curse, Arleigh. I'm doing this because I want to, not because some damn curse has control of me."

He paused long enough to tongue her clit. The shudder that ran through her body was exciting. His cock beaded with his cum. Okay, so maybe it was a little about him. He shoved his hand into his boxers and grabbed his dick.

"Squeeze your nipple, honey."

He lifted up long enough to watch her fingers tighten on her nipple. His fingers worked her pussy, and her teeth caught at her lower lip. She ran her hand across her breast, cupping the fullness of it in her small hand. He could almost feel her breast under his own hand. He could definitely feel his dick. It was hard, pulsing, throbbing. And he was going to come.

"Open up. Let yourself go. Trust me. Tell me how much you like this."

"I love this," she whispered.

"Good. Now let go."

He drove his fingers into her again and licked her pussy, one long leisurely caress along the entire area. Her body trembled in anticipation, waiting, waiting until he touched her clit with the tip of his tongue. A spasm rippled through her. It was small, but she cried out. He took advantage of her preoccupation to tug at his cock. He dropped his forehead against her pussy, breathing in the scent, and gave his cock a couple of quick tugs. With a groan, he shot cum all over his hand and flooded his boxers. He wasn't proud, but he certainly felt better.

She squirmed on the table. He got back to business. He ran his tongue over her pussy, and this time when he reached her clit, he flickered his tongue swiftly several times, and another spasm tore through her. This one was real. He began to suck on her. She began to quiver, trembling violently beneath his hands. Her back arched, her hips lifted, and a moan of such intensity ripped through her. He was determined to shatter every illusion she

had of who she was. He sucked harder. When he heard her burst into tears, he pulled his mouth away.

He stood up and leaned over her but pushed his hand between her legs. His cum mixed with hers, and his wet fingers slid over her swollen flesh easily, dipping into her, spreading the lips, rubbing gently, making her accept every moment of the experience. She sobbed while her body shook and quaked under his hand. When her climax tapered off, he still refused to let her go. He laid his palm against her damp thatch, rubbing gently, trying to calming her down. Tears slid from beneath her closed eyes and her mouth pulled in tortured gasps of air. Gradually the trembling subsided. He pulled her up and gathered her against him. She lay limp in his arms.

He lifted her up and carried her into the bedroom. When he laid her down, he pulled off her skirt and shoes and tucked the blanket around her. She didn't say a word. She seemed to be out of words for once in her life. He sat on the edge of the bed and wiped the tears from her cheek.

"You're not supposed to cry when you come," he said gently. "Did I hurt you?"

She turned on her side, pressed her face into the pillow, and shook her head.

"Did you like it?" he asked.

"Aye," she said softly.

"Then why are you crying?"

She sighed, and the sound broke something inside of him. "You made me feel wanton. I know you don't have a very high opinion of me, but I'm not a whore, Ryder. I feel like a harlot."

He gripped her shoulder and forced her to roll over.

"A harlot? Honey, I think you're the most naïve woman I've ever met. My touch shouldn't make you feel like a whore."

"I ne'er used to feel this way. The curse brought no shame, no sense of immorality. But you fill me with such lewd thoughts, such uncontrolled feelings. You stir my body to want such wicked things."

He winked at her. "What kinds of wicked things?"

"Please stop teasing me. I'm serious."

"I know you are, honey. These thoughts and feelings you have are good things, Arleigh. At least we're on the same wavelength. There are no restraints between lovers."

"You're not my lover. You want me because of the curse."

"Goddamn it, Arleigh, stop this insanity. I want you because you're fucking beautiful and spirited as hell. You're everything I ever wanted wrapped into a mouthy, hot-tempered, seductive little hellcat, and I want you to start believing that. We may not have fucked yet, but I *am* your lover, and I'm not going anywhere. So get used to it."

She looked doubtful, but he tucked his hands around her face and kissed her. He tasted the tears on her mouth.

"I want you, Arleigh Donovan. For keeps. And the next time you come, I don't want to see tears, I want you to smile at me. Now take a nap. I think I wore you out. We'll talk more later."

A small smile flickered across her lips, and her eyes closed.

* * * *

He slumped onto the bed and pulled off his boots. If he could have made a bigger mess out of his time on Trinity he would have liked to see it. He hadn't yet managed to retrieve the Caindale girls. All of his bullying tactics couldn't seem to keep Flynn away from the island. And no matter how much he tried, he couldn't capture the heart of the girl who had stolen his.

"It's been less than a week," he muttered. "What do you want? A bloody miracle?"

That's exactly what he wanted. He wanted Arleigh to walk through that door and admit she loved him. He wanted her to drop to her knees in front of him and beg him to be part of her life. He wanted her to touch him with the same burning need he had for her.

"Be a writer, Kendall. Then you can make up all the fantasies you like."

He stripped off the rest of his clothes, dropping them into an untidy pile. He leaned over, ready to blow out the candle, when the latch of the door jiggled. Arleigh came through a tiny gap like a childish wraith, wrapped in her blanket. She slipped into his room as she had slipped into his heart and, after closing the door with a firm resolve that made him smile, she came toward him. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, but he thought there were tears drying on her face again. He had stayed away from her all day to give her time to think.

He sat on the edge of the bed and waited, arms on his thighs, his hands loosely clasped. What did she have on her mind now? Would there ever be a time when she would be able to confront him in the daytime? When she dropped to her knees in front of him, he couldn't help himself. He took hold of her shoulders and pulled her closer, tucking her between his thighs.

"I want to tell you about myself," Arleigh said. "It's very important you understand. Will you listen?"

He nodded. Her soft voice, her warm eyes, made his heart melt, but the tone was filled with surrender, and his heartbeat quickened.

"I can't stay away from you. 'Tis very important I should, but I can't. Eventually I'm going to let you, well, you know, and I want you to know what might happen after. I've tried before, but when I tell you the whole story, maybe you'll finally believe me. I need you to know the risks."

Arleigh dropped her blanket and climbed up on the bed. She knelt behind him and ran her hands up his back, kneading his muscles in her fingers. He groaned and relaxed under her hands. Her hair fell over his shoulder as she leaned down and kissed him on the back of his neck.

"Cameron and I—"

"I need to know only one thing about Flynn. Are you free? Is it over with him?"

"Twill ne'er be o'er."

Ryder's gut twisted, but he had asked for it. He peered over his shoulder.

"Do you love him that much?"

"I don't love him at *all*!" Arleigh wailed. Her hands clenched on his shoulders. "I want him to go away."

"He's made it pretty clear he's not going anywhere," Ryder said. "We can't pretend he doesn't exist."

"I know, because I tried for six months. I knew he watched me, made plans. I knew I would ne'er escape him."

Ryder twisted around and faced her. "Stephen couldn't protect you?"

"He tried, but he's dead now because of me, and 'twas such a waste, because I knew Flynn before I even came here, before I was—"

"Did you know Flynn back in Ireland?"

"Aye, we knew each other long ago."

He ran his hand down her arm. "Honey, I already know you have a warped sense of time. Long ago? What, two, three years?"

"Hundreds," she said. "We knew each other hundreds of years ago. Before I was—"

She reached out for his hand. Her cold fingers twisted around his. He grabbed the blanket from the floor and tossed it over her shoulders, tucking it around her like she was a small child.

"Come on, Arleigh. Tell me. Before you were what?"

"I knew Cameron Flynn in Ireland. Hundreds of years ago. Before I was mortal. Human."

He almost laughed, but for some reason he couldn't do that to her. He thought he'd better humor her, so he asked the most ridiculous question he'd ever heard himself ask.

"What were you before you were human?"

"I've already told you. I was the Leanan sidhe." Her voice held sorrow, but mixed with it, a trace of pride. "Oh what can ail thee, knight at arms, alone and palely loitering?' Have you wondered why the knight is sitting on the cold hillside?"

"He's lost his love," Ryder said, "the love that had sustained him."

"No, Ryder. 'Twas the love that stole his life. After being allowed glimpses into the faery world and offered the body of the loveliest of the faeries, a price must be paid. I know, because I made men pay it. I killed them."

Ryder rubbed his forehead.

"I did not think of it as killing then," she said. "In the faery world, there is no right or wrong. We do what we do because 'tis our nature. My nature was to steal the soul, the lifeforce of the men who loved me. And there were many, o'er and o'er, season through season, for hundreds of centuries. I have lived forever, Ryder, probably since time began."

"You have memories of this?"

"Aye. In pieces. In dreams and waking moments. Now, 'tis difficult to think on it. I see the human perspective and 'tis sad to me. Then 'twas but an instinct. I needed those men to survive."

"And you enjoyed it?"

"There was pleasure in it."

His gut twisted. "Physical pleasure?"

"Aye, but nothing like what I've felt with you."

"So was Flynn one of these men?"

"Aye, my hardest challenge and an obvious failure, because he managed to cheat the banshee's call. Twice. I am still unsure how he did it, because of my banishment."

"Punishment for trying to kill Flynn?"

"No,'twas punishment for loving Remy. I sought to keep him, whole and alive. 'Twas forbidden and punishment swift. The joining of the flesh had always been a part of what I was, but I had a few glorious moments of real love before banishment. I had forgotten how wonderful it felt till you came here."

He smiled and reached out to touch her face.

"The feelings came flooding back when I met you. I remember the rush, the heat, the fire, the passion, the touch of skin, the wonder of the kiss, the hardness of the body against the softness of the flesh. And the smoldering love that surges through the body like a rising tide, melting into you and burning with an ache and a need that fires the blood and tingles the skin. I remember the hunger, the yearning—"

Ryder shifted uncomfortably on the mattress. "Stop, Arleigh. You really believe all this?"

"Tis the truth."

"Who told you this? What happened in the Quay? Did you lose your reputation and sully the Donovan name, cause a scandal?" Arleigh shook her head. "It's a fairy tale, honey, an attempt to control you."

Arleigh shrugged off the blanket and spread her arms toward the ceiling. Movement fluttered above. More faeries? When had his bedroom become inundated with faeries? She was a regular faery magnet. The tiny creatures began to glow then shot blazes of colorful fire toward her, spiraling over her body, across her skin, twisting through her hair. She glowed with every color Ryder had ever seen. They circled and buzzed for several minutes, whispering and flickering, shouting and flashing. Finally they cruised toward the ceiling and settled down into a soft, gentle glow, like Christmas lights strung from corner to corner.

Arleigh tugged her blanket back over her shoulders and tucked her hand around his face.

"You can see that and still wonder if I tell the truth? There are no fairy tales, Ryder. There are only true stories that have turned into legends. I know, because I am one."

"A Leanan sidhe?" he asked doubtfully.

"The Leanan sidhe," she corrected.

"Right. I forgot. There can be only one. So if the honor's been stripped, who is the reigning Miss Leanan sidhe, riding the float in the faery parade? Who's wearing the crown now?"

"Tis my fear the spirit is still trapped within me."

"How many men do you think you've killed, Arleigh?"

"Thousands."

Ryder smiled. "And you were planning to add me to this number?"

"I would do anything to stop it, but I've no control o'er this. 'Tis why I try to resist everything I want and..." She lowered her eyes and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. When she raised her eyes to his, he saw pain flash through her. "'Tis why I can't possibly love you."

"Do you want to love me, Arleigh?"

"Aye," she murmured.

A slow smile spread across his face.

"Then we're going to figure it out, honey. We're two reasonably bright people. We'll come up with something."

He wanted to draw her down on the bed and prove to her nothing would happen. The urge to coax her into surrender was strong, and Ryder didn't think she would fight him, but he still wanted it to be her choice, without reservations, without fear. Ryder stood up and began to pace around the room.

"So how did you kill all these men?"

"I stole their souls, their spirits, and their will to live. I'm not sure how the curse works now. The boys and men who died were all in good health. There was no withering of spirit, no deterioration of body. Yet the curse still found them, and they died."

"Of natural causes?"

"Is a musket ball in the back a natural cause, Ryder?"

Ryder stopped short. "No, of course not. I'm trying to show you these men died from other causes, not you. Who put this in your head, Arleigh?"

"Tis always been in my head," Arleigh said. "As a little girl, things were happy in my home. My mother loved me and cuddled me, and my father adored me. I could do no wrong in his eyes. But when I grew older, things began to change. My mother began to speak of curses and faeries and changelings. My father laughed at her superstitions, but when she began to speak of me in the same breath, he grew angry."

"Your father must have been an enlightened man, Arleigh. He recognized crazy talk."

"He was wrong," Arleigh said, "and he paid the price, because he became the first casualty of loving me. We lost him one winter when a wasting sickness overtook the Quay. My mother blamed me, but she had also grown afraid of me. She kept me isolated on the farm and withdrew all of her affection. After that, my world began to crumble. My mother, Alice, treated me like a boarder in my own home. She fed me, clothed me, but she rarely spoke and refused my help in anything for fear of retribution."

"Retribution from whom?"

"The faery kingdom. Alice believed I was a changeling, delivered into the human world in a mortal form. She soon realized I was more than that." Arleigh took a deep breath. "When several of the village boys died in one month, they blamed me, because Sean, Liam, and I spent all of our time together. They were my only joy, and when they both died, my heart broke. Alice said I held them under a spell, and they were dead because of the curse that follows the Leanan sidhe. Soon the entire village feared me. When Alice remarried, the curse again found my own cottage. My stepfather, well, he too found me irresistible."

"Your mother blamed you because the dirty bastard couldn't keep his hands to himself?"

Arleigh nodded. "I tried to tell her I had done nothing, but she feared for her husband's life. She didn't love me anymore. Not at all. She banished me from the house, but I could find no refuge. No one in the Quay would help me. Alice made sure of that. I fled to Dublin and found work in a tavern, but no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I resisted, the men were persistent, and they died. They always died."

"How old were you when you left the village?"

"Fifteen, I think."

"You were a goddamned kid, younger than Charity!"

Cold fury snaked its way down his spine. He wanted to hit something. He wanted to get his hands on this Alice Donovan and shake her for what she'd done to this beautiful, loving girl. He restlessly prowled around the room, and Arleigh watched him, her brows furrowed.

"Who's Charity?"

"My sister," he mumbled.

"I thought your sister's name was Faith."

"I have three of them, and I'll tell you about them some day. I want to talk about this so-called mother of yours. She sounds like a fucking lunatic. She should have protected you, loved you."

"She couldn't. She was afraid and had a right to be. I didn't deserve her love. I didn't deserve anyone's love after everything I'd done."

"You did deserve it, Arleigh. She was your mother, for Christ's sake!"

"None of it matters, Ryder, because Alice had always been right. I couldn't escape the curse. It didn't matter if I lodged in the Quay or in the city. The men continued to want me, and they continued to die. They charged me with murder because a healthy sailor dropped dead and a witness had seen him with me. I expected to be hanged, but because there were no wounds on his body, they sent me here."

"So you think you still have these powers and the curse followed you here?"

"It must have. Stephen is dead."

"Stephen is probably dead because of Flynn, Arleigh. Don't blame yourself for that."

"I must. If Flynn had e'er forgiven me, and if Stephen had not become so obsessed with me, your brother would still be alive. I've always been afraid to be close to men. I have left a trail of dead men throughout all of my lifetimes, including this one. 'Tis the reason I'm afraid to be close to you. I could steal your life."

He sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "You don't have to steal it, Arleigh. I'll give it to you if you ask."

"I can't ask," she whispered.

"Then I'm offering. Arleigh Donovan, I am offering my life to you. Take it and do with it what you will. I'm not under a spell. There is no curse. I'm giving you everything I am of my own free will. It all belongs to you. My heart. My soul. My very breath."

"Ryder," she whispered, "'tis so sweet. Stupid but sweet."

She moved closer to him on the bed and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Her hands touched the back of his neck, featherlight and warm. The coldness had left her. She lay full against him, and his body responded with that hot rush of agony he had gotten used to in this place.

She kissed him, her mouth hot on his, moving across his lips like she searched for something. Her warm breath streamed into him, flooding his senses and causing an ache to spread through him. He tore his mouth away.

"Arleigh, we can't start this again," he said. "Not yet. We have to wait for the right time."

"When will it be the right time?" she asked. She pressed her body against his.

"I don't know," Ryder said, "but I've made you cry countless times since I've been here. I've treated you like shit, and I'm feeling guilty as hell. I just can't—"

She ran her hand down the side of his body, and when it dipped between his legs and pressed against his cock, he groaned.

"Now could be the right time," Arleigh said. "Haven't we waited long enough? In this lifetime there have been no men. No one in Ireland. No one in this colony. Not Stephen. Not Cameron. I know I should deny everything I'm feeling, but I wish to give myself to you. You're the first man I've wanted in this human form. I will do everything I can to keep the curse from taking you. Do you still want *me*?"

"Very much, but I want everything right between us when it happens."

Arleigh climbed off the bed and dropped the blanket. She pulled down the quilt and climbed under it. She pulled up the covers to her chin and gave him a little smile.

"I'm sleeping here tonight," she said.

"Oh, okay, well, I guess I'll..." Ryder glanced toward the door and rose slowly. Arleigh pushed the quilt down and patted the mattress.

"With you, Ryder," she said. "Come to bed. I've not slept with a man before. I want to see what it feels like. I want to be close to you."

Her eyes glimmered in the candlelight. Could he do this? He felt like he was violating her trust in him. She'd been honest, even if her tale had been a psychological mind game spun from a lunatic's jealousy. But *his* entire existence in this place was built on a lie, and he had never even thought to

tell her the truth. His mind told him to let her sleep alone, but he wanted to climb into bed and hold her. He needed to hold her. He blew out the candle and slid under the covers.

He cradled her in his arms, and she tucked into the groove of his shoulder like she belonged there. She felt perfect beside him.

"Arleigh," he said.

"Hmm?"

She snuggled close, her leg wrapping around his, her arm across his chest. Pure, delicious torture. He didn't know if he could do it, but he'd try.

"I'm not going to die," he said, "but if something happens to me, or if I disappear from your life, I want you to know it had nothing to do with you."

"The curse takes everyone who loves me. I'm prepared for it."

"It's not going to take me," he said. "My soul belongs to you now, remember? If you hold it close to you, the curse can't touch it."

"I will wrap it around my own and hold tight," Arleigh murmured.

"Two bodies, one heart. Two bodies, one soul," Ryder said. "The curse will have to take us both."

You're in love with a goddamned faery, Kendall. How are you getting yourself out of this one?

Obviously, he wasn't. He planned to keep her. Why would he let go of the thing he had been searching for all his life? He loved Arleigh Donovan, and if he died...well, he'd deal with that little problem when it came.

He steeled himself for a night of agony, but falling to sleep in her arms was the easiest thing he had ever done.

Chapter 21

Ryder thought he might get seasick, or riversick, whatever applied in this case. The boat, if you could actually call it a boat, rocked unsteadily and looked like it had been around since before Columbus. It had been left out in wind, snow, hailstorms, and rain, and was so thoroughly rotted, water leaked through the bottom. He hoped they would make it to the other side before they drowned in it.

"Can you swim?" he asked Arleigh.

"In the water?"

"Where else would you swim? Never mind, I don't want to know. Can you?"

"A little."

"Good. It's been years since I had to save anyone. We're going to be swamped here. Look at all this water. Stephen had some money. Why didn't he buy a better boat?"

"What's wrong with this one?" Arleigh asked.

"Don't get me started. I'll be glad when we make it to the other side."

"We're ne'er going to get there the way you row. You said you knew how to row."

"I'm doing okay. The boat's moving, isn't it?"

"Aye, but, 'tis going in the wrong direction."

Ryder glanced over his shoulder.

"Jesus Christ, we're moving with the current. I thought I left all my inadequacies at home with all the technical bullshit, but I don't even fit in *here*. I can't even row a Goddamned boat."

"You take the name of the Lord in vain very often," Arleigh said. "Why do you do that?"

"Bad habit. At least I never started smoking."

"What's wrong with smoking? 'Tis how we make our living. We grow the tobacco for people to smoke."

"Yeah, well, in a couple hundred years, the Caindales will be real heroes. Lots of people will be thanking us for that occupational choice."

Ryder pulled the oars and swung the boat around. The bank wasn't too far away—a little more sweat, a couple of breaks to puke, and he would make it fine.

"Are you sure you don't want me to row?" Arleigh asked.

"No, I got it."

"You're heading back toward the island."

"Damn it!"

She took the oars from his hands, settled them back in the water, and began to row. The boat flowed smoothly across the water, and Ryder's stomach began to calm down. The girl may not be the New World's greatest cook, but she sure knew how to row a boat. He wished they had a propeller, though. When they reached the opposite shore, Arleigh tied the boat to a tether that jutted from the earth. Ryder glanced around.

"What, no taxis? What do we do now?"

"We walk," Arleigh said.

The path to Jamestown was overgrown. Ryder clawed his way through a seemingly vast jungle of giant trees that swung branches toward his head, snagged his shirt, and tripped him up with their roots. He slapped at several incredibly large mosquitoes trying to eat him alive.

"You people need more roads. How do you stand it? All this life. I feel like I'm on safari. I need some Raid, or Off, or something. There's probably malaria here, right? Or West Nile virus. God, that would be a terrible thing to get. I should have had shots before I came."

Arleigh gave him an odd look but smiled. She led the way, and he followed behind her like a good Scout. He wished he had paid more attention during Scout survival training or at least taken notes during Survivor. How to find food that wouldn't kill you. How to recognize venomous snakes. How to find clean drinking water. How to fish without a pole. How to build a fire. Yep, all of that would have come in real handy here in this colony, but his survival skills were sketchy because, at thirteen, he had been too busy hitting on the babes at the nearby girls' camp to worry

about survival skills, and he usually fell asleep on the sofa while watching TV.

They walked for over a half hour and, finally, the village of Jamestown came into view. He hadn't known what to expect but not this. So many people milled around he felt like an extra on a movie set. Craftsmen busily made barrels; others pounded on anvils, slaughtered animals, and prepared lumber for building materials. They were sweaty and dirty and did not jell with the nostalgic notions he had in his mind before he traveled back in time. Traveled back in time? It made him want to puke if he thought about it too much, so he concentrated on the village. For some reason, with Arleigh, he forgot he was in freaking 1639.

Tired women, dragging buckets and baskets, went about their daily chores with bleak faces and heavy steps. Exuberant children, released from the bonds of chores for a trip to the village, filled the square. They escaped from their preoccupied mothers and raced about, enjoying the chance to be in the company of friends.

Stalls filled with live animals littered the village, the smells hovering in the air with a tangible stench. Ryder wished he had a gas mask. Booths had been set up in the square, and the merchants sold and bartered wares of all description, and food he would have been afraid to eat. Animal carcasses hung from hooks, surrounded by such a vast array of insect life, hovering and settling, he felt a little nauseated seeing it, let alone thinking of eating it.

Small boats and several large ships anchored in the river. The sights and smells of the busy dock were overwhelming. Dirty, distracted sailors unloaded cargo, shoving barrels and crates across the wet gangplank, their eyes focused on the enticements of the village, particularly the tavern. Crates and barrels lined the riverbank.

Sounds filled his ears—the scrape of wood, the crack of lids being pried open, the thump of freight as men pushed it the distance between the old and new worlds. The ships groaning against their moorings and the flapping of canvas in the autumn breeze as the crew gathered the sails nearly deafened him. A man perched high on one of the anchored ships shouted orders. Others tossed bails and packages to the dock below, yelling at one another. Animals were led past them. Their smells took Ryder's breath away.

The fort loomed in the distance.

"Where does Flynn live?"

"Beyond the fort."

"Can we rent a couple of horses or something? I can ride."

She looked at him doubtfully. "Do you ride as well as you row?"

"You don't think I can do anything, do you? I know I haven't been hiding in the woods, preparing for Armageddon, but I know a little about this time. I think I'm doing pretty okay. Hell, I should have jumped ship when the faery stories started, but I hung in there. Of course, I guess I didn't have a choice, because the Weird Sisters haven't tried to contact me, or extract me, whatever. Hell, I don't even know if they realize I'm missing. I'm trying here, Arleigh, but this is all new to me. I'm doing the best I can. You don't have much faith in me."

Arleigh took his hand. "Tis in the company of a madman, I am. You're wrong about my faith in you. I have all the faith of many worlds in you."

She pulled him down and kissed him. Right in public.

"I won't let you down," he said. "I'll fix all this. I promise."

"Stephen said that to me." Arleigh said.

"I'm not Stephen."

"No," she said. "But I didn't care for Stephen the way I care for you."

"You care for me?"

She nodded.

"I care for you, too. Let's get some horses."

* * * *

Cardew Manor looked like something out of *Wuthering Heights*, not the newer versions but the old black-and-white version with Laurence Olivier. It looked gloomy and cheerless, an environment where children would be thoroughly out of place. Hell, anyone with a soul would be out of place in that eyesore.

As the horses carried them toward Flynn's estate, Ryder could not believe his eyes. Where had Flynn found all of that stone? Gray, cheerless walls surrounded the manor. The house itself looked like it had been transported from the Middle Ages. Turrets rose into the sky to offer a clear view of the surrounding area and warn of invaders. Ryder didn't doubt Flynn was an unpopular fellow, but what use did he have for turrets and arrow slits?

"Paranoia, thy name is Flynn," Ryder said. "What's with the castle? Could it be any more obvious he's not from around here? I think the people here should get a clue. I can't believe there's not a drawbridge."

Dank, dismal, and ugly, but it was certainly prosperous. The horses trotted up the winding path to Flynn's manor house, and Ryder saw numerous barns and outbuildings. Flynn had his own stables and blacksmith stall, a mill and granary, a separate kitchen with a very large attached garden, and rows of cottages to house his indentures. Flynn had quite the plantation. And river frontage. That would be costly.

"His land is on the river," Ryder said. "Why didn't we row here?"

"You saw the boat," Arleigh said.

Beyond the plantation proper grew the tobacco. Ryder had thought Caindale plantation successful. In comparison, Flynn would have been considered a very wealthy man. The tobacco fields stretched all the way to the horizon. And, he expected, beyond.

"Well, it's obvious I'm not going to be able to bribe him," Ryder muttered.

"Cameron is a very successful planter," Arleigh said.

"I'll say. Look at this place. It makes our place look like a dirt farm."

"You farm dirt where you come from?" Arleigh asked. "What profit would there be in that?"

"You'd be surprised," he said. "Did Flynn acquire all this from tobacco?"

"He's involved in many things. He also mines, owns a fleet of ships, buys and sells indentures and land, loans money at a profit, sends out exploratory ventures, and exports to England. He is very enterprising."

Ryder shifted on the horse, and that jealous knot twisted in the pit of his stomach. He should have been over that. "You know an awful lot about Flynn."

"He visited Stephen often, and I overheard conversation. I knew Stephen owed him money. I ne'er knew how much or what for."

"He's a regular First National Bank of Flynn. The guy must be a freaking millionaire."

"Aye, whatever that is, I'm sure you must be right."

"Could some of this be from his fairyhood? Faeryness? What word would you use? Faeryness sounds kind of gay. I know he's not gay, but that

might be a good thing right now. Women generally can't leave me alone. They think I'm pretty good-looking. I could use some of my charm if he was gay."

"Cameron may laugh sometimes, but I don't think he's gay. There's not much happiness in him."

Ryder laughed. Damn, she was cute. "Flynn didn't catch a leprechaun by any chance, did he?"

Arleigh's eyes widened in horror. "No one would try to catch a leprechaun. They can be very nasty creatures."

"But they always have gold, right?"

Arleigh laughed. "You're a silly man. Where do you find your stories? Leprechauns are cobblers."

"Dessert makers?"

"Shoemakers, Ryder. Don't you know what a cobbler is?"

"Oh, yeah, I do. I forgot. If they make shoes, they might have gold."

"Aye, they are good cobblers, but they would ne'er give away their gold."

"Ok, so he isn't in league with the leprechauns. What else might he be doing with his faery powers?"

"He wouldn't be using powers. He seems to want to live in this human world, so he would behave like a human. Besides, faeries have very little power when dealing with the human world. Most often faeries have only one talent."

"And in Flynn's case?"

"Desire. Passion. 'Tis all the power and control Flynn has."

"That's a lot of power, Arleigh. You can do anything if you can control someone's heart. You ought to know that."

Arleigh stiffened, her hands tightening on the reins, and shot a withering glance toward him. "I ne'er used my power for gain," she huffed. "Only for life. Only for sustenance."

"And pleasure. You used it for pleasure."

She blushed, and her glance darted away from him. "Aye. There was that."

"So Flynn could be using his power to control the people around him, particularly the women. He's a good-looking guy and quite the catch. I'm

sure every lady in town has the hots for him. He's a drop-dead gorgeous bachelor with money. A woman's wet dream."

"He would also be leaving behind a path of dead women," Arleigh said.

"Not if he has enough control."

Arleigh's voice was firm, touched with annoyance. "He has great willpower. He must, or he would not exist. He would have died when he should have."

They rode through a massive wooden gate and into the courtyard. Uniformed liveried men rushed out of a nearby stable and took their reins.

The door to the manor opened, and a woman came out. Tall, slender and wearing a pretty green dress with a pristine apron, she looked to be in her fifties. Her black hair was streaked with gray and pulled back under a white cap, but in her vanity, she had left several tendrils peeking out. She didn't have glasses pushed on top of her head, and she wasn't standing behind a library desk, but Ryder blinked.

"Mrs. Cargill?"

"No, I am Mistress Cullen."

"She's the ban-tee," Arleigh whispered. "A faery nurse. Watching o'er the children."

"Wow," Ryder said. "I think I know her from home. If this woman is anything like Cullen Cargill, those girls are in good hands."

"She has neutral hands, Ryder. Her wants are limited to caring for children. She has no concern for what happens around her."

"So she wouldn't care that Flynn's a psychopath?"

"A syco what?" Arleigh's brows drew down then she tossed her hair. "No, Ryder, she wouldn't care."

"That makes for a pretty good employee," Ryder said.

"Would you like to come in?" Mistress Cullen asked. "The children are expecting you. Have a care with them, as they belong to Master Flynn."

"They belong to us," Ryder said. "He's kidnapped them."

"I do not understand that word," the ban-tee said.

"Losing battle," Ryder whispered. "Totally neutral. At least she won't let anything happen to them."

"If something happened to them," Arleigh said, "the ban-tee would cease to exist."

"Well, she still exists at home," Ryder said, "so that's a start. At least I know I haven't screwed things up totally. The girls should be okay."

"Are you sure you're not a seer?" Arleigh asked.

"Pretty sure," he said. "I'm just a Keeper."

He took Arleigh's arm and led her through the door.

* * * *

The prosperity reflected on the inside of the manor house surpassed the grounds. Flynn had the best of everything, and obviously the utilitarian nature of his castle did not extend to the interior. Flynn enjoyed luxury. Ryder saw finely crafted furniture, beautiful linens and wools, decorative pottery and gold, elegant chandeliers and rugs.

"I think I'm underdressed," Ryder mumbled.

Arleigh's glance swept across him. "No, you remembered to put everything on today. You're dressed fine."

The ban-tee led them through the large main hall and toward the back of the manor. She opened the door to a large, dreary chamber. Luxurious velvet curtains hung over the windows, blocking out the glare of the sun. The fabric covering the furniture looked to be silk. The hearth and glistening candelabras cast soft light throughout an otherwise very gloomy room.

On a sweeping rug that Ryder suspected came from the Orient, lay three little girls, scribbling on parchment. They glanced up when the door opened. When they saw Arleigh, they scrambled to their feet, and the room filled with squeals of delight. Ryder thought his eardrums would burst. He had forgotten how loud and piercing little girls could be.

They rushed at Arleigh and nearly knocked her off her feet. He had thought her beautiful before, but when she touched the children, her face transformed into something he had not seen in a long time. This woman may not have been their mother, but he could not imagine a mother radiating more warmth or love. Her arms wrapped around the three of them, and they fell to the floor in a bubble of laughter.

He thought for a second he would go mad from the chatter. An endless rush of questions and answers, a tidal wave of words, spilled from them. Their smiles were so wide he thought their faces would burst. He dropped

into a chair and waited patiently while they had their reunion. They were positively in love with each other.

He thought he had been handling 1639 pretty well, but he was not prepared for this. He looked into the faces of younger versions of Faith, Hope, and Charity. They had the same hair, the same eyes, the same bodies, and the exact same faces. Reincarnation was not the right word. He suspected that, somehow, they had moved through time. Perhaps they had always been. No wonder his sisters were so smart.

The ban-tee stood near the door. She made no move to interfere with Arleigh, nor did she hinder the girls in any way. Mrs. Cullen/Mrs. Cargill watched in her measured, neutral way. Ryder guessed she, too, had always been, and wondered when the ban-tee had decided to live in the human world. He would have to pay Mrs. Cargill a visit when he got back home.

The youngest girl glanced his way. She had a shy, secret smile on her face and gave him a little wave. He waved back. The Charity-clone. He wanted to scoop her up.

"Girls," Arleigh said. "I need to breathe. Besides, I've brought someone to meet you."

They all stood, and Arleigh swept her arms out to encompass all three of them. He guessed at their ages, remembering back to when the girls were younger. The oldest he put at thirteen or fourteen, when Faith had been wearing braces and pined in her room for days over Christopher Poole. The middle girl was about ten. He remembered Hope, jealous of Faith, worrying for months about when she would finally get breasts and her period. And the little girl he placed at around seven, the age Charity had been when she won a prize in a regional music competition but had puked out of nervousness when she had accepted her award.

They were gorgeous little girls, and their blue eyes studied him. He heard the middle one whisper, "He looks like Remy." The youngest one smiled.

But it was the oldest one who came toward him first. No surprise there. Faith had always been the one in charge, and now he saw why.

"It worked," she breathed. Her voice held a trace of surprise, like she had not been expecting such a miracle.

"Like a charm," he said. "I assume you must need me for something." "More than you can know," the girl said.

"I'm Ryder."

"We know," they chorused.

"You're pretty talented little girls. My sisters use their powers for stupid things like A's and prom dates and reading my mind, but they've got me wrapped around their fingers as tight as you do. I'm Stephen's brother. Your...uncle." He nodded his head slowly, hoping they'd picked up on his signal.

"Aye, of course, you're our uncle," the oldest girl said, smiling. "Who else would you be?"

"Smart kid," he said.

"Did you call me a *goat*?"

He laughed. "And the language barrier continues."

She ignored him the way Faith always did when he tried to be funny and she didn't think he was succeeding.

"I'm Fiana," she said, "but I suppose you knew that. That's Hannah, and the little one is Corliss."

"Sure," he said. "I'm your uncle. Of course I know who you are."

"I thought you hadn't seen Stephen in years," Arleigh said.

"Oh, mail and stuff," he said.

"Male?"

"Forget it, honey. It doesn't matter."

"Are you living at our house?" Hannah asked. "With Arleigh?"

When he nodded, Corliss tugged at his hand.

"Have you seen the faeries?"

"Yeah," he said. "Kind of freaky at first, but I've gotten used to them now. That Adelina is a stitch."

Corliss wrinkled her tiny forehead. "She's some kind of sprite. What's a stitch?"

He couldn't help it. He reached down and swept her off her feet, spinning in a circle. She giggled, and when he set her on her feet, she cuddled against his leg. Man, he was going to fall in love with them. He ruffled the hair across her forehead, and she glanced up at him.

He took her hand and sat down. She crawled up on his lap. He motioned for the other girls to come closer, and they sat down on the floor at his feet. He felt like Santa Claus. Arleigh went over to speak with the ban-tee. Where

she thought that would lead, he hadn't a clue. He didn't think the ban-tee would help them. She had made it pretty clear she wouldn't.

"We need to talk about Flynn," he said softly.

"He's not in the house right now," Hannah said. "You don't have to whisper."

"What about her?" He motioned toward the ban-tee.

"She's nice," Corliss said.

"She won't tell him anything," Fiana said. "She doesn't really care about Master Flynn. She only cares about us."

"Does she treat you well?"

"Very well," Fiana said. "Like Arleigh. Only we don't love her the way we love Arleigh."

"Arleigh is very easy to love," Ryder said.

"Do you love Arleigh?" Corliss asked.

Ryder's glance swept over the girls with surprise. "That's kind of a private question, don't you think?"

"We need to know if it worked," Hannah said.

Fiana shot her sisters a disgusted look. "Don't listen to them. We want Arleigh to be happy. We're glad she's not lonely."

"Arleigh and I are fine, but she misses you guys a lot," he said. His voice lowered. "She cries."

"Corliss cries all the time," Hannah said.

"I don't!" Corliss said. "Not all the time. Just sometimes."

"She misses Arleigh and Papa," Hannah said. "Papa's dead, you know. We miss him terribly."

"I know what you mean," Ryder said. "It's okay to be sad about that, and it's okay to cry. We all cry sometimes. But Arleigh is very sad you're not home. When she thinks I'm not looking at her, she has the saddest face, but she's trying to be brave. Like you're trying to be brave."

"It's hard sometimes," Fiana said, "but we do try."

He reached out to touch her hair. He couldn't help himself. "I know you better than you might think."

"Our other selves?" Fiana asked. "The ones in the after."

"We've seen them," Hannah said.

"They look like us," Corliss said. "Only bigger."

"My sisters," he said.

"We know," Fiana said. "You have sacrificed much to come here. You must miss them."

"I do, but being with you helps."

"We're glad," Hannah said.

"I'm glad you seem okay," Ryder said. "Is Flynn being nice to you? He hasn't hurt you in any way, has he? Are you getting enough to eat? Do you have a nice place to sleep? Do you have enough clothing? Are you cold, tired, lonely, sick, anything?"

Fiana laughed. "You talk a great deal. Too many questions at once."

"Yeah, I've been told that before," he said, glancing at Arleigh.

"We are being well cared for," Fiana said. "Everything has been fine. Master Flynn doesn't frighten us too much."

"Because things are okay doesn't mean we're going to leave you here. I'm taking you all home."

"When?" Fiana asked.

"Now," he said.

Chapter 22

Ryder stood and picked Corliss up in his arms. Her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms circled around his neck. Her hair smelled like a field of clover. The other two girls stood and held hands.

"Come on, guys, we're getting out of here."

He strode across the room, and Arleigh took the ban-tee's elbow, moving her out of the way, but the woman resisted and barred the door.

"The children cannot leave," Mistress Cullen said.

"Look, Cullen," Ryder said. "Don't make me move you. I'm really a nice guy."

"I'm sure you are a wonderful person," the ban-tee said, "but I still cannot allow you to take these children from this house. They belong to Master Flynn."

"They belong to me," Ryder said. "Now move your skinny ass before I run you down."

The ban-tee's brow wrinkled. "Children?"

Fiana put her hand on the woman's arm. "We want to go with him. You can let us go."

"I am to keep you well and try to make you happy," the woman said.

"It would make us happy if you let us go," Hannah said.

"Come with us!" Corliss said. "Then you can take care of us at our cottage!"

The older woman turned to Arleigh. "Is that possible?"

Ryder pulled Arleigh aside and turned away from Corliss. "Does she know about you?" Ryder whispered. "I thought you had a secret identity or something."

Corliss tugged on Ryder's hair. "What's a secret identity?"

"It's like Clark Kent and Superman, honey," Ryder said.

Corliss laughed and glanced at Arleigh. "He talks funny."

"You'll get used to it. I hardly notice it anymore," Arleigh said. She turned back to Ryder. "Aye, 'tis a secret, but I told her because I thought it might affect her decision."

"Did you have that much influence in the faery world?"

"I had influence."

"What am I falling in love with? Were you like a queen or something?"

"A queen? No, I wasn't a queen, but... You're falling in *love* with me?"

"Of course. Didn't you know?"

Arleigh took a step closer, brushing against him, and the look on her face was curious, hopeful. "You didn't say *that*, Ryder. You said you cared for—" He started to reach for her, but the ban-tee grabbed her elbow and yanked at her.

"Is it possible?" the older woman asked again.

Caught in two conversations, Arleigh's head twisted between them. She heaved a sigh and turned to Mistress Cullen.

"I don't know all the laws that govern you. Don't you know?"

"No, I've not had reason to question the laws before. The children are always where they want to be. They do not wish to go elsewhere."

The woman's glance darted between Arleigh and Ryder and touched on each of the girls. She seemed truly conflicted.

"Let's give it a shot," Ryder said. "Come on, Mistress Cullen. You're welcome to come with us."

"I will try. I don't know what will happen. I am not to choose. I am to be neutral."

"You're not choosing," Ryder said. "The girls are choosing to come with me. You will be following them. Come on, it's going to be an adventure."

The ban-tee nodded her head and took Hannah's hand. Arleigh grabbed Fiana's. They almost made it to the front door.

"Where's everyone going?"

They stopped dead in their tracks. Ryder turned and met Flynn's eyes. Cold, hard, glittering with something that would make an ordinary man nervous. But in this place, Ryder did not feel like an ordinary man. Flynn walked toward them like he had all the time in the world.

"I'm taking them home."

"They're not going anywhere," Flynn said. "Cullen, what are your responsibilities?"

"Leave her out of this," Ryder said. "She's taking care of the girls where they *want* to be. I know it's a loophole, but I think it will work."

"Loophole," Flynn said. "Interesting concept. You must be a fairly bright man. I had my doubts about you. I thought you might be completely mad."

"Oh, I'm mad all right," Ryder said, "and getting madder by the minute."

"What you're doing here is very dangerous, Kendall. I warned you. Arleigh. You should keep your man on a leash."

"Cameron, let us go," Arleigh said.

"You can be so sweet when you want something," Flynn said. "Such a bitch when you don't get your own way."

"That's enough," Ryder said.

He put Corliss down on the floor, and the ban-tee took her hand, backing away.

"I've had enough of you," Ryder said. "I know your secret, and I know your game. Why don't you work some of your faery magic on me and get it over with? The suspense is killing me."

"I can arrange the killing part," Flynn said. "But I wasn't thinking of working my faery magic on you. I'm going to work it on her."

He looked at Arleigh. She moved backwards, pulling Fiana with her, but Ryder saw her blink, and her eyes took on a glassy haze. She dropped Fiana's hand and took a step toward Flynn.

"Arleigh!" Ryder shouted. "Don't move, honey."

She glanced toward him, and a spark of terror flickered in her eye. She continued to move toward Flynn. Heart hammering, Ryder started to lunge toward her, but nausea suddenly overwhelmed him, and his head seemed to split in two. He doubled over and nearly fell to his knees. The sweat poured from his body in streams, and through strands of damp hair, he saw Arleigh come within inches of Flynn's body. The man grabbed her and pulled her against him. He wrapped one hand around her waist and covered her mouth with his. His other hand cupped her breast. The girls gasped.

"No," Ryder breathed. He fought to move, steeling his muscles, concentrating on his legs, but the nausea and weakness wormed its way

through his body like a drug. He couldn't stand upright; he couldn't move his legs. The nerves in his body sputtered and flared with a dull aching throb that sucked the strength from his body. "Arleigh, no..."

Arleigh didn't struggle. She leaned against Flynn and sighed.

His head began to swim. Vertigo spun the world around him, and his stomach lurched. He thought he might actually fall to the floor. The edge of his vision blurred, and black spots flickered in front of him. He shook his head, trying to draw a breath, and in the next instant he felt okay, but for a minute there, he wondered if he'd blacked out. No, he was swaying but still on his feet.

When he turned, Arleigh's arms had risen and were around Flynn's neck. The kiss had deepened, and his heart stuttered in his chest. He rushed across the room. Flynn pushed Arleigh away, and she fell to the floor.

Ryder came at Flynn, swinging, but Flynn backed up and drew his sword. Ryder skidded on the floor and barely stopped before being impaled with the point of the weapon.

"See how dangerous it is to play games with me, Kendall?" he said. He flipped the sword in his hand, clearly enjoying the thrill of his own prowess. "The Between Times are a magical place. Did *you* enjoy being there? You look a little peaked."

"I'm fine," Ryder snarled.

"Well, you won't survive the experience very often."

Ryder glanced at Arleigh lying in a quiet puddle on the floor. "What did you do to her?"

"Her experience was infinitely more sensual than yours. The Between Times are for pleasure or power, for lust or for control. This time, well, this time I decided to stop fucking around with her, Kendall. You've forced the game to higher stakes, and I no longer have the luxury of merely toying with her. I've claimed her now. She belongs to me."

Ryder took a step toward him, but Flynn flicked the sword in his direction. Ryder tried to control the impulse to lunge at him, weapon or not. The adrenaline coursing through his body seemed to have a mind of its own. "She belongs to *me*!"

Flynn shook his head. "No, sorry, Kendall. The wheel has been spun. She's mine now. I can make her do anything I want by merely thinking of it. Imagine the delightful possibilities of that. I can make her wish for me when

she lies in your arms. I can make her call out my name when you are inside of her. I can make her—"

Ryder's fists clenched. "Shut your filthy mouth."

"I think you get my point," Flynn said, flipping his sword. "Both of them, actually. I could kill you now, and these little girls lose any hope. Or you can back away, take the woman, and go. But the children stay here."

"Why do you want these girls? Why is it so important they stay here with you? You're a sick mother—"

"Ryder!"

The sound of Fiana's voice froze him. Fiana bent over Arleigh's unconscious form. How could a kiss that had taken only moments done that? It had been only moments, hadn't it? Ryder tried to think, but his mind seemed to be empty of thoughts and filled with cotton.

"It's your choice, Kendall," Flynn said. "I know what you're thinking. We're about the same size. We're about the same strength. Well, we would be if I were mortal like *you*."

His laughter echoed in the hall and drilled into Ryder's skull. Flynn shook his head, that dark hair swirling hypnotically around his shoulders.

"You think you might be able to kill me. Perhaps with your bare hands. But you cannot do that, Kendall, because I am immortal and you are not. Don't even try. These girls will be drenched in your blood."

"Ryder," Fiana said.

He turned around and faced her. She wore the serious Faith expression, the one that said she had made a decision, wouldn't take any arguments, and she had taken charge. He had never won an argument with Faith.

"Take Arleigh and go," she said.

"Oh, baby, you know I can't do that."

"You must. It's the only hope we have. Please."

The other girls nodded. Jesus, they were tearing him up inside. He looked at each one, trying to detect any kind of hesitation, any slight flicker that said it would be the wrong decision. But he saw nothing. Their eyes were hard sapphires, firm, unrelenting.

He leaned down and kissed each one of them.

"I'll come back for you," he whispered.

"We know," they chorused.

He took in one more moment of their beautiful faces, then turned and picked Arleigh up from the floor. She felt too heavy in his arms. The lightness of her spirit had disappeared.

He glared at Flynn. "This isn't over."

"Of course it isn't," Flynn said. "It's just begun."

The ban-tee opened the door and gave him a nod of encouragement. Ryder left his girls, his nieces, his sisters, and part of his soul behind. He walked away from the stone monstrosity, struggling to hold back the tears that gathered in his eyes.

* * * *

Arleigh could barely raise her head from the pillow. She felt like she'd been sleeping for a hundred years, and even that had not been long enough. The sun glared through the window, and the sounds of birds singing in the trees nearly split her head in two. She wanted to snuggle back into the covers, forget a new day had dawned, and pull the pillow over her head to smother the noise. But her body had other plans. She stretched her hand across the mattress. The cold sheets signaled Ryder was long since gone.

She remembered nothing but the Between Times. How long had she been there? However long had been enough. She could think of nothing but the kiss, the need, the desire. Her face grew warm thinking of Cameron Flynn, his face, his form. He had consumed her dreams while she wandered between sleep and awake, and now he consumed her thoughts. She would have to go to him.

She rose from the bed and reached for her clothes.

"Where do you think you're going?"

The voice startled her, but she straightened up and turned to face him. Ryder stood in the doorway, wiping his hands on a cloth, eyebrows drawn down, his lips tight. A trace of worry lingered in his narrowed eyes. Something else lingered there. It might have been suspicion, but that had to be her imagination. He did not know yet that he had lost her, but she couldn't put it off any longer. He would have to be told.

"You were unconscious most of yesterday and last night. You're not getting out of bed."

"I'm fine," she said. "I have things I need to do."

"What kinds of things?" he demanded.

She ignored him and lifted her dress from the floor. A tight grip locked on her arm and spun her around. The skirt fell to the floor.

"Talk to me, damn it! What the hell happened to you yesterday?"

"Please, Ryder, don't make this harder on both of us."

He wouldn't release her arm. His face came closer, and he peered at her, trying to find some kind of answer. He must have seen something, because he dropped her arm and took a step back. His shocked whisper hurt something inside of her.

"Don't make what hard?"

He was a nice man. She had known the girls would like him, and when they were a family again, he would be a protective and loving father figure for them. He was like Stephen in that way. Good, decent, caring. It should have been very difficult to tell him what she needed to tell him, but it wasn't.

"You know I have to go to Cameron."

"Like hell," he said.

"'Tis not a choice," Arleigh whispered. She dropped her head, and her hair tangled around her. She didn't want to see Ryder's face. "He took me to the Between Times. I tried to resist, but he consumes my thoughts now. He's in my head, whispering things to me, promising things to me. I can feel his touch. I need his touch. It won't stop."

"Sweetheart, what you're feeling isn't real. Come on, look at me."

He raised her face, his hand gently cupping her chin. She struggled to meet his eyes, and fear ran rampant there now. Somehow her words had loosened it within him, and it spun beyond his control. She felt sorry for him, but Cameron filled her head.

"It's not real," he said again.

"What's real no longer matters. Reality has shifted. That's what the Between Times does. I can't change it. The power belongs to him, and he will use it. He *is* using it. I am filled with ache, with hunger. I want to see his face, put my hands in his hair. I need him to fill the hollow places of my body."

Ryder's face paled.

"No, that's not what you need. It's a spell, magic, something. Flynn's controlling you, honey. You need me. Come on, tell me. Tell me you belong with me. I need to hear it right now."

She stared at him but could find no words for him. She found she had no thoughts for him at all. Cameron spiraled through her thoughts.

He shook her. Hard. She felt his hands on her, saw his frightened face looming above her. His fear turned to a bright, hot anger that poured from him and burned her skin. Still she could not say the words he wanted her to say. She needed another.

"You can't stop me."

"I will stop you," he snarled. "If I have to tie you to this bed, I will."

She held her wrists toward him. "Then do it, 'cause 'tis the only way you'll keep me here."

Ryder kicked the first thing his gaze fell on. The chair hurled against the wall and smashed into kindling. The splintered wood dropped to the floor, loud, rolling clunks that punctuated the silence between them. She reached once again for her skirt, but he caught her wrist, gripping hard, and yanked her closer.

"Don't do this," he warned. "You'll lose me, Arleigh. Is that what you want?"

"I don't have any control o'er it."

"You know what you're dealing with. Fight it!"

He shook her, and she moaned. "I can't. I want him."

Her body burned with fire. Doubt flickered across his face. He didn't know what to do, but something disturbing lurked in his eyes. An idea blossomed there, and that wasn't good. He had already lost.

"There's no way to stop me," she said firmly. "I'm going to him because I must. My skin needs his touch, and I'm throbbing inside. You can't hold me here. I need him."

"You need me," Ryder said.

"You should have fucked me when you had the chance. You'll ne'er have me now."

The fear dissolved from his eyes, and that hard, vicious glint returned. For one moment, thoughts of Cameron left her mind and she saw the anger and hurt of the man standing in front of her. Wasn't he the one she wanted? Despair poured through her when she saw the fury in his eyes, and she felt a

flash of shame. What had she done? What had she said? She couldn't seem to hold onto a thought.

"I have to go to Cameron. He's the only one who can give me what I need."

He shouted at her again, shaking her. She stared at him, willing him to accept the truth.

He shoved her, and she tumbled back on the bed. She rose up on her elbows and glared at him.

"You lost your chance, Kendall. I will be with Cameron."

"You are so wrong about that," he said. He tugged the shirt out of his breeches and yanked it over his head. "Relax, baby. I think you'll like it. I've never had a complaint."

Arleigh sputtered. "You don't...you don't have—"

"The balls? You're wrong about that. I'm claiming my rights. I own you, remember?"

He fell against her and knocked her to the mattress. His body covered her, and she fought against him, kicking at his legs and pushing at his chest until he grabbed her arms and forced them above her head. Holding her wrists in a steely grip, his mouth came down on hers, hard and vicious. The brutal kiss tore through her like lightning. The blinding need boiled to the surface, and one thought burst through her head—not Cameron. But it was a hard body to temper the fire and hold her to the earth, and it felt so good. When his lips moved from her mouth to crush against her shoulder, Ryder's husky breath fluttered against her skin.

"Tell me what I want to hear."

"No talking," she whispered. "Let me go. I want to touch you."

He released her hands, and she plunged them into his hair, running her fingers through the sun-kissed strands. His hand found her breast through the nightdress, and she arched against him, wanting more, needing more. His touch was not a gentle caress but a rough, punishing, demanding assault of her flesh, rubbing her nipples through the fabric until the raw scraping burned her. His fingers struggled with the ribbon of her gown, and it came loose, shredding the top of her nightdress. She caught his hand and pulled it back to her naked flesh. His touch left tiny sparks that danced on her skin.

His lips trailed over her body. She fought to breathe, gasping as the burning hunger took every bit of energy she had and twisted it into fire. His

rough fingers kneaded her flesh, running down the length of her body to reach beneath the fabric, sweeping over her stomach, over her hip bones, and finally, finally between her legs. His fingers burned a trail of fire that made her gasp.

She pushed against him, but he seemed determined to deny what she wanted. His hand returned to her breast, pulling and twisting with the anger she had unleashed within him. She ached for more. She needed more. She needed the hunger to stop.

Ryder moved away, and the rustle of clothes and the thump of a boot broke the silence. She waited in agony, and it seemed an eternity before he came back to her. He peeled the torn nightdress away from her skin, stripping it from her like a magician, and the hard bare skin of his whole body fell against hers. It was a gift from heaven, and her arms and legs twined around the muscled body that held her captive. She ran her hands over his shoulders, down his back, and across the mounds of his ass, making him quiver. She pulled him tight.

His hands were in her hair, his mouth on her breasts, sucking at the flesh. Her nipples rose, pulling taut to meet him. His lips moved like velvet over her hip and swept over and between her thighs, and the roughness of his beard followed, scratching her skin. The trail of desire stirred her to claw at his shoulders, because she could not seem to get close enough. She pushed against him, pulling him closer with hands that kneaded and clutched his skin. He still denied her what she wanted. Desperate, she grabbed his hand and pulled it between her legs.

"Touch me," she whispered.

"Do you belong to me, Arleigh?" he asked. "I won't, unless you belong to me."

"Aye, please touch me."

He pushed her thighs apart and touched her clit, spreading fire through her. A ragged sigh exploded from her when his finger swept across her. He used his hands to work magic on her, rubbing and flicking at the soft nub between her legs that pulsated with the beat of her heart. For endless moments, his fingers pressed against her, making her body quiver, sending gentle pulses of fire through her entire body. Finally he plunged his fingers into her, driving deep, pulling back, in and out as his thumb pressed against the tiny piece of her that begged for more. She cried out, biting against his

shoulder, but he refused to move from her. His hands were everywhere, moving quickly, passing over flesh to tease, to taunt, to drive her to madness. Her body shuddered under his touch, spurring him to tighten his palm against her, rubbing harder and harder. She couldn't find the courage to look at him. She lost herself beneath his hand.

"Oh, please," she moaned. "'Tis too much."

"Please what?" he snarled. "I'm not stopping till you're mine."

"Make it stop," she whispered.

The friction of his hand burned her, blazed through her like a flame. Her body throbbed, and each time his finger dipped into her, she gasped and her pussy clenched. She thought she might be dying. A shudder passed through her. Her heart wept somewhere deep inside. She clutched at his shoulders and tugged at his hair.

"Make it stop, Ryder," she moaned. "You are the only one who can."

"I'll make it stop when you beg me."

"Then I'm begging. Please, Ryder, you're all I want. Make it stop."

Finally, when she thought she could stand it no longer, when her body cried out in the most pleasurable pain she had ever felt in any lifetime, something roared through her, causing her to rise against his hand. Her muscles tightened then quivered. She lost whatever control she had.

"Ryder..." she breathed. "No one will e'er be able to do this like you do."

"Don't talk. Relax. Enjoy it."

She arched against his hand and gripped his face. "Kiss me."

His mouth snatched at hers, breathless, gasping. He too seemed to be losing control. How did he gain so much pleasure from giving it to her? She couldn't stop the quivering, she couldn't stop the pleasure that spiraled through her limbs and twisted her body beneath him. Ryder's tortured breath and his words threaded through her consciousness, fighting their way through the rapture of the physical sensations flowing through her body.

"Remember this, Arleigh," he whispered.

"Always."

Ryder moved above her, his body hard, his muscles powerful against her soft flesh. He pressed his hips hard against hers, locked his mouth over hers again, and pushed his body between her thighs. She opened her legs. His cock brushed against her pussy, a velvety violation between her legs.

The moisture of her own body spread across her skin. She lifted against him, preparing to pull him inside, but he paused, and his body trembled. He lifted his head to stare into her eyes. He was thinking, He couldn't think *now*. He couldn't stop. She wouldn't let him. She wrapped her fingers around his neck, tugging at his hair, and pulled him close.

"Tis what you want," she whispered against his ear.

"Yes," he groaned.

She needed him to finish, to soothe the ache, scrape against the throbbing flesh inside. She arched up, rubbing against him, grinding against him. He thrust against the soft, vibrating parts of her body, a hard driving force that could lessen the throbbing inside, but he held back. He didn't want to give it to her. He could not stop now. Her body burned.

She grabbed his ass. She ran her fingernail between his cheeks, and he convulsed in her arms. "You want to fuck me. I know you do."

Her hands pressed hard against him and pulled him closer, crushing him against her. He would have no choice now but to push his cock into her. He would have no self-control. There would be no words in his head, only desire, only lust. He pushed himself up, elbows locked, and stared into her face and found words. He pulled them from the depths of his soul, and his desperate tone, filled with anger and longing, hurt her inside.

"Tell me what I want to hear. This isn't enough. Tell me."

"Shhhh," she whispered. "We don't need words between us."

Her hand snaked between them. Ryder gasped when her fingers locked around his cock, drawing him closer, tugging him to her warm, wet pussy, the place his body longed to be. His body lowered, and he moaned against her lips and swelled harder within her hands, pulsing and quickening. She pressed his cock against the wetness of her body. She rubbed him against her, teasing him with the moisture that leaked from inside, the muscles that tightened at each stroke, soft dips into hollow spaces that she needed filled.

"I don't want to talk," she whispered. "You're ready. I'm ready. Fuck me."

"Damn you," he groaned.

For a moment, a fraction of a second, she panicked, because he pulled back, but he didn't leave her. He pushed, slowly. Refusing to wait, refusing to give him time to be gentle, giving into the hunger, she arched up and yanked his body toward her. He drove into her like a knife, and Arleigh

cried out. She pressed her mouth against his shoulder to muffle the sound. Above her, Ryder groaned and pressed farther, filling the empty spaces that burned within her. Large, firm, hard, demanding, punishing, tender, loving, soft as an infant's skin, silky as a rose petal, hard as iron. Perfection. The satiny length of him buried deep, touching something in her that immediately sent a jolt through her, and her body shuddered. It was a drink of fire, a breath of desert wind, a flash of lightning.

His hands slid beneath her. Ryder clasped her ass, pulling her up, tighter against him, pushing himself deeper within her, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, cradled beneath him. His fingers dug into her skin. His breathing burst hard and rapid against her neck, and something wet and hot dropped on her skin. He moved against her roughly, his arms around her so tightly she had no choice but to move with him, swept along in his passion. His mouth burned against her throat.

"Give me what I need, honey. Please tell me."

"This is what you need, Ryder. Only this."

His arms tightened around her. The rhythm pulled at her like a sea tide caught in the tug of the moon. The hunger flashed inside, once again awakening the need, and wave after wave of searing fire spread through her. She quivered as his body moved faster. His cock thrust into her hard, pounding her pussy. They were locked together, so close, so merged, so blended she feared she would cease to exist when he left her.

Ryder whispered to her—loving words, hurtful words, angry words, words that made her shiver and quake with anticipation, and her greed for him tore through her. His heavy breath brushed against her ear. He struggled to tell her everything in his heart and soul. She wanted to answer, say something, anything, tell him what he needed to hear, that more lay between them than this hot mating, this fucking. She wanted to say she would be lost without him, empty, nothing. But another voice whispered inside her head that was more compelling, more intoxicating, and her words were forgotten.

Ryder was above her, around her, in her. She saw his face, his eyes locked on hers, filling himself with the sight of her as he filled her with the parts of himself he could give. His mouth roamed her skin, his breathing hard and fast. His body rocked against her. He captured her face in his hands.

"Open your mouth. Kiss me."

His breath filled her mouth, and Arleigh moaned. She angled her body until her clit rubbed against him. She strained against him, stroking her clit to match his rhythm. The pulses that fluttered through her flared and flashed in a blaze and she tensed. Her pussy clutched his cock in an intense spasm, clenching him tight and milking his flesh. Arleigh arched against him, delighting in the spasm, the tension, the wave that spread quickly and consumed her entire body. His cock pulsed within her, fast, so fast and his body tightened and shuddered. A warmth flooded through her as hard spasms gripped him and his hips bucked against her. Her pussy throbbed again and one touch against her clit sent her careening again. She let the wave carry her away until she lay limp and breathless beneath him.

Tight, rigid, he fell against her, groaning against her lips and gathering her in his arms. He rested his forehead against her shoulder and lay quietly. She said the only thing she could possibly say.

"Cameron."

Ryder tensed, his arms clenching around her, and growled like a wounded beast. Pushing himself up, he bolted from the bed, and she felt abandoned, lost, anchorless in an eternal sea. Her body rose, seeking his flesh, his warmth, and her hand skimmed across his chest. He flinched.

"Don't," he said.

He stood at the edge of the bed, looking down at her like an archangel, so beautiful. His golden hair glowed in the sunlight that streamed through the window. His heart beat rapidly, tiny flickers against the flesh of his chest. The fine hairs spread across his muscles pulsed with the rhythm. His skin flushed golden, a sheen of light sweat covering his body.

She wanted him again. She wanted to pleasure this man who had given her so much. She needed to run her tongue over his skin, kiss every inch of him, suck at his nipples, run her tongue across the silky length of his cock, and hold it in her hand till it swelled and moved with desire.

Ryder was so beautiful, but he would never be enough to keep her from the Between Times. No mortal man had the power for that. But he stood before her, and he had felt good under her hands, and he had felt good between her legs.

"Come back to me," she said. "Let me touch you. I'll do anything your body wants. We could do some of the wicked things you want to try."

She ran her finger down his cock, and it stirred, swelling under her touch. She smiled and glanced up at him. He stared at her, his fists clenched at his side, his brown eyes full of anguish, fury, sorrow. His gaze searched her face for something.

"I want you to touch me again," she whispered. "You can make it stop."

He shook his head. The flush of his skin disappeared, and he paled. His eyes were suddenly blank, pools of emptiness.

"Come back to bed," she begged. "Touch me again."

"Not in this lifetime." He bent down to search the floor for his clothing. He gestured toward the rumpled sheets. His cold voice stabbed at her, and she flinched. "Glad I could be of service. Without that little annoyance, you can whore around all you want."

Arleigh glanced down and saw the stain of blood. She felt the wetness between her thighs. She pulled at the sheet and wiped the blood away.

Arleigh glanced up, struggling to meet his eyes. "But you can make it stop."

"Not interested."

He pulled on his breeches and gathered his clothes in his arms. He tossed her torn nightgown to her.

"Pack your shit and get out."

She pulled the nightdress against her. His glance raked across her. It was almost painful.

"A little too late for modesty," he said. "I think I've already seen everything you have to offer. Flynn was right. You *are* a good lay, but I don't fucking share."

"I need more," she said.

"I don't," he said. He reached down and grabbed her face in his hand, pulling her. She had no choice. She stood up. He squeezed, gently, so controlled she barely felt it, but the tone of his voice was deadly. A shiver ran down her spine. "Now get the fuck off my island."

He shoved her away and went into the keeping room. The door slammed. A tear slipped down her cheek and, absently, she brushed it away.

Chapter 23

He didn't see her leave. He yanked his clothes on outside the front door and headed toward the barns. If he had to see her face again, he knew he wouldn't be able to control himself. He would strangle her, hit her, or fuck her. He didn't know which one, and it didn't seem to matter. Christ, none of it mattered at all. She didn't even want him.

He rode around the island on one of Stephen's horses for several hours. The beauty of the island did nothing to improve his mood. Sitting on the banks of the James did nothing to improve his mood. Talking with Jack Kensington did nothing to improve his mood. In fact, talking with Jack made him feel worse because Jack had delivered Arleigh to Cardew. He rattled off questions for which Ryder had no answers.

He left the cottage pissed and returned to the cottage pissed. He knew she didn't have many belongings, but he looked around anyway. Her clothes were gone from the pegs upstairs and her tiny chest emptied. Her cloak, brushes, and little bottles of violet and lavender water were gone.

His head ached, and his eyes burned. His stomach twisted into so many knots he knew he would puke soon. None of that mattered either. He chopped firewood to ease the pain. He struck the ax through the wood again and again until his stack of logs reduced to tiny bits of kindling. The sweat poured down his face, stinging his eyes. His hair hung in lank strands around his face, and the stubble on his face itched like crazy. He kept swinging the ax, and each time he felt the ax strike its target, he thought of Flynn. Finally, even thinking of killing Flynn wasn't enough.

"Goddamn it!"

He flung the ax away, and it buried itself into the earth. He kicked his pile of kindling until the entire front of the cottage looked like a field of wood chips. Eventually his energy gave out, and he dropped to the ground,

pressed his face against his knees, and tried not to think of anything. But of course, thoughts of Arleigh spiraled through his head.

He didn't know how long he sat there. The seconds seemed like hours, the minutes like days. The sounds of voices finally tugged him out of his misery. He lifted his head up and looked toward the river. He stood up.

They ran toward him. Three little girls, their hair flying behind them, their cloaks swirling around them like cotton candy. His heart skipped a beat when they rushed toward him and threw themselves at him. He found a way to hold all three of them at once. Finally they pulled away, and their faces were filled with anguish. He knew the feeling well. He also knew what they would tell him, because he knew this wasn't his lucky day. He had figured that out a couple of hours ago, when his heart had been ripped out and shoved down his throat. It had taken only one word.

"He let us come home," Fiana said.

"Uh huh," Ryder said. "He's a regular prince."

"Arleigh is at Cardew," Fiana said.

"I know," he said.

"Why did you let her come?" Fiana asked. "How could you let her come?"

"She's a grown woman. She makes her own decisions. There's such a thing as free will. I encouraged her to make a decision."

Fiana stomped her foot on the ground and looked at him hard. "What brought her to Cardew was not free will!"

He took a step backwards. Christ, she was angry with him, all bunched up in a little fury under that red cloak. And that look in her eyes scared him. How could he explain this to a kid her age? She wouldn't understand that, when your lover decided she wanted to fuck someone else, you fucking let her go or blew your brains out. He had no idea what to tell her. Images of Arleigh flickered through his mind like fireflies. He could still smell her on his skin, taste her in his mouth, feel the warmth of her pussy on his cock. And he heard her voice whispering a name that wasn't his. He rubbed a hand across the fierce ache in his forehead. The railroad spike was back. What a fucking nightmare.

"It doesn't matter what brought her there," Ryder said. "She had a choice. She doesn't want me. End of story."

"It is not the end of the story," she said.

"Look, honey, I don't know what story you're reading, but I read the last chapter. I have no right to demand what she doesn't want to give me. I'm not that kind of guy. Okay, yeah, maybe I was that kind of guy this morning, but it happened only once. And a couple of times before, I came pretty close, but the woman is bloody impossible. I'm not proud of any of it."

"She loves you," Hannah said.

Ryder shook his head. "She's not said it."

"You love her," Corliss said.

"Doesn't matter," Ryder said. "I'm not what she wants."

"But your love is *real*," Fiana said.

"If our love was real, she wouldn't have left me standing in the bedroom with my...never mind. Trust me. She made a choice. She could have had me. I practically offered myself on a silver platter. I spilled my guts to her. It doesn't matter. It's over. She moved on. Better-looking guy, more money, place in the country, the whole works."

"This is not helping us," Fiana said. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"I'm not. I'm trying to live in reality. Look, for the past couple of days, I've been in some kind of weird fairy tale. I'm in a place where I don't know my ass from a hole in the ground, surrounded by witches and faeries, a Leanan sidhe, and a Highlander. You pulled me through some kind of gigantic worm hole that has closed behind me. I'm stuck in a place I can't handle and a time I don't understand. And the woman I gave my heart to, the woman I actually loved..."

He stopped talking, because he thought he would choke. He couldn't get his breath. They watched him with concern, their little faces scrunched. Corliss reached out and took his hand.

"Don't worry," he said, gasping. "It's a panic attack or something."

Corliss shook her head. "We know you're sad. We're sad, too. It's okay to cry."

He blinked, and before he could think, before a thought filled his head, he fell to his knees on the carpet of wood chips and crushed her against him. A sob tore through his chest. He buried his face in a little girl's shoulder and wept like a baby. He felt their hands in his hair, across his back. He had not even cried at his own father's funeral, and here he sat in a pile of sawdust,

being comforted by three little girls who had lost their mother, their father, their home, and the person who loved them most.

"God, I hate this freaking place. I'm so bad at 1639 that I can't even cut firewood."

"Well, it is a little small," Corliss said. "But I think we can still use it."

He tried to smile. "I went a little nuts. A lot nuts. Sorry about the meltdown."

"What are you going to do about Arleigh?" Fiana asked. "Go to Cardew and get her?"

Man, the chick was all business.

"It won't help," he said. "I told you, she doesn't want me. I can't love a woman who doesn't want me. Besides, she doesn't belong to me."

"She does belong to you," Fiana said. "Legally."

"I'm not talking about the indenture, Fiana. I already twisted that little legality to get what I wanted. I'm talking about love between a man and a woman. When you love someone, you give your heart to them, you give your soul to them. I gave them to Arleigh, and she threw them back in my face."

"I know what love is," Fiana said with disgust. "But love is not what we should discuss right now. We must think of Arleigh because she is not herself. She is under an enchantment. Master Flynn will use her until she has nothing left to give. She will die, Ryder. Do you understand that? You cannot allow her to die because you think it's her choice. I know she hurt you, because I can see the pain on your face. I know you are angry with her, your pride is bruised, and your manhood has been questioned. None of that matters. Do you understand?"

She stood with her hands on her hips. Her eyes flashed liquid sapphire. He understood all right. He'd seen it before. She would get her way.

"What do you know about my manhood?" he asked.

"More than I care to know," Fiana said.

"Why, you little witch. You read my mind," he said, and the blood drained from his face. "Oh, my God, how much did you see?"

"I saw enough," Fiana said. "Are you going to go get her or not? I did not bring you across more almost four hundred years for nothing. I brought you for her."

"I thought you brought me here to save you. To be a hero."

"We can *obviously* save ourselves, thank you," Fiana said. "I can take care of my sisters. You have always been for Arleigh. You are the one she has always loved, and you have always loved her. You are linked through memories and lifetimes, through faery spells and reality. Without each other your souls will wither and your lives will hold no meaning. Don't let her die, Ryder. She is a most perfect gift. We have given you to each other once again. You have tamed the spirit within her, Ryder. She has given her soul to you without taking yours in return. Please love her. If you do that unconditionally, she will accept you with open arms and heart and soul. You can make it stop. And our lives will continue the way fate has meant them to be."

The other girls nodded.

"I can make it ...?"

He thought of Arleigh's words, her pleas. He had thought it had something to do with Flynn, that perhaps he could drive out the memory, exorcise the enchantment by possessing her and making her his own. But it hadn't worked. He had forced her, pressed her down on the bed, taken away her choice, and then she had quickly turned it around, seducing him, filling his body with such craving he would have died if he hadn't fucked her. And still she had not seen him. Not enough to keep Flynn out of her mind.

"I can make what stop, Fiana?"

She cocked her head and rolled her eyes. "The curse, of course. Love is a gift, to be given freely, not taken or coerced. Please do what I ask and accept our gift. We want you both to be happy."

"Why would you do this for me? You don't even know me."

She offered a tiny smile. "I have always known you, Ryder, in this life and others. Will you please do what I brought you here to do?"

"Honey, I don't understand half of what you said. But if you think we belong together, I guess I'll have to trust you. Do you think this indenture legality will work? Sounds like another loophole. I mean, I'd pretty much have to carry her away screaming."

"If that's what it takes. Master Flynn will not want a scandal. He is an important man in this colony. He will not hold her if you claim her. You won't have to control her for long. We have a few things to work out. Hannah, make sure our chests are handy. Corliss, gather anything else you think we might need."

The girls ran off to do their sister's bidding.

"Just like home," Ryder said.

Fiana watched him from the corner of her eye. If he had been holding a drink in his hand, she would have taken it. He thought about his last encounter with Arleigh, and his face flushed. God, he hoped Fiana hadn't seen too much. He should have been paying attention. He kept forgetting the things they could do.

She smiled, a soft grin full of secrets. This girl was worming her way into his heart. And he liked it.

Chapter 24

Cameron Flynn stood in the doorway and watched her. She stood in front of the full-length mirror he had imported from London, studying her reflection. The candlelight from the sconces spread a luminance over her skin, turning it to gold. Her lashes cast shadows under her eyes, and although it should have made her look old and worn, the shadows made him think of a tired waif.

In mortal years, Arleigh Donovan was a young woman. When he glimpsed her on the dock, he had been very pleased to find her. He had waited nearly four hundred years to see her again. To have her land in his town, on one of his ships, had seemed a miracle of sorts. Destiny. He had enjoyed planning for the day when he used his power against her as she had so blithely used hers against him. He had all the time in the world. Immortality was nice that way. He had waited for half a year, but for some reason, as time passed, it became harder to merely plan. He could feel her under his hands, smell her, practically taste her mouth. He had grown impatient.

He had found many excuses to visit Trinity Island in the last six months. He and Caindale had business dealings and, although he could have sent one of his many assistants, he decided it best if he conducted the business personally. But of course that was only on the surface. He went there to see her.

He watched her carry out her chores. He noticed many times that she seemed fairly inept at many of them, and he wondered what kind of life she had led before she arrived at Jamestown. He could never find the opportunity or an excuse to ask her. He enjoyed watching her struggle to hang clothing on the line and labor over bread making. He liked seeing her attack the garden with rakes and hoes. But he also enjoyed watching her play with Caindale's brats. Not that he liked children, because he did not.

But he enjoyed watching Arleigh Donovan be herself; not the playacting she did as an indentured servant.

So he studied her, scrutinized her, and basically enjoyed making her life a living nightmare. Not only did he like to look at her, he enjoyed her physical discomfort and mental anxiety. He conversed with Caindale about harvesting, finances, and shipping. His very presence tormented her, and he relished it. He liked to see her squirm.

Occasionally he caught glimpses of her in Jamestown, and it became almost too much to bear. If he could find reason, he would approach her and force her into conversation. But these small little interludes that he allowed himself from time to time drew unnecessary attention to him. She was, after all, an indentured servant, and he was a respectable member of Jamestown society. He could not afford to have people gossiping about him.

One autumn evening he'd gone to Trinity to discuss legitimate business with Caindale. He'd arrived at supper time and had walked into such a touching family scene that anger had flared inside his head and twisted into a vicious knot. Caindale and his brats had been laughing, and he had seen Arleigh Donovan's hands lying on Caindale's shoulder. She had visibly flinched when she noticed him standing in the open doorway, but her discomfort that particular evening did not placate him.

Emotions brewed inside of him that he had a hard time understanding. The emotions irritated him, and when he left Trinity that night, desolation enveloped him. He felt cheated, betrayed, and hurt. He could not understand why, but the feelings led to a melancholy mood that lasted for weeks and would not leave him.

He knew then he had to have her. Caindale and his wench had become a little too close for his comfort level. Seducing the wife of another man created risks he couldn't take if he wished to remain in Jamestown.

So he had made the decision to kill Caindale and have her for his own. He realized now he should probably have waited longer, used more discretion. His power was a gift, but also a responsibility. The fae frowned upon seducing the very young and taking their lives. He might have to answer to someone for his lack of patience. But he would worry about that later. For now, he had at least seen to that annoying virginity problem. The woman standing in front of him was no longer a virgin, and that removed at least a little of the complication of her youth.

He could now enjoy the seduction and the revenge. There would be so much satisfaction in the retribution because he owed her for much. How much was a man's life worth? He would see how long he could prolong her agony. Or in this case, her pleasure. He hoped she might last a very long time.

He watched her brush her hair. He wanted his hands in it. She ran her hands over her body, and he wanted his own hands to follow. She smoothed the dress he had given her. Emerald green to match her eyes. He had drowned in those eyes once. Now he would make her drown in his.

He walked into the room, and the movement caught her attention. She turned and gave him a smile.

"Cameron," she said. "I've been waiting for you."

"You look very beautiful," he said. "As beautiful as you have for thousands of years."

She came toward him, her hips moving hypnotically under the yards of emerald silk. Her breasts swelled above the low-cut bodice, and he could not take his eyes from her.

"You called me," she said. "I came to you."

"You had no choice," he snapped.

"I wanted no choice. We have been to the Between Times. I belong to you now."

"Not yet," he said, "not totally. But you will."

Arleigh's arms went around his neck, and she pressed against him. He could reach out and cup her breasts; his arm could encircle her waist; his hands could caress her smooth thighs and delight in the warm, wet pussy that invaded his dreams. Her mouth moved very close, and he wanted to kiss her. But suddenly that was not enough.

Flynn stared into her eyes, looking for her, trying to find any spark of the woman whom he craved, thirsted for, coveted with every fiber of his being. But something was missing in her eyes. He saw the beauty, the desire, the lust, the promise, but he could not find the Arleigh Donovan whom he had killed for.

Heart pounding, he pulled her roughly against him. His mouth crushed down on hers, and she responded. Her lips opened under his; her tongue met his with an avid greed that took his breath away. Her hands ran over his

body and finally caught at his clothing, frantically pulling at his breeches. He felt her searching for his cock and heard her moan.

He tore away from her.

"Stop," he said.

"We can't stop," she said. "I need you."

"Not good enough," he said.

"Cameron, we are to be together. You have whispered to me, sent for me. I am to be yours."

She pulled at him again, her fingers gripping the cloth of his shirt. Her lips caught at the edge of his jaw, and he groaned, his mouth devouring hers once again. He led her to the bed and pushed her down onto the mattress. He fell against her softness. Eagerly, her legs rose and locked around his, her hips pushing against him. His lips moved from her mouth to her throat and grazed across the tops of her breasts. She whimpered against him.

He kissed her for what felt like an eternity. His hands could not get enough of her soft skin, the gentle curves of her body. He forced himself away from her once more. Each time it grew harder and harder to release her. He leaned on his elbow and looked at her once again. Her hair fanned about her; her small faced raised to his. Her eyes partially closed, and she breathed in small, irregular pants like a wounded animal, or a woman in the midst of fucking. His finger grazed her lips. Where was the woman he had dreamed of, wished for, wanted for four hundred years?

"Can you love me?" he asked.

"I do love you, Cameron."

"Do you know how many women have said that to me?" he asked. His fingers combed through her hair. "Hundreds, thousands."

"I am here now."

"Do you want me?"

"Yes," she said. "I want you always."

"You are mine?"

"Forever," she said.

"Do you know how long forever is?"

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"It does to me," Flynn said.

He moved away from her and sat on the edge of the bed. Her hands moved along his back, pulling at his shoulders.

"I need to think," Flynn said.

"We have no time to think," Arleigh said. "I want you. You want me. Take me to the Between Times so we can join."

He stood up and looked down at her. She knelt on the bed. Her dress had come loose from one shoulder. He wanted to push her down and take her as he had in his fantasies every other day of his miserable existence. And here she was in the flesh. And he could not bear to touch her.

"Get undressed," he snapped. "Get into bed. Wait for me."

She moaned, but he did not turn around and look at her. He couldn't.

Chapter 25

The girls walked with Ryder to the dock. Once he got to Cardew, he would deal with the consequences. He'd worry about that later. He could think about only one thing at a time. Right now, he tried to convince himself he had made the right choice. He wondered how he would keep Arleigh on the island, but, most of all, he wondered how he could live with her under the same roof and keep his cool.

Promising the girls to bring Arleigh home was one thing. Seeing her, smelling her, being near her seemed a whole different ball game. He had already proven to himself more than once that he failed at keeping his cool where Arleigh was concerned. She seemed able to inspire him to new heights of idiocy, but he worried most about hearing that name whispered in his ear. That scared him, and he didn't know what would happen if she said it again.

The girls were in better spirits than when they had arrived. They chattered now about the delicious food they had been served. Apparently, Flynn's chef was quite the epicurean and a far better cook than Arleigh could ever hope to be. Ryder didn't doubt that at all. The clothes Flynn had acquired for them were the latest fashions, and the fabrics, imported from *France*, Ryder, *France*, apparently were to die for. They'd taken advantage of the magnificent horses stabled at Cardew Manor more than once by begging Master Flynn to take them riding.

Apparently Flynn, that ever loveable Mr. Perfect, had been spoiling Ryder's girls. Flynn had the best, and the girls had clearly enjoyed the luxury at Cardew. They were delighted to regale him with everything Flynn owned. Ryder felt like a country bumpkin next to the cosmopolitan Flynn with his silk stockings and flamboyant cloaks, but he could live with that, because the girls had managed to survive their incarceration with mostly happy memories. Flynn had kept his promise to care for them.

Their exuberance filled him with his own memories. He could have been listening to his sisters discuss what they bought at the mall, the boys they liked, and the newborn kittens down the street.

"So what exactly do you think you can do about Flynn?" he asked. "And about Arleigh?"

"We're going to use our boxes!" Corliss said.

"Boxes?" Ryder asked. An uncomfortable sensation growled in the pit of his stomach. "Wooden boxes with initials?"

Three little faces snapped toward him. He thought of three boxes at home. Over the years, his sisters had filled theirs with a motley collection of fibers and herbs, stones and shells. He didn't know what they did with their wooden boxes, and he had never asked. It was enough to know that Faith, Hope, and Charity could read his mind, coerce people into doing things they might not otherwise do, and occasionally tinker with the weather. He had never wanted to know how powerful they might be, but suddenly it seemed important.

"What do you have in your boxes?" Ryder asked.

"Odds and ends," Fiana said. "Nothing of any value."

"Our charms," Hannah said.

"And our treasures." Corliss said.

"Girls," Fiana said. "Ryder doesn't care about such things."

"Oh, Ryder cares a great deal about such things," he said, "and I'm wondering now why I didn't care before. What are you planning to do?"

"Magic!" Corliss said.

"For Master Flynn," Hannah said.

Fiana looked disgusted and rolled her eyes.

"Not a good idea," he said.

"We know what we're doing," Hannah said. "We do it all the time. We use things like this."

She reached into the pocket of her cloak and pulled out a chunk of obsidian the size of Rhode Island. Ryder took it from her palm and hefted it in his hand. "Where did you get this?"

"I have always had it. It goes out and it comes back. It has always been mine."

"But my sister Hope has a piece of obsidian that looks exactly like this."

"Because it's always been mine," Hannah insisted.

"It's magic," Corliss said. "We don't know how it works, it just works."

Ryder glanced at Fiana. She ignored him, staring calmly toward the river. Oh, his sisters always tried to have their little secrets, but eventually they confessed. He knew how to do make them do it, and he also knew how to get this one's attention.

"Well," he said, "if none of you know how the magic works, you should probably leave it alone. It might be dangerous."

"I *know* how it works," Fiana snapped. "As long as one of us knows, we're safe."

It was the same reaction he would have gotten from Faith. Ryder's brow shot up. "Care to explain it to me?"

She huffed. "I'm not very good at explaining things. Hannah, tell him."

Hannah knelt down and scooped her hand into the dirt. Her fingers moved across the grains delicately, reverently. Her smile vanished, and she put her on serious face. Ryder had seen it before on Hope's face. The look said: Listen up. I'm going to say it once. If you don't understand, you're out of luck.

"The elementals control the entire world around us," Hannah said. "They are creatures of the earth, air, fire, and water. My sisters and I represent earth, fire, and air. You and Arleigh are water. The elementals also control the forces in the world that transect the ordinals of the earth. My sisters and I represent north, south, and east. You and Arleigh are west. We opened a rift to bring you here by requesting help from our elementals at our ordinals, because we needed the energy, the grounding, the opening of space.

"When the earth is in perfect balance, harmony spreads across the earth, uniting every living creature, every rock in the field, every blade of grass. We shifted the balance a little, and the energy released, opening the rift, and—"

He held up his hand. "Stop, Hannah, I don't understand it. How old are you?"

"Ten," she said.

"And you get all this?"

"Aye," Hannah said. "I understand how the earth is. I feel it."

Ryder ran his fingers through the dirt on her palm. "Just like Hope. She's studying environmental science. Ever think of becoming a scientist?"

Hannah laughed. "Your sister may need science where she lives, but I'm a witch, Ryder, I don't need science."

"So this harmony," he said, glancing at Fiana, "what do you do to work your magic?"

"I stir it," Fiana said. "The disruption causes a channel, and the energy I send out follows the channel and creates a new reality. It can be very tricky, because disturbing the balance too much can cause severe consequences. That is why we always ask permission and seek the aid of the elementals."

"How do you know these things?"

"I just do," Fiana said. "I am perfectly capable of performing magic. I managed to bring you here, didn't I?"

"Indeed you did," he said. "Does all the power belong to you?"

"No," Fiana said. "We all have power, but only I seem able to do the stirring."

Ryder nodded. "You're the center that holds it together. And this power appeared out of the blue? How did you know you had it?"

Fiana laughed. "We've always had it because we have always been."

"And now you're thinking of stirring things up for Flynn."

"Master Flynn has asked me to do something for him. I can hardly refuse. I think his need is the only thing keeping us out of the goal. He threatened every hour to turn us over to the authorities if I change my mind. If I don't do it, he'll take us away again."

"Liking him more every day," Ryder said.

"Because he needs something from us, we are safe," Fiana said. "And we hold some power over him."

"What does he want you to do?"

"Something easy," Fiana said. "Something I've done before. I need you to trust that I've made the right decision."

He cocked his head and studied her. She was one tough little cookie.

"I do trust you. I've a feeling you've been perfecting your powers for centuries. Did your father make these boxes?" Their little heads nodded. "Stephen was a nice guy, right?"

"Very nice," Fiana said. "Patient, loving, kind. We've known many like him. Most Caindale men are the same. You are one of the exceptions."

"Because I'm not a real Kendall. I'm adopted. All my life I tried to be like my dad, because he was a good man. I thought I had done a pretty good

job, but I've discovered since being here that I'm no Prince Charming. I've done things and said things I'm ashamed to admit."

"We all do bad things," Hannah said.

"Arleigh will forgive you, Ryder," Fiana said.

"Doubtful, kid," Ryder said. "If you knew what I'd done—"

"I do know what you've done," Fiana said.

He took Fiana's arm and pulled her away from the other girls. He glanced at Hannah and Corliss. "Run and get Jack Kensington for me."

When they ran across the field, he studied the girl in front of him. His discomfort level rose to an all-time high. He rubbed his hand across the new growth of beard and stared at her hard. She gazed at him coolly, and Faith's constant impatience with him suddenly snapped to the surface on the face of this girl. Had Faith been this domineering so young? He couldn't remember, but probably. Fiana put her hands on her hips.

"I'm practically a woman, Ryder," she said curtly. "I am of marriageable age. I know the way of the world, of men and women. Get on with it."

He looked at her doubtfully while she waited impatiently for him to determine her scope of knowledge. A kid here in 1639 seemed a little different than home. This girl had lost so much she probably did know the way of the world. He didn't seem to have much choice. He had to get this off his chest, and there were no therapists in Jamestown.

"Well, then, okay. I almost, I practically, it was the closest to rape I ever want to get."

She shook her head. "It wasn't that at all."

"No?" Ryder asked. "What would you call it, then? I shoved her. I threatened her. More importantly, I didn't ask, and she didn't offer. I'm bigger. I'm stronger. I'm supposed to protect women, not force them to do things they don't want to do."

"You never forced her," Fiana said. "What she initially felt was linked to the enchantment, but she should have killed you before she allowed you to touch her. Her eyes should have been for Flynn only. And yet she saw you."

"But she said his name," he groaned.

"Arleigh may not have had control of the body," Fiana said, "but she had control of the heart."

"How can you know that?"

"Because I just know," Fiana said.

She gave him that unfathomable look he recognized. The kid did know the way of the world, and she knew the exact thing she needed to say. How did these girls seem to know him so well? A surprised look flashed on Fiana's face, and she laughed.

"We are one," Fiana said. "I told you that already."

[&]quot;You are indeed."

Chapter 26

No river sickness this time. It amazed him what riding with a skilled man could do. Ryder jumped out of the boat as Jack tied it to the dock. Cardew loomed ahead like a fortress in the middle of a meadow. He wondered what he had gotten himself into.

"Okay, Jack, I should be only a few minutes, but if I'm not out soon, send in the Marines, or maybe a vampire slayer. I'm not sure what kind of help I'll need, but send it."

Jack Kensington smiled and winked. "Aye, sir, I'll see if I can locate the Slayer, though I wouldna be countin' on it. She's usually busy with her own problems, and I've heard she's in Prussia." When Ryder's jaw dropped, Jack laughed. "Go get the little faery lass."

He strode toward the gates and let himself in. He stood in the main hall and looked around, but the hall loomed eerily silent, and with the door closed and the sunlight shut out, the room became dark and gloomy. It kept getting better and better. His heart hammered in his chest. He wished he had a SWAT team.

He hustled from room to room, opening and slamming doors. He careened through the dining room, the parlor where he had first met the girls, and found what he thought might be Flynn's study. But he couldn't locate Arleigh or Flynn. Panic nearly overwhelmed him. He might never find her in this stone monstrosity. He went out into the foyer and cupped his hand around his mouth.

"Flynn!"

The roar of his voice echoed through the room and up the staircase. He waited a moment and called again. Finally, preparing himself for an all-out search and rescue, he heard the creak of a footstep on the staircase. Each step brought him closer and closer to the edge he feared he might step over. His fists clenched against his sides, slimy with perspiration. His blood

pounded through his head, and he fought to keep himself from racing up the stairs and pounding the Highlander to within an inch of his life. Hell, he thought he even might take that extra inch.

Flynn took his good old time. No need to hurry when immortal. Each creak of the staircase echoed in Ryder's head. He was a teacher, for Christ's sake. How he had gotten himself into this impossible scenario? He had been transported into an actual fairy tale. He wished he had paid more attention to the Disney movies. Animated villains wove through his head, creating a colorful montage of evil. He could see all their faces. He desperately tried to think of all the ways they had been defeated. There had to be some truth in there somewhere. He could not believe he had been shoved through a curtain in time and found himself in an R-rated Disney movie.

Flynn finally rounded the bend in the staircase and walked casually down the stairs as though he were meeting a business acquaintance. But this was no business meeting. He wore a dressing gown of dark blue silk, and his hand threaded through dark disheveled bed-hair. Ryder's jaw cracked.

"Kendall," Flynn said.

"I've come for my property, Flynn. I expect you to return it. Arleigh Donovan belongs to me."

"Legally, perhaps," Flynn said. "But in a few moments, Kendall, she will belong to me. Your timing, as I've said before, is most inopportune."

Ryder's stomach rolled over, and he thought he might be sick on the carpet. He struggled to keep his face calm, but his body shook. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. A Ganconor. Had Disney ever made a movie about that? Doubtful.

"I have her indenture papers," Ryder said. "Do I need to go to the colony government about this? As Stephen's lawful heir, I am entitled to all of his property, indentures included, until we settle the debts. I'm still working on that part, but I'll come up with something."

Flynn adjusted the cuffs of his dressing gown. He walked casually across the floor, and Ryder saw his feet were bare. He could also see the wisps of dark hair on Flynn's chest through the loose opening of the dressing gown. He thought of Arleigh touching this man. His stomach twisted again. Twisted wasn't the right word. His stomach lurched.

"So is it to be a legal battle, then?" Flynn asked. "You don't want to fight me for her?"

"I don't have to fight for her. She's mine."

"But you'd like to fight, wouldn't you, Kendall? You'd really like to use your fists. So much more personal and satisfying, isn't that right? Or perhaps you'd rather run me through with a knife. Are you even carrying a knife? Obviously you are here on impulse and didn't think this all the way through. Why would you return to my home and not even think to carry a weapon? You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you, Kendall?"

"Give me three wishes," Ryder said. "Guess what would be at the top of the list?"

"Unfortunately, I am not one of the djinn, so your wishes may have to go unfilled, but you have managed to retain your sense of humor, and that speaks volumes. You will need a sense of humor in the days to come."

"Meaning?"

"If I return Arleigh to you, you must realize she'll fight you to return to me."

"She'll stay."

"You know what she'll want. She told you herself, didn't she? Didn't she whisper my name?"

Ryder's fist tightened. "She'll want me."

Flynn laughed. "You have no idea the kinds of forces you're dealing with here. Have you forgotten I am the Ganconor?"

"Yeah, I know all about your fancy super powers. The Ganconor. Jesus, could you have chosen a more asinine name for yourself? Tinker Bell has a better name, and that chick is a real faery. You, though, Flynn, I'm beginning to have my doubts about."

"It would not be wise of you to anger me, Kendall. Men who anger me don't live very long. You've seen but a small sampling of what I can do. Would you like to hear what your life with Arleigh will be like while I hold her?"

"Spare me the details. I'll deal with whatever happens. Same shit, different day."

"You are very strange," Flynn said.

"I'm not here for a personality analysis," Ryder said. "I'm here for my property."

"She's very lovely, isn't she? Very sensual. If she doesn't kill you, she will wear you out in a matter of days. Why I've had her only a few hours and—"

Ryder took three steps and shoved Flynn hard.

"I'm going to kill you," he growled. "Super faery or not, I'll find a way. That's a promise."

"There is no way to kill me and no way to stop this. Once you realize that, you will be able to let go. I am the Ganconor, and the power that goes with it is eternal. Until death do us part."

"I've already heard you sing that song, Flynn," Ryder said, "and frankly, I'm sick of it. It doesn't play well. It'll never be Top 40."

Ryder paced the floor. His glance darted toward the staircase. He thought he could make it past Flynn, because he ran on a regular basis and Flynn didn't have his sword this time. He might be able to find Arleigh. Getting out of the house might be tricky, but he'd deal with that later.

"I'll say it plain, for the slow learners in the room," Ryder said. "I don't care what your name implies. I don't care what you *think* you can do, and I don't care how eternal you think you are. I'll deal with it. But you need to know I'll never let her go."

"You have every reason to want her. She's an exquisite creature. There is such heat, such fire in her. When you reach that fire, it boils your blood, doesn't it? You had her. Remember how it felt to be inside her? But when she shuddered in your arms, it was my name she whispered, wasn't it?"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Ryder tore across the hall and lunged at Flynn, diving for him with every ounce of strength he had. He smashed into Flynn's chest, and they fell to the floor. Flynn's head cracked against the stone floor. He pulled back his arm and punched at Flynn's face with everything he had. Pure pleasure poured through him when he saw the blood spray from Flynn's nose.

"Immortal, my ass. Do immortals bleed, Flynn?"

Ryder hit him again and again, until his hand numbed and his arm moved without thought. His knuckles split open and hand smeared with blood. Finally, Flynn's head lolled to the side and, with satisfaction, Ryder saw the blood dripping from Flynn's mouth. Ryder pushed away from Flynn's body, shoving at his chest. He rose to his feet and headed for the

staircase. He took the steps two at a time, running faster than he ever had in high school.

He raced down the hallway, flinging doors open so hard they slammed against the walls and several shattered in the jambs. He reached a room where candles glowed softly in wall sconces. The covers drooped from the rumbled bed and spilled over the floor. A puddle of green silk lay on the floor, still holding traces of a woman's form. Heart pounding, he stepped into the room.

Arleigh sprawled across the bed on her stomach. Her hair covered her face, but the strands blew softly with her breath. Her bare shoulder peeked above the sheet that mercifully covered the rest of her body. She appeared to be sleeping, but his heart lodged in his throat.

He reached out and touched her, but she didn't move. He gently rolled her over and brushed the tangled hair from her face. He leaned down, and her arms wrapped around him, pulling him close, and her mouth fastened on his.

Stunned, he let her kiss him. She felt so warm. He let her suck the life from him with her mouth. She kissed him forever. She did not seem to need breathe. She moaned, soft whimpers that puffed into his mouth. He finally tore himself away and caught her face in his hands. Her eyes were closed.

"Arleigh, look at me."

A soft smile settled across her face, and her eyes fluttered open. When she saw him, the smile wavered.

"Where's Cameron?" she whispered. "How did you get to the Between Times?"

He yanked the covers from the bed. The sight of her naked body ripped through him, but he forced himself to look. There were no marks on her. She appeared fine, a tired, satisfied woman after an afternoon of lovemaking. What had Flynn said? Had he touched her yet? The conversation filtered through his head, but he couldn't remember.

She rolled and pushed her hands under the pillow, snuggling into it like a child who doesn't want to go to school.

"Get up!"

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her off the bed. She hit the floor with a thud and glared up at him.

"Leave me be." Her hands clutched at the bedclothes. She tried to claw her way back up. "I don't belong to you."

"You freaking do belong to me, Arleigh. Where are your clothes?"

She ignored him, and he ignored the green silk lying on the floor. Damned if he'd take her home wearing a whore's dress. He tore through the room, ransacking drawers and tossing clothes he didn't recognize into a snowstorm of linen and silk. Finally he found something he knew belonged to her. He took it back to the bed where she sat on the edge. He pushed the chemise down over her head, fumbling to find the neck hole, dragging her arms through the sleeves. She fought him every step of the way, but he managed to get her partially dressed. He decided it was good enough.

He grabbed her cloak and threw it over her shoulders.

"Let's go."

She shook her head.

"We'll do it my way then," he said.

He picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She was very light, but she kicked at him, her feet hitting his stomach, his hips, his thighs, his groin. He bore the pain and decided it didn't matter, because there were parts of his body he wouldn't need in the next few days. Her fists pounded at his back and pulled at his hair. Her screams echoed in his ears. He would probably be deaf by the time he got her home, but he made it to the foyer.

Flynn sprawled on the stone floor, wiping the blood away from his face with his silk sleeve. Staring down at him, Ryder gave him a smile.

"You look pretty bad for an immortal."

"I didn't say I couldn't be hurt," Flynn said. "I said I couldn't be killed."

"Maybe I'll have better luck next time," Ryder said.

"We are having a next time, then?"

"You can count on it," Ryder said.

"She'll kill you, Kendall."

"I'll take my chances," Ryder said.

"Are you a lucky man?"

"Not usually," Ryder said, "but things are starting to look up. Be seeing you, Flynn."

Ryder rushed through the door. He moved quickly to the dock. The marines hadn't landed, and Buffy was nowhere to be seen, but Jack met him with a smile. Maybe luck was finally on his side. He met Jack's smile with

one of his own, deciding it was the best way to start the first day of the rest of his life.

It was the easiest decision he had ever made. He would keep her, and he would stay in this wondrous world of 1639. He'd take the rest as it came. He could think of only one thing at a time. Right now, he needed to control the little spitfire in his arms, which would prove an interesting challenge.

Ryder smiled again and dumped Arleigh into the boat.

* * * *

The journey down the river tested his patience and offered a grueling challenge. Arleigh refused to cooperate. He tried to keep her calm by holding her arms at her sides, but he found by doing that, he had no control over her feet and her head. When she knocked against his face with the back of her head, she didn't care that she hurt herself, as long as it inflicted pain on him. Her feet, small and bare, should have been harmless. Instead, he found that a woman in a furious rage could be quite strong and powerful. He paid for it now. His own feet beat a dull rhythm of pain, and his lower legs were numb. To top it off, she had also tried to render him sterile by consistently bouncing against his groin.

Her screaming and crying attracted a great deal of attention as the boat traveled along the banks. Although they watched with interest, speculation and possible suspicion, the people who worked on the river did not interfere with the strange scene. They were probably used to the capture of runaways, but he felt like the rapist thug he probably was.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He released her long enough to tear strips from the bottom of her chemise. He paid for that little decision, also. When he bent down, she pounded her fists into the top of his skull. When she saw his hands curl into fists, she huffed and puffed, but all the pain finally paid off, because she became mercifully quiet. He wound one strip around her ankles, another around her wrists. The third he stuffed around her mouth. A smile split Jack Kensington's ugly face.

The sun dipped near the horizon when the boat finally arrived at the dock on Trinity Island. He carried his little bundle of fury along the river bank until he could see the cottage. Before he took her inside, he wanted to

lay down a few ground rules. He dropped her on the ground, and she squirmed, trying to get away. He laughed and knelt down beside her.

"I'm not happy about it either, but this is the way it's going to be, and you're going to listen. Okay?" She glared at him. "I'm going to take you inside now. The girls are home, and I don't want you scaring them. I'd also like a little peace and quiet so I can do some thinking. If you think you can give me that, I'll gladly take the gag off. But I hear one peep from you, it goes back on. Got it?"

She nodded, but her eyes said she wasn't making any promises to a rapist thug.

"I'll also take the bindings off, because I really don't like hurting you." Arleigh rolled her eyes. "But you're going to have to stay in the cottage. If you try to leave, I'll tie you to something."

A look of defeat came into her eyes. He might be a sick, sorry bastard, but he liked it.

He picked her back up and heaved her over his shoulder. When he got into the cottage, the girls were filled with questions and began to bombard him. He held up his hand while he plopped Arleigh down onto a bench. Fiana had started the fire, and something simmered over the hearth. He didn't think he could even eat. His stomach had been churning since the day before. He waited several minutes before turning back to Arleigh. She glared at him, her eyes filled with hate. It hurt him to see it.

"Addy!" he called. "Get your fairy ass out here!"

A soft pink glow flickered inside the jar, and she came swirling out in an undulating ribbon of magenta fire. She darted around the room, hovered near Arleigh, and finally settled down on the edge of the table. He couldn't see her face very well, but she didn't look very happy. He didn't know if it was possible for a facry to cry, but he thought Addy might be pretty close.

"You know what's been going on around here?" She pulsed. "Couldn't you have stopped it?"

She rose to his eye level and came very near his ear. He heard a soft whisper through his hair.

"The enchantment happened elsewhere," she said. "I had no power to stop it. I am sorry."

"Can you do anything about it now?"

Addy's little face twisted into grief, and he saw that faeries could indeed cry. He wondered if the Disney people knew that. Addy wiped shimmering fingertips across her eyes.

"I can control it a little. I can temper it. It depends on how much of our Arleigh is left."

"Please do what you can. I want her back, Addy. I *need* her back. I don't feel whole without her."

Adelina nodded and streaked around the room with flashes of pink lightning. She raced toward the hearth and up the chimney; she swept through the curtains and disappeared up the stairs. In her trail, she left twinkling faeries that, once aroused, flitted and circled around Arleigh. Ryder heard the hushed voices of hundreds of faery conversations. He heard shock, dismay, fear, and disappointment. He heard anger and outrage, but most of what he heard was pain that their mistress had been damaged.

Ryder bent down and took Arleigh's gag off. He expected an outburst, but she remained mercifully quiet.

"Sit here for a minute. Don't move."

"Not bloody likely," she muttered. "Tied, remember? You're a bastard, Kendall."

She kicked out hard and hit him in the shin with her bound legs. He would be a walking bruise in the morning, but he smiled because she had gotten her sassiness back. He went outside and got the ax from where he had buried it in the ground. When he came back inside, her eyes widened with horror, but she wisely kept her mouth shut. He swung the ax like a tennis racket.

"A little insurance. Nothing to worry about."

There were nails in the firebox, so he got several and took them into the bedroom. He pounded two nails into each window frame with the end of the ax handle. He knew she would be able to get them out if she worked hard enough. The enchantment driving her anger gave her an amazing strength. She was also quite an enterprising girl and would probably be very determined. He needed to give himself a wide enough margin of time to stop her. He wished he had a pair of handcuffs.

When he returned to the keeping room, her head had bowed in defeat. He untied her bonds, and she looked up.

"Get your ass in the bedroom," he said. "I'll bring your supper."

She gathered her chemise in her hands and gave him a cold stare. Throwing back her hair, she brushed past him. The faery princess had emerged once again, not the charming princess, the bitchy one. He smiled and swatted her behind. She whirled around with a murderous glare then swished her skirt, went into the bedroom, and slammed the door. She screamed with frustration. She had obviously tried the window. Score one for quick thinking.

He sat at the table, watching Fiana feed her sisters, wishing he had a bottle of Jack. He knew it wouldn't solve his problems, but he needed something that would take away the pain, if only for a few hours. He searched through the cupboards until he found another bottle of battery acid. Good old Stephen. What a pal. Not Jack, but it would do.

After he took Arleigh a bowl of stew, he sat down and started to drink. The girls watched him warily, and though their eyes filled with questions, they wisely decided to remain silent. He didn't think he could tell them how scared he actually was.

The faeries spun webs of protective light around the windows and around the frame of the door. Arleigh's faeries would not be able to stop a human from entering the cottage. He had learned that much about faeries after the girls had been abducted, but they would be able to stop Flynn from barging in unannounced. A human man Ryder could deal with, would enjoy dealing with, but Flynn was another matter. He couldn't risk having Flynn around Arleigh. Not for one minute.

He finally sent the girls to bed. He drank for hours, letting the soothing warmth of the alcohol settle into his stomach and muddle his head. When his head fell into his arms, he knew he needed to sleep. He opened the bedroom door and went inside. In the darkness, Arleigh breathed softly and muttered in her sleep. He glanced around for something to barricade the door. He settled on Stephen's large trunk and pushed it across the room.

A gleam of light from the window struck the objects in the trunk, and Ryder paused. He had forgotten the trunk was loaded with weapons. Knives, daggers, swords, arrows.

"Why don't you slit your own throat and make it easy for her?"

He opened the door and shoved the trunk into the keeping room. He closed the door and made a wiser choice in his selection of barricades, piling

the smaller trunks against the door. The soft glow of faery lights wrapped around the door frame.

He undressed and slipped into bed. He lay for a long time staring at the ceiling. The details of the day were still stark in his mind, but the alcohol kept them manageable, pushing them to a place where they settled like a dull ache. Finally, when he had managed to turn off his brain for the night and sleep tugged at his consciousness, a soft, silky leg slid across his thigh, and she rolled toward him.

Her scent overwhelmed him. The musky aroma of sex, the flowery smell of her hair. Her fingernail traced a line across his chest, and the curve of her naked breast nestled against his arm.

"Knock it off, Arleigh. Go to sleep."

Her hand trailed down his side and touched the band of his boxers. He tensed. Her hand moved lower, stroking him through the thin cotton. Despite the anger and hurt, his body did not seem to mind at all. It responded with a quickness that surprised him, considering the whiskey and bruises should have been a major deterrent. His mind struggled, seeming to forget there were reasons for the anger. But there *were* reasons, and for one moment, his mind cleared. He pushed her hand away.

"You're killing me here. Stop."

The relentless little Leanan sidhe was on a mission. Her hand cupped around his cock, folding around him possessively, and she snuggled closer.

"You promised," she said. "You're ready. I'm ready."

Ryder struggled through the alcohol fumes, trying to make sense out of her words. They'd already had sex. He might be drunk, but he clearly remembered that, because he hadn't given her a choice. She had lost time and didn't seem to remember anything that had happened between them. Did she remember Flynn?

She pushed against his leg until he felt the heat that poured from her. It practically seared his flesh. Her damp skin pressed against him, and his body throbbed in response. He gritted his teeth, steeling himself to push her away.

She sat up and hovered over him for a minute, her hair falling against his face. Her lips touched his gently then she moved. Her hands ran across his hips, her fingers gliding into the waistband of his boxers. She began to tug, her fingers searing his flesh as they pulled the boxers away, trailing

down his skin and across his aching body. The cotton slithered down his legs, and her mouth followed, raining soft kisses against his hip bone, the curve of his thigh, below his knee, leaving a path of fire. When she reached his ankle, she pulled the boxers from his legs, flung them to the floor, and her lips started back up his body again.

When she reached the soft nest of warmth between his thighs, her hand swept around his cock and gripped tightly. Her mouth rooted in the darkness, her tongue flicking across his skin, and he moaned. His hand found her hair, and he grabbed at the silky curls, pulling her head up.

"Stop," he said roughly.

"Let me. I want to taste you."

He groaned, and she moved to take him in her mouth. Her lips were so soft, the movement of her tongue intoxicating. His fingers combed through her hair, tugging and pulling as she tugged and pulled at him. A soft suction. A gentle stroke of her lips from base to tip. A swipe of her tongue against his balls. A swirl of her tongue around the throbbing head, where she licked the pre-cum from the tip, right before she pulled him into her mouth. On fire, he could do nothing to stop her. Her mouth was filled with him, and he was filled with her smell, her touch.

For endless moments, she sucked at his flesh, driving his body into a frenzy. His hands caught in her hair, wrapping around her face, pulling her closer, tighter against him. He had never been a selfish lover, but her mouth drove him insane, and he pushed her head down to make her take more. Her mouth opened, and she swallowed his length. She moaned, sucking on his flesh with hard, rapid tugs, suckling him, wringing from his body so much pleasure there was no conscious decision, no means to stop her. He released the pressure without thought.

He throbbed as the cum spurted from him, wave after wave of pulsing warmth. Her mouth continued to suck, milking every drop until the swelling subsided. She finally pulled her mouth from him, but her hands continued to roam the length of him, and her mouth continued to lick and suck, caress and kiss. When his dick started to swell again and grew hard and rigid under her hand, she finally released him, her mouth pulling along his skin, hot and tight.

She slid up his body, her skin warm against his, the friction unbearable. She kissed his abdomen, his chest and throat, and came to his face, kissing

his mouth and finding the spot on his jaw that sent pulses of electric fire through him.

She kissed his neck again, and her teeth lightly nipped his shoulder. She finally returned to his mouth. Her tongue explored and licked the inside of his mouth, over his teeth and across his lips.

She threw her leg over his hips and straddled him. She slowly rocked against him, his body growing tenser, more rigid, hers softer and more yielding. The folds of her pussy burned him.

He reached out and grabbed her hips.

"Arleigh," he groaned. "We have to stop."

"No, we don't e're have to stop. We belong to each other."

She reached down, and her hand fastened around him. She moved closer. His dick pulsed in her hand, rigid, hard, eagerly pushing against her. She rose slightly, brushing his cock over her warmth, letting him know how wet she was. She moved it back and forth. He enjoyed the feel of it and the flickers of pleasure quivering beneath her skin. She lowered herself onto his cock, and pushed down. He slid inside of her easily, gratefully, filling every inch of her. She sighed, and he belonged to her. He had always belonged to her.

She sat on him, moving slowly, exquisite torture. He was buried so deeply within her, and their bodies were so close, so perfectly connected, that as she tugged against him, her muscles tightening deliciously around him, he rose with her movement. Her hands rubbed against his chest, her body moving forward and back, her hair trailing along his skin. She leaned down, and her breasts grazed his chest as she kissed him. Enticed by the feel of the hard pearly nipples against his flesh, he grabbed for her, and her husky laugh filled the darkness. His hands splayed across her breasts, kneading the soft flesh, flickering across the nipples, pulling her down until his mouth caught at them. He suckled her, moving between them greedily, his tongue sweeping around her nipples, his lips pulling them into his mouth. His hands continued to caress her breasts, her back, down her sides.

She moved faster, and Ryder sat up, pulling her to him, forcing himself deeper into her. Her head fell back, and his mouth locked on her throat. They moved slowly, their bodies tight against one another, her thighs locked around his sides. His hands spread under her ass, lifting her up and down against him, pulling her forward, pushing her back. Her arms wrapped

around his neck, her head tucked into his shoulder, and she moaned as her body quivered and tiny spasms flickered through her muscles. Her pussy gripped him harder, locking, releasing, pulsing against him and making him shudder.

"Come for me, Arleigh. Please be mine."

He pushed her back, and they fell together onto the bed, still locked tightly in each other's bodies. Heart pounding, gasping for breath, Ryder plunged deeper into her, pounding into her, and she pulled at his hips eagerly. Their joining seemed to last forever, and yet, to Ryder, forever would not have been enough. This was where he belonged, what he had been searching for all his adult life. Her body trembled, and she spasmed, a giant burst of quick pulses that pulled his cock tighter within her. He could wait no longer.

He let himself go with a shudder and poured his life and love into her. He kissed her mouth, his hands wrapped around her hips. Fiana had been right. Arleigh was a perfect gift. He could think of nothing he wanted more in the world than her. When he collapsed against her, she moaned, and her arms tightened around his neck. She took a deep breath.

He lifted himself away from her and put his hand over her mouth. He couldn't take it again.

Chapter 27

Cameron Flynn forced another bite of mutton into his mouth and chewed. He hardly needed food, in fact the idea of swallowing it made him sick, but eating was a necessary evil when one pretended to be mortal. He grabbed the goblet and poured the wine down his throat to wash away the taste. Shuddering, he pushed his plate away and plunged his hands into the finger bowl.

He eyed the humans at the dinner party. They chewed and swallowed, cows chewing on their cuds, barnyard animals at a slop trough. Their gluttony revolted him, and the atmosphere of the room repulsed his senses. The humans seemed to relish the flavors, stuffing greedy mouthfuls into their bodies, but Flynn was nauseated by the globs of fats, the grease that smeared their fingers, the aromas that hung cloyingly in the air.

Listening to the vapid conversation around him created another nuisance associated with his pretense. The mortals talked between bites, another pleasant sight. He wanted to hurl his goblet at someone. If they knew how dangerous he really was, they wouldn't waste their time with their gossip and their eating.

Running them through with his sword might be fun. What pleasure it would be to simply skewer the entire lot and revel in the blood as it darkened the pristine tablecloth. Better yet, he could use his powers to entice the women at the table to do the things they conjured in their depraved little minds. He sensed the licentious thoughts that swirled through his female companions. Their lewd glances touched on him, lingering on his body with lusty invitation to fuck. His fingers curled around the stem of the pewter goblet, and he fought hard against the impulse to work his magic. As enjoyable as it sounded, he knew there would be consequences.

He tuned out the din and tried to relax. He had nothing to fear here. He allowed his mind to wander, to go home, to the place where he had even

more control and power, the place he longed for in his heart. His heart? He laughed, and his pretty dinner companion smiled. Well, the fact that he had no heart hardly mattered. He still wanted to be there. He struggled against the human clamor and took himself to Ireland. 1235. He took himself home and thought about his last mortal day.

He had known he was dying. His spirit strained against the confines of a body that grew weaker with each step he took. He felt his spirit fighting against the thin webbing of his skin, searching for a way to escape the mortality of his dying body. His head became light, like his very thoughts were made of air. Each time he exhaled, he saw pieces of himself scatter into the hot summer day as flecks of blood.

He had also seen the banshee hovering nearby. She followed him for hours, flowing through the hills like a ghost. When he caught glimpses of her white ragged cloak shimmering in the summer sun, his nerves flared with fear. She keened softly, but he knew her moans would intensify, and when that happened, he would panic.

It had been better not to think of the banshee. Instead, he focused on the reason the blood leaked from his body and stole his life. He pictured her in his mind, and the anger kept his feet moving. Green eyes that spoke of pleasures yet discovered. Red hair that wrapped around him like a warm blanket. A body that swept him beyond reason on a tide of ecstasy. Bitch. He decided he would live to spite her and make her pay.

Damn her! No woman had been worth his life. It wasn't the first time he'd been a fool, but he could bloody well make sure it was the last. The blood gurgled in his throat and splattered onto the earth at his feet with each breath. He planned to get to the village, enlist help, and have his revenge.

Rivulets of blood flowed from the wound in his side. He staggered over craggy rocks, stumbling over the stones and hazards hidden in the tall grasses. The bright summer sun burned hot on his dark head, and sweat poured across his face. The insects hovered around him, little vultures eager for a taste of the blood smell that clung to him.

Why had he wanted to kill Remy Caindale? What had possessed him to travel all night to kill a man he barely knew? Oh, he paid the price for that decision, didn't he? He had left a trail of blood that stole his life with each step. And Caindale clung to life with the aid of his three witch sisters. He planned to see them burn. He didn't care that most people in the county

sought their advice. A witch was a witch. He cursed the name of Caindale and the woman who started the downward spiral of his life, the woman he loved. Bitch.

He knew now that she hadn't been a real woman, but he hadn't known then. He hadn't understood how she could have such a hold on him when no woman could have wielded such power over him. He should have been able to toss her aside and forget her. But he couldn't then. Something about her stirred his senses and pulled at what remained of his heart.

He had laughed, despite the pain that had torn through his chest. His own mother had decreed he would never find love because he was incapable of giving it. And then some wench had wrapped her arms around him, looked deeply into his eyes, and stolen his very soul.

Bitch. Green eyes that tugged at him like an ocean current. Red hair that stirred a fire within him. A voice that whispered and promised all the magic that life had to offer. A body that smelled of intoxicating flowers and offered all the earthly delights he could possibly imagine. He should have known. No other woman had ever been able to hold him more than several hours, and she had captured him for months, stirring passions in him that sucked the very life from him and left him pining for more. He could not get enough of her touch, her laughter, her glance.

Even dying, his cock stirred at the thought of her. The pain that had surged through him paled next to the ache of his need for her.

"Bitch," Flynn muttered.

It was all so vivid in his head that, even now, he felt the excruciating pain flare through his side where the knife had dug in and ripped his lung to shreds. And his memory of the red-haired bitch became so vivid, and his need for her so strong, the throbbing began, and his cock stirred in his breeches. Well, he could take care of that little problem soon. He had worked his magic on the mortal wench, his Leanan sidhe wrapped in human skin, and soon the ache could be appeased.

His pretty dinner companion—What was her name?—glanced toward his lap and smiled. He smiled back, his eyes offering promises, but she meant nothing to him. He would take her body later and drink of her soul. Not too much. He wouldn't want anyone to become suspicious. Just enough, a tiny taste to boost his energy. Aye, his dinner companion would come in handy later in the night. He let his mind roam back to Ireland.

Though wounded and tired, he'd continued to move, but he had to concentrate to get his feet to obey. Light-headed, he knew if he fell, he would not be able to get back up. So he had kept on his feet through will and the anger that increased with each thought.

Flynn had wiped the sweat from his face, but his body had been cold. Despite the heat of the sun and the muggy air, his body shook like it had been dipped in a frozen river. The banshee continued to follow him. Her presence shimmered around him. His mind hadn't been quite right, and he thought perhaps he imagined the banshee. Was there more reality than mysticism to the feelings that plagued him? Could Remy Caindale be following him? Perhaps one of the witch sisters scryed for his presence.

"They will be punished," he had said to no one. "All of them. I am a warrior. How can it be that Caindale lives and I am dying?"

"He lives because he loves with his heart."

The voice had blasted him like a winter wind and cut through to the marrow of his bones. He had stumbled and fallen to the ground. A pain of such magnitude roared through him he nearly passed out. He tried to breathe, but the blood bubbled in his lungs like he was drowning. He panted for a moment, his head down, streams of dark, sweaty hair falling across his eyes.

The voice had been in the grass, murmuring to him, making him shiver, like ice frosting a winter stream. The voice of death. He hadn't wanted to look at death. His empty heart told him not to risk his last moments of life, but he had never been a coward. He would accept it.

He raised his head, and there she was, crouched several yards away. Her tattered cloak, once white but layered with centuries of dust, covered most of her shriveled body. She was reed thin, a framework of bones held together with gray, mottled skin. Her red eyes, swollen with tears yet unshed, peered at him through strands of lank silver hair. She tried to smile, but the ghastly image unnerved him, and he swallowed hard.

"My Flynn," she whispered. Her voice was hollow, dead, a blanket of dirty snow on frozen ground. "My Flynn is dying."

A wail had risen into the hot summer sun and frozen his soul. The highpitched keen stirred the grasses, and hundreds of insects rose from their summer nests and fled the sound, rising into the air in a torrent of swirling

air. The banshee cocked her withered head, surprised at the life around her. Another ghastly smile spread across her face.

"So much life," she crooned.

Flynn had smelled her rancid breath rising into the hot, muggy day. It swept toward him on the dead air of her lungs, reminding him of maggots in carcasses, the steaming air that shivered around rotting corpses. He tried to hold his breath against the smell but couldn't. He breathed it in, nearly choking on the taste of it.

"I thought I imagined you," Flynn said. "I thought the witches were toying with me."

"The witches are occupied, trying to save their brother. He should have died, but they have great power."

"Power," he had groaned. "I am sick of power, of creatures who possess it. I am a man of great power, and yet I find that means little. Look at me!"

"I have come for you."

Flynn had nodded. "I hoped you would come for Caindale."

"I cannot take him," the banshee said. "He is not for me. He belongs to a dark cloak. But he is not going to die. It has been decided by others. His love is pure. He resisted the spell. He loved with his whole heart."

"Witchcraft," Flynn said.

"No, not witchcraft. Love. You fell under the spell of the Leanan sidhe. She stole your heart. Caindale's heart cannot be stolen, and he has given his love freely. The Leanan sidhe has no power over him, and yet they love."

"She was mine," Flynn said. "She betrayed me."

"That is her power," the banshee said. "She cared not for you. She lives by stealing the love of others."

"It is wrong," he had said.

"It is not right or wrong. It just is."

"And I must die? For loving the wrong woman?"

"Many have died for loving the Leanan sidhe. It is the way."

"She must be punished," Flynn said.

"You would like to do so?"

"With my last breath," he said.

"Your mortal life means nothing now. It will be forfeit in a matter of moments."

Flynn pressed his hand against his side, and his fingers came away sticky with blood.

"This means nothing?" he asked. "I would have killed to keep her."

"You were not to die this way," the gray woman said. "You were to forget the laws of nature, to relinquish your life grieving for lost love. But blood is rarely shed and has intrigued us. You are a man different from most. We see promise in you. A wish can be granted."

He held up his bloody hand. "I wish to punish the bitch who did this. No one leaves me."

"The Leanan sidhe's power has been revoked, and she has been sent to the ether world. She was to take love, not give it. She failed. Her life force could not be sustained. Your wish has been granted. Have you another?"

"Then I wish to live. Heal me, leave me, move on, whatever it takes."

"You will not live," she said.

"Speak plainly then," he mumbled. "I am in too much pain for riddles."

"We must balance the scales." Her voice whispered through the grasses. "A faery life has been taken. A faery life can be given."

Flynn shuddered as another spasm of pain ripped through his body. "The pain will stop?"

"There will be no pain," she said.

"I will have power?"

"More power than you can imagine."

"What must I do?"

"Take my hand, willingly, freely, and pledge your soul to the fey."

Flynn had reached out. His bloody hand was taken by the wisp of the dead woman who hovered near him. She smiled as the pain left his body, the air burst from his lungs, and he collapsed onto the green meadow.

Flynn took another sip of wine. He smiled at the pretty woman next to him. She chatted, but he didn't listen. He nodded in all the right places, allowed her hand to rest on his thigh, but he thought of the green hills of Ireland and his little Leanan sidhe. And the new thorn in his side that looked surprisingly like Remy Caindale. Bastard. He would make them all pay.

Chapter 28

When Arleigh woke up the next morning, she slid her arm across the bed. She followed the warmth and found Ryder's body. She had been so afraid it had been a dream. If she had opened her eyes and found him gone, she did not think she would be able to take it.

She thought of everything she had done the night before, and her body flushed. She didn't know what had come over her. Had the memories from eons of temptation, seduction, and fucking finally controlled the human body she inhabited? She could not believe she had been so brash and impetuous. Had she actually... Oh, she could barely think of it. He would think her a whore.

She had been sleeping when he came to bed, dreaming of her faeries. In her dreams, Adelina and all the others spun soft enchantments, weaving a fabric of magic that glistened in the moonlight and sparkled with iridescent colors. Sapphire, emerald, ruby, and gold spun together to form a mosaic of brilliance that made her smile. She had felt warm and loved, cocooned in a safe blanket of protection. It had been a wonderful dream, and she sought to stay in the mystical haven.

But Ryder had fallen across the bed, dropping onto it like a man who had used the last of his energy. He had sighed, an exhausted sigh that spoke of important decisions, desperate news, troubled times. The moment he had lain beside her, something rushed through her that she couldn't stop and didn't want to stop. A fire burned inside of her, and only Ryder could help her put it out.

She remembered how much she wanted to lie in his arms, search his mouth with her own, and fuck him. She had thought perhaps she could offer him solace and help him with his worried mind, but he had seemed reluctant, perhaps even angry. She had to convince him. Even as he slid into

her, he had been protesting, saying they had to stop. Why would two lovers have to stop? There was no earthly reason.

But the fucking had quenched the fire within her, and her heart had soared when his arms wrapped around her. He was the only man she had ever really wanted, the only one who could still the commotion in her head, calm her troubled heart, release her soul from the bonds of guilt, and make all the madness stop. Ryder. The only man she had ever loved.

She turned on her side and watched him sleep. She wanted to touch him again. She wanted to look at him. She lifted the covers to peek, and saw that he, too, must have been remembering the night. His cock was hard again, rigid, stirring against the sheets.

She raised her eyes, and he watched her.

"See anything you like?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "'Twas dark, and a lot of last night is a blur for some reason."

"Don't you remember what we did?"

She blushed and nodded. "I think I might have tried to persuade you a little."

"Persuasion? That's not what we call it at home."

"I'm not sure what I should call it, but did you like it? Are you angry with me? Disappointed? I acted like a harlot. I don't know what I was thinking."

He laughed and ran his hand through her hair, drawing her face to his. When he kissed her, she could not feel disappointment. She felt wanted.

"It was a little surprising," he said. "I woke up afraid I'd dreamed it. Are you really with me? Is it really *you*?"

"Of course, 'tis me!" She took his hand and laid it along her cheek. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"Too much whiskey," he muttered. "And a very bad day. But you're here now. And you, well, you seem better, like you want to be here. With me."

"Of course I want to be here. Are you angry with me for being so bold?"

"No, your boldness was very enjoyable."

"So I may do it again?"

"Honey, you can do that any time," Ryder said, "but right now, I want it to be for both of us. Something that won't be a blur."

He pushed her down onto the mattress. She reveled in his weight, his leg stretched across hers. The hairs of his chest tickled against her breasts, and his flat stomach pressed against her own. He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her neck. All that was enough, but when his hand reached down and touched her throbbing clit, she thought she would never let him out of her sight again.

She trembled and pushed against his hand, enjoying the small tremors that flowed through her body and the sudden heat between her legs. But she felt the need for something more, a craving, a desire, a yearning that she could not comprehend. She clutched his shoulders, murmuring against his neck.

"Please, Ryder," she whispered. "I want you to fuck me."

"Oh, baby, with pleasure."

He drove into her, and she gasped. The softness of her body eagerly accepted him. Her pussy clenched around the hard length of his cock. When he moved, she clung to him, whispering, whimpering as wave after wave of intoxicating delight rippled through her. Her breath came harder, and she finally pushed her face into his neck and let the tide sweep her away.

His arms tightened. He moved for long, excruciating moments, until she thought she wouldn't be able to take one more moment. But he continued, merciless, pushing into her body again and again, rubbing parts of her that throbbed and ached and made her tremble under his hands, made her legs quiver, and pleasurable waves passed through every inch of her body. She had never known such pleasure.

"Arleigh." His achingly tender voice seemed a whispered prayer against her mouth. "You drive me crazy. Are you okay? It feels good? It's enough?"

A shaky laugh exploded from her. "Enough? I don't think I can take much more. 'Tis—"

A huge spasm rippled through her body, and she lurched against him. Ryder tensed and thrust against her one last time. His body shuddered above her as he came. The pulse of his cock seemed an unimaginable force tearing through her. She locked her legs more tightly around him, trying to hold herself to the earth. He laid his head on her breast and took a deep breath.

"Is there anything you want to say?" he asked.

She choked out a laugh. "I can barely breathe. You want me to talk?" He raised his face. "I'm serious."

His brown eyes sparkled with some sort of challenge. What went through his mind? What did he think she would say?

Ryder gave her a little shake, his entire body demanding an answer. "My heart's still beating. Don't you want to remedy that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but there is one thing I'd like to say to you. If you're willing to listen."

He closed his eyes. "Get it over with."

His arms clenched around her, and his jaw cracked in the silence. She pressed her lips against his.

"I love you, Ryder Kendall. You are the only one I have e'er loved."

He opened his eyes and stared at her. His gaze roamed her face with a lurking disquiet, and for some reason, doubt flickered there. She put her hands on his face. She kissed him again.

"Ryder? Have I said the wrong thing?"

He shook his head, and a smile spread across his face.

"No, baby, it was the perfect thing."

"So what's wrong?"

"Nothing in the world," he said.

"You looked a little peaked."

"Honey, I had the worst twenty-four hours of my life. But maybe everything will turn out okay. Do you believe in destiny? In fate? Do you believe two people can be meant for each other? Do you believe in magic?"

"Of course," she said. "Do you listen to a word I say?"

He kissed her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Only Ryder could make the madness stop.

"I love you, too, Arleigh," he said. "You are my life."

"Don't e'er let me go."

"No, baby, never."

Chapter 29

Cameron Flynn took his coat from the man's hand and shrugged into it. Looking into the mirror, he adjusted the lace of the sleeves and brushed his hair back from his face. He met the man's eyes in the mirror.

"Get out," he said. "I need to think."

The manservant bowed and retreated.

Flynn pulled back the draperies, poured his tea, and settled into a chair at his writing table. He gazed through the window and out across his property. As far as the eye could see and miles beyond, it all belonged to him. He had made sure of that, because controlling the people around became easier if they had nothing and you had everything. He had learned that lesson centuries ago, and he had learned it from Remy Caindale.

Just thinking of the man made Flynn want to kill something. He felt the urge to put his hands around someone's neck and squeeze. Thinking of Arleigh Donovan caused his hands to flex. What a bitch.

She hadn't always been that way, of course. He had thought the choice was his. He thought he had conquered her, wrung from her all the passion she displayed, and she had succumbed to him because of his skill, his knowledge, his power. But that had not been the truth. The truth lay somewhere between the darkness of her spirit and the darkness of his soul. They were two of a kind, even then. But he had taken the form of a human, callous and unyielding. She had been but a faery wisp, soft and yielding but existing in a soulless well of amorality. But things had a way of changing, didn't they? He always made sure of that.

He had expected to toss her aside. The county held a great deal of women that cowered when they saw him or shadowed the path of his life. But the green-eyed bitch had been different. She had not been Arleigh Donovan then. She had been a stranger, a woman who came out of the Irish mists and told tales of foreign lands. She never gave her name, and he did

not care to ask. He had granted her sanctuary and had immediately fucked her. But he soon realized, for the first time in his life, the power did not belong to him.

He lusted after her. She filled his head every waking hour of the day, and at night she entered his dreams with a vengeance. He could not stray from her presence. He listened to her words, feeling each one in his head like a flock of birds that swirled and swooped, filling him with need and want and desire.

Every night he fucked her, and it was not enough. He loved her until he thought his heart would burst, his head would split, his body would shrivel and become a husk. Soon he sought her out more often, exhausted, hungry, unable to eat or sleep. He felt his control and his power slipping, and he cared not. He lived for her. He breathed for her. His body belonged to her, and his mind soon became filled with thoughts of only her, until it seemed he could not think at all.

Then one day she disappeared. He tracked her for days, but he could not find her. She had vanished like an apparition, as though she had never existed at all. The only proof he had was a body that had lost its strength, a spirit that had lost its will, and a mind that had lost its reason.

He returned to his estates—a bruised, battered, and useless specimen of a man. He tried to repair his body and mind, but his thoughts were still full of her. He tried to focus on his accounts, on his farm, on his assets. He even, for want of a better idea, focused on his wife. None of it worked.

Then one day he had a visitor. The man spoke of a new woman living with Remy Caindale. Flynn's blood boiled and his brain, useless for so long, thought perhaps he needed to pay a visit to the mighty Caindale, with his successful estate and personal stable of witches. Flynn had no use for witches, but they had obviously served Caindale well. Remy was one of the wealthiest and most favored men in the county, and the man Flynn hated more than any other. The fact that Caindale had only recently left his boyhood behind seemed of no consequence. His youth would make him an easier target.

He left that day and, on horseback in the hot summer, began a grueling trek across the green meadows of Ireland. The sun left streaks of perspiration rolling across his dirty face. His clothes became wringing wet.

His body grew weaker because he refused to stop for nourishment, for water, for rest. He spent days traveling and finally came to a village.

He paused there long enough for one meal, and he listened to the conversations around him. Aye, Remy Caindale would be marrying a beautiful woman, a stranger from a distant county. No one knew her origins or her name. He saw her in his mind. She had taken every bit of memory and reason he had and left enough room for only an image of her. His body grew hot, hotter than it had been in the blazing summer sun, and the familiar ache spread through him, into his head, his limbs, his loins. The hot, burning ache that could be fought only with her touch and the warm wet heat of her pussy. He thought, for one impossible horrible moment, he might dissolve into tears. His love was a torment and his lust an affliction that drove him to the point of insanity.

He reached the Caindale estates and searched through the castle like a thief. Caindale's fate was sealed if the woman he fucked was Flynn's.

He found his beautiful bitch wrapped in her lover's arms. They fucked in the early morning as the sun came over the horizon. He watched the sun's rays blanket their flesh and turn it golden. He watched Caindale's hands roam her body and move across her flesh, finding all the hidden delights that belonged to Flynn. He watched their kisses, light and playful in the morning sun, turn to the hard demand of greed.

In her lover's arms, she trembled and quivered, moaning in such ecstasy that Flynn's heart pounded to match the rhythm of their mating. She stared into her lover's eyes as he took her, her hair unbound and spread upon the pillow, her limbs opened and willing, then wrapping around Caindale with such elegant surrender Flynn knew it would be the last moments of the man's life.

He left his hiding place, the dagger drawn. They were so caught up in their lust they never heard him. He focused on Caindale as he moved above the woman. Her moans and sighs filled Flynn's ears until he could not hear the sound of his own breath, feel his own heart beat. She filled his head, and he drank her in, willingly and completely.

The dagger went into Caindale's flesh easily, finding organs and ripping through them mercilessly. The dying man collapsed on his lover, his blood splattering across the woman and spreading across the bed. Flynn gazed with satisfaction at his accomplishment and knew, as the blood ran from

Caindale's body, he could regain his life, his lust, his love. He turned to her and opened his arms.

But he had made a mistake. He had not thought at all of consequences. It was not surprising, since he had no reason left with which to think. He had such emotion pouring through him that his judgment had become clouded but, for one luminous moment, his sanity returned, and one single thought filled his head. Flynn saw her face and realized he had made a fatal error. The woman cared about Caindale. He had not expected her to care.

Her beautiful face twisted with grief, and such a wail of such hopelessness came from her that Flynn thought the banshee had arrived. The woman he loved, lusted for, killed for, flew at him like a harpy, her nails drawn, her hair wild about her face. She struggled with him, beat at him, and pounded his flesh with no mercy, no regard for his weakened physical condition.

Despite her small size, she fought like the mightiest warrior he had ever encountered. He fell to the floor, bruised and scraped. She pulled the knife from her dying lover and came at him, plunging the dagger into his side with a hard thrust then she collapsed on the floor, crying, the sounds of her heartache filling his head. Flynn struggled to his feet and fled.

His escape was hard. Blood pouring from his wound, his body torn and battered, he could not keep on his feet. He lurched and staggered across the courtyard and away from the castle. He never even thought of his horse. He was not thinking at all. He walked for hours, days it seemed. His life flowed behind him in a pathway of blood. And still his mind filled with thoughts of her, always of her, stealing his soul as she had stolen his life.

"Bitch," he said.

Then he had met the banshee, pledged his faith, and begun to formulate a plan on how he would win her back.

"You will pay now, lover," Flynn said. "You will pay for every excruciating moment I have suffered at your hands. And your new lover, well, he will have to pay, as well."

Flynn downed the cup of tea. He rose and took another long look at his property. The James flowed past and, through the trees on its bank, Flynn saw the tip of the island he would soon own. Not that it mattered. Not that anything in this time, this place, really mattered at all.

"But I will enjoy it in the meantime," he said. "Now, I think I will pay a visit to Trinity and get back what belongs to me."

Chapter 30

Adelina's faery magic appeared to work. Arleigh did not mention Flynn's name. In fact, she seemed to have no recollection of anything that had transpired between her and Flynn at all. She thought she had been unconscious and did not know why. Ryder told her she had hit her head when Flynn pushed her to the floor. He did not have the heart to tell her any of it. In fact, he worried what would happen if she found out.

They talked for most of the morning, locked in each other's arms. Ryder did not want to let her go, but hunger eventually forced them to leave the room. Arleigh put on her chemise and started for the door.

"Why do you have the door barricaded?" she asked.

He made up some story of keeping Flynn's men out of the house. He blathered on for a long time, embellishing his story, until he forgot what question she had asked him. When the foot-tapping begin, he knew he had talked for too long. He moved the trunks, and when she entered the keeping room, she stumbled against the cache of weapons, bruising her leg. She looked at him doubtfully, and he shrugged.

"You were worried about Flynn's men coming to the cottage, and yet you put weapons at their disposal? Did you not think you might need them for yourself?"

Okay, thinking on his feet had never been his strongest suit. He had always left that to his sisters. Usually he invented stories easily, but he had already used most of his imagination on the first one. He had run out of ideas and could think of nothing to say to her. He glanced at the three girls sitting at the table, but they lowered their heads and seemed intensely interested in the hunk of bread they were sharing for breakfast.

Arleigh walked around the table, dropping a kiss on the top of each dark head. She did not seem at all surprised to find them there.

"You put them out here because of me," she said.

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know," she said. "But you obviously thought I might be dangerous."

"Honey, a lot has happened in the last day or so. You've been unconscious. It's better not to dredge it all up."

"I want you to dredge it all up, Ryder. After I'm dressed, I want to hear every word. And I want the truth, not one of your tales. Girls, 'tis happy I am to have you home."

She gave them a bright smile then headed toward the staircase. When he dodged in front of her, the smile vanished. She pushed at him. He simply stared at her, because once again he could think of nothing to say. His brain appeared to be on vacation.

"Why can't I go upstairs?" Arleigh asked. "You've ne'er been at a loss for words before. What is up there I can't see?"

Ryder's breath exploded from his lungs. He prepared for everything to be ruined. "There's nothing up there, honey, nothing at all. Your clothes, your personal things. They're gone."

"Gone? Where would they go?"

"You took them when you left the island," Ryder said. And then because he didn't know what else to say, because he could not possibly lie to the woman he loved more than anything, he said the words he knew would hurt. He knew they would hurt, because they practically killed him thinking about them. "You took them when you went to Flynn."

She ran her hands across her face then tugged her hair back. He watched her face, and he knew that the memories had poured back into her mind. Horror spread across her face and the contentment and happiness he had seen earlier dissolved from her eyes.

He waited for her to cry. Her body trembled, her mouth quivered, and he finally saw that what he thought was grief had spiraled into anger. She paced around the keeping room, her bare feet stomping across the floorboards. She moved around the room like a coming storm, and he braced for the onslaught. Finally she came back to him and shoved him so hard he lost his balance and fell against the hearth. His body, numb from the beating she had given him the day before, barely felt the impact. Fiana herded her sisters up the stairs.

"How could you touch me after what I've done? I'm disgusting. The way I acted, the things I've done. I let him... His hands were all o'er me. I remember being in his bed. How can you even look at me?"

He grabbed her face between his hands. "Please, Arleigh, forget about the time with Flynn. It wasn't real."

"It was real. I was in his bed."

"Honey, you were in my bed, too."

"But why? Was it my choice, yours? Was it the curse I can't seem to escape? Ryder, you don't know how it affects me. I am mortal, but still the faery magic brings things into me I cannot resist. I am not myself at all when surrounded by magic. How will we ever know how much came from my heart or how much of the passion was fey?"

"You're not doing much for my ego here, honey. I'd like to think you wanted to be with me."

"But did you want to be with me? I can control men, you know. That part of the Leanan sidhe is always inside of me, and sometimes it surfaces when I'm not aware it has. I may not have the power to kill, but I do have the power to make men love me."

"I don't doubt that," he said, laughing. "I was smitten with you the moment I saw you."

"You see? Why would you suddenly appear and be enthralled with me?"

"I don't think I'm in your thrall, Arleigh. That implies a lack of free will. I've made my own decisions here. What we did this morning was very real. I know it."

"But," she whispered, "yesterday. Yesterday when we, God, I don't even know what to call it. 'Twas practically mating."

"Not how I envisioned our first time together," Ryder said, "but, whatever happened with Flynn, you lost your virginity to me, Arleigh."

"I called you by another man's name," she whispered.

"That wasn't you. Flynn controlled you. He willed you to say his name, but somewhere outside of the enchantment, outside of the magic, were your feelings for me. I know I stole them. I had no right to do that, and I'm sorry, but I didn't know what else to do. We did make love, Arleigh. After the anger and after the lust, there was love. All the passion you showed was for me. Honey, tell me it was for me."

"I can't," she whispered, "because I don't know."

She tried to pull away, but he grabbed her arm. She trembled.

"You said you loved me," Ryder said. "Was that the truth?"

"Tis not o'er," she said. "It will ne'er be o'er."

"Answer me, damn it! Was it the truth?"

"Aye, 'tis the truth," she said miserably, "but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all! I know how the spell works, Ryder. 'Tis what I used to be. The Leanan sidhe. The Ganconor. We are one in the same. He will not give up. He will not lose. He can't."

He ran his hands down her arms.

"You're with me now," he said. "You're safe."

"You can't keep me safe," Arleigh said, "and you can't keep me here. I can see the magic woven around this room. I know what Adelina has done. She's keeping the Ganconor's power out, but if I walk out the door, I belong to him. What I feel for you will be forgotten. There will be nothing but Cameron. Only him. You will cease to exist for me."

"I'm not going to let that happen."

"He will eventually call me, and I'll go, and when he is tired of toying with me, there will be nothing left. I will die. That's the way 'tis been for thousands upon thousands of years, and nothing will stop it."

"I'll stop it."

She looked at him sadly. "How will you do that?"

He shook his head and pulled her to him. "I don't know. We'll wait it out and see what happens."

She pushed his arms away. "Have you been listening to me? There is no waiting it out. Time has no meaning for Cameron Flynn. He will stand outside our door till we starve to death, till we become ill, till we die. Or he will send men for me, Ryder. Real human men who are perfectly capable of walking into this cottage and running you through with any weapon they happen to be carrying. And believe me, there will be weapons. You will die."

"So you're saying waiting is not an option?"

He wanted to laugh. Jesus, he wanted to laugh so badly. But something in her face told him, if he dared to laugh, she would grab one of Stephen's weapons and run him through herself. Her Irish temper had risen up again, and he was the cause. Finally, he had excelled at something in 1639.

She paced around the keeping room, and he tried to keep out of her way. She almost knocked him over several times. He finally found it easier to get out of her way, so he went and sat at the table.

"Fiana has a plan," he said.

She pulled up short and turned to him with a scowl. If she had been a dog, she would have been growling.

"You're placing our future in the hands of a thirteen-year-old girl? Well, I feel so much better about everything. Thank you for sharing that with me. So, Fiana is going to find some way to vanquish a Ganconor, keep her sisters safe, remove the curse that haunts me every day of my life, and figure out some way for you to inherit everything all nice and tidy and legal? Tell me how she's going to do all that, Ryder."

He sighed. "I don't know. She didn't say."

"Precisely. And yet because she tells you everything will be solved, you believe her."

"I trust her," Ryder said. "Besides, she's a very powerful witch."

"She's a little girl with a very active imagination and a small amount of talent. I know the three of them can read people's thoughts and can sense things. That does make them special, but I watch them, Ryder. I know what they do when they think I'm not looking. They have their spells, and their charms, and their little magic boxes."

"Which they know how to use," Ryder said.

"Which they *think* they know how to use. But in reality, they are three little girls with nothing to do all day long because their father loved and spoiled them. They live in some kind of fantasy in which their family legend is built upon witchcraft. It keeps them occupied and happy."

"But it's all true," he said. "They're very talented. Look, I'm here right? Living proof they can—"

He shut up because she gave him that look again. He couldn't believe he had almost told her. He didn't think she would ever look at him again if she found out he was not Stephen's brother, that everything he had told her had been built on a lie. She waited for him to continue, but when he didn't, she dismissed his words as babbling and continued her tirade.

"I'm sorry for everything that has happened to them, but things will change here very soon. Fiana certainly can do nothing to stop any of it. Even my power will not stop it."

"Yeah, this so-called power of yours is real valuable. You're a real dynamo when it comes to stopping an apocalypse. If anything, you're the cause. Thanks for that, by the way. The girls and I hardly needed a loose cannon like you running around the island. This sex curse is very fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable, but hardly what we need, even if you could control it."

"Meaning?"

"You're out of the loop, Arleigh. Useless. A liability. I'm here now. I came to help."

"Oh, aye, you've been a big help. Have you not noticed things have gone from bad to worse since you've come?"

"Seems to me your problems with Flynn started when you killed him, Arleigh. *Twice*. When was that now? About four hundred years ago? How can you blame this on me?"

"I'm not blaming you, but you can't stop it."

She was starting to piss him off again. It amazed him how fast she could that. "Don't underestimate me. People in my life have always made that a bad habit, and it's not a wise thing to do."

"You can barely dress yourself! I don't know where you came from, but whatever talents you possess are paltry and insignificant here. You will lose this island, and you will lose me."

"Have I ever had you? You change your mind about me as often as you change your apron. And after listening to your opinion of me, it doesn't seem like such a big loss."

He stalked across the room and grabbed the basket.

"Where are you going?" Arleigh asked.

"One of us has to get food. We have children to feed. Since you're confined to this cottage, I've been volunteered."

She tried to grab the basket from his hands. "I won't be a hostage in my own house."

"Do you think I want to go outside and fight chickens for breakfast? Do you think I want to go into that slaughterhouse you call a butchery? It makes me sick looking inside. Do you think I want to dig my food from the dirt like some kind of bushman? It wouldn't hurt you to have a refrigerator around here, you know. And a bathroom. A freaking bathroom would be very handy to have."

She stared at him like he'd lost his mind. Maybe he had. He was sure on his way to losing everything else, so what difference did it make? He grabbed her arm and shook her.

"Do you want to go back to Flynn? Do you want to be his love slave, or whatever the hell you call it? Maybe Flynn isn't such a bad bargain after dealing with me." She shook her head furiously. "Last night was great. And this morning, this morning went beyond great, but there's more to a relationship than good sex. I'm in love with you, Arleigh."

"I know," she whispered.

"I'd sell my soul to keep you. I'd sign it over right now. I hate being a possessive bastard, but you have to belong to me. Only me. The choice is yours. It's your right. But think about it, because once you leave this cottage, the choice is gone, and it will be too late."

"I don't want to be with Flynn," she whispered.

"Are you sure? Because here's the deal, and I mean every word of it. There are images in my head right now that make me want to physically hurt someone. If any of it happens again, with or without your consent, I will never touch you again. It's your choice. Go for it if that's what you want."

"Why would you think I want that?"

She sulked, her beautiful mouth turned down in a frown, but he didn't care.

"Because it's obvious you have doubts about me. I don't do things halfway. I don't want you unless I get all of you. Got it?"

She nodded, and he left the cottage to find them something to eat. What he really wanted was a hot shower. A grocery store would be nice, too. Working so hard for everything tired him out. He had never worked this hard for a woman in his life.

* * * *

If he ever got out of this 1639 hellhole, Ryder vowed he would never eat chicken again. He also decided he would never eat another egg unless cooked by someone else. Filthy and smelly, dark and dreary, the chicken house was an absolute horror, with flapping and squawking, pecking and clucking. Chickens were the most disgusting animals on earth. He didn't

care if the grocers on Trinity Island were giving away *cordon bleu*, he would pass.

He had even gotten a tad leery about the meat. He was used to small packets of precut meat in tidy Styrofoam containers, and he'd never get used to hacking his own. The butchery was a horror, filled with hunks of meat he didn't recognize. These carcasses had ribs and bones attached, were loaded with globs of fat and covered with flies. Did flies even live this close to winter? Why die when there were so many succulent and tasty tidbits on which to dine? It was ghastly. After stripping off a slab of bacon with a knife that looked like it had been used more than once by Jack the Ripper, Ryder thought vegetarians might have the right idea.

Of course when he went to the garden and had to forage for whatever he could find, he changed his mind. He pulled things out of the ground that were covered with dirt clods and had twisting, gnarled roots that only the hardiest of creatures would be able to eat. The bodies of squirming, sluglike creatures covered the roots then crawled over his hands, making him shiver with revulsion.

To top off his fantastic morning, it started to rain. He slogged through the mud and mire. At home, in his reasonably sane and perfect world, he had enjoyed rainy days, a good excuse to hide in his study and think and reflect. Here in the nightmare world of 1639, the rain seemed only good for one thing—making his life more miserable than it already was. As darkness filled the clouds overhead, his mood followed. By the time he opened the cottage door, he had wrapped himself in his own cloud of thunder. He carried all of his hard-won groceries into the cottage and dropped his basket onto the table.

"I don't want to see it again until it's on a plate. I've had enough disgust for one day."

He shook himself like a wet dog. Sullen, she poked through the grocery basket and was displeased as usual. Her frown increased.

"You should have brought in a chunk of meat, as well," she said. "Then I could have started supper."

Ryder sighed and stopped in the midmotion of stripping off a dead man's clothes. "How did my brother put up with you for so long? He must have been a better man than I am. You're a royal pain in the ass." He retied his shirt.

The girls appeared in the stairway door, and he motioned them inside. "I'll go," Fiana said.

"No, baby, it's raining. Besides, her highness has commanded me to go. I'll go back to the store. My hands still reek anyway."

"And I need water," Arleigh said.

"Domestic or imported?" When she gave him one of her looks, he rolled his eyes. "Never mind, I'll decide. Why didn't Stephen ever dig a damn well?"

He started for the door and had almost managed his escape when he heard the shuddering exhale.

"Ryder, what have I done?"

"Don't get me started."

"Why are you so angry with me?"

"Do you want the unabridged version or the Cliff notes?"

"I want you to talk to me."

"Yes, that's what you all say," Ryder said, rolling the cold, dripping shirt to his elbow, "until we start to talk, then all of a sudden, we're babbling, and you tell us to get to the point. On the other hand, when you have something to talk about, we're supposed to shut up and listen. But when something's on our mind, it's, sorry, Jack."

"Who's Jack?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes and slammed the door for emphasis, although his heart wasn't really in it. He left the cottage and headed for the wilds of Trinity Island. He got some beef for whatever bland stew she had on her mind, and carried buckets of water from the stream. He changed his clothes, taking his time, and she was stirring something in the hearth when he returned. He hoped he wouldn't come down with pneumonia. Hard to fight a Ganconor with pneumonia. He sat at the table and read his Keats, trying to ignore her, but every movement he caught from the corner of his eye made him look at her. Looking at her made him want to touch her. If he touched her...

He chatted with the girls, but his heart wasn't in it, because a somber Arleigh ignored him. He wished he could escape, maybe ride around the island, but of course nature had conspired against him, forcing this close proximity. She drove him crazy but, despite the weather, he couldn't dare leave her alone, and he couldn't make three little girls responsible for her. It

wasn't exactly that he didn't trust her, but well, he didn't trust her. He picked up his book because he could feel her eyes on him.

How could he be in love with a woman he couldn't trust? It went against everything he believed in. She cleared her throat, but he continued to pretend to read.

"Your Master Keats is not familiar to me. Would I have known him? I cannot possibly remember everyone I met o'er thousands of centuries, but he is certainly familiar with the legend. Perhaps there is a new Leanan sidhe, and he met her."

Ryder raised his head, surprised she wanted to talk. He peered at her suspiciously. There had to be an argument brewing in her somewhere.

"Is he dead?" Her hand paused in midstroke, hovering over the bowl.

Ryder glanced at Fiana. No help there. She shrugged. "Keats hasn't been born, well, yes, he's dead."

"Probably young and handsome?"

"Yes, quite the catch. Definitely memorable."

"I was often drawn to poets. The romance within a poet is so alluring." She paused, stirring rapidly, a blush stealing over her face. "If he's dead, there must be a new Leanan sidhe. I have often wondered who she is, what she looks like, how her methods differ from mine."

"Why don't you two get together and compare notes?" Ryder said. "I'm sure it would be a blast. How to seduce, how to make a man waste away to nothing, how to kill with kindness."

"Compare notes? You mean talk with each other? That would be interesting. We—" The smile that hovered on her face vanished, and she glanced down at her bowl. "Oh, that was one of your jokes."

She went back to stirring the eggs.

"Tell me more about your life, Arleigh."

"Aye," Hannah said, "you've never told us anything about yourself."

"Come on, Arleigh!" Corliss cried. "Tell us!"

She glanced up, but her eyes looked hesitant, doubtful. She shook her head, and her hair flowed about her shoulders. He wanted to know everything about her. Beyond his little inquisition, that had mostly been designed to make her uncomfortable, he hadn't asked anything about her, and what she had shared with him was filled with holes. Why hadn't he ever asked about the hardships she had experienced or her arrival in a new

world? How had she felt about her life in this cottage, about Stephen and the girls? He was in love with her and knew nothing but her name and her rather questionable origins.

"Honey," he said.

She looked at him, and a tear dropped on her cheek.

"Talk to us. We want to know everything about you."

"No," she said. "The more I say, the angrier you become. 'Tis better if I stay quiet."

"I won't get angry," he said. "Scout's honor."

"Will you tell us about your life? About these sisters of yours?"

"Sure," he said. "The Weird Sisters. I'll fill you in on every grueling detail of my own childhood."

She hurried and finished cooking. She had her smile back, and she hummed a little while she cooked. Fiana leapt up from the table to help, eager to hear. While they ate, she told them the story of her life. And he fell in love with her a little more.

Chapter 31

When the girls finished breakfast, they went outside to do their chores. Arleigh rose from the table and put the dishes to soak in the washbasin. She had told them everything she remembered from the thousands of years she had spent casting her spell over men of different times and places. She had seen so much of the world, experienced so many different cultures, but men had been the same everywhere. Willing to love her, willing to die for her. She felt sick thinking of the path that had led to her humanity.

"A time came when I wanted to give love in return. 'Twas not a decision. It just happened."

"Because you fell in love," Ryder said. "Do you remember him?"

"No, I don't have specific memories of Remy. But I remember the feelings. They were not to belong to me, so I was banished to a world that was neither alive nor dead, where the banshees waited to be called, where babes waited to be born, where faery sparks waited to be created. 'Twas not a miserable existence, but I waited with little hope and no explanation. Now I am mortal and yet so much more. There's power still."

"You're drop-dead gorgeous, Arleigh," Ryder said. "That's not a power. It's good genes."

"'Twas unnatural to Alice. When she told me the legend of the Leanan sidhe, I denied it, but I began to remember shadows, and the curse began to take those I loved."

"Not a curse, honey," Ryder said.

"Then why did they die?"

"Do you know how hard it is to stay alive in this time? The average life span is that of a gnat. Do you know how many diseases there are? How much bacteria there is in the water? Do you understand what actually kills people? People can die from a tooth infection, from a splinter, from a dog bite."

"From a bee sting?"

"Sure, if they're allergic. These deaths have nothing to do with you."

She tried to smile, but worry consumed her. This man with his strange ways and even stranger words always searched for answers where there were none. She scrubbed at the dishes with a vengeance.

"A curse is a curse."

"I'm still alive," he said.

"Aye, but I am preparing to lose you."

"Not going to happen," he said. "I'm going to find some way to prove to you this curse isn't real."

"I wish you could," Arleigh said, "but the Leanan sidhe is not supposed to be human, and I can't control the power and take what I need. It has to be given."

"That's not power; it's love. I don't want you because of an imaginary power you think you have. I want you because of who you are, not what you were."

She shook her head. "'Tis out of your control."

"That's bullshit, Arleigh."

Ryder rose from the table, and Arleigh took a deep breath. She flinched when he caught her arm. Soapsuds trailed across the floor.

"Honey, quit telling me how I feel. The Leanan sidhe is gone, okay? I'll admit there's fallout. You're pretty good with faeries, and God knows what else, but you're a live woman. If you take away the glossy faery crap, we're left with you. A very human Arleigh Donovan. No magic. No tricks. No illusion."

"Just me?"

He pulled her against him. She wanted to believe him, to trust him.

"There's not a man alive who wouldn't want you," he said, "but it's not a curse. It's you. You're stunning. You're desirable. You can even be very funny when you're not being a pain in my ass. You have a way about you that makes a man feel like a man. That's not a curse either. Your mother was wrong, honey. She should have told you your beauty, your passion, and your charm are all part of who you are."

"And you love me because of who I am?"

"Do you see me wasting away? Am I dying of love for you? Am I loitering on a hill, alone and pale?"

"Not yet," she whispered, "because I can't seem to let you go."

"Arleigh, I belong to you, heart, mind and soul. I don't want you to let me go, but if I have to lose you to prove my love, then I'll go. Voluntarily. Is that what you want me to do? Should I walk away? Will that be enough to prove I love you?"

"Please don't," she said. "I think I would die."

She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him. His words had such certainty and were hauntingly familiar. She could not let him go. She would never let him ago. She felt him smile against her mouth.

"So I stay. And you stop talking the nonsense. Agreed?"
"Aye."

"Good. Once upon a time there lived a man and a woman who were in love, and they lived happily ever after. End of story."

"Even if what you say is true, 'tis not a happy ending we'll be having. Flynn won't allow it. One of us will die."

"Flynn can go to hell," Ryder said. "And, for the record, neither one of us is going to die. I didn't come all this way to die here, and I'll kill everyone in this colony before I let something happen to you."

"You said you weren't a warrior," Arleigh said.

"I'm not," Ryder said. "I'm a lover, not a fighter."

He swept her off her feet, and she laughed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to prove it to you," he said.

"The girls could come in!"

"No, they won't, because at this very moment they're reading my mind."

* * * *

As the boat drew up to the dock, Cameron Flynn surveyed the property of Trinity Island. It was indeed beautiful, and he wished he had owned it, but some things were not meant to be. He loved this land on the other side of the sea, but he missed the rolling hills of Ireland, the crisp scent of the air, the mists that clung to the meadows. He missed his home, his estates. But soon he would be home where he belonged, in a time that belonged to him, where he could control every aspect of his life with no interference, no need

for pretense, and no possible repercussions for anything that crossed his mind.

Being lord and master of an estate mattered little if he had to follow the rules of society. He had never been very good at following rules and had no intention of continuing to do so. He saw nothing but change stirring around him, and he did not like what he saw. He needed his own place, his own time. But before he could return home, he needed the one thing missing, and soon she would be returned to him.

He didn't expect Kendall to turn her over willingly, and that suited Flynn just fine. Kendall would feel that need to fight for her as so many human men were prone to do. Mortal men always felt the need to fight, even when they knew the odds were insurmountable. Even when they knew how futile their sacrifice would be.

He would have probably done the same in his former life. Hell, he had done it, and the fact that Remy Caindale had lived had nothing to do with his warrior's skill but everything to do with the bitches that surrounded him. Flynn would not make the same mistake with the three little witches he had under his control.

He looked forward to killing Ryder Kendall. He thought Kendall would fight hard, but how well he fought, how much courage he had, wouldn't matter. He would die because there was no other option.

Of course he had to get them out of the cottage. Those damnable little faeries had woven their magic and spun their enchantments so thoroughly the cottage might as well have been plated in armor. That presented a problem for him but not for the men who followed him. Humans one and all. It had not been hard to fabricate a believable story. They may have left England behind, but the people of Jamestown were still Englishmen at heart. His charge of witchcraft against Arleigh Donovan was trumped up, but his little band of cohorts didn't need to know that. They were more than eager to follow him on his desperate search for the witch who had ensnared Stephen Caindale's daughters in her web of magic.

By the end of the afternoon, Arleigh Donovan would be at his side, and Ryder Kendall would be dead. All because he willed it. It was going to be a very good day.

The men tied the boat, and Flynn stepped onto Trinity. The moment he touched the ground, he could feel her, and his fists clenched at his side.

Kendall was fucking Arleigh. Oh, there would be such pleasure in seeing the man's blood flow. He would watch Kendall's entrails fall from his body and the pain wrack his face. But the most enjoyable part of all would be the look on Kendall's face when he finally realized he had lost.

His men knew what to do. Grab the woman. If the man tried to stop them—and there was no doubt in Flynn's mind Kendall would—kill him.

He led the way toward the cottage. Such a beautiful day for a killing.

* * * *

Arleigh stretched against him, and Ryder's body once again responded to her touch. If the magic of the Leanan sidhe made him feel the way he did, he would willingly fall under her spell. The woman who kissed his throat and pressed herself against him was what he wanted, and he would slay an entire battalion of Ganconors to keep her. He wrapped his arm around her tighter. She nestled against his chest, and suddenly stiffened.

"He's here. I can feel him coming."

Ryder tossed back the quilt and leapt from the bed. He grabbed his breeches from the floor and pulled them on, staggering toward the bedroom door.

"For Christ's sake, get dressed! Hurry!"

He pulled open the door. The faeries flew around the keeping room like disoriented paratroopers, swooping and falling, their lights pulsing in a frantic rhythm. Ryder felt like he'd stepped through the gates of a demented carnival midway.

"Addy!"

The pink prism hovered in front of his face, blinking furiously.

"Flynn," she gasped. "He's here. With others. Humans."

The girls rushed through the cottage door, hair flying, their faces pale. Fiana slammed the door and threw her body against it.

"Damn it!" she cried. "It's the middle of the bloody day! And there's no full moon tonight! I told him I needed a full moon to stall. What can he want?"

"He wants Arleigh," Ryder said.

"No," Fiana said. "He wants to go home. I told him two days! Hannah, get the boxes! Oh, my God, he couldn't..."

Ryder rummaged in the trunk, looking for any weapon he might know how to use. He had been to enough Renaissance festivals to know what they were, but damn, they were all so heavy. These men must have the strength of Neanderthals.

He glanced at Fiana.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"No, no, I can't, he wouldn't expect me to do that." She grabbed Hannah's arm. "Would he expect me to do *that*?"

Hannah's small face puckered, and Corliss burst into tears. All three looked positively terrified, and he knew exactly how they felt. He hefted a sword, swinging it through the air to test his balance then grabbed the ax that lay on the hearth stones.

"These aren't going to work. I need a shotgun. A bazooka. A grenade launcher." Adelina swooshed around his face, trying to get his attention. "What can I use?"

"Nothing will stop a Ganconor."

"Jesus, Addy, he's not the fucking Terminator. There has to be something."

She shook her head, and her golden hair swirled around her.

"What would happen if I squashed you like a bug? Something bad must happen, right?"

"I would dissolve," Adelina said, "only to reappear elsewhere. You can cut off his head, but he will reappear again."

"But I smashed his face in yesterday," Ryder said. "There were cuts and blood. It had to hurt. He looked like hell."

"He chose to let you hurt him," Adelina said. "He likes to feel the pain to remember his humanity, but 'twas his choice. He will not let you have the advantage again. Not when so much is at stake."

Fiana pulled on his arm as Arleigh came out of the bedroom, dressed in one of Stephen's shirts. The large linen shirt enveloped her to below the knees, but her slender calves were visible, and Ryder groaned. The panic level escalated, and when he heard his name called from outside the cottage, his heart hammered in his chest.

"Get upstairs," he said. "All of you."

"I can help," Arleigh said. "I know how to use the weapons."

"No, I'll handle it."

She looked doubtful, petrified, conflicted. He knew how she felt because he felt the same way, but he didn't want her around when they streamed through the door and ran him through the gut with a sword before he had a chance to lift his. He reached over and caught her chin, kissing her hard.

"I love you. You know that, right?"

She nodded. Fiana herded her sisters toward the staircase but seemed reluctant to join them.

"Go!" he shouted.

Fiana turned back. "Ryder, there's more—"

"Honey, I don't have time. Get upstairs!"

Arleigh grabbed Fiana's arm and pulled her up the stairs. The faeries followed her in a swarm. Addy gave him one last look and disappeared into the stairwell in a swirl of magenta fire.

Ryder pulled open the door to the cottage and stepped outside. Flynn stood about ten yards from the doorway, surrounded by a group of men who would have been professional wrestlers in the 21st century. Ryder knew he wouldn't stand a chance against one of them, let alone the five who had come to his island. But that wouldn't stop him from trying.

Mistress Cullen stood next to Flynn. When Flynn leaned down and whispered something in her ear, she headed toward the cottage. Ryder was torn between telling her to stop and knowing that she would do everything in her power to keep the girls from harm. He let her go and faced the wrestlers.

"Gentlemen, I hope you realize you're trespassing on private property. I'm sure there are penalties for that here. You might want to rethink this whole plan."

"There are penalties for witchcraft, as well," Flynn said. "These men are here to enforce the law."

"Have you told them why you're really here, Flynn?"

"To deliver a witch unto the proper authorities," Flynn said. "You know Arleigh Donovan is a witch. These men will take her to be tried for crimes against this colony and the Caindale children."

Ryder put his sword against his shoulder and glared at Flynn. His gaze swept across the five men. The group moved forward.

"He's been telling tall tales again, gentlemen. Master Flynn is angry because the woman chose me. Hey, we're both good-looking guys, but I can't help it if I'm better in the sack. Poor guy, his pride is all in a bunch because his dick isn't big enough to satisfy her."

Flynn drew his sword. "This is going to give me more satisfaction than I thought possible."

Ryder turned his attention back to the men. "Think about this hard, friends. Kidnapping and accessory to rape are serious crimes. If you add murder into the equation, it all adds up to serious trouble."

The professional wrestlers glanced at one another and back to Ryder. The largest one stepped forward.

"Sir, we believe you have been bewitched. You need to step out of the way so we can do what we came to do."

"Not a chance in hell," Ryder said.

He dropped the sword and charged toward Flynn, swinging the axe and aiming for his throat. Whether he killed him or not didn't seem to matter, but he needed to prove to these men that Flynn was not what he appeared to be. He needed to take off the mask and show the world what a pansy-assed Ganconor looked like.

Flynn sidestepped quickly, and one of the giants grabbed at the axe and tore it from Ryder's hand. Ryder lost his balance and stumbled against one of the other men. A hand pushed against his back. He couldn't believe these men were going to stand around and watch them fight. He turned around, hoping to talk some sense into these strange men, but air rushed past him, and he knew suddenly this wasn't some kind of game. It was serious business, and these men of Jamestown were going to let Flynn do whatever he wanted.

Ryder spun around as Flynn's sword rose effortlessly then swooped down and cut him across the side. A sting ripped across his skin, followed by a sharp burning. Back peddling, he howled in anger, grabbed his sword from the ground, and ran at Flynn, cutting through the air with the blade, hoping any one of his blows would find a target. But Flynn was too good, and Ryder could not touch him. Some of the men circled and, from the corner of his eye, he saw two of them enter the house.

"No!"

He turned and ran into a large body. The sword was pulled from his hand. Hands yanked him against what felt like a tree trunk. Arms pinned at his side, he kicked behind him, delivering blows that should have made the man shrink in pain, but the giant didn't budge. Flynn came toward him as he heard Arleigh scream from the cottage.

"I told you it was futile," Flynn said. "You could have left Jamestown and saved yourself. But you decided you wanted to be a hero."

"You thought I would hand over everything I love?" Ryder asked. "Some things are worth fighting for."

"Lost causes," Flynn said. "You should learn to recognize them for what they are, Kendall. Do you know what happens to heroes in a crusade they can't possibly win?"

"They turn into faeries?"

"No, Kendall," Flynn said, "they die."

He pulled the sword back, holding it like a dagger, and plunged it into Ryder's chest. As the blade pierced his chest, Ryder gritted his teeth to hold the scream inside, but there was no air in his body to create a scream. When Flynn pulled the sword away, Ryder's blood oozed down the metal. A massive pain settled on his chest, and he struggled for a shallow breath, wheezing as the oxygen tried to fight its way into his body.

Two men emerged from the cottage. One of them carried Arleigh, screaming and twisting in his arms. She looked so small, so helpless.

"Don't do this," Ryder gasped. "Don't kill her."

Flynn laughed. "Is that what you think my intention is? No, no, Kendall. Arleigh Donovan is going to be mine. Totally, absolutely mine. Master Allen, bring the witch to me."

The man walked across the yard and put Arleigh down. She started to run, and for one small moment, Ryder thought she might succeed, but she stopped short and turned. When she saw Flynn, a soft smile spread across her face. She went to Flynn and put her hand in his.

Ryder hacked blood onto the ground. Arleigh's glance touched him, but her eyes seemed empty, holding no recognition. The giant released his grip, and Ryder dropped to his knees. The pain in his chest was huge. He could barely get a breath, and dizziness overwhelmed him. Nausea wormed its way through his stomach and up his throat. When Flynn pulled Arleigh

toward him and kissed her, Ryder vomited on the ground, his hand pressed hard against his chest. Weak coughs erupted from his throat.

"Master Kendall," Flynn said.

Ryder raised his head, peering at him through strands of sweaty hair. His body shivered with cold, and yet sweat welled from every pore of his body. He vaguely wondered how long he would live in this time. Probably not very long. There was a lot of blood. Someone should call 911. He wished he could see his sisters. Flynn's image dimmed slightly, like he was woven inside a bright aura. Ryder tried to stand up, but his muscles weren't working.

"You have tried your best," Flynn said, "but it was not good enough. And believe me, Master Kendall, my dick is large enough to satisfy her."

Ryder spit another glob of blood and bile onto the ground.

"Get the fuck off my island," he gasped.

He fell to the ground. His vision turned black, and he thought he heard the wail of a crying woman. She sounded so sad.

Chapter 32

Ireland 1235

The air shimmered around them with prisms of color. The land was caught in a violent rainstorm. For one moment, there was no air to breathe, then a blast of cold wind hit them full force, and they fell to the rough brown grass. The wet, soggy ground, littered with puddles of freezing water, sucked at their feet. A deluge of icy rain fell from the sky. Lightning flashed off the horizon, behind the hills that circled the meadow, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

Disoriented and dizzy, Flynn struggled to his feet and studied the landscape through the veil of mist and stinging raindrops. It was colder than he had expected, and his body shivered. It should have been the hottest of summers. The last thing he remembered of Ireland had been the blazing heat of the sun, the sweat pouring from his body, the insects that hovered around his dying flesh. Something wasn't quite right.

He reached down and hauled the girl to her feet. She wore one of Kendall's shirts, and her bare feet sunk into the boggy earth. Why hadn't he thought to dress her properly? He had obviously had more important things on his mind, but he couldn't imagine how he had forgotten something as necessary as shoes. She trembled. In this weather, she would freeze to death. He pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Welcome home," he said.

She peered at him through strands of wet hair and hugged the jacket around her. Something in her eyes bothered him. She looked angry and confused. When he reached toward her, she flinched and stepped backwards.

"Don't," she said.

"You belong to me," Flynn said. "Come here!"

"Absolutely not."

"Do you think you have a choice in this?" He had to raise his voice against the thunder. "Come."

He gripped her arm, and she struggled. She should have stepped willingly into his arms, unmindful of the wind, the rain, the storm that wailed around them. What had those witches done?

"Get your hands off me," Arleigh said. "Who are you? Where are we?"

Flynn blinked. She didn't know him and didn't remember his power, but her memory should mean nothing. She should still come to him. And he was actually cold. He shouldn't have been cold. The weather had not affected him for centuries, and yet the raindrops were cold on his skin, and his body responded by shivering. Gooseflesh peppered his skin.

"Bloody hell!"

He stalked through the tall grass. The woman watched him, clearly afraid but unsure of where she should go, what she should do. She stood quietly as the rain fell around her and waited for him to scream at the heavens.

"They sent us back too far!" he cried. He gripped her shoulders and shook her. "I'm *human* again! Goddamn those little brats! Oh, someone is going to bloody pay for this. The Caindale legacy will die here and now. I have waded through witchcraft my entire existence. They have interfered in my life for the last time."

He stormed around in the meadow, scanning the horizon and the hills. He knew where he was. Several miles to the west were his lands and his manor. Cardew. If they walked beyond those hills, they would soon reach some of the cottages where his tenants lived. He would take what he needed from them and get home, if they made it through this rainstorm without losing their lives. He turned back to Arleigh.

"Do you know who I am?"

She shook her head, and the raindrops fell from her lashes and trailed down her cheeks like tears.

"I'm your new master," he said. "You belong to me. We're going home."

She glanced around the dark, gloomy meadow. He saw her weighing her options. Her gaze flickered across him. Only death awaited her in this place. She lowered her head and came toward him.

"Good choice," he said.

Chapter 33

The burning pain in his chest pulled him into consciousness. He gasped in small irregular breaths, and he could not seem to suck enough air into his lungs. It felt like someone sat on his chest or had piled rocks on top of him. There were also tiny pinpricks of pain, as though someone knitted his skin with a pair of needles. His eyes fluttered open, but only darkness met him. The pale glow of twilight sat at the edge of the window, waiting quietly to turn to night.

His vision was like peering through a web of hazy gauze, but he saw a figure sitting beside him and gradually, as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he recognized Mistress Cullen. Her serious gaze studied him, her eyes peering intently at something on his body. Her dark hair had loosened, and flamed around her face in wild abandon. She looked beautiful, like an aging angel of mercy. Behind her stood Jack Kensington.

He tried to sit up, but a massive pain gripped him, and he slumped back onto the mattress. A hand gently pushed at his shoulder.

"Stay calm," Cullen said. "We are working."

He then saw the lights. Tiny pinpoints of silver lights flashed in and out of his skin, threading through the hole in his chest. They had none of the random, swooping movement of Arleigh's faeries. They were not playful delicate creatures that winked in happiness and flashed in anger. These little creatures were purposeful, intent on one thing.

They moved in and out of his wound. They appeared to be healing the tiny blood vessels that had ruptured, and amazingly, were cauterizing the veins and arteries that were damaged inside of him. They settled on his body and emitted arcs of fire like tiny welders. They swiftly moved through the cavern of his chest like a surgeon's laser.

Ryder watched them through half-closed lids, wincing as the lights flashed, gritting his teeth as they tugged and pulled at his flesh.

"Faery doctors?" he whispered. Two simple words nearly undid him. His voice was raspy, wheezy. The faeries seemed to have much work left to do.

"I suppose you could say that," Mistress Cullen said.

She brushed the hair from his face and ran a cool cloth over his forehead. It felt wonderful, and he closed his eyes.

"Where are the girls?"

"They're in the other room, sick with worry for you. Young Fiana is beside herself."

"She's tough," Ryder said, "and very bossy."

"Aye, I like her very much," Cullen said. "But she fears you will be angry with her."

"Never," Ryder said. "They're witches you know."

"Oh, indeed," Mistress Cullen said. "Powerful. They come from good stock. I've known some of their brood."

"Where's Addy?"

"She is right here, watching over you. She will not leave."

A pink glow nestled on the pillow beside his face. She pulsed gently, sending out her aura. It skimmed across his flesh like a warm touch. When he touched her, her golden hair wrapped around his finger like a baby's hand and squeezed as she slept.

"Was I dead?" Ryder asked.

"Very close to it," the woman said. "I heard the banshee crying. The dark one. The Caindale spirit. I have seen her before, many times."

"I'm adopted," Ryder whispered. "Nice of her to come."

"Nice indeed!" Mistress Cullen huffed. "I chased her away. I have no time for banshees. They only get in the way. I won't lose you now. I've become quite fond of you."

"Thought you were neutral." He tried to smile but found his smile muscles weren't working very well. He thought perhaps the faery magic had numbed his flesh, but what did he know about faery magic?

"You needn't spread it around," she said. "I have a reputation to uphold, but sometimes it is so hard to be neutral. I may be punished, but I'll deal with that later. Jack here managed to control the bleeding well enough until the others arrived. He has magical hands. One of us, you know."

Cullen winked. Behind her, Jack Kensington smiled.

"Pretty ugly for a faery, Jack," Ryder said. "Were you in the wrong line when they were passing out looks?"

"Not much for lines, Master Kendall," Jack said. "Besides, look at the trouble ya got yourself into for bein' pretty."

A laugh caught in his chest, and a massive pain split him in two. "Yeah, well, in my next life I'll know better."

"Ya won't have a choice, lad. 'Tis already been determined."

The weight on his chest lifted slightly. He could breathe a little better. The burning had settled into small twinges that reminded him of the stitches he had in childhood after a bike accident, itching and burning as they healed. How had these little faery lights worked so fast?

"These guys are good," Ryder said. "Are they licensed by the AMA?"

Mistress Cullen gave him one of her looks, so he decided to lie back and enjoy being the object of everyone's attention. He had so many questions, so much he needed to know, but he felt weak as a newborn kitten. He'd had a major ass-kicking. Ryder Kendall had been beaten up by the schoolyard bully and needed time to figure out what to do. But he didn't think he had much time. Whatever reason Flynn had for wanting him dead probably had other consequences. He really needed to find Arleigh and make sure she was all right.

"Will he hurt her?" Ryder asked.

"Arleigh?" Cullen asked. She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. He planned a journey."

"A journey? Is he taking Arleigh away from here?"

"Oh, aye, very far. To a distant time and place."

"He's what?"

Ryder scrambled up in the bed, and hundreds of little faery voices chorused.

"Be calm... Work to do... Blood to stop... Flesh to repair..."

Calm? His world had been crumbling for days, and it crashed around him now. He swung his legs to the side of the bed, and the lights on his chest flashed furiously. Adelina jerked awake and hovered near his face, sending out splashes of magenta fire.

His mind raced with possibilities. He thought he might understand Flynn, how he thought, what he wanted, what motivated him. There could be only one place.

"Goddamn it! He's taking her back to fucking *Ireland*. Away from here. Away from now. And the girls did that? How can they think that is the answer?"

"I don't know his intention," Mistress Cullen said. "Please lie back down. We are not finished."

"Oh, yes, we are. Get the girls and bring them here."

"Ryder!" Addy shouted. "Please lie down."

Jack lifted Ryder's legs back onto the bed, giving him a stern look and crossing his arms over his barrel chest. "Listen to the ladies, Master. They know best."

"Are you going to stop me, Jack?"

"If I have to, lad. I'm not wantin' to hurt you more, so listen to them."

"Only a few more minutes," Cullen said. "Fiana wants you well and whole. You will not be able to help them if you are not well. The banshee still lingers on the island. I have kept her at bay, and the faeries have kept her quiet. But if you do not cooperate, she will return for you, and I cannot keep her from you twice. It is not within my power."

"Jack can handle her," Ryder said.

"I've no power over a banshee," Jack said. "And to be honest, they scare me." He shuddered.

Ryder pulled the air into his lungs. He could draw a breath now with very little pain. They were almost done. He could feel that. Fiana had said she would fix everything. He didn't know what the little witch had up her sleeve, but he guessed he would have to trust her.

He fell back down on the bed and let the faery doctors finish their work. Adelina breathed a sigh of relief. He held out his hand, and she nestled in his palm while he waited to be made whole again. He vowed to take fencing lessons. Being stabbed in the chest was not on his list of things to experience twice. It hurt like hell. Meeting the Caindale banshee in person was also not on his list, even if it had been nice of her to make a special trip.

* * * *

Ryder drifted in and out of consciousness for hours, but Jack Kensington maintained a vigil at his side. He struggled with the nausea that gripped him. He knew the pain didn't cause the roiling in his stomach. It

was plain, ordinary terror. Not that knowing it made him feel any better. He could hurl until his insides were gone, and he wouldn't feel any better.

What had those girls been thinking? What had Fiana planned in that complicated little mind of hers? What had she thought she could do against a Ganconor, and what had possessed her to think Arleigh should be a part of it? She had given Arleigh to him, damn it! Now he had to travel across more time to get her back. He didn't know where he belonged anymore, but he couldn't live anywhere if Arleigh wasn't at his side.

The girls had been too quiet in the other room. As far as he knew, they hadn't even peeked in on him once. The thought of Flynn bullying his girls into doing anything was not acceptable. He thought Flynn was probably long gone, and Arleigh, too. Ganconor or not, super powers or human, Flynn would pay. Nothing existed on earth as powerful as a pissed-off brother.

Mrs. Cullen opened the bedroom door, and three figures stood on the threshold. He raised himself up on the pillow and motioned to them. The two smaller ones flew toward him, knocking him back down to the mattress.

"Girls, girls," Mistress Cullen said. "He has just healed. Be careful with him."

"We've been waiting and waiting," Hannah said.

"Are you better?" Corliss asked. "We were scared."

He nodded his head and gave them a little smile. Cute as they were, talented little witches all, only one of them had the answers he needed to hear. He gestured to the shadow in the doorway. Fiana stood quietly, her hair veiling her face. He willed her to look at him. She resisted, but she finally raised her face.

"What have you been doing behind my back?" he asked.

She burst into tears and ran across the room. He pulled her against him and smoothed her hair.

"It's not what I planned!" Fiana cried. "I don't know how everything changed so fast. Arleigh wasn't supposed to be part of it. I planned to send him to the ether, but he told me if I didn't do what he wanted, he would send some *thing* for me, and I—"

She started to sob and buried her face in Ryder's neck. Hannah met Ryder's eyes over the top of Fiana's dark head. Her gaze darted toward the window, and the color leaked from her face. He tugged her to the bed before she fainted on him. When Hannah spoke, her voice was very quiet, as

though saying the word would draw unwanted attention. "Flynn threatened to send a bocan."

He glanced between the sisters. "What the hell is a bocan, and what did he threaten to do?"

"A bocan is a gatherer," Corliss said. "A scary gatherer."

Fiana shuddered in his arms, and Hannah continued. "Flynn said, with Arleigh human, there was a role Fiana could fill. He wants a new Leanan sidhe."

Ryder gently pushed Fiana away and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I am sick of this faery crap, and I am sick of his thinking he can touch anyone who belongs to me. I'm pissed now. Girls, get your boxes. If you can do magic for Flynn, you can do it for me."

Fiana swiped at the tears on her cheeks. "What do you want us to do?" "You're going to send me to Ireland," he said.

Fiana pulled back and stared at him. "I can't do that. Flynn is there. He'll try to kill you."

"You're not going to talk me out of it. I came here to be a hero, and you're not going to stand in my way. I've always wanted to see Ireland."

Fiana stammered, "But... I can't—"

"Don't worry," Ryder said. "I'll blend right in. It's a talent of mine." He winked at her.

* * * *

He had never really seen witches in action. The three Caindale girls spelled ritual with a capital R. They were like cute little Druid priestesses in their capes and the dark hair flowing across their shoulders. Their little altar burst with talismans and charms, candles, and small bowls that held herbs and flowers, and disgusting concoctions he didn't want to think of. He hoped their spell didn't involve his drinking anything. Even the water from the James scared him. When he thought of all the bacteria that could live in an ounce of water, his stomach churned.

Dozens of candles burned, and curls of smoke hung in the air like gauzy spiderwebs. The air was so thick he couldn't breathe. He hoped he wouldn't have to make another appointment with the faery doctors. He felt pretty well, considering he'd been skewered the day before, but he wished they

wouldn't take such chances with his health. A man had only one set of lungs, and they had to last a lifetime. He doubted the daughters of a tobacco farmer would take that lecture very seriously.

What they did take seriously was their magic.

"When am I going to?" he asked.

"We'll be ready in a few minutes," Fiana said.

"No," Ryder said. "When? What year?"

"The year of our Lord twelve hundred and thirty-five."

"All you have to say is somewhere worse than here," Ryder said.

"What's wrong with here?" Hannah asked. "We were very happy here...once."

"Oh, nothing that a little electricity, purified water, and qualified medical care wouldn't fix."

Corliss grinned. "We don't know what any of that is, but it sounds nice."

"All great things. And I'm eager to have them again."

"So you're going home someday?" Hannah asked. "To your own time?"

Ryder peered into a bowl of what looked to be tomato paste, but he couldn't be sure, and he didn't think he was that lucky. Could blood really get that thick? He stood upright.

You are going back, right, Kendall? Your life is four hundred years away. You have a job, a home, friends, sisters, waiting for you to come back.

The girls all watched him now, waiting for an answer.

What have you been thinking the last week? That you'd ride off into the sunset with a woman that's been dead over three hundred years? Did you think these girls would be part of your life, when they exist in the future?

He felt dizzy and slumped onto a bench

"Christ," he whispered. "I haven't thought this through. Can I even *go* home?"

"You belong to that time," Fiana said. "We can send you back."

"And Arleigh?"

Fiana shook her head. "Tis possible to go only backwards into what has happened, not forward into what has not yet been. Right, Hannah?"

"We think that's how it works," Hannah said.

"But I have to go forward to go home," Ryder said.

"You can," Hannah said, "because it's your time. You can travel greater distances than we can."

"You have traveled backwards?"

"No, silly," Hannah said. "It takes the three of us to work the spell. We are all needed at one end of the time line. We can see into places, but we cannot visit. Otherwise, Fiana would have followed Arleigh and brought her back."

"Leave that to me," Ryder said. "Arleigh is my responsibility."

"There is another Trinity there," Fiana said, "perhaps—"

"Another Trinity?" Ryder asked.

"Aye," Fiana said. "The First Trinity. The alpha, the beginning."

"Sounds impressive," Ryder said, "and very ominous. But it's just another set of you, right?"

"Aye, but Fallon is slightly controlling, and—"

"You first sisters are all that way, Fiana, thinking you know best, bossing people around, keeping secrets. You're all stubborn, proud, arrogant, and you're downright bullies when it comes to dealing with people."

The other girls nodded enthusiastically, and Fiana huffed.

"I don't need a personality analysis, Ryder. I'm trying to make you understand. Fallon can try to send Arleigh back, and we could keep you safe."

"Not a chance," Ryder said. "It's time I did my own dirty work around here. I'll take care of Flynn, and I'll get Arleigh back. She's mine."

Fiana smiled an odd little smile and shook her head. She motioned her sisters toward her.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Corliss asked. "We haven't practiced much."

"You guys are very professional. I'm sure you'll do fine. So what are you going to tell people while I'm gone?"

Hannah laughed. "We'll say you went mad, and we have you locked in the barn, but no one will ask. Most people think you're a little crazy. They're scared of you."

"Damn right," Ryder said. "Do you think they're expecting me at the other end?"

"Aye," Fiana said. "When we push you through the rift, I suspect Fallon and her sisters will find you and pull you through. I'm concentrating on the timing. And the place, of course."

"The timing? The place?"

"I shifted the place earlier because I didn't want Flynn to appear in front of Fallon and her sisters."

"Of course not," Ryder said. "That would have been dangerous. So where did they land?"

"I'm not sure exactly," Fiana said. "I've never been to Ireland."

Ryder's hand plunged into his hair and pulled. He might have screamed.

"So you dumped them?" Ryder cried. "In the middle of nowhere? She could have landed in a river, off a cliff, anywhere."

"I didn't think of that," Fiana whispered.

"And the time?" Ryder asked. He was dangerously close to giving her a little shake. Why didn't these girls ever talk to him about anything?

"I shifted the time stream when I sent Flynn through because I wanted Fallon and her sisters to have time to plan."

"So how long have they been there?"

Fiana flinched. "Several months, I should think."

"Jesus Christ! Arleigh's been in Flynn's hands for several months? She could be dead, she could be sick, anything could have happened to her."

"She's fine, Ryder," Hannah said, "believe us. We have been scrying." When his brows drew down, she smiled. "Looking into the fire, into the water, into the air. We can see other times and places. We've seen Arleigh. Flynn hasn't been near her."

"His wife has made Arleigh her chambermaid," Corliss said.

"Flynn has a wife?"

"Oh, aye," Hannah said, her voice a hushed whisper. "We think he's had several wives. One slit her own throat because she could stand him no longer."

"Hush, Hannah," Fiana said. "That is rumor."

Hannah made a face. "I can tell stories if I like. Besides, I'm sure it must be the truth. Mistress Flynn likes Arleigh and takes good care of her."

"Great," Ryder said. "Everyone's taking care of my business but me. Let's get this show on the road before I lose my nerve."

Fiana closed the shutters and lit the remaining candles on their altar. Corliss ignited a small bowl filled with sprigs of flowers, and the lovely smell of lavender drifted through the room. Hannah took a knife from the pocket of her skirt and began to carve a pentagram onto the table surface. He saw them lay three offerings down on the table. A shard of flint. A hunk of obsidian the size of Rhode Island. A sprig of lavender. His sisters owned the same articles.

Ryder fingered the copy of Keats in the back pocket of his Levis. He wore his traveling clothes and carried his own talismans. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stand there quietly," Fiana said, "and don't laugh at anything."

"I already know it's not going to be funny," Ryder said.

His own ragged breathing stirred the hush of the room then other sounds followed—the musical lilt of a flute, the mighty flap of a hawk's wings, the crackling of fire licking at dry wood. It had to be his imagination, but he couldn't be sure. The things he was sure about in the world had decreased greatly in the last few weeks.

The girls arranged themselves behind the altar, and shadows of their hoods obscured their faces. He could not see their features, only the dark hair that escaped the confines of their hoods. He thought the Caindale sisters might be gone. What possessed these girls when they delved into the forces that surrounded them?

Fiana raised one of her candles into the air.

"I am Fallon. I am Finoula. I am Faye. I am Flannery. I am Fiana. Guardians of the Fire, spirits of courage, spirits of renewal. I bring a gift, a token of my pledge. It is flint, carried across time, from my hand to my hand. What has come from the past and across the bridge of time, let it return to its place. Carry with it the man who chooses to be a champion. Blessed be the Fire."

Hannah traced her finger across the pentagram. Ryder felt sick. How could these girls exist in every century? How was it possible for three spirits to unite over and over again? Where did that power come from?

"I am Honora. I am Hilde. I am Holloway. I am Heather. I am Hannah. Guardians of the Earth, spirits of nourishment, spirits of rebirth. I bring a gift, a token of my pledge. It is obsidian, carried across time, from my hand to my hand. What has come from the past and across the bridge of time, let

it return to its place. Carry with it the man who chooses to be a champion. Blessed be the Earth."

Corliss ran her hand through the smoke that drifted from the bowl. A dreamy smile settled on her face.

"I am Caitlyn. I am Cecily. I am Colleen. I am Casey. I am Corliss. Guardians of the Air, spirits of intellect, spirits of inspiration. I bring a gift, a token of my pledge. It is lavender, carried across time, from my hand to my hand. What has come from the past and across the bridge of time, let it return to its place. Carry with it the man who chooses to be a champion. Blessed be the Air."

Ryder's legs wobbled, and a dizziness swamped his head. He focused on the girls' words, trying to remember the names. Fallon. Honora. Caitlyn. Fiana picked up a cup.

"Guardians of the Water, spirits of emotions, spirits of dream. We bring a gift, a token of our pledge. It is our life force, carried across time, from our hands to our hands. What has come from the past and across the bridge of time, let it return to its place. Carry with it the man who chooses to be a champion. Blessed be the Water."

The girls took a sip of water and then, with a sigh, he reached out for the cup Fiana held toward him. James water hadn't killed him yet. What was a little water when there were so many other interesting ways to die spread across time? He downed the rest of the water in the cup and put it back down on the altar. He gave them a little smile.

"I can guess this part," he said.

The girls smiled back as he disappeared from the room.

Chapter 34

They had called her Arleigh Donovan for months now. It didn't matter. She could not remember her real name or where she had come from. She could not remember if she had family or a home. The only thing she remembered from this place was standing beneath a cold rain while a man ranted toward the sky like a madman. And she remembered following him because she had no choice.

She had hoped for an opportunity to escape, but they walked for hours, bent double against the sheets of icy rain. They had finally arrived at a small village, if indeed it could be called that—four small cottages, perched on a barren field, a barn, and a garden that struggled to survive in the cold, hard land. The tenants had nothing of value, but Lord Cardew had taken what he wanted. He confiscated their only horse, provisions and extra clothing. He did not care if they needed the clothing nor that their food stuffs were dangerously low in the early spring. What he wanted, he took.

No chance for escape existed. Other than the tenant farmers who had followed his directives with lowered heads and a great deal of groveling, they had met no others on their journey. Even if they had, no one would have interfered with Lord Cardew. He was an object of fear, and there would be no safe harbor if Cardew had chosen to hunt for her.

She rode in front of him across the bare back of the horse, cold and wet, shaking and coughing. She had lain against him for warmth and had allowed his arms to slide around her because she could not control her shivering and feared she would fall from the animal. They did not speak and paused only once in the day to eat.

Cardew stayed in a foul mood the entire journey. He muttered curses under his breath, spoke of killing and maiming, bloodshed and revenge. He prattled on about witches and curses, spells and faeries. She thought he must be quite mad, but if a madman offered the only protection she had in this

godless environment, she would accept it. Arleigh let his words and curses lull her to sleep. She lay against his chest and stole what heat she could from his loathsome body.

They passed fields in preparation for cultivation, outbuildings in need of repair after a hard winter, and malnourished cattle and sickly sheep grazing in the grasslands around the estate. They finally reached the outlands of his manor proper. Cardew Castle loomed in the distance, a dark gray monstrosity perched on the highest land in the valley. Its tall spires rose into the gloomy sky, and the battlements looked like craggy mountaintops that spiked through the cold air.

She expected the worst. She did not remember how she came to be in the company of Lord Cardew, but the fact that she didn't implied something she might best let be forgotten. A man did not purchase a woman for the simple pleasure of her company, and he did not drag her halfway across Ireland on horseback to be a scullery maid or serf in his fields.

His looks were pleasing, his body imposing, but she knew the moment he moved toward her that she would cease to remember even the name he had given her. His eyes frightened her, and a need rose there she knew she could not meet.

When they entered the courtyard, people ran from all directions in the cold drizzle to meet his demands. The horse was immediately taken to shelter, and they were bundled within heavy blankets and led into the house. The man possessed an amazing number of servants. They stoked the fire, gathered clothing, fetched hot water, and prepared a meal. Arleigh sat upon a bench, wrapped in her woolen blanket, and stared into the fire of the hearth, waiting to discover her fate.

A tall woman with long black hair entered the main hall. She walked regally across the stone floor, her rose-colored dress stirring up dust as it swept the path behind her. At first sight, Arleigh presumed they were near the same age, and yet when the woman neared, Arleigh saw the fine lines around her eyes and mouth.

"Cameron," the woman said. "Welcome home. Thy travels must have led thee far afield."

She leaned toward Lord Cardew and put her mouth against his in a proprietary kiss.

"Thou hast brought a guest?"

Lord Cardew embraced the woman, glancing at Arleigh over the top of the woman's head. The first signs of discomfort registered on her captor's face. His eyes narrowed. His glance raked across her shivering body, and Arleigh knew he had made a decision he did not want to make.

"No, gentle wife," he said, "a gift for thee."

"Where didst thou find such a wondrous gift?"

"The woman is slow-witted and dull," Cardew said, "but should make thee an adequate servant. She is a widow but hast no memory of the life she has lost, so I brought her to thee."

The elegant woman had studied Arleigh for a few moments, and the way she cast her eyes back toward her husband proved she had not believed his story. But she smiled and thanked him with a kiss.

"We shall give thee a new life," she said, pulling Arleigh to her feet. "I am Cullen Flynn, Lady Cardew. Thou art most welcome in my service. We shall see thee are happy being with us. Come."

She had taken Arleigh's hand and bundled her through the dark and dismal chambers of Cardew Manor and led her to a room that blazed with candles and shone with as much sunlight as could be gleaned from the cold, dreary afternoon. The tapestries hanging on the wall were airy and filled with images of childlike creatures and fascinating beasts from myth and legend. The bedclothes were dark pastels, and the curtains that surrounded the massive bed were white and draped with wildflowers.

"I like not a dreary world," the lady said. "Tis Cardew Manor and the Lord within that filleth the world with darkness. My heart once filled with sunlight and music, laughter and joy. My father's estates lieth to the east of Cardew, and the manor house is filled with cheer, but Cameron is my lord, and his desire is to dwelleth here. I will not be dragged into his darkness, so I keep my light sheltered and locked in these four walls."

"You are a lady true?" Arleigh had asked.

"Indeed," she said. "Most of the land, the stock, the servants are mine. My father hast been most generous. My husband is a man that hast desires beyond his station. He wed me though I be near ten years older because he wanted what I possessed."

"Why did you...why did thou wed him?" Arleigh asked.

The woman considered for a moment. "He is pleasing to look upon and a great warrior. He hath the ambition and talent to find greatness. My heart filled with him."

"Is thy heart still full?"

"No," she answered curtly. "He hath killed the love in my heart, and there is naught that can be done to waken it."

She had ordered clothing found and a hot bath filled for her new serving girl. As three other young women added water to the tub, Arleigh dropped her wet shirt to the floor, and an older woman scooped it up. The lady wrapped a soft dressing gown around her shoulders.

"What name dost thou answer?" the lady had asked.

"He calls me Arleigh Donovan," Arleigh answered. "I don't know if 'tis my true name."

"Your past hath been completed, Arleigh Donovan," the lady said. "We shall think on thy future. I know not what my husband hast promised, or threatened, but his tongue hast tricked him, and thou art now mine. He shall not touch thee."

Arleigh burst into tears, grateful for any protection and comfort she could find, and the gentle lady had wrapped warm arms around her and cradled her like a child.

Arleigh vowed she would do anything the lady asked in thanks for her guardianship. She served her well, doting upon her lady with quiet grace and respect. She slept in a small trundle bed that tucked beneath the lady's own, and before sleep came each night, she thanked the woman who offered her shelter and companionship.

One evening when the lady stitched a baby frock in the glow of the hearthlight, Arleigh dared to question her.

"My lady, hath thou no children?"

Cullen Flynn shook her head sadly and smoothed her hand across the child's garment.

"Nay," she said. "The joy of a child's presence hath been denied me. Six births, five dead children. All I ever wished for was a child of mine own. To raise. To love."

"Were they stillborn, my lady?"

"Nay," Lady Cardew said. "All born alive but five met with death. The sixth is safe for now. My father hath taken him far from here. Perhaps some day he will be mine again."

Arleigh wanted to question the lady further but saw the heartache spread across her face. She could not bear to open the wounds and cause further damage. But soon the lady put aside her sewing and came near to sit beside Arleigh on the hearth rug. She told her a story. It was the legend of the Leanan sidhe. Arleigh found it fascinating, and when the lady told Arleigh what she wanted her to do, she took only a moment to make her decision. She said she would do what the lady asked.

Chapter 35

Light blazed behind his eyes, and he tightened his lids against the sudden burst. The last time this little trip had knocked him out, but he seemed to be getting used to the evaporation of his molecules. He lay very still, listening for sounds, afraid to move even the smallest muscle for fear parts of him hadn't arrived yet. He wished he understood how this worked.

After a few moments, he cracked his lids a tiny bit. He thought for a split second he had gone blind, but gradually, shadows began to return to his vision, gray movement inside a field of darkness. A flash of black darted past, another of a light blue. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into the face of a woman in her thirties.

She had long dark hair, parted in the middle and framing a perfectly oval face. A golden headband circled her forehead and captured the straight locks of hair before they could sweep across her face. She had the most gorgeous blue eyes he had ever seen. Check that. He had seen them in sets of three over the past few weeks, or hundreds of years if you wanted to get technical.

He rose to his elbows, winching at the pain that flashed behind his eyes. The time-travel hangover hurt like a bitch, and he struggled to focus. Two younger women flanked the beautiful blue-eyed woman. All three wore sky blue dresses that swept the floor and puddled at their feet. He let his gaze roam over each. It was like looking into a crystal ball and seeing the future faces of his sisters. Check that again. Looking into the past. He would never keep it straight.

"You don't have a frying pan behind your back, do you?" he asked.

The oldest woman gaped and pulled back, appraising him like livestock. Her brow furrowed, marring the smooth flesh and revealing her age. The two younger ones smiled.

"A frying pan?" she asked. "Thou art most odd. Why wouldst thou be thinking that?"

"No reason." He held out his hand. "I'm Ryder Kendall."

"Aye," said the woman, with a huff. "We felt thee through the chasm. We thought thee would arrive sooner."

"I don't think it was a direct flight," Ryder said.

The woman looked at him dubiously then reached for his outstretched hand. She grabbed it and pulled him to his feet.

"Welcome to thy past, Ryder Kendall," the woman said, "but I must remind thee, for me and my sisters 'tis but the present. And the present is fraught with danger."

Ryder smiled. "I'll try to remember that." Ryder studied the large chamber he had landed in. Now here was a place that didn't have the familiar contours and comfort of his keeping room—cold, sterile, and austere yet, at the same time, oddly soothing. "I like what you've done with the dungeon."

The three women looked around. Puzzled, they glanced at the gray rock walls, the stone floor spread with rushes, the gigantic hearth that filled one entire wall, and the dark tapestries that rose from floor to ceiling. He saw them exchange a look he had seen many times before. The youngest one peered at him from beneath a fringe of dark hair.

"The dungeon? Sir, thou art mistaken. 'Tis our main hall. Hast thou been struck on the head?"

Ryder laughed. "Repeatedly, but no concussion this time. You must be Caitlyn."

"Indeed, sir," she said with a smile. "Wilt thou meet my sisters, Fallon and Honora?"

"Ladies, I am most pleased to make your acquaintance," Ryder said. He bowed with a flourish and turned to the oldest of the sisters. "You must be Fallon. For some reason I expected you to be younger."

The woman rolled her eyes. "I am as old as I am. Thirty-eight summers."

Ryder held up his hand. "Not an insult, I swear. You're very lovely. I've been with, well, let's see, one sister's been twenty-three, the other thirteen. I guess I thought we'd be going backwards. I was afraid you three would be kids."

"Kids?" Fallon wrinkled her nose. "Why wouldst that notion float through thy head?"

"Not important," Ryder said, "but you're holding up great here in this time. Way better than I would have thought, considering what life must be like here. It's a bit dismal. Faith's got it made if she's going to look like you."

"Faith," Fallon said, "aye, the one in the 21st century. She is known to us."

"So you've seen Faith? Do you have a crystal ball or something?"

"A crystal ball?" Fallon tapped her lip. "An intriguing notion. Nay, I need not an object of any kind, Master Kendall. The future is everywhere. 'Tis in the fire of the hearth, in the water of the spring, in the dust of the earth, in the air around me. Look and thou shall see."

She waved her hand in front of her face, and the air in the chamber tossed and rippled like the waves of the ocean. Her face blurred behind the glistening air, and her fingertips shimmered when flashes of pale blue light sparked from her hands and tiny crystals hung in the air. For one moment, he caught a glimpse of Fiana, Hannah, and Corliss running through the field near the cottage. Jack Kensington and Mistress Cullen watched over them like proud parents. He knew his mouth dropped open, but he couldn't help it. Fallon laughed.

"Tis not difficult for me, Master Kendall. I see into everywhere. I see us into many distant years, and my heart grows warm. The Trinity legacy holds much power, and 'tis steadfast in its unity. But Faith and her sisters are as far as I am able to see. The alpha and the omega."

"Fiana said something like that," Ryder said absently. He watched the pale blue light wane and dissolve. "That was some parlor trick. You could make a lot of money doing that. You're better than David Copperfield."

"Truly?" Fallon asked. "I am not familiar with Master Copperfield. Is he a witch or a conjurer?"

Ryder laughed. "I'm not sure, but he's pretty impressive. He scares the heck out of me. Does it worry you that Faith is as far as you can see?"

"Nay, not a bit. In reality, 'tis not happened yet."

"In reality..." Ryder echoed. He didn't like the sound of that.

Ryder's stomach churned. He was going to have an ulcer if he didn't get home soon. These women all scared the bejesus out of him. How had they

survived in this century with such obvious power? A visible ring surrounded each one, as though they were cloaked in a web of color. Distinct auras of red, green, and blue shimmered around them, winding in and out of their bodies like pale ribbons of light. Surely someone else would have noticed they were like no other women. They should have been hunted down and burned. The thought made him sick.

"Very few fear our power, Master Kendall," Fallon said. "We are accepted and sought out for our skills in this place and time. We are called upon to heal, to curse, to charm, to predict. We are most respected in our community."

She had read his mind. Damn these women.

"That's not what I've always heard about witchcraft," Ryder said. "What about the hunts, the trials, the burnings? I've been a student of history all my adult life. I know this family can't always have a happy ending. Not with what I've seen you all do."

"Aye," Fallon said, "'twill indeed be sad times ahead. A century or two doth change perception, and belief turns to suspicion. Care will be taken, secrets well-guarded, and yet still men will be cruel and unjust. 'Twill be heartache, loss, and sacrifice."

"You see all this happening?" Ryder asked. "And you can't stop it?"

"The tides of the sea cannot be changed, Master Kendall," Fallon said. "To know something doth not *always* make reason enough to change destiny. There are many reasonings of reality I do not ken, although I try. Honora could explain them to thee perhaps."

She waved her hand in the direction of her sister. The air shimmered with a dusky radiance. Ryder toyed with the collar of his shirt, trying to get more air. Fallon knew that, some time in the future, the three sisters might not survive, and yet she accepted it all as fate. He could not understand how she could possibly do that.

She waited for him to say something. What had she asked him? Oh, yeah, something about reality.

"No, don't bother with explanations," he said with a smile. "I wouldn't understand."

"As thou wish," Fallon said. "Some day I hope to see beyond thy sisters. But I have seen thee in many places."

Honora stepped forward. "We have seen thee. We have listened to thee."

"Do all of you girls spy on me?" Ryder ran his hand through his hair. "Not one of you respects my privacy. Do you watch me in a bowl of water or one your little candles? You all seem to have your tricks to keep tabs on me. Hell, my own sisters are constantly reading my mind. There is such a thing as privacy, you know."

Caitlyn smiled. "'Tis not a bad thing we do, Brother. We watch thee because we love thee."

"Yeah, yeah," Ryder said, "but the Trinity witches get to have all the secrets, and what does Ryder get? Jack shit. No power. No magic lessons. No aura. I can't even do a simple card trick. Why? Because I'm not one of your precious Caindale clan."

He paced across the stone floor. It didn't matter what century he landed in. Annoying sisters still bugged the hell out of him. He paused when he heard Honora speak.

"Thou speakest as though thou art of no importance to the family."

He turned to her and shrugged. "I guess I wouldn't go that far. I know everyone loves me."

"But to thee," Caitlyn said, "the love hath not been enough. 'Tis always been distressing to thee thou art not a Caindale true, when in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth."

"What's the truth?" Ryder asked. His glance lingered on each of the women then settled on Fallon.

"We are the truth," Fallon said, "and we are the beginning. Come, I will show thee."

She moved toward a doorway and grabbed a torch from a sconce on the wall. The black smoke swirled around them like a dark cloak, and the burning smell of oily vegetation assailed his nostrils. The shadows cast by the torch shifted, and gloomy visages spread across the gray wall. He followed her down a long hallway and up a flight of curved stairs that had no railings and dropped straight to the rock floor below. He hugged the wall as closely as he could. Honora and Caitlyn climbed behind him, whispering as they moved up the staircase. He knew they were talking about him, but he was afraid to look back. He didn't want to fall to his death to make a face at them. How would that look on his gravestone?

Fallon paused at a thick wooden door and pushed it open, revealing a room with rounded walls and tall, narrow windows.

"The castle keep," Fallon said.

"I've been here before," Ryder murmured.

Tapestries partially covered all the windows, but the fire in the hearth cast enough light on the bed for him to see the occupants. A young man stretched across the straw-filled mattress. His long blond hair curled across his shoulder. A thin blanket partially covered his naked body. His body was muscular and well-used, despite his youth. The man's flesh was marred by numerous scars. He suspected the scars had not been acquired during the exuberance of childhood. The man's face had the innocent quality of a child tucked into bed for the night. He could not have been more than twenty.

But this boy was no child. He tucked a young woman against his arm, her head on his chest. Her red hair spread across a pillow, and though he could not see her face, he knew who she was. Her petite, naked body had fully blossomed into womanhood, with full breasts, long, slender limbs, and gently rounded curves. It was a body he had loved only hours before, but a visible difference existed between the woman he had loved and the woman who lay before him. A velvety lavender sheen wrapped and curled around her like a heavy mist. Touching her flesh and threading through her hair, the gentle, luminous shimmer wavered with each breath she took and hovered around her like an aura.

"Arleigh," he breathed.

Ryder ran his hands across his own body as he looked at the boy on the bed. The young man had slim legs, a broad chest covered with light hair, narrow hips, strong shoulders. He had seen the facial structure in the mirror every day of his life, and the hair was a shade lighter than his own. This boy had spent most of his days outside instead of trapped in a school, and his hair shone with the kiss of the sun. The boy upon the bed, a boy that in the 21st century would be a college student, was himself.

"Is that me?" he muttered. "Not possible."

"Tis Remy," Fallon said. "Our brother. The Keeper and a Caindale true. But it matters not what his name is here and now. It matters only that he is now and forever. That *thou* art now and forever."

"We are one?" he asked.

"Always."

"I have to talk with him," Ryder whispered. He started forward, but Honora grabbed his arm.

"Nay," she said. "We forbid it. We know not what might happen if ye occupy the same space in this time. 'Tis not in our realm of knowledge yet. We have kept him under enchantment. Fallon has given them a potion so he will not waken. Remy would be fearful of thy presence. Remy is a Keeper, as are thee. The ways of the Trinity are not to be understood by Keepers. 'Tis most dangerous."

"A Keeper," Ryder said, nodding his head. "I'm the Keeper at home. At least that's what they tell me. But I wasn't born to the Kendall family. They adopted me."

"No," Fallon said, "thou wert not, so thy parents had to search until they found thee. They searched long and hard to find the perfect soul to complete their family. And they finally found you. Remember this, Ryder: Thou art a Caindale true. Thou always were, and thou always will be."

"And Arleigh?"

"Remy calls her Aislynn," Fallon said, "and he loves her. How could he not? She is, I fear, the Leanan sidhe. And yet he thrives. We do not understand it, but we know the love is meant to be."

"He looks amazingly fit," Ryder said. "He's not suffering from the curse. This is the true love she had, and because of it, she'll be punished."

Fallon exchanged glances with her sisters, and Caitlyn took a step toward him.

"Aye, thou speakest truly," Caitlyn said. "It has begun. Her aura will soon grow dim. Already her shadow fadeth, in spite of the binding spell. Look with thy heart, and thee will see her spirit is lightening. She will soon enter the ether world. There is naught we can do to stop it, and I am sorry for Remy."

"They belong together," Ryder said. "Two souls that will wither, and lives that will hold no meaning without the other."

"Ye belong together," Caitlyn said. "It matters not what time binds thee. We cannot give Remy his true love. But we can give her to thee."

Ryder could not take his eyes from the bed. The woman's body curled softly around her lover, his arm tight around her. They slept in peace, wrapped in each other's arms. Soon, he knew the Leanan sidhe would be

gone, and Remy would be wounded. These three women would have to save his life.

"I was not in the 17th century when Arleigh was reborn."

"Nay," Fallon said, "thou wert not."

"So you arranged it."

"Aye," Fallon said. "Stephen was a true Caindale and a very gentle man, but not the one for her. Thou wert the one, but not where thou were meant to be. I thought long on what to do. When Stephen was killed, the answer became clear. But I did not see Lord Cardew's future."

"You mean Flynn?" Ryder asked.

"Aye," Fallon said. "Cameron Flynn. Lord Cardew."

"A freaking lord," Ryder said. "Figures. No wonder he wanted back here. Too bad you couldn't have seen that coming. Could have saved a lot of grief."

"Aye," Fallon said. "I understand thy meaning, but there art some magics I cannot control. Faery magic springs from a well of surprise. One can ne'er predict the actions of banshees. Or the bloody nobility. I saw the intention too late. I did fear Cardew's action, but indeed we were busy saving Remy's life."

"With witchcraft?"

"Of course," she said with a smile. "He was dying."

"But hasn't all of this already happened?" Ryder asked. "How are we going to change something that has already happened? And how is it you seem to know all this?"

"Tis magic, Ryder," Fallon said. "Witchcraft. Thou art not expected to understand. How can it be thou art physically in two places at the same time? How is it thou hast met three sets of sisters within days of each other that span eight centuries? How is it Lord Cardew was a Ganconor but 'tis now a mortal man? These questions I fear will cause madness, and as I listen to thee, I think mayhap thou hast not far to go."

"You're very funny," he said. "You girls love a joke at my expense, don't you?"

"Indeed," Fallon said. "But my words should be taken seriously. 'Tis best not to think on the questions that plague thee. Thou art for the woman. The Leanan sidhe. Thou hast tamed her. When thee resisted the power of her

magic and offered true love instead, her spirit became yours. We could not give the gift of love to Remy, but we have given it to thee. 'Tis enough."

"Arleigh is all I want," Ryder said. "That's why I'm here. Wait. You said Flynn is a mortal man?"

"Of course. 'Tis why Fiana has sent him to a time before the faery magic. 'Tis why we have kept Remy and the Leanan sidhe under enchantment. 'Tis very dangerous to do so but necessary to keep them apart from Lord Cardew. Fiana would not have sent a Ganconor to us. 'Twould be too dangerous."

"That works out pretty well," Ryder said. "I'll be able to kill him as a mortal before he can become the Ganconor."

"We have kept the Leanan sidhe bound," Caitlyn said. "She has not met Lord Cardew. She was the reason he came here, the reason he tried to slay Remy, and the reason he became the Ganconor. There is no reason to kill him now."

"Ganconor or not, I still want him dead."

"And thou reasons that will solve the problems?" Honora asked.

"What else can I do? What else would I be here for?"

"We know not," Honora said. "Fiana must have had a reason. She sent thee here."

"I insisted she send me," Ryder said.

"Fiana is very strong-willed," Fallon said. "Thou would not have convinced her if she did not have a secret purpose."

"Yeah, I get that," Ryder said. "But I'll find him, and I'll kill him. And I'll make sure he stays dead."

"Is that possible for thee?" Honora asked.

"Believe me, the world is better off without him."

"I have known him as a man," Fallon said. "I have seen him as the Ganconor. Both are dangerous. Both are deadly."

"But I have the element of surprise," Ryder said. "And I intend to use it."

Caitlyn stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. "Thou hast not the heart of a killer."

"I'll fake it," Ryder said.

The three sisters sighed, and Honora pulled the door closed on Remy and his Leanan sidhe.

Chapter 36

Arleigh knew when the door opened who stood at the threshold. His stare ran the length of her body and sent shivers through her. She wanted desperately to keep her back turned, hoping he would leave her, but she had made a promise to her lady. She finished smoothing the bedclothes and turned to face him.

"Where is my wife?" he demanded

"She hath gone to the squire's cottage, my lord," Arleigh said. ""Twill be a babe born this night."

"Stop talking like that," he snapped.

"How shall I speak, my lord?"

"Like Arleigh Donovan," he said.

"I do not remember Arleigh Donovan, my lord," she said.

"Damned if I can figure out why," he said. "Your memory should be intact. The enchantment should not have interfered with memory, or emotion, or how you feel about me. Those little witches must have done something."

He closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, studying her. Arleigh's stomach rolled over, and she suddenly regretted the promise she had made. He began to walk across the room, and she backed up slightly.

"There was a time when you called me Cameron," he said.

"I do not remember," she said. "We were close?"

"Very close," he said.

"We are to be close again?" Arleigh asked.

He nodded. "Don't you think it's time we stopped playing games? I plan to tell that bitch that things will change between us, and she can do nothing to stop it."

Arleigh willed herself to move toward him. She concentrated on his face. If she had judged him on his looks alone, she would have found him a

most worthy man. But the smile that curved on his lips held more than a trace of cruelty, and the blue eyes that seemed to sparkle shone with a brightness that had its origins in something beyond her understanding. She met his eyes, but she felt like the victim of a giant predator that had been caught in a trap.

"My lady will not approve," she said. "I belong to her."

"No," Flynn said. "That's where you're wrong. I brought you here for me. For my pleasure."

"I am pleasing to thee?" Arleigh asked. She reached out and placed her hand against his chest. His heart pounded.

"Oh, aye. Very pleasing. I want you. And I will have you. Your lady does not rule over Cardew Manor. It is my home. And everything in it, including the lady and you, belongs to me."

"Tis my duty to serve," Arleigh said. "If thou wishes to use me for thy pleasure, then—"

He yanked her toward him, and before she had a moment to think, to move, to react, he crushed and held her in an embrace that tore the breath from her. Her head fell back, and his mouth came down hard on hers, stealing her thoughts and weakening her legs so that she buckled against him. He pulled her tighter, and his kiss deepened.

She wanted to push against him, but her arms were trapped at her sides. She had no choice but to move them up his body. She needed to get away from him. The promise she had made would steal too much of her soul, and she didn't know how much she had left. Being so close to him made her heart flutter with fear and betrayal, and yet, she had done only what the lady had asked.

Touch him. Tease him. Make him love thee. The spirit of the Leanan sidhe is alive, trapped but yearning for release. It needs only a place to dwell. I will have revenge for my dead children. I will have my live son returned to me. I cannot share my son's life with the father alive. Allow Cardew to love thee, and I can have my life returned. Perhaps I can be happy. And we will be free.

Arleigh thought of the lady's words and wanted to give Cullen a chance at happiness, to have the life that had been denied to her. She fought against the urge to pull away from the strange man who seemed so familiar and

foreign at the same time. Her lips began to tingle as he pulled and sucked at them with his mouth.

A heat stirred in her body, wavering like a flickering candle, fanned by a sudden breeze. It pulsed through her, sweeping into her limbs, flowing through her pelvis, and finding the soft core of her soul buried deep inside. It made her head swim, and she felt light-headed and unfocused. What thoughts she had were being expelled to allow entry for something else, something she could not fathom.

Something tugged at her then hurled through her body with blinding speed, gathering strength and life from the fire her body created. She tried to fight the sensations, tried to block the fire, tried desperately to push away the hard body that seemed fastened to her own. What had sought the heat with a vengeance and settled within her? What pushed at her? She could not fight it. The pleasure, the desire, was too strong to battle. Besides, what swept through her like a hurricane tide felt so wonderful, so purposeful, she had no choice but to acquiesce.

Locked in Flynn's arms, Arleigh's body relaxed. Her arms lifted and curled around his neck. Her body softened against his. Her lips opened. Flynn moaned softly against her mouth.

She tugged at his shirt, and they collapsed on the bed, his mouth running across her throat, across her breasts. His hands pulled her skirt and swept across her thighs, searching eagerly for the heat, the fire. She pressed against him, her arms hugging his neck, her fingers twisting in the hair at the nape of his neck.

Over his shoulder she saw the shadow of her lady, tucked into an alcove near the window. Cullen nodded, and Arleigh cupped the husband's face within her hands.

"The sedge is withered from the lake," Arleigh said. "And no birds sing."

"I don't understand," Flynn said. "What does it mean?"

"It means thou wilt belong to me," she whispered.

"Always. Forever. Until I die."

"Aye," Arleigh said. "Until death."

She pulled his face down and locked her mouth over his.

* * * *

Cameron Flynn roamed throughout the castle like a pale ghost. He could not focus or concentrate. He had accounts to settle, repairs to oversee, tribute to collect. There were crops withering in his fields, animals dying in the heat. The summer blazed, and the sun threatened to destroy his assets and his future, but only one thought filled his mind. Arleigh Donovan. He could not get her out of his head. She had spun and woven herself through his brain like the gossamer threads of an intricate web. She strangled his mental capacity until the only thing that occupied his thoughts, his feelings, was her.

His mind had become a giant labyrinth. He started out each day on a path in which he set goals for himself, tasks he needed to accomplish. He left the manor house with the rising sun, eager to begin his day. During the early morning, he tackled his responsibilities with a vengeance, hurling directives toward his serfs, his stable masters, and his craftsmen. But some time during the early afternoon, he took a turn in the labyrinth that led him to thoughts of Arleigh. After that turn, he became lost, and the only way he could find himself was to seek her out. He would find himself standing in the courtyard, disoriented and confused, wondering how he had arrived there.

His need for her caused an ache to spread through his body, and when he could not find her, the pain tore through him like a rusty blade. Damn her! Even when he did find her, cornering her in a dark alcove, pulling her into a barn, and pushing her down on the straw, his need for her could not be abated. She would kiss him. Her hands would roam across his body, sending waves of pleasure through him. She would allow him to lie against her, allow his lips to travel across her flesh. Her kisses and her touch would drive him to the point where he thought he would die of need for her.

Yet each time his hands sought her heat, each time he thought he would burst with his need for her, his wife, that bitch, would appear out of nowhere. Arleigh would adjust her skirt, push against him, and vanish, leaving him bewildered, unfulfilled, dying inside.

When she refused him, he spent the rest of his day wandering around the estate. The serfs and servants stared at him. He knew what they thought, and he did not care. He did not even care that they dared to watch him, although normally he would have had them whipped for their boldness. He had more

important things to think about than the impudence of servants. He had Arleigh, and his need for her caused him to forget all other things, even the joy he had once taken in making the lives of others miserable.

He spent his time seeking her, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, living for one moment when her lips would graze across his cheek, when her hand would trail across his chest. He would grab at her, catch her arm, pull her skirt, anything to get her close to him, if only for the briefest of moments. Her lips smiled, her eyes promised him such delights, and that bitch, Cullen, would appear out of nowhere once again.

He allowed his crops to burn in the sun. He let his animals die of thirst. The fencing rotted, and the stone walls crumbled. His tenants suffered as they struggled to exist. He did not care. He lived for Arleigh.

He was dying of love for her. And he didn't care.

Chapter 37

Cardew Manor rose out of the early morning mist, a giant blot on the beauty of the landscape, with dark stone walls, massive turrets and long, narrow windows. An actual moat and drawbridge protected the castle.

"Home sweet home," Ryder said to the horse. "I don't care much for his architectural taste, but at least he gave up the drawbridge and moat in Jamestown. Not much need for them when you're top dog. But here, yeah, a definite need. He's probably not a very popular fellow around here. Let's go see how happy he is to see me."

He usually knocked, but hey, the drawbridge was down. He rode into the courtyard, and the state of disrepair startled him. The summer appeared to have been hard. Across the countryside, he had seen plenty of dead animals, and crops had died, but throughout all the estates he had crossed, he noticed a fury of activity to try to repair the damage. Tenants had tried to divert river water to irrigate the fields. Animals were corralled in areas where plentiful water existed. It looked here as though Flynn had done nothing to advise his tenants, to help protect his livelihood. How could a landlord not care about the state of his land?

Several servants rushed toward him and gathered the reins in their hands. One knelt down so Ryder could use the man's back as a step.

"Hey, don't do that," Ryder said. "It's not necessary."

He jumped down, narrowly avoiding the man.

"Master Caindale," the man said, "is our lord expecting thee?"

They thought he was Remy Caindale. So much the better. This might be easier than he had expected.

"No, it's a big surprise. I don't want to be a bother. I'll find him myself. I know my way around."

He entered the manor house and, mercifully, left the blazing sunlight outside. The inside of the castle was cool and dark and surprisingly familiar.

Ryder took a few moments to let his eyes adjust. A tall woman entered the room. Her face held classical patrician lines that implied nobility and breeding. Dark curling hair reached to her waist. She came toward him, and he took a step backwards. He recognized her. In fact, he recognized her from a couple of places, but she was a little younger here, and very pretty.

"Cullen?"

"Indeed," the woman said. "Do we know one another? Thou art familiar."

"Yes. Well, no, maybe not. Not yet. I'm a Caindale."

"Aye, Remy Caindale. Thy estate lieth several days journey from Cardew. Thou hast sisters. The witches. Many hath sought thy sisters for favors. I am Lord Cardew's wife. Dost thou have a need to meet with my husband?"

"No. In fact, I'd like to avoid that if possible. I've come for my...wife. I heard she stayed here with you." When she quirked a brow, he continued. "Arleigh. Is she here?"

"Indeed, the woman doth reside with me," Cullen answered. "She hath no memory of thee or anything else in her life. I was told her husband hath gone to the grave."

"I'm not dead yet," Ryder said, "although it was a close call."

He raised his shirt to display the scar that ripped across his chest. She came closer and touched the raised flesh where the saber had sliced through him.

"How is it thou survived such a wound? 'Tis very deep, and it did strike the lung."

"The luck of the Irish, I guess," Ryder said. "Look, to be honest here, Mrs. Flynn, I want to get my wife and get out before I have to kill your husband. I don't have a problem with killing him but, for some reason, the Trinity, my sisters, is against the idea, and I don't want to stir up more trouble than the world can handle. I don't want to change fate or anything."

"Tis not possible to change fate," Cullen Flynn said. "Why wouldst thou think that possible?"

He did not want to get into a philosophical discussion with the woman, no matter how intelligent she seemed. When he got home, he might have to reevaluate the general opinion of women throughout history, and the town

librarian would be the place to start. He needed to have a conversation with Cullen Cargill.

Arleigh suddenly appeared on the stone staircase, wearing a dress of flowing violet-colored fabric. A tiny circlet of gold held her hair away from her face. She had never looked more beautiful. His little faery princess fit perfectly in this world. The lady of the house had obviously been taking very good care of her. She glowed with good health and vitality, and he had seen little of it in the past few days. Glowed?

"Holy Christ," he breathed. "Look at her."

"She is beautiful," Cullen Flynn said. "My lord hast become quite enamored of her. Thou may find it necessary to slay him and fulfill thy desire. I fear he wilt not let thee have her."

Ryder dragged his stare away from Arleigh and met Lady Cardew's glance.

"You want me to kill your husband?"

"Thou wouldst be providing a great favor," she said. "I can not do it, and I have tried the wiles of the heart, but he thrives. I cannot understand why."

Ryder grabbed the woman's arm and shook her. Lady Cardew met his glance bravely, and a smile skimmed her face.

He flung his arm in the direction of Arleigh. "Look at her! What have you done?"

She seemed surprised for a moment and simply stared at him. Finally she sighed. "I have invoked the spirit of the Leanan sidhe. The spirit was tightly bound and struggling for survival. It hath not long to live, but I have used it to my advantage. I have powers of mine own, not unlike thine own sisters."

"Jesus freaking Christ, Cullen! Do we have to do this all over again?"

"Tis not possible to change fate," Cullen said.

Ryder dropped her arm in disgust. He stomped across the distance that separated him from Arleigh and reached for her hand. Arleigh pulled back.

"Come on," he said. "We're getting the hell out of here."

"Who art thou?" she asked, glancing at Lady Cardew. "I live here. I belong to her."

"I don't have time for this. You're my wife. I'm your husband. Accept it. You're coming with me. Let's not make it like the last time. I turned into a walking bruise."

"I know him not! Please, lady, help me!"

He tugged her across the stone floor, and she pulled against his arm, her hair flying around her shoulders as she tried to get back up the stairs. Ryder hauled her back down and dragged her across the chamber. He had almost made it to the door when he heard the sound of his name. He turned slowly, his arm clasped around Arleigh's waist to hold her still, and Flynn entered the chamber from one of the dark hallways.

It seemed impossible, but the man was better looking as a human. He seemed a little pale, but his eyes were wells of emotion, flashing now with anger. His clothes hugged him tightly and showed every muscle of his body. His dark hair hung long and loose around his shoulders, and a full beard covered his face. This was a warrior, a tough man living in a hard world, and he had the body to prove it. If he had fallen under the spell of the Leanan sidhe, he appeared to be holding up well. He had to have incredible will.

"I had hoped you were dead," Flynn said. "Will I never be rid of you?"

"What can I say?" Ryder said. "I'm like a bad penny. I keep turning up."

"A bad penny?"

"Not invented yet," Ryder said. "Don't worry about it."

"So you talked the witches into following me?"

"Actually, I begged to come. I missed you."

Flynn smiled. "We do have some unfinished business."

"I'm all for tying up the loose ends," Ryder said. "We might be able to meet on more equal ground here. I heard a rumor you might be human now."

"Aye, well, humanity does have its drawbacks. But it also has its strengths. Do you have any idea how powerful I am here?"

"Yeah, I'm getting that," Ryder said. "The 13th century agrees with you. If I didn't know you better, I might even put you in the same league with Robin Hood. You certainly look the part. But of course I know better. Been raping and pillaging much since you've been home?"

Flynn laughed. "I don't need to rape and pillage, Kendall. I own everything you have seen."

"You don't own me," Ryder said, "or Arleigh. I'm also thinking you don't own her."

He cocked his head toward Cullen Flynn. His glance ticked between the husband and wife, and a grimace crossed Flynn's face. He had obviously hit a nerve.

"Are you going to let us leave without a hassle, or do we have to fight? Frankly, it's been a long ride here, and I'm hot, tired, and a little cranky. I also see the little beauty here doesn't remember me. That's going to be a pain in my ass. But if you insist on fighting, I did bring a weapon this time."

He touched the hilt of the sword that hung at his waist. Arleigh struggled in his grip, but he held on to her. Cullen Flynn stepped forward. She looked at Ryder for a long moment, struggling with a decision, but finally she sighed.

"Let them leave, Cameron," she said. "He hast come to collect his wife. She is rightfully his."

"I own her," Flynn said. "I will keep her."

Flynn crossed his arms and stared hard at Ryder then his glance darted to Arleigh, following the curves of her body. A fire lit within his eyes, and Ryder knew Flynn was struggling with the impulse to grab at her. He had seen that look before in Arleigh's eyes, but Flynn seemed to have very good control. He had not fallen under the spell so completely he had lost himself. Not yet, anyway. Ryder thought Flynn didn't have much time, but so far, he was still Cameron Flynn.

"Look, Flynn," Ryder said. "Don't you know what's happening here?"

Flynn shook his head, his shaggy hair obscuring most of his face, but his eyes locked on Arleigh, and she battered Ryder's shins with quick kicks.

"You and I aren't friends," Ryder said, "but that doesn't mean we have to kill each other. You're under an enchantment, Flynn. Remember what that means? You've done it lots of times. It's being done to you now. Somehow, the Leanan sidhe spirit has gotten back into Arleigh. I don't know how exactly, but there's going to be hell to pay when I find out."

He glanced at Cullen, who smiled.

"Enchantment?" Flynn asked. His gaze settled on Arleigh's face. She smiled at him even as she punched her elbow into Ryder's side. "No, 'tis love. I cannot get her out of my head."

"She won't leave your head, Flynn," Ryder said. "Not until you're dead. Are you going to take their shit? Do you want to die for a woman?"

Flynn's face snapped toward him. "No, not again. Get out. Take her, and get out." He turned and stormed from the room.

Ryder breathed a sigh of relief. He allowed Arleigh to hug Cullen Flynn then he snatched her away and headed toward the courtyard. Once again, his ears were tormented by curses and screaming, and his body paid the price. He ignored the pain and bundled her onto the horse in front of him. It would be a long hot ride back to the Caindale estate.

* * * *

Ryder suffered three days of torment. He thought he might have a cracked rib from a powerful elbow jab. A large bruise bloomed on his jaw from a well-aimed punch, and once again, Arleigh seemed determined he spend his life sterile. He thought several times of dumping her along the random path and letting her find her way back to Cardew. Flynn could have her. He had never put up with this much from any woman in his life, not his sisters, not his lovers.

When her tactic of physical abuse didn't work on him, she tried a different tact altogether. She began to use her feminine wiles on him. He didn't know how much of a line existed between Arleigh and the Leanan sidhe spirit, but he wasn't falling for any of it. She had so thoroughly pissed him off with the sucker punch, that each time she batted her eyes, offered him a coquettish smile, or ran her hands over his body, he snapped and snarled at her like a rabid dog. A look of sheer disbelief would cross her face, and she would begin to rail at him once again.

They met several people along the journey, but no one dared to interfere with him. He rode upon a horse with the Caindale arms, had dressed in Caindale's clothes, and wore a sword. Ryder thought the sword pretty much said it all. Stay away from me. I have more. I know more. I am better than you are. He didn't like it, but it seemed to be the truth of the place.

The laws in this place had nothing to do with justice and everything to do with sheer power and force. In his right mind, he would have wondered why people wouldn't offer aid to a woman clearly being taken against her will, but he wasn't in his right mind. He thought if anyone dared to interfere with him, there would be some serious hell to pay for their good Samaritanism.

He could deal with Arleigh during the daylight hours. She would have periods in which she would fight, try to knock him from the horse, use every part of her body as a weapon. But in the heat, she would tire quickly, and then she would doze off into a fitful sleep. Her body would lay against him, damp and hot, and though uncomfortable, he would cradle her and continue to move across the parched landscape under the grueling sun.

When night fell and exhaustion had set in, he pulled out a small bottle and dropped a splash of liquid into her cup of water. Fallon had prepared a light sleeping potion, and he used it only because he needed to sleep himself. He could not take the chance she would disappear during the night. He hadn't come four hundred years to lose her while he slept. The first night she saw him spiking the water, and she wouldn't drink. Though it went against everything he believed in, he'd simply held her and forced it down her throat. She was a feisty little thing, but his strength prevailed. The next night, she drank without protest.

They finally reached Caindale Castle. Ryder had to carry her inside, protesting and squalling. He was thoroughly exhausted, sunburned, and his patience had run out days before. He dumped her onto a chair and told her, if she moved, he would paddle her. She smiled that Leanan sidhe smile of hers.

"If that is what thou desires," she said.

"Believe me," Ryder said, "nice as your ass is, Arleigh, it won't be for pleasure."

He stood in the main hall and bellowed their names. Fallon, Honora, and Caitlyn appeared like magic from different areas of the castle. Arleigh wasn't a model of etiquette upon meeting the sisters. She seemed to have no memory of Fiana, Hannah, or Corliss, so she displayed no recognition when she met the first Trinity. Hell, her entire memory bank was shot.

"I don't understand why she doesn't recognize you," Ryder said.

Fallon peered at Arleigh like a mysterious puzzle that defied rational thinking. Arleigh tried to spit on her.

"She was enchanted when pulled through the rift," Fallon said. "A Ganconor's magic hath great power."

"She didn't remember Flynn, either," Ryder said.

"Odd," Honora said.

"Very odd," Caitlyn said.

"Tis most perplexing," Fallon said.

"Doth she remember any of her life before?" Honora asked.

"No," Ryder said.

"She doth not remember thee?" Caitlyn asked. Her small face dissolved into sorrow, and her eyes filled with tears.

Fallon swept her hands through the air, hovering near Arleigh's face. Arleigh waved her off like a plague of insects, but the air shimmered with the pale lavender emanating from the woman he loved. Fallon turned to him, distressed. A furrow appeared in her brow, and her clinical inspection of Arleigh seemed to have taken a new route.

"The spirit of the Leanan sidhe resideth within her," Fallon said. "How did that come to be?"

"Mrs. Flynn," Ryder said. "Or Mrs. Cullen. Or Mrs. Cargill. I don't even know what to call her. She said she invoked the Leanan sidhe power. Can she really do such a thing?"

The three sisters exchanged glances while Ryder pushed Arleigh back into her chair. She seemed to think they weren't paying attention to her. He gave her a look that promised a spanking. She smiled at him, but he glared harder, and she lowered her eyes.

"'Tis said," Honora said quietly, "that Lady Cardew hails from the Seelie Court."

"Thou should not spread rumors, Sister," Fallon said.

"It could easily be true," Honora said.

Ryder's gaze shot between the sisters. "Enough. What the hell is the Seelie Court? Is she like a queen or something?"

"The Court holds the rulers of the fey," Caitlyn said.

"Faeries?" Ryder asked. "You mean Mrs. Flynn is a faery? Is everyone but me a freaking *faery*?"

Honora put her hand on Ryder's arm. "The tale is that Lady Cardew is a changeling, given to the human realm to protect the fey, to be a guardian for the faery circles that lead to their world."

The three women hurled questions at him like prosecuting attorneys. He ran his hands through his damp, sweaty hair. He wanted to sleep, to eat. He wanted a cold bath and some Benadryl to ease the itch of all the insect bites that covered his skin. He didn't want to answer questions. He wanted Arleigh back.

They circled around Arleigh, inspecting every inch of her like the answers were going to be found written on her flesh. Arleigh lashed out several times, cuffing Honora on the side of the head and pulling at Caitlyn's hair. She stood up and tried to run, but Ryder grabbed her and threw her back into the chair. She huffed and glared at him. Ryder couldn't take another minute. He spread his arms and whistled to get their attention. All four women jerked and stared at him like he had lost his mind. He thought he might be the only sane one in the bunch.

"She isn't some kind of magic puzzle box, ladies. I didn't bring her here for analysis. What are we going to do about it? You're witches! *Fix* it!"

Honora and Caitlyn whispered to each other, their eyes darting between Arleigh and Ryder, but Fallon tilted her head, and a small smile formed on her lips. Ryder rolled his eyes.

"What?" he demanded.

"Tis not within our power to...what did thou say? Fix it," Fallon said.

"What good are you, then?" Ryder asked. "I can't keep her like this. She hates the sight of me."

"She hast not seen thee yet," Fallon said.

"What does that mean?" Ryder said. He couldn't control his voice. It grew louder with each word.

"Think on it," Fallon said. "There is something thee must do to win her back. 'Tis why Fiana sent you here."

Ryder smacked his hands against his forehead and yelled in frustration. The shout echoed throughout the main hall, and birds flapped in the rafters overhead.

"Stop talking in riddles!" he yelled. "Look at me. Do I look like a man who wants to play games? I've got sweat pouring from every inch of my body. I probably have West Nile from all these bug bites. I haven't had a

decent meal in six days. No, make that weeks. I was practically killed a week ago, and now I think I have a broken rib. And let's not forget I'm probably incapable of having kids in the future. Oh, yeah, that will make everyone at home *very* happy, since I'm the Keeper and supplying an heir has been written into my job description."

Fallon tapped her foot against the stone floor. She was losing patience with him? God, they were all alike.

"Thou art very dense," she said. "Take her to thy bedchamber, Ryder."

Ryder's eyes widened, and he glanced at each of the sisters. They were smiling at him like a child who had lost his temper.

"Oh," he said.

"We have prepared a bath," Honora said. "And a meal."

"Oh," he said again. "Well, thanks."

"She hath the Leanan sidhe within," Fallon said. "Thou must prove thy love is beyond the enchantment. Can thou doest that? Or shall we follow thee?"

They all smirked at him. Would there ever be a set of sisters who didn't have an interest in his sex life?

"I think I can handle it," he said, pulling Arleigh up from the chair. When she tried to pull away, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. She screeched into his ears at the top of her lungs. "This is starting to be a bad habit."

"Art thou sure thou needs not our help?" Caitlyn asked with a smile.

"If I need something," Ryder said with a grin, "I'll let you know."

Chapter 38

Ryder really wanted to dive into the tub of cool water then fall down on the soft mattress and sleep for about a week. But sleep would have to put on hold for a little while. He had a job to do.

The Caindale sisters had turned the bedchamber into something of a honeymoon suite. The tapestries were pulled aside to allow the warm breeze to stir through the room. Candles flickered, the scent of flowers drifting in the warm air. The tub of water was crystal clear, cool to the touch, and a pile of drying cloths lay on the stone floor. There were two dressing gowns at the foot of the bed. The covers were turned down, revealing soft, clean sheets, and the pillows had been fluffed.

"What, no mints?" Ryder asked.

He dropped Arleigh to the rug in front of the hearth. She glared up at him, but when he ignored her, she rose to her feet, smoothed her lavender dress, and ran her hand up his arm. He glanced at her and began to pull off his belt. She reached down to help him, but he pushed her hands away.

"I'm not buying it, baby," he said.

"I do not understand," she said with a smile that practically tore his heart in two.

"No touching," he said.

"I am meant to be touched," she said, taking his hand. She pulled it toward her, and his fingers lay against the soft swell of her breast.

"Very tempting," he said, backing away from her, "but you're not calling the shots here. I am."

He dropped his shirt to the floor and slumped onto the bed to pull off his boots. He didn't think he had ever been so hot in his life. He dripped with sweat. How did these people make it through a day in the heat of summer without air conditioning? The tub of cool water looked refreshing. He unlaced his hose and peeled them off his body. She watched him from the

center of the room, her eyes glittering with something that scared him a little.

"Thou art ready," she said, taking a step toward him.

"Yeah," he said, glancing at his traitorous cock. "Seems I can't control everything. In this heat, and the way I feel, you should be flattered."

He staggered to his feet and went to her. He gripped her dress and slowly tugged, pulling it up to her waist. Her tongue swept across her lips, and she leaned toward him. He yanked on the dress and pulled it up and over her head. Her naked body came against him, and he thought for one moment he would lose whatever tug-of-war they were in. Her breasts touched his chest, and heat poured from her body. Her mouth reached for his lips and caught for the briefest of moments. An ache spread through him, and he wondered what kind of fool he really was, but he pulled back and swept her in his arms, dropping her into the tub.

She slipped under the water and came up sputtering and choking. Her wet hair streamed over her face, and she frantically tried to pull it away from her face. He tossed her a sliver of soap.

"Don't take too long," he said. "I'm hot and dirty, too."

He gathered one of the cloths around his waist and sat down at the table to eat what the sisters had provided. The beef, at least it looked like beef, swam in some kind of sauce that looked a little iffy, but turned out to be pretty tasty. The dark brown bread, slathered in thin butter, looked greasy, but a starving man had few options, and he had ceased worrying about cholesterol. He was famished, but he took his time, eating slowly. He watched Arleigh lather her hair and run the soap down her arms, across her legs, over her pussy.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

He concentrated on his plate. He drained a goblet of wine and poured more. She took her sweet time, enjoying the glances he cast her way. She peeked at him each time she ran the soap across her breasts, down her throat.

Finally he stood and walked to the tub. She gave him a smile and tugged the cloth from his waist. He dunked her head under the water. She jerked to the surface, cursing him between sputters. He hauled her to her feet then lifted her out. She tossed wet hair away from her face, shaking her head like a puppy. She grabbed the cloth when he tossed it toward her.

"Be a good girl," he said. "Sit down and eat. If you try to leave the room, I'll catch you. So don't even try."

She huffed and puffed, stalking across the room as she dried her wet skin. She plunked down naked at the table and stuffed food into her mouth, glowering at him through a tangle of wet hair. He settled into the tub, enjoying the cool liquid, then began to scrub vigorously, sanding away the dirt and grime with the harsh soap. He massaged the soap into his hair and beard, hoping he had not become a haven for lice. When he convinced himself he might be clean, he let his head fall back against the lip of the tub and closed his eyes. With the sweat gone, the itching of the bites had subsided. The room grew quiet. For one single moment he allowed himself to revel in the peace.

Ryder jerked when she touched him, and his eyes flew open. Her fingers ran the soap across his chest, down over his stomach. Her eyes were warm, full of longing and promise. No wonder Flynn had lost his concentration and half his mind. He could almost feel sorry for the guy. Almost. Ryder grabbed her wrist.

"No thanks, sweetheart. I'm clean enough."

He stood and grabbed a cloth quickly, wrapping it around his waist. No use in giving her ideas he couldn't follow through on. He climbed out of the tub and picked up one of the dressing gowns and laid it around her shoulders. When she made no move to put it on, he pushed her arms into it, like he would do for a child, and tied the sash around her waist. The gown was much too large, and she looked like a young girl, with her hair spread across her shoulders and the gown puddling at her feet. His stomach rolled, a little squeamish. He hoped it was the food.

He poured them each a cup of wine. He held one toward her. She looked puzzled for a moment, then reached for it and took a tentative sip.

"Hast thou the intention to keep me drugged?" she asked. "What be the point in keeping me at all? 'Tis obvious I cannot enchant thee. Thou hath spurned mine every advance."

Her mouth dropped into a pout. He didn't know if the pout came from Arleigh or the Leanan sidhe, but he didn't think it mattered. He had confused her, and that seemed enough. She had given up, lost interest in trying to pursue him. She sipped at her wine.

"Tis unfathomable to me," she said. "I am beautiful. I am desirable. Thou art a man. Thy body clearly wants me, and thy heart is open. What power doth thee possess?"

"Willpower, honey," Ryder said. "Good old American willpower."

"And thy will cannot be broken?" she asked.

She tried that dazzling sweet smile on him again. He wanted to grab her, peel the dressing gown from her body, bare her smooth skin, run his hands through the damp tangles of her hair, fuck her. He shook it off.

"No," he said. "I'm very stubborn when I make up my mind."

She stared into her wine. She seemed to be looking for answers in the dark liquid. She chewed on her lip and finally raised her eyes.

"But I want thee," she whispered.

"Nice try. Almost convincing. Might want to work on that look, though. You come on a little too strong."

She pitched the goblet to the floor. It clattered across the stone and bounced against his leg, then smashed into his foot. Wine splashed everywhere, and Ryder hobbled toward the bed, reaching down to rub his foot.

"Goddamn it, Arleigh. Stop being such a brat."

"Nay," she shouted, stomping toward him. "Thou wilt bend to my will! I want thee!"

"For what?" he yelled. "Another conquest? So I can be another entry in your catalogue of dead guys? Sorry. I don't use sex as a weapon, Arleigh. I want more."

"I can give thee more," she said. "I can make thy body yearn for—"

"My body belongs to me. I will decide what it gets and when. Got it?"

Her fists clenched. He gripped her wrist and fell back on the bed. She lost her balance and tumbled, falling next to him. The dressing gown fell open to reveal the smooth white flesh of her legs and the dark red shadow within. She slipped her leg against his, and her knee rose, lifting the cloth at his hip. Her arm slipped across his waist, and her fingers loosened the cloth, dipping down inside. He let her pull it away, gritting his teeth. Her hands searched, and her mouth moved next to his ear, whispering that she wanted to be fucked. He wanted to do it.

He settled back on the pillow and slipped the dressing gown over her shoulder. She lifted, allowing him to remove it. He tossed it on the floor

then tugged her against him. Her mouth sought his eagerly, but he pulled away.

"Not interested," he said. "I'm thinking about a nap."

She fought him for a moment, her body rigid, but she soon gave up and nestled against him. Her damp hair felt cool on his skin. He tightened his arm around her. He would never let her go. He didn't care if she fought him every day of his life. Her lips pressed against his neck, and she murmured something against him, but he barely heard her as he drifted to sleep.

* * * *

Arleigh woke to the sound of birds calling to one another, but they were hesitant songs of good morning, as though reluctant to wake one another. Most were waiting for the sun to peek above the horizon. Arleigh's eyes fluttered open. Darkness still hovered near the window, but a cool breeze drifted through and lifted the perspiration from her skin. She moved slightly and pulled the sheet over them. The man next to her muttered in his sleep, and his arm came around her waist. She lay back down and let herself be gathered up against him.

Shouldn't she remember if she had a husband? He seemed infuriating enough to be a husband. He seemed to think he had control over her and treated her like property. She vowed if that had been their relationship, it would be changed. She could not live with a man who thought he could control her.

She found his looks very pleasing. He was easily as handsome as Lord Cardew, and although she had seen this man could have a nasty disposition, he did not seem to have Lord Cardew's malicious streak. She would have to be thankful for that, at least.

But there was something she did not understand. Lord Cardew had eagerly pursued her, could barely keep his hands off of her, even in the presence of his wife. How had her newly discovered husband managed to ward off the power of the Leanan sidhe spirit? Lady Cardew had been most sure Arleigh would be capable of bending the will of any man and had pleaded with her to use the power against Flynn. She would have done anything for Cullen, even lead her husband to death.

But this man beside her seemed impervious to her charms, and it baffled her. She brushed the hair from his face, and a soft smile touched his lips. Perhaps if she were less contrary, they could find a way to reach some sort of compromise. She might like to try.

She glanced back toward his eyes, and in the darkness, saw a small glint of light. He watched her. His hand moved against the nape of her neck and tangled in her hair. Slowly he pulled her face toward his and kissed her. She lay quietly, afraid to move, afraid he would stop if she dared to breathe. Something like fire spread through her.

His mouth forced hers open, and she willingly surrendered to his kiss. His tongue swept across her lips and stole into her mouth. She could not breathe, and she didn't care. She reached for him, but he grabbed her hand and held it behind her back, pulling her roughly against him.

"No touching," he whispered against her lips.

His mouth resumed its work. His lips skimmed her jaw, down her throat, sweeping across her collarbone, lingering at her breasts, teasing and pulling, sucking at the taut flesh that rose eagerly to meet his mouth. Again and again he came back to her mouth, stealing her breath with his lips and tongue. His teeth nipped at her lips, and sharp pain flared at the same time something deep inside her pussy stabbed at her with a pleasure that was almost pain.

She fought against his hand and finally succeeded in wrenching hers away. Her arm went around him, and she pulled at him desperately, drawing his head closer, pressing her mouth more tightly against his. His free hand now swept across her leg and brushed her hip, searching for something. Her legs parted, and she lifted one across his hips, pulling him closer. His hand came between them, and she gasped when he touched her clit, his fingers moving magically around the soft flesh, pressing and circling, feeling the wet folds of her skin, dipping inside her pussy. Slowly, softly, achingly tender.

Arleigh moaned and tucked her face against his neck. His ragged breathing matched her own. His mouth found her breast, licking the soft flesh, pulling it into his mouth, pulling her to pieces. She thought she might be dying, but she let herself be swept to whatever place he wanted to take her. She didn't care. Nothing mattered. Not Lady Cardew. Not Flynn. Not the three strange women who lived in this castle. Not this place, or this time,

or the fact that she knew nothing of who she was. Nothing mattered but this man, this man who claimed to be her husband. She wanted to belong to him. She felt she had always belonged to him.

She throbbed with her want for him. Her body needed to feel him, to hold him, to pull as much of him inside as he could possibly give. They needed to be joined, to mate, to fuck, to be one. They were meant to be together. They would wither and die without one another. What magic had he had cast over her? He had bewitched her, had taken her own magic and turned it against her. Her life held no meaning without him. She felt like she had known him forever, had loved him forever.

She arched against his hand, pressing against his fingers, and he responded, bringing her more pleasure, more pain, more need. When she thought her body could not take one more moment, she shuddered against him, and he pulled her tighter, refusing to stop. He forced her to respond again and again, until she gasped, pleading, begging him to stop.

His mouth caught at hers again, licking the salty sweat from her lips, following a path down her body until he reached the part of her that burned. His mouth locked on her pussy, and he began to torture her once again, his tongue doing to her what his fingers had just finished, sweeping across her clit, dipping into her hot pussy. He brought her such pleasure.

She plunged her hands into his hair, and her fingers wrapped around the back of his neck, drawing him tightly against her while his lips continued to pull and suck at her, while his tongue lapped at the moisture that dripped from between her thighs. Her body squirmed against him, wanting more, needing more. The spasms that tore through her waxed and waned like a sea tide, and each time, the waves crashed over her with more force, more pleasure, until her body quivered beneath him.

"Ryder," she whispered.

He came to her, his body full against hers, his mouth coming down on hers. His hard cock nestled between her legs, prodding against her quivering flesh, eager to fill her. But he lay perfectly still against her.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her gently. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she murmured against his lips.

"Please tell me that I belong to you. That you belong to me."

"Always," he said.

"Promise me," she said. "I will die if you leave me."

"I'll never leave you," he said. "I'll never lose you. I would follow you to the ends of the earth, through hell, through time. Believe me, Arleigh."

"I belong to you. Make me yours again. My body, my heart, my soul, my life. Please, Ryder, I need you to love me again."

He kissed her and pressed his cock into her, and the memory of his touch, his smell, flooded through her. She had loved this man before in a place other than this, where they had found one another, two hearts searching for the other blindly, without thought, but with a need that tore through the soul. He had found her again, and his face flashed in her memory. The memory of his face was stamped in her mind with more clarity than her image in a mirror. The face reflected his love for her, his anger, disappointment, and pain. Neither of them belonged here, but they belonged to each other.

She wrapped her legs around his, pulling him closer. A soft, gentle lull like the ocean tides swept through her once more. This time they would be swept away together. But before she lost control once again, she needed to say one thing. She caught his face in her hands.

"I love you, Ryder Kendall."

His kiss was all she needed, but when his tears touched her face, she knew there was more to love than she had ever thought possible.

* * * *

"The girls sent us here, to this place?" Arleigh asked. It was the third time she had asked the same question. "I don't understand. How is that possible?"

He played with her hair. He liked the way it coiled around his wrist. He didn't want to talk about physics, or metaphysics, or paraphysics. He didn't know what they were involved in, but it didn't matter in this bed.

"Ryder? Are you listening to me?"

"Sure," he said. "What happened to that cute little accent of yours? I liked all the thou and thee stuff. It made me feel all masculine and protective. Like King Arthur."

"King Arthur was not real," Arleigh said. "This is reality, Ryder. Can't you try thinking for a minute?"

"I'm having a lot of trouble thinking right now. I missed you. I think I missed you for a very long time."

"Aye, 'tis that way to me, too," she said, snuggling against him. "But I still want to know how the girls sent us here. You don't know?"

"No, they tried to explain, but of course it's all over my head. I never was the brain of the family. Apparently something to do with Keepers. We're great to look at, but the brains and the power all go to the girls. All I know is those little witches have some fabulous tricks up their sleeves."

"But all this time, I thought they were pretending, wishing."

"Yeah, well, their wishes all seem to come true," he said. "Now we have to get Fallon and the others to send us back."

"They can do that?" Arleigh asked.

Ryder laughed. "You haven't seen Fallon in action. If you think Fiana is tough, you should see this one. Fallon's the one who started it all. Where her power comes from is beyond me, but she has it, no question of that."

"My head is spinning," she said.

"My head hasn't stopped spinning for weeks," Ryder said. "But of course, a lot of that has to do with you. I have a feeling there's a straightjacket at home with my name on it."

"Whatever that is, you'll look handsome in it."

She dropped a kiss on his mouth, laughed and jumped from the bed. She flung her arms out and whirled around, dancing in the early morning sunlight. He loved the way the light touched her skin, shimmering with a golden glow. The lavender aura had vanished, and that made him very happy. He had knocked the Leanan sidhe right back to where she belonged. He decided not to mention it. She seemed to have no memory of it at all.

"Come back to bed, honey," he said.

"I'm too excited. I can't wait to go home. I miss the girls, and I can't wait to see Adelina. I hope she's been taking care of things. There's so much to do. The girls belong to you now, so once we're married, I can be their real mother and—"

Her dancing came to a halt, and she turned to him, a serious expression on her pretty face. She studied him for a moment and pursed her lips.

"You are planning to marry me, aren't you?"

He opened his arms, and she went to him.

"How else am I going to keep you? Can't have you running through time with strange men."

That impatient look settled into her eyes, and her foot beat a dangerous rhythm against the bed.

"Yes, Arleigh, I'm going to marry you."

She squealed and threw her arms around his neck. She kissed his cheeks, his neck, his forehead, and finally his lips.

"We are to be married! I can't wait to be Arleigh Kendall. Do you think we'll have children?"

"I can pretty much guarantee a boy. It's tradition. But don't get your hopes up. He won't be the bright one of the family."

"I don't care," she said. "I hope he's like you."

A sound across the room caused Arleigh to freeze. Ryder reached down and grabbed his hose from the floor and pulled them on quickly. He tried to remember where he had dropped that sword. He hoped it was one of the sisters, checking up on their makeup session, but he knew he wasn't going to be that lucky. Someone recently had told him fate couldn't be changed, and he thought she might be a pretty good authority. A voice spoke from the shadows where the morning rays of the sun did not reach.

"You two make me sick," the voice said. "You're no better than animals."

Ryder moved around the room, feeling with his foot for his weapon. "Thought I made it pretty clear you should stay home."

"Tried to," Flynn said. "Would have been here sooner, but I had to take care of the bitch who called herself my wife. I sent her back to hell where she belonged. Killing her brats wasn't enough to keep what should have been mine. She would never let me have it. So mighty, so proud, so righteous. Such a bitch. She did this to me, you know."

"Cullen didn't deserve to die," Ryder said.

"She deserved that, and more, for what she's done to me," Flynn said. "Look at me! This is not who I am. I'm not some lovesick puppy sniffing behind a woman, waiting for favors. I take what I want. I use what I want. But here I am, sniffing just the same. And it must be Cullen's fault, because I am different now. Look at me."

The tip of Ryder's bare foot touched a cold metal object. He reached down and grabbed the hilt of the sword. Flynn moved across the room in the

darkness and finally came into the light. His eyes were wild, searching the room for Arleigh.

"Where is she?"

"She's mine," Ryder said.

"So we fight for her?" Flynn asked. "I've been in better shape, believe me. I'm hot, tired, and a little cranky. But if it takes a fight."

A flash of silver split the air in front of him and Ryder jumped back. He would have to learn this fast. The sword slashed in front of him again, and instinctively, Ryder raised his arm as though blocking a punch. Flynn's sword bounced off, and Ryder swung his arm down and back up, aiming toward Flynn's side. Flynn seemed in rough shape but pretty quick on his feet for a half-dead man. He managed to avoid the blow by darting back, and Ryder took the small moment to call out.

"Arleigh, get out of here! Find the sisters!"

A flash of white flew through the corner of his eye. Ryder dodged toward Flynn when he made a grab for her. Without thought, he spun around and did a back kick, catching Flynn in the stomach and throwing him across the room. Flynn sprawled against the stone hearth, surprise spread across his face. He scrambled to his feet and ran toward Ryder, his sword raised.

Ryder blocked three rapid blows toward his head, backing up as Flynn moved toward him.

"You will die," Flynn growled.

"Not today," Ryder said.

He found if he thought of the sword as part of his hand, he could manage it fairly well. It was heavy, but the sword followed his arm and did what he wanted it to do. Several times he kicked out, and his foot rammed into Flynn's body. The look of shock on Flynn's face was priceless. Ryder would have laughed if he weren't so busy fighting for his life. He didn't know what would happen if he lost this fight, but he decided he would take Flynn with him.

Flynn's anger escalated with each swipe of the sword that missed his target. Ryder saw a moment's hesitation and took full advantage of it. He delivered a solid roundhouse to the side of Flynn's head. Flynn rocked on his feet, his face steaming with sweat, and charged him again. Ryder ducked down, and his leg swung in a circle, catching Flynn across the legs and knocking him to the floor. Flynn's head smacked against the stone, and

Ryder placed the point of the sword against his throat. He stared at him for a minute, running the tip of the sword across his neck in small circles.

"So is this what you had in mind?" Ryder asked.

"Not exactly," Flynn said. "For some reason, I didn't think you'd last this long. I must be more tired than I thought."

Ryder dug the tip of the sword into Flynn's throat, and a spot a blood trickled down his neck.

"I'm not a killer," Ryder said.

"Then why I am bleeding?" Flynn asked.

"Because I'm the one on top," Ryder said.

"Indeed. Why don't you push a little harder? I don't think I care to talk any longer."

"Because I'm not a killer," Ryder repeated. "It's not the way I want to be written about in the history books. Will you give this up? Go back to Cardew?"

Flynn nodded. Ryder pulled back the sword and took a step backward. Flynn started to sit up then suddenly raised his sword and plunged it into Ryder's chest, slicing through the flesh in a wide arc. Pain flared through Ryder's chest, and he gasped.

"You Caindales are such a trusting lot," Flynn said. "How on earth did you get that way? It's really not the way to insure a dynasty. You're too easy to kill."

Ryder shoved his hand against his wound, and his palm came away smeared with blood. He dropped his sword and swung a fist toward Flynn's face, but the momentum spiraled into vertigo, and he fell to the floor.

"Near your heart, I think," Flynn said. "I have fairly good aim. Don't worry. The pain won't last long."

Flynn rose to his feet as a scream echoed through the room. Through his hazy vision, Ryder watched a figure hurl itself toward Flynn. It was Fallon, her dark hair flying behind her. She plunged a dagger into Flynn's back, burying it to the hilt. Flynn's mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened. A grimace of pain flared across his face. He dropped to his knees, and Fallon pushed him onto the stone floor.

Ryder could not draw a breath. Blood poured from the wound in his chest. His eyes searched the room and finally found Arleigh. She dropped to her knees beside him. The sisters ran from the room.

"It hurts," he whispered.

She pressed her hand down on the hole in his chest. "Don't talk."

The sheet wrapped around her body smeared with blood. Did he have that much blood to lose? Jesus, he hoped these women would think to call 911. Did they even have a phone?

"Stay with me, Ryder. Don't leave me again."

"Never," he whispered, and then he closed his eyes.

Chapter 39

Cameron Flynn staggered through the courtyard. He couldn't remember if he had tethered his horse, but the animal had vanished, and he had to get away. Those witches would hunt him down once they realized their precious Ryder had died.

The problem was he really couldn't go home to Cardew either. His wife's body lay in a pool of blood in the stone courtyard. He might be a powerful man, but Cullen Flynn's father was a more powerful one still. There would be hell to pay for that little error of his judgment. He could not believe he had put up with her for twelve years only to toss her from the battlements in a fit of passion. He would have to work on controlling his emotions. They were starting to play serious havoc with his life.

Blood poured down his back. He had no idea how deep the witch had planted the dagger, but it had ripped through his lung. He struggled to breathe. The pain seemed enormous, a constant sharp thrust through his chest. Even worse than last time, if possible.

Flynn laughed, and a glut of blood tore from his mouth. Fallon Caindale. Beautiful, smart, and deadly. He knew now why he had rethought his desire to fuck Fallon. She was a murderous bitch.

"Have to get even with her," he murmured. "Can't kill me and get away with it."

He wiped his hand across his lips, gagging at the taste. He glanced back toward the estate and found, though he felt he had been walking for hours, the sunlight had barely peeked above the horizon, and he could practically reach out and touch the castle. "Going to be a long day," he said to no one.

For the first time in a long while, his mind seemed reasonably clear. Arleigh Donovan seemed to be out of his head. He could not really remember why he had followed her in the first place. Sure, she was beautiful, but beautiful women lived all over the county. And why had he

been so determined to kill Kendall? He was a royal pain in the ass, but Flynn had actually liked him a little bit. Not too much, of course, but enough.

"Wife's dead. I'm bleeding to death *again*. I've lost two homes. All for a woman? What an ass I am."

He kept walking, staggering across the grass, climbing over stone walls and across rocky terrain. He paused at a small stream to get a drink of water and stared, appalled at the stranger that looked back at him. Dirty hair surrounding a dirty face. A scraggly beard he hadn't trimmed in weeks. A pale, gaunt face and hollow eyes. Who the hell was that man? It could not be him. He would have no part of that man.

Nothing else to do but walk. Should he sit down and wait for the witches? Or worse yet, wait for Malcolm Cargill to ride across the Irish hills to avenge his daughter and finish the job of killing him? The sun beat down on his dark head, and the sweat dripped into his eyes. So hot. He coughed and spit and fell to the ground. The sudden movement terrified some insects that flew randomly into the sky, bumping into one another and sweeping off.

He heard the slight stirring in the grass, the sound of crying. He glanced around but could see nothing. Was that bloody banshee following him again? That's all he needed. He staggered to his feet and lurched across the grass. His legs numbed. His feet and hands felt like ice.

He would not make it to the village, and even if he did, there would be no help for him there, at least not once they had heard of Cullen's death. His head would have a price, and there would be no haven for him in Ireland.

He came upon a large boulder jutting from the land as though it had been placed there for him. The wind sang a soft sound that sounded like the sobs of a woman. He sat down on the boulder, closed his eyes, and waited.

It took only a moment, and he heard the snapping sound of a cloak in the wind, and a wail split the silence. She had come for him. He waited to hear what the banshee had to say.

* * * *

Ryder glanced uneasily around the chamber. If he thought he had seen glimpses into witchcraft in the last few weeks, he had been seriously mistaken. The circular chamber that rose into the castle's turret had a stone

altar that faced toward the east window. As the sun rose, it cast its light on a single candle that sputtered and flamed when the rays of the sun passed over the wick. He gasped when he saw it, but the women in the room paid him no attention. They were talking in whispers around him.

Flowers littered the altar, and herbs and the scents in the room intoxicated him, all blending into one aroma that took his breath away. Not that he complained. He was glad to be alive and smelling anything at all. He had given up all hopes of getting out of this with his lungs intact. After all, he had a viable future as a tobacco farmer. He didn't know how he would deal with the morals of that issue, but he didn't think he would be able to fight a whole society, at least not in 1639. Maybe with enough thought, he could come up with something. He'd ask Hannah for some advice. He had also given thought to Stephen's brew. Did the colony have a distillery? He might look into that.

A slight twinge twitched in his chest, and he rubbed his hand across the scar. Fallon said it would probably hurt from time to time, but he shouldn't worry because his heart was strong. She had pieced him together pretty well for a dead man.

They were huddled around a cauldron, an actual freaking cauldron like in *MacBeth*. Here were the Weird Sisters incarnate. They were bent over, stirring something within with a large wooden spoon, their dark hair covered by the hoods of their cloaks.

"Double, double, toil and trouble," he said.

Caitlyn glanced at him, peeking at him from beneath that fringe of hair he found so charming. "What didst thou say?"

"Wondered if you remembered I was here."

"Indeed," Fallon said, "thou art most hard to ignore. Thou art very present."

"Speaking of present," Ryder said, "when do we get this little show started? And what the hell are you brewing in there? I don't have to eat it, do I?"

"Nay," Fallon said. "Thou wouldst be sick, and I—"

"I know," Ryder said, "you'd puke."

Fallon raised an eyebrow. "Canst thou read my mind now?"

"How's it feel to have your privacy invaded?" Ryder asked.

"Slightly disturbing," Fallon said. "As much as I like thee, Ryder, I will be most glad when Remy is awake and thou art safely elsewhere. Remy is much less challenging."

"Give him time," Ryder said. "He'll come around. He's just a kid."

Honora stepped away from the cauldron and went to a large wooden box tucked under the altar. She removed several items and distributed them to her sisters. A shard of flint, a chunk of obsidian, a sprig of lavender.

Ryder stuffed his hand into the pocket of his Levi's and felt to be sure he still had his Keats. He felt the leather and fingered the edge of the small sheath of parchment tucked within. *Talismans, check. Now all I need is my girl.*

He glanced up as the shadow fell across the floor. She looked beautiful. She wore that pretty violet dress Cullen had given her. Her hair flowed down her back, held in place by the small circlet of gold. She was fairy princess material. He took Arleigh's hand and stood in front of the altar. The sisters stood behind it, waiting for them. He hoped his wedding would be this nice.

"I guess I won't ask how this is going to work," Ryder said. "And I won't laugh."

"I should hope not," Fallon said. "Tis serious work we do here."

Ryder nodded and put on his best serious face. Arleigh squeezed his hand.

"I've enjoyed meeting you, ladies," Ryder said. "Thanks for saving my life and all. I guess I'll be seeing you lots of times over the next eight hundred years or so. Considering my limited brain capacity, I'm probably not going to remember, am I?"

"Nay," Honora said, "thou wilt not. 'Tis intended to be thus. Thou art the Keeper."

"Tis enough that we remember thee, Brother," Caitlyn said, blowing him a kiss. "Fare thee well."

Fallon, all business as usual, passed her hand through the flame of the candle on the altar.

"I am Fallon, the First Sister. Guardians of the Fire, spirits of courage, spirits of renewal. I bring a gift, a token of my pledge to thee. 'Tis flint, carried across time, from my hand to my hand. What hath left my hand again and again, hast come from the beyond now and across the bridge of

time. Let it return to its place. Carry with it the man and woman chosen by others to be their champions and guardians. Blessed be the Fire."

Honora traced her finger across a pentagram that had been formed using the branches of a willow tree.

"I am Honora, the Second Sister. Guardians of the Earth, spirits of nourishment, spirits of rebirth. I bring a gift, a token of my pledge to thee. 'Tis obsidian, carried across time, from my hand to my hand. What hath left my hand again and again, hast come from the beyond now and across the bridge of time. Let it return to its place. Carry with it the man and woman chosen by others to be their champions and guardians. Blessed be the Earth."

Caitlyn picked up the candle and set fire to a small sprig of lavender in a bowl. She ran her hand through the smoke and spread it into the corners of the chamber.

"I am Caitlyn, the Third Sister. Guardians of the Air, spirits of intellect, spirits of inspiration. I bring a gift, a token of my pledge to thee. 'Tis lavender, carried across time, from my hand to my hand. What hath left my hand again and again, hast come from the beyond now and across the bridge of time. Let it return to its place. Carry with it the man and woman chosen by others to be their champions and guardians. Blessed be the Air."

Fallon picked up a cup from the altar. The three women began to recite together. Ryder tugged against his collar, and Arleigh pressed against him. Her breath came in tiny pants. He put his arm around her, focusing on the words of the first Trinity.

"Guardians of the Water, spirits of emotions, spirits of dream. We bring a gift, a token of our pledge to thee. 'Tis our lifeforce, carried across time, from our hands to our hands. What hath left us again and again, hast come from the beyond now and across the bridge of time. Let it return to its place. Carry with it the man and woman chosen by others to be their champions and guardians. Blessed be the Water."

Fallon took a sip from the cup and passed it to Honora. When Honora finished, she passed it to Caitlyn. Fallon motioned Ryder and Arleigh to come forward. She handed the cup to Arleigh first. She took a large sip, and her eyes widened. She handed the cup to Ryder.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Blood," Arleigh whispered.

"Holy Christ," he said. "Okay, if that's what it takes."

Ryder placed the cup against his lips and downed it in one giant swallow. Thick liquid slid down his throat. If Fallon hadn't wanted him to puke, maybe she shouldn't serve blood at her rituals. He pulled Arleigh closer, and she tucked her head against his chest.

"Bet you'll miss me," Ryder said with a wink. The three women smiled.

Chapter 40

He felt like he had downed a bottle of Jack and been hit in the head with a sledgehammer. He had been killed twice in two weeks, and it hadn't felt this bad. He rubbed his hand across his forehead, wincing at the pain. He tried to sit up, but something pushed on his chest. He reached down and felt a mass of silky hair.

He pushed himself up, and Arleigh came along for the ride. He stretched her across his lap, brushing the hair away from her face. She looked very pale.

"Arleigh, honey," he said. "Wake up."

He patted her cheek, and her eyelids fluttered. Tentatively, she opened them, and a small smile touched her lips.

"Are we home?" she asked.

Ryder glanced around the room. The fire in the hearth cast dancing shadows on the wall. The remnant of someone's dinner lay on the table. The spinning wheel stood in the corner, the small pile of mending at the base of the chair. Lights flickered in the attic stairway. Cowardly little faeries. Why didn't they come out?

"Where are they?" Arleigh said.

Suddenly, the sharp, shrill cry of little girls pierced the quiet. A familiar pain drilled through Ryder's head. There was nothing like the scream of little girls to wake you up from the near-dead. A flock of hungry seagulls didn't sound as bad. The lights in the stairway pulsed rapidly, darting about and casting tiny shadow points onto the floor. Footsteps pounded down the stairs, and the lights swarmed into the room, followed immediately by three little girls dressed in white sleeping gowns. Their hair was disheveled and their faces crinkled with sleep.

At the bottom of the stairs, they crashed into one another as Fiana stopped dead.

"They're here!" she cried.

All three flew across the room and pounced on Ryder and Arleigh. They tumbled together on the floor, rolling and hugging, kissing and touching each other's faces. A small pink light swirled around, eager for a peek.

"Addy," Ryder said. "Come here."

He lifted his hand above the writhing bodies and offered the small faery a perch. She settled down, her wings fluttering swiftly. She glowed in her pink way and wrapped her hair around his finger.

"Welcome home," she said.

"Glad to be here," Ryder said. "You missed me, didn't you?"

He reached out and tickled her stomach. Adelina laughed and swooped down to brush against Arleigh's face. Ryder got to his feet, pulling Hannah and Corliss with him. They had their arms wrapped around his waist, and he had no intention of making them let go. He reached for Fiana and froze when he heard footsteps in the attic.

"What the hell?"

He started toward the stairs, but Fiana grabbed his hand.

"It's Mistress Cullen," she said. "She's been here with us."

Ryder sighed with relief, and when the bantee appeared in the doorway, he went across the room and grabbed her in a hug. He planted a big kiss on her lips.

"Ryder Kendall!" she cried. "What was that for?"

"For everything," he said. "For saving my life, for watching after the girls, for keeping Arleigh safe. You risked so much for us. You could have been banished to the ether for helping us."

"Neutrality is often capricious," Cullen said. "I twist it to my own purpose from time to time. I have been to the ether before. It is not a bad place, Ryder. It is a crossroads between death and life. We have all been there, but it is not meant to be remembered."

"Where's Jack?" Ryder asked.

"Jack's time here is over," Cullen said. "He watched after this family for a long while waiting for me. He returned to the ether for a rest. The earth wore him out. He wasn't ugly when he first emerged from the ether."

Ryder laughed. "But you'll stay with us? No chance of your being banished to the ether?"

"Do not fear for me," she said. "I have many friends in both faery and human worlds, as does Arleigh. But I like this world, and I have a soft spot for you, Ryder Kendall. I always have, and I always will."

Arleigh wrapped her arms around his waist and tucked her head into his back. "The girls want to hear the tale of our adventure. You're the storyteller in the family. They want a bedtime story."

Ryder twisted and met her eyes. He could not believe that he finally had everything he wanted. His lips found hers in a soft kiss that promised everything he had to give. Arleigh sighed against him. He winked at her.

"Can't wait for them to hear how I got my ass kicked?"

Arleigh smiled. "Is that any way for a champion to talk?"

"I have something I need them to do for me first," Ryder said. "Girls, gather round. I have a job for you."

Chapter 41

Faith Kendall watched Hope's fingers trail across the keys and credit cards on the dresser. Faith didn't like the look on her sister's face. Hope was starting to unravel.

"I think we should call the police," Hope said.

Faith leaned against the doorjamb.

"And tell them what?" she asked.

"That our brother vanished, and we don't know where he is."

"But we know where he is," Faith said. "We've seen him."

Hope's face paled. "It's not certain. This could all be some kind of illusion, some kind of trick."

"It would make for a pretty good trick," Faith said. "The room is filled with mystical energy. I can practically see the rip."

Faith grabbed her sister's arm and hauled her into the keeping room.

"It's right here," she said.

Faith waved her hand through the air in front of the desk. A light blue shimmer streamed through the air at the touch of her hand.

"Anyone want to follow?"

"You know we can't do that," Charity said.

Faith turned to her youngest sister. Charity looked in worse shape than Hope. Why did these girls always fall apart when she needed them most?

"I'm sure he's fine," Hope whispered. Faith huffed while Hope struggled with an obvious wave of nausea. "With a little more time, I might be able to work out the science. I mean, it's probably molecular fission, magnetic fields or something. Maybe we can pull him back through."

"Yeah, whatever, Hope," Faith said. "You know this has nothing to do with science. It's witchcraft, and just because we've not used our powers much doesn't mean they don't exist. We've obviously used them before, and

damn, we were good. I can't figure out why someone thought pulling Ryder out of his life made sense."

"He's okay," Charity said. "I can feel it. Relax for a minute. I think you'll feel it, too."

Hope dropped down onto the leather sofa and sank into the pillows. Faith had a better idea. She pulled open the drawer of the desk and took out a glass, slapping it on the mahogany. She reached way back in the drawer, knowing he hid it pretty well, and her fingers touched the familiar contours of the Jack Daniels bottle. She pulled it out and blinked. Something shimmered at the edge of the desk, a pale blue haze that swirled like a mist. When she blinked again, an object sat there. Christ, she hoped it wasn't what she thought. She pulled the worn leather volume toward her, sliding it across the desk with tented fingers. She didn't really want to touch it. Her stomach flopped.

"This wasn't here a minute ago," she said.

She held the book between her fingers like a squashed bug and glanced at her sisters. Charity looked like she might be sick on the rug. Faith certainly didn't need that.

"Lean over the trash can, honey," she said. "You're making me nervous."

"I'm okay," she said.

But Faith saw that Charity didn't look okay at all. Not a bit okay. She was worried about herself, as well. She dropped the book onto the desk like it burned her fingers.

"It's the Keats, isn't it?" Hope asked, pulling herself to the edge of the sofa. Faith wondered how a pale girl could get even more colorless. This would be great if one of them hurled and the other fainted.

"Put your head between your knees," Faith said.

Hope obeyed. Her small voice drifted through the room, fighting through the web of hair that fell to the floor. "Please tell me he has two ratty old books. I know that wasn't here today, because I looked for it."

"Poetry, Hope? You?"

"English project," Hope said. "It's just like him to disappear when I really needed his help."

Faith's heart pounded, but she knew someone had to do it. She reached toward the Keats, and her fingers hovered undecided. Her hands shook, so

she did the only thing she could think of. She opened the bottle of Jack and took a very long swig. The liquid slid down her throat, burning its way to her stomach. She took another swig for good measure, closing her eyes to take a bigger gulp.

When she opened her eyes, Hope stood at the desk. She was still pale, but she seemed steady. That was a good sign.

"Give me that," Hope said, grabbing the bottle. She took a long drink and swallowed. She shivered and made a face. "Yikes! How does he drink this stuff? It tastes like battery acid."

She held the bottle out to Charity, who shook her head weakly and dove for the trash can.

"Gross," Faith said.

They waited for a minute, while Charity spit into the trash can, then grabbed a tissue and wiped her mouth. The three sisters hovered over the desk, watching the book as though it might do a trick.

"Is it really the Keats?" Charity whispered.

Faith nodded. Her head felt heavy, and she thought the next nod might make it fall off her neck.

"Check it, Faith," Hope said. "Make sure."

"Why do I have to do it?" Faith snapped.

"Because you're the oldest," Hope said.

"Damn it, Hope!" Faith said. "That's Spock logic!"

"Come up with something better."

The last thing on earth Faith wanted to do was touch that book. Ryder had been gone less than twenty-four hours. She had peeked in last night and seen him buried in that bottle of Jack, reading some kind of parchment. It couldn't be the book that sat here, and if it was, where was he? How had the book returned and not brought its owner?

Faith's hand shot out and picked up the book. She expected it to disintegrate in her hands, or at the very least, burst into flame. But the book sat in her hand like a book. She ran her hands over the leather and across the bumpy ridge of the paper. The writing on the spine said *The Complete Poetry of John Keats*. She glanced at her sisters, and both of them gave her a nod of encouragement.

Thanks for nothing.

She flipped through the pages. There were the telltale Ryder markings, the arrows and underlines, the hieroglyphic notes and stars. There were the habitual coffee stains and the dog-eared page containing "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." As she ruffled the pages, a parchment sheet fell onto the desk.

"Jesus," Faith said. "He was reading this last night. I recognize the charred edges."

"Were you spying on him?" Hope asked.

"He's been losing it," Faith said. "Haven't you noticed? I don't think he had any idea what prolonged stress can do and—"

"No psychobabble tonight, Faith," Hope said. "We all know he's been acting funny."

Faith reached toward the parchment.

"Don't touch it!" Hope cried.

"Why not?" Faith asked. "We've gone this far. How can it get worse?"

"I don't know," Hope said. "I just don't want to."

Charity reached out and tentatively touched the piece of parchment. She jerked her hand back.

Hope flinched. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Charity said. "I changed my mind."

"Stop being babies," Faith said. "We already know what it is. It's a piece of parchment."

"It's more than that," Charity said. "They weren't here a minute ago. If the book is here and the parchment is here, why isn't Ryder here? Where is he, Faith? What happened to him?"

Charity's face scrunched. Faith really didn't need a hysterical sister on her hands, not when she felt so close to being hysterical herself. Too late, there were the tears.

"Hope," Faith said. "Come on, help me out here. What's going on?"

"You think I know?" Hope asked. "How would I know?"

"You're the scientist," Faith said. "Do some science. Figure it out. Tell me about these magnetic fissures or whatever they are."

Hope pressed her hands against her eyes and screeched.

Oh, yes, bad to worse if Hope is getting hysterical.

"You think this is science?" Hope asked, sweeping her arm around the room. "There is a rip in this room! A one-way ticket to another time, another place. Does that sound like science to you? Does it, Faith? Because, as far as

I know, none of this ever happens in a lab. We don't have a clue what is happening here. If anyone should know what's going on here, it's you."

Faith blinked. "Why me?"

"Because you're the *oldest*!" Hope cried. "You're the *first* sister!"

"Are you kidding me?" Faith asked. "I'm the oldest, so I have to have all the answers? Why would you even think that?"

"Because that's the way it is," Hope said. "You're our center. You hold us together. And you understand him better than anyone. You always have the answers. Find some goddamned answers!"

"Please stop," Faith said. "I can't handle both of you crying at the same time. Give me a minute. I'll do it. We'll figure it out, okay?"

She stood for a long while, staring at the book, a stupid book that should have been like any other book on any other desk in town. But this book had never been like any other book. This one was filled with Ryder. It held his thoughts, his dreams, and his hopes. This book was probably the last thing from this world he had touched, and the parchment was the first thing he had touched from where he had gone. They were connected, not only to both times, but to their brother.

Once again, her hand reached out, and for some reason, she knew now she would find the answer. The Keats and the parchment held all the answers they wanted. She had to find the courage to give the answers to her sisters, when she doubted she wanted the answers herself.

She picked up the parchment and unfolded it. One side offered a letter, seemingly written by a woman. Faith handled it carefully. She did not want the last thing her brother had touched to dissolve in her hands. She recognized it—the strange diary page of that woman. She flipped it in her hand and found his message. He had written his words with a quill and, though the nature of the writing instrument had forced him to take more time, she recognized his unmistakable scrawl. The writing blurred through the tears in her eyes. She blinked them back and glanced up at her sisters.

"There's a note," she said. She hardly recognized her own voice.

Faith nodded.

[&]quot;A note," Hope whispered.

[&]quot;From Ryder?" Charity asked.

[&]quot;What does it say?" Hope asked.

Why did Hope sound so young? Why did she sound like a small child who had heard a monster under the bed?

"Read it, Faith," Charity said. "Please."

She really did not want to do this, but of course there was never a choice. Both of her sisters looked at her with that look she had seen all her life. The look said, *Fix it. I can't deal. You're the one. Make it better*.

Check my closet, Faith. Kill the spider, Faith. I miss Mommy, Faith. Leslie's picking on me, Faith. Brad dumped me, Faith. Daddy's crying again, Faith. Where's our brother, Faith? Oh, yes, she had seen that look so many times.

She cleared her throat. No way out of it. No choice. No options. It was hell being the oldest. She started to read, and her voice shook. She hated sounding so weak, so scared, but she kept reading.

Hi, Faith. I know it's you reading this letter. Say hi to Hope and Charity for me. They're crying, aren't they? Don't let them cry. There's no reason for tears. I've never been happier.

I found the woman I've been searching for all my life, thanks to you. Her name is Arleigh. She's perfect. We are linked through memories and lifetimes, through faery spells and reality. Without each other, our souls will wither away, and our lives will hold no meaning. Does any of that sound familiar to you, Faith? It should. You said it to me once, a long time ago. Somehow, you've always known the right thing to say. How do you do that?

I'm in 1639, and in the company of the first American Trinity. Fiana, Hannah, and Corliss are perfect and way more familiar than I like to admit. They are safe and happy, but they are very young. They need me to look after them and make them a whole family, and I want to do it. Since I know them so well, loving them and caring for them is going to be the easiest thing I've ever done. The three of you, the Trinity, have always been, but you've probably always known that.

I love it here, and I'm going to be the best damn tobacco farmer this colony has ever seen. I haven't figured out how to deal with the moral issue of that yet, but I'll come up with something. And since they don't have Jack here, I'm going to do some serious distilling.

Don't worry about me fitting in. I blend in great. No one would ever guess I'm not a colonial. I'm going to keep a journal of my adventures. Maybe you'll read them some day.

It appears to be my responsibility to continue a dynasty. Not one to shirk duty, I have graciously consented to do my part with Arleigh's full cooperation. Did I tell you how perfect she is? I wish you could meet her.

Try to do without me for awhile, okay? I know you miss me, and I miss you, too, but all I have to do is look across the room, and I can see your beautiful faces. When I hug them, I'm hugging you, and my love flows across the bridge of time to you. Love is not held by the boundaries of time and space. It is limitless and eternal, and my love is always with you. You can feel it, can't you? I knew you could. Hold onto it and keep me close.

You three are the best sisters a guy could ever have, over and over and over. I love you.

Don't wait up. I'll be late.

Ryder

A tear ran down her face, and Faith wiped it away absently. She reread the letter.

"Jesus Christ," she whispered. "He's staying in that godforsaken place."

Charity reached out and took the parchment from Faith's hand. She ran her fingers over the words on the page. "He sounds happy. I'm glad he found someone to love. It's all he ever really wanted."

Hope twisted her hands together. She looked shell-shocked. Shaking, she reached out and took the page from Charity. She held it in her hands for a minute before Faith reached out and took it back. The page looked too fragile in Hope's restless hands.

"So what do we do now?" Hope asked.

"I don't know," Faith said. "But we'll figure it out as we go. It's not like he was much help around here anyway."

She folded the parchment like a treasured heirloom and tucked it back into the pages of the Keats. She stood for a moment undecided, then walked to the bookshelf and tucked the leather volume where it belonged between the Lord Byron and the Dylan Thomas. She ran her hand over the binding and turned to her sisters.

"We'll wait for him," she said. "He has to come home eventually, right? It's not like anyone can put up with him for very long. He's impossible."

Faith reached toward the bottle on the desk. She needed something to calm her shaking hands. When she lifted it to her mouth, it felt different. She

lowered it slowly, feeling the triangular shape, almost afraid to look. The label on the bottle said Trinity Whisky, Kendall Distillery.

"Well," Faith said, "he solved one moral dilemma and created a whole new one."

She held up the bottle, and when her sisters smiled, she tipped the bottle to her lips. Faith nearly choked when a knock sounded on the door of the cottage.

"It's him!" Hope cried. "He's back."

"I don't think he'd knock on his own door, Miss Spock," Faith said, moving toward the door. "You're the one who said this wasn't science. Don't you think he'd materialize or something?"

Faith yanked the door open. She didn't know what she expected on the other side, but certainly not the hunk standing there. He was the most gorgeous thing she had ever seen. When she looked at that pair of blue eyes, she thought for a split second she would throw herself into his arms. She clutched the latch on the door and struggled to find some words.

"Hi," she squeaked.

"Hi, yourself," the man said.

He looked like he had stepped from the pages of a romance novel. He had such a beautiful face that he had to be a model or an actor. What the hell was a man like this doing on Trinity Island? And that hair. Dark waves fell over his shoulders in a messy yet seriously seductive way. The bristly stubble on his jaw made him sexy as hell. He wore a plain white t-shirt with a pair of jeans and a leather jacket. Faith had no idea muscles could actually show through leather.

The man stuffed his hand into the pocket of his jeans like he dug for his keys. When he pulled it out again, he held a penny in his hand. He flipped it through his fingers like a magician.

Faith gulped. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so," the man said. "I'm looking for Ryder Kendall. He lives here, right? I was told to come to the stone cottage."

He had an accent, the most beautiful accent she had ever heard. Irish, she thought.

"Right place," Faith said. "But Ryder, well, he's sort of out of town. On an emergency."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the man said.

His voice should have been singing rock ballads on the radio. It was throaty, husky, full of quiet passion. Faith desperately tried to focus.

"Someone sick?" he asked.

"What?" Faith said. "Sick? Oh, no, everyone's fine. Ryder's a teacher, a historian."

"There was a teaching emergency?" the man asked. He smiled, and Faith wondered how this man could get better looking.

Faith shook her head. "No, well, yes, something like that. He's not here, Mr...?"

He held out his hand. "Flynn. Cameron Flynn."

Her hand still lingered on the latch of the door and, for a split second, so fast it barely registered, Faith had an overwhelming desire to close the door on the handsome face. Instead, she opened the door wider, and the stranger stepped inside. She put her hand in his and shook, feeling the warmth and surety of his grip. He held her hand for quite a long time. Her sisters hovered behind her, listening and watching, but for some reason they were leaving her on her own to deal with the stranger. It was hell being the oldest.

"And you are?" Cameron asked.

Faith shook her head. She couldn't find any words. Did she even know any words? He released her hand, and she took a step back, trying to put distance between them. She had to, because she had a desire to reach out and touch his face, or maybe run her fingers through the hair that fell over the collar of his jacket.

She shook her head again. She grasped at any words she could find. She could barely remember her own name. "I'm Faith. Ryder's sister."

Where did he get that smile?

"How do you know our brother?" Hope asked.

Thank God someone could talk, because Faith's throat felt dry. When she ran her tongue across her lips, she saw the man's eyes dart to her mouth. His eyes rose slowly to meet hers, crawling across the planes of her face with a seductive heat that made her blush. His eyes were filled with slivers of silver light, and when the man finally dragged his eyes away from her, she felt a moment of relief. He gave Hope a smile.

"I'm a bit of an historian, too," Flynn said. "Immigration patterns of the early colonials here in Virginia. Your brother planned to help me with some

research I'm doing on some of the first families. Since I was born in Ireland, my primary area of interest is the Irish. Your family fit into the profile."

"The profile?" Faith asked.

When would she would be able to form a complete sentence? And why hadn't Ryder ever mentioned this man? This was a man who should be mentioned. His eyes had found her again. She should learn to keep her mouth shut if she couldn't be coherent.

"Irish. The first families in Virginia. The Caindale legacy. That profile."

He smiled at her like she was a slow child and he explained how to tie her shoes. She nodded like the slow child she thought she might be. Mrs. Neilson had always thought she was a bit slow. Perhaps she'd been right.

"I'm working on a book," he explained.

He looked toward Hope and Charity for help with the stupid sister. Charity went to him and touched his arm. Faith took a breath. Thank God for Charity.

"Wow," Charity said. "A book. Ryder always talked about how much he wanted to write a book, but he got so preoccupied with things."

"He wanted to write a book?" Faith asked. "How could I not know that?"

She glanced at Cameron Flynn for help, but he raised those dark brows and shrugged.

"How long have you known our brother?" Hope asked.

"Not long," Flynn said. "We've been corresponding a couple of weeks. I tried e-mail, but he never answered, so I resorted to the old-fashioned way. Pen and paper."

Charity laughed. "Ryder's not much for technology. He's kind of a throwback to the olden days."

"Aye," Flynn said. "He seemed a bit odd. Like he didn't quite fit into the times. I'm sorry I've missed him, though. It would have been great to see him. We have lots to talk about."

"I'm sure he would have liked to see you, too," Charity said. "He may not be here, but Ryder can still help you. He has lots of documents here already. Maybe you'd like to look at some."

"That would be great," he said, "but I wouldn't want to impose."

"You wouldn't be imposing at all," Hope said. "You could work here in the cottage while Ryder's away. I know he wouldn't mind. Faith?"

Faith watched Cameron Flynn's hands as he flipped that penny. He wound it through his fingers, tripping it across his knuckles like magic. Something about it bothered her, but of course that was ridiculous. It was a nervous habit. Everyone had one.

Her eyes locked on the penny, Faith finally closed the door. For some reason, she could not imagine letting this man walk out of the cottage now that he had entered and was in their lives. Besides, it never hurt to have a handsome, charming man around the house.

"Faith?" Hope asked.

Faith tore her eyes away from the penny and looked toward her sister. Hope seemed to have something on her mind.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I'm talking about Cameron's book. Maybe you could help him with the research. You're pretty good at that."

What the hell was Hope talking about? Research? How did the hell did they get on that topic?

"I know my way around research," Faith said.

Cameron watched all of them, but his glance kept coming back to her. She felt a little warm, too. Could a man make you feel warm by the way he looked at you? She had thoughts that she should offer the stranger some dinner and thought another drink might be nice, a real drink with ice cubes. A hand waved in front of her face. Hope didn't seem to be finished.

"Don't mind her," Hope said to Cameron, "she zones out every now and then. Lots on her mind. Faith, Cameron's staying at the Trinity Inn. He's going to be here awhile. Don't you think he should come to the Halloween party next weekend?"

"Sure, yes, he should come," Faith said.

She turned to the stranger, although he hardly seemed like a stranger. For some reason, she felt like this man had always been in her life. She certainly wasn't going to let him leave, not with a face like that. She made a decision. Finally.

"Cameron, we're ordering pizza. Can you stay for dinner? We could talk about your book. Do you have time?"

"I have all the time in the world," Cameron said. "I'd love to have a chance to get to know you better."

Cameron Flynn had the most beautiful eyes, and when he smiled at her, Faith felt like the only woman in the world. This was a man she definitely wanted to get to know.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amber Carlton's love of historical romance began when she picked up her first copy of *The Passionate Adventures of Angelique*, following the life and loves of a woman in the 17th century. Amber is entranced by all things historical, but has a special fascination with English and early American history. She lives in the present but loves to write about being "elsewhere".

Her obsessions include the writing of Stephen King, Philip J. Fry and his friends on Futurama, the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and things that go bump in the night. Her kids and family also hold a special place in her heart.

Amber lives in Ohio with her boyfriend and dog.



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