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Kentucky Blood Lust

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Kentucky Blood Lust

By

Sophia Danu

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wonderful husband and two precious girls, my Mom and my large and loving family. To all my girlfriends who give me endless suggestions. To the Kentucky Romance Writer's group, a very talented group of writer's that have given me such a boost in writing exposure that I can't thank them enough. Finally, but certainly not least by any stretch, to my readers, whose wonderful compliments give me the desire to keep writing. I wouldn't be inspired without you.

Prologue

A long, forgotten castle on the Irish coast

In today's technological age, only a few enchanted locations remained on earth. Gods and Goddesses names invoked and worshipped bountifully so long ago are now only found in ancient books. Most are unknown and forgotten to the world today. Places such as Stonehenge, the Nazca Lines of Peru, Easter Island, the stone walls of Machu Picchu, and the Pyramids of Egypt are considered ruins of a time before. The ancient Druid castle, nestled among misty, green hills, was one such enchanted place, unknown to the world. Outside of the Thiesson clan who owned the Irish castle, only members of the Druid Order knew of its existence and only the governing Druid Council knew its exact location.

The mystical altar room that housed enchanted Druid artifacts remained as originally constructed eons ago, encased within three feet of magically preserved sandstone. Thick, red velvet tapestries covered yellowed stone walls. Giant metal sconces hosted endless flames that illuminated the area with a soft, flickering, golden glow.

The hidden, heavily warded altar room contained the largest collection of ancient scrolls and manuscripts of the Order. Irreplaceable texts and teachings, canons and covenants were amassed in shadowed cubbies of a wall of old growth, wooden shelves and slots. Priceless, enchanted weapons hung from wooden pegs. Printed history, magical weapons, sacred spells of a society that disappeared from known written record in the second century CE graced the charmed space.

Members of the ancient Druid society were originally of magical, noble families. They were priests, scholars, warriors and magicians. As a class, their skills and power were unsurpassed. It was because they were so formidable that they were targeted. Historians say they were suppressed by the Romans because they were so powerful that they threatened the vast Empire.

The Order adapted and changed with the chaotic political environment of the time. Their objective was to protect humanity, not be at war with it. To this end, clans insulated themselves and passed the Druid way of life on to their descendants. Because it was foretold centuries ago that the Order would formally exist again, they hunkered down and escaped notice, quietly gaining control and influence of some of the most powerful positions, magical objects and people on earth.

Sorrowfully on a chilly, gray afternoon, evil gained precious ground in the ever-going battle against good...and the Gods and Goddesses, who'd been sleeping, waiting for so many centuries, awoke...

Chapter One

"No!" roared a cry that embodied the very essence of anguish and sorrow. It reverberated about the altar room in Thiesson Keep. Greed, envy and obsession overcame one clansman's every thought and drove him to commit the ultimate betrayal—the murder of a family member, his female cousin, an innocent. Betrayal and pain flooded the young girl's mind as the knife sliced through her delicate, pale skin and in a moment of spilled blood, the pendulum shifted from favor of the Light to the shadows of the Dark.

Blood flowed, thick and dark. Its metallic scent filled the air and splattered on the cool stone floor. The killer, Urais Thiesson, inhaled the aroma in fascinated appreciation. He avidly watched the dark liquid slide into the cracks of the large stones and stream toward the altar, pooling around its black marble base.

The primal fragrance stirred a deviant desire that surprisingly intrigued him. A desire he was tempted to indulge and explore further, but with an effort, he reminded himself that he had business to attend. He adjusted his hardening cock with a smirk and, with one last, longing glance at the blood, promised himself, *another time*.

He shook his head and focused his wayward thoughts, giving the room a good once-over. *Ah, there it is*—the book, under a glass case, atop the marble altar. A year of meticulous, cunning maneuvering paid off. Satisfaction inundated him. He was so close to having everything he wanted.

With his evil act, Urais threw in his lot with the dark side and sealed his fate. His sins were compounded by his plan to steal the Thiesson clan's legacy, the *Uéron*, the source of limitless power for the Druids in the battle with evil. Sadly, he felt no remorse to speak of, quite the opposite, in fact.

He was about to bring the Order, and his cousins, to their knees in a series of carefully constructed, strategic moves. Then he would wield the power they brandished so effortlessly. Illusions of grandeur and power filled his obsessive brain, it was the least he deserved after all.

He raised his brows, considering the various glittering and ancient artifacts sitting about the room. A third of the bounty was added by his cousins in just the last ten years. They were such noble idiots, so obsessed with their heroic quest to secure the world against evil that they didn't appreciate the value of the treasure found here or what it could do for their lifestyle. They didn't even *see* the goods here as treasure, but as weapons that could be used against people. They hid priceless artifacts in an effort to keep them out of the wrong hands, but *who cared about that?* Not he.

The outcome of humanity didn't matter in the least to Urais. Humans were nothing, simply sheep to be led to the slaughter, he thought contemptuously. They were blissfully unaware of the dangers around them, assuming *they* were the top of the food chain. How absurd.

Sin and his brothers were in the Middle East, even now, searching for a rare book of spells. A book that would bring them a cool hundred million on the black market, *but no*, they were going to stick it in this room to gather dust. Idiots, he smirked again. In their naïveté, they provided him the opportunity to do his dark deed by simply being gone, so sure were they of their wards and spells to keep the altar room safe.

They should have paid more attention to the home front, he considered with a smug smile. One day very soon, these treasures would be his and he would sell them off, one by one, to the highest bidder, amassing such a fortune as no Thiesson had ever held. Evil was closer to home than his cousins suspected.

Yes, evil existed and it flourished and thrived. Demons, vampires, shape shifters, fairies and other creatures abounded in the world and all of them would do anything to get their hands, or paws, on the treasures held in this room. It made him giddy to realize that he should be counted among that list of evil beings, too. He, the scholarly cousin, who had always been overlooked, discounted, for simply being an intellectual. Who had the last laugh now? As it was, with The Truth in his hands, he would be one of the most dangerous men on earth and he loved it.

The scent of sandalwood wafted from ash-filled burners scattered about the corners of the room. It reached his senses and pulled his attention back to his present task. Magic-invoking treasure and objects littered every surface and crammed every nook, intended to be safe from dangerous hands. His palms itched at the treasure displayed before him, but he really came for one thing. He needed only one weapon to bring about the destruction of the Order—the book known as The Truth.

The *Uéron*, or The Truth by its common name, was a book that detailed Druid secrets. It included their understanding of earth, its many species, different dimensions, underworld portal locations, warding spells and other powerful, ancient curses. Rumor had it that the very fabric of reality could cease to exist if The Truth's spells ever came to light. That was okay with him, as long as he was one of the most powerful men in the world, reality could split all it wanted.

On rare occasions throughout the book's history, it was used and guarded by a Keeper. The Keeper was a person of magical blood linked to the book in a metaphysical connection. They had an innate sense when the book was in danger of being taken or destroyed. They were able to conjure any spell within and read any of the over fifteen languages found there. Many spells and secrets housed in the book were invisible to every eye except that of the Keeper. Urais took a short moment to be thankful that there was currently no Keeper for he never would have gotten this far.

While the Guardians, specifically the Thiesson clan, were appointed by the first Council to guard The Truth, they also protected the Keeper. In the event of a Keeper not linked to the book, then the clan was the sole line of protection from the evil entities in the world that coveted the knowledge found there. There had not been a Keeper for centuries, which made it more vulnerable and ripe for the plucking, or stealing, as it were.

Though his clan had long been entrusted the responsibility of guarding of The Truth, today was the first he'd ever been granted entry to this room and even then, it was by fatal subterfuge and deceit that he was here. Anger seared him anew, churning in his stomach, burning his gut. If his family and the Order had just trusted him with a task worthy of respect, he wouldn't have gone to such lengths. Still yet, he thought with a smile, he was a scholar and it was fitting that a book would be his weapon of choice.

Despite the fact that his family members were on the Council and the Guardians of the Druid treasures, he and his father and sisters lived in a small, albeit luxurious, manor in the next county over and held no official duties to that end. Only the family of the eldest child resided on a permanent basis in the Clan's castle and had access to the objects held within. Then that position carried over to the eldest child's heirs and so on. Urais' father held an honorary position on the Council, but had no real decision-making authority and always went along with the decisions made by his younger nephews.

Urais laughed ruefully, disdain for the archaic tradition of the Order and his whole damn family ran rampant in his thoughts. To make matters worse, he was the only clan member who was not an Arcane Druid, a magician. Though Thiesson's had been Arcanes since the first days of the Order, he was the sole member who lacked magical talent—effectively keeping him out of the altar room and the Council chambers.

He should have been a fucking Guardian with the right to call the Keep home and all the priceless trinkets within it. Only the most gifted Druids were drafted to be protectors of the secrets of the Order and to be considered for that lofty position, magic was a must. Rage infused him again at his place among his clan. It distracted him from his task and jealousy bloomed, bright, hot and fanatic. The thought of the power denied him thoroughly incensed him as it had for many years and he gripped the knife handle, clutched in his grasp still buried in his cousin's body, fiercely. No longer would he be ignored and ineffectual, he promised himself, *no longer*.

He was fed up with his lot in life. The only son of the youngest son, with *one* gift no less—a scholar, a nothing, he reflected with contempt. His lip curled at the memory of his father's disappointment in his lack of magical abilities, as if he wasn't good enough to be a Thiesson because he couldn't cast a spell.

As much as he hated his life and his family, the only time he felt at peace was when he sat among old tomes, especially those of a dark nature. Now there was real power. It was there, surrounded by dusty pages, that the idea to steal the book entered into his plans and calculations. The years, since his first foray into the shadows, only strengthened his fascination with sacrificial magic and curses and there was no greater book of spells than the *Uéron*.

He wasn't an Arcane, capable of twisting spells and calling magic, but he was a scholar and one thing he did well, was research and recover lost spells. If anyone was capable of finding a way to use The Truth without magic skills, it was he. Weeks ago, he found a text that suggested using the blood of an Arcane may give the same result to firing a spell as actually *being* an Arcane. The more he thought through his plans, the more they seemed doable...and now here he was.

The dark Druid looked down upon the beautiful, heart-shaped face of his cousin and pulled the knife from her body. She slumped to the floor. In a surprisingly unpredictable but admirable effort, she took a final, deep breath and flung out her arm toward him with a sharply spoken, incomprehensible word of a forgotten language. An arc of violet-blue light flared from her fingertips. It missed its intended target, burning only the top shoulder of his shirt. Damn.

He cursed and grabbed her arms. Lifting her tiny frame up, he slammed her back to the floor, pounding her skull into the hard surface. A wet crack sounded and with a gasp, her eyes closed. He allowed her to fall to the stone floor and after watching her for a second to assure she was down, he turned to the book. He smiled and shook his head at the close call. The top of his shirt was charred, but he was otherwise unscathed. Apparently, it was *meant* for him to steal the book.

He'd played his naïve, young cousin so well after all. It was all too easy really. Camma, so talented in the arcane, but so sheltered from the concept of avarice and greed, was effortless to manipulate. He couldn't have done it without her since he'd needed her to enter the altar room. Only an Arcane Druid was capable of removing the security wards and open the enchanted doors. He studied and plotted for two years to be granted the position as his cousin's tutor. He was a member of the family after all, but he needed a reason to be in the castle while Sin and his brother's were away.

Camma was easy prey. As her cousin and tutor, he insinuated himself into her comfort zone and subtly undermined her relationship with her brothers by commenting on her habitual, forced seclusion while they traveled the world. Who cared that they were in third world hot spots using their abilities to rescue a kidnapped missionary, assassinate a despotic tyrant, or take out a coven of demons? To a young, impressionable girl eager to experience life, they participated in one adventure after another while she was intentionally excluded, albeit for her own safety.

She might have every luxury a young woman could want, but she had no friends and no life outside of the castle and the Druid way. She was hungry for a confidant. Still yet, it took months to win her trust and convince her to show him the altar room. Meanwhile, he researched, improved his grasp of the ancient Gaelic language found in The Truth, watched and devised his plan.

He would take the book and flee Ireland for a while. He was an outsider among his family and ready for far more than their simple, altruist goals and ideals. He *deserved* more and with the book, he could name his price. He was through with obligations to this clan—fuck them all. The Druid way was not for him and while he intended to return eventually and exact some payback for the years of being nothing, he needed to gather magical ammo for that battle.

He lifted the glass case shielding The Truth and set it on the floor, his gaze riveted on the thick tome before him. The aged, leather cover fairly vibrated with power, even a non-magical scholar such as he could see it. With two hands, he caressed the supple surface and then opened it, running his fingers over the softened, aged pages.

A dangerous, knowing smile tilted the corner of his lips. He was pleased with his work this day. The hard part, dealing with Camma, was over. If he was honest, he admitted that killing her gave him a euphoric rush of power and confidence, not to mention a strange, new blood fetish. It was a heady thing to hold a life in your hands, to feel the pulse pumping, to almost literally smell the fear of dying. Then there was the resignation that filled the victim's eyes when death approached and they recognized it. He loved playing God.

He smoothed his palms over the book again, starting when a jolt passed through his body. He originally assumed the cover was made of leather, but upon closer observation, he realized it was human skin. Cool. It also didn't escape his notice that his chi flowed and his adrenaline raced upon contact with it. Magic. He'd longed for a taste of it his whole life and now it was right here in front of him—his for the taking.

Teleportation, shape shifting, demon-calling and more spells than he could possibly conceive were kept here. If the tales his father told him about the book were true, he would be unstoppable with this kind of information. First, however, he needed to find the spell to help him escape—teleportation. With Camma's blood, he was going to attempt to conjure the spell, something usually only an Arcane Druid could do with the magical properties of their blood. If that worked, then the world was his for the taking. He would learn every spell in the book.

He took a quick peek at his watch and discovered that he was nearly ten minutes into the job. He ignored his cousin's body cooling next to him, but was acutely aware of the possibility of discovery with each passing second. After what felt like long minutes later, he finally found it. The teleportation spell would take him and the book to the location of his desire. In theory, he would reappear in his hidden library in his father's manor to gather his belongings. From there he planned to make his way to New York City in the States.

With the tip of the knife, he swiped a blade full of Camma's blood. He let a fair amount drip into a glass vial that he took from the manor's herb

shelves. He collected the blood for the future spells he planned to twist. Arcane blood was a requirement for most of the spells within the book, especially those he wanted to use like teleportation, demon calling, shape shifting, and invisibility. That was just a few of the hexes he anticipated conjuring.

He secured the tube in his pocket for future use and lifted the bloody knife. Awkwardly, he balanced the book on his arm and read the ancient Druid tongue while simultaneously dripping the blood to form a circle around him. Eventually he completed the loop and the spell and clutched the book to his chest. Nothing happened. Frowning, he wondered if he'd done it wrong. Then he felt a most curious sensation, as if the world faded and his body dissolved. Dark glee overcame him. It was working. Indeed, it seemed his plan *and* the escape spell was successful.

As the wind simmered and whipped into frenzy, a curious feeling of defragmentation encompassed his body. He laughed in satisfaction. He was a lowly scholar no more. Then with an audible pop, he disappeared. The bloody knife clattered to the stone floor with the force of his exit, coming to rest in the cooling pool of blood. The Truth was unleashed and evil gained access to the single most threatening weapon in the arsenal of the Light. Watch out humans.

* * * *

Camma had sent her energy internally, working quickly on healing the fatal wounds on her dying body, when she felt the familiar air displacement of teleportation. No! Her thoughts were in chaos and pain radiated in every part of her, but she couldn't let Urais leave with the book. He could potentially end the world before they could hunt him down.

She quickly wrote his name with her finger in her own blood. *Eek!* Then shifted to her avian form in an attempt to heal the worst of the wounds, and leapt through the closing portal after him. Goddess, help them all. If only the book had a Keeper. If only she herself had not been so stupid.

Chapter Two

Kentucky

Ever have one of those days when you figure out that life, as you know it, is about to change? You reach a turning point when a single choice affects the entirety of your existence and you realize it. Well, I didn't yet know *what* that choice was going to be, but I knew upon waking it was one of those days. I hate those days.

It could have been the ruby red streaks across an otherwise gray, dawn sky that tipped me off. Or maybe it was the freakishly, large Raven on the limb outside of my bedroom window. Indeed, it was a creature so large that the stout oak branch dipped in distress. Not to mention its disturbingly direct and intelligent blue-eyed gaze that mesmerized me. A flutter tickled my conscious as our eyes locked. *You are the Keeper*, echoed in my mind. Was the bird *talking* to me?

The absurdity of that notion struck me and I snorted in derision at my fantasy. My world was freaky enough without adding telepathic birds and bad omens to the mix. The silliness of my musings, however, did nothing to quell the foreboding of the morning. Quite possibly the bad feeling was also a consequence of the nightmare that my subconscious practically catapulted me out of sleep to escape, only moments ago.

It was an immensely disturbing dream and I shuddered at the memory of it. It was about blood, tons and tons of it. In small quantities, the fluid of life was not a fearsome thing to me, but in my dream, it covered everything—the streets, the trees, and the grass. It dripped from the rooftops and turned the creek red.

Think, *The Shining*, when the blood gushed out of the elevator and into the hall—*that's* what I'm talking about. But this blood wasn't a bright red like in the movies, no, this blood was dark, nearly black in the chill October night. There was no surface that wasn't covered in the sinister liquid.

My heart pounded and my belly twisted in knots from fear of the oh-so-spooky nature of the dream. I nearly panicked when hands, coated a dark crimson, lifted out of the viscous liquid and grabbed at me. My slick flesh gave me the advantage I needed to jerk free, but the grasping appendages came at me again.

Perhaps my subconscious recognized that I'd reached my sanity limit because I awoke in a frantic rush. My gaze anxiously roamed the shadows of the room and relief consumed me when reality filtered in, no blood to be found. The stained-glass nightlight near the bathroom door cast a soft, reassuring glow as I took in the familiar surroundings. I was safe—no grasping, bloody hands in sight. Thank God.

Still, the vision of it clung tightly. The dream world didn't want to be left behind. I fought to clear my mind of the bad stuff and struggled to regain my breath. That's when I glanced out the window to see the toddler-sized bird silhouette against a bloody-red sky. It stared at me, unblinking and direct. Talk about creepy. I almost expected a cartoon, pop-up sign with a flashing arrow to point at the bird and spell out B-A-D O-M-E-N any moment.

It was on that weird note that the epiphany occurred. You see, not only can I read the blaring neon premonition signs before me, but I am also clairvoyant. Sometimes, admittedly unpredictably so, I know and see things that others don't and the fact that my life was about to become more strange than usual struck me.

I hid in my bathroom for about ten minutes, both from the bird and fate, trying to decide what to do, but I'm made of tougher stuff than that and I didn't plan on hiding in my house all day, waiting for the life-changing event to happen. Besides what was the bird going to do, peck me to death? I was up and out the door an hour later.

With two labs to teach at the university, I didn't have the luxury of avoiding whatever unpleasantness, or change, fate held in store for me. Plus, I'm pretty sure a giant bird and a premonition was an unacceptable excuse to postpone class. My professor, Dr. Liu, a former soldier in the Chinese red army would most likely frown on such whimsy.

I kept a cautious eye out for the Raven, note the capital R, and made the trek to the bus stop much quicker than usual. Most days, I walk to class or ride my bike, but the thought of the huge creature diving-bombing my head changed my mind about this morning's mode of transportation. Thankfully, I didn't see it anywhere, but I stood in the bus shelter on the chilly, portentous morning just in case.

Finally, the campus bus rolled into view. I quickly worked my way onto it and snagged an empty seat. It was going to be a long day and after such a restless night, I just didn't have the heart to open my planner and see the long list of tasks to accomplish. Normally I found Wednesday and Friday's hands-on, instructional labs fulfilling, but they were also exhausting and I was already bone tired. Plus, I had the distinct feeling I might look over my shoulder all day, what with the bad omen and all.

As a full time teaching assistant, research assistant and graduate student at the university, my weeks were busy and diverse and entirely too short. Truth is, I could use another three hours in my day, *at least* . Time was spent juggling research for two professors, teaching labs, handling student hours and papers to grade, and that's not mentioning my own classes and graduate thesis research. In that regard, I studied in the library or worked running data in the lab several nights a week, sometimes until the wee hours of the morning. Precisely the reason why I wished I was still warm and cozy in my bed. I believe it was a quarter till three when I crawled into bed this morning, only to toss and turn in a blood-soaked nightmare.

Today I wore the Teaching Assistant hat. The labs that I instructed consisted of two three-hour-long classes in Forest Ecology and Forest Photogrammetric and Remote Sensing, respectively. That latter class' title is simply fancy lingo for mapping and surveying. Crammed between the labs were a quick two hours where I ate a hurried lunch and then held office time for students. Mostly those with questions about the homework they were to turn in that day.

I'm ashamed to admit that I simply went through the motions that day, but finally, it was done and I was back on the bus. My body rocked with the movement as it lumbered along the university's tree-lined route to residential housing. I was dog-tired from the lack of restful sleep the night before, and it took all of my strength to keep my butt planted on the bench as the bus took a curve.

I slapped my foot down to keep from tumbling to the floor and sighed when a snicker sounded. I love humor at my expense. Do you hear the sarcasm? Fuming and out of sorts, I closed my eyes, in an effort to dismiss the comedian slouched on the opposite bench, and lost myself in the melody of Widespread Panic's *Crazy*, blaring from my ever-present ear buds. Despite the figurative black cloud over my head, the easy flow of the chords all but soothed the tension away.

Worries spiraled into nothing as the music bubble encapsulated me. Music always struck a chord deep within me. I fully believe music healed and recuperated me on more than one occasion. More importantly, it kept the incessant voices that resound in my head to a minimum. Yes, I hear voices, and I'm not talking about from the living either. Nope, like the boy in the *Sixth Sense*, I see dead people. I hear them, too. Music keeps me sane, although presently there are no dead people roaming about the bus. The music is habit at this point in my life.

A swaying stop at the light pulled me back in the present. Eagerness to reach the little cottage on the edge of the campus arboretum swamped me. Everyone has a place, a sanctuary, or they should at least, and my quaint, cozy home was mine. There was never a ghost to be found there. It was the one place in the world that I truly relaxed and felt free.

Two songs and seven tedious stops later, I slung the bulging book bag across my body and staggered off the swaying bus. After no more sightings of the monstrous bird, I began to wonder if it was nothing more than a psychic extension of my dream. It wouldn't be the first time I'd confused fantasy for reality, the dead for the living, or the unreal for the real. You get the point. With no bird in sight and more than a little freaked by the whole episode, I decided to do what always worked for me—ignore the issue.

My address is at the end of the street nestled in the woods. It was separated a bit from the rest of the townhouses and duplexes of the student living area as it was originally privately owned and only later bought by the university when they added the arboretum to their property. A trickling brook ran beside my home, creating the illusion of a quiet cottage away from civilization. It was perfect for me.

I loved the stonework of the house and the beautiful arched windows. Last summer, I put up copper flower boxes in the windows and filled them full of geraniums and petunias. In the summertime, zinnia's lined the curving stone walkway that led to the entrance—though the beds were clear now with the chill season. Colorful stained glass filled the oval of the antique door framed by the small stone porch. Pewter stars and moon chimes filled the spaces where overflowing summer hanging baskets usually hung by ornate hooks.

The fragrant scent of marinated roast beef greeted me when I entered. I breathed deep in happy appreciation. Red potatoes, garlic and rosemary soaked with the meat in red wine, where it basted in the crock-pot since this morning before I left for class. Dinner was going to be delicious. I was hungry after only eating half of a tuna sandwich and two thin carrot sticks between labs.

My dad loved pot roast. He would be by for dinner soon like he was on most Wednesdays and Sundays. We were a father and daughter on a mission to stay connected—despite our busy schedules—so we met for dinner twice a week.

It wasn't easy. We were both active and over-scheduled like most people in the US. He was a veteran detective in the police department and worked nearly round the clock. I did the same, studying long hours in the library and working late in the lab, but we still managed to maintain our twice-a-week dinners and I think it was good for both of us.

Not to mention that I had my doubts about how nutritious his diet was the remainder of the week. I think his menu included an unhealthy amount of donuts, pizza and beer. I know that's typical single guy, cop food, but not the type of eating that promotes longevity. Plus, I loved to cook and it was nice to cook for others instead of just myself.

We're close for a father and daughter, but it's just us left. There is no other family. My mom, Diane, died of cancer when I was eight and we've been tight ever since. The relationship could have gone the other way for a bitter cop and a young girl lost to grief, but we pulled together and made it work. Our mutual loss forged a strong bond that never weakened.

I put my keys, phone and mail on the foyer table and then dropped by the study to sling my book bag on the opened, roll-top desk. That beauty was inherited from my grandfather, my mom's dad. My father graciously let me have it for studying when I moved into the cottage.

Relaxing from the long day, I toed off my Ugg's and curled my toes. I sighed out loud. After hanging my scarf and jacket in the coat closet, I made my way up the dark, gleaming stairs to the bedroom. Comfy clothes were a must. I'm one of those people that put on pajamas as soon as I walk in the door.

In the soft lamplight, I shrugged out of my jeans and fleece pullover. Donning yoga pants, a thin cotton tunic and fuzzy slippers, I went back downstairs and tossed the salad and heated dinner rolls. Listening to my favorite Sirius channel, I finished the dinner prep and put red wine on the table.

Thinking ahead to dessert, I got coffee ready to brew and set teacakes, picked up from the bakery yesterday, on the counter. We usually lingered after dinner over coffee and dessert, talking about the week. I pulled the rolls from the oven just as I heard Dad's jeep pull into the cobblestone driveway. Good timing. I poured us each a glass of wine.

James Connelly, my Dad, was a tall, handsome man with a head full of dark hair shot with gray at the temples. I knew for a fact he had lots of female attention. Unfortunately, he never let any of them get close for too long. When I asked him about it, he always said that no one compared to Mom. I hated that he wasn't able to move on, but I guess we all have to deal with grief in our own way.

He gave a courtesy knock and entered the door through the kitchen. "Kate, your door is unlocked."

I smiled at the gruff complaint and lack of greeting. He worried more than was healthy about my safety, but I figured it was natural for someone who constantly saw the darker side of humanity. I didn't hold it against him. Like any father, he was concerned for his daughter. "I just walked in, Dad," I admonished lightly. "I knew you were right behind me."

"Yeah, well, it only takes a minute for someone to come in on you."

I giggled at his insistence.

He smiled tiredly in chagrin, "Sorry, lass."

"Here you go," I said and handed him the wine as I hugged him with one arm, leaning in close. "How are you doing?"

"Oh." He sighed. "Not bad." He rubbed his face and then took a sip. "I'm exhausted and hungry." He shucked his coat and hung it on the doorknob, shutting the door on the cool night air.

"Then have a seat. Dinner is ready. We're having pot roast," I said while I filled a plate with the juicy meat and vegetables. I tucked a roll on the edge of the plate and set it in front of my dinner guest while I made my own. The salads were already on the table.

"Bless you, Daughter," he said fervently as I sat down.

I laughed and we proceeded to chow down. Dinner was delicious and we ate more than we talked as we were both tired and hungry after the long day. The lines on his handsome face, the dark shadows under his eyes and his preoccupied air didn't escape my notice.

"How's work?" I asked when I served him the teacake. A case disturbed him deeply, consuming his thoughts. It was easy to read the signs. Frustration colored his aura before the hardened, veteran detective resumed control once again. Suddenly I knew instinctively what case he was tied up in—the two female college students killed in the warehouse district.

Concern for his welfare filled me. Familiar tension swamped my body and limbs and I realized *this was it*—the life-changing moment, the decided course of action of which I knew was before me, the bad omen was all related to this case and to my dad. The outcome, the course of action, was still vague, but I knew, I *knew* in the way that I know things others don't, that this case was part of it.

"It's ugly," he stated flatly, referring to the murders.

Lost in his reverie, he was unaware of my rising emotion. I remembered the headlines. Two female students were murdered, off-campus, on the north side of town. Their deaths were frighteningly brutal, vicious, and ritualistic. That bit of information wasn't leaked to the public, but unfortunately became obvious by the torturous images that flashed in my mind as he spoke of it—blood, a dismembered arm, a circle, melting black candles, all flashed in my brain.

I must admit, at times, I've called my ability a curse. This would be one of those times. It's hard to be normal when you see ghosts, horrific visions of the past or of things to come. Still, I tell myself that I have this ability, what some might call a gift, for a reason. Maybe there's a purpose

for me to fulfill or someone to help, like my Dad.

Suddenly, the path was clear and I knew what I was supposed to do. Well, I amended, the next step was illuminated anyway, beyond that was as murky as muddy water. Dad needed me on this case. The town and the people here needed me. This wasn't a typical murder of passion or greed. It was more and it was going to take more than regular police work to solve it because I knew the killing wasn't over. My next step was to go to the crime scene. I needed to do a re-creation. As unforgettable and disturbing as it was likely to be, it had to be done. The police needed the knowledge I could give them about the murder and who committed it.

"There's no evidence, no DNA, no murder weapon," he continued. "No one saw or heard anything. They were butchered, those young girls. Unimaginable things were done to them. They were *eaten*, for Christ's sake, and all I could do was look at them and thank God it wasn't you." He sighed again and took the last gulp of wine.

I took a deep breath and released it slowly. His description threw me for a loop. Eaten? I didn't really want to relive the painful energy of such a heinous act, but I'm not sure I had a choice. When I know a path I am supposed to take, there is no getting around it. Fate has a way of getting you to do what's in the cards, one way or another. Plus, I would never forgive myself if someone else died because I was too afraid to go to the crime scene, and the only way to see what happened or provide any helpful information is to go where the murder took place. Sometimes I get flashes of events by hearing about them, but I get tons of information by being at the actual location where the energy lingers.

I set my glass on the table, decided. "I want you to take me to the scene." He shook his head before I completed the sentence so I continued more persuasively, "Look, Dad, this isn't over. There will be more. I can help now...before more women die." Agony and indecision crossed his rugged features. I confirmed what he suspected would be true—that the murders weren't over. "Come on, Dad. Let me help you with this one. No one has to know, except Hank."

Hank was Dad's partner of eighteen years—a tall, lanky black man with a bald head, an earring and a huge heart. He was one of my favorite people in the world and usually accompanied Dad for dinner on Sundays. Hank knew of my abilities and quirks.

He found out when I was a young, pig-tailed girl of twelve. I was at his house with my Dad and their police buddies for their monthly poker night. I was settled in the den watching *Goonies* and eating popcorn, while they played at the kitchen table.

Hank lived in the same house he'd grown up in as a child. His parents died in the house. His mother's ghost, a short, big-bosomed, gray-haired lady asked me to tell him about money they'd hidden in the attic under the floorboard. I usually didn't talk about my freaky abilities with other people, but even at twelve, I realized that a cop's salary was minimal. Hank needed the money so I stalled and got Dad to wait around until everyone else had gone.

Dad's partner was skeptical at first, but Dad simply smiled, knowing it was only a matter of time before he believed my story. Even when I described his mother in detail, he pointed out a picture in the hallway where I could have seen her likeness. But he became a true believer when he found close to twenty thousand dollars exactly where I told him to look.

"Kate," my Dad argued. "I don't want you to see such gruesome deaths. They died horrifically. You are everything that is light and good. How could I expose you to that?"

I heard the finality in his tone. I covered his hand with mine. "Dad, let me do what I'm supposed to do. I have this gift for a reason. Let me use it for something worthwhile."

"Then become a psychiatrist or a lawyer," he muttered, raking his hands through his hair.

"No," I said firmly. "*This* is the way—its *fate*. You are a detective and I can detect things most people can't. Let nature take its course. We're a perfect team in this." Finally, I pulled out my trump card. "Dad, I'm meant to do this. I've seen it. You know there's no escaping a vision once I've had it."

He pressed his lips tightly together and turned away, shaking his head.

Disappointment bloomed in me, but then I saw his shoulders fall and knew he'd given in. I couldn't say I was excited about his decision. Dread and trepidation would be more accurate, but I'd gotten my way and I wasn't about to voice those emotions to him. If I showed the least amount of fear or doubt, he wouldn't let me participate and I had a growing feeling that there was no getting out of it for me.

Tiredly, he stated, "This is such a bad idea."

While I agreed, I just smiled innocently. I would do anything to help him with this case and make sure he stayed safe *and* to rid my quaint, little college town of a murderer. He left shortly after we watched the local news. Unfortunately, it made mention of the murders discovered in the warehouse district and that the police were still reporting no leads.

I put up leftovers, washed dishes and wearily made my way upstairs. A hot bath eased my muscles and after watching the opening dialog of the late show, I drifted off to sleep—anxious about the visit to the crime scene tomorrow. How did one prepare to see a person being eaten?

I ran through the woods, leapt over the fallen tree and never broke stride as I took a quick peek behind me. Years of running track and jumping hurdles had never paid off so well—for evil followed closely on my heels. I couldn't see it, but I sure as hell felt it. It laughed and hissed and spurred me faster through the darkness, further from the cozy comfort and safety of home.

I recognized the forest path accessed by my backyard. I jogged the path every morning when the weather was nice. Typically, bright sunlight dappled the leaf-covered trail. It was a path that was now dark and sinister and treacherous. The fragrance of wildflowers and trees, mixed with the organic aroma of decomposing plants, normally so relaxing and soothing was suddenly too dank, too pungent, too decaying.

I reached the small green clearing and turned in a quick circle, searching for the enemy. Shadows lunged at me from all angles and fear engulfed me. Despite the gloom of the night, I saw the now familiar dark stains of blood that covered everything—the trees, the bark and leaves, the trail, the briar bushes and the wildflowers. Blood, it seemed, followed me at every turn these days.

Suddenly, I felt it rushing toward me—evil. Only a split second before it grabbed me, but there was no defense against what I didn't see. Jerked off my feet and lifted in the air, invisible hands squeezed my throat, choking me. Frantically, I scratched and clawed at the nothing in front of me, inflicting no pain and gaining no purchase against the power that seized me. Panic set in.

Mocking laughter blared in my ears and thundered echoing in my head. Darkness closed in, taking over and my consciousness wavered. The last thing I noticed, as my tunnel of vision disintegrated, was a white wildflower, Trillium, I believe it's called, covered in blood. It was now a red Trillium. I was confused and disoriented. *Was that my blood covering everything in sight?*

I sat upright in bed, gasping and gagging, my hand at my throat. Unsettled and shaky by the frightening dream, my breath was ragged, hindered as if I was really choking. Adrenaline pumped in the aftermath and it was all I could do to remain still in the bed. Instincts screamed—operating in fight or flight mode.

After several tense, hard-breathing minutes, I flopped down on the mattress and lifted the damp tank top away from my skin. *Damn. This is getting old.* The bloody nightmare was once again ominous and foreshadowing, and I could feel in my bones that it was more than just a dream. It was my future, in some form or fashion. While the future is never set in stone, I knew I had a date with a deluge of blood at some point. I just hoped it wasn't mine or Dad's, or Hank's even.

I tossed and turned the rest of the night. Dread, of what I was about to undertake, of my decision to battle the evil stalking the City, weighed on me even while unconscious. I'm not a super-heroine or even a little *bit* of a heroine, for that matter, but I can go to a crime scene or anywhere really, and tell you, based on residual energy and emotions, what happened there and possibly provide leads to solve these murders and find the killer.

Violence and death caused extremely intense emotions that translated into energy. Energy is created in the passing of a life, in the death of a soul—a tremendous amount, in fact—and it has nowhere to go. After a murder, energy lingers, sometimes as a ghost and sometimes just intense emotion, but it waits for something to expend it. That can be in the form of revenge or even justice.

It's that leftover energy that I sense and as I do, I see the act, or the murder in this case, unfold. Have you ever heard ghost stories of how a death scene is re-enacted over and over by spirits? That is what I see. Those death throes are playing out in the world all around us where violent deaths have occurred, only, the majority of people can't see them. Lucky me, I can.

That's not to say that everyone who was murdered lingers. Some go on into the light, or the great beyond, whatever you want to call it. Since I go to church and believe in God, I call it Heaven. But many spirits don't move on. Not only can I feel the energy left behind, but I see the spirits, too. That's always an interesting experience. It can be a bit...jarring, but I became used to it long ago. I've seen ghosts since I was a child.

Dread and fear swirled in my scattered, restless sleep and thankfully, morning finally made an appearance. I dragged myself out of bed, gratefully noticing no birds outside the window and after a quick shower, made my way downstairs, eager for warm tea. I dawdled over a toasted English muffin smothered in peach preserves and greedily eyed the bright sun filtering in the window crowded with plants. Unfortunately after last night's dream, I wasn't about to go jogging on the nature trail this morning.

Chapter Three

I opted to ride my bike to the lab to make up for missing the morning jog. Rain wasn't forecasted to begin until later in the week and though there was a chill to the air, it was a beautiful, sunny day. It was a good opportunity to ride and I soon reached the office, red-nosed and invigorated. The disturbing darkness of the night before slightly lessened and eased with the promise of a new day.

I peddled into the carport of the 1930s-era, brick building and attached my bike to the rack. I occupy a desk in one of the offices within. It was almost literally just desk-space since the office I worked in was no bigger than the size of a walk-in closet.

Marston Poe stood next to the back entrance, smoking a pipe in his tweed jacket and handlebar mustache. He's the former Dean of the Agriculture College...and he died in 1958. This building that now housed the Forestry Department was his former residence.

I nodded a greeting to him on my way in. The ghostly remnant of the sweet smell of tobacco teased my senses. I've never been sure if I literally smelled the tobacco or if my brain simply triggered the memory of it when I saw him with his pipe.

Mr. Poe was content to stay in his home rather than move on to the light and the salvation found there. His kind of spirit was rare. Most are restless and agitated if they are earth-bound. They have a purpose for being here—something to do before they move on, but the majority of spirits need, no, they *want* to move on.

He comes to sit with me from time to time while I work on my research. He is aware that I see him so he likes to be around me. His essence flares brighter when he's in my presence. He seems peaceful. Sometimes we discuss current events and as an environmental intellectual, he's curious about my research. Mostly, however, he was content to simply sit and smoke his pipe while I buried myself in numbers and writing.

The day passed uneventfully as I downloaded, processed and ran the model of my data. The analysis and programming of my thesis work was a challenge and required complete concentration, but there were days like today when distraction reared its ugly head. To combat my wandering thoughts, I put in my earplugs. Roberta Flack soon crooned in my ear, grounding me, and I sunk myself in the columns of numbers.

I ended the day in the ecology lab. Aside from student teaching, I further supplemented my income by splitting my time as a research assistant for two professors. For the last three hours of my workday, I added hydrochloric acid to various leaf solutions. Testing and recording the reactions while half-heartedly listening to John, the undergrad lab assistant, tell me about his date the night before. He chugged from a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew and crunched Doritos while he gave me way more info than I cared to hear. I just smiled politely, made noncommittal comments and concentrated on not dropping the test tubes.

One long hour later, I perched on my grandmother's antique Rosewood chair changing from biking shoes to black Mary Jane's when my dad's jeep pulled up. My stomach tilted and clenched. Now that it was time to go to the crime scene, I was incredibly nervous, almost nauseous. Not a state of mind that I was going to mention to Dad. He would pull the plug on this venture before I even stepped my dainty, little Mary Jane's out the door.

I thoroughly dreaded the upcoming murder re-enactment. It's difficult to watch a victim's pain. To see the sliver of hope for escape in their eyes, knowing the outcome, but I didn't see any way around it. I reminded myself again why I signed up for this task. Oh yeah, the ominous premonition, the huge Raven, the bloody dream, Dad's involvement. Yep, had to be done, there was no way around it. So I might as well just quit going on about it and take care of business. I didn't like whiney girls and I was suspiciously close to becoming one with all of my mental self-pity.

You would think I would be used to seeing death, but really you never quite get used to watching people die. I handled it better as an adult than I used to when I was young. I experienced my first ghostly re-enactment when I was five.

My kindergarten class took a fieldtrip to Fort Boonesborough. I enjoyed the tour of the rustic buildings, imagining life as a gun-toting lady pioneer. Except in my musings, I wore buckskins and boots rather than homespun dresses. Then I heard the first war cry and life as I knew it, was never the same. I screamed and dropped the giant, rainbow-swirled lollipop, out of sticky fingers, when hatchet-carrying Native Americans with painted faces descended upon the Fort. Men, women and children colonists were cut down by the angry natives, intent on defending their territory from encroaching settlers. It was surreal when I realized that I watched scenes from the past, that my classmates and teacher did not see or hear the brutal massacre played out around us.

I'll never forget the look of incredulous horror in Mrs. Ellison's eyes when I told her what I saw, describing in detail the blood, guts and bodies lying around us. Quickly, anger settled in her gaze when she decided that I told tall tales for attention. She, nor the other kids, believed me. After that debacle, the fieldtrip was over. Mom was called from the gift shop before we even got on the bus to return to the city. Mrs. Ellison suggested she be at the school, waiting to pick me up as soon as we arrived. Her disgust, dislike, and fear of me were evident. Confusion and hurt consumed me at her dismissal and disbelief. I'd done nothing but tell the truth about what I saw and it landed me in serious trouble.

When I told Mom about the Fort's invasion, she ordered me not to talk about ghosts to anyone else but her and Dad. Fortunately she believed me, mainly because my father's Irish mother had the same ability. She knew the reaction people would have to what I could do, and she tried to protect me from their misunderstanding and discrimination by keeping it a secret, as her mother-in-law did.

She encouraged me to talk to her and Dad about everything, knowing I needed an outlet to speak about it. Knowing I needed someone who believed. Nevertheless, that first experience taught me clearly that my gift, if you want to call it such, wasn't welcome by society as a whole. Despite the fact that I was to hide what I could do, she told me over and over that it was a gift from God. That I was chosen for a reason, and one day, I would use it to make a difference to others. I confess that I haven't really done that up to this point.

It was only two years later that Mom got sick. My next vision wasn't a ghastly scene of the past, but a heartbreaking insight to our future. It was knowledge that I kept to myself, but it was the day that I ceased to be a child. The day I realized the deep, nurturing love, that I'd been so lucky to have, would soon be gone.

Resolved for the task ahead and ready to dismiss the past, I took a deep breath and bounded down the stairs. I threw two bottled waters into my big bag and opened the door for Dad. He hugged me and looked in my eyes, an are-you-ready-for-this kind of look. I smiled and willed it to reach my gaze, trying not to look away. I'm an expert at hiding my feelings. I've had years of practice, behaving as if nothing out of the ordinary occurred, as if I didn't see ghosts or the future, but sometimes it was hard to fool Dad.

What he saw on my face reassured him, however, and after carefully watching to make sure I locked the door, we silently made our way to an abandoned warehouse on the north side of town. Understanding the gravity of the situation, Dad didn't try to fill the void with small talk. He wasn't the small talk kind of guy anyway.

He pulled the jeep into an empty lot. The whole street was nothing but abandoned warehouses. The north side businesses and commercial district had been steadily dying over the last decade. Efforts were made to revitalize it, but it seemed that the new businesses lasted only a year or two before they, too, fell by the wayside. The large, gray metal building looked ominous. My stomach, already squirrely and queasy, twisted in painful knots.

Weeds grew in the cracks of the parking lot. A rusted, faded red car, minus the wheels, was abandoned on the far corner of the pavement. Sections of the metal roof were gone, victim of gale-force winds earlier in the spring, and the interior behind the busted windows was dark and

eerie.

Yellow police tape stretched along the front side of the building and trailed off at the ends. The slight, evening breeze lifted one end of the tape. It flew in a swirling, graceful pattern that caught my eye. It was one of those random, mundane images of important events that people notice. I knew I would remember the dancing police tape for a long time to come.

The tape wasn't the only thing the breeze lifted. My nostrils flared and my lip curled when I caught a whiff of the stench permeating the desolate area. There was no doubt in my mind that I smelled evil. Though I had never inhaled such a pungent aroma, I knew it upon sight, or scent, as it were.

There's no mistaking it. It's a sulfurous odor, foul and putrefying, and I kept my breaths shallow to limit intake of the fetid air. It riveted me in place and made it tough to voluntarily move closer to the structure.

Along with the smell, a dark miasma encompassed the building, visible probably only to me since my Dad didn't seem to have any reservations about going inside. My instincts, however, emphatically screamed at me not to enter. By this time, he stood next to the double doors, looking at me questioningly. The lines on his forehead deepened and I could tell he was on the verge of calling off the purpose of our visit.

"Kate, are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely," I said, projecting a determined and positive spin to my voice. Sheesh, could I stop being such a baby? Frustration filled me at my cowardice and fear and gave me the boost I needed to carry on. "Just checkin' things out."

You know, I'm not surprised real evil exists, I suppose. It's just that, well, it's shocking since I've never seen or felt it before. Lexington's criminal element was made up of idiotic humans and the typical crimes they perpetrate—like murder, rape, theft. While those are indeed evil and vile, they are emotions and actions expected of humanity.

This evil was deeper and far more terrifyingly dark and frightening. In my twenty-three years of seeing death happen around me, jealousy, passion, and greed were explainable motives, but not this. This was something far outside the realm of what I've come to consider normal, and it scared the shit out of me, figuratively of course.

I ducked under the police tape and, for Dad's benefit, nonchalantly walked into the cavernous room. Long chains with thick hooks hung from steel rafters. Stacks of wood pallets lined one side of the warehouse to the ceiling. An interior metal door creaked as it swayed, attached by one rusty hinge. Spooky it definitely was.

What were the girls thinking coming here with a strange man? Not that I'm indicating, in any way, they asked for their murder, but didn't they have any sense of self-preservation? I wouldn't willingly walk into this building with a man I didn't know for *any* reason. I don't care how handsome he was. You couldn't pay me a million bucks to do it, but then I guess I have more insight into the darkness of the human mind than others do. Maybe others would rather see the good in people when there's no good there to see.

Blood covered the floor near a dilapidated, stained mattress, in dried pools and splatters. More than you ever expect to see. It was hard to look at. I also saw the circle of blood from my vision. Why was the blood fashioned in a circle?

Two small paint spots indicated where the bodies were found next to the mattress pushed into the corner. I knew from catching a glimpse of Dad's crime scene photos as a child that the tiny spots were usually sprayed directly above the head of the body. I wandered over to stand above the bright orange reminders of the girls' deaths. It was as if I could see their lives, their dreams and hopes represented there, as well as, unfortunately, their tragic demise. I tried to shake away the depression that accompanied the thought.

Suddenly, it became arctic cold and my breath condensed in the frigid air, a signal that preceded a ghost sighting. Chills skated across my skin. I looked it up once—why it gets so cold when they are present. I read that ghosts draw the energy to manifest from heat in the surrounding area, which causes the temperature to drop drastically. I rubbed my hands along my arms to warm my skin and dispel the goose bumps.

I swallowed past the thick knot in my throat when I noticed the transparent figure hovering over the mattress. Her body became more substantial as I looked at her. She wore a short jean mini skirt, a pink v-neck sweater and black boots with black, fishnet hose. Her hair had an auburn sheen and she reminded me of the girl next door—just another college student—in the wrong place at the wrong time. She looked sad and regretful about her demise as she gazed forlornly at the fatal paint spot.

I heard a faint clamoring at the door and she looked up with a fierce glance before fading away. I took a deep breath, aware that it was now show time. I turned to see the vision of a tall, handsome man enter the warehouse. Behind him sauntered the young women about to be murdered once again before my eyes.

The man wore black. Black pants, black dress shirt and shoes. His hair was reddish-blond and long, past his shoulders, and I regret to say that he looked very polished and attractive, sinfully handsome even, the loser. Isn't that always the story? Apparently, pure evil comes in a nicely wrapped package. Despite his outward appearance, there was an aura about him that shouted wickedness. It oozed from his pores, cold and relentless. I figure I'm the only one who can see this side of him. Everyone else noticed the sophisticated looks and tailored clothing and looked no further. They very gullible trusted and desired him and he used it to his advantage.

The other young woman, the blonde, wore black leggings, a long red tunic with a belt and a scarf and boots. Her face was happy. She was excited to be with the man, and I ached for the life she lost so horribly and was about to lose again in her ghostly existence.

If only all young women embarked into the world with the sense of awareness that I held, they would never be in such a predicament, at least not willingly, blindly walking into danger. Anger burned in my gut for them and the torture they experienced, for the unfairness that fate dealt them.

After lighting the black candles, the man smiled a satisfied grin that sent chills down my back. He turned and crooked his finger at the redhead

and she eagerly came flush against the front of him, moaning at the touch. He licked and nipped and caressed as they undulated, sandwiched against him in pleasure, enthralled with his seduction.

He knelt on the floor between them, running his hands up the soft skin of their thighs. Red soon tossed her head from side to side as he thrust his finger inside her and began pumping in deep strokes. It wasn't long before she shouted her orgasm to the rafters. Simultaneously, he bit Blondie's nipple through her shirt and laughed deep in his throat when she shrieked and arched into him. The women moaned in unison, lost to passion and seemingly enchanted.

I watched his every move in excruciating dread of what was to come, feeling slightly voyeuristic in a can't-look-away-from-the-train-wreck kind of way. Blondie fell to her knees and unbuttoned his pants. I really didn't want to watch, but did as she pulled his cock out and licked along its length.

She took him into her mouth, moaning as she did so and then pulled back and licked and nipped the bulbous tip. Red reached between his legs from behind and gathered his balls in her hand. I closed my eyes while they moaned and squeezed and sucked and licked him to completion. While I understood the appeal of watching people have sex, knowing what the scumbag was leading up to simply made me nauseous to watch it.

He groaned in a way that was familiar to all men nearing completion so I opened my eyes again. After he spurted onto Blondie in front of him, he jerked her up by her hair and planted a hard, open-mouthed kiss on her lips. In their lust, the young women didn't notice as he discreetly lifted his pant leg and withdrew a knife from the leather sheath strapped there. Nor were they aware when he began to chant, whispering low, under his breath.

I gasped and my heartbeat kicked up a notch. A bead of sweat eased its way down my temple. Instinctively, I thought to warn the young women. I wanted to shout at them to flee, but obviously it would do no good, only freak Dad out. Their deaths would play out in the same gruesome detail as they did the first time, so I bit my lip to maintain silence and watched the worst yet to come.

His voice continued in its whispered, dark cadence. Though I tried, I couldn't decipher the words. Whatever was said felt wrong and in a word...evil. It raised the hair on my arms and made me shake. My mouth became dry and my eyes watered.

The silver of the knife blade flashed in the darkness, and he ended the chant on an abrupt note. I gasped when he slashed into Red, quickly, brutally. He pierced her in the belly and jerked upward in a quick, efficient move that caused her to slump in his arms without a sound. Blood splattered on his face.

Blondie stared in confusion at the scene before her, unable to comprehend the violence inflicted, trying to make sense of the horrific shift from lust to terror. As if suddenly aware of the blood covering her, she glanced down at her hands and screamed. The killer turned with a quick, sideways slice and opened a deep gash across her throat. Her eyes grew wide and she grabbed at her throat. The sound of blood gurgling from the wound was sickening. I watched as it seeped through her fingers in a stream. She collapsed to the concrete floor.

I closed my eyes for a moment, horrified by what I saw, but I heard him moving and knew it wasn't over. I watched as he positioned the bodies, side by side and moved the candles into position at the four corners. Bile rose in my throat when he bent and soaked his knife in their blood and began chanting again. Dripping the fluid from the knife onto the floor, he walked in a circle around them. That explained the circle I noticed.

I'm not very up on spells or witchcraft, but I do know that circles are used in many rituals. I wasn't sure what he was going to do, but I didn't feel good about it at all. Now the source of the evil I sensed became clear. It was more than this man alone. It was magic.

The moment he closed the circle of blood, the air sucked out of the room like a vacuum. The building shook and it roared in my ears. It was suddenly difficult to breathe. Light shot out of the circle and a loud crack split the night. I reminded myself again that I watched something that already happened—thank God. This was very bad.

When the air cleared and the fog inside the circle lifted, a creature stood in the center. Chills crossed my body and terror filled my heart—deep, dark terror—the kind that comes from tales of the Boogiemán, from the monster hiding under your bed. Nothing human inspires this kind of fright. I was in the presence of pure evil and it was knees-turned-to-jelly terrifying. I gasped and Dad's hands settled on my shoulders. He tried to turn me away, but I stood firm, resisting, intent on watching what happened, unable to look elsewhere.

The being snarled and growled and gnashed its teeth at the man safe outside of the line. I had the feeling it would love to get its hands on him. My heart thumped almost painfully in my chest while I stood riveted by what I witnessed. Then it lifted its nose to the air and turned with inhuman quickness to attack the offering left for him. He wasted no time and leapt on top of the girls.

I heard and saw every gruesome assault upon both women, while somehow managing to set myself apart. It was the only way to mentally absorb the vision before me, but I wasn't unaffected. Every breath from my body was expelled in a harsh gasp. Fear crawled on my skin and I was colder than I'd ever been in my life.

When the creature was satiated and the bodies literally eaten and torn to pieces, it growled at the man who'd called it and then simply disappeared. The man left the building as well, avoiding the bodies and leaving them as they lay, pieces and all. Here one minute and gone the next, but I would see the images of their death for the rest of my life. I would never be the same again. You can't watch people being eaten by a demon and go on with life as it was before.

I slumped in relief with the end of my job. My head and shoulders fell and Dad caught me before I hit the ground. Exhaustion and horror battled within me, making it impossible to stand. The world as I knew it was no longer and I happened to know a lot more about it than most, but this new knowledge was mind-boggling. It was a huge burden. The people in this city had no defense against this kind of monster. How was I to fix this?

"Kate, are you okay? What did you see?"

Dad's hand was on my shoulder, shaking me, pulling me out of my disoriented, numb state. How to even begin to tell him? *Fuck me*. Crude words, I know, but the occasion, without a doubt, warranted such language. Who would believe such a tale?

I looked up with a tired smile. I couldn't possibly eat, but Dad would be hungry and I wanted to get out of here as quick as possible. I gripped

his hand and let him pull me up. It was way past time to get out of this evil zone.

"Let's grab a pizza and go back to my house and I'll tell you all about it. I want to get out of here and what I have to tell you should be done privately, not at a restaurant."

He took a long look at my face and nodded. "We'll drop by the Mellow Mushroom on the way."

I leaned my head back against the headrest in his Jeep. I was dog-tired. I felt physically and emotionally and even spiritually wrecked. Dad was silent—feeling my need for peace.

"I'm sorry, Kate," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have brought you into this. What kind of father am I to do such a thing?" He questioned angrily in self-frustration, slamming his palm on the steering wheel.

"Dad," I said, interrupting his rant. "I asked to do this. I *wanted* to do this and I don't regret it. I'm *going* to help you solve this case. I *have* to help you solve this case. Just give me a little bit to think about it all. I'll be fine," I lied.

Despite deep fatigue, my mind raced. The unanticipated and unwanted knowledge granted me on this day wouldn't let itself be placed on a shelf. The dark figure loomed larger than life, literally, in my mind. I'll never get the image of the creature and its actions out of my head. My eyes were opened in a huge way today regarding the world around me. And that's saying a lot since I see more than most folk, but low and behold, there's a whole lot more out there than even I knew.

Despite the otherworldly danger, we had to find the killer and his creature before they killed again, but how? I sighed as I considered this question and felt Dad look at me with paternal concern. We pulled in to the pizza place and I got out before he had a chance to turn off the ignition. I needed to clear my head. The cool Lexington wind did the job as a blast of it blew my hair in a swirl.

I ordered a pizza with pepperoni, tomato and banana peppers and sat in a booth to wait, willing myself not to throw up at the thought of food. I thumped my fingers on the tabletop in distraction, unable to think of anything but the vision. I wondered where the man met the girls and if anyone else saw them leave with him.

I was sure the detectives already covered these issues, but I didn't know the answers and was curious. The pizza order was up within ten minutes and we were back to my house in five more. I posed all of my questions to Dad as we sat at the table where he alone munched on the pie.

The girls last known location was at a rave in a warehouse at the end of the same street. The victims, Lisa and Renee, drove to the party with another friend. The *other friend* didn't see them leave. She stayed for a while after her boyfriend showed up and when she was ready to go, she couldn't find them anywhere and assumed they must have hooked up with someone else or gotten a ride back to the dorm. She didn't see them talking to anyone before they left. In fact, no one at the party saw them with anyone or saw them leave.

"Can you tell me what you saw, Kate?" Dad asked hesitantly after he answered my questions. His patience was commendable. He had a lot riding on the case. Finding the killer had become an obsession for him and after what I knew now, that scared the daylights out of me.

"Which one is the redhead?" I pictured her again in her ghostly likeness.

He sighed. "Renee Lowry, a sophomore."

Okay. "This is going to be hard to believe and even harder to investigate or put in a report, but," I told him straight and direct, "I saw a demon or some kind of creature eat those girls. It wasn't human and it was the scariest thing I've ever seen." For a second, I was distracted by the myriad of expressions that crossed his face, but the dark vision wanted to be told.

"A man lured them to that abandoned warehouse," I continued. I ached for the young students and the terror they experienced in their last moments. "They were so taken by his sophisticated, European sensuality. They wanted his love and he seduced and stabbed them." I swallowed and looked down at my hands—seeing it all again.

I whispered, "That's not all he did to them. He chanted something, whispered it. I couldn't hear him, but he made a circle around their bodies with their own blood. When that was done, he used magic to call a creature into the circle. I don't know where it came from. It simply appeared there. The girls were a sacrifice for this being. Whatever he brought inside of that circle ate them. You know the rest. That's all of my vision. It ended when the creature disappeared and the man left."

If I knew my Dad well, and I do, he passed the next few seconds in disbelief, calmly looking for a logical explanation to what I thought I saw. I'm sure he considered the fact that I had finally gone off the deep end after seeing one too many ghosts. We looked at each other for long minutes. After that, he realized that I was sane and telling the truth, he spent longer moments considering how to defeat such a creature before it killed again.

"Describe the man who brought the creature over. Tell it to me again," he ordered.

I sighed and plunged into my spiel again. "He's tall and handsome with long, reddish-blond hair. He wore expensive, tailored dress clothes—black pants, black shirt and shoes and wore the look of casual wealth and class like he was born to it. What I noticed most about him though was the coldness and cruelty that cloaked him. He's a killer, through and through." I watched Dad mentally file the info away.

"I'll have Doris come up with computer mock-ups of the description you gave me and I'll drop by tomorrow and let you pick the closest. I'll say that I got an anonymous tip of a man seen in the area on the night of the murder." At my nod, he said, "Keep going."

I left out the sexual aspect of the vision. Not about the cover that with Dad. "He stabbed Renee, first, in her belly. Then he cut Lisa's throat. They fell on the ground and he rearranged their bodies, lining them up. He dipped his knife in their blood and made a circle around them with it as he chanted something, some kind of spell that I couldn't hear." I shook my head, frustrated, and raked my hands through my hair. "When he closed the circle, bright light exploded from the inside, clear up to the ceiling and when it faded, a monster stood within."

"What did the creature look like?" he asked quietly, intensely.

I could practically feel the anger simmering in him at my description of the girl's murders. He would never back down on this case until it was solved. Dad was one of the toughest men I've ever met and he took each case personally, especially when innocents were killed. No stone would go unturned until he found those responsible.

"It was covered in a long robe. I couldn't tell much about it. But it was huge, with red skin and long, black claws." I pictured it again and remembered the sound of it...and the smell. "It growled like an animal continuously as it ate them—like it couldn't get enough—and it smelled like rotten eggs."

Dad's pizza dropped with a cheesy plop on the plate. We sat in silence for a few minutes while he digested my revelation because his ability to digest the pizza disappeared. He left soon afterward without much to say, but he gave me a kiss on the forehead and whispered his thanks. I could almost literally see the wheels spinning in his analytical brain. I knew he would research ways to find and kill demons as soon as he reached the crime computer lab. I wondered how he would tell Hank. That would be an interesting conversation.

With a lead to follow, they wouldn't rest until they tracked it down and while I was happy that I gave them a direction to follow, anxiety consumed me over what they would find when they reached its conclusion. To that end, I sent up a heartfelt prayer to God, asking for guidance and blessing in what lay ahead, because I had the sinking feeling that I had just set us on a very dangerous path that would change our lives forever. Yea me! Great going, Kate.

Chapter Four

Ireland

A roar of rage echoed from the castle rampart and battlements. Creatures in the lush, verdant forest beyond grew still in the presence of the fearsome predator. Galen grimaced at his brother's wrath, watching the tall, muscular man stalk the wall-walk before him. The dark red aura surrounding his brother was ominous.

Taliesin, better known as Sin, was his most lethal at this moment. It behooved Galen to sit quietly, not attracting his brother's attention. He breathed low and even, while he allowed the highly-charged, pacing Druid to strategize and plan their next step.

The robbery and the assault on Camma by their cousin, Urais, shook them all, especially the uncertainty of it all. Was she still alive? Did he take her or was she on her own? She was a gifted healer, but there was a lot of blood pooled on the altar room floor.

At least she had the presence of mind to write his name, providing them with a lead. The family was aware of Urais's discontent with his position in the Order, but to betray his clan in such a way was unthinkable, unforgiveable. He would die for his actions, and judging by his brother's fierce expression, it would be Sin's most satisfying pleasure to dispatch him to Hell personally, and probably slowly and painfully.

* * * *

Sin curled his fingers into his palm, forcing back the claws threatening to unsheathe. He anticipated the moment when he squeezed his hands around his cousin's throat, when he snapped the fragile bones and watched the light fade from his gaze. Nay, that's too merciful, the Druid reconsidered, pausing in his fluid stride. He bared his teeth and then resumed his pace. He would break his neck *after* he gouged out his eyes, cut out his tongue, and broke his fingers, arms and legs.

The discovery of the blood on the altar room floor flooded his system with a fury that had yet to calm. Then Joah, his brother, calmly remarked on the missing *Uéron*. Rage consumed, surrounded and emitted from him in almost palpable waves. The thought of The Truth unguarded and loose in the world, vulnerable to evil, was extremely troubling and further exacerbated the limits of his control.

His skin itched with the need to shift to his panther form. As a Druid shape shifter, he normally controlled such urges, unlike born shifters who were forced into the conversion every full moon. Yet, in this killing rage, it took all of his effort to stay upright.

He made an effective leader of the Guardians because of his methodical calculation and cold lethality under pressure, necessary characteristics in his capacity as the Chieftain, but at the moment, it was a tenuous position. His skin felt tight across his frame and his joints ached. What the hell was wrong with him?

He was like an untried soldier, losing control, letting the rage take over. He was at a loss as to why maintaining his usual cool focus was so difficult. It wasn't only Urais's betrayal and the attack on Camma, as enraged and murderous as he felt about that. In the past, such an act only made him colder, more ruthlessly logical and lethal. Instead, his rage and the need to become panther outweighed everything at the moment. If he had a woman here right now, he would sink into her tight, wet pussy over and over again, deep and long and hard until he exploded. *Fucking hell.* Where did that thought come from? He'd gone off the deep end.

He snarled, baring his gleaming, white teeth once more in the darkness. His temple pulsed and he knew he must look savage with the Druid ruins, tattooed on his temple and cheek bone, turned a dark red with his rage. The urge to give in to the tremors just under the surface of his skin nearly overwhelmed him.

Fortunately, he heard the footsteps of Myria, a Druid diviner and cousin, on the stone staircase. He turned with a growl.

* * * *

Myria gasped and raised a hand to her throat in fear and then lowered it slowly. She knew how much her cousin loved and doted on his beautiful sister. He had right to be infuriated. Sin, her mother's cousin's son, would never hurt her, but the menacing scowl and blood-red tattoos on his handsome face were a fearsome sight. Her heart skipped a beat when he turned with a snarl, baring his teeth at her. Everyone knew the high-level warrior tats turned red when Druids were angry. Urais was an idiot to invoke such wrath.

Her scholarly cousin had always been such a weasel. She remembered when he used to visit her family home and threaten her kittens in the stables. Sin was going to impart Druid justice when he found their cousin and he certainly deserved it after what he did to the clan's beloved Camma, a young girl that was everything light and good.

"What did you determine?" he rasped in a low growl.

"She is still alive," she reported, her gaze on the ground, hesitant to look at his flashing eyes. "Sounds strange, but I keep feeling her in the States, and when I hover over the map, I keep going to Lexington, Kentucky. Now why Urais would go there, I have no idea, but that's the answer that comes up every time."

Sin turned away to stare out over the wall into the forest.

"Bless you, Myria," Galen murmured, stepping up to see her to the stairs.

"You know," she added as she reached the stairs, turning back to look at the striking brothers. "Her essence feels different. From the loss of blood, I would say she's very badly wounded. I can't reach her and usually a blood-spell divination gives me exactly what I want. Go to Lexington and find her, Sin. She's in over her head."

* * * *

Sin, fed up with doing nothing, slammed his fists into the stone. Myria shrieked and clattered down the steps, escaping his fury though it was not directed at her. Rage consumed him. More and more it took over the calm balance of the Druid philosophy. He felt the dark fury gaining ground within him.

He remembered when they found Camma's blood. Galen had cried out in pain, falling to his knees. But he felt no such pain, nothing but a need for revenge. He'd simply turned, reset the wards to the precious room and walked out, feeling nothing but wrath and a burning desire to kill. Revenge, killing and sex were all he thought about these days. When he became such an animal, he wasn't sure.

He recognized his divergence from the Druid way, but as of late, balance and peace were hard to come by. His anger was out of control. It took every ounce of power in him to keep it under wraps.

If he didn't find it such an absurd notion, he might consider that he experienced the mating curse. Historically, only high level Druids experienced the phenomenon. Interestingly, no Druid had felt it in over three centuries, but damn if he didn't feel all of the symptoms written in The Truth—extreme anger, territorialism, impatience, need, *God, the need*, tremors, and the urge to shift, to kill.

Males under the influence of the curse gained an increase in dark emotions while the female gained a knowing, a premonition of the change to occur. The pair felt the symptoms, in some cases, before they even knew each other, and in the mystical way that destiny has of handling such things, they would meet within weeks of beginning the curse. Apparently, fate knew that no one could stand the symptoms for too long. The couples that thrived in the relationship and bonded gained enhanced Druidic magic and power and an easing of the darker side of the curse.

In the last centuries, however, the curse became the stuff of legends. Three centuries ago in fact, was the last such alleged affliction. It sounded like bullshit to him. He was crazy for even considering the possibility, when he needed to focus on saving his sister, retrieving the book and tearing his cousin apart, limb by limb.

Tired of fighting the need, he leapt onto the crenellations and dove off the side. He flew one hundred feet through the air and landed perfectly on

the ground in an agile crouch. He needed to run and let off steam before he lashed out at his family. In a shimmer of mist and magic, his body changed from that of a full-bodied male to a long, sleek panther with mesmerizing topaz eyes and giant paws. In one giant bound, he cleared a fallen tree and sprang off into the woods, his mind racing as fast as his agile body.

He would find Camma. He would kill Urais and bring The Truth back to Thiesson Keep. He would not fail the Order. The knowledge in The Truth would destroy the world if it landed in the wrong hands, like a demon for instance, and he was absolutely certain his cousin intended to sell it to the highest bidder. Urais's stupidity and greed for money would start a war that might end the human race.

Only a small portion of humanity knew of the supernatural world. Most of the super races policed themselves, to a degree, and kept knowledge of their existence to a minimum. As it was, the vast majority of people lived in total ignorance. That would change if half-eaten bodies started showing up in droves.

In fact, most missing persons, seen on milk cartons, pamphlets or bulletin boards, were more than likely food for one of the supernatural races--vampires, shifters or demons. However demons were, by far, the biggest threat to humans. Vampires and shifters tried to keep their kills to a minimum to escape notice. They had their own Death Hunters and Enforcers to help police their populations. Demons did not. They weren't concerned about being noticed. They not only prized Homo sapien flesh, but they absorbed the person's soul, an even worse kind of death. It was theorized that the soul lingered in limbo for as long as the demon lived.

The only factor working in humans' favor is that the vile creatures resided in the underworld. Tied as they were to that bizarre, airless world, they weren't able to exist long on the surface. With the book of Druid spells, they would be able to come and go at will, however. In that fucked up scenario, the tide of the vicious creatures flooding the earth could potentially decimate the human population. Something the Order, and himself particularly, wasn't about to let happen.

He ran thirty miles before returning to the castle with a plan, shifting in mid-leap back into his body. Never again would he leave his sanctuary in such a vulnerable state. One of his brothers would always be within to guard against such an attack again, for the sake of his family, not to mention, the world. Sadly, you never knew when an attack would be mounted from the inside.

His golden eyes blazed for a moment before he disappeared from the mist only to reappear in the soft light of Camma's room. He snarled upon seeing the empty bed and quiet room. The protector within him raged at his failure to keep his charge safe. He was a leader of the Order and the head of his clan, and he didn't protect his own home from aggression.

He ran a calloused hand over the unused pillow and mentally summoned Galen who followed him as he strode to the master suite. He rinsed his face in the marble bowl atop a black iron pedestal, removing the disorientation that came from too much teleportation and lack of sleep from their mission. He leaned back to regard his red-haired, bulky, younger brother, thinking of the tasks ahead of him and what to delegate.

"Talon stays here for this mission. I want the altar room and the castle protected at all times from now on. This will not happen again. The wards won't protect our secrets if they are disengaged. Joah will report to the Council members and put them on alert. If this isn't resolved within a few days, we'll call out all Guardians. Joah should be ready to do so at a moment's notice. Meanwhile, I want you to go to Urais's library and see what leads you can come up with as to his plan." He rubbed his hands tiredly over his face. He felt grubby after their long mission in the Middle East and the shock they'd found upon their return. Not to mention, he hadn't eaten or taken a shower in two days.

He shrugged, "I have no idea why they are in Kentucky. There's got to be something in his lair that can help us figure out his intentions. Find it. Talk to Uncle Rikol, see if he knows of his son's agenda. I'm sure he doesn't, but to prove a point to others, he must be involved in his son's punishment. He'll want to be, if I know him at all. I'm going to cross the lines to Kentucky and bring Camma and The Truth back home, after I eat and take a shower. Text me if you find anything."

The Ley lines were alignments of powerful earth energy like ancient sites across the landscape. They crossed the globe. Skilled Druids traveled along them freely and at will. It was the quickest and easiest way to move across distances, powered by the energy inherent in the lines.

"Are you sure you don't want backup, bro?"

"Nay, Galen, I'd like to keep this low-key, if we can. Tell Joah not to give full disclosure unless I give the order. We'll handle this within the clan if possible."

"Okay, I'll have Nera bring a plate to you. The Shepherd's pie was good and it'll boost the energy you burned the last couple of days. I'll go to the Manor and visit with Rikol after I stop by the kitchen," Galen said and then headed out, closing the thick, wooden door in his wake.

Sin stepped under the cold spray of water in an effort to not only cleanse the grime from their narrow escape through the Middle East being chased by guerrilla's, but also to ease the tremors picking up in intensity. The run eased his tension to a degree, but only slightly and planning his strategy to defeat Urais brought it all back. His cock had been hard and full for what seemed like days now, and it was taking a heavy toll on his nerves. He was on edge and tense, snapping at everyone, and while he was an exacting leader, he wasn't typically so hard to please.

He considered stroking himself to completion, but was quite positive that would do nothing but make him ache more, want more. What he needed, what he longed for, was to sink into a woman, warm, moist and tight. *Fuck*. The thought sent blood surging painfully to his stiff cock, but he still didn't make the call that would bring relief.

There were women in nearby villages, beautiful and available, happy to provide whatever he needed. The lovely Darnia, Rosaeria, and Inlania lived in the nearby village and then there was Kilria and Mearnin in the next county over. Any of them would welcome him with open arms if he called. They appreciated his frequent attention and thorough loving, and though they weren't too fond of the no-strings-attached nature of his relationship with them, they were all adults and enjoyed being with him for the time that he could give them, making no demands. Not that they knew about each other.

The missions, searching for artifacts, weapons and spell books, fighting demons, guarding the portals, these tasks were his life. More often than not, his focus was literally on saving the world. It was too difficult and dangerous, not to mention unfair, to cultivate a committed relationship with someone who deserved more. So he kept it simple and pleasurable, very pleasurable, and emotionally uncomplicated. The relationships provided a

wee bit of light in the midst of darkness and the sex healed the psychic wounds left from battling evil.

Making love was a relief for him. It eased his soul after the evil creatures he encountered on a regular basis. He fucked like he was a dying man with one last chance at love, focusing on a woman's every detail and flutter. He used rough dominance when it was called for and titillating gentleness when not. He loved to lose himself in a woman's pleasure for hours and bring his partner to screaming completion over and over and over before reaching his own. Fucking was life to him—life in the midst of death and darkness. It kept him grounded and pulled him out of craziness when it all seemed to be too much.

Lately, however, none of the women he normally visited interested him. He hadn't called any of them in weeks. Their messages went unanswered and calls to him unreturned. His body wanted a woman, badly, intensely, just not those women. It's as if he waited on someone or something. What the hell was wrong with him?

He turned off the water and shook his hair, flinging drops in all directions as he stepped from the shower. Once dressed, in faded jeans, a black, long-sleeved shirt, and boots, he ate the steaming food that awaited him on the small, wooden table in the sitting area of his bedroom. Afterward, feeling clean and well fed, he sheathed his knife in his leather ankle sheath, tied his long, dark hair back at his nape with a leather cord and then disappeared, teleporting himself to Kentucky—what Google called the Bluegrass state. It was time to put an end to Urais and his evil work.

Chapter Five

Urais reclined on the patchwork, quilt-covered bed in the farmhouse he confiscated from an elderly couple. Their half-eaten bodies decomposed in the crawl space and had started to smell. His path up to this point had been unpredictable at best, but nevertheless exhilarating. Somehow, he'd ended up in the States, in the city of Lexington, Kentucky, a university town full of nubile, young college students, who were fresh-faced and ripe. In other words, perfect for a hungry demon. In exchange for human flesh, the creature provided Urais with drops of his magical blood. Blood that Urais used to activate the spells he learned from The Truth.

Hiding out in the Bluegrass state was only a temporary situation. Sin and the Guardians would eventually hunt him down. It wasn't smart to maintain a killing spree in one place for too long. Discretion was advisable to a degree to avoid police interference. So far, he'd used a spell of invisibility while in public, wanting no one get his description.

As far as he knew, there was no need for alarm, no one that could point a finger at him. It certainly wouldn't do to be arrested or become the target of a manhunt, but it was hard to resist the Druid magic at his beck and call. He wanted it all, the money, the women, and the power. It was becoming extremely difficult to deny himself what he could easily take at any time.

He still had a few things to learn, however, before he faced the Order, like how the fuck the teleportation spell and the Ley lines brought him here, across the pond, instead of the manor house and how the fuck he was supposed to get back. Sin was a master of Ley line travel, the bastard, while he obviously was not. He'd begun to think it was Camma's weak blood that he used to fire the spell that messed up his destination.

Frankly, it made him a bit nervous. If he did conjure the spell wrong and attempted it again, there was no guarantee he'd return to his intended destination. Who knew where he would end up? He definitely didn't want to teleport back to the castle by mistake before he was ready.

Meanwhile, Lexington was as good a place as any to hole away and gather the knowledge and power he needed to confront his clan. His dick-head cousin, Sin, was the highest level Druid in centuries. It would take no less than a well-developed plan, memorized spells and a supply of the demon's blood as well as the demon's coerced help to come out on top.

In the meantime, the power he'd gained in just a few days was incredible. He felt God-like and was highly addicted to the thrill of it all. Killing, spelling, and the magical blood became his new obsession and like any junkie, he spent a lot of time thinking up new ways to do it again. His lust for more blood and the acquisition of it was constantly on his mind.

A groan from the young woman next to him snared his wandering attention. Gagged and naked on the bed beside him, she struggled ineffectually against the bonds that tied her securely to the engraved, wooden headboard and footboard. Her firm breasts bobbed and swayed with her movements. He liked the sight of his cum smeared between her peach-toned thighs. She was a slim, sexy, Goth-beauty and up until he tied her up, very willing and happy with his attention. Now she was scared. Her eyes, wide, frantic, and pleading, caused him to chuckle in appreciation.

Replete from fucking her taut, young body, he had no personal use for her anymore, but *damn* did she do memorable things with her mouth. She was a pleasant memory he would recall for a long time to come. Aye, despite the hurdles placed in his path, the askew teleportation, his endless lust for blood, his plight wasn't that bad. He laughed at the thought. Who knew Kentucky was such an exciting place?

He tuned out the terrified whimpers panted in his ear as he once again imagined the devastated look on Sin's face when he returned from the Middle East to find his domain violated, his sister attacked and the clan's legacy stolen. He hated missing that. He really did. It would have almost

been worth facing him to please. Aw, but then he would most likely be dead instead of enjoying the fine fillies of the Bluegrass State. It was better to just imagine his cousin's distressed reaction.

He spent his days reading The Truth and learning spells and secrets of the Order and scouting, searching for his next target, for Asterian's next meal. The demon, whose name Urais first found in a dusty tome in the family library over five years ago, was a fearsome creature. He recalled to this day the buzz of excitement he felt when he discovered the ancient text about the demon who feasted on human flesh. He recalled thinking such a pet would make him very powerful indeed. He was right. Urais never imagined of the kind of power he'd gain with the demon's blood. It was so much better than Camma's blood, which didn't even land him in the right location. He ignored the fact that Asterian made him nervous and chose to see himself as the dominant of the two.

His plans included crippling the Thiesson clan and the Order, to get his hands on more of their sacred objects, and sell them to the super races around the world, to anyone who wanted a piece of the Druid treasure, and more specifically, to whomever was willing to pay the most. The thought brought a smug smile across his lips. He would be a man to be reckoned with then.

He mentally calculated a timetable of a week before he returned to Ireland. By then, he'd have memorized enough spells and have gathered enough demon blood to teleport to the castle, call the demon to occupy his cousins, break into the altar room and take more priceless treasures. He hoped Asterian would do some damage and if he killed Sin, well then the plan would have worked better than he could have hoped for. Sin's death would leave the Order and his clan cut off at the head. It would devastate them and he wanted that almost more than the treasure. He lived, breathed and dreamed about their fall while he himself came out on top.

The Truth and the Druid treasures were highly coveted by the supernatural world, especially the witches and demons with their magical blood. Dangling the proverbial carrot to the most powerful races in the world would be tricky, but well worth the effort and the pay off would be astronomical. But for now, the thought of prices to be paid brought his attention to the shaking, frightened beauty, soon to be no more than chow for a monster. She was about to pay a high price indeed to assuage his lust for blood.

He patted her soft cheek, "Thanks for the fuck, love. Enjoy the other side." He rolled to his feet and grabbed the knife from the nightstand. Ignoring her muted, frantic shrieks, he slashed the bonds that secured her to the frame of the bed and pulled her onto the floor. He felt excitement rise again, despite the thorough completion of sex.

He wrapped a leather belt with a metal loop around her wrists and then dragged her writhing body into the circle, lifting her over the chalk line so as not to smudge it. It wouldn't do to leave an opening for Asterian to escape. He still wasn't sure the demon wouldn't eat him if given the chance, although he felt sure he wouldn't.

He snapped the leather cuffs into the hook he'd added to the floor. The thrill of the moment was not lost on him. He leaned over the young girl and gave her a cold leer, smoothing aside a hunk of hair that fell across her face, happy with the terror and desperation apparent in her gaze. He held the knife over her body and watched as terror flared and reigned supreme. Finally, resignation bloomed and took over when she realized there was no help for her. Her life was forfeit and she knew it. Simply beautiful, he thought.

She struggled, twisting as much as she was able in her bondage. It didn't stop him. He slashed her torso, licking at the blood that splashed across his lips. Sweet. He stepped carefully back out of the circle.

Time to call his powerful pawn to the scene before the body grew cold. The demon preferred the flesh and blood still warm. He lit the candles on the four sides of the sphere, murmuring the memorized chant. Urais heard his growl before he saw him through the fog.

* * * *

Urais was unaware that his fear stank up the area when he was in the demon's presence. In his naive arrogance, Urais deluded himself into thinking the demon under his control, which highly amused the almost eight-foot tall being. Asterian came when Urais called because the weak Druid had something he wanted.

To further milk the situation, Asterian demanded a sacrifice each time he was called to earth. It wasn't necessary, but he liked making things as difficult as possible on the Druid who liked to think he was in charge. In return, he imparted tidbits of knowledge, half-truths, plus a few drops of blood here and there to give the scholar a taste of the highly addictive rush of power, inflating his already delusional and irrational ego.

It all served his demonic purpose. Soon the pathetic, near-Human would lose sight of the danger he was in, puffing himself up in importance and that's when the demon would strike. He simply bided his time until the non-magical Druid dropped his guard and then the Order's book of Secrets would be his. Once Asterian had the book, he would make a tasty, little meal of Urais and then he would go after the enemy of all demons—the Druid Order. Blissfully unaware of the creature's contrasting plans, Urais saw nothing beyond his own devious devices and small-world thinking.

* * * *

Twenty-six bone-crunching, flesh-ripping, a new spell, and three-drops-of-demon-blood minutes later, Urais rocked on the front porch, listening to crickets. He watched the sun set, staring out over a field of golden wheat while drinking a Guinness. Life was good. Aye, he still had to dump the body somewhere, but he'd handle that early in the morning. There was an abandoned horse farm ten miles away. Hopefully, no one would find her for a while.

He was confident in his actions and plans. He was sure he flew under the radar of the local police as well as the Guardians. How could they find

him here, after all? If they put a tracking spell on the book, they would have been here already. He certainly had not planned to come here so he left no traces in the Manor that this intriguing Kentucky city was his destination. Nay, they weren't bearing down his neck. No way.

The Truth was tucked away under a wooden floorboard in the living room, beneath the sofa. No one would find it. His prize possession was hidden and safe, his demon had just been fed and he had more magical blood.

He leaned back and kicked his bare feet up on the porch rail. His lips lifted into a wicked smile and he toasted the Kentucky sky. Time to savor and enjoy the fall to the dark side, he thought. Tomorrow he'd go to the city again. The thought sent lust surging through his body in anticipation of smooth flesh, tight pussy, fresh blood and more power. What more could a man want? He laughed low in his throat and took another long slug of the stout.

* * * *

A huge, black, bird of prey watched from the towering oak. Camma wiped her beak with a feathered wing, trying to remove Urais's stench from her senses. Despite the fact that the sun was near to rising and he'd snored in his bedroom for six hours now, the aroma of sulfur coated his lair and scratched her throat. The odor left her feeling contaminated and unclean, as did the guilt she felt for contributing to the situation.

How did she not see his duplicitous and evil nature? Goddess, but she should have known better. Still, the answer to her question was easy. He was family. Any good Irish lass was trained from birth to put the clan first, love unconditionally—faults and all. It was their way. She had always felt sorry for him, for his lack of abilities. It must have been hard living in such an extraordinary family. His sisters were the same, making excuses for him when the darkness, that in hindsight was now obvious, made an appearance.

Well, she wouldn't make that mistake again. Trust no one was a good rule to live by. Be on guard at all times wasn't a bad one either. Although she must admit, despite her anger, her brothers were trustworthy. They wanted to keep her in a protected cage, but they wouldn't hesitate to give their life for hers.

She was ashamed of what her immaturity cost the Order, not to mention, humanity. By the time she caught up to him and The Truth, Urais had killed three women already that she knew of, using a stinking demon no less. He was totally insane. How could the whole clan have missed such a defect in character?

She was lucky she found him at all. They ended up in different locations as they came across the lines, but she knew he was still in the City. She could feel the low-level energy of The Truth, barely pulsing. When she'd landed outside of the house of the beautiful psychic, she understood the purpose of why she was there.

There was a reason she sensed the book and why she landed on that tree and connected with the woman inside. In the past, the book employed strange methods to find its Keeper. After praying for help from the Goddess to find The Truth and after thinking how desperately the book needed a Keeper, she was lead to the teacher's quaint cottage.

Camma didn't believe in random occurrences. She believed in fate and destiny and the power of the book to find its protector. She knew with every Druidic instinct and feminine intuition within her that this Kentucky woman was the one—the next Keeper of The Truth. The red-haired lady was the answer to her prayers. Now she just had to get her the book.

The next time her sick, fucking cousin left the house, The Truth was hers—if she had to tear the farmhouse apart with her beak and claws. Good thing she was a big, damn bird because she'd have to carry the book in her beak, since she couldn't shift back to her body. Luckily, most people didn't keep an eye to the sky or they would see a bird flying through the air toting a book since she had no magic to shield herself. She was still too wounded, critically so, unable to even perform the simplest magic.

Meanwhile, she had to get the book from Urais, before he did any more damage with it, before the demon took it from him, and get it to its rightful owner—the Keeper.

Chapter Six

The dream, both surreal and disturbing, had me tossing and turning. The mysterious Raven was back. Its size along with its black, iridescent feathers were beautiful and frightening at the same time. The wingspan, nearly eight feet across, cast a long, eerie shadow in the sky. The wings whooshed with sound as they furled and unfurled, rhythmically and gracefully.

To further confound the image of the monstrous bird, a large, brown book, the size of a pulpit bible, was inexplicably grasped in its beak. I'm not joking. Hysterical laughter threatened to erupt. I knew birds used paper or plastic and whatever they could find to build nests, but this was definitely odd.

It landed, diving in with clawed feet extended to the branch outside my window, shaking the large oak tree. What should have been an absurd occurrence seemed perfectly natural in the bizarre dream world. Do you usually know when you are dreaming? Wait, I was dreaming, right?

I watched the bird of prey for long moments, mesmerized again by the intelligence in its gaze. What was its purpose? Why did it keep coming to my window? It lifted its head, gesturing with the book, pointing it out to me. As if I couldn't see the oversized tome clenched gently, almost reverently, in its sharp beak. Did it want to give me the book?

This is for you.

Whoa. Good thing I'm dreaming or I might think the bird was talking to me again. The dream, and the bird for that matter, projected an urgent quality. I felt like I should be doing something, understanding something that was beyond my grasp. Suddenly, with one powerful lunge from the swaying tree, the bird lifted from its perch and flew out of sight. I wondered where it was going. Would others think it strange to see a large bird carrying a book?

An ear-piercing shriek thrust me headlong into consciousness and out of the freakish dream. I sat up and blinked five times, trying to focus. I remembered the Raven's cry and couldn't decide if the sound was real or from the dream. I checked the window, relieved when I didn't see the black avian there.

I pushed back the sheets, groaning when I stepped out of bed. I was groggy and totally exhausted, and the urge to crawl back under the covers was monumentally hard to refuse. The restless nights were taking a toll on me. I stood in the shower, only half-awake. Bracing my hands against the mocha-colored tile, I let the water wash over me and felt only marginally better afterward.

I scraped my wet hair into a ponytail. It's layered so corkscrew tendrils escaped immediately. My hair is thick, long and curly and while people say it's gorgeous, I say it's the bane of my existence. You might suggest that I cut it if I don't like it, right? But then it would just be short and curly and huge, at least when its long, the weight of it pulls it down and it doesn't pouf out as much. Anyway, when I get it trimmed once every month and half, my stylist straightens it for me. It takes him an hour of blow-drying and straightening, so I leave it that way for a couple of days and enjoy the feeling of being a polished, straight-haired chick.

I pulled on Gap jeans and a black, long-sleeved, scoop-necked shirt. Lip gloss and hoop earrings were the only makeup and accessories I could wrap my mind around this morning. I was lucky to even get that far, considering the way I was dragging ass this morning. I strapped on my black, leather, braided sandals and made my way to the kitchen.

I skimmed through the motions of breakfast. Juice and spray-buttered toast were the most I was able to muster up. The desire to cancel classes was nearly unbearable, but fortunately today was Friday. I told myself I could manage to get through classes since it was so close to the weekend.

Despite the research I planned on tackling tomorrow, catching up on sleep now took priority. I almost moaned in delight at the thought of sleeping Saturday away. It was enough incentive to give me the motivation I needed to get my butt in gear.

I brushed toast crumbs from my hands and grabbed my backpack. A quick glance out the kitchen window assured me rain was not imminent. I would walk to class today in an effort to clear my thoughts of the strange twist my life had taken. Tired of the chilly weather, I chose to wear sandals to lighten my mood. Crazy, I know, but if you walk around campus long enough, you see that no one dresses weather-appropriate. Students wear shorts all year long for some crazy reason. The worst I do are sandals on cold days. Plus, I love to look down at my Cabaret Red polish. It lightens my mood.

I opened the door and promptly stubbed my pretty, polished toe on something hard. Gasping a curse, I bounced on one foot, holding my big toe. *The book!* I took a quick panicked look in the air, but saw no dark shadows hovering above, ready to strike.

What the hell? My dream was real? Why did the world make absolutely no sense anymore? But there was no doubt about it. This was the book the Raven held in its beak. Even the sentence sounds insane.

A check of my watch showed me that I would be late if I didn't get a move on. I grabbed the heavy book, with two hands, and shoved it into my large bag—stretching the seams when I tried to zip it shut. There was no way I was leaving the prize here.

I wanted to sit and go through it so bad I could taste it. I would work it into my day somehow. The need to guard it was almost a compulsion. I *knew* I had to keep it with me. For some reason and by some strange twist of fate, the bird chose me to have it. Right? I certainly didn't want to piss off the otherworldly creature.

I locked the door and headed to the bus stop. Walking with the giant volume was out of the question, not to mention I didn't want to run across the Raven again—despite its gift. My foot tapped impatiently as I waited under the shelter. The need to pull out the book made my fingers itch. I could hardly wait to have an opportunity to look it, but I instinctively knew it had to be in private. It was better to keep the book a secret, for now.

Three and a half hours later, I entered and locked my office door, eager to peruse my new find. Class was almost impossible with the puzzling tome tempting me from within my backpack, but I managed to get through it. Luckily, all I had to do was give the class their instructions and then they went to work, measuring tree diameters and cataloguing tree features.

That was good since the only thing I could think about was sitting quietly with my book. When it became *my* book I'm not sure, but I did know that it was meant for me and nothing was going to take it from me without a fight. Okay, that was a weird thought, but it felt right. I felt strangely tied to it like I had to protect it.

I ran my fingers across the unique spine and cover, wondering over what appeared to be animal hide or skin of some kind. Human skin? I lifted it to my nose and smelled its musty, unusual aroma, wrinkling my nose in disgust—human skin, really? Where did that thought come from? Still, I

couldn't deny it looked an awful lot like it. Disgust speared me at the thought of someone dying to cover a book, but at the same time, I was in awe of the treasure before me.

It looked ancient—like it should be in a museum or collection of some kind. How did the bird get it? Why give it to me? Was it stolen? I hoped the police wouldn't be knocking at my door looking for it. My story of a bird giving it to me would be suspicious to say the least. I'm fairly sure no one would believe that tale.

The strange thing was that I felt a connection to it. Electricity, of a sort, almost static, shimmered between my fingers and the book. I felt strange, more alive in its presence. Energy raced through me. My soul linked with it—as if a million miniscule threads stretched and connected together. My body felt pulled to it, a part of it. Sounds crazy, I know, but I can't explain it any other way. Maybe I'm going crazy?

Curious, I lifted it, cradling it in my arms, ignoring the sharp edges biting into my skin. A book this old must have energy that I could *see*. Suddenly conscious thought flew out the window as the visions struck. Flashes and sound raced through my mind—a knife, a scream, an uttered spell, blood spreading across a stone floor, the killer's face.

I dropped it with a loud thunk on my desk. Shaken, I desperately pushed away, rolling in the squeaky computer chair until the wall stopped me. My mouth became dry and my heart raced. The connection of the book and the city's recent murders floored me—the bird, the book, the killer, the creature, my life-altering premonition? What next?

The feeling that my life had spun out of control made me nervous and I'll admit...scared. While my life was already bizarre, to say the least, this was totally out of my realm and way too outlandish even for me. I rubbed my forehead and sighed, glancing at the book again from the corner of my eye. Unable to stop myself, I rolled slowly toward it again.

My hand shook as I opened it cautiously. Before I could guard against it, another image struck—a man. The sexiest man I had ever seen. The kind you don't just meet on the street or at work. His hair was dark and long and his eyes were golden, almost animalistic in nature. They looked cold and ruthless and utterly spellbinding. His jaw was square and strong and his skin tanned—the perpetual kind of tan that comes naturally to some. Remarkably, a black Celtic tattoo crossed his temple and cheekbone on one side of his face and gave him a dangerous, roguish appearance.

I only flashed his face, but I had the impression of height, toned muscles and strength. He looked wicked, sinful and lethal. The very sight of him both turned me on and terrified me at the same time.

I'm talking drop-dead, terrifyingly, beautiful, angelic sensuality and attractiveness. He was the kind of man that pulled people to him. Men wanted to be him and women wanted to fuck him, but everyone was a little bit afraid of him. Incredibly, my gut clenched and I squeezed my legs together at the sight of him. Oh sweet heaven. Never had I experienced such a reaction to anyone in my life and certainly not from a vision.

Somewhat bewildered and off-balance by his effect on me, I lifted my hands from the book again. The dark man's image disappeared from my mind. I breathed a sigh of relief and a soft laugh escaped me. Who knew you could almost orgasm just from seeing a face, albeit even the sexiest, most incredibly male face ever? I squeezed my legs tight again and shook my head in disbelief. I really didn't need to meet this dangerous man in person. Why, I would probably shed my clothes and drop to the ground with my legs spread without him uttering a word.

With the hard, sensual face no longer distracting me, I actually looked at the page I had opened. Intricate designs outlined the edges of the yellowed paper. Detailed drawings were inked in the center top of the page and ancient text filled the body. Line after line of flowing, indecipherable script followed and disappointment filled me that I couldn't decipher the words. But as I looked, the most incredible thing happened, a golden glow appeared over the passages and suddenly I could read every word, as if they were written in English. The only language besides my own that I knew was Spanish and this was not Spanish, so how could I suddenly comprehend what was written?

Not only that, but what was written was amazing. Apparently, it was a spell to conjure shape shifting. Seriously? Could this be for real? Somehow, I suspected it could be. It certainly looked authentic enough. I glanced over it quickly. No ingredients were needed to perform the hex. Simply intoning the chant brought about the conversion. Dare I try it?

The reversal of the spell was outlined directly below the spell itself. I bit my lip in indecision. Well, if the magic wasn't for real, then it wouldn't matter, and if it was, then I could simply reverse it—in theory. I glanced at the large clock on the wall. There was still plenty of time before my next class. I paused again, what if something went wrong? An even more interesting question is what would I turn into? I read over the words again, slower and more carefully. There was literally a blank spot where the spell filled in what to shift into. No kidding.

I rubbed my face with both hands. Was I really considering this? It didn't take long for me to realize that, yes I absolutely wanted to give it a try. I had to know if this was real—if the book was meant for me. If I couldn't twist the spells, then there was no way the book was meant to be mine.

Okay, so what would I choose? It had to be something small and ordinary. If for some reason, I lost my mind in the process and turned into something large like a tiger or leopard—well, that might be bad for everyone in the department. Or if my professor came by and unlocked my door for some paperwork, it wouldn't do to have a wolf sitting in my chair. No, I better pick something subtle and discreet like a mouse. Not very exciting, I know, but at least it wouldn't be farfetched if someone spotted me. Hopefully, I could shift and then re-shift and be done in a matter of minutes.

I checked again to make sure the door was locked, even rolled my squeaky chair under the knob. I mentally read the words one more time to make sure I had them down and then began to read them aloud. Incredibly, I spoke in flawless ancient Celtic combined with a secret language that only Druids understood. I knew these were the languages written before me now, the languages that I read as if I had spoken them my entire life. The knowledge was just there—in my mind, vivid and comprehensible. For now, however, I chose to ignore my baffling ability to read a language I didn't know, so I could concentrate on the trickier task of converting my body into that of a rodent.

I began to feel a tingling vibrating through my body and paused my reading to explore what was happening, but I suddenly had the vision of half-Kate and half-mouse so I quickly picked up where I left off. I finished the last line in a rush, a little freaked out by the sparks shooting off my fingers and arms. I looked like a fourth of July sparkler. Freaky.

I felt a weird sensation in my feet and looked down to see my empty sandals. I screamed in fright, but it came out as pitiful, little squeak. I kid

you not. Suddenly, the sensation covered my entire body and the next thing I knew, I was covered up by my jeans and shirt. I looked down to see little, tiny pink digits where my hands used to be and wriggled my pink nose, intrigued by the long, white whiskers filling my vision.

My tiny claws clicked on the floor and I scrambled to get free of my clothes. Once I did, I stood still, shocked by the view of a world that I had taken for granted for so long. It was a whole different story from this outlook. My miniscule office was suddenly oversized. The scents and sounds of the building were overwhelming. The urge to explore nearly overcame my good sense. It was tempting to let go and become the mouse, but that wasn't the point of this test. I needed to be Kate again. Not to mention I had another class to teach. I laughed and it sounded like a series of little high-pitched squeaks. Weird.

After what felt like fifteen minutes, I managed to work my way up on the desk and onto the book. The words were large and awkward and I had to blink my rodent eyes a few times to try to make sense of them. I wandered over the text line by line, saying, or rather squeaking the words of the reversal. I worried that it might not work since I squeaked rather than spoke, but apparently, it works either way because sparks began shooting off my fur.

A second later, I was crouched naked on top of my desk. I panted hard and fast. That was fucking incredible! Elation filled me. I couldn't believe what had just occurred. I was a mouse one minute and the next I wasn't.

The sound of students passing my door spurred me into action and I hurriedly dressed. A knock at my door reminded me that this was normally my office hours for the students so I brushed the small white fur from the book and thrust it back into my bag, slinging it with two hands in the corner behind my desk. I rolled my chair back to my desk and opened the door, hoping I looked normal and all of my parts were back as they should be.

Casey, a forest measurements student, entered and we went over her homework for the next twenty minutes. It was all I could do to focus. I tried not to fidget too much while I pointed out her mistakes. I must have retained the rodent's extraordinary sense of smell because the smell of rodent and her patchouli oil gave me a headache.

Five hours later, I tiredly unlocked my front door, pleased as punch to be home. I couldn't wait to sit down with a glass of wine and read my new book. The phone rang before I could even put my bag down. I noted Dad's number on caller ID and my gut clenched in warning—knowing something else had happened—another murder.

"Kate, I hate to ask, but can you do it again?"

I heard the resignation in his voice. He'd struggled with calling me to do this. It must be bad for him to willingly include me. "Of course, I'll be ready when you get here."

I hid the book in the roll-top desk in the study and locked it, placing the key on top of my refrigerator in the kitchen. I wasn't ready to show it to Dad yet. The feeling that it would be dangerous for him to see it filled me. No one could know yet—more bad things would happen if it came to light too soon. I grabbed a bottle of water and waited on the front porch for him.

We sat on the stoop for five minutes after he arrived and looked at the graphic composites the police artist, Doris, rendered. I picked the closest one and then instructed Dad on the changes to make. Thin the lips here, lengthen the hair, make the nose thinner and pull the eyes closer together, square the jaw a bit. Once I felt like the description was accurate, we hit the road.

Forty minutes later, we arrived at an abandoned horse farm for sale, on the south side of Lexington. The property was owned by a Middle Eastern sheik that only came to town once a year, usually during Derby season. The horses and farm hands had long since moved to the larger farm he purchased several miles away.

We traveled the winding tree-lined drive to the main house. Towering willows swayed to and fro as we passed. The picturesque rolling, green hills and black fences presented a tranquil front, but I had to wonder what horror I would find at the end of the road.

The woman's body was found in the empty stables by the property's realtor. It was surmised that she was murdered elsewhere since there was a lack of blood for the wounds she'd received. The thought of pools of blood and splattered walls somewhere in the city made me shudder.

Dad pulled the jeep around the circular drive in front of the sprawling, white Colonial mansion with black shutters. Large columns decorated the long veranda. The stables were accessed by the wide, brick walk that led around the side of the house. I pictured the tall, glossy horses that must have walked this route in its day, their shod hooves clomping on the hard surface. It was a beautiful home, despite the patches of peeling paint.

We followed the brick path to the back of the house. Hank stepped out of the stables to greet us. I hugged the tall man as he murmured his apology for encouraging Dad to call me to the scene. My spirit always felt a bit lighter in Hank's presence. While Dad had a very intense personality, his partner was more carefree despite his veteran position on the force.

"We shouldn't bring you into this mess, Kate, but I'm worried about what will happen if we don't get some answers quickly," he said as he patted me on the shoulder.

"I told Dad I wanted to help on this one, Hank, and I mean it. I can handle it. You two have to stop worrying about me so much. So point the way and let's get this done."

We headed toward the large barn doors, draped with police tape. Gravel crunched under our feet. "So you think she was murdered at another location?" I said in an effort to get their minds off their guilt for including me. "I'm not sure how much I'll see since she wasn't killed here. I usually have the visions where the violence was enacted. That's where the energy is left behind. There wouldn't be any here. Well," I continued, "unless her spirit is here."

We stepped into the darkness of the barn, pausing for a second to let our eyes adjust. I caught the faint whiff of the same stench from the warehouse, but it wasn't nearly as overpowering here. The beam of Dad's flashlight caught the reflection of the small paint spot that denoted the body's location. I took a deep breath and moved to the telltale mark. It immediately became ice cold and my breath came out in a fog.

"Damn, this always freaks me out," Hank muttered under his breath.

I noticed my Dad take a step closer to me and stop. I knew he wanted to protect me. I tuned them out and focused on the energy gathering in the stale barn. It coalesced slowly, faintly. She seemed to be having trouble forming. Some spirits have more trouble than others in the beginning.

After several minutes, she finally became a recognizable being. I was able to make out her short, spunky haircut, complete with what looked to be streaks. I couldn't make out actual colors, but I could see the contrast in the tones. She wore Goth style clothing--black lace-up boots, a short, plaid miniskirt, a white shirt and short leather jacket. Her jewelry included a velvet choker and a hoop in her nose. I ached for the life she wouldn't get to live.

Except for Mr. Poe at the Forestry Department, it wasn't often they talked to me. Most aren't even aware of me, locked as they are in their endless death throes. So I jumped in the air, startled when she spoke. I felt my Dad's hand on my shoulder, but I kept my gaze on the girl.

"You have to stop him. He won't stop killing." She reached a hand out to me.

"Who is he?" I asked, my heart racing at the exchange. I was eager to have a name from her.

"You have to stop him," she repeated.

It was clear she could see me and was aware that I saw her, but she didn't seem to hear my question or have the ability to communicate more than she was already.

"I died that way," she said, pointing a long, slim finger in the easterly direction. "Help me," she said as her ghostly body flicked once before fading away completely.

I slumped in the aftermath. Dad wrapped his arms around me, pulling me out of the stable and into the bright, fresh Bluegrass sunlight, easing me down in the grass. The singing birds and gentle wind brought me back to reality. Hank hovered over us, concern evident in his gaze.

"Are you okay, Kate?" Dad asked as he brushed my hair away from my face.

"Yes, fine. It zapped me to try to keep her energy going, but I'm fine." I sat up on my own and after a few seconds, stood. They would never let me help again if I passed out every time.

"Are you sure you should get up yet, girl?" Hank was such a mother hen.

"Seriously, you two, I'm cool. It's only a temporary thing. Let's walk back to the car and I'll tell you what I saw." I didn't mind putting a little distance between myself and the girl's dumpsite.

"Well, I saw her. I didn't see her death played out, as I'd suspected since she wasn't killed here. She had trouble keeping form, but she was able to talk to me. She said she was killed that way," I pointed to the east. "She also said that I had to stop him because he wasn't going to stop killing."

Chapter Seven

Sin crossed the Ley lines easily and arrived in Kentucky. With a few spoken words in the ancient language, he felt the pull on his psyche leading him to The Truth and to his sister. They were first on his list. He would handle Urais after he secured the *Uéron* and Camma.

He sensed his initial targets were in the same location and not far away. She took her duty of guarding Druid secrets seriously, despite her nearly fatal wounds. He was proud of her tenacity. Urais fucked with the wrong Irish lass.

Ten minutes later, he came upon a quaint, stone cottage at the end of the lane, nestled in the woods. He felt his sister close by and walked around the back of the residence to see her perched in a large tree. Relief speared him. She gave a happy chirp and leapt from the thick tree to settle at his feet.

Secure from prying eyes in cozy backyard, he knelt next to her and placed his hands on her. Closing his eyes, he whispered a Celtic chant. His hands warmed as he sutured her damaged organs and revitalized her life force. He felt the change in her body structure under his hands and opened his eyes to look upon his sister's familiar face.

"Thank God, Sin," Camma spoke, hugging her brother. "I'm so sorry," she said, immediately apologizing for the predicament they were in. She couldn't get over the guilt for her part in their situation.

He placed his finger against her lips. "You are not to blame for the choices Urais made. He betrayed his family and the Order, you didn't." He hugged her again. "But you are going back to Ireland. I can settle matters here."

"Sin, I have to fix this. It's my fault," Camma protested, shaking her head.

"No, Camma. Don't argue with me about it. If you can't travel the lines, then I'll put you on a plane to Dublin and Galen can pick you up."

She ducked her head, unsettled and angry that she couldn't see her mission through, but she knew Sin wouldn't change his mind. "No, I can make it over the lines. I feel fine now. Thanks, by the way. I couldn't get better on my own," she added begrudgingly. She was grateful to finally be herself again. It had become incredibly tedious existing as a bird all the time.

"Look, Camma. I understand how you feel, but you're still young. Give yourself time to become a Guardian. You'll be involved in missions up to your neck soon enough. For now, you've been hurt. Go home and recoup." He lifted her chin. "Besides, I couldn't live with myself if anything else happened to you."

"Aye, Sin," Camma agreed though it was evident she wasn't happy about his decree.

He helped her stand, fashioning clothes for her with a few spelled words. They started the walk back to the lines, along the campus bike path he'd arrived. The lines ran through the middle of campus. He'd landed outside an old, stained-glass church and he intended to see her off from the same location. When you know where you are going, you don't have to use the lines. You can simply think of your location and teleport there, but with her injuries, she needed the power of a pure line to get her home.

"Where is *Uéron*?" He would secure the book as soon as his sister was safe.

"Sin, you'll never believe what's happened," she exclaimed eagerly. "I can't believe I didn't tell you right away." She paused for effect, "I've found the next Keeper. It's her, I swear. She's connected with the book already."

"What?" he asked and stopped, turning her toward him in surprise, doubt evident in his voice. "Camma, are you sure? The Keeper has always been Druid. I'm not sure it would be an outsider."

"You doubt me, but I'm right about this, Sin. Mark my words. I spend more time with the book than you. I know I'm right and you'll agree once you see her with it. By the way, it's in her house. It will be safe with her, until you all can make it back to Ireland. She lives in the cottage where you found me." She laughed and shook her long, red hair off her shoulder as they continued their walk. "You'll eat your words. Plus," she added mischievously, "I think she's Irish. She may have Druid blood in her." She was a little too thrilled with the thought for his liking.

After seeing his sister disappear from sight through the line, he breathed a sigh of relief that she was safe from harm. Now, he could take care of Urais in the way he wanted without her soft, judgmental eye on him. He knew she wouldn't want her cousin taken out in the manner he intended to do it, regardless that he'd tried to kill her. Sin couldn't wait to get his hands on him. He felt no mercy for the bastard, family or no. Urais made the choice to disregard familial ties. With that in mind, they certainly wouldn't hinder Sin.

He turned to head back to the path that would return him to the cottage near the woods to retrieve The Truth. The city of Lexington and the surrounding area reminded him of Ireland. The green, rolling hills and the power shimmering from the Ley lines crossing the landscape felt familiar, powerful even. In fact, the force of the power, not to mention the urge to shift simmering in him, suddenly became stronger than ever. He sensed he was moving toward something incredibly strong, something other than The Truth—something he'd never felt before.

The urge to follow that power made his fists clench. His cock became rock hard, his heart pounded to a fast beat, and it was all he could do not to shift in front of the bicycling students racing to their next class. There was no way he could shield the sight of a large, black panther from them all.

He fell into a light run, ignoring the female students that stopped to watch the agile, drop-dead, sexy man lope along the path, his golden muscles contracting and releasing rhythmically. The force of the feeling coming over him was impossible to ignore. He could do nothing else but follow the psychic trail with every fiber of his being and hope to God that there would be something at the end of the line to ease the sensation coursing through his body.

Suddenly, the psychic pull, that had his gut clenched and his dick rock-hard, changed course from a direction that led back to the cottage to somewhere else. He stopped mid-step and followed the new route. The mulch path led him through maze of trees on the edge of campus and then he saw her. Everything in him leapt for her. It was as if colors swirled and his world shifted and suddenly became right, suddenly clicked into place and became aligned in a way that he hadn't realized was lacking.

His animal wanted to jump her, take her to the ground and fuck her for hours. He wanted to hear her scream his name over and over. He ached to pump and bite and lick and suck and pump some more. He wanted to clench her hair and hold her still while he pounded into her. More than that, his soul wanted to collide with hers and become one. He simply had to have her. She was his, totally, irrevocably.

She must have felt his attention because she looked up at that moment. Surprise, alarm and fascinated appreciation crossed her face in waves. She was a beautiful woman. Long, thick auburn hair was pulled into a ponytail, perfect for subduing her. He could see her deep, blue eyes, almost indigo in hue, from where he stood stock-still at attention, every fiber focused in on the sight of her. Light freckles crossed her nose and he wondered if they were anywhere else on her body. It was a question he would soon have an answer to. Her body was lean and curvy in the right places and just right for him to do as he pleased. He was taller than she, but they would fit perfectly. Her body was his and he would soon know every single inch of it, thoroughly and completely.

Fear got the better of her, despite her attraction to him. An attraction he sensed even despite the distance between them. She picked up her pace in an obvious effort to elude him. Possibly his focused attention frightened her, but that was too bad.

Rage burned in him at her evasion. She was his and she wasn't going to escape. He inhaled a deep breath and the animal imprinted her scent, deep into his lungs. There wasn't a place on earth now that she could hide from him.

He settled in a light jog after her. Walking quickly, she looked back over her shoulder. Upon seeing him chasing her, she gave a small shriek and began to run. She lumbered somewhat slowly with what he suspected was The Truth in her bag, banging against her back. She would do better to drop it, but she held tight to her possession. She neared the edge of the path and his rage flared even higher. He didn't want her to reach the safety of others.

"You! Stop," he shouted in a growl. He let his animal take over and crossed the impossible distance between them in one long leap, catching and taking her to the ground. He rolled her with him out of sight of the path behind the full, canopied pine trees, holding a hand over her mouth.

Her eyes were wide as he looked down into her gorgeous, expressive face. His body ached for her with everything in him. She was his. His soul shouted *mine* and it all became clear—his mate. It was her. The Keeper that Camma warned him about was also his mate. There was no question about who she was. He sensed The Truth under her, in her bag.

He laughed in triumph. She was perfect for both positions, mate and Keeper. Hell, he could think of a million positions she was perfect for, and he intended to experience every one of them with her. He leaned down and licked his tongue along the seam of her lips and she gasped, parting them. He felt his fangs drop.

He pressed his hips against her, grinding his cock between her legs, on the verge of losing control. Despite her token struggling, he noticed her eyes turn a smoky blue with desire. In fact, he noticed everything about her. The panther smelled the arousal wafting from her and it made him crazy. Control skated along a fine line. He wanted to fuck her here among the trees, uncaring of where they were, barely hidden from students coming and going. The urge to have her, to claim her, ate at him, burned him.

She moaned and he took the opportunity to kiss her. His tongue swept into her mouth and he lifted his hands to hold her head still. She was sweet, like strawberries, and he growled into her mouth. She tasted so good. Her small tongue tentatively touched his, causing him to growl again and nearly go berserk. He held her still with his muscled body, subduing her slight frame. He caged her, flattening his palms in the grass on either side of her head. When she moaned again, his claws shot into the earth, digging in.

He slanted his mouth over hers, going deeper. He wanted to eat her alive. She pressed her hips up against his and then wrapped her feet around his waist, locking her ankles. Her tongue brushed against his fangs and she pulled back in surprise, looking at him in awe.

"Who *are* you?" she breathed in a husky, soft southern drawl. Bewilderment and desire and a measure of fright crossed her fair features.

"I'm someone you will know the rest of your life, in every possible way," he promised in a low brogue. He licked his fangs and teeth, tasting her essence. "You are *mine*. What you hide in your bag belongs to me," he warned.

"I don't know you. I'm not yours," she protested in a gasp.

"You will know me," he stated in a gravelly voice. "For now, you may call me Sin."

"Holy shit," she cursed, belatedly struggling again. A group of laughing males walked by only feet away and she screamed before he could muffle the sound.

"Fuck," he ground out. He wanted to beat them all within an inch of their lives for simply being there, but he was supposed to be the good guy. He couldn't very well take out a bunch of college kids. He growled loudly and some of them fled, but one of them decided to play hero and burst through the trees. He shielded his presence from their memory and released his mate. His conscience wouldn't let him hurt the young men as badly as he wanted to thrash them all. No matter, he promised himself, he knew where she lived.

She scrambled up, grabbing her bag, and was gone before the student could stop her.

He heard the boys trying to get her to stop running, but she kept going. She was fast and tough and would be the perfect mate for him. He growled loud and deep again and the group scattered. Good for them since he was on the verge of mauling them all with his claws.

He returned to her cottage and broke in unapologetically. He spent the next hour going through her belongings, looking at pictures, going through her desk, reading over her research. Smart girl, he realized proudly. A home reflected a lot about a person and hers reflected an elegant but cozy sense of style. Her possessions were classy and relaxed at the same time, even further increasing his desire for her.

She kept food in her refrigerator, homecooked no less. He smiled happily. He couldn't wait to get to know her. Somehow, he had to get over the hump of scaring her, and he wasn't so sure he would be able to do that soon. The need was riding him hard. His emotions ran high.

He had a feeling that, for now, she would run from him and unfortunately, that would enrage him and he would chase her. He understood that reaction and was even okay with it since she couldn't run far enough to get away from him. But the good thing was...she wanted him. A sexy smile crossed his lips. He felt her reaction and smelled her desire—it wouldn't take long to get her to come around. She was close to surrender in the woods until she licked his fangs.

It didn't escape his notice, that he was headlong into the mating curse. While it had been a passing thought in Ireland, there was no question of it now. He knew as soon as he laid eyes on her that she was his.

Urais and his mission still hovered there in his thoughts. It was an objective that would be carried out and fulfilled, but his primary concern initially was securing his mate. Without her, there was nothing. Without her, he wouldn't even have the mind control to finish Urais.

He'd wrap up the situation with his cousin quickly so he could focus all his attention to fucking his mate, hard and long and often. Then he'd get her back to the castle and situated in his home...to stay. He found his way upstairs and settled in the comfortable wingback chair across from her bed to wait on her return.

Chapter Eight

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. The litany rang in my mind over and over. What just happened was more than my mind was capable of processing at the moment. My emotions ran the gamut—arousal, lust, fear, bewilderment, confusion, awe, and arousal. Wait, did I say arousal twice?

So I ran as fast as I was able with the backpack, magic book and all, bouncing painfully against my back, though it was probably more accurate to say that I lumbered along like the hunchback, Quasimodo. The book was heavy, like a stack of bricks, but I wasn't about to drop it when every protective instinct inside me cried out at the thought. Leaving the book behind felt akin to cutting off my hand and dropping it somewhere along the path.

Fortunately, he wasn't chasing me. Sin, was that what he said to call him? He couldn't have a more appropriate name. Common sense told me to stay away from a guy with such a name, but I'm not sure my good sense was in charge of things right now.

What was he anyway? A vampire, a demon—at this point, anything is possible. If there are creatures, like what I saw in the vision, then I wouldn't be surprised to know vampires, werewolves and fairies existed, too. So what was Sin? He spoke with an accent, an Irish one at that, in a low, husky voice that sent shivers down my spine. I was a sucker for a man with an accent, most women are.

I was still undecided as to what side he was on, however—good or bad. He didn't smell evil, like the energy left behind at the warehouse and the faint trace found at the stables, but the way he tackled me...oh my God! Well, I'm not sure what that was about, but it was scary and thrilling at the same time.

My body and soul recognized him and wanted to jump eagerly into his arms, but my logical mind warned that he was a stranger, despite having seen his face when I touched the book. *The book* that was linked in some way to three murders, a killer and a demon, I reminded myself grimly. So who knew which way the wind blew with this guy? How did he know I had the book? What made him think it was his? The bird gave it to me after all. Did it take the book from Sin?

My instincts were usually spot-on and they told me he wasn't bad. His lips and kiss and oh-so-hard cock that had pressed between my legs so carnally, not to mention my response to him, told me the same. The feel of him was electric, earth-shattering, mouthwatering, world-ending, orgasmic—and well, you get the idea. There aren't proper adjectives to describe this man or the way he made me feel. I could go on all day about it. Suffice to say, I have never come across a man like this in all my existence and most likely never will again.

He's the kind of man that women dream of in their most erotic fantasies, but never meet in real life. He was dangerous and strong and so sexy that just thinking about him made my mouth water and my toes curl. His muscles and hard body were so dominant on top of mine that he sparked every primal urge within me. If I wasn't so scared of him myself, he would be the kind of man that I could go into the pits of hell with and not be afraid about coming out safely.

With his body covering mine, I totally lost sight of everything. I had been ready to have sex with him three feet away from the high-traffic bike path to campus from student housing. I desperately wanted his hard cock inside me. Cringing, I remembered the way I pressed against him and locked my legs around his hips to get as close against him as possible.

The only thing that pulled me out of the sexual fog I had fallen headfirst into was my tongue roving across sharp canines. I still might have kept going if I hadn't heard the students at that moment and been freaked out by what I was willing to do in public. His kisses and his hard body against me were like a drug—highly addictive and mind-altering. That's my excuse anyway.

I can't say enough how unlike me that was. I'm a very private person. I've had to be with the peculiarities of my life. I've got a few friends in the department that I go out for drinks with or to the movies, but that's about it and none of them know about my gifts. In other words, I'm not really close to anyone but Dad and Hank. While I realize that sounds pathetic, it's the sad truth.

I've had one semi-serious boyfriend in my life, but he didn't really know me. I enjoyed sex with him, but it was nothing, and I can't express enough, *nothing* compared to what I got a glimpse of today. Kent was a nice guy, but he was just a boy compared to the man who nearly made me lose my mind today. Heaven help me if Sin found me again. Hopefully, he didn't know where I lived. I definitely would not return home using the bike path tonight, but instead would take the bus.

I planned on going to my office and working on my thesis data there, but in the wake of the attack, I decided to go somewhere a little more populated. I needed to look up reference material at the library anyway and students gathered there at all hours. I wouldn't feel so vulnerable there.

Despite my exhaustion and need for sleep, I had headed back out after Dad dropped me off from visiting the crime scene, precisely because I needed the distraction. Sitting at home thinking about the victim's mutilated body or dreaming about blood wasn't appealing, so I headed out, book in tow, along the bike path—a quicker route to campus than the more traveled, but slightly longer trip along University Drive. I should have just stayed at home and dealt with the restlessness.

I entered the brightly lit, modern library where students studied quietly at tables—immediately feeling safer. After finding and checking out the reference books I needed, I slung my bag onto an empty table at the end of the long, study area. The hall was actually a sky bridge that connected two different parts of the library. The walls were made of glass and sometimes during the day I would sit and people-watch as students and professors walked or biked underneath.

I opened the book, found the information I was interested in and then proceeded to read the same words twice before I admitted it was impossible to concentrate. My mind was not in the right place. These problems couldn't have come at a worse time. I had six months left before I presented my thesis to the committee and there was a lot left to do—field research, modeling, writing, results and conclusion, not to mention the classes and work that took away from my thesis prep time.

If I was going to help Dad with these murders, get involved with this book and men like Sin, I might as well wave goodbye to my graduate degree, unless I managed to compartmentalize it all and focus on studying when it was time to study. Difficult task there, damn near impossible, in fact. I shut the book with a thump and lay my head down on it, shutting my eyes.

Immediately Sin's face came to mind. His long, black hair was silky and gorgeous. I clenched my hands into fists under the table at the thought of running my fingers through it. He had dark skin and remarkable, golden eyes. His jaw was square and rugged and his nose was perfect in his strong face. His hard, muscular body was amazing. He could easily lift me, command me, and do what he wanted with me. He spoke with an accent, a brogue, and the fact that he was Irish, intrigued me even more. Heaven help me, he was so sexy. And those tattoos! When I first saw him in my vision, they looked black, but this evening they were red.

This was an impossible situation. I wanted him like I never wanted anything before. A man like that takes what he wants and then when he's done, what's left? He walks away with no regret, but I'm not like that. I've never fallen for a guy before, but I know the way I am. Once I fall for a guy, I'll fall for life. Not a good thing with a man like Sin.

I'm not the type that inspires commitment in a guy like him anyway. He belongs with super-models and celebrities. He commands respect and exudes power like it's no effort whatsoever. Any woman in the world would fall at his feet. I'm pretty I guess, but I'm nothing special. I'm a clairvoyant who sees ghosts, but that's not something that makes people want to spend forever with me—quite the opposite in fact—not that I ever tell anyone. I'm sure it would send them running, either because they think I'm crazy or because they'd believe and consider me a freak of nature.

I remembered his sexy announcement that I was his. Dangerous thinking that. Most likely, he just wanted the book and was going about it in the way he handled all women, by sleeping with them. Unfortunately, that approach looks like it will work in my case, too. Well, he's not getting my book without a fight...or a fuck. I groaned and laughed softly at the thought. I really didn't want to give up the book, but if it was his, what right did I have to keep it?

It crossed my mind to talk to campus security or call Dad about him, but that felt like the wrong move. I wondered if my self-preservation was out of whack lately. Under normal circumstances being accosted while walking along campus was a matter for official help. I would advise any of my students to get help, but I couldn't stop thinking about how I nearly crawled down his throat when he started kissing me. I couldn't exactly cry rape and other than rolling me around on the grass, he didn't hurt me.

I thought about pulling out the book and putting my hands on it to see what I picked up. It was one way of getting more information, when I desperately needed to know what the hell was going on. I wasn't sure bringing out the book in such a public location was a good idea, however, especially if it sent me a vision. A violent vision could potentially make me pass out and someone might notice me acting weird. It was better to check it out at home. That decided I was ready to go.

I sighed loudly and lifted my head. I took the library books to the copier and photocopied the sections I needed to read for later. I was calling it a day. Tomorrow was a new day and I was going to take a break this weekend. Maybe I was burned out with all of the work and study and visions and demons and needed a couple of days off to assimilate everything. Monday I would come back focused and ready to get back to work.

I trudged to the bus stop, exhausted beyond belief. I appreciated the brightly lit bus shelter and the other students waiting. Two sorority girls stood together laughing. I almost envied their naïve look on life. The most important thing in their minds was probably which nail polish best matched their lip gloss. I don't remember ever really having the luxury of such frivolous thoughts.

Then I thought about the murdered girls, who were cut from the same cloth as the two next to me, and was, for once, grateful for the jaded view in which I looked at the world. These girls would be putty in the killer's hands. I mentally wished the girls well, hoping that nail polish was all they ever had to worry about, and made my way to the back of the bus, away from their lighthearted chatter.

Almost thirty minutes later, I breathed a sigh of relief that I made it home without seeing Sin. I convinced myself it was a sigh of relief after all and not one of disappointment. I checked the downstairs, feeling a tad paranoid, and breathed another sigh of relief/disappointment when everything was normal. I grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and carried my bag upstairs.

I just wanted to get in bed and see what visions I gathered from the book before falling asleep. Tomorrow was Saturday and I was going to sleep all day. I even told Dad that I was catching up on sleep. He said he wouldn't disturb me and would bring Thai food for dinner Sunday night, so I had the next couple of days to myself and I desperately needed them.

I dropped the book on the bed, leaving the room in the dark. The soft light of the moon provided a small stream of light across my bed. It fit my mood. A tiny, niggling doubt tugged at my mind, but I was tired and didn't want to think about anything. I ignored the warning voice that normally guided me, ready to be done with all serious thought for the day.

I stripped my clothes and lay down on the bed in my silk, peach panties. It felt so good to lie down. I could easily fall asleep, but I really wanted to get a read on the book so I sat up and crossed my legs, pulling the bag across the bed to me. I caught a flash of something out of the corner of my eyes and turned to see two animalistic eyes reflected back at me in the dark.

I opened my mouth to scream and was surprised when the figure leapt across the room faster than I could get the sound out. A large, callused hand covered my mouth and I was pressed down on the bed by a hard, muscled body. Sin was in my house! I was naked! Oh my God. Oh my God.

Oh my God.

I really had to stop thinking that every time he came around. I tried to pry his hand off my mouth, both hands frantically pulling at his, to no avail. His hips pressed between my legs, his heavy body kept me from moving except for my kicking feet. I definitely wasn't going anywhere unless he let me up.

"We'll stay like this all night, lass, until you stop struggling," voiced a husky promise.

Oh my God. I glared at him, my eyes saying what I couldn't. He laughed softly and that did things to my lower body. I immediately became wet. His nostrils flared and I got the strangest idea that he smelled the moisture between my legs. A growl rumbled in his chest and I struggled again.

"Stop, lass," he ordered with clenched teeth, "unless you want me to fuck you right now."

I immediately froze, breathing hard from my efforts.

He laughed wryly. "I know you want it. I can smell it," taunted the sexy brogue.

My nipples immediately hardened, pressing into his chest. Keeping his eyes on mine, he leaned down and blew on them. Oh sweet Jesus. They tightened as stiff as possible and goose bumps spread across my full breasts, which seemed impossibly big right now, like plump pillows against him.

"Now that I've got you where I want you, let's talk."

Talk? Was he serious? Dear God.

"If I remove my hand, are you going to scream? You know, no one would hear you anyway. Your cozy cottage here is conveniently situated far enough away from the rest of the residences. I'm simply doing this so I don't have to listen to a hysterical female."

Hysterical female? Asshole, I fumed mentally. I nodded and he slowly removed his hand. A million questions ran through my mind, like who he was, what he was, why he wanted the book, how he'd found me, what he was going to do to me? But I usually found it more beneficial to wait and see what others said first. There's a lot to be learned by letting others speak and simply listening. He tilted his head and merely stared at me. His reflective eyes reminded me of an animal and I swallowed loudly. We simply looked at each other. Our gaze spoke volumes.

"Maybe not a hysterical female after all."

He ran a finger across my cheek. He gripped my chin, gently but firmly and turned my head to the side. I still didn't speak when he hooked a finger in my hair band and pulled it out. He lifted my unbound hair, sifting it through his fingers and inhaling the smell of it, taking the pomegranate scent deep into his lungs.

He rose slightly and then leaned down to wrap his lips around my nipple. I inhaled a deep breath and expelled it, unable to stop the moan that erupted. He smiled, his white teeth visible in the moonlight, and lifted his body, pulling me by the wrist to sit up with him. He stood and held his palm out toward my nightstand. My lamp turned on and my mouth fell open. Damn.

I sat up straighter and quickly reached over to grab my pillow, holding it in front of me. He laughed and returned to the chair where he'd been waiting for me. I would never take my clothes off again until I checked the whole house.

"Tell me about you," he ordered in a don't-fuck-with-me kind of way.

"Um, I'm Kate," I said lamely. My head fell back and I shut my eyes. "Look, I'm out of my element here. Can I put some clothes on?"

"You're fine for now. Your lack of clothing suits my purpose. I've got the advantage. Without clothes, you won't try to run and since I don't feel like dealing with such nonsense, because there is no way you can get away from me, I'll leave you undressed for now. And you have an incredible body and I like looking at you. Now talk."

I squeezed the pillow to me. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your gifts. You are more than human. Describe what you can do."

"I'm human," I said, affronted. As if.

He laughed. "Don't be offended. It was a compliment. Talk to me, Kate, and quit stalling."

"What are you?" I confronted him with question for a question. I wasn't going to give up my secrets unless he gave up some of his. He wasn't the only one with the advantage. If I could just touch him, I could see more. Unfortunately, when he lay on me earlier, lust was the only thing on my mind. My gift was unpredictable at best, but if I could touch him with a clear question in mind, I would probably have my answer.

"I'm a Druid," he said as if that explained it all.

It took a minute for what he said in his husky brogue to sink in and assimilate since it was the furthest thing from my mind. But finally, his Irish-laden version translated into my southern-laced version and I understood. I had always thought of Druids as a religious class of people that worshipped nature, oak trees, and the Gods. He didn't seem the type.

"Druids still exist?" I inquired, but he simply raised his brows, waiting for my answer. "Okay, sometimes I can touch things and see the past." I left a lot about my ability out of my explanation, but I wasn't going to give up all my goods to him. He was certainly leaving out a lot.

"There's more than that to you," he stated, waiting.

"Why do you sometimes have fangs?" I asked instead of responding to his statement. Why that was my next question I'm not sure, but it was an answer I was interested in. I wanted to know if he was a vampire that was going to suck my blood or not.

His lips lifted in a sexy grin, but he ignored my question. "What do you see when you touch the book?"

Well, that was the question now, wasn't it? I swallowed and whispered, "I see you."

His smile faded and his eyes became a bright golden. "You saw me in a vision before we met?"

I snorted. "You make it sound as if we met at a party rather than you tackling me to the ground on the bike path."

He smirked and tilted his head. "What was I doing in the vision?"

"Are you a vampire?" Two could play the evasion game.

"No, I'm not. What about the vision?"

He stared at me so intently that my body warmed under his intense gaze. "I saw your face when I touched it. That's all. You weren't doing anything that I could tell." Since it seemed he wasn't going to answer the fang question, I tried a different one. "How did you know I have the book? Is it yours?"

"I can sense it and it belongs to my family. Do you have family or a boyfriend?"

Wow, he sensed the book. That's a neat trick. "Yes," I answered his question, not specifying which I referred to—family or boyfriend. Then I got to the burning question on my mind, "Why did you say I was yours and that I would be with you forever?"

"Because you are, you just don't realize it yet, but I'm working on that," he said with a sexy smile. "How do you feel about the book?"

I frowned at him, but kept our game going since neither of us was saying more than we wanted right now. It would be best to find out as much info as I could. "I feel like it's mine—like I have to protect it. I feel extraordinarily tied to it for some reason." I went way more into that answer than we'd been going in this Twenty Questions game, but my connection with the book was strange and I wanted to know more about it. However, all he did was nod knowingly, as if my link to his family's spell book made all the sense in the world. "Do you know anything about the murders of the women in the city? I think the book is related." I noticed how he narrowed his eyes at the last question.

"Why do you think that? Tell me more," he said in such a commanding voice that I did as he said with no balking.

"I envisioned the killer when I touched the book."

"I thought you said you saw me?" he returned.

"I did," I explained, "but before that I saw a red-haired man, the killer."

"How did you know he's the killer?"

I shrugged, not ready to tell him about Dad, or the crime scenes, and my ability to see the dead. I still wasn't sure I could trust him. I told him too much already. "I just know."

"Listen," he said as he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and stared at me fiercely. "I know you feel you can't trust me and I do understand that. There is a killer on the loose and I'm a stranger." He smiled wryly before continuing, "A stranger who chased and threw you to the ground upon our first meeting, no less. Not the best move, I realize, but my control was stretched pretty thin at that moment and when you ran from me, well, I did what I had to, but I will *not* hurt you. I've never hurt a woman and never will. The point is that there is far more going on here than you know. More than murdered college students. Normally I never talk to people about such otherworldly things, but you are different. You are special. You are connected to the book and I need you to trust me."

"Then let me put my clothes on," I said immediately. "If you honestly want me to trust you, then let me get dressed and let's go down to the kitchen where you can tell me what's really happening." He leaned back in the chair, staring at me, evaluating my sincerity.

"There will be no point in trying to run. I won't even let you get to the door. Besides, there is nowhere in this world you can run that I can't find you."

I didn't say anything in response. I totally believed him.

He reached a decision and stood. "Get dressed. I'll wait on you and we'll go downstairs."

I dressed in my closet, pulling on flared sweatpants with a white strip down the side and a black tank top with a built-in bra. I turned to follow him out the door, but then went back to the closet again. For good measure, I pulled my fuzzy, purple robe on over my tank and sweats.

He laughed softly as we walked down the stairs to the kitchen. He sat at the table while I heated water for tea. The cheery whistle sounded and I poured us each a mug full. I settled into a chair at the table and crossed my legs, holding my warm mug between my palms. "First," I began in anticipation of this discussion, "I'd like for you to tell me more about you."

"My name is Taliesin Thiesson, but most call me Sin. I'm from Ireland. My clan is one of the most ancient families still living and practicing within the Druid Order. You questioned earlier about the remaining existence of Druids. We never went away, we just became more obscure. Our purpose became more focused and secret from the world."

I admit I was completely intrigued by his tale, not to mention his sexy, Irish brogue. "So as a Druid, what can you do? And what is the purpose

that the Order hides from the world?"

He took a drink of the tea and smiled appreciatively. "Druids have many skills. We are born to them, but they don't manifest until we reach puberty. We might be scholars, priests, healers, warriors or even sorcerers, or Arcane, as we call ourselves. Some have more than one gift, as is the case in my clan, which is why we are leaders within the Order. I am the Chief Guardian of the warrior class of the Druids. My family holds seats on the Council and we are the protectors of the many ancient secrets, weapons and spells of the Order. The book you have is one those items, mayhap the most important, that we protect."

There were several points in what he just said that I had questions about. Druids! Who would have thought? After a warm sip of the fragrant tea, I began with the first. "So you're a warrior within the Order?"

"I am a warrior, but I am also an Arcane, a scholar and a healer," he said calmly, as if it were no big deal. There was no boasting in his tone. It was simple acceptance and confidence of his abilities.

"Do others have as many gifts as you?"

"Not currently," he said without further explanation.

Okay, so he's an exception even among his own kind. "Do you consider yourself human?"

He laughed softly. "Well, now that's a question, isn't it?" He sighed. "I'll tell you the story all Druids are told when we are young." He took another sip and then began, "In the earliest of times, people worshipped many Gods. There was Arawn, God of the Underworld, Esus, God of the Harvest, Barinthus, a Sun God, Danu, the Mother Goddess, and many more. People referred to them in many ways, as Gods, as Fae or the Faerie, and as the Sidhe. It varied depending on the region, but nonetheless, they were more than human. Have you heard of Faeries?"

I nodded.

"The story goes that when the earth became more populated by humans, the ancient Gods decided to retire to another dimension, where there were no humans—sort of like in Greek myths with their Gods and Mount Olympus. But the Celtic Gods were fond of the humans who were most devoted to them. As a gift for their dedicated worship, the Gods imparted their magic upon them before leaving. Those humans now possessing magic became the first Druids. Their very blood changed and it passed on to their descendants, remaining strong even today. So to answer your question, are we human? Not anymore, though the first Druids began that way."

Wow. "So why did I see fangs when we were on the bike path?"

He smirked and said, "That really interests you, doesn't it? Alright, I'll begin with why I sometimes have fangs. As an Arcane, I have ability to shape shift. I prefer the form of a panther or a wolf, although I have also taken the form of an eagle."

Since I had already become a mouse, this wasn't a stretch to believe. A panther sounded intriguing or a cheetah, something really fast. It was amazing really, the world that had opened up to me in the space of only a few days. "But you weren't either on the bike path so why the fangs?"

"Let me tell you another story. There was once a Goddess called Druantia. She wasn't always a Goddess. She was also called the Queen of the Druids and was one of the original humans given the power from the Gods. She was a healer and a scholar and became known for her ability to promote fertility. It was she that started what became known to the Druids as the mating curse and bond. So they say that when a Druid meets his true mate, they bond and become like one—one mind, one heart, one soul. But until they have the opportunity to meet, the weeks prior are like a curse. They feel edgy. They become aware of something that's coming, aware of their fate changing. I didn't believe in such things, until I met you."

"S-so you think we're mates?" This conversation included one amazing revelation after another. Some frightening, some awe-inspiring, but all of it kept me riding on the crazy, emotional rollercoaster that I'd been on for days now. He described what I'd felt perfectly. I've experienced all of the symptoms of the alleged curse in the past week.

"I know we are mates," he promised in a husky voice. "I've spent the past weeks torn apart. I've been tense, irrational, and out of control. When I saw you, I could hardly stop myself. My body threatened to shift and explode and all I wanted to do was throw you on the ground and fuck you until you screamed."

I swallowed. This man made me want things that I had no business wanting. He made my body tighten and nerves tingle. I wanted to deny the bond between mates that he spoke of, but a part of me realized it could very well be true. He resonated within me. He touched that part of my soul that no one ever came close to before. He accepted my gift as natural. He accepted *me* as natural. And I wanted him to throw me to the ground and take me.

We stared at each other for long minutes. I saw the instant it became too much for him to ignore. His chair scraped along the floor as he stood abruptly. It tilted and crashed loudly. I gasped and stood, too. He came at me quick and I backed away. Not because I didn't want him, I did, but because I was intimidated by the hungry look in his eyes.

I came up against the wall and he pressed flush against my body. He plundered my lips and his tongue swept into my mouth. He tasted like tea and heaven and sweet heaven, I wanted more. His hands lifted on each side of me, trapping me in his arms. He changed the angle of his kiss, fusing us tighter together in delicious harmony. I moaned in his mouth and put my hands under his shirt to the warm, smooth skin on his side.

He growled a deep sound that I felt through his body. It thrilled me. He released me from his kiss, only to pick me up in his arms and carry me up the stairs to my room, where he laid me on the bed, unbelted my robe and pulled off my pants and tank top. He was both dominant and gentle at once. I felt wanted, cherished, desired.

He crawled on the bed on his hands and knees above me and lifted my hands above my head, holding them together with one strong hand. We stared at each other. The thought of what I was about to do struck me and a moment of doubt crept in.

He whispered, "Don't think..." and kissed me like his life depended on it.

All thought fled as our tongues tangled. I tried to free my hands to hold him close, but he held them tight, refusing to release them. That bit of dominant bondage thrilled me. I curled my right leg around his waist. Sensation swept through me at the feel of his hard body between my legs. He leaned down and nipped my breasts, using his teeth and tongue on my hard nipples. He alternated between damp, gentle licks and stinging, nips and it all sent tingling pulses straight to the core of me.

I nearly exploded from this attention alone. My breasts were almost painful, they were so full and aching for his mouth. Finally, he stopped the teasing and took me fully into the warm cavern of his mouth, sucking strongly. I moaned, unable to hold it back. I felt each strong pull at my sensitive breast throughout my body and felt the orgasm building rapidly.

Unable to help myself, my hips pumped in invitation. I was lost in a haze of sensual desire. I thought of nothing but the sensations racing through my body. A long finger swiped my slit, slick with cream. My legs stiffened at the movement and shudders racked my body. Another moan escaped me. That one swipe nearly sent me careening into oblivion. I was so close, hovering on the edge in delicious anticipation.

He laughed softly, triumphantly. "You don't know how close I am to losing control, Kate," he warned in that sexy voice of his.

Chills spread across my body at the declaration and my decision was made. I wanted this powerful man to lose it and know that I caused it. I'd never experienced such carnal intensity in my life. "Don't hold back on my account," I taunted. "Do what you want with me."

He stopped, still as a statue, for a brief second as if he replayed my words to assure himself he understood what I said. With a snarl, he exploded into action. He rose up. His tall body towered over me—sexy and dangerous. I stared at him in fascinated appreciation, in awe of the prime, male body before me.

With a rough jerk of his hard hands upon my legs, he lifted the slim limbs onto his broad, muscled shoulders. Dear Heaven. With his flashing gaze on mine, he attacked me with his teeth and tongue. I screamed as he tongued my clit. But that wasn't all he did. It was as if he was everywhere at once.

His hands squeezed my breasts and kneaded my ass—back and forth, leaving neither area neglected for long. His teeth nipped at the flesh on my thigh and then his tongue entered me before swirling up to circle my clit. I screamed again as orgasm rushed through me—sensation entered and flooded every extremity. What he did to me was amazing, mind-blowing, and full of such acute pleasure that I was totally senseless.

He growled and then lowered my hips from his mouth to plunge into me with his long, hard cock. It was both painful and wonderful at once and the intensity of those feelings merely made it all the more exciting. He thrust long and hard, touching my cervix with each entry. I moaned with every push into me.

With a low growling rumble, he suddenly stopped and withdrew. I whimpered in protest. With strong hands, he flipped me over on my hands and knees. A large hand spread across my belly while the other hand rubbed and squeezed my ass cheeks. The hand on my belly stroked down to my clit, rubbing in a gentle, pressing circle. At the same time, the hand caressing my backside gave a sharp slap.

I jumped and yelped and instinctively attempted to escape, but he held me still with firm hands. I turned to look at his face and was arrested by the intensity there. His look on his face was breath taking. His sinfully beautiful face projected a hunger and carnality that made my mouth water. His was a face I would dream about the rest of my life. He looked at me as if I was the most beautiful woman on earth, as if he wanted to eat me alive.

He noticed my attention and gave me a sexy, half-smile before he landed another sharp slap. I groaned again, dropped my head forward in surrender and then he tunneled into me. In this position, he went even deeper than before. I felt full of him and closed my eyes in bliss. Dear God. This man was more than I could take. I had no defense against this. He could do whatever he wanted to me and I would happily go along with it.

He thrust and spanked me in time, rhythmically. Shivers covered my body. The pleasure was almost too intense, as if I left my body and nothing but sensation ruled me. There was no more Kate. I was simply an extension of this man and his erotic loving. I would never be the same again.

He thrust over and over and over and I lost myself again, screaming in pleasure and completion. He growled again, the sound sexy and dangerous and I felt his seed spill inside me. It was the last thing I knew as I gave in to the pleasure and exhaustion.

* * * *

The Goddess once known to the world as Druantia, looked down upon the entwined, sleeping couple and smiled. The mating bond was alive once more. The lovers lightened the heart of the Goddess that had been too long denied...

I woke incredibly rested, satiated and warm, marveling that there had been no nightmares when I realized that I was so hot because I wasn't alone. A hard, male body spooned my own. The previous night's adventure rushed back into startling focus. Clarity bloomed and my eyes widened as phrases that included the f-bomb ran rampant through my mind.

First of all, I had never had a one-night stand. I'd only been with one man in my life and had never even considered sleeping with someone I had only known for a few hours. Second, the man wasn't even human. He was something powerful and supernatural and while I had been exposed to such a world, more than most people, I'd still never been affected by it in such a physical way. My third and final point of amazement, but certainly not the least by any stretch of the imagination, was the thorough and totally mind-blowing connection we made last night. I never thought making love was such an all-consuming and soul-linking act. I had read such in romance novels and heard girlfriends in the department talking about it in such a way, but I never really believed it and certainly never expected it to happen to me.

Sin stirred as these thoughts crowded my mind. He gathered my body tighter against his and lifted one long, tanned leg across both of mine, enclosing me in a cozy cocoon of muscle and warm male. His body felt delicious against mine. For the moment, I surrendered and simply enjoyed waking with someone. For the first time in my life, I wasn't alone. That was addictive in and of itself.

With his face pressed against my unbound hair, he inhaled deep and growled in appreciation. "Um, you smell so good. I like waking up with you in my arms."

Since I agreed, I didn't say anything, but being the pessimist that I am, I did have my doubts about the permanency of our situation. On that thought, I made a move to get out of bed and he tightened the cage of his arms more.

"I don't think so," he said and then rolled me underneath him, effectively trapping me on the bed.

I tried not to smile, enjoying the game and the man too much for my own good. "Let me up, Sin. I want breakfast and we need to talk."

"I'm not ready to let you up yet."

I swear that sexy brogue was lethal to a woman's libido. I struggled, bucking my body and trying to pull my wrists free of his hands, but it gained me nothing. He was entirely too strong. I stared into his face with his rugged, tanned features, his dark eyes and sinister tattoo. He was so incredibly sexy and dangerous and beautiful that it hurt to look at him and realize that someday he would go back to Ireland.

He lifted my hand and nipped my finger and those thoughts faded. That sexy, half-smile crossed his lips and turned to a full-fledged, wicked grin when I tried to jerk my hand out of his grasp, but couldn't. He lifted my arms over my head again and held them immobile, grinding his hips into mine. My mouth went dry.

He leaned over and licked a path down my chest to my bellybutton. Goose bumps spread over my flesh. He twirled my stiff nipples with his thumb and forefinger. I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by the delicious sensuality of his touch.

He rubbed his chin back and forth on the soft skin of my belly. His chin had a night's worth of short whiskers that tickled delectably. The dark shadow also managed to give him an even more ruggedly male appearance.

Sin leaned up onto his knees. Putting his hands under my arms, he lifted me upright as well, looking into my eyes with his intense gaze that noticed everything. A calloused hand caressed over my breast and caused a shiver through my torso and a hitch in my breath. Every nerve ending reacted to his slightest touch. He leaned over and swirled his tongue around the puckered bud. I moaned long and low at the gentle seduction.

With strong hands, he turned me to face the antique, white-iron headboard and placed my hands on the rails. They were cool to the touch and I grasped them tightly as I felt his palm smoothing over my backside. One hand rubbed over my hair and lifted it to settle over one shoulder. He leaned close to inhale a deep breath in the long strands. I got a thrill every time he smelled me like that. It was animalistic and primal and I totally loved it.

He came flush against me, his hard, muscled chest against the soft skin of my back. Large hands splayed across my belly and swept down to cup me between the legs, lifting me back against his erection. Three fingers dipped into the most sensitive part of me. I let my head fall back against his shoulder, my eyes closed. I could stay in his arms forever. I felt safe, sensual, beautiful and tingly.

With one hand on my shoulder blade, he tilted me slightly at the waist toward the headboard. I felt his cock sweep through my cream and then push into me. The sensation was so consuming and strong I think I stopped breathing. I merely held on tight for the first few, full pumps and then I lost control. It was too much and my breath came out in a rush. I pushed back against him wildly, lost in the feeling.

His hands, which were settled firmly on my hips, came up next to mine on the rails. Those large, tanned fists next to mine were so erotic. I couldn't take my gaze from them as he slammed into me and I thrust back at him. His hands wrapped around my chest, pulling me up and back, settling me into the cradle of his lap. Still pounding into me, he licked and then nipped my shoulder. Chills spread down my back, but that was minor compared to the feelings quickly spiraling in my lower body. Then without warning, he settled his teeth on my tendon and bit sharply. Not drawing blood or tearing flesh, but simply giving me that sting of sensation that sent me into oblivion. I screamed as it raced throughout my body.

He kept me held tight against him while he pumped five more times and then spilled his seed into me. My body felt boneless and I simply was ready to go back to sleep, but with a kiss to my damp back, he lay me back on the bed and then got up. I watched him while he drew on his jeans, without buttoning them. His chest was amazing.

He smiled. "Let's go, I'm hungry."

Then he pulled me out of bed and threw my robe to me. Bemused, I pulled it on and tied it for my own sake. My body felt used and slightly sore. I wasn't used to such thorough loving...or any loving for that matter. I whipped together scrambled eggs, bacon and fruit salad for breakfast. He stood at the counter next to me while I prepared the food.

"Can you pour us orange juice to drink? The cups are in the cabinet next to the refrigerator." I stirred the eggs in the pan with a wooden spoon while I turned to watch him. Damn, he had such a fine, tight butt and sexy, sculpted back. He chose that moment to turn and look at me, as if he felt my appreciative attention. I'm sure my cheeks turned blushed at being caught and I covered that by issuing another request.

"After you are done with that, can you set the table? The plates are in the next cabinet." He laughed softly, pleased with my response to him. I popped toast into the toaster. "So tell me about your tats. What do they mean?"

"I was waiting on you to ask about them. Its further proof of what I say about your place in my life."

"How is that?" I inquired, curious with his answer.

"Well," he said as he poured a second glass of OJ. "They are Druid symbols and only other Druids can see them. They are invisible to the public. They denote not only your clan but your status in the Order. There is one other way that you can see them and that's if you are a Druid mate. There have been rare cases in past centuries where a Druid's bond mate was a human. They were able to see the markings despite not being Druid. I've wondered if you could see them. I'm happy that you can."

I ignored the implications of that for the moment with another question. "How do they change colors?"

"It's sort of a mood indicator, I guess you could say. It turns red when I am angry or excited and stays black otherwise."

Wow. That was both bizarre and very cool. I set our food on the table and grabbed the jelly from the refrigerator.

In between bites of fluffy eggs, bacon, jellied toast and juicy fruit, he told me of the history of the book and the legacy of his clan as its guardian. He also told me that the book typically has a Keeper, that is a person tied to the book in inexplicable ways and is the main Protector of the secrets within. The Keeper can also read many spells that are invisible to others.

"Did you know that a bird gave me the book?" I asked, still intrigued by how I received the book.

"Aye, the bird is my sister, Camma. She was following our cousin, Urais, the killer. He attacked her and stole the book and then came here to begin his killing spree. She retrieved the book back from him and brought its next Keeper. You, Kate, you are now the Keeper of The Truth. It has a way of finding its owner and it found you."

I didn't dispute his claim. It felt right and I knew as soon as he said it that I was the Keeper. I had a link with the book that wasn't normal. I felt somehow complete with the book in my hands and by my side. I was able to open it and read the spells inside, despite the fact that I didn't speak the language. It was bizarre that I had this tie to an ancient book of the Druid Order, but it still felt true.

"You know, I saw your cousin in a vision before I got the book. I didn't tell you before, but my dad is a homicide detective and I went to the crime scenes with him to recreate what happened. You see, I can see ghosts as well as see the future. Sometimes I can even touch things and see the past. If I go to a place where a murder happened, I can sometimes see the energy left behind and the spirits if there are any. I can see what happened there."

"That's an amazing power you have," he complimented.

"Well, there are times when I would argue that with you," I replied ruefully, "but it is what it is and it's been my gift, or curse, for as long as I remember."

"What did you see in your vision of Urais?" he asked with his Irish lilt.

"I saw him stab two girls and then summon a demon to eat them. It was horrific and something I will never forget or be able to erase from my mind. The images and sounds will be seared on my brain for as long as I live," I ended on a whisper. He reached across the table and laid his hand on mine. It was a sweet, comforting gesture.

"I'll get him, Kate. He won't be in this world much longer. He tried to kill my sister, he betrayed his clan and he is killing innocents. He will pay," Sin promised in a cold voice.

The tats on his face turned a deep red, and I sensed the rage and the lethal resolve emanating from him. This man would carry out his objectives. I had no doubt. "How will you find him?"

"Remember the Raven?" he inquired.

I nodded.

"She told me where he is staying."

"Then I need to call my dad. They can have a team to arrest him in minutes." I made a move to rise from the table and he stopped me with a warm hand on my wrist.

"No, Kate. This is a Druid matter. Let me handle it. Humans shouldn't be involved."

"But they are involved, what about the girls he's killed?" I protested.

"I know and think about how they died. The demon can easily decimate a swat team. Let someone equipped and experienced in dealing with this

kind of situation handle it."

I hadn't thought about the beast being there. He was right. I certainly didn't want my dad and his partners on the force facing the monster, but I didn't necessarily want Sin to face it either. "So what's your plan?"

"I'm going to find him and kill him."

On that ominous note, I rose to clean and put away our dishes and straighten the kitchen. We went upstairs to put on clothes and when I dropped my robe, hands grabbed me from behind. I gasped and laughed as he lifted me to face him and wrapped my legs around his waist. He walked us to the wall and leaned me back against it, still held in his arms.

With one hand holding me under my bottom, he used his other hand to unzip his pants and free his cock. He grimaced as he maneuvered the denim around his stiff erection. He leaned over and sucked my nipple into his mouth. His hard dick felt so good pressed against my moist slit. Since I was already wet, he slid his long, delicious length into me. We both groaned when he reached the hilt. The pleasure was indescribable.

He thrust into me, in and out, in and out. The luscious loving was gentle and erotic and breath taking. I leaned my head against the wall and pressed my pelvis into his, tightening my heels on his backside. He lightly bit my nipple and then nipped it with a bit more of a pinch. It was enough to send me on over the edge. I moaned, long and low, keening my satisfaction. Sweet heaven. My body would never recover from such erotic responsiveness and sensitivity. He pumped twice more and growled his completion, tickling my ear with his pleased rumble. He lifted me and walked us to the bed, where we lay for five minutes, until our breathing returned to a normal rhythm.

As we lay there recovering, another question came to mind. I rolled over on my belly and rose on my elbows to look at his face. "How did you get here? I mean, I assume that you fly the airlines, but how did your sister get here as a bird? Did she fly all the way from Ireland?" That seemed quite a remarkable feat to me.

"We traveled the lines, the Ley lines."

I'd heard to the mystical lines that cross the earth. "How do you travel them? Will you show me a Ley line?"

"Of course, it will be good for you to know anyway."

"I can travel the lines?" I asked incredulously.

"You are the Keeper. You can cast any spell found in the book."

Holy cow.

We dressed and walked across campus, enjoying the cool fall air. He remarked how like Ireland my home state was. I was pleased to hear the compliment in the observation. It was obvious he loved his home. I couldn't imagine growing up in a castle. He seemed to think that I would adjust to it well, castle living, that is. I kept my thoughts about that to myself, but it still seemed an unlikely occurrence. It was hard to picture myself anywhere other than Kentucky close to Dad.

We walked to the small stone church on the outskirts of campus. The back of the church hosted a small cemetery. The church was where the original headmaster, his family, faculty and students worshipped many years ago. It's no longer used, but remained protected by the Historical Society. He guided me to the back to the cemetery and directly to the largest monument there—a stone angel with a broken wing and a chipped nose. He stopped directly in front of it.

"This is where I came through on the line. Arcane Druid's travel the lines using an ancient chant. Only an Arcane with the magical properties in their blood can do it. Demon's travel the lines when someone calls them to earth and witches have to use ingredients and their blood dropped into their potion to be able to move through the lines."

"But this is something I can do?" I asked dubiously.

"Yes, the spell to travel the lines is found in The Truth. Let me show you how."

He wrapped his arms around me and said something lyrical and indecipherable, but I knew when I looked at it in the book, the words would be comprehensible to me. I wasn't prepared for my body disassembling. I nearly screamed, but he squeezed my hand and murmured a word of encouragement and I calmed down when I realized the spell worked.

We disappeared. It seemed as though we traveled in a swirling, black vortex for mere seconds before we re-appeared in the secluded front of the church. I figured he only took me the short distance so as not to freak me out. It was amazing—traveling this way. We reappeared whole with all our parts in the right place—clothes and all. I felt giddy at the thought that I could traverse the world this way. I intended to look at a map of the lines at the first opportunity.

He smiled at my reaction. I think he enjoyed my wonder and awe at the ancient magic. It's something he had probably taken for granted his whole life and now he could see the marvel of it all through the eyes of someone new. Of course, with the gift of such magic, came the responsibility and consequence of it, too.

Chapter Ten

Urais spent the day out and about. He made his way into town in the black Ford truck owned by the rotting couple in the crawl space. He drove around campus for a couple of hours and quickly found another target. A young, blond, pony-tailed student caught his eye. He tailed her to a coffee shop and sat in the next table over. He planned to follow her and strike up conversation. If he couldn't talk her into coming voluntarily, then he would take her by force—though he hadn't had to do so yet. They all went freely with him wherever he lead them. Amazing really, such naïve girls...

He sipped on a sweet tea, having grown fond of the southern drink, when he noticed his likeness on the flat-screen on the wall in the corner. Son of a bitch, Urais muttered. How the fuck did his description get out there? He'd been so careful to use the invisibility spell, which made him unnoticeable to everyone, but his intended target. So how was his face being flashed on the news now?

He looked around and noticed his target watching him. She hadn't watched the news segment. He smiled at her, but decided that retreat might be in order for now. He didn't want her glance up and shout out, pointing a finger at him. He felt compelled to get out of the café. He dropped money on the table and stood unhurriedly so as not to draw attention and walked out.

He walked out of the café, confident that his spell cloaked him from curious eyes and wandered aimlessly, wondering about his next move. If the police were onto him, it might be a good time to move to a new city. He still wanted to go to New York, if only he felt secure in using the teleportation spell.

He walked about the campus, crunching the colorful fall leaves and considering his options when he noticed a man who looked oddly like Sin walking a hundred yards in front of him. He narrowed his eyes, squinting to see if it was his cousin or just another longhaired student. Son of a bitch—it was him!

He ducked into the doorway of a bookstore, out of sight. Despite his invisibility spell, he didn't doubt that Sin knew some spell to reverse it or could recognize its use. He peeked around only to see the couple walking on. They didn't look back and seem to notice him at all. In fact, Sin draped his arm across the redhead's shoulders and they leaned toward one another as they walked. She laughed and pushed at him playfully, but then they came back together again. It might have been a trap, but they seemed oblivious to his presence.

What the fuck? Sin was definitely here to kill him. He'd never known his cousin to put pleasure before the business of the Order. This was more than business, it was personal—he'd killed Camma and stolen The Truth so why was the Chieftain ignoring his duties to walk romantically about campus with a lass? He had no doubt whatsoever that his cousin planned to kill him in a very painful way. When did that become so unimportant to him?

He stood where he was in fear of a trap for long minutes until they were barely visible on the long University Drive. When no Guardians appeared to snatch him, he set out to follow the pair. He didn't want to lose them. The woman, whoever she was, must be important to cause his cousin to forsake his duty. There had been some whisper about the castle that Sin had begun feeling the effects of the mating curse. Could it be true? Was the redheaded lass his mate? She wasn't a Druid, was she? Wouldn't she have to be a Druid to be his mate?

Puzzled by the situation, he trailed them nearly a mile back to a small stone cottage. They went in and he settled down behind a tree to wait and watch. Thirty minutes later, Sin left the house and got into the SUV in the driveway and pulled away. Urais waited until he was out of sight and then crept up to the window.

He thought he heard a door open and walked around to the back of the building to see a young woman, the lass with Sin, sit down on a cushioned chair on the porch with The Truth. How did she get it? He thought it was safe back at the farmhouse. What the fuck was going on here? Maybe the stupid bitch Camma didn't die after all and led her brother here.

Whatever was going on, Sin was stupid for leaving the lass here alone because now she was his as well as the book once more. What a bit of luck for him to see them. The Fates were with him again. There was some cosmic force out there that wanted him to succeed.

He started toward his new target and the leaves crunched beneath his feet. She looked up, saw him and screamed to high heaven. He leapt onto the porch and tried to grab the book from her hands, but strangely, he received an electric shock that knocked him off his feet. The lass tried to hop up and run inside, but he was up quick and grabbed her arm before she could escape. He pushed her on through the door and followed her, locking them both inside. She turned to face him, holding the book protectively in her arms. "Who are you, lass?" he asked, sincerely curious what her connection to the whole situation was.

"It doesn't matter who I am," she said obstinately. "I know who you are," she warned in a sexy, taunting voice as she scuttled onto the other side of the couch, putting the barrier between them.

She was the kind of target he'd been looking for all along—a fighter, a beautiful one. The demon would be happy with this one and since Sin obviously cared for her, it would be extra sweet to destroy her. He pulled his knife from the sheath and circled the sofa. She danced around it as well, keeping the book in her hands and out of his reach. He laughed ecstatically, thrilled with this new conquest.

"Where did my cousin go? Probably to find me, right? Once again, I slipped in right under his nose," he boasted. "I'll have you along with the book this time. You know," he continued, "I'm curious how you got it, but I guess that's a story for a different time. First, I need to get you out of here before he comes back." With those words spoken, he hurdled over the couch. The lass screeched and turned to flee, but he grabbed a handful of hair and yanked her back. They both fell on the floor and he grunted when she elbowed him in the gut. The bitch flung her head back and head-butted him in the forehead. Stars burst behind his eyes. Another backward elbow caught him between the legs and he dropped the knife to cup

himself. He groaned in excruciating pain.

He was going to kill the bitch very painfully when he was done with her. He probably wouldn't even offer her to Asterian, preferring to take care of her himself after the abuse she'd meted out. She'd only made it a couple of steps away when he forced himself to his feet, dizzy from pain and tackled her again, sending her face first to the floor. She held the book against her chest and landed on top of it and he landed on top of her.

She gasped, unable to breathe, as the air was forced out of her lungs.

He grasped a hand full of hair in his fist and pounded her head into the hardwood floor. She grunted in pain and bucked in an attempt to dislodge him, but he was too heavy for her slight body. He reached down and thrust a hard hand between her jeans legs, causing her to scream in rage. He lifted and jerked her to her feet. Amazingly, the stubborn cunt still clutched the book.

He tried to take it from her again, only to have it send another jolt into him. What the fuck? It didn't do this before when he took it. Who was this girl? What kind of power did she have over the book?

Angry with her defiance and refusal to stop fighting, he backhanded her and she fell to the floor. Her cheekbone colored a deep red from his strike. Blood dripped from the corner of her mouth and he licked his lips at the thought of tasting her blood. The book had fallen from her grasp when she hit the floor and he kicked her in the stomach. She curled in agony, gasping for breath. He cautiously reached for the book again.

"No!" she yelled, pushing up to her hands and knees. "That's my book!" She reached for the book and though it was inches from his hands, it slid over to her.

Fuck. Could she be the new Keeper? She was more powerful than he thought. She swept the book into her arms and at the same time, grabbed a lamp from the end table and threw it at him. He lifted an arm to block it, but it still grazed his temple, drawing blood. She was out the back door quick as a flash. He swayed, shook his head and then headed out after her.

He caught a glimpse of her as she rounded a corner on the trail into the woods. He hoofed it after her, not about to let his prey or his prize get away. He was going to make Sin's bitch pay.

* * * *

I ran through the woods, wondering what the hell I was doing going on the path from my dreams with a killer chasing me. But I took this path because I didn't want to lead the killer onto campus. He had killed enough people and I had a feeling that if I got him in a crowd, more innocents would pay the consequence.

I was small and familiar with the trail so I ran like the wind despite the heavy book. I angled toward a rock outcropping where I planned to stash it. If he caught up with me, I definitely didn't want him to get the book. I simply had to keep him busy and myself alive until Sin arrived. Strangely, I sensed my lover getting closer. Not back on campus yet, but close.

I slowed enough to push my book into the dark crevice and then grabbed an armload of fallen leaves and stuffed them in front for camouflage. I quickly hit the trail again and led my stalker away from the prize. I had to protect my charge and I would willingly put myself in harm's way to do so. Sounds crazy, right? When did I become so attached to a book?

It almost hurt to run away from it, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I would get back to it as soon as it was safe. I heard crunching in the leaves behind and sped up my pace. I knew where to go. I had already seen this vision played out in my dreams so I knew where the outcome would occur—the small, grass clearing where the phantom evil choked me in my nightmare. Have you ever heard the saying that you can't escape fate?

I reached the clearing and turned a split second before he plowed into me. His hands rose to my throat and squeezed, lifting me off my feet. I grabbed at his arms and kicked out at his legs, but he only squeezed harder and I had no luck getting him to release me. Luckily, destiny always steps in at the most critical moment. I had thought ahead and swiped his knife before I ran out of the house. I pulled it from the back of my pants. My vision was growing black, but I held it at bay and with a rush of rage, punched the knife into his belly, withdrew and then stabbed him again. Blood shot out in an arc, covering me, Urais, the grass and leaves.

His hands dropped from my throat and I fell to the ground, gagging. I couldn't move, just lay there trying to catch my breath. I heard a scream of rage in the distance that was unlike any sound I'd ever heard. It dawned on me that it sounded like a big cat and then I realized it must be Sin. Apparently Urais did, too, because with one hand on his bleeding gut, the other pulled what looked like a small vial of blood from his pocket. He murmured a chant and dripped the blood into a circle around his body. I sensed Sin eating up the distance in his agile cat form and then a wind blew my hair into a swirl and Urais disappeared.

I closed my eyes, relieved, knowing I was safe for now. A black panther skid into the clearing and came to a stop before me. I caught my breath at the sight, but wasn't afraid. I can't describe the feeling of relief when I'd heard him coming to help me. He licked my face and then backed up and a misty minute later, crouched in his human form. He stood naked and with a word, leaned over me now clothed, lifting me in his arms.

He kissed my cheek gently and whispered that I would be okay. My throat ached terribly and my body was sore from fighting with Urais. I licked my lips and tasted blood at the corner. I knew my cheek was probably growing darker by the minute, but I was alive.

"No," I protested as he started back to the house, "we have to get The Truth. I hid it from Urais here in the woods. Go this way." After retrieving the Druid text, we made our way back to the house. He laid me on the couch and then checked the house over. He picked up the lamp and straightened the mess we made in the scuffle. He came back with a glass of water.

"How are you?" he asked as he smoothed my hair back from my face. "I'm tired of that son of a bitch hurting the people I love. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I was out on the porch looking at the book and he came up on me. He must have followed us back here and waited on you to leave. I tried to run inside, but he followed me and forced his way in. We fought and he tried to take the book, but it kept shocking him. It was cool the way it protected itself from him." I took a breath and swallowed painfully.

"Wait a minute," he ordered.

The gentle lay of his hands on my throat created warm pressure and several seconds, he leaned back.

"How's that, lass? Better?"

"Much better, thanks," I said. It no longer hurt to talk or swallow. The man had limitless gifts. "Anyway, I got out of the house and he chased me into the woods. I had knocked his knife out of his hands when we fought inside and snatched it as I ran out. I hid the book and then went to the clearing where I'd had a vision of myself there with everything covered in blood."

"You foresaw battling Urais there and didn't tell me?" he was surprised.

"No, it's not like that," I said, shaking my head. "The past few nights, I've had a dream where something chased me into the woods and everything was covered with blood. The trees, the leaves, the grass...and it was like that today, when I stabbed him. Not as much blood as in my dream, but I saw drops of it on the leaves and grass. It's always worse when I have a foreshadowing vision. It happens in some form, but never exactly the way I see it. I've come to think the vision is more about getting a point across than being true to form. Anyway, I never actually saw Urais in my vision."

"You stabbed him? Fatally?"

"Well, I don't think so. He was bleeding a lot, but he had enough sense of mind to use a spell and disappear. He used a vial of blood to form a circle around his body."

"Hmm, I wonder whose blood he's using. Camma's? Oh, damn," he said, smacking the side of the couch. "He must be using the demon's blood. He's exchanging human flesh for demon blood. It would activate the spells just like Arcane blood. Damned fool."

He leaned down and gently kissed me. "I'm so relieved you are okay. I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you. Thank you for protecting the book. You didn't let him get it back and that's what he was after. You are indeed a valiant Keeper."

"Thanks for coming to my rescue. It was hearing you coming for me that prompted him to split the scene."

"Kate, we have to return the book to Ireland. It needs to be safeguarded back in the altar room. I want you to come with me and meet my family. Please," he requested.

I couldn't deny his plea. Plus, I wanted to meet his family and see the castle. I had to accept the fact that the book belonged to the Druids and not with me in my small, stone cottage here in Kentucky, vulnerable to the world. I certainly wasn't a warrior skilled enough to protect it. "I'll miss it when I have to leave it behind." I said sadly.

He sighed. "Kate, haven't you heard a word I've said? You are the Keeper, the protector of this book. Further, you are my mate. You belong with me and the book in my castle in Ireland. How many times do I have to say this to make you believe me?"

"What?" I questioned in amazement. I had half-believed him when he said such stuff, but it still seemed surreal and I thought the whole time that the Keeper was a temporary kind of position. That once it was time to return to Ireland, he and the book would disappear and that part of my life would be over. "You expect me to just leave my life here and move to Ireland?"

"Yes, I do. That's exactly what I expect. You have a greater destiny to fulfill now. You and the book are one. *We* are one. We belong together," he said, his voice usually low and calm, rose in octave with each word. His tats turned red again.

"What about Dad?"

"He can visit anytime he wants. Married couples move away from family all the time."

"Are we getting married?"

"Yes, I assumed we would."

The conversation revealed more surprises each moment. I shrugged out of his arms and went to kitchen. I needed warm tea.

He followed me. "Talk to me Kate."

"I love my dad, Sin." I turned around to face him, leaning against the counter. "He's a big part of my life and I don't want to live that far away from him. I have my thesis work to finish and I've worked too hard to leave it behind when I have six months left on it. My life has always been here. I'm not saying no to you or the Keeper position, I'm just saying it's all happened too quick and unexpectedly. I need time to think and plan and prepare."

"Okay, so let's forget all that for now. Come with me to Ireland tonight to return The Truth, meet my family. I'll bring you back tomorrow and I'll finish Urais then. I want to get the book safely back where it belongs before it falls into the wrong hands again."

"Okay, but let's take it one day at a time. I want you to bring me back tomorrow."

"I promise."

* * * *

Urais cursed a blue streak as he teleported to the abandoned horse farm where he dumped the third body. He didn't want to return to his place unless Sin knew where to find him. Fuck. He was in a fine mess now. He was bleeding from the gut like stuck pig. He had enough blood left for only one more spell and no longer had The Truth, his trump card. He couldn't very well go pick up a young college student to give to Asterian for more blood because he was sure they'd all seen his description on the news by now.

He sank down against the wall with his head in his hands. What should he do now? In one fell swoop, Sin and his bitch sent his plans to hell. He took a deep, painful gasp and looked down at his wet, bloody shirt. The bitch stuck him good.

It looked like his confrontation with the Order had come sooner than he expected. He had nothing to lose at this point. He already lost everything. It was time to finish it...

Chapter Eleven

After drinking the soothing tea, Kate was visibly calmer from her ordeal and their enlightening conversation. It was obvious that she felt the same way about him as he did about her, but she was definitely a woman who made her own decisions. He better slow down on his voiced assumptions about their future and let her believe she had some say regarding the matter. "Ready?" he asked with a raised brow.

"Yep, let's do it," she said.

He gathered her in his arms. In turn, she held The Truth cradled tightly in hers. He intoned the spell that would teleport them to Thiesson Keep. Her small body trembled slightly in his arms, and he held her tighter in reassurance.

He felt the familiar defragmentation sensation and smiled when she gasped at the feeling. He rubbed his cheek against her hair and inhaled her erotic scent. He couldn't believe he'd found his mate. To be such a skeptic, he was sure sold on the idea now. He felt complete with her in his life and couldn't imagine an existence without her now that he'd found her. He was the luckiest man in the world.

They disappeared from her small cottage and for brief moments, entered the swirling, black vortex. He held her secure in the warm circle of his arms. They arrived with an audible pop into his Irish bedroom. He wanted to arrive in a quiet place where she could gather her thoughts and orientation before being put on the spot before his family. He mentally sent notice to his brothers and Camma and guided Kate to his leather wingback chair.

She sank down heavily as if her legs had given out. Her hands never ceased to caress the cover of The Truth. His woman was a fierce protector of the Druid legacy. The Gods and Goddesses chose the Keeper well. She looked anxious and he wondered if the thought of returning the book to the altar room or meeting his family caused her distress.

She looked around his room with wide eyes.

He followed the path of her gaze as well and saw it with fresh eyes, thanks to her. He'd always taken his home for granted. He loved it and it was his refuge, but considering what it must be like for her, gave him a renewed appreciation for the medieval surroundings.

He occupied the master suite, the largest bedroom and sitting room in the castle. It had been his parent's room when they were still alive and his grandfather's room and so on. It passed to each eldest child of the clan. To think that one day his and Kate's son or daughter might sleep here filled him with pride.

The floor and walls were made of large blocks of sandstone. Thick, hand-woven tapestries graced the walls. They showed pictures of large oak trees, ravens, the moon and The Truth—in some ways telling the story of the Order. A large stone fireplace and hearth occupied one side of the room and his favorite swords hung above the mantel on display.

Heavy, hardwood furniture scattered about the room—a huge bed, end tables, an armoire, a sitting table and chairs, and a dark, leather sofa and matching chair. Two new additions over the last year included a forty-two inch flatscreen and Ipod docking station speaker system. A doorway led into his personal bathroom decorated in black granite and a large walk-in closet. He didn't have enough clothes or shoes to fill the small room so it also contained weapons, books and outdoor and travel magazines.

The direction of her stare landed on the large bed and her cheeks flushed pink before her gaze returned to his. He gave her a wide, wicked grin. He looked forward to having her naked in his bed. Unfortunately, it would have to wait. His family wanted to meet his mate. "It is my utmost desire to have you naked and wet and waiting for me in that bed," he said, nodding in its direction. Her cheeks blazed pink again and he laughed softly, thrilled with her response to him. He couldn't have asked for a more perfect woman.

"I love this room, Sin. It suits you. It's very masculine and powerful," she complimented him with a soft voice.

"I hope it suits you as well since it's also now your room," he said as he bent to a knee before her. He tucked a silky strand of her red hair behind her ear. "We are going to spend many, long and wonderful hours here together."

She bit her lip and took another quick glance at the bed.

Her eyes turned slumberous and dark with desire. He'd already come to recognize the signs of her arousal. It was like he'd known her his whole life. She was already such a part of him. His life before her seemed a vague, unsatisfied memory. He took the book from her hands and placed it on the rug.

To his delight, she leaned over and touched her lips to his. He let her kiss him gentle and sweet before it became too much and yet, not enough. He wrapped a hand behind her head and took her in a hard kiss. He couldn't get of her. Her sweet taste, her erotic scent and the way she fell apart when he touched her made him crazy. He angled his head and kissed her deeper. If only his family wasn't urging him to come out...

He leaned back and sighed, rubbing a finger over her glistening lips, plump from his carnal attention. "I want you so much, Kate," he said, his voice low and husky from desire. "Unfortunately, my family is clamoring to meet you."

She smiled and gave a shaky laugh. "Do they know what we are doing?"

A smile of satisfaction crossed his lips. "They probably have an idea."

"Okay, let's do this. Wait, do they know I am the Keeper?" She gathered the book again in her arms.

"I'm sure Camma has already spread the word," he assured. "They are an easy group to please. They will love you simply because you are the Keeper and my mate. You hold a very important position in our lives, Kate. We will never take that for granted."

She swallowed. "That's a tall order."

"It's one I have no doubt you will fill."

They walked down the wide and winding stone stairs to a large room referred to as the Great Hall. They gathered around the long ancient, gleaming wood table where feasts had occurred for centuries. The only difference in the room from ancient times before was the elegant, electric chandeliers that hung high above, a dark, marble floor where there was once stone and rushes and the elaborate sound system and flatscreen against one wall.

Despite it being nearly one in the morning, his brothers and Camma lounged in relaxation around a small fair of fruit and cheese and soda biscuits. They stood as one when he and Kate entered the room.

Camma stepped forward first and hugged Kate. "It's so nice to finally meet you. Could you hear me talking to you as the Raven?" she asked in her usual bubbly voice.

"I did, but I convinced myself that I was losing my mind," Kate said with a rueful laugh.

"Kate, you've met Camma, she's the baby of the group. This big guy here--" he clapped his tall tree of a brother on the shoulder-- "is my brother, Galen. And this pretty boy--" he pointed to his blonde, womanizing brother-- "is Joah. Finally, the youngest of us brothers--" he nodded to the fresh-faced redhead-- "is Talon. I'll introduce you to Nera later. She's the mother hen of the Keep."

Sin watched with good humor as his brothers greeted and flirted with his mate. It was obvious they were enthralled with his beautiful lass. They all sported wide grins, teasing and touching her on the hand and shoulder as much as possible. Camma looked at her with adoration. He had no doubt she looked forward to hours of girl talk. Kate's female presence in the castle would give her someone to talk to besides their older cousin, Nera, who cooked and cleaned the Keep.

They seated themselves again at the table. Sin briefed the siblings on Urais and his nefarious plans that included using demon blood to twist The Truth's spells. He gleamed with pride when he told of how Kate hid the book and faced Urais in the forest. Kate described the murders and the demon for the Thiesson's.

"Well, let me show you this," Galen said as he disappeared and then seconds later reappeared along with a slim, brown book. "I found this in Urais's study at the manor. I've been looking through it while Sin was stateside." He flipped to a turned down page and pushed it to the middle of the table for all to see. A thick finger pointed out the specific text as he read, "And there is an ancient demon. One named Asterian, of red body and long claws, who craves the flesh of humans. He who calls the demon must pay a fee of flesh and blood..."

Kate shivered. "That sounds like our demon. I'll never get the sound of his teeth crunching the bones and tearing the skin of those poor girls out of my head."

"By now, he's figured out that we have The Truth," Sin commented. "Wonder if he'll come back for it? Think he'll bring the demon?"

"Bring it on," Joah said with a growl.

"Everyone remain alert," Sin ordered. "If he has any blood left, he may be tempted to teleport here and have another go at The Truth. He won't

be able to get it from the altar room. I'll cast new wards, but if he brings the demon, he might think he has a chance."

"Can you show me the altar room?" Kate asked. Her fingers tightened on The Truth, reluctant to let it go now that it was time.

"Of course, the Keeper has to be able to twist the spell to retrieve her book," Talon assured her with a smile.

They walked to the sacred room. The brothers named ancestors in paintings and artifact history along the way. Camma linked arms with her and pointed out particulars of the shoes and clothing from the artwork. Sin appreciated the way his siblings went out of their way to make her feel comfortable and welcome.

They wound their way through the ancient castle and arrived before a large door engraved with tree carvings and scrolls. There was a large round knob in the center of the door.

Sin stood before it and pulled Kate into his arms to stand beside him. "Watch me," he commanded. He put his hands out and began an intricate weaving rhythm with them. A glow appeared in the air, forming the same pattern his hands made. He spoke a mixture of Gaelic and the secret Druid language that only a few still mastered. As the Keeper, he knew Kate would understand and remember the spell. A gift of the Keeper was to recall and replicate any spell read from The Truth. When the glowing, blue pattern turned fiery gold and then shimmered into invisibility, the ward was set. They entered the room and returned the book to the marble altar.

"It's good to have it back there," Galen murmured in relief.

"Aye," agreed Camma. "I'm sorry again guys."

They all shushed her before she started her apologies once again.

"Let it go, little sis. You learned a hard lesson that you shouldn't have had to learn," Joah stated.

"Well, I'm for bed. It's been a long week," Talon said with a yawn. "Goodnight, Kate and welcome to the clan. You are one of our own now, lass."

They trickled off, one by one, until Sin and Kate were left in the mystical room.

"Sin, can we stay here for a bit," she asked with a pleading expression. "I've wanted to have some time just to read The Truth since I found it. Everything kept getting in the way. Murders, a killer, school, crime scenes..."

He laughed. "Have at it, baby. I'll be right here." He settled into a reading chair and propped his feet on brocade footstool, whispering, "Let me know when you are ready to go to bed." He smiled at her shiver in response and watched as she opened the book and began to read. With each page that she turned, her eyes widened with amazement. A half-smile played on her sensual lips. He could almost literally see the power build in her. Her face took on a brighter glow with each spell she absorbed.

Time seemed to stop as she bonded even more with The Truth. It was an awesome thing to see. He must have dozed because he came to when she gasped. He opened his eyes to see the book's pages flipping in fast succession. He literally saw the power fly from the text into her mind. He leaned up to touch her, to assure she was okay when she held a glowing hand out to him.

He settled back into the chair and kept a narrowed eye on her. The book reached the end of its pages and she slumped. He put his hands around her shoulders and then was thrust back into the chair by an invisible force when the pages began to flap again. She bolted upright once more and stared into the air just above The Truth at something he couldn't see.

He noticed her lips form the words, *oh my God*. He looked over her shoulder to see the page the book stopped on and was puzzled to see it was blank. He realized she read a page that was visible only to her. It was said that the Keeper can read some of the more deadly and intricate spells in The Truth that no one else was able to see. This must be those pages.

Kate's lips began to move in a silent language too quick for him to decipher. Her expression was one of wonder and awe. He settled back into the chair, knowing she was safe in her role as Keeper. The Truth would have its way and would do nothing to harm its guardian. Half an hour later, her shoulders slumped in exhaustion and the book thumped closed.

He touched her shoulder and she rolled into his arms, fast asleep. He smiled. The events of the past day and the book's power took its toll on his lass. He kissed her cheek and carried her out of the altar room and through the halls to his rooms. With a word, a blazing fire roared in his fireplace. He undressed his woman, shucked his pants and shirt and slid with her under his soft sheets. He gathered her in his arms, settled a kiss on her smooth cheeks and drifted off, enjoying the feel of her in his arms.

I bolted upright in bed, knowing instantly what pulled me from sleep. "The *Truth!* Sin, they're here! In the Great Hall."

He jumped from bed, pulled on his jeans, grabbed his sword and was out the door quicker than I could get out of bed. I awoke a different person. The knowledge that flowed into me, only hours ago, left me far more powerful and confident a person than I had ever been. Knowledge came to me in waves. Spells, history and strategy hovered in my mind, ready for access. Snap decisions were made at the tips of my strangely, glowing fingers. I was aware at all times, of The Truth and what happened around it. I knew that at that moment Sin and his brothers had converged in the hall with the fearsome creature. Urais was in Camma's room, preparing to haul her to the altar room to force her to remove the wards and once again give him access to The Truth. *My Truth.*

In an instant, I teleported to Camma's room in the next wing. The swirling, black vortex no longer intimidated me. Camma would die before going with her cousin. The Truth would be safe behind the wards placed on the altar room door and with the brothers battling the otherworldly creature, I would have to help the teenager.

A small lamp in the corner provided only a soft glow to the darkened room when I appeared in the shadows. Urais stood over the wide-eyed girl with a knife that glinted in the darkness. Rage filled me when I noticed blood on the blade. Camma held a hand to her neck and shoulder where he'd already pricked her when she refused to go with him.

"Urais," I hissed, fueled by my hate of the man. I was no longer afraid as I was in the forest. Nothing scared me anymore. The Truth gave me strength and would see me prevail against such despotic evil.

He turned, startled, and a wide smile crossed his face when he noticed me. "I hoped I'd see you again," he threatened.

"Here I am," I taunted.

He shifted direction, waving the knife to and fro.

A wide smile crossed my face and it shocked him. He shifted the knife from one hand to the other in an attempt to frighten me, but it only served to make me angrier. I thought of the young girls that had been tortured by this man and wanted nothing but revenge for them, for Camma. If he wanted blood so much, then I would give it to him.

I tilted and my head and began to whisper. The Gaelic chant gained in strength as it poured from my lips. A brilliant, blue glow encompassed my body and the ends of my hair rose with a slight breeze where there should be no wind. Fear crossed his features.

The bleeding spell began to work and he grabbed his side in pain. In a desperate move, he fell to his knees and smeared Camma's blood from the knife onto the floor in a circle around his body. He invoked the hex to teleport him to safety just as I finished my spell. Blood from his stab wounds poured from his body, forming a huge puddle on the floor. He screamed in agony from the pain as he disappeared from sight.

I cursed when he got away again, pissed that I hadn't finished him. I quickly went to Camma's side and grabbed a sheet to press on her wound. After a few seconds, I wiped the blood away and then pressed my hands on gash and whispered the spell of healing, miraculously able to envision the wound suturing together. I lifted my hands to find it was so. *Cool.* When I was sure Camma was fine, I hopped to my feet.

"Stay here," I ordered and teleported to the Great Hall to see Talon being thrown across the room onto and then over the long table. Sin held a long sword and flashed an arc of blue light from his fingertips. The demon blocked the light with a black shield and immediately sent it back in my lover's direction. Sin used his sword to absorb the power, but grimaced at the force of it. Galen leveled a roundhouse punch at Asterian, but the demon grabbed the Druid's large fist and lifted him high in the air. Joah kicked low in an attempt to sweep his feet, but the demon simply jumped over the hurdle of his legs and kicked back with one of his own, sending the blonde crashing into the wall.

Sin gathered another fireball of energy that hit the demon this time, but the creature absorbed it easily and cracked Galen, whose body he still held in the air onto the stone floor in a sickening sound. I winced at the thought of Galen's broken body. The demon turned to block Sin's sword with a parry of his own.

Enough, I thought. This was one powerful creature and I certainly couldn't help in a physical battle with him. I did the one thing I could do. I'd spent my life seeing my power as a curse, but on this dark night, I saw it for the gift it was.

The spells I absorbed last night were powerful and amazing. There were spells to heal, to change one's appearance, to shift form or shape, which I had already tried, to become invisible, a spell that didn't work on demons by the way, to create the blue flame that the brothers fought with before me, to teleport and travel in time, and to open a portal to Hell—these and many more were all spells that were visible to Druids.

But there were some spells that only I could see. The Truth will take a Keeper's gifts and provide spells designed specifically for them. My gift is that I can see ghosts and the book I protected gave me a spell that was so much more than that. I raised my arms in the air and invoked the sacred spell—the spell that only I could call.

Wind blew through the Great Hall. It raised the heavy, velvet curtains and tapestries from their resting place and sent them swirling in the air. Sin alone battled the demon now. Parry and thrust in a bone-jarring rhythm that had to be wearing him down. His brothers lay prone on the stone floor. I would take no chances with my new family. I shouted the last word of the spell and called my power. With a thunderous crack and flash of brilliant white light that shot from the floor to the high ceiling, I raised the ghosts of the ancient and powerful Druid Thiesson clan.

Sin and the creature turned in unison and see the Hall filling with the transparent and frightening images of the sentient spirits. Spirits that were angry that their home had been invaded. Spirits that wanted revenge against the demon that dared to harm their descendants.

Sin's eyes widened at the sight before him and quickly stood to the side as he saw the ghostly image of his parents, his grandparents and many others crowd and surround the flailing demon. Ghostly swords pierced and chopped at the creature's red skin and limbs. Long, transparent fingers pulled and tore at the creature that had no defense against what he could not hold. He screamed a long and ghastrly sound. Sin raised his brows in

wonder at me and then turned with a swirl of his sword and removed Asterian's head from his body.

I opened the portal to Hell and the ghostly beings swarmed the body and carried him back where he belonged. With a smile of love and a nod of approval of me and their son, Sin saw his parents and the rest of his ancestors return to their rest. A last swirl of wind placed the room to rights and the raucous battle was over. The curtains and tapestries settled, at peace again. I ran to Sin and he swept me in his arms.

"Kate, you are something else, lass. I love you," he said with a fist clenched in my hair.

I kissed him back and we let go and turned to his brothers. We used Druid power to heal their injuries and helped them into chairs and off the floor.

"What did we miss?" groaned Talon.

Sin and I just looked at each and smiled.

"I can't even begin to explain right now. It's a tale for a night around the fire. Suffice to say, Kate saved our asses."

Camma ran down the stairs then and hugged her brothers and me.

Sin grabbed her and looked her over when he noticed the blood on her shirt. "Are you alright?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Kate saved me. Urais got away, but she stopped him. His blood is all over my bedroom floor."

After downing a few of shots of Irish whiskey to calm down from the battle, everyone made their way back to their rooms. We were confident Urais was done, at least for the night, and would need time to recover from his injury before his next move. The brothers declared that the hunt was on in the morning, only two hours away. Sleep, if only for a couple of hours, would help Joah, Galen and Talon fully recover from their wounds.

I yelped as Sin hoisted me up on his shoulder and practically flew up the grand stairs and down the corridors to his suite. He shouldered the large wooden door to his suite open and then slammed it shut with a powerful kick of his boot. He strode across the room and threw me on his monstrous bed.

"You don't know how hot you've made me, lass. I've never seen magic such as what you've practiced on this morn. I have to fuck you right now," he said as he stalked me around the bed, keeping his predatory gaze on mine.

Spurred on by his desire, I rose up on my knees and started to undress, making it as sexy an act as I possibly could. I raised my shirt, flashing him a shot of my smooth belly and lifted my hands up to slide over my breasts. I grasped the hem and pulled it off and then shrugged out of my silky, black bra. I rolled onto my back and caressed one finger up the middle of my chest, between my breasts and then circled each nipple with one fingernail. They hardened into stiff points. I put the finger in my mouth and gave it one slow lick before sending it back down the same path. In one smooth move, I lifted my hips and pulled off my pants and underwear.

I cast him a glance out of the corner of my eyes. He looked...hungry. His eyes were a brilliant shade of gold and his expression was intense. He looked ready to pounce. His nostrils flared and I knew he smelled my arousal. Dear Heaven, that turned me on. I loved everything about him, his power and magic, his sexy face and mouth-watering body, his nobleness and honor, and not to mention, the way he looked at me. He made me feel as if I was the most beautiful woman in the world. I sent my fingers on down between my legs and dipped a finger in.

With a growl, he leapt onto the bed.

I laughed and shrieked in excitement. He lifted my hips to his mouth and attacked. He ate me as if he was starved for me. I clenched my hands in his hair, out of my mind from the attention of his swirling tongue and nipping teeth. All I could do was lie there and take it and thrash my head from side to side. It didn't take long, merely seconds before I careened over the edge. Every nerve was super sensitive and responsive.

He leaned up and flipped me over on my hands and knees and thrust as far as possible into me, forcing me higher on the bed. His strong hands grasped my hips and pulled me back as he pumped forward. I moaned, feeling incredibly full—almost painfully so, but that just made it oh-so-good. It was heaven, nothing but pure, erotic bliss. He reached his hands up and around and squeezed my breasts. His fingers twirled and pinched my nipples and that sweet eroticism sent me even higher than I thought possible.

I pressed back against him with each thrust, wild with desire. My hair hung down around my shoulders and face, enclosing me in a red cascade of silky texture. Tingles encompassed my body and my eyes closed as another climax threatened to consume me, body and soul. He clenched a hand in my hair and that simple dominant act did it. I soared out of my body, shivering and lost in the throes of orgasm.

He pumped four more times and groaned. Cum shot into me. He leaned his large body over mine. His chest and hips were warm against my back and backside. After getting a cloth to clean us, he nestled me into his body and spooned.

I felt safe and cozy in the warm circle of his arms and the comfort of his large bed. A smile crossed my lips as I felt him press a soft kiss to my hair. I must have been exhausted because despite the incredible day that I'd experienced, I immediately drifted to sleep.

The next morning, we sat around the large table with a traditional Irish breakfast of eggs, Irish bacon and sausage, fried with mushrooms and tomatoes. The brothers planned to begin with a search of the manor for Urais. I was going to teleport back to my home. Dad was coming for dinner and I wanted to catch him up on everything going on. Sin would make an appearance later after the hunt for their cousin.

"So everyone is off on a noble quest once again and I'm left here alone," Camma complained. "I'm not trying to whine, but this is really getting old."

"Why don't you come to the States with me? We'll be safe there. You can meet my Dad," I offered. It would be fun to have the carefree teenager keep me company for the day.

"Oh, can I?" she asked Sin. "Please let me!"

"Yes, just stay with Kate and do what she says," he ordered.

"I will," she promised enthusiastically. "Yea," she said pumping her fist in the air. "I'm going to put on different clothes." She leapt to her feet and raced up the stairs.

I laughed and Sin leaned in his chair to kiss me softly on the lips.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"No problem. We'll have a fun girl's day. Maybe I can take her shopping before Dad comes for dinner. Try to make that if you can. I want you to meet him."

"I promise, lass," he said in his sexy brogue.

Dear Heaven, the man was too much. After a thorough, heart-pounding kiss in which Camma whispered *get a room*, we disappeared from the Irish castle and popped back into existence in Lexington, near my stone cottage. *Cool*. I'm really not sure how long it will take me to get used to such magic, but it probably won't be any time soon.

"I'm glad I get to experience Kentucky as a person this time," Camma said and we laughed.

I agreed with her. Her raven was a bit frightening. Camma and I went to the mall where we spent most of the day shopping and eating. She bought skimpy lacy tanks, Capri's, short skirts, heels and jewelry. Clothes her brothers definitely wouldn't approve of. My only purchase, aside from a small bag of chocolate-covered strawberries from the Godiva Chocolates kiosk, was a negligee from Victoria's Secret. I'd never had cause before to have something so scanty and erotic, but I got a kick out of imagining Sin's expression when he saw it.

It was nearly five in the evening when we headed back to my place to wait for Dad and his promise of Thai food. Camma had never experienced the tasty, spicy food so I was happy to introduce her to it. Thai food is a must for everyone.

We walked in the front door laughing at the thought of how Camma's brothers were going to react to her new clothes.

Camma was brutally conked over the head with the butt of a gun. She fell to the floor, unconscious.

I screamed in surprise and Urais slammed the door shut behind me. He leaned against the wall. One hand pressed against his gut and the other held a gun pointed at me.

"It's me again, bitch," he said with clenched teeth.

My heart pounded rapidly in my chest, fear encompassed me, but an ember of anger sparked, too. This man just kept hurting women. He wouldn't face Sin or his brothers. He targeted women, the coward. I can't express how enraged I was by his abuse of Camma. Blood trickled down her forehead, forming a half-dollar sized pool on the floor.

Without warning, I called the Hand of Flame. Sin used the spell when he battled the demon. I mimicked the same pose he had when he fired the blue light from his hand. My aim was a little off, but the bolt still hit—only it landed in his groin region.

Urais bent over in pain and fired the gun in retaliation.

I ducked and the shot went wild, thunking into the wall.

Urais screamed in agony and frustration. The smell of burned clothing and flesh filled the air. The door opened, knocking Urais into the foyer table.

Dad rolled in low with his gun drawn, took in the situation in a glance and fired upon the killer.

Urais was off balance, but the shot caught him in the shoulder.

In the midst of the vicious chaos, I heard a pop and turned to see my large panther bound into the fray, straight toward his cousin. One large paw batted the hand that held the gun and sent it clattering across the hardwood floor. With a ferocious growl, the sharp claws ended the battle with a long swipe down the killer's throat and chest cavity. I turned away, unable to look at the gore.

Dad held the gun on the panther, unaware of whom or what he was.

"Dad, help me," I pleaded as I bent to Camma. "The panther won't hurt you."

He looked my way with wide eyes and raised brows, as if to say *are you crazy?*

"Trust me, please," I begged. We got on either side of Camma and carried her to the couch in the living room. A flash of light came from the foyer, and I knew Sin had opened the portal to the Underworld and sent Urais where he more than deserved to go. I put my hand on Camma's head and felt the warmth take hold. I saw the wound closing and seconds later, she opened her eyes with a gasp.

Dad stood off to the side, but backed up and drew his gun again when Sin walked in, dressed and in human form. "Don't move," Dad commanded forcefully.

Sin halted and looked at me to explain.

"Dad, it's okay. I know him. The man you shot was the killer that you've been after."

"I figured that out, Kate. He fit the description you gave us. But who is this?" he asked, waving the gun in Sin's direction.

"He came here to find the killer. His name is Taliesin. He's a Guardian for his people in Ireland where Urais, the killer, came from. We met a couple of days ago. This is Camma," I said, motioning to teenager who waved happily to my father. "She is his sister. Urais attacked her first before he came here and killed those girls. Dad, Sin is like me. He has gifts. Aren't you wondering where the panther went?"

Dad cast a glance over his shoulder toward the foyer. He walked over and looked. The cat and the body were both gone. He holstered his gun and sat on the couch.

I sat next to him and gave him a tight squeeze.

"Okay, tell me everything," he ordered.

An hour later, after finishing the Thai food Dad left on the front porch when he heard the gunshot, he had all the details. He looked only slightly stunned, but then life with me had never been normal. He took it in with his usual aplomb, even going so far as to thank Sin for keeping me safe and removing the threat.

"So, Ireland?" he inquired.

"Not all the time, Dad. I'm going to finish my thesis. I haven't come this far to quit before I'm done, and we'll still have Sunday and Wednesday night dinner. I wouldn't miss that for the world."

We sat at the table with empty Thai containers, talking when I felt a presence. Sin turned and I saw his mouth open in shock. A transparent shape formed before us. The form turned into the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She defied human beauty. She was angelic, magnificent and luminescent.

"Kate, I can see it. Is it a ghost?" Dad asked in amazement.

"No, James Connolly, I am most certainly *not* a ghost," replied the radiant voice with a tinkling laugh. It sounded like bells and laughter and sunshine. "My name is Druantia, and I've been asleep a long, long time."

"My Queen, Goddess," Sin addressed in reverence, bowing his head.

"Taliesin, you take as your mate a descendant of mine. Keep her well and keep her happy. She is a powerful Keeper and sorceress and will protect The Truth and Druid secrets from harm. You two are a couple of legend and will be blessed with many children."

She turned to me and held a glowing hand to my cheek. Her touch felt electric. I was spellbound by the moment.

"Kate, I'm proud you are from my bloodline. I'll be watching over you and your children...always."

I held my hand over hers on my cheek.

With a smile, she gently pulled away and began to back away. "You will find love again, James. Rejoice in it. Most people only hope to have the love you have had and will have again," she pledged to Dad. With those assurances, she began to fade again. "I'll be here for you, my children. I've been asleep too long as it is." Then she was gone.

We sat quietly for long moments. It was comical really, the way we were all speechless. Finally, I walked over and hugged Dad. I had tears in my eyes and then noticed that my tough dad had watery eyes as well. I turned to Sin, "I love you." My heart felt light and happy.

"I love you, lass," he said in a voice that made it obvious.

"A legendary couple, huh?" I mentioned with a smile and I raised my brow. "Many children?"

He groaned. "What have I gotten myself into?"

We laughed. What an amazing future we had to look forward to.

He hugged me and whispered, "I wouldn't have it any other way, lass. I'm the happiest man on earth."

I walked down the wide, curving stairwell into the Great Hall. Dad held my arm in his, helping me navigate the steps in my high heels. I swallowed, able to see the huge crowd of people through my veil and felt a bit nervous. I didn't remember inviting that many people to my wedding.

"Just look at Sin, Kate," advised Dad with a wide smile.

I'm not sure he ever envisioned me getting married. I followed his advice. My soon-to-be husband looked incredible standing up on the dais. He wore a black suit and was so sexy and mouth-watering that I wished we could skip right to our wedding night. His brothers stood by his side and Camma and Nera waited for me on the other.

Finally, we reached the dais. Dad placed my hand in Sin's. He kissed my cheek and stepped away. I winked at him and turned back to my Druid. Love, satisfaction and triumph shown in his gaze and happiness flooded my mind and soul. I had always imagined a life alone, never believing I would find anyone that would understand my gift and my uniqueness. Instead, I found someone that celebrated my differences and made me stronger by being his mate. My life to this point alone only prepared me and saved me for this moment.

Thank the Goddess. Let our legendary life together begin.

About the Author

Sophia lives among the green, rolling hills of Kentucky. She is the happy wife of a wonderful, sexy man and mother of two precious girls. She enjoys spending time with her loving, supportive family and fabulous friends. Tennis, cooking, and watching and playing sports are her favorite past-times. Writing is a joy for her and she loves to give people a story to escape into after a long day.

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