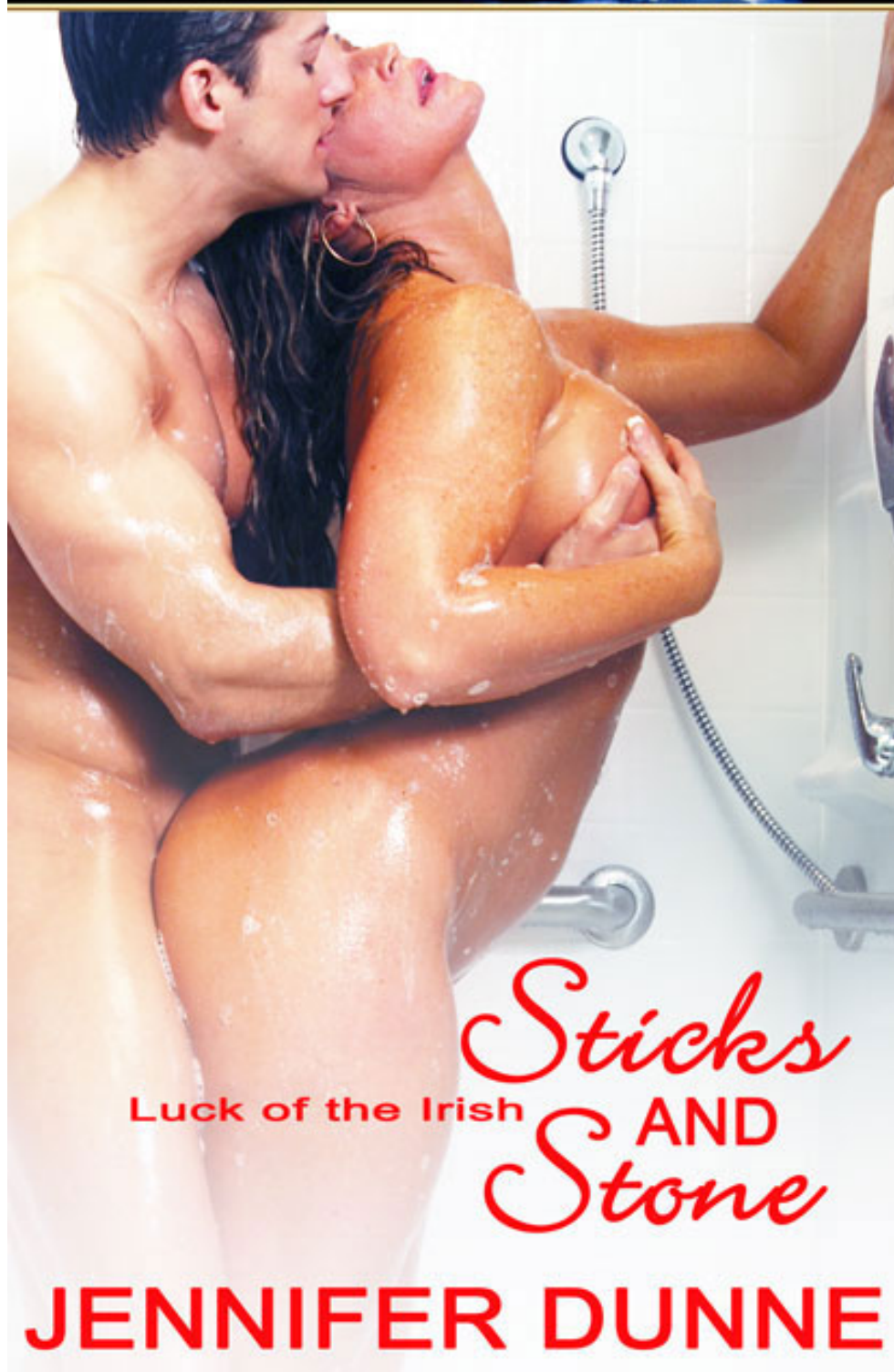


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Sticks
Luck of the Irish AND
Stone

JENNIFER DUNNE

Sticks and Stone

Jennifer Dunne

Part of the Luck of the Irish series.

Three men and a leprechaun? When Dermot, Greg and Zev meet at the wedding of a past lover, the little green guy offers each man a golden opportunity to possess his greatest desire. Unfortunately, figuring out what that greatest desire amounts to isn't as easy as it sounds.

Wealthy, powerful and recently voted the year's most eligible bachelor, Dermot Stone has it all. But he wants more. He wants magic. Irish witch Eileen Daniells has her hands full with a busy writing and teaching career. The last thing she needs is an arrogant American stirring up trouble among the faerie creatures in her woods. When a tree spirit appears and seduces him, Dermot thinks he's getting the wish the leprechaun promised — only to discover it may cost him his life. Eileen uses her powers to save him, but Dermot must confess to his secret sexual longings before her rescue can be complete. Could she be the answer to his heart's deepest desire?

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Sticks and Stone

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STICKS AND STONE

Jennifer Dunne

Prologue

Ireland, present day

"This isn't how I envisioned present-day Ireland," said the nerd at the table.

Dermot Stone wished he would quit talking. Every moment Dermot had to spend responding was one less moment available for the task of getting shit-faced drunk.

"So what were you envisioning?" asked the other guy, Greg something. A lawyer.

The nerd shrugged and took another drink of Guinness. "I don't know. More people wearing green, I guess. A few more redheaded wee Irish lasses. Where are the pet leprechauns?"

Dermot really needed to switch tables. He was far from sober himself, but at least alcohol didn't turn him into a babbling idiot. He sighed and looked around the wedding reception. A huge number of people, probably hundreds, having themselves a grand old time and here he was sitting at a table with a lawyer and an intoxicated nerd. Wonderful.

Greg the Lawyer took a sip from his beer, grimacing a bit. The guy clearly wasn't a drinker. "So, Zev, are you here for the bride or groom?" he asked the nerd.

"The bride. Tami's an ex-girlfriend."

That caught Dermot's attention. "Really?"

"Yeah. We were together for about a month when she was living in the states."

"She was my *nanny*," said Dermot. "I lost my virginity to her."

"Your *nanny*?" asked Greg. "How old are you?"

"Never mind," said Dermot, immediately wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. "It's a long story."

"Yeah, but you're, what, early thirties? She's gotta be about your age, maybe even younger." Greg started to count on his fingers.

"It's not important." It was definitely time to steer the conversation away from himself. "What about you? Are you here for the bride or groom?"

"Groom. But I did sleep with the bride."

"All three of us slept with Tami?" asked Zev. "That's a pretty big coincidence."

"Well, I don't mean to show disrespect for the bride on her wedding day," said Greg, "but it's not all *that* big of a coincidence, if you know what I mean."

The men all nodded.

"I want to hear more about the nanny thing," said Zev. "I bet she sure as hell didn't have to fight to get you in bed by nine."

Greg laughed. "Yeah, I have to say, I really got ripped off in the babysitter allocation. If I was good, all I got was a Popsicle."

"Maybe he *wasn't* so good."

"We were talking about leprechauns earlier," said Dermot, desperately trying to change the subject. "Have you ever tried to catch one?"

"No, not recently," said Zev.

"I know how. Want to try?"

"Now?" asked Greg.

"Sure. It's not like this reception doesn't suck."

"I know I could use an extra pot o' gold," said Zev.

"We all could. Let's go."

* * * * *

"Heeeeeeeeere leprechaun!" shouted Zev, as they trudged through the woods. "Here, leper, leper, leper!"

"Please shut up," Dermot requested.

"I think I see one," said Greg. "Hand me the lantern! Oh, no, wait, it was just a couple of ogres and a troll."

"Catching a leprechaun is serious business," said Dermot. "If we do see one, don't grab it. He'll just vanish. And he'll do everything he can to trick you, so don't let yourself be fooled. Let me do the talking."

"Are we lost?" asked Zev. "I think we're lost."

"We've been walking for two minutes. You can still see the lights from the party."

"Oh. I've never been a big forest kind of guy. Give me a good meadow any day."

Dermot ignored the nerd and continued walking. Even though the leprechaun hunt had been an elaborate method of changing the subject, he had to admit that he was now genuinely excited to be out here. He would never admit it to these idiots, but he truly did believe in leprechauns and other such magic, and if only he could find...

"Does anybody know any good Irish songs?" asked Zev.

"When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," Greg suggested.

"I don't know that one."

"Me either."

Zev began to sing "Twist and Shout". Badly.

Dermot rolled his eyes. They were in Ireland, for God's sake. You were supposed to be able to hold your goddamn liquor.

They marched through the woods for a few more minutes, Zev singing the entire time. Dermot was just about to bash him over the head with the lantern, bury him in a shallow grave, and turn him into another Irish myth when he heard a rustling from the trees.

"Shhhh!" he said.

Zev and Greg fell silent.

The three men stood there, listening.

Nothing.

"False alarm," Dermot said. Zev resumed his singing...and the rustling started again. Dermot waved his hand for silence. As soon as Zev shut up, the rustling stopped.

Greg walked over to the source of the rustling and peeked through the leaves and branches. "I can't see if there's anything in there or not."

"Sing some more," Dermot told Zev.

Zev resumed his abysmal rendition of "Twist and Shout". Moments later, something burst out of the shrubs and danced in the path in front of them.

A little green man, only three feet tall. Dressed entirely in green, with a red beard, a pipe, and a hat. He danced around in time with Zev's singing.

"Keep singing!" Dermot ordered.

The leprechaun, if this truly was a leprechaun, continued dancing around.

Dermot crept forward, waving for Greg to stay where he was. The lawyer nodded and watched the leprechaun in amazement.

If the legends were true, and at this point there was no damn reason to believe that they weren't, he could capture the leprechaun by holding his gaze. He kept moving closer and closer, watching the little green man happily dance around, trying to catch his eye.

The leprechaun made eye contact.

Dermot didn't look away.

The leprechaun stopped dancing and stared at him.

"I've got him!" said Dermot, forcing himself to hold the leprechaun's stare. "Everybody stay cool!" He took a few more steps forward and crouched down, putting himself nearly nose-to-nose with the creature. "Are you a leprechaun?" he asked.

The little green man laughed at him. "Well, of course I'm a leprechaun! What did ye think I was, a unicorn?"

"Then I demand that you take us to your gold."

The leprechaun looked pained. "Me gold? Now, what would a fancy lad such as ye be needin' with me gold?"

Dermot realized that the other two men were moving closer, but didn't dare break eye contact to tell them to scram. "You must take us to your gold."

The leprechaun nodded, sadly. "Aye, lad, I must. Unless ye wish to strike a bargain."

"No bargains."

"Well, aren't ye an impatient one? Perhaps ye should listen to the offer before ye get all huffy about me gold. There are few things finer than gold, save but for a nice pair o' shoes...and, perhaps, wishes?"

"Wishes?" asked Zev.

"Aye, wishes. I can grant ye three wishes. One for each. I can see into your hearts and grant your greatest desire, I can. Now, isn't that much better than a silly pot o' gold, lad?"

Dermot thought about that. He had all the money he wanted, but his greatest desire...

The leprechaun smiled. "I see a reasonable lad before me. Let me free, and I will grant ye each one wish. Ye will get what your heart most desires."

"Go for the wish!" said Zev.

Dermot nodded. "Fine. I release you." He broke eye contact with the leprechaun, hoping he hadn't made a huge mistake.

But the leprechaun didn't run away. Instead he looked at each of the men in turn. "Aye, I have seen what it is ye most desire, and so it shall be granted."

"When?" asked Dermot.

The leprechaun chuckled. "Have patience, lad. Leprechaun magic is a tricky business. It will work differently for all of ye. But it will work, that I promise."

Greg held a hand to his forehead, as if suddenly dizzy, and then fell to the ground. Within seconds, Zev had fallen as well.

“What did you do to them?” Dermot demanded.

“Don’t worry, ‘tis nothing to be concerned with. Their greatest desire lies elsewhere.” The leprechaun pointed into the woods, in the same direction they’d been walking. “Yours lies this way.”

The leprechaun winked, laughed merrily, and then dove back into the leaves. Dermot stood there, listening as the laughter faded.

He suddenly realized that Zev was gone. Vanished completely. Where had his greatest desire taken him?

It didn’t matter. Dermot’s desire lay straight ahead.

Leaving the lawyer snoring on the path, he headed deeper into the woods.

Chapter One

Dermot Stone picked his way carefully through the darkened forest, cursing his stupidity. Wandering through unknown woods with only a single Coleman lantern for illumination, in search of his heart's greatest desire, was a calculated risk. He knew what he desired more than anything—to see members of the faerie realm. Incontrovertible proof that there was more to life than the relentless pursuit of money and power that formed the bedrock of his father's life. Proof that Dermot was right to believe in more, in the magic of unseen possibilities.

Already tonight he'd seen, and captured, a leprechaun, although that could have been an elaborately staged prank. The drunken nerd who'd accompanied him had disappeared suspiciously, possibly to set up the second stage of the joke. And it had been the nerd's singing that summoned the leprechaun.

Still, it would show more wit than his beer-soaked brain had seemed capable of to mastermind a prank of this magnitude. Dermot couldn't see what he would gain from such a stunt, anyway. No, he was mostly convinced that he'd bargained with a real leprechaun. And the little man had promised that Dermot's greatest desire lay this way.

He checked his watch. He'd been walking for twenty minutes. Another twenty should bring him to the edge of the forest. If he didn't find his heart's desire before then, he'd use the GPS feature on his cell phone and call his driver to come pick him up.

His trek through the woods might be foolish, but he had a plan, and a contingency plan. His stupidity lay in what he'd done before he and the two other wedding guests had caught the leprechaun. That's when Dermot had revealed that Tamara Fuller had been both his last nanny and his first lay.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. The tabloids would have a field day with that news. Dermot could only hope the men didn't know who he was, or wouldn't remember his confession in enough detail to repeat.

At least he hadn't been foolish enough to tell them the details of his relationship. His parents had pulled him out of prep school for the summer and hired a nanny for a grand trip of Europe that was supposed to unite them as a family, or some such foolishness. He'd protested that he was nearly in college and far too old for a nanny, especially one who was barely older than he was, but his parents had insisted that he not be allowed on his own in countries where he was over the legal age of consent. His mother had visions of gold-digging foreign women lurking in wait for American heirs they could slap with paternity suits. Given the number of out of court settlements his father had arranged for himself, her fears seemed fully justified.

Dermot had suspected at the time that the young woman, tall and lean with a dancer's graceful strength and model's stunning looks, had been hired because his father wanted to sleep with her. She matched Dermot for height, but he was awkward and uncomfortable with his newly added inches, and seemed to become even more clumsy and tangle-footed whenever he was around her. He had been appropriately awful to her in the way only a self-involved teenager could be. The poor girl had been at her wit's end when she finally decided the only way to keep him in line would be a good, old-fashioned spanking. She'd pulled off his pants and shorts, shocking him into immobility, and laid him across her lap, her miniskirt riding up so that he was stretched across her bare thighs. What followed had been like no spanking he'd ever known.

Thinking of Tamara, his ass cheeks heated. He still remembered how her small, soft hands felt slapping his ass, over and over again, while his hardening cock rocked against her bare thighs with every blow. Then his cock had slipped between her legs. She clamped her thighs around him, and he thought he'd died, the pleasure was so intense. Every slap of her palm against his ass forced his cock down, stroking against

her thighs. When she lifted her hand, he pulled back, stroking the other way, so that she could do it again.

He'd been terrified that he'd embarrass himself by coming in her lap, the fear keeping him rock hard longer than he'd known was possible. Her slaps grew harder and faster as her breathing turned ragged. Then she gave a strangled gasp, and her thighs relaxed.

"Let that be a lesson to you," she'd said. "Now pull up your pants and go." He'd run to the bathroom and jerked off, harder than he'd ever come before, his vision fogging and his body shaking with the force of his release.

After that, he'd found a reason to be "punished" every night that his parents were out. Since they went out almost every night, his ass was incredibly tender by the end of the trip. A few soft swats would be sufficient to have him gasping across Tamara's legs, fighting not to come.

The last night of their trip, his ass had throbbed even before she'd pulled down his pants. The light scrape of cotton and elastic over the burning skin had made him instantly hard. Tamara had licked her lips, gazing at his straining cock, and wrapped her fingers lightly around it.

Dermot whimpered.

"You're a bad, bad boy," she whispered, her fingers tightening until they gripped his cock with a delicious pain that made it even harder. "Would you like to be a bad, bad man?"

"Please," he begged.

She pushed him to the floor. He landed on his ass, the pain making his vision swim and forcing a bead of come from the tip of his cock.

"Lie still, and don't come," she'd ordered. Then she'd knelt on the floor, straddling his hips. His rigid cock disappeared beneath the mysteries of her miniskirt. She shifted position, and the head of his cock touched hot, wet flesh. Then his cock was pushing past her slick skin, sinking deep inside her. She rose up and down on him, faster and

harder, until his tender ass was banging against the floorboards with every stroke. He gasped, fighting for control, struggling not to come, when everything was heat and wet and pain.

"Now, Dermot. Come now," she ordered.

"I...I can't."

She rode him harder, her breath coming in harsh gasps. He grunted and strained beneath her, but the weeks of spankings had trained him to endure her painful pleasures without coming. He couldn't convince his cock that this time, it was okay to come.

"I'll just have to make you come," she panted. Leaning forward, she slid her hands beneath his shirt. It was the first time she'd touched him anywhere except his ass or his cock, and he trembled even harder as her nails scratched over his stomach, blazing a trail up to his nipples. She flicked the twin erections with her sharp nails, then rolled the hard pebbles between her fingers. He groaned in agony, waves of heat pouring straight to his groin. He bucked beneath her, slamming his ass against the floor, rocking his cock against the tight walls of her vagina.

He felt the cool wetness of tears running down his cheeks as his head thrashed wildly from side to side. He was blubbering like a baby. That's all he was, a baby. He wasn't man enough to come inside her.

"Please Tami," he begged. "Make me come."

Her fingers tightened on his nipples. With a hard thrust, she took his cock deeper than ever, until even his balls nestled in the wet welcome of her flesh, at the same time she savagely twisted both his nipples. White fire flashed a burning path to his groin, where it sparked an explosion he couldn't contain.

His body arched up from the floor and she covered his mouth with her own, swallowing his hoarse cry. Then he was coming, flooding into her, his entire body rigid and shaking as the orgasm tore through him.

Her inner muscles clenched around his cock, pulling the last of his come from him. Then he was swallowing her cries as she shuddered and shook above him, at last collapsing limply on top of him like a quivering human blanket.

Their fused mouths gentled, becoming a slow, deep kiss. Dermot sighed as their breathing faded to normal, and Tamara lifted her head.

She smiled with an almost feline expression of satisfaction. "My poor sweetling, I made you cry."

Her tongue swept over his cheek, gathering the dried salt of his tears. He closed his eyes and groaned.

"Yes, you did. Please, do it again."

Dermot smiled, warmed by the memory. Then he realized he'd stopped walking, and had been absent-mindedly rubbing his cock while he was lost in the past. His rigid cock was stretching the lines of his Armani slacks in a way the designer had never intended.

He cupped his balls, thrusting against the heel of his hand. What the hell. Maybe he should find a nice, dark tree to lean against, drop his pants, and toast the bride the way she deserved.

He lifted the lantern in his other hand, looking for a suitable spot, when a flash of white to his right caught his attention.

He dropped his hand to his side. He wasn't letting some paparazzi catch him fondling himself in the woods. Shrugging out of his suit coat, he draped it over his free arm and held it before himself to shield his erection from sight.

"Who's there?" he called.

A woman's silvery laughter floated through the trees.

He turned off the faint path he'd been following and threaded his way between the wych elms, ashes, and sycamores. Their branches swayed suggestively, urging him on, as if someone had run between them a moment before.

He burst from the trees into a small clearing, no more than eight feet across. The twined branches of the trees on the far side of the clearing formed an impenetrable wall. The woman he'd followed had disappeared.

"Where are you?" he called.

Airy laughter tinkled from his right, very close. He lifted the lantern higher, throwing a beam of light to the far end of the clearing, and realized an elm he'd thought was part of the surrounding trees was actually a foot or two inside the clearing. The woman must be hiding behind it.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

The beam of his lantern revealed her pale face, peering out at him over a fork in the trunk.

He stepped closer, and realized she was not standing behind the tree, looking over it. She was standing *inside* the tree.

Now that he knew what to look for, he saw that the forked limbs of the tree looked remarkably like uplifted arms, and the smooth gray bark of the trunk resembled the curves of a woman's body, concealed by a flowing garment of bark.

"A dryad," he whispered.

His heart hammering in his chest, Dermot slowly set the lantern on the ground, his gaze never leaving the dryad's. Moving as if he was forcing his way through liquid resin, he took one step closer, then two. Then he was standing in front of the dryad's tree, near enough to touch her if he dared.

Dermot had been accused of plenty of personality faults by his competitors or the press, but no one had ever called him timid. He lifted a hand and touched the dryad's cheek.

Her silvery laugh cascaded over him, along with a confetti of leaves and seed pods that fell from the branches above. She stepped forward, passing from tree to human form so smoothly that she seemed to simply appear before him.

Her white skin gleamed in the reflected lantern light, like a moving, living statue. A naked statue.

She had a slim, slight build, what he'd previously called "willowy." Inanely, he wondered if "elmy" was a word, since she obviously lived in a wych elm, not a willow.

The dryad had wild brown hair, reminding him of an out of control chia pet, framing a face that could have been carved by Michelangelo. In a less jaded age, men might have been reduced to tears by the sight of such beauty. Even Dermot, who had known his share of beautiful woman and recipients of the plastic surgeon's art, felt an urge to fall to his knees before her and beg to be allowed to worship her.

His gaze traveled from the dangerous perfection of her face, to the safety of her delicate breasts. They swept up in graceful symmetry to her pointed nipples, already tight and hard with arousal.

He swallowed, flexing his fingers as he imagined playing with those nipples. His cock surged with anticipation as he pictured his mouth closing over one of the dryad's breasts, while he tugged and fondled the other.

He wanted to go to her now, to begin loving her immediately, but knew that a creature of such perfection would never allow the coarse touch of a human lover. It was enough to admire her, and imagine himself loving her.

He let his gaze drift lower, admiring her trim, flat abdomen, then lower still.

Dermot blinked. Her body was completely hairless. Her legs joined smoothly, like two branches meeting at a fork. A pang of frustrated desire shot from the back of his throat to his groin, as he realized she might not even be capable of making love in the human way.

As if she knew what he was thinking, the dryad swept one hand across her smooth abdomen, then beckoned him forward.

Dermot swallowed. His cock, already primed by his memories of Tamara and his admiration of the dryad's body, surged to full readiness, jutting forward like a mighty oak. Throwing his jacket aside into the wall of trees surrounding them, he revealed the

bulging eagerness of his cock. He pointed to his tented slacks, then to her, and raised one eyebrow. The dryad nodded.

Hardly daring to believe his luck, Dermot undid his belt and dropped his pants and drawers, ruthlessly kicking the fine Armani into the fallen leaves and other debris ringing the dryad's tree. Lifting her arms above her head, she wordlessly offered him her body.

He stepped forward, the tip of his cock just touching the flat plane of her stomach, and skimmed his hands over her hips. His eyes told him he caressed a woman's body, but his fingers said they glided over the smooth contours of polished wood.

The dryad stepped closer, trapping his cock between their bodies. Dermot drew in a shaky breath, as his hard cock pulsed against her equally hard flesh. She wound her arms about his neck, and pressed her lips to his. Warm, living lips, as hard and demanding as he might dream.

He slid his hands higher, over her smoothly polished skin, and cupped her breasts. They fit perfectly in his hands, the hard, tight nipples nestling in the center of his palms.

Her head tilted back as she sighed like leaves in the wind, urging him to further exploration. He rotated his palms over her nipples, wringing a low, rustling moan from her.

Dermot was momentarily thrown by the way her breasts remained stationary, with no bounce or jiggle to them. But the dryad seemed to like having him play with them, just like a human woman would, so he continued.

Lowering his head, he replaced one hand with his mouth. Her breast was smooth and solid beneath his lips and tongue, more like a carved statue than a living woman. But her shuddering sighs were growing in volume and intensity, now sounding like storm-tossed branches, so he ignored the strange sensation. He circled the hard peak of her nipple twice with his tongue, then started to suck on her breast. His other hand tugged her opposite nipple in time with his mouth.

She swayed backward, drawing Dermot after her, until she bumped into the solid trunk of her tree. Pressing his head against her breast with one hand, she arched toward him, urging him to draw her breast deeper into his mouth.

He tried to suck harder, but his lips slid off her rigid breast. So instead, he bit down on her nipple, using that as an anchor.

She whispered something in Gaelic, and sweetness filled his mouth. He swallowed reflexively, then realized he was drinking the legendary ambrosia of the gods. The fluid, thin and sweet like watered down maple syrup, poured from her breast. He bit down harder on her nipple, sucking her sweetness, eager to swallow every last drop. He could feel the ambrosia coursing through him, heating him and hardening him, making him the proper mate for an immortal faerie.

He pumped his hips, stroking the oaken length of his cock along her stomach. She lifted one leg over his hip, urging him to plant his cock in her fertile valley.

Dermot slid his free hand down, between her legs, and felt for her opening. It was there, right where it should be, as rigid and unmoving as her breasts.

He circled one finger around the smooth curve of her opening, gauging its size. It would be a tight fit for his cock, but pleasantly so. Sliding in and out of her rigid ring would feel similar to a human lover's encircling thumb and forefinger, stroking his cock from the base to the head and back again until the teasing pressure drove him mad and he exploded in her hands.

Dermot slipped two fingers inside the dryad, testing her readiness. Her inner space was snug, not much bigger than the opening, and coated with a thick, slightly sticky fluid.

He swallowed another mouthful of ambrosia from her breast, and hungrily tongued her nipple, wondering if she would allow him to feast on her other nectar after he'd satisfied her with his cock the first time, before he took her with his cock a second time and finally came himself.

Removing his fingers, he guided the head of his cock to her opening, then slowly slid inside. The hard ring of her opening caressed the rigid length of his cock, and her wet, sticky walls held him in a deep embrace.

She sighed, a soft exhalation of rustling leaves, as he groaned. He'd never felt anything so good. She was the perfect woman. She might even make him come the first time, although he hoped not. He wanted to prolong this pleasure as long as possible.

He slid mostly out of her, her rigid ring stroking the length of his cock all the way to the head, then thrust deeply into her waiting wetness, her opening stroking him down to his balls.

Dermot lifted his mouth from her breast, throwing his head back and groaning. "Oh, God, that's good."

The dryad moaned something in Gaelic, and stroked his shirted back with her stick-like fingers. Her hands roamed downward and cupped his ass.

Dermot sucked in a quick breath, hope swelling in his heart. It was too much to ask for, to expect that this beautiful, ethereal creature would —

Smack.

The dryad slapped his ass, the openhanded blow striking his bare skin as if she was beating him with a whisk broom.

Dermot gasped as she hit him on the other side. Then she found her rhythm, her stick-like fingers slapping his ass again and again, a rain of fire on his tender flesh.

He began moving with her, each blow on his ass driving his cock through her hardened ring, sheathing his full length in her sticky depths.

"Oh, God, yes," he begged. "I've been a bad, bad boy. Hit me again."

The dryad complied, her branching fingers caning his ass until the skin burned and he was floating, flying, transported by the pain to a place of such unutterable beauty he knew he must have reached the faerie realm.

A different kind of pain, deep in his scrotum, wrenched Dermot back to the forest.

He was no longer moving with the dryad's beating. In fact, he was no longer moving at all.

Something warm and wet flowed down the back of his legs, each stroke of the dryad's hands adding another trickle. She'd whipped his ass until he bled, and showed no sign of stopping.

He started to pull out of her, until the agony in his scrotum stopped him. Blind panic consumed him. He was stuck!

He reached between their bodies, feeling where they were joined. Either he'd swollen or she'd shrunk, but there was no way his cock was sliding through her ring.

"Wait. Stop!"

She continued beating him, and Dermot grabbed her arms to make her stop. The dryad growled, at least that's what he thought the noise of clattering, lashing branches translated to. Her face was distorted by fury, and he wondered how he'd ever seen it as beautiful. Terrifying and alien, yes, but it wasn't remotely beautiful now.

She fought him, her hands clawing and whipping at his chest and back, tearing the fine cotton of his dress shirt. Finally, in desperation, he let go of one of her arms and punched her, a swift right cross to the jaw.

"Ow!"

It was like slugging a tree.

Dermot cradled his injured hand beneath his other arm, whimpering. It felt like he'd broken all four fingers.

The dryad began lashing his ass again, all semblance of erotic play gone. Each blow made his vision swim in a wash of red pain. If he'd been capable of it, he'd have fallen to his knees.

He stopped trying to resist, his mind floating in a hellish parody of his earlier ecstasy. Idly, he wondered why his state of abject terror hadn't reduced his cock to the size of his thumb. Then he wondered what the tabloids would make of the manner of

his death when his body was found. He'd wanted to accomplish so much with his life. He'd made a good beginning, started a number of new projects and initiatives within the company and accumulated a sizable reservoir of personal favors among the rich and powerful while building his share of the family fortune. But none of that mattered. Instead he'd be remembered as a blight upon the family name, the Stone who died in the bizarre Irish sex scandal.

A Gaelic shout pierced the fog of his pain, causing the dryad to redouble her efforts to beat the life out of him. The shout was repeated, followed by an angry confrontation between a cloaked woman and the dryad. The golden-haired woman held up her fist, bright blue light radiating from between her clenched fingers. She shouted again, and the dryad held up one arm to shield her eyes.

The ring around Dermot's cock loosened fractionally.

Crying with relief, he jerked his cock free. He turned to run from the dryad, but his legs gave out and he collapsed on the ground, sprawling in the wet mud. The abandoned Coleman lantern still burned where he'd left it, casting its dim radiance in a small circle around it. In its light, Dermot could clearly see the sticky black mud for what it was—his blood mixed with the dirt of the forest floor.

He looked up, just in time to see the dryad fleeing back into her tree. The woman who had saved him hung the glowing blue crystal from one of the branches, then turned to face him.

"Help me," Dermot croaked. Then the last of his strength deserted him, and he sprawled face down in the bloody mud.

Chapter Two

Eileen pushed back the hood of her cloak and surveyed the scene. She'd managed to intervene before the dryad had killed the man, but it had been a close thing. He was sprawled face down in the mud made from his own blood, his shirt slashed to tatters, and his otherwise fine looking ass scored with bloody welts. He'd tried to fight at the end, rather than being completely under the dryad's spell. Eileen hoped he'd continue to be a fighter, because he wasn't out of the woods yet.

She gazed at the pool of bloody mud and shook her head. "Fertile ground, indeed. Come springtime, we'll see how many new dryads your foolishness has seeded."

She picked up his discarded pants, then bent to pull him to his feet. The man groaned, and staggered upright. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders to help support him, she led him to her cottage.

"It's a good thing for you I found you when I did. Dryads plant their seedlings in mud formed from the decayed leaves of their tree and the blood of their human mate. It's the rare man who survives the encounter."

"I didn't know," he whispered. "That was never mentioned in the legends."

"It wouldn't be, now, would it?"

They reached her cottage, a traditional square stone building with a thatched roof. The only obvious concession to the twenty-first century was the satellite dish attached to the chimney.

She pushed open the door and led the man through the living room and kitchen, and into the small bathroom.

"Into the shower with you," she ordered. "That mud's got to come off so I can clean your cuts."

She slid his arm from around her shoulder and stepped back, so he could remove the remains of his shirt. It was the first time she'd gotten a good look at his face.

Even with mud caked in his wavy dark hair and smeared across his classically proportioned face, he was handsome. And vaguely familiar. She didn't know any Americans, which his accent clearly proclaimed him to be. Even if he hadn't spoken, who but an American would be wandering around the woods in designer slacks and dress shoes?

There'd been some sort of posh wedding held at one of the nearby estates. Helicopters and limousines had been ferrying guests from Gatwick and Shannon for two days. He must be one of the rich and famous wedding guests. That was why he looked familiar. She'd probably seen his picture in the news.

He winced as his tattered shirt ripped free of the blood congealed on his body, then kicked off his muddy shoes and socks and stepped into the shower. Eileen turned the shower massage to a warm mist, and opened the taps.

Dirt and blood washed down his back, pooling around his feet. With the filth rinsed away, she could finally see the extent of his injuries. It wasn't as bad as she'd feared. Vicious welts crisscrossed his back and sides, but it looked as if his shirt had protected him from the worst of the dryad's attack. His ass was red and starting to swell, covered in welts and shallow cuts, but only three or four of them seemed at all deep. Some antiseptic and bandages would take care of those. It would burn like hell, but maybe that would teach him not to go sticking his cock into places where it didn't belong.

While the gentle mist of water dissolved the last of the mud and blood sticking to his back, she distracted herself from the sight of his naked body glistening beneath the steaming water by shaking out her cloak and carefully hanging it over one of the pegs on the wall. It was smeared with mud where his arm had rested across her shoulders, and where his side had pressed against her. The sight reminded her of the strength she'd felt in his lean muscles, even though they'd trembled with exhaustion. Strength enough to sire a dozen dryad saplings.

"Turn around," she snapped. "You'll be needing to rinse all the blood off before I start fixing you."

Bracing himself against the wall with one hand, he slowly pivoted to face the spray. Muddy blood coursed down his chest in thick streams, dividing to flow down either side of his swollen erection, encased in drying amber.

Eileen's eyes widened, as she realized what this meant. She'd freed him from the dryad's embrace before he'd come. The good news was, there would be no young dryads sprouting in the spring. The bad news was, if the dryad's sap hardened around him, he'd be dead well before spring.

She needed to sit him down and clean off the sap, but where could he sit with his ass torn to ribbons? The hard wooden chairs in the kitchen were out of the question. The ergonomic chair in her study was designed for long hours in front of a keyboard, but would make cleaning his cock extremely awkward. Then she remembered the boudoir chair in her bedroom, the normally useless piece of furniture good only for collecting laundry. The soft round seat, high cushioned back, and lack of arms made it perfect for what she needed to do.

She picked up a washcloth and swiped it over him, washing away the last of his grime, then turned off the shower. As he stepped onto the braided rag rug, she handed him a towel.

"Follow me."

She led him into her bedroom next door, and sat him on the boudoir chair. He collapsed onto the cushioned pouf of rose-patterned chintz and stared dully ahead, the towel grasped limply in one hand.

Leaving him there, Eileen gathered a fresh washcloth and an enameled basin filled with warm water. He was sitting exactly as she'd left him when she returned.

"Spread your legs," she ordered. "I have to clean your cock. The dryad's sap is stuck to it."

He looked down with mild interest. "Is that why it didn't shrink?"

"Yes." Kneeling between his spread legs, Eileen dipped the washcloth in the warm water then stroked it over his cock.

She tried to remain impartial and professional, like a nurse, but soon lost that battle. The man was leaning back, his eyes closed and the back of his head cradled by the top of the chair, in a posture of complete exhaustion. As the washcloth rubbed up and down his cock, he sighed softly. The amber melted away. Eileen's brisk abrasions gradually turned to gentle fondling, stroking him from his balls to the slit head.

He had a beautiful cock. Not overly long, and nicely thickened, it was the perfect size and shape for sucking. As the washcloth glided over him, she imagined it was her hot mouth cleaning him, until she ached with frustrated desire.

She rubbed her thumb over the wet, velvety head. Was that a trace of sticky sap she detected? There was only one way to be certain she'd removed all of the dangerous substance.

Dropping the washcloth into the basin, she ran her fingers up and down the length of him. The man sighed again, and his cock twitched in response.

Eileen bent her head and opened her mouth, sliding her lips over the head of his cock. With her tongue, she slowly circled the delicate skin, tasting the faint sweetness of the dryad's sap. She licked him until all she could taste was warm male, then slid her tongue into the slit, probing for any lost droplets of amber.

The man gasped and jerked awake.

"What are you doing?" he yelped.

Eileen reluctantly let his cock slide out of her mouth. The wet head bobbed tantalizingly in front of her, and she licked her lips, eager to take more of him into her mouth. But first, she had to explain.

"I washed off as much of the sap as I could. But the only way I can be certain it's completely gone is to use my tongue. Human saliva dissolves the sap better than plain water."

He frowned. "That doesn't seem right. What if I didn't have someone to lick me clean?"

"Any human fluid will do," she admitted. "If you'd rather do it yourself, just make sure you spread your come evenly over your cock."

The man flushed and looked away, then mumbled, "You'd better do it."

"Do what? Make you come?"

His flush deepened, and he seemed to find the plants on her windowsill utterly engrossing.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Use your saliva. I have...difficulty coming. It takes a very long time."

Eileen's eyes widened. She'd heard of men who had trouble getting hard. But she'd never heard of any who stayed hard yet couldn't come. She'd have suspected him of trying to trick her into sucking his cock, except he was obviously extremely embarrassed about admitting to his trouble.

She'd see if she could find any references in her books for such a problem, and if there were any spells or herbal remedies that might fix it. Later. First, she had a hard, wet cock to finish licking.

Running her tongue over her lips again, an eager wetness blossomed between her legs. She wanted him in her mouth, but if he really did have trouble coming, maybe he'd stay hard long enough to take her up the vagina, too. Her mouth watering at the possibility, she leaned forward, parted her lips, and let his wet cock slide inside.

She started where he'd interrupted her, pushing her tongue into the slit in the head of his cock. The man whimpered, and his cock twitched, thumping against the roof of her mouth.

Deciding that might be too much stimulation for him, she slid her lips further down his shaft, and licked the soft fold below the head. He sighed in pleasure, his skin warm and pliant beneath her tongue, over an inner core of ironwood.

Slowly, a quarter inch at a time, she crept down his length, pulling his cock deeper and deeper into her mouth. Each time, she stroked her tongue over, under, and around the newly devoured skin.

He was very vocal, moaning and whimpering with each sweep of her tongue. Her sex trembled in aching sympathy, clenching every time he moaned, dripping hot lubricant every time he whimpered. She'd never been so turned on by sucking a cock, and she redoubled her efforts, seeking her satisfaction in his bursting climax.

He didn't come. She reached the base of his cock, then took a deep breath and relaxed her throat to let him slide all the way to the back so that she could lick his balls. She thought she'd go insane from the perfection of holding his entirety in her mouth, tonguing his balls in their nest of rough hair while the tip of his cock slid up and down against the back of her throat. The ache between her legs built to an insatiable demand that only this perfect cock could fill.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at him. His fists clenched the chintz cushion and his head rolled restlessly from side to side.

"Please," he whispered. "Oh, please. I can't take it. Make me come."

Eileen pulled back, letting his cock slide out of her mouth. It glistened, red and wet and impossibly hard, bobbing and swaying gently before her. He flexed his hips, blindly seeking the hot cave of her mouth.

"No..." he moaned.

She stood and unzipped her jeans, then quickly stripped them off. Her damp panties followed, as did her T-shirt and bra, until she was as naked as he was. Reaching down, she wrapped her fingers around his cock. He moaned again and thrust forward.

"Not here," she cautioned. "Come to my bed."

He opened his eyes and stared at her in glazed confusion. "What?"

"Make love to me."

He blinked. "But...protection?"

She smiled and shook her head. "The only thing your seed is good for at the moment is making saplings."

Groaning, he staggered to his feet. Eileen kept her hand wrapped around his hard cock as she backed toward her bed. She liked leading him across her room this way.

With her panties no longer absorbing her lubrication, she could feel her readiness slicking the skin of her thighs as she moved. She could hardly wait to have him inside her, filling her the way he'd filled her mouth moments ago.

Her legs bumped the side of her bed, and she awkwardly clambered up, never releasing her hold on his cock. Lying on her back on top of the rose-patterned duvet cover, she bent her knees and spread her legs, then guided him in.

His thick cock slid smoothly through her eager opening, until he was fully sheathed within her. They sighed in unison.

Slowly, he began pushing his cock in and out, teasing her the way her tongue had teased him. Eileen moaned and flexed her hips, urging him onward.

"Faster," she begged.

He complied, increasing the speed and force of his thrusts.

"Faster," she insisted. "Harder."

His cock pumped in and out of her, wet sounds of suction accompanying his harsh grunts. Her desire rose, pulsing waves of need gripping her until she shook and shuddered beneath him. But something was wrong. She sensed, with the same sense that had led her into the woods that evening, that his pleasure was not building the way hers was. He wasn't going to come.

"What...is it?" she gasped.

"I can't," he said, his voice tight as if he was fighting back tears. "Not like this. Please. Would you please, slap my ass?"

Surprise almost broke her out of her building passion. Almost. But his cock was still pumping in and out, driving deep and hard, each stroke carrying her closer and closer to the release she strained for.

"But...you're hurt."

"Not enough. Please."

Not really sure what he was asking for, Eileen lightly swatted his pumping ass. His cock jumped inside her, and his eyes crossed in pleasure.

"Harder," he grunted.

She slapped him again, hard enough to sting her palm. His cock jumped again, and they both moaned.

Soon, she had her legs locked around his hips, holding his cock firmly seated inside her. Slapping his ass with both hands, she rocked his rough pubic hair against her clit and made his cock surge and thrust within her. Her hands moved faster and faster, until they were in constant motion and she and he jiggled and shook, gasping and moaning. She tightened around his cock, squeezing him until he whimpered and begged, and she whimpered and begged him to come now, please, now.

With a hoarse cry, he exploded within her. She clung to him, shaking, as her orgasm ripped through her, a second one following immediately afterwards. And still his hot seed spurted into her, filling her completely and spilling out to pool beneath her hips.

They were crying, sobbing with the glory of their final release, holding each other as the tearful shudders finally subsided. Still locked in an intimate embrace, they rolled beneath the covers and slid into exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

Eileen woke to a confused sense of being trapped. She opened her eyes to see the man she'd rescued during the night sprawled beside her, the tangled bedclothes pulled over her and around him, pinning her to the bed. Cautiously, not wanting to wake the exhausted man, she inched out from under the cocooning covers.

As soon as her arms were free, she pulled herself into a seated position. She reached to push the covers off of her legs, then saw the rusty stain flaking off of her palms. Blood. The man's blood.

"By the sacred circle," she whispered. "What have I done?"

She buried her face in her hands, unable to look at the evidence of her shame. That she, not just a practitioner of the light but a guide to thousands of others through her books and lectures, should have behaved so! She had struck him, again and again, for her own selfish pleasure. She was no better than the dryad, beating him until he bled.

She felt him stir beside her, but could not bear to look at him, not after what she had done.

"Good morning," he said softly, his American accent strangely sharp to her ears. Was he angry at her for using him so?

Taking a deep breath, Eileen lowered her hands and looked at the man. He was smiling.

"I don't know how to thank you," he said. "For rescuing me from that hideous tree creature, and for what you did afterward."

She shook her head, amazed at his foolishness. "I struck you."

Rather than showing justifiable anger, his smile deepened. "Yes."

He was remarkably dense, even for an American. She held out her hand, still streaked with his blood, and waved it in front of his face. "You were hurt. Bleeding. And I struck you."

Now he did frown, but not in anger. His brow furrowed, and he glanced from her hand to her face.

The warmth faded from his expression. He could have been carved from stone. "I should not have asked you to. I apologize. Thank you for your assistance, and I won't trouble you again."

He turned as if to leave, and she grabbed his shoulder, wrenching him back to face her.

"Are all Americans as thick as week old pudding? You apologize, when it is I who have injured you? And I a priestess!"

He blinked. "A priestess? Of...what, exactly?"

"Of the light, of course. Did you think Ireland just happened to be filled with stones that glowed of their own will and power?"

"I don't understand."

Eileen took a deep breath. "No, of course you'd not. I'm a priestess of the light, what you would call a witch. One of our most sacred tenets is 'Do what thou wilt, an it harm none.' And I have harmed you. Now, are you seeing my wrong?"

He shook his head. "Honestly, no. I don't see anything of the kind. You saved my life. And I asked you to give me an ass-slapping. Begged you, if I recall correctly."

Heat blazed in her cheeks and she looked away. She recalled begging him for a few things, too. But in her case, they'd brought only pleasure, not pain.

She smoothed her hand over the coverlet, flattening the wrinkles, wishing she could restore order to everything so easily.

"It's filled with the dryad's magic, you were." Hearing herself falling back into the lilting brogue of her youth, Eileen shook her head. "You were not to have known. But I knew. The wrong is mine."

The man blew out his breath in a sharp huff. "Fine. If your religion says you were wrong, you were wrong. I assume there's a penalty?"

She nodded, and gathered her tattered composure. When she spoke again, she had once again mastered her tongue. "The law of three. All that we do, for good or ill, returns to us threefold."

"So you're saying if I slap your ass three times as many times as you hit mine, we'll be even and everything will be all right again?"

Eileen groaned. Americans. "Then you would have caused harm to me, and that harm would be visited threefold upon you."

His arm snaked its way beneath the covers to find and caress her hip. Startled, she finally looked at him. He was smiling.

"I can live with that."

Chapter Three

Dermot grinned at the woman's wide-eyed expression. He shouldn't tease her, not when she was so obviously distressed over what she perceived as a fatal flaw in her character. But he seemed unable to convince her that, far from hurting him, she'd helped him.

Maybe his words couldn't convince her. But he could show her.

Gliding his fingertips in soft circles over her hip, he coaxed, "If you're so convinced you've done something wrong, I know how you could apologize."

"But I have —"

"No. We have a saying, actions speak louder than words."

Slowly, she nodded. "*Ní bheathaíonn na briathra na braíthre.* Words do not feed the friars."

He pulled her back beneath the rumpled covers, until she was stretched out beside him. His fingers danced over her ribcage to stroke and fondle her breast. Dermot scraped a light circle around her aureole with his fingernail, smiling at her sudden intake of breath. Palming her soft mound of flesh, he rotated his hand slowly, then faster, then slowly again.

Her nipple hardened against his palm. Lifting his hand, he flicked the tight bud with his fingertip.

She moaned, and he smelled the sudden musky scent of her desire. This was going to be even easier than he thought.

Slowly, carefully, he lifted himself up and moved over her, kneeling between her legs. All the while, his fingers continued to flick and stroke her breast.

Leaning down, he replaced his hand with his mouth. She sighed as he swallowed half her breast, his tongue alternately swirling around it and rasping across the sensitive tip.

Her fingers crept up, as if moving without her conscious volition, and buried themselves in his hair, pressing his head tight to her breast. She wanted him to suckle her, but that wasn't what he had in mind.

No longer needing his hand to play with her breast, Dermot reached down between her legs to find a new playground. His fingers slipped easily through the wet folds, already spread in welcome, and found the swollen bud of her desire.

His tongue swirled around her nipple, as his thumb circled her bud. Then he flicked his tongue across her nipple, at the same time flicking her heated bud.

She gasped, her hips rising, and warm liquid flowed across his fingers. His hardened cock jumped, eager to enter her willing warmth.

A low growl of frustration escaped him. He'd been trying to ignore his cock, focusing on the woman beneath him and her reactions. Now was not the time to search for his own satisfaction. He was trying to show her something.

Again, he flicked both nipple and bud. Again, she gasped and opened more for him. He wasn't going to be able to resist her body's mute entreaty much longer.

His cock hummed like a high tension wire, heavy and hot and aching to slide into her wet depths. And he would, he promised himself. Later. First, he had a lesson to teach her.

Lifting his head, he stroked her breast with his lips, until only her pebbled nipple remained in his mouth. She moaned, and whispered an incomprehensible Gaelic entreaty. Her hips lifted and fell, seeking fulfillment, trying to drive her swollen flesh against his fingers. But his hand moved with her, riding her, so that her only relief was the teasing flick of his fingers timed with the flick of his tongue. That only enflamed her more.

Her head whipped restlessly from side to side, and her fingers convulsed in his hair. She began to whimper softly, her cries growing steadily in volume. His fingers slipped, unable to keep his grip on the pulsing bud in the flood of eager liquid flowing from her.

She lifted her hips, seeking to follow up on her brief advantage. It was the perfect moment.

Finding the swollen bud again, Dermot pinched it lightly, just as his teeth closed around her nipple in a love bite.

She screamed, lifting her hips nearly a foot off of the bed, and the hot flood of her satisfaction bathed his hand. She held the pose, her body bent into a quivering arch, for ten long seconds. Then she collapsed. Tremors continued to ripple through her limp body.

She blinked slowly, gradually opening her eyes and focusing on his face. He tried not to look smug, but suspected his masculine pride still showed upon his face.

"What did you do to me?" she whispered.

"Did you like it?"

"Aye. It's pudding I am. Hot, happy pudding."

Dermot schooled his features to show concern. "But I bit you. And pinched you."

"Did you now?"

She was still too far gone in the aftereffects of her orgasm to understand what he was trying to show her. He'd have to speak more directly.

"I broke your law. I harmed you."

"Oh and truth, there's no harm done. Quite the opposite."

"Even though I bit you? And pinched you? Both of those are painful, aren't they?"

She blinked again, marshaling her scattered wits. Then her eyes widened.

"I thank you for your teaching. There was no harm done last night, was there?"

He smiled, and stroked her sweat dampened cheek. "Quite the opposite."

Dermot trailed his fingers around her ear, pushing her honey gold hair away from her eyes. He hadn't noticed last night, but it looked like it would frame her alabaster face in soft curls—once it was brushed, that is. Right now, it was flattened from where she'd slept on it and streaked with sweat. The sight made him want to bury his face in her hair, inhaling the scent of her, and teasing his cheek with a thousand soft caresses. Instead, he ran his fingers through it, while he studied her face and eyes.

Wide and clear, her eyes were a peculiar shade midway between blue and green. He wasn't certain if they were really blue, and only colored with a reflection of the emerald green pillow-case she lay on, or if they were truly so unique. Her nose was small and gently rounded, above dark red lips swollen with passion.

He remembered those lips, feathering his cock with tender kisses as she slowly swallowed him. His cock jumped, aching at the thought of entering the warm cave of her mouth again. Despite the exhausting events of last night, just looking at this woman was enough to make him hard again.

He trailed a fingertip across her lips, parting their seam. Slipping his finger inside, he stroked the wet fullness of her lower lip, and pictured the head of his cock teasing her this way. His cock pulsed with swollen desire, a painful pleasure Dermot wanted to extend forever.

As if she knew what he was thinking, the woman's tongue wrapped around his finger, drawing it deeper into her mouth. He groaned. Then she began sucking on it.

His groin was on fire. The leaping flames were swelling his cock like a cooked sausage. He was going to burst unless he cooled himself in her flowing waters. The agony was unendurable. He hoped it never stopped.

He realized he was grunting softly, in time with the seductive pull of her mouth.

Pulling his finger free, he silenced himself by closing his mouth over hers. Their kiss was hard, savage, an openmouthed duel of teeth and tongues. He tasted blood, but neither of them could stop now.

She pulled his tongue deeply into her mouth, sucking hard, and Dermot's eyes crossed as the pleasure tore through him.

He covered her body with his, her tender breasts crushed beneath his chest, her stomach quivering against his hard, hot cock. Driving one hand deeply into her hair, he held her head and thrust his tongue as far into her throat as he could. With his other hand, he reached between their bodies, searching for the swollen bud he'd so recently teased.

As soon as he touched it, she bucked beneath him. He swallowed her sharp cry, their mouths still fused together, and rubbed her—hard. Writhing, moaning, and pumping her hips, she sought relief. Dermot's fingers kept slipping, she was so wet, unintentionally teasing her to the point of near madness. Twice she shuddered, tremors rippling through her body, only to continue rubbing against his hand after a brief pause.

She clutched his back, and when that was not enough, his ass. She ground her hips against his, churning against his rigid cock. Dermot's eyes were closed, but the flares of pleasure were so strong, bursting behind his closed eyelids in neon reds and greens, he was sure he'd gone blind.

They broke the vacuum seal of their kiss, both of them gasping for air. She shoved at his hips, lifting him from her body, and his trapped cock sprang free to hang between her legs. She moaned, a ragged groan of pure pleasure that begged for more.

Dermot panted, struggling for control, as he stroked the length of his cock up and down her slick cleft. Her pulsing flesh wrapped around him, caressing him, and his control broke. He thrust inside her. She was so open and eager, she barely felt his entrance, sliding smoothly up the wet passage.

Another shudder rippled through her. Taking advantage of her momentary stillness, he began slicking his cock in and out. Soon she was moving with him, rising to meet his thrusts as he grunted and pumped against her.

The damned tears that he never could master pooled in the corners of his eyes. His head spun, crazy colored lights and snatches of songs echoing in his mind. His cock was so huge, he couldn't imagine how he could fit inside her, and every brush against her hot, wet flesh was like broken glass scraping across his sensitive skin.

He whimpered, then begged. "Please."

On his next thrust, she surged upward, sheathing him to his balls, then wrapped her legs around his, locking him in place.

Another whimper broke from him. "Yes. Oh, yes, please."

Her palm smacked his ass, crushing his balls against her swollen bud, and he cried out as lightning flared in his groin. Wildly, he kissed her face—her cheeks, her chin, her nose, her mouth. Anyplace that he could reach. His hands groped for her breasts, squeezing and kneading until her sharp gasps told him he'd found the most sensitive spots. And all the while, she kept slapping him, the frantic tempo building until he was rutting madly, unable to think of anything but appeasing the pain.

With a howl torn from deep within him, he came, pouring into her. And still her hands rose and fell against his ass, rocking him against her as her inner muscles clenched and squeezed his cock. Waves of euphoria ripped through him, white-hot and glowing red, carillons of bells and wheeling flights of birds bursting into wing. It was if his entire brain had been rewired, and now he heard with his eyes and tasted with his ears.

A moment later, her triumphant scream slashed across his senses, and she collapsed beneath him.

She stroked his back, with the leisurely caress of the well-pleasured. Dermot snuggled against her, nuzzling her neck and licking the salty skin. Gradually, he became aware of a chill against his naked back. Lifting his head, he saw that their enthusiastic lovemaking had thrown all the covers from the bed.

Then he turned to look at the woman beneath him. Eyes closed, she smiled like a sleepy angel. A well-loved and completely sated angel.

And he didn't even know her name.

Dermot groaned. Rolling off of her, he covered his eyes with his arm. God, what had he done? Last night had been...well, he could be forgiven for not thinking clearly after all he'd been through. But he hadn't been under any enchantments this morning. He could have thanked the woman for her assistance, promised her a check as an expression of his gratitude and to ensure her silence, and been gone.

But no. He'd gone out of his way to explain his hidden desire, making sure she fully understood how much he enjoyed getting his ass slapped. And then he'd begged her to do it again. Him. Begging for a spanking. God, the press was going to have a field day with this. They loved tawdry sex scandals.

He could see the headlines now. "Most Eligible Bachelor's Secret Bedroom Shame" "Kick-Ass Millionaire Enjoys Getting Ass Kicked" "Spanking Makes Stone Hard"

He'd been so careful. For years, he'd camouflaged his inability to come the normal way as solicitousness for his partner's needs, and a preference for hand jobs that couldn't possibly get his partner pregnant.

He groaned again, as an even worse thought hit him. Last night, the witch had said his seed was sterile, good only for creating saplings with a dryad. But he had no idea how long that condition lasted. Was he infertile for good? Or might his sperm even now be eagerly attacking one of her ripe eggs?

God. Either one would be a disaster. He slammed his head into the pillow, but it was too late to knock any sense into his brain.

The woman rolled to her side and brushed her fingertips across his chest. Despite himself, he felt his nipples tensing.

"Is it a problem you're having?"

She sounded like an uneducated farm girl again, which he'd noticed she did under passion. His masculine pride longed to indulge in some puffing and strutting, at this proof of how deeply he'd rocked her with his lovemaking. But now was not the time.

"We didn't use protection," he said, still shielded by his arm.

Her hand on his chest stilled. "Oh."

That answered his question, then. The dryad's effect was just for last night.

"I think it will be okay," she said softly, as if she was trying to convince herself as much as him. "My last period was not too long ago. I shouldn't be able to get pregnant now."

Dermot snorted, thinking of the old joke. What do you call a couple who relies on the rhythm method for birth control? Parents.

Speaking of which, he could just imagine explaining this disaster to his parents. "Mom, Dad, I met this beautiful Irish witch. She saved me from a dryad and I got her pregnant."

He groaned again. "I don't even know your name."

"Oh! It's right you are!"

She breathed deeply, no doubt making her delicious breasts jiggle and sway most alluringly. Dermot resolutely kept his arm over his face. He would not look. He would not be tempted again.

"My name is Eileen Daniells. What's yours?"

He dropped his arm and stared at her. She watched him out of those guileless blue-green eyes, waiting for his answer. "You don't know?"

She shook her head, pursing her lips. He couldn't think about those lips, where they'd been, what they'd done. He forced his gaze back to her eyes.

"You looked familiar when I saw you last night," she admitted. "I thought you had come from that big wedding. You're obviously an American."

There was no point in lying to her. All she had to do was pick up any news account of Tami's wedding and his photo would be there. The fact that he'd attended his former nanny's wedding had been billed as a great human interest angle, a softening of the Stone image.

"My name is Stone. Dermot Stone."

She smiled, as if the name meant nothing to her. "Dermot is a good Irish name."

"My mother is Irish. Well, of Irish descent. She always makes sure everyone knows her family moved to America long before the potato famine brought so many Irish immigrants over."

He worried for a moment that he'd offended her, but she just nodded sagely. "I understand what she means. When the American publishers first started approaching me, one had the nerve to ask if I wanted an American 'expert' to ghost write my books, after I'd already sold three of them here. We're the most literate country in Europe—well, maybe second after Iceland, it depends who you ask—but the fools couldn't get past my accent."

"That's why you decided to get rid of your brogue?"

"Yes, they—" She frowned at him. "How did you know that?"

"It comes back when you're excited. I figured it was a recent change." He paused, then asked the question hammering at his heart. "What kind of books do you write?"

"Some history, but mostly nonfiction references on being a priestess of the light. What my publisher calls 'New Age' material."

He smiled. Of course. She was a witch. She wrote books about witchcraft. "How are they doing?"

"They sold very well over here, that's why Silver Moon was interested in publishing me. My first book of theirs is already in its fourth printing, and they contracted for an open-ended series. The second book will be out in two months."

Dermot whistled. He'd heard of Silver Moon. They had double digit growth rates and 20% profits, when most publishers were struggling for any growth and happy to make 8% profits.

He cast his mind back to the cocktail party cum investment meeting he'd attended in New York, where he'd heard those figures. All but the most inept New Age

publishers were doing well, but Silver Moon had a sizable lead over its competitors. One of the reasons given had been their ability to identify talented writers and build a following for them. And one of the writers they'd crowed loudest about had been an Irish witch named Eileen Lyons.

"You're Eileen Lyons."

She blushed, her fine alabaster skin glowing rose. He was amazed that someone so uninhibited about sex could be embarrassed about public recognition.

Dermot breathed deeply, the bands of fear that enclosed his chest shattering like sugar candy. She would never expose his secret to the press. Her career depended on her image, and any scandal would destroy her completely.

"Yes, that's the name I write under. But how did you guess?"

"I was approached about investing in the company a few months ago. I remembered the name."

She tilted her head, resting it on her bent arm, and studied him. "You're uncommonly clear sighted for one who doesn't walk the path."

"I pay attention and I know what I want." He shrugged. "No great trick."

"And what is it you want?"

Money. Power. To make his mark in the world and surpass his father's achievements. And right now, her.

"To spend the rest of this day in bed with you," he admitted. "But I can't. I've already missed a breakfast meeting with our Dublin directors. That was only a status meeting, and I'll get as much from reading their reports as from listening to them. No doubt they figured I was sleeping off the wedding celebration, and carried on without me. But I have to be in London by one o'clock. I can't miss that."

She rolled away from him, then leaned over the edge of the bed to gather some of the covers. "So you won't be staying in the area, then?"

"No. The only reason I was down here was the wedding." He reached out and touched her shoulder, turning her to look at him. "I'd like to see you again, Eileen. We could meet in Dublin."

She wouldn't meet his gaze. "Is it seeing you've a mind to do, or could you as easily keep your eyes closed?"

He blew out his breath in a disgusted snort. "Yes, I want to make love to you again. But it's more than that. Beautiful women throw themselves at me all the time. I don't need to import lovers. I want to see you again because there's something special about you, something I don't have the time to explore right now even though I wish I could. I hoped you might feel the same way."

Now she looked at him, gazing deeply into his eyes as if she could read his soul. For all he knew, she actually could.

But he'd told the truth. The sex had been phenomenal. After all these years of denial, finding a lover who understood and encouraged his desires was like a dream come true. And to have her be an intelligent, successful woman on top of that? If there was one thing he admired more than anything else, it was a person who'd succeeded because of their own tenacity and competence. God, he couldn't have asked for a more ideal woman.

A chill ghosted over him, and it had nothing to do with his nakedness. She was exactly what he'd asked for. And the leprechaun had delivered her.

Dermot leaped out of the bed. His clothes were in the bathroom where he'd left them, although the pants had been hung on a peg to dry.

"Where's my jacket?" he asked.

"You weren't wearing one. Just your shirt and shoes. You're lucky I saw your pants, black as they are."

"Damn." Now that he thought about it, he recalled carrying the jacket over his arm as he walked through the woods, his blood warmed by the Irish Whiskey.

"Are you in such a hurry to be leaving?"

"No, it's not that. I wanted to give you my business card. It has my office number, and I'd give you my cell phone number, too, so you can call me no matter where I am. Except the cell phone was in the pocket of the jacket."

She lifted the pants off the peg, and held them out to him. The wool blend fabric was stiff with dried mud and blood.

He took the pants and stared at them, momentarily at a loss. "I can't wear these."

"Then you'll be walking through the forest naked."

Grunting, he stepped into the pants, grimacing as bits of the forest floor flaked off against his legs. He picked the shirt up off the floor and shook it out, revealing the full extent of its tatters. He tossed it onto the floor again. "That's useless."

"You'll have your jacket to wear again soon enough," she reminded him. "I'll lead you back to the dryad's clearing."

She pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, wrapped her stained cloak around her shoulders, and led him into the forest. She moved silently, discouraging any attempts to talk to her, so he just watched her lithe body swaying beneath her cloak.

The mere sight of her, even shrouded in that cloak, was enough to make his blood pulse. There were so many more things he wanted to explore. Were the backs of her knees ticklish or would kissing her there leave her dripping with excitement? Would she gasp and moan in pleasure if he buried his face between her legs and loved her with his mouth and tongue? Would her breasts bounce and sway with her energetic movements as she straddled his hips and rode his cock? Now that she knew his name, would she scream it as she came?

She stepped into a clearing and swept her arm out to gesture at the leaf-strewn ground. "This is it."

He recognized the wych elm at once. Eileen's crystal still hung from the branches, and he'd swear the tree was sulking. That was the only explanation for the pronounced droop of the branches.

Skirting widely around the tree, in case the dryad managed to break free of the charm binding her and lunged for him, he searched the surrounding forest. His jacket was tossed over the lowest branch of a neighboring sycamore.

He pulled it from the tree, then dug in the inside pocket. After pulling out a business card and a pen, he scribbled his cell phone number on the back, and handed the card to Eileen.

For a moment, he thought she wouldn't take it, but then she reached forward and plucked it from his hand.

"I'm not promising I'll call."

He smiled. "You'll call."

"Arrogant American!"

She turned and stalked away. Dermot watched her go, her long, swinging strides reminding him of her strong legs, locked around him. When the forest had swallowed her, he sighed and took out his cell phone. He punched in the number of his driver.

"Meet me at the eastern entrance to the woods in half an hour," he ordered.

"Your luggage has already been loaded in the limousine. Would you like to leave directly for the airport?"

"Unload it. I'll need to go back to the manor and shower before I can be seen anywhere."

He snapped the phone closed before his driver could ask any more questions. Shrugging into his coat, he stared for a moment at the last place he'd seen Eileen. Then he sighed, and opened his phone again. He'd never expected to use the GPS feature. He'd never expected a leprechaun to grant him his heart's deepest desire, either. He needed to learn to broaden his expectations.

Whistling softly, Dermot headed for his rendezvous.

Chapter Four

"Arrogant American," Eileen muttered under her breath as she stalked back to her cottage. He expected her to call him, did he? And drive up to Dublin for a quickie at his convenience?

Her anger softened, her steps slowing and her lips curving at the memory of their lovemaking. No, it would never be a quickie with him. That she could be sure of.

"Dermot." She whispered his name, enjoying the feel of it in her mouth. Almost as much as she'd enjoyed the feel of him in her mouth.

A flush of heat swept over her, her breasts tingling and moisture gathering between her thighs. By the circle, the man was a fantastic lover.

She smiled, fingering the card he'd insisted she take. Maybe she'd call him after all.

She glanced at the card, instantly recognizing the logo of a globe chiseled from granite. Stone International Industries, makers of applesauce, zippers, and everything in between. Stone.

She sank to her knees in the leaf-strewn path. Now she knew why his face had looked so familiar. It had been staring at her from the magazine racks on her last trip to the market.

Dermot Stone, multimillionaire son and heir presumptive to Randolph Stone's multi-billion dollar empire, had been declared the most eligible bachelor of the year. A collage of photos had shown him on the arms of models, actresses, and beautiful women from the wealthy elite.

Eileen knew she was pretty enough not to scare the livestock, but certainly not in the same league as the women he normally dated. What could he possibly find of interest in her? Her mind and spirit? He hadn't had a chance to discover much of either. They'd barely spoken to each other.

Then she knew. He'd never told any of those other women how he liked his sex. He wouldn't have told her, if he hadn't been desperate for release from the dryad's spell. Now she was the only woman he knew who could give him what he wanted. She could be a toothless hag with the interpersonal skills of a filth-covered hermit, and he wouldn't care, as long as she slapped his ass while his cock was filling her.

She crumpled his card in her fist. She wouldn't be calling him. Ever.

* * * * *

Dermot frowned at the numbers scrolling by on his screen. It was an enticing proposition.

He shifted position, trying not to think about his enticing Irish witch. It seemed that everything he did lately reminded him of her.

With his usual thoroughness, he'd read her first Silver Moon book. She'd described a ritual of renewal performed naked in the woods. The image that had sprung to his mind at her words was so arousing, he'd had to stop reading and relieve his massive hard-on.

Dermot sighed and forced his attention back to the report on his screen. Silver Moon publishing was a lucrative business opportunity. The returns weren't quite up to his standards, but he could easily trim costs in warehousing and transportation by piggybacking on other Stone investments.

Then there was the matter of increasing the value of their assets. With her beauty, self-possession, and quick wit, Eileen was a natural for the talk show circuit. They could start her out on some of the smaller networks that catered to women's issues—much of the resurgence of interest in witchcraft was part of a women's empowerment groundswell. Slanting the material to attract potential buyers would be trivially simple. The viewers would love her. And they'd become ardent buyers of Eileen's books.

The fact that many network studios were located in Manhattan, where his primary office was also located, was an added bonus. There'd be many hours surrounding her

television appearances during which Eileen would be at loose ends, and in need of companionship. Companionship he was eager to supply.

They wouldn't have to spend all their time in bed. There were plenty of places he'd love to take her, showing her his favorite parts of the city. They'd dine at his favorite restaurants, listen to music or dance at his favorite clubs, maybe even go to a show or a museum if she was interested.

He smiled, anticipating the leisurely process of getting to know everything that interested her. Everything she enjoyed. Everything that gave her pleasure.

He absent-mindedly caressed the casing of his computer with his thumb, stopping as soon as he realized what he was doing. Instead, he reached for the phone.

He'd waited for her to call him. He'd waited two weeks, longer than he was accustomed to waiting for anything. So now he'd take matters into his own hands.

* * * * *

Eileen shook her head, certain she'd heard her agent incorrectly. Switching the phone to her other ear, she asked, "Would you repeat that, please?"

"Silver Moon is considering booking you on the talk show circuit for your next book's release, and needs to know if you'd be comfortable discussing your beliefs on the air."

That's what she'd thought he'd said. "Why? They never showed any interest in publicity before."

"Some shakeup in the company, I hear. The new management wants to increase the value of the company's assets, and that means building their lead author's name recognition."

"Stone."

After a pause even longer than the usual transoceanic delay, her agent said, "That's what the rumor mill says. But how'd you hear that all the way in Ireland?"

“Never you mind. Tell them I’ll be coming to discuss it with them, if they’ll be paying my way.”

Although he tried, her agent couldn’t convince her to give a more definitive answer. He promised to relay her response and hung up.

Eileen put down the phone and stared out her kitchen window at the trees beyond. She’d wondered how Dermot Stone would react to her not calling him. Now she knew.

She’d called him arrogant before, but she hadn’t comprehended the magnitude of his arrogance. He was willing to buy her publisher—or at least invest heavily in the company—to get her to come to him.

A horrible suspicion rose in her mind, souring her stomach. Did he expect to buy her along with the company? Was the television offer supposed to be the incentive to lure her into his bed?

She sighed. No. That didn’t seem like Dermot’s style.

Her gaze wandered over the pile of magazines stacked on the kitchen table; lifestyle magazines discussing his eligible bachelor status, entertainment magazines with photos of the premier events he’d attended, and business magazines analyzing a merger between one of his companies and the offshoot of a French conglomerate.

She recalled one of the quotes he’d given the business magazine. “I have no desire to win every game. But I only play when I can be confident of winning.”

He’d been referring to his skill at picking underrated companies in which to invest, returning 80% of them to profitability within five years. He had been scoffed at by the business press for turning down lucrative investment deals, only to have his instincts proven correct two or three years later. Some companies were now hesitant about approaching him as a possible investor, fearing that if he rejected their offer, no one else would be willing to risk the investment.

But his words now haunted Eileen with a different meaning. He would not play until he was confident of winning. Buying her publisher was surely the opening gambit of his play. So what was it that he hoped to win?

Feeling suddenly restless, she grabbed her cloak and headed for a walk in the woods. Without her conscious volition, her feet led her to the dryad's clearing. Her ward stone glittered blue and white in the sunlight, now just a pretty trinket twisting in the light breeze.

The dryad stepped out of the wych elm, her arms crossed beneath her breasts.

"Is it you, then?" she asked in Gaelic.

"Aye. It's sorry I am to be disturbing you," Eileen answered in the same tongue. "I was only just out for a bit of a wander."

Reassured that Eileen wasn't going to trap her inside again, the dryad slipped back into her tree. Eileen felt a brief surge of hot emotion, demanding the tree woman be chained within her elm with no hope of ever escaping. But that was foolish. The dryad's binding that prohibited her from enchanting mortal men to their deaths had been broken by a leprechaun. Restoring the binding was sufficient action. To punish her further simply for being what she was would be wrong.

When Eileen had confronted the dryad after stopping her attack on Dermot, she had forced the dryad to seek refuge within her tree and then trapped her there. But that had been a matter of expediency. She'd needed to make certain the dryad wasn't enticing anyone else to her tree while Eileen was caring for her victim. After Dermot left, she'd released the dryad and reset the binding to the proper level, allowing the creature her freedom, so long as she caused no harm.

"No harm," she whispered. She'd explained that tenet to Dermot. Maybe the best way to test the temper of his intentions was to see whether or not he was acting in accordance with her beliefs. Was he doing as he wished, regardless of others, or would he first ensure his actions caused her no harm?

When she looked at it that way, perhaps her haste to ascribe the worst possible motive to him reflected poorly on her. "Cause no harm," she repeated.

Very well. She would fly to America and meet with him, to discuss the possibility of a talk show appearance.

Her blood heated at the thought of seeing him again. Although it had been two weeks, she could still taste his lips on hers, and feel the imprint of his body. His lovemaking had transported her in a way she hadn't known was possible. She'd salvaged her pride by insisting it had been a lingering effect of his encounter with the dryad, enhancing his appeal. He'd certainly seemed less than appealing when he'd hurried away from her without a by-your-leave, and all but ordered her to schedule another session of lovemaking. In retrospect, she may have overreacted to his innate arrogance. He was an American, after all, and a rich one. He was used to giving orders. It didn't mean he thought less of her, any more than her brogue meant she was a fool.

Now that she'd found a way to soothe her conscience and see him again, she eagerly anticipated finding out if it could be as good as she remembered.

Humming softly to herself, Eileen turned to leave and spotted a branch that had fallen from the dryad's tree, and been half-buried in the mud. She plucked the fallen branch from the ground, then knocked it against her leg to dislodge the dried mud clinging to the smooth gray bark. She'd clean it up and bring it to America with her. The thought of striking Dermot's firmly muscled ass with the supple branch made her breath quicken and wet heat build between her legs.

Swishing the wych elm stick through the air, she trotted back to her cottage.

* * * * *

Dermot scanned the line of passengers coming from the Aer Lingus flight to the luggage area. He'd given Eileen first class tickets, so she should have been one of the first people off the plane. But that didn't mean she'd be one of the first to reach the luggage carousels. She might have gotten a slow line through customs.

He turned to his driver, Chris, looming behind him for protection. "If I don't tell you otherwise, take us to my apartment and cancel Ms. Daniells's reservation at the Niko."

The driver couldn't quite conceal his smirk. "And keep the limo's privacy screen up and the intercom off. Yes, Mr. Stone. You've already given me thorough instructions."

Struggling to control his rising impatience, Dermot schooled his features to polite indifference and went back to searching the crowd for Eileen. There! His breath caught in his throat. Still wearing the cloak he remembered so well, she seemed to float down the corridor, a breath of Irish breeze mysteriously finding only her among the crowd of passengers and wafting through the soft curls of her honey gold hair.

Lifting his arm, he waved to her. "Eileen!"

Those incredible blue-green eyes focused on him, going wide as she realized who had called her name. Then, like sunlight breaking through a cloud-filled Irish sky, she smiled.

"Dermot."

She stepped out of the flow of people, and crossed to meet him.

Chapter Five

At the sight of Dermot waiting for her, a warm glow of contentment filled Eileen. He looked out of place in the crowded airport, standing as still and unmoving as the stone he was named for while currents of passengers broke and swirled around him.

Threading her way through openings in the crowd, she crossed to his side.

"I didn't expect you to meet me."

"Officially, I sent my driver to meet you." He nodded his head to the side, directing her attention to the man in a charcoal gray suit and mirrored sunglasses standing behind him to the left.

The man nodded. "Ma'am."

"Hello." She smiled and nodded in return, then turned back to Dermot. "Unofficially?"

"Let's get your luggage. We can talk in the limo."

"Of course. It's a blue rolling case, with a crescent moon appliqué."

She wasn't sure what reaction she'd expected from Dermot, but it wasn't this cold aloofness. He'd gone to a considerable amount of trouble to get her here. And there'd been no disguising the pleasure on his face when he'd spotted her in the crowd.

As they followed the driver—judging from his size and attitude, Eileen suspected he was a bodyguard as well—through the crowd, she turned and asked softly, "Are you happy to see me again?"

"More than you know. Seeing you pass through that security gate was like seeing the sun after two weeks of rain."

She felt her cheeks glowing, and glanced away, before her eyes could reveal all her hopes and longings.

"It's a weakness I have for a finely tuned phrase," she muttered.

Dermot chuckled. "I'll have to remember that."

They reached the designated luggage carousel and fell silent while they watched the various cases and bags circle past. She pointed out her suitcase to the driver. He grabbed it, then carried it to the waiting limo.

Eileen frowned slightly. A long black car, its sleek lines marred by the profusion of antennae sprouting from it, waited at the curb for the two of them. It contrasted sharply with the crowded mini-sedan that had carried her and five members of the Sullivan clan to the airport.

She'd appreciated the amenities of her first class seat on the long flight to America. Rather than being equally appreciative of the first class ground transportation, however, the luxurious automobile only served to underscore the differences between her and Dermot.

Once again, she wondered how he could possibly be interested in her. But she had resolved not to prejudge Dermot's motives. She would wait to hear whatever he had to say.

She slid onto the gray leather seat, and stared at the consoles before her. The bench seat faced two televisions, connected to a DVD player and VCR, a computer hookup, a 12-CD stereo, and a fully stocked bar. A silvered window made it difficult to see out the front of the vehicle. No doubt the driver would be unable to see them at all.

Dermot slid onto the seat beside her. The driver closed his door, sealing them together in the back of the limousine. A moment later, the car rocked slightly as the driver stowed her suitcase in the trunk. Then he took his own seat, his image blurred and darkened through the privacy screen.

Dermot pressed a small button amid the cluster of controls on his door. "Midtown," he ordered.

Another touch of a button, and soft music began playing, some classical piece that was all violins and woodwinds, drowning out the faint sounds of the people and traffic surrounding them. As the limo pulled away from the curb, Dermot turned to face her.

"Now, we can talk."

"If talking was all you were wanting, you could have taken another trip to Ireland. You know where I live. Instead, you bought my publisher."

Dermot shrugged. "I didn't buy it. I invested in it. Pending their ability to implement improvements."

A chill ghosted down her spine. Her appearances on talk shows. Was Dermot buying her after all?

"And if you don't invest?"

"Your publisher won't go bankrupt, if that's what you're concerned about. They were looking to expand. Without investment capital, they won't be able to grow as fast as they would otherwise, but the underlying business is still sound." He reached over and clasped her hands in his. "I offered to get you talk show bookings because I know it's something our publicists could arrange, it would increase the value of Silver Moon's assets, and you'd make more money. You'd be a natural in front of the camera. That's true, even if you want nothing more to do with me."

"But...?"

"Why didn't you call me?"

His hands still held hers prisoner, and she was strangely reluctant to break free of his grasp. Instead, she turned her head and stared at the buildings and other cars moving past.

"Eileen, why didn't you call me?" he asked again.

"What was there to say?" she countered. "We shared one night together, but how many more could we share before our differences drove us apart?"

"A relationship between us is doomed, so you don't even want to try?"

She shrugged, still not meeting his gaze. "Belike."

"I refuse to accept that."

She couldn't help the smile that pulled at her lips. "Arrogant American."

That was one of the things she found desirable about him. Not his arrogance, which infuriated her, but his calm assurance and soul-deep dedication to a course of action.

She turned, to find him watching intently, waiting for her answer. Tugging one of her hands free, she reached up and stroked the side of his face. "You see extremely clearly for one not on the path."

He closed his eyes, leaning into her touch.

"I want you. And yes, I arranged all of this to get you here where I could tell you that. But you didn't have to come."

He stroked his fingertips along her hairline, from her forehead to her ear. Eileen shivered with desire. She wanted to turn to him, capture his mouth with kisses, strip off her jeans and his slacks, and make love to him on the wide leather seat.

"I'm here now. But wanting, having, and keeping are three different fish."

He cupped her cheek in his palm, splaying his fingers into her hair while his thumb outlined her lips. With his other hand, he cupped her breast, his thumb flicking the nipple.

She gasped, instantly wet as her body remembered the lesson he'd taught her during their morning together. Her nipple beaded into a tight, aching bud.

He flicked his thumb against it twice more, then pinched it lightly. She moaned, arching into his touch.

"I see the wanting," he whispered huskily. "And you can be having as soon as you give the word. Let the keeping take care of itself."

She opened her mouth, letting his thumb glide over her lower lip. Eagerly, she sucked on it, sweeping his thumb with her tongue.

Dermot's breath hitched, then he whispered, "Say the word, Eileen."

"What word?"

"Yes."

Dimly, the shreds of her common sense struggled to be heard through the sensual haze of his hands caressing her body.

"And what question would I be answering 'yes' to?"

"Stay with me tonight and be my lover."

She let out her breath on a shaky sigh. "Yes."

He also released a shaky breath, then moved so that he was kneeling on the carpeting in front of her, his hands braced at her hips.

"Let me love you, Eileen. Now."

"Yes," she whispered again.

Slowly, he unsnapped her jeans and slid down the zipper. He reached inside the waistband of her panties, skimming her stomach with his thumbs, then caressed her hips, and finally shoved his hands inside the panties to cup her ass.

Eileen moaned softly. His hands on her body felt so right, as if this was where she'd always belonged, and just hadn't known until now.

Dermot kneaded and caressed her ass, lifting her from the seat so that she sat on his hands. As he rocked her gently, his hands slowly worked further under her panties, until she was balanced on his wrists, then his forearms. His fingers stroked between her legs, light teasing brushes that started at her ass cheeks and gradually approached her aching heat.

His fingertips dipped into her slick folds, and she moaned again, flexing her hips. He circled his fingers at the edge of her vagina and she lifted her hips again, urging him to press further inside.

"Like that?" he asked.

"Yes. Oh, yes," she answered. That seemed the only thing she could answer him.

In response, he stroked her clitoris with his thumb. Eileen grabbed the leather seat with both hands and lifted her hips, tilting them to allow him greater access.

Dermot pulled her jeans and panties down to her ankles. Holding her by the hips, he scooted her to the very edge of the seat, then nudged her knees as far apart as they would go.

"Lean back," he told her.

"Yes." Her breathless answer had become almost inaudible. She leaned her head back and cradled her neck on the buttery smooth leather, tilting her hips to expose her sex to his sight and touch.

Dermot rested his hands on her thighs, pressing lightly to keep them spread, and used his thumbs to delve between her slick folds. When he brushed her swollen clitoris, she moaned and thrust toward him.

He dipped his thumbs in the wellspring of liquid pooling within her, making her shudder and moan again. Then he slid his wet thumbs over and around the tight bud until she thought she'd go insane.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," she chanted, not knowing what she was agreeing to now, only that he made her feel so good that she never wanted him to stop.

And then his thumbs were replaced by his tongue. Eileen gasped. He swept a wet caress around her sensitive bud, and then surrounded it with his mouth.

"Oh," she moaned. "Yes."

She plunged her fingers into his thick hair, cradling his skull and holding his mouth right there while she bucked against him, trying to deepen his kiss. He began sucking on her bud, still flicking it with his tongue.

Eileen writhed madly against him, clutching his head and pumping her hips.

"Yes. Yes. Yes." Her whispered litany was broken by sharp gasps and low moans as his skilled mouth and tongue brought her closer and closer to climax without giving her release.

He cupped her ass with one hand, supporting her as he plundered her with his mouth. Then his other hand reached past what he was doing with his tongue and found her vagina.

He teased her, slipping one, then two, then three fingers just past the sensitive ridge of muscle. She shook, trembling under his onslaught, and locked her thighs around his neck.

“Yes. Yes. Please. Now. Yes.”

His fingers thrust deeply into her vagina just as his teeth bit lightly on her clitoris. Eileen came in a blinding rush, all light and heat and wave after wave of fluid pouring out of her that he lapped and suckled.

She floated, Dermot’s skilled hands and mouth keeping her body hot and excited while her mind and spirit spun in wheeling ecstasy. Gradually, her passion cooled, and she returned to awareness to find herself fully clothed and sitting cradled in Dermot’s lap on the back seat. His free hand was tucked beneath her shirt, softly caressing her breast.

“Welcome back to Earth,” he whispered. “Did you have a nice flight?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Oh, yes.”

She closed her eyes and leaned against his wool-clad chest, wishing his suit coat and crisp shirt were gone so she could feel his heated skin beneath her cheek. She heard the steady beat of his heart, and snuggled closer.

His hand closed over her breast, as if he wanted to feel her heartbeat as well, and he held her quietly. The only sound was the gentle swell of violins, building to the final crescendo of the music.

The limousine lurched, rocking them forward then back against the upholstery. Eileen lifted her head to look out the window. They were turning onto a narrow street, almost impassibly cluttered with double parked cars. Scraggly trees struggled for life amid the exhaust fumes, their narrow circles of dirt imprisoned within larger squares of concrete. People bundled in heavy coats strode briskly along the sidewalk, their heads

down and shoulders hunched as if they battled a strong wind. The buildings' brown and gray polished marble and granite walls reflected distorted views of the cars and pedestrians.

The limousine lurched again, turning to squeeze between two marble pillars flanking a cobblestone circular drive that passed underneath one of the buildings. Bumping over the uneven surface, the limousine slowly drew even with an elderly black doorman liveried in the same brown and gray as the building.

Dermot released her, sliding her onto the seat beside him. The limousine slowed to a stop and the electronic locks popped open. No sooner had she heard the click, than the doorman swung open the limousine's door.

The tiny doorman peered inside the car. "Good evening Mr. Stone, ma'am. Would you like a hand?"

Eileen thought it was more likely that she would pull the man into the car than that he could successfully pull her out of it.

"I can manage."

He nodded his head and stepped aside, holding the door so that it wouldn't swing back and hit her as she exited. Dermot followed her out of the limousine a moment later.

"Good evening, Clarence. Has your grandson heard back on his audition yet?"

"Not yet, sir." He shut the car door and hurried ahead of them to open the glass door into the building. "By Tuesday, they said."

"I hope he gets it."

"I'll tell him you said so, sir."

Feeling completely ignored, Eileen walked up a short flight of brown marble steps to a bank of elevators. The nearest one was already waiting with the door open.

She stepped inside, joined a moment later by Dermot. He slid his key into the slot at the top of the elevator panel and turned it. The letter "P" lit up with a pleasant chime.

He removed his key, finishing just as the elevator doors closed, and turned to take her in his arms.

Eileen sidestepped him. "What was that about?"

"Clarence's grandson is a talented musician. He's trying to get into one of the orchestras. They've already called him back once."

"That's nice. But I meant, why are you all over me as soon as we're alone, but when we're where anyone can see us, you act like you hardly know me?"

Dermot's eyes widened, as if she'd asked why water was wet. "Because anyone could see us."

"And...?" she prompted, feeling foolish but needing to know his reason. Did he want to keep her his guilty secret?

He sighed, and leaned back against the elevator wall. "Images sell stories. The news rags won't invent a scandal if they have no pictures to support it."

The elevator chimed again. When the doors slid open, she darted through them, into a brown and gray marble foyer. Two glass-topped tables, each filled with a massive floral arrangement in a marble urn, flanked the single door.

Dermot unlocked the door and ushered her inside. She pushed past him into his black leather and wire-work living room.

The open wire shelves held an entertainment system, including a home theater, easily a hundred CD's, and hardcover business books, interspersed with small sculptures and decorative glass bowls and vases that provided the room's only color. The couch and accent chairs were all upholstered in black leather. Sheer panels of black and white gauze draped over the sliding glass door leading to a roof garden.

He closed and locked the door, then turned to face her. "My driver will leave your luggage in the foyer."

"Am I your secret scandal, Dermot? Is that why you weren't officially at the airport to meet me?"

"No!" He pushed his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Waving one hand at the couch, he told her, "Sit. This will take a while."

She glanced at the soft leather cushions, and was immediately reminded of the back seat of his limo. "I prefer to stand, thank you."

Dermot prowled around the perimeter of the room, as if seeking the perfect position from which to deliver his argument. Finally, he leaned his hip against one of the shelving units and faced her.

"When you didn't call, I wasn't sure how you felt about seeing me again. After all, I was the one who gave you my card. You never volunteered your number. Maybe that night didn't mean anything to you. You might have done the same for any man you rescued from a dryad."

Eileen opened her mouth to protest, but he raised his hand and cut her off.

"Since I wasn't sure of your feelings, I thought it prudent to act as if you would not be interested in furthering our relationship. I told no one that we'd met. You have a room booked in your name at the Niko. Officially I was not at the airport so that, if you wished to deny our previous encounter, there would be no awkward questions for you to answer."

Eileen swallowed to clear her tight throat. Do no harm. He'd arranged everything so that he would do no harm. His motives couldn't be any plainer than that.

"It's sorry I am to have doubted you," she said. Darting across the room, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Dermot curled his arms around her waist, pulling her hips tight against his, and deepened the kiss. Opening her mouth, she allowed the sweet invasion of his tongue. He tasted like mint.

Twining her tongue with his, she sucked lightly. He groaned. He rubbed his growing erection against her abdomen, and when that wasn't enough, grabbed her by the ass and lifted her to straddle his swollen cock. She locked her legs around his waist and rocked against him.

His cock pressed against the seam of her jeans, teasing her with the light touch. Still joined together, he turned them away from the shelving unit, until he had Eileen's back pressed against the wall.

He ground his hips against hers, digging his cock harder and harder into the cleft between her legs. She whimpered, needing to feel him inside of her instead of this torturous tease through his slacks and her jeans.

Breaking their kiss, she labored for breath, then asked, "Why are we still dressed?"

Before he could answer, the door bell rang; two deep, sonorous tones.

"Because we're waiting for your luggage."

Eileen reached underneath his suit coat and ran her nails down the back of his shirt. He arched into her stroke with a groan.

"You don't need your luggage just yet," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, but I do." She scraped her nails down his shirt again, eliciting a throaty groan. "There's something in there for you."

He pulled up the hem of her sweater, exposing her stomach, and reached for the snap on her jeans. "It can wait."

"It's a branch from the dryad's wych elm."

He stilled immediately, his cock no longer pressing insistently against her. "The dryad?"

"Certified dryad free. It's just a tree branch. A very long, supple, springy tree branch." She slapped his ass for emphasis.

Dermot trembled against her. "Would you...?"

She gazed into his eager face and smiled. "You made me incredibly happy on our way over here. Now it's my turn to make you happy."

Eyes shining, he swallowed twice before he was able to speak. "Let's get that suitcase now."

Chapter Six

Dermot smoothed his hand over his hair out of habit as he hurried to the door. Eileen's suitcase was waiting in the hall, his driver having delivered it and then departed.

He grabbed the handle and swung it inside. After closing and locking the door, he carried the suitcase to the guest room and tossed it onto the navy and gold bedspread.

Eileen followed him in a moment later, pausing in the doorway to glance around the room. "You paid someone to decorate your apartment, didn't you?"

Dermot appraised the gender-neutral guest room. The bed, chair, and pillows were covered in navy and gold brocade trimmed with gold braid. The headboard, nightstand, and dresser were made of pecan with gold accents. Navy gauze panels tied back with gold tassels draped over a decorative pecan rod, unifying the theme. The look was completed with three still-lifes bordered by wide navy mattes in slim gold frames. It looked elegant, without being ostentatious.

"She did a good job."

Eileen smiled. "It's pretty enough, true. But it's not you."

"This is the guest room." Dermot grinned, anticipating her reaction to the designer's safari look in his room. "Wait until you see the master bedroom."

Eileen unzipped her suitcase, flipped it open, and tossed aside a sweater to reveal a slender gray branch, about two feet in length, tapering from an inch in width at the foot of the branch to the tiny twigs at its tip.

Dermot swallowed, unable to tear his gaze from the innocuous branch. He remembered the feel of the dryad's hands whipping his ass, the glorious pain that transported him to the faerie realm of indescribable beauty. The ecstasy that had nearly killed him.

He reached for the branch, and saw that his hand was shaking. Quickly, he clasped his hands behind his back before Eileen could spot his tremors and have second thoughts.

She lifted the branch out of her suitcase and whipped it back and forth in front of him. It whistled as it cut through the air.

Dermot's entire body trembled with eager fear. His cock hardened and jutted forward, making a tent in the front of his pants and pulling the fabric tight against his ass. A soft whine escaped his throat, like a dog whimpering for a promised treat.

Eileen smiled and lifted one hand to encompass the guest room. "Here?"

He shook his head. "My room. This way."

He led her down the interminably long hallway to the master bedroom. The Safari Suite, as he'd nicknamed it.

The heavy wooden furniture was embellished with leopard-, cheetah-, and lion-skin prints. Mosquito netting draped the bed, matching the black and tan gauze panels curtaining the window.

"It's all faux," he hastened to reassure her. "I wouldn't let the designer use real animal skins."

"Harm no one." Eileen bestowed a brilliant smile upon him, and slapped the branch against the bedspread with a sharp snap.

Dermot jumped. The blood rushed to his cock, leaving him lightheaded, and the plaintive whine broke from his throat again.

She stroked the branch across the shoulder of his suit coat, caressed his neck, then slid the branch inside his open jacket and down his chest. The tip flicked one of his nipples through the fine cotton of his shirt, wrenching a groan from him. Then the branch stroked lower still, and his stomach muscles clenched in trembling anticipation. She hesitated at his waistline, then dipped the branch and lightly tapped his cock.

He surged forward, heat flaring in his groin, and groaned. "Oh, yes, please. Yes."

"Strip," she ordered.

Dermot yanked off his suit jacket and flung it against the wall. His trembling fingers seemed unable to grasp the tiny buttons on his shirt, so he simply pulled it over his head. There was a moment of resistance, then the offending buttons gave way. He yanked his hands free of the imprisoning cuffs and tossed the shirt after the jacket.

His belt was next, followed by his pants. The brush of fabric against his cock as he wrestled with the button and zip was maddening, but he persevered, and soon freed his cock from the tangle of his briefs as well. His pants fell to his ankles. He stepped out of them, getting rid of his shoes at the same time, then balanced on first one foot then the other to remove his socks.

Completely naked, he waited for Eileen to tell him what to do next.

She'd been busy while he'd been disrobing, and had pulled all the covers off of the bed, leaving just the black and tan fitted sheet.

She tossed a leopard-printed pillow into the center of the bed.

"Lay down, and cradle your cock in that."

When he looked at her in confusion, she smiled. "I don't want you coming too early. I want to find out just how much we can hurt you without doing any harm."

He shivered, his balls trying to pull up, even as his cock hardened still further and molten desire filled his veins.

"Yes," he whispered.

He crawled up on the bed and lay face down, his cock nestling into the soft embrace of the feather pillow.

Eileen stroked his ass, her soft hand warm against his quivering flesh.

"Your scratches have healed nicely. Good."

He thought again of the blood coursing down his legs from the dryad's beating, and cold fear clutched his heart and balls. Then Eileen slapped his ass, and he felt only hot desire.

The bed shifted as she climbed onto it and straddled his legs. The soft denim of her jeans caressed his thighs.

Her fingers stroked the cleft in his ass. "The having is as easy as the wanting if you say the word."

"Yes!" he cried.

Her palm slapped his ass, driving him into the pillow. It was a poor substitute for the wet embrace of her mouth or vagina. Using both hands, she covered his ass with stinging slaps.

His hips rose and fell beneath her, matching her rhythm. His cock thrust in and out of the feather pillow with each swat.

Dermot grunted at each blow, aching for more. He wasn't sure what he wanted. Higher, harder, faster, stronger. Something. Something that would turn this sweet stinging pain into the full-throated bellowing agony of ecstasy.

She paused then, and ran her hands over his tender skin. "Your ass is a lovely shade of pink. All warmed up."

A shudder rippled through him. She'd only been warming him up. Now the real hitting would start.

The wych elm branch cracked against his ass. He bucked beneath her, startled by the sudden pain, but pinned to the bed by her weight across his legs.

The branch cracked across the other side of his ass. His body twitched again, this time arching up his torso and thrusting his hips down.

The pillow cradled his cock in softness, promising soothing relief from the sharp pain in his ass. Dermot groaned, and ground his hips into the pillow, caressing his hot cock. The branch fell again, thrusting him into the soft feathers.

Soon he was bucking and humping with Eileen's new rhythm, each slash of the branch driving his hard cock into the warm embrace of soft down. His world collapsed to the twin sensations of painful lashes against his ass and the sweet thrust of his cock

into the waiting feathers. The tension between the pleasure and the pain built within him, shaking him with fevered chills.

He groaned and gasped in delicious agony, balanced on the knife edge between buildup and release. His cock was huge, swollen as hard as it had been for the dryad, and every blow on his ass pumped more blood into it.

The feathers scraped and scratched, clawing his cock as he thrust again and again, straining for the release that eluded him. Hoarse, harsh vocalizations ripped from his throat, grunts and whines and broken whimpers. His fingers tore at the sheet, searching, always searching for the secret that would send him over the edge. And still the whip rose and fell against his ass, marking the time in which his body writhed.

The whip fell again, one last blow that was finally too much for his abused flesh to take. With a scream of agonized delight, he spasmed, hot come bursting in a geyser to rival Old Glory.

Moaning in ecstasy, he rocked against the sodden pillow, wringing the last drops from his spent cock. He was still rocking gently when he fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

Dermot woke slowly, curled around Eileen and cuddled beneath his thick comforter. His leg covered hers, and one of his hands loosely cupped her breast. She was deliciously, delightfully naked.

He snuggled closer, pressing as tightly against her back as he could, and nuzzled the side of her neck. As he shifted his leg, his ass throbbed dully, reminding him of the glorious whipping she'd given him.

And afterward, she'd cleaned him up and reassembled the bed before climbing in beside him. What a woman.

He tugged and teased her breast. Her responsive nipple hardened against his palm. Continuing to toy with her nipple, he scraped his teeth lightly along her neck, then followed with openmouthed kisses.

Eileen sighed deeply in her sleep, and shifted slightly, turning her head to the side and angling her chest into his hand.

He eased his other hand down between her legs, and delved between her folds. Her hips rocked slowly, taking his fingers into her a fraction of an inch at a time. His cock firmed, tucked in the cleft of her rocking ass, and Dermot purred with pleasure.

"Dermot?" Her voice was thick with sleep. "What time is it?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "Does it matter?"

She wiggled her ass against him and giggled. "By the circle, you're hard again? What does it take to deflate that thing?"

Fair was fair. He wiggled his fingers, transforming her giggle into a breathy sigh of pleasure.

"I hope we never find out," he answered.

"Mmmm."

They fell silent, enjoying the slow movement of his fingers slipping inside her and her ass rocking against his cock.

"I need my hand back for a moment," he murmured in her ear.

"Must you?"

"I promise you'll be happy with the result."

She sighed. "Very well."

He chuckled at her obvious reluctance, giving her one last wiggle of his fingers before he pulled his hand free. Then he rolled to the side and reached for the drawer of his nightstand. His fingers fluttered among the cascade of condom packages within, finally nudging one to the front where he could grab it.

He ripped the package open and rolled the lubricated condom over his jutting cock. Then he snuggled close to Eileen again, resting the head of his cock against the opening of her ass as his hand slid between her thighs. She eagerly opened her legs, welcoming his fingers into her wet and waiting warmth.

He flexed his fingers, pulling a moan from her, and pressed lightly on her hips, rocking her backward. The very tip of his cock slid into her ass.

“Oh! What are you...?”

Softly, Dermot rocked her forward onto his hand, then backward onto his cock. The entire head slipped into her ass.

She moaned again.

He let out a shaky breath, and kissed her neck.

“It’s up to you. Take me as slow and as deep as you want to go.”

She clenched her ass muscles and he groaned. He held her, unmoving, and she slowly relaxed. Tentatively, she rocked forward, sighing as his fingers slid deeper into her. Rocking backward, his cock slid an equal depth into her ass.

They sighed together.

“Don’t stop kissing me,” she whispered.

“Never.”

With mouth and tongue, he swept gentle kisses over the pulse pounding in her neck. He kissed her shoulder and behind her ear. All the while, she rocked back and forth, until his folded hand was buried in her up to his wrist, and his cock was sheathed to the balls in her ass.

“God, baby, you feel so good,” he murmured in her ear.

She let out a broken sob. “Love me, Dermot. Please. Love me now.”

He rolled her over so that she was impaled on his hand. Flexing his fingers, he stroked the walls of her vagina as he pulled his cock partially out and thrust deeply into her ass.

She moaned. “Yes.”

Twice more, he stroked her with his hand and cock. Thick lubricant coated his fingers and flowed down his arm, increasing with every stroke. His cock grew firmer

with each thrust into her tight ass, until he was hard enough that he feared hurting her if he pulled out and tried to enter her again.

Holding her tightly, Dermot rolled them over again, so he was on his back and she was lying on top of him. He gasped as their combined weight pressed his tender ass into the bed. His cock swelled in response, and Eileen shuddered and moaned, her ass muscles clenching around his rigid cock.

He started rocking beneath her, rolling his hips up and down to find all of the tender spots she'd left on his ass. Every time he pressed against one, his cock jumped within her, and she moaned and writhed above him, rubbing herself against his hand buried deep within her.

He licked and kissed her neck, shoulder, and back, uncaring what he tasted except that it was Eileen's skin. His buried hand stroked and fondled, while his free hand roamed over her stomach, ribs, and breasts, sometimes caressing her and sometimes simply clutching her tightly as they rocked back and forth.

His blood pounded in his ears, deafening him to the labored rasp of his breathing and Eileen's sharp cries. No longer able to hear her response, he focused on the feel of her, flowing hot and wet around his hand, and clenching tight around his cock.

She grabbed his arm, her nails digging into his skin, and forced his hand deeper still. His middle finger slipped through her narrow cervix.

She went wild, bucking her hips as tremor after tremor rippled through her muscles. Deep muscles clenched the length of his cock just as she slammed backward, driving her weight onto the tender spot on his ass.

He grabbed her and held on as he came, arching in an instinctive final thrust as he filled the condom with his seed, driving his hand deeper at the same time. She screamed something in Gaelic, then collapsed limply on top of him.

His hand slid out of her in a wet flood, and his flaccid cock slipped free of her sticky ass. He pulled off the condom, trying to be careful, but his slick fingers couldn't hold onto the lubricated surface and his hot come poured out onto his stomach, running

down his hip to puddle on the sheet. Now that the euphoria of their lovemaking was fading, he couldn't bear to lie on the sodden, sticky sheet, while the evidence of their passion dried in itchy patches on his skin.

Dermot threw aside the covers and climbed out of bed. A glance at the bedside clock revealed it was nearly four o'clock. Too early to get up, but too late to change the sheets and remake the bed.

Bending down, he lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and snuggled against his chest.

"We'll spend the rest of the night in your bed," he told her, getting a sleepy mumble in response. "But first, we need a shower."

Chapter Seven

Eileen drifted slowly to wakefulness, nestled in Dermot's warm embrace. Listening to his slow and even breathing, she relished the peace and comfort of simply lying beside him.

Soon, that was not enough. Turning onto her hip, she propped her head on her fist so that she could study him at her leisure.

Even in sleep, his face held the strength and determination she admired. Lightly, she traced her fingertip over his arching brows, along his jawline, and across his dangerous lips, rendered temporarily safe by sleep. His lips parted slightly, releasing a tiny sigh.

She slid her finger along the open seam of his lips, pressing lightly, until he pulled her finger into his mouth. He sucked gently, sparking a heat deep within her as her body remembered how he'd suckled and feasted upon her flesh in the back of the limousine.

She smiled. Her first limousine ride, and she remembered nothing about it except the feel of Dermot's hands and mouth as he'd brought her to one shuddering, shaking climax after another.

She tugged her finger free, earning a soft protest from her sleeping lover. His head turned, trying to recapture his prize.

"Hush, now. Be still," she whispered, stroking his thick hair until he subsided.

Her exploration continued. She glided her palm over the smooth planes of his back, down his spine, to his trim hips. As she caressed his ass, still slightly swollen from the beating she'd given him, he moaned softly in his sleep. His cock twitched to life.

Eileen watched, entranced, as it slowly lengthened and straightened, like an inflating balloon. By the circle, the man was insatiable! She'd thought the number of

times they'd made love in her cottage was a side effect of the dryad's spell, but this voracious sexual hunger seemed to be his natural state.

She heard his breathing shift. A moment later he opened his eyes.

"Mmm. This is a nice way to wake up."

"I know." She brushed his lips with a feather-light kiss.

He moved closer, sandwiching his warm cock between their stomachs and pressing her breasts against his chest. His hand cupped her ass, holding her hips tight to his, while his mouth captured hers in another kiss.

He groaned as he released her. "I would like nothing better than to make love to you all day. But we have to get ready for the Silver Moon meeting."

"What is it we're to be discussing? My agent never gave me specifics."

"Oh, publicity plans, how to position you, what your talking points are, those sorts of things. Mostly it's for the publicist to see what level of media coverage you can handle."

His hand drifted lazily up and down her hip. She pressed her body against his and hugged him tightly, needing the reassurance of his solidity. That was his world, the world of media coverage and publicists, of celebrities and limousines. She didn't belong in that world. She belonged in her woods, writing her books and following the cycle of nature.

"Do we have to go?" she whispered.

"What is it? You're shivering." He held her close and rubbed her back. "Are you cold? Or scared?"

"Why am I here, Dermot?"

He hesitated, then answered slowly, "Are you wondering or am I supposed to guess?"

"Tell me. Why did you send for me? What is it you see in me that made you go to so much trouble to bring me here?"

He sighed deeply. "Well, you did save my life."

"Is it because you're grateful, then?"

"Of course not. I mean, yes, I'm grateful, but my gratitude is usually expressed in a check with a healthy number of zeroes. It's something more with you."

"Great sex," she muttered.

"God, yes! It is."

She stiffened, but he didn't seem to notice.

"We're great together. I shouldn't have to tell you that, not after last night. It's a good thing this is the penthouse, or my neighbors would have called the cops, the way you were screaming. And what you did to me with that branch..." He groaned, a shudder rippling through him. "God, that was good."

Eileen swallowed against the lump in her throat, and blinked her burning eyes. That was it, then. She knew the secret of how he liked his sex. He wanted his ass whipped, so he wanted her. It had nothing to do with who she was as a person.

Dermot continued, oblivious to the devastation his words had caused.

"And, of course, you're intelligent, beautiful, and highly successful. You have an adorable accent."

"I donna!" She clapped one hand over her mouth, but the treacherous brogue had already escaped.

He just laughed. "See?"

His mirth faded, and his voice softened, as if he was thinking out loud rather than speaking to her.

"But I think, even with all that, I would have let you stay in Ireland if I hadn't read your book."

She blinked. "You read one of my books? Which one?"

"The latest. I wanted to understand the Irish witch who had beguiled me. The dryad nearly killed me, but before that, the sex with her was better than I'd thought

possible. Throughout history, men have gone mad trying to recapture the embrace of a faerie lover, even though they knew it meant their deaths. Yet I barely thought about her. It was the night and morning afterward that I couldn't get out of my head. You. I had to figure out why."

Eileen stared at him with rapt fascination. "Why?" she breathed.

"Your book gave me the clue. You talked about the potential for human purity. That's you."

She thought of all her doubts and disbeliefs. "I don't feel very pure."

"Oh, but you are! It shines from you, like a light that can't be seen, only felt in the heart. It makes me want to be a better person, to be the kind of man who would deserve you."

She couldn't breathe. Her lungs labored in deep, shuddering gasps, but her throat was too tight for the air to pass.

"Eileen?" He pushed her away to see her face. "Are you crying?"

"No. And a proper gentleman would know better than to ask a lady such a question." She spoiled her indignation with a wet sniff.

Dermot smiled, and curled her close to his chest. "Whatever you say."

He continued stroking and caressing her, molding her body gently to his, until her breathing steadied and she relaxed against him.

Turning her head slightly, she swept her tongue across his flat nipple. He sucked in a sharp breath, so she did it again, this time cupping and caressing his ass at the same time.

"Keep that up, and this conversation will be over in a few seconds," he warned.

"Didn't I tell you it was a weakness for a finely turned phrase I had? And you, you've kissed the Blarney Stone for certain."

He chuckled. "Well, then, it's time I stopped talking. Your turn. Why did you accept my offer to come to America? Was it only for the publicity tour?"

She heard the fear underlying his forced good cheer, and hurried to reassure him.

"No. Nor for your wealth. Truth be told, that was why I threw your card away. I couldn't imagine you in my world, and knew I could never fit in yours."

"But you changed your mind."

"Aye. I realized I knew no such thing. I believed it. As if I'd seen a rainbow, and believed it rained."

He frowned. "But it does have to rain before you see the rainbow."

"Did you never see a rainbow over a waterfall?"

"Oh..."

"Aye. I misjudged you. And it's sorry I am to have done so." She pressed another kiss to his chest. "What do I see in you? Ask why am I here, and get the same answer to both. You did not give up. Not when the dryad tried to claim your life, not when I needed to help you in my cottage, and not when you chose to pursue me. You see clearly, Dermot Stone, more clearly than most who do not walk the path, and you walk your own path guided by what you see."

She blew out a disgusted sigh. "So many of the people I meet are searching, for what, they don't know. But it's me they want to find it. It's me they want to tell them the truth that should be hidden in their own hearts. Not you, though. You know. And like the stone that is your namesake, there's none alive who can move you once your feet are set."

He brushed his hand through her hair, then tilted her face up so that he could meet her gaze.

"You see all that in me?" he whispered.

"Aye."

His lips closed over hers. They continued speaking, no longer needing recourse to words. Instead, their kiss expanded and deepened, until they breathed each other's souls.

Slowly, with no sense of urgency, Dermot rolled her onto her back and slid inside her. She held his cock sheathed deep within her, not moving, just kissing him, while time stretched and distorted and billowed around them. They hung suspended, supported by their fused breaths, in a moment that transcended time.

The blood pulsed in her groin. Dermot's cock twitched.

Time snapped back in a howling rush, reclaiming them to the ordinary world. Her hands roamed across his back, stroking and petting and clawing, while his heavy cock slicked in and out of her wet vagina. He grunted, thrusting hard and fast, and she slapped his ass, urging him on. And still they devoured each other with their mouths, teeth and tongues tangling and striking.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She could only feel, Dermot hard and hot and pounding inside her.

Then he burst, flooding her with his fire, scorching the tender flesh he'd loved so thoroughly the night before. She broke apart, shattering into a million pieces, each a mirror to the glowing flame of his love, until she was engulfed in a brilliant inferno without end.

* * * * *

Eileen had no time to think about the coming meeting as she hurriedly showered and dressed in her book-signing outfit of a long gray wool skirt, white blouse, and gray velvet shawl. As soon as she was ready, Dermot called for his limousine.

He glanced at his watch. "Barring traffic, we'll make it."

"Isn't traffic usually a problem in Manhattan?"

He grinned as he escorted her to the elevator. "Compared to what you're used to, I'm sure it would be. My driver can handle it."

The driver and limo were waiting for them in the circle outside the apartment building. A new and younger doorman held open the limousine's door for them. As she

entered the passenger compartment with Dermot right behind her, Eileen was assailed by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

As soon as they'd taken their seats and the doorman sealed them inside, Dermot pressed the intercom button. "The Silver Moon offices. For a nine o'clock meeting."

"Yes, sir!"

Dermot released the button and reached for one of the brushed steel coffee cups engraved with the Stone Industries logo, only to be flung backward into the seat as the limousine shot out of the circle and into the street.

He righted himself, and grabbed a bagel from the bag beside the coffees instead. "I'll wait until a traffic light to try drinking anything. Would you like a bagel? We have plain, sesame, cinnamon raisin, and blueberry."

She rested her hand on her stomach, which chose that moment to gurgle. "Yes, please. Blueberry."

She tore into the bagel, surprised at how suddenly ravenous she was.

He smiled indulgently, more interested in watching her than in eating his own bagel. "Built up quite an appetite last night, did you?"

"What with all the time zone changes, I missed a meal along the way."

"Would you like another bagel?"

She pressed her palm to her stomach, which was now churning. "No, thank you. That wouldn't be a very good idea right now."

The limousine stopped at a light, and Dermot quickly swallowed half a cup of coffee. She added cream and sugar to hers, so only had time for a single sip before the car lurched into motion again.

The driver continued darting the big car in and out of traffic in a manner that did nothing to soothe her nerves. Dermot held her hand, offering her silent encouragement.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," she admitted. "I suppose it's because I don't know what to expect."

"My publicist is excellent. She'll find your comfort level, and book you accordingly. Just be yourself. You'll be fine." He squeezed her hand lightly. "There is one thing, however. It would be best if you didn't mention we knew each other."

She smiled, recognizing now that he was trying to protect her. "You don't want them to think this publicity is favoritism?"

"I want them focused on enhancing the value of the publisher's lead author, and public recognition of Silver Moon."

"How long should we wait before telling them, do you think?"

"They don't need to be told."

Eileen frowned. "Your limousine driver, and the two doormen at your building all know I spent the night with you. You know what they say. It is not a secret if it is known to three people."

"Don't worry about it. They are well paid for their discretion."

"And when you run out of those whose silence you have paid for, what then? Am I to be seen nowhere in public with you?"

"Don't be silly. Of course we'll be seen together. We have to eat. And I'm eager to show you many of my favorite places in the city. That doesn't mean our personal lives need to be fodder for the gossip rags."

The limousine pulled up before a utilitarian, cement-walled building. As soon as it stopped, the driver hopped out and hurried around the car.

Eileen pulled her skirts away from Dermot so that not even her clothing touched him.

"No one who sees us now could mistake us for lovers. Does this make you happy?"

His glance darted to his driver, leaning forward to open the door. "We will continue this discussion later."

"Only if you find a new tune to sing."

Pushing past him, she climbed out of the car and hurried into the publisher's building.

Chapter Eight

Dermot traded an exasperated look with his driver as he exited the limousine.

"Would you like me to run any errands for you during your meeting, sir?"

Dermot knew what Chris was asking—did he need a bribe to regain his lover's good graces. Chris had purchased roses, diamonds, and coveted event tickets plenty of times in the past for him.

Dermot wasn't certain what had just gone wrong, but he knew enough to know that a gift wouldn't make it right.

"No. No errands today. Pick us up in three hours. And make reservations for dinner—someplace with a lot of people. Leave a message on my cell with the details."

"Yes, sir."

Dermot forced down his frustration and put on his game face. Time to meet with the publisher and publicist. At least now he'd get to see how Eileen handled herself, and if she could remain professional even when she was upset.

She was not in the deserted lobby. Hoping she knew which floor the meeting was on, he took the elevator up to the seventh floor. Everyone was already assembled in the conference room. Everyone except Eileen, that is.

He glanced around the four people already in the room to make sure he hadn't overlooked her, although he couldn't imagine ever doing such a thing. She wasn't there.

"Where's Eileen?" he asked.

"She's in my office," Brian Royce, the CEO of Silver Moon, said. "Adjusting her travel arrangements."

“Will she be long?” What the hell did ‘adjusting her travel arrangements’ mean? Her flight back to Ireland was booked for next Tuesday, and he’d already canceled her reservation at the Niko since she was staying with him. Neither needed adjusting.

A chill rolled down his spine. Unless she wasn’t planning on staying with him after all. Whatever had just upset her hadn’t upset her that badly, had it? Surely she was going to give him a chance to correct the situation.

“No, not very,” Royce answered. “In fact, here she comes now.”

Eileen breezed into the room, the wind of her movement rippling the fringe on her shawl with eye-catching waves. All he could think about was chasing everyone else from the room, ripping it off of her, and turning the cherry conference table into an impromptu bed. Far from getting his fill of her, after their night of passion, he was well and truly addicted to the pleasures of her body.

A slight smile slipped his iron control. Technically, that wasn’t correct. The mind-blowing ecstasy she’d given him using that wych elm branch had been a pleasure of his body. But whether they’d been making love skin-to-skin or pleasuring each other in one of the other creative variations they’d found, it had been great, and he wanted more. He didn’t think he could ever tire of making love to her.

Numbly, he took his seat at the table, across from Royce. Where had that thought come from?

Royce began his presentation, introducing the people at the table, but Dermot had no attention to spare for the man. He hadn’t given the matter any particular thought, but had simply assumed that any affair with Eileen would run the normal course of his affairs, a brief flare of passion followed by growing disinterest until the embers were completely cold and he moved on.

Could he possibly be thinking of something more with Eileen? Something like marriage?

But that was ridiculous. They were completely unsuited for marriage. She’d said it herself – they came from two entirely different worlds.

Royce had finished his introductory comments, and Sara Combs stood up to give her presentation of the proposed publicity campaigns.

“Our goal is twofold. First, we want to identify in the consumer’s mind the name Eileen Lyons with the female-empowering neo-pagan revival.”

“But I’m not —”

Sara shot a brittle smile at her, silencing Eileen’s objection. “Those are just the buzz words. We’ll address your actual beliefs in your product differentiation.”

Sara glanced around the table, checking for any additional objections. When none were forthcoming, she plunged back into her presentation.

Dermot listened to the ideas with a sense of impending doom. Eileen had tried to warn him. She’d known that they were embarking on more than a casual affair. That’s what had angered her so badly this morning — not that he didn’t want to disclose their relationship, but by refusing to plan for a future disclosure, he was announcing that he was only interested in a brief fling.

His skill at manipulation that had engineered her arrival so smoothly now worked against him. He’d bought into the publisher under the pretext that his money would be used to fuel growth and expansion. The publicity campaign was central to that growth.

Eileen was going to be associated irrefutably in the public mind with witchcraft, bizarre and scandalous pagan rituals, and weird occult powers. The news rags would be thrilled to exploit any personal connection between the two of them. Eileen would be accused of bewitching him. Dermot’s business judgment would be called into question.

He remembered how, after one of his parents’ legendary scandals, the reporters had circled the family home like sharks scenting blood in the water. An enterprising photographer had snapped a picture of a very young Dermot playing in his sandbox, catching him in the act of demolishing a sand castle, and used it to highlight an article about the effects of parental discord on children. Dermot was forbidden from playing outside after that, trapped in a state of house arrest for over a month until the reporters and photographers finally disappeared.

He had vowed as a child that he would never endure that particular hell again. His conduct as an adult had conformed with that vow, so that while he'd had his share of articles and photo spreads about his personal life, especially after that most eligible bachelor nonsense, he'd never suffered through another tabloid feeding frenzy.

Most of his adult life, he corrected. His trip to Ireland had touched off a flurry of irrational behavior. First his telling the men he'd gone leprechaun hunting with about his affair with Tami. Then having sex with a dryad. Confessing his sexual desires to Eileen, and having unprotected sex with her.

His stomach clenched. He hadn't used a condom this morning, either. And the last time they'd made love, it had been in the standard position that could easily have gotten her pregnant.

A sudden babble of voices recalled him to the meeting. Sara had concluded her presentation, and the other attendees were now adding their own comments.

Royce glanced his way and frowned. "You look concerned, Stone. Do you see a problem with Sara's proposal?"

"The proposal is fine. I said as much during our prereview." And thankfully he had reviewed Sara's material once before, since he'd paid absolutely no attention during her presentation. "But there's a difference between a proposal and an executed campaign. I'll reserve judgment until I see how it all plays out."

Royce didn't look happy with Dermot's answer. And why would he be? Dermot had practically shoved the publicity campaign down his throat, and now he was backing off his support.

Sara regained the meeting's momentum like the trooper that she was. "That's a valid concern, Mr. Stone. And why we're here today, to hammer out the details of the execution. Ms. Lyons, after hearing the presentation, which sections of the proposal did you feel most comfortable with?"

"I liked the idea of applying ancient wisdom to modern situations. In fact, as soon as you said that, I had an idea. Women are so often called upon to play the role of wife,

mother, and caretaker of elderly parents. Many times, they feel guilty about taking time for themselves, and end up neglecting their needs in favor of others'. Or else they overcompensate and always put their own needs first, with no regard for how their actions affect those that rely upon them. One of my religion's central beliefs crystallizes how to balance those two extremes – do what you want, so long as it causes no harm."

Sara scribbled frantically. "Oh, yeah. That's good. We can run with that."

Dermot leaned back in his chair, stunned. How could he have overlooked something so incredibly simple? In all of his plans and deliberations, his schemes to get Eileen to come to him or his resolve to have nothing more to do with her, he had not once asked what she wanted. Oh, he'd considered her wants. How else could he have baited his trap with this publicity campaign? But he'd never simply come straight out and asked her.

God, he was a fool.

He entered the discussion, offering his full range of experience and support. He'd make sure Eileen had every opportunity for a successful publicity campaign. If she chose not to go through with it, that was one thing. But he wouldn't cripple the campaign before it started, simply to make things easier for himself. That would run counter to her prime dictate, and he was gaining more respect for that philosophy every time he heard it.

* * * * *

The meeting broke up an hour and a half later. Dermot stood immediately.

"Ms. Lyons, if I might have a word with you?"

"Certainly." Her cheeks glowed, and sparks glimmered within her eyes.

The other attendees slowly filed from the room, most telling Eileen how pleased they would be to work with her, or how successful the campaign was going to be. Finally, the two of them were alone.

"You did great," Dermot said softly. "You'll knock 'em dead on the talk show circuit."

She blinked, then smiled. God, he loved that smile. A barrel of honey would not be as sweet as the curve of her lips.

"Thank you, Dermot."

"You know why I'm so certain you'll be a knockout talk show guest?"

"Why?"

"Because listening to you speak made me have a revelation. I have been a complete fool. Eileen, what do you want? For us, I mean."

Her eyes widened. "That was a revelation."

"Don't dodge the question."

"I'm not dodging. I'm stalling." She traced scrolling patterns on the gleaming surface of the conference table. "What I feel for you is different from anything I've ever felt before. Maybe it's love. Maybe it's something else entirely. I want the opportunity to find out."

"So, you want to date? I can do that. When you return to Ireland, I'll fly over every weekend I can get away, so we can keep seeing each other." He hesitated, his new resolve to focus on her wants warring with his need to know. "Royce said you were readjusting your travel arrangements. Are you still going back on Tuesday?"

"Yes. But I won't be staying long. I called my friend Soibhan. She's watching my woods while I'm gone. She'll move into my cottage and take over the position so I can stay in America a while longer."

"You can live with me. There's no better way to find out how we really feel about each other."

"I'd like that." She favored him with another glowing smile.

"But I've got to know. Why? You were furious with me this morning when you left the limo. Why did you go out of your way to make sure you could spend more time with me?"

"An áit a bhfuil do chroí is ann a thabharfas do chosa thú."

"Sounds lovely. What does it mean?"

"It's an old saying. 'Your feet will bring you to where your heart is.' I knew this morning, when your refusal to acknowledge our relationship hurt so badly, that my heart was here." She shrugged. "So here was where I needed to be as well."

He couldn't believe it. Everything was falling together perfectly. Everything except the tabloid threat, that is. But after watching how she handled herself today and listening to her responses to Sara's questions, he knew he had nothing to fear from her religion. The only possible scandal was a much more prosaic one, and he had a simple solution for that.

"If you're going to be living with me," he warned her, "people will talk. The easiest way to cut short the gossip is if we're engaged."

She blinked. "Engaged? But the whole purpose for my staying is to find out if it's love."

"So we'll make it a long engagement. Years, if you like."

"Somehow, I don't think it will take that long."

"However long it is, I'll be here when you make your decision." He walked around the table and stopped in front of her, taking her hands in his. "My feet have brought me to where my heart is, too. And I don't ever plan to leave."

Looking deep into her eyes, Dermot knew he'd made the right decision. The worst media frenzy would be inconsequential with her by his side, and soon over, compared to the hell he would endure for the rest of his life if he let her get away.

Slowly, reveling in the feel of her trembling body beneath the soft velvet of her shawl, he glided his hands up her arms, to her shoulders, then down her back. He

moved forward, at the same time pulling her to him, so that their bodies were pressed together from leg to chest.

Eileen's hands slid under his suit coat, caressing his chest, then slid down his ribs and around his waist to cup and cradle his ass. His cock sprang to full and instant arousal, pressed into the folds of her skirt, and he considered locking the door and making love to her right there on the conference table. But that would mean he'd have to break away from her in order to reach the door.

Instead, he bent his head and captured her lips in a deep, soul-searing kiss. Everything he'd said, hadn't said, or wanted to say but had said incorrectly, was all expressed in that one perfect kiss.

Distantly, he heard a click.

"Mr. Stone, if you're—" Sara began. "Oh. Excuse me."

Dermot turned. "Sara. There's one more thing you'll need to consider for your publicity campaign. Eileen has just consented to become my fiancée."

Sara's eyes widened. "But this changes everything! We'll be able to book you on—"

"No," Eileen interrupted. "He asked you to consider it, in case the news would affect my believability as an independent authority. But I won't answer any questions about my personal life."

Sara shook her head. "You're wasting a golden publicity opportunity. But fine. I'll reshape a few things, and otherwise ignore your engagement. Now I'll let you two alone to finish your, mm, discussion."

She slipped out of the room, closing the door softly behind her. Dermot stroked Eileen's cheek, admiring the fire in her eyes. She'd have no trouble handling nosy questions from reporters.

"The tabloids will ask, you know," Dermot warned softly.

"I think not." Eileen slanted a smug smile at him. "Neglecting to print gossip about our relationship could not possibly harm them."

Dermot stared at her in amazement, then began to laugh. She was everything he'd ever wanted in a lover, plus she had the power to keep the tabloids away. The leprechaun truly had given him his heart's deepest desire.

About the Author

Jennifer Dunne is the author of over a dozen novels and novellas spanning the genres of fantasy, science fiction and romance. (She's either a unique individual who is difficult to categorize, or easily bored—you decide.) Beyond that, there's no point describing her hobbies or activities, since they'll have changed by the time you read this. (Score one for "easily bored".) She lives in upstate New York, where she happily plays the lead role in her very own love story, thankfully with fewer explosions, occult happenings and dire situations than in her fiction. Although, there was that one time...

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

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