

Rosette

Jo Barrett

Fairy Rose

*The Man
In the
Mirror*



The Man In The Mirror

by

Jo Barrett

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The Man In The Mirror

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Connor watched from the mirror as she leaned her head back against the front door with a sigh. Her nose appeared red to him, and the freckles that dotted her face seemed pale. Were those tears on her cheeks? What could have caused her to cry?

She swiped the remnants of moisture from her face. "I have got to get a grip," she muttered. "I don't love him anymore. It shouldn't matter that his new wife is having a baby. It doesn't matter that they live in a big beautiful house just like the one I wanted. It doesn't matter that he's even—got—a—dog," she cried and ran across the small foyer through the living area to disappear into her bedroom.

He wished he could move to the mirror there, but knew from experience that it would cost him. Choosing mirrors was a sensitive task, one that had taken him nearly fifty years to perfect. If he were to attempt to peer through the glass he knew hung on her bedroom wall, a *private* mirror, his energy would become so depleted it would be years before he could appear again.

He must be invited by her.

And yet the sobs he heard coming from her room tore at his heart, one he'd been certain had died a long time ago.

An hour later, his jaw ached from clenching his teeth. The floor, if one could call it that, would have had a track worn into it from his pacing if he could affect anything in the world behind the glass. As it was, he could only move from mirror to mirror and watch from within as

the world grew and changed in front of him. If only he could comfort her in some way.

Her door opened and she appeared wearing a long t-shirt with some faded design on it. Her cheeks were scrubbed clean of face powder and her light brown hair hung about her shoulders in soft waves. Although her eyes and nose were red from crying, he thought her beautiful.

Tori Fraser was average, to hear her tell it, as she spoke such things to the hall mirror often. She would stand in front of him, unaware of his presence, before leaving for work and say, "So, you're not a ten. You're not a one either. You're fine just the way you are." Then with a firm nod, she would slip out the door and out of his life for the course of the day. But invariably she would return home with a despondent look upon her sweet face.

The man she'd been engaged to some years ago worked for the same institution she did. Although he didn't work in the same bank branch, he visited there on occasion. And gossip, Connor had learned from his youth, had feet that led straight to the one person it would harm the most.

She moved into the kitchen where he could not see due to the lack of a mirror there, but he heard the sound of glass clinking against a table, the pop of a cork, and the splash of liquid. A moment later she strolled into view and picked up the remote, pushed a button, and her television came to life. She sat on the sofa, tucked her lovely limbs beneath her, and stared at the moving images on the screen. He could tell her mind was not on the story being portrayed, her gaze seemed distant as she sipped her wine.

He let out a long sigh of regret. Before him

sat a woman who should not be alone. She had so much life in her, and so very much to give. If only he could do something to ease her pain, to help her find someone to care for as she once cared for the man she'd cried so many tears over.

The telephone rang and she hesitated before answering.

"Hello," she said.

Her face brightened for a moment. "I'm fine, Nana. Yes, I'll be by tomorrow for lunch. I didn't forget." She listened for several minutes, then said goodbye.

So, she had an outing to visit her grandmother. It would do her good, as she always returned with a brilliant smile and her spirits lifted. But over the course of the late night hours, he could see her earlier pain returning as she finished a full bottle of wine.

Drowsy from drink, she laid her head against a pillow and gazed at the shifting images on the screen.

"Why didn't he just love me? Why was that so hard?" she muttered.

"Because he is a fool," Connor grumbled.

She snorted softly as she tucked the cushion beneath her cheek. "And I was a fool to love him."

Connor sucked in his breath. Had she heard him? After two hundred years, had someone finally heard him? The first decade had passed painfully as he'd shouted, screamed, slammed his fists against the glass only to be ignored by the world outside. Had the sea witch who'd cursed him decided he'd learned his lesson?

"He did not deserve you, sweetness," he said, and held his breath.

"But I loved him so much," she said, her voice breaking. "Don't I deserve someone?"

He swallowed hard, wanting to shout out with joy, but with a steadying breath he chose his words with care. "You deserve everything, and it will come to you, I vow it. But you must be patient."

"I'm so tired of waiting. I hate being alone."

"I am here for you, sweetness." Yes, he would remain in her mirror for all eternity. He would watch over her, be there for her, he would—his heart stuttered in his chest.

Good Lord. I'm in love with her. He'd watched her for months, observed and enjoyed her many conversations with herself, but this was something he'd not been prepared for.

"So cruel," he whispered, knowing the sea witch listened. He was her prisoner, and her joy lay in his torment. Why not grant him the pleasure of finding his one true love, only to never be able to touch her? To love and yet never be loved, to see and yet never be seen?

Although he now had a voice, he realized his exile to the mirror for his avarice and conceit had not been thorough enough. She'd tortured him with a half-life for centuries, simply to bestow upon him the most brutal penance of all.

"Yes, he was cruel," Tori murmured. "But I let him do it to me."

"You did nothing but love him, and in return he broke your heart," he said, his temper rising. He'd like nothing more than to take the man who'd done this to her and break his neck.

"I should've known. All the signs were there. Date me—dump me—date me. It was a long, bizarre roller coaster ride." She climbed to her feet, her body swaying from too much drink.

"Perhaps you should rest now, love. Things will be much improved in the morning," he lied. Her head would no doubt pound, as if a volley of

cannon fire had crossed her prow for hours.

She sighed and took a tentative step forward. "I'll feel like crud in the morning, and you know it, but you're right. I may as well go to sleep. I can barely keep my eyes open as it is anyway."

Teetering toward her room, she paused and glanced back over her shoulder. She looked about the space, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed, then shook her head and went to bed.

No doubt she realizes she's been conversing with no one, he thought with a chuckle. At least no one she could see. Perhaps he could manage this life the witch had given him after all without losing his mind completely.

Morning came, and the woman who'd stolen his heart failed to emerge from her room. Connor knew she would rise late after imbibing so much drink the night before, but wished he could see through the door that separated them to be certain she was well.

He paced his domain for ages before her door opened. She stumbled to the kitchen, her hair mussed, her eyes barely open, and still wearing that long shirt with nothing covering her legs.

He listened as she worked in the kitchen, and after several minutes he heard a chair scrape against the floor followed by a moan of pleasure. The sound shot straight through his body. A more torturous existence awaited him—apparently. Not only had he discovered he had a heart, a part of his body he'd never engaged during his natural life, but lust was to be his constant companion as well.

The doorbell rang, and she rose to answer it. He observed her as she came into view. The circles beneath her dark green eyes caused him

to wince and mutter a curse against the man who'd caused her so much pain.

Tori paused, her hand on the doorknob and glanced around the room.

"Oh, I am so losing it," she muttered. She'd spent half the night talking to herself, crying in her wine, and now she could swear she'd heard someone. As if they were standing right beside her cursing.

Which she proceeded to do as the bell pealed once again. She opened the door to admit her friend, Lynne, knowing and hating what was going to come out of her mouth.

"Hey there—wow. What hit you, a truck?"

"A big bottle of wine." She waved her in, and they went into the kitchen.

Lynne snatched a cup of coffee and sat down at the table beside her. "Then you already know about Tom."

Tori nodded. "And before you say anything, yes I know I need to get over it, yes I know I can't go on crying over him, and yes I know he's not worth a single tear."

Lynne patted her hand and smiled. "Then you're getting better. You used to cry for a full twenty-four hours and deny all of that, as I would so kindly remind you each and every time."

She chuckled, then winced, cupping her forehead as she leaned on the table. "Actually, I had a nice little talk with myself last night and I think it helped."

"Good. Now, although I suspect you'd rather stay home and veg, we're going out shopping."

Tori groaned. "Lynne, thanks, really. But I'm just not in the mood. And I need to get myself repaired before I visit Nana this afternoon."

Lynne sighed, but agreed.

They visited a little longer then once Lynne left, she hit the shower. Her fingers tangled in her hair, and she recalled her conversation the night before.

"I deserve everything," she said with a chuckle. Well, why not? Maybe if she thought like that she could get past the hurt. Although she had to admit, the hurt wasn't really about Tom anymore. It was about what he represented. About not being loved, about not having all the things she thought she would have by now. A home and family. Why were those things so hard to obtain?

With a scowl, she wrapped a towel around her and crossed the room to her dresser. Halfway there, she paused, eyes wide, and swallowed the lump of fear climbing her throat.

"Lynne?" she called, peeking through the doorway to the living room, but got no answer. She eased out of her bedroom, certain she'd heard someone.

"Have mercy," a voice groaned.

With a yelp, she jumped back into her room and slammed the door. "Whoever you are, you'd better know I'm calling the police." Problem was, the phone was in the living room. Her little apartment didn't need more than one, and she'd left it in the living room by the couch last night after talking to Nana.

"Blast it," the very male voice said. "I'll not hurt you, I vow it."

"I have a gun," she lied. She only had some pepper spray, which was sitting in her purse on the table by the door.

The voice sighed. "I know you do not, but it would make no difference. It would not work on me. Nor would the fierce spray you keep in your

reticule.”

“Oh God—oh God—oh God.” Tori shook all over, terrified beyond belief. What was she going to do?

“Listen to me carefully, Tori. I will not harm you. We spoke last eve, do you not remember?”

He’s been there all along—in her house—watching her? “H-h-how long have you been here?”

“Since you bought the mirror. The one that hangs by the door in your small hall.”

“Two months!”

“Yes, love,” he sighed. “Two months. You bought the small glass for a shade over twenty-five dollars. You already knew where it was to go the moment you lifted it from the shelf in the store.”

“You couldn’t possible know that.” Her fingers were turning numb where she clutched the towel.

“I know, Tori, because I am *in* the mirror. You’ve only to come out and see for yourself.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right. What do I look like, an idiot?”

“No, you look like a beautiful woman wearing far too few clothes. Come out—after you’ve dressed. I beg you not to torment me further with your bare limbs.”

This was too much. She had a stalker in her apartment, but he wanted her to get dressed? Insane. It was completely totally insane. But she had to get out sooner or later, she couldn’t stand there all day waiting—hoping Lynne or someone would show up and call the police.

She double-checked the lock on the door, grabbed her clothes and streaked into the bathroom—where she locked that door as well. Her hands shook as she jumped into her undies,

then her jeans and shirt, took a quick second to pull her damp hair back into a ponytail, before edging out of the bathroom.

No one was there, thank goodness. She rushed to the closet and pulled out a baseball bat, her last means of protection. As quiet as a cat, she eased open the door and looked around the living room and into the kitchen as far as she could see. It stood behind a small partition wall, the wall where she'd hung the mirror, but she couldn't see all the way to the back. It was the only place he could be hiding, because she didn't have so much as a hall closet. Unless he'd left, but she couldn't be that lucky.

Tip-toeing around the wall, her bat poised, she prepared herself. A few steps later, her breath slipped out in a whoosh. There was no one there, just her refrigerator and a cup of cold coffee sitting on the counter.

She spun around and lunged for the front door, reaching for the locks, but they were all set. The chain even sat in its slot.

"I told you I would not harm you," he said, and she yelped.

Flattening her spine to the door, she frantically searched the room, but saw no one.

"I am here. Beside you in the mirror, but you will not be able to see me, I fear."

Tori gulped and warily looked to her side, then let her gaze climb the wall to the mirror. "Ah—ah—ah—"

"I will not, cannot harm you. You must believe me." His gaze searched her face, or so she assumed, he was barely there, whatever he was.

"I s-s-see you."

His eyes widened. "You do?"

She nodded.

“What game is she playing?” he muttered.

“Are you a g-g-ghost?”

His mouth cocked up at the corner. “Not exactly.”

Her gaze narrowed and her temper simmered. She tossed her bat to the side. “Is this some sort of sick joke?”

She’d seen enough television shows and movies to know just about anything was possible these days with computer chips, so she reached for the mirror and took it from the wall, determined to find the source of this *haunting*.

The image groaned.

She lifted it and stared into his eyes. His mouth fell open in shock, and he blinked a time or two. “Look, whoever you are. This isn’t funny. When I find the chip that’s sending the signal, you can bet your ass, I’m calling the cops.”

“Chip?”

Oh, he was good. His expression screamed complete and utter confusion. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Yeah, chip. You know, a computer chip. A device that can transmit a signal.”

“A chip,” he said with a nod. “You believe that I am being—transmitted—like the images on your television.”

Tori shot him a smirk, a look so delectable Connor wished he could taste it—and her. But he had to prove himself, and hope she didn’t decide to destroy the mirror. It would take ages to find another, and worse, he would never see her again. If she wished him gone by destroying the mirror, he could not return to her without an invitation. He would have to find another, and the thought was more than distasteful to him.

“You paid very little for this mirror,

sweetness,” he said. “Do you truly think that one of these *chips*, a thing I am certain would be very expensive, would be inside?”

Her brow furrowed, then she flipped the mirror over, and once again, blessed him with a close up view of her breasts. Close enough that he could almost feel their softness.

“I’m not beaten yet,” she grouched.

He quickly dropped his hand from the glass, as she flipped the mirror back around and marched into the kitchen. She placed him face down on the table. He listened as she rummaged amid something nearby.

“Let’s see how you did this,” she murmured.

The mirror shifted, but he remained face down for interminable seconds, then was lifted off the table. He could see the frame of the mirror before him, cleanly dismantled. The room spun as she turned him to face her.

Her eyes widened and her exquisite mouth fell open. “How did you—it’s not possible. This is nothing but a sheet of glass.”

He smiled at her confusion. “As I tried to tell you.”

She sat down at the table, and held the mirror in her hands. Hands he wished could hold him. He pulled his thoughts back to her and his tale.

“My name is Connor Stevens. I am—was a sea captain some centuries ago. A bit of a privateer, to be exact, which aided in bringing me to this current existence. I angered a sea witch, and she condemned me to this existence.”

Slowly, she shook her head. “There are no such things as witches.”

“There are many things in this world and the next we know little of, Tori. I was taught that lesson quite clearly. I was, and am sorely

ashamed now to admit it, a conceited, greedy, womanizer. The last is what brought me to my current predicament. I seduced a woman, the sea witch's daughter, and left her heartbroken. I refused to heed my crewmen's warnings of the sirens of the sea, they were but myth, I told them. But I was wrong."

She propped him in the chair and sat back to study him. He disliked the distance, as he'd enjoyed knowing her hands held him, but said nothing.

"This is insane. I must be certifiable," she said, shaking her head.

"You are not insane."

Jumping to her feet, she busied herself in the kitchen. "Of course I am. It's the only logical explanation. My brain has decided to create an imaginary friend for me, a man." She glanced over her shoulder and squinted in his direction. "A handsome one—I think, you're not really clear. But you understand about my problems and so on." She emptied her cup in the sink. "It makes perfect sense."

Connor sighed. "If that is what you wish to believe, I will not argue the point. Perhaps that is what I truly am, and that is why you can see and hear me. The rules I thought I was bound by seem to no longer apply."

She paused in her vigorous scrubbing of the cup, a cup no doubt cleaner than it had ever been, and looked over her shoulder at him. "What rules?"

He explained his past, how he'd tried many times to communicate to people, how some mirrors he could appear in and others he could not. He even braved the truth, and told her that if she truly wished him gone, she need only break the mirror, and he would never return.

"Other mirrors? You mean you can move to other mirrors?" Her horrified expression almost made him smile.

"I'm not a complete arse, Tori. I don't peek into powder rooms or bedrooms. I do not invade people's privacy. And even if I wanted to, if I venture close to a mirror of that sort, I am instantly thrown into darkness. The one time I tried it, before I understood the rules, I awoke ten years later in a seafood restaurant." He sighed and rubbed his stomach. "I do so miss the taste of food."

A giggle burst from her lips. "You got what you deserve, I bet. So whose mirror was it?"

"A lover, if you must know. I thought if I appeared in her boudoir glass, all would be well, that I would be welcome in some way, but I was wrong."

"Oh," she said, folding her dishcloth with supreme exactness.

A glimmer of a smile teased his lips then fell. It wasn't jealousy but hurt he saw in her. It was the reminder of the man she loved. He had left her for another, a fact he'd learned by listening to her conversations with Lynne.

"She could not see me as you can, and had found another in my absence," he said, hoping to ease the memory.

"I'm sorry."

He sensed her sincerity. "It's in the past."

She took a deep breath, and he strained to keep his gaze on her face—something he'd not had to do for more years than he could count. No one had ever seen him before, and he was free to look where he wished, but her body, shapely yet petite, called to his baser self. It was a painful existence, indeed.

"Well, let's talk about something else," she

said with a forced smile. "So, if you're real, then how come you sound American? Almost modern." She sat across from him and nibbled on a piece of dry toast.

"Ah, well, sweetness, I've been alive for over two hundred years, and I do have ears. So I suppose I've picked up on a few things. Besides, I am an American," he said with a chuckle.

"Really? Where are you from?"

"New York. But I spent most of my life on the sea."

"Do you miss it?"

"Odd you should ask that," he said, stroking his chin. "It's been some time since I've even seen the sea, but strangely I've no desire to sail it any longer."

She grinned, a delightful twinkle in her eye. "I suppose being cursed by a sea witch would tend to taint the experience."

He chuckled. "Yes, that it has. But it's more than that. I've—changed over the years. Grown, I suppose."

They chatted for more than an hour, and laughed often. It was a balm to his soul to see her smile.

"Well," she said, rising from her place at the table. "I guess I should put you back together and get to Nana's."

He spoke no more, allowing her time to adjust to him, hoping someday she would believe he was real. But obviously, she did not.

An hour later, she came into view before the front door, her keys in hand.

"Have a nice visit with your grandmother," he said.

She paused and looked at the mirror, a slow smile easing over her lips. "Thanks. I'll, um, see you later." With a backward wave, she slipped

out the door.

"That you will, love. That you will," he murmured, knowing she was doing her best to put him from her mind, her imaginary friend, but he had no plans of going anywhere.

Several hours later, she returned, slamming into the apartment with a growl, her face hot with color, and her beautiful lips set in a firm scowl. "How could she?"

"How could she what?"

She glared at him. "She set me up!"

Connor shook his head. "I don't understand."

With a huff, she started for her bedroom. "Follow me," she said, not sparing a glance back at him.

"Into your bedroom? I—um—are you certain?"

She stopped in the doorway and looked over her shoulder. "Only when I invite you," she said, wagging her finger. "And I'm inviting you. There's a mirror over the dresser, an antique one that conniving old woman I call my grandmother gave me."

With a grin, he left the small foyer behind and met her in her bedroom. He did his best not to look at the large sleigh bed in the center of the room, for he knew if he did, he would picture her there—and him beside her.

Her reticule landed on the bed with a thump, and his gaze shot up to the ceiling with a faint prayer. So much for not looking at the bed.

"So, um—" He cleared the lump of longing from his throat. "What did your grandmother do that has you so upset?"

"She set me up on a blind date." She flung open the closet door and scowled at its contents.

"A blind what?"

"Date. I have an assignation with a man," she snarled.

"The devil you say!"

She chuckled roughly and snatched a blue dress covered in small white flowers from the closet. "Sorry. Poor choice of words. I have an appointment for coffee." She hung the dress on a hook just inside the bathroom door, then disappeared inside.

"You mean to say your grandmother arranged for you to meet a gentleman?"

"Yep," she called from the bath.

"And that's not acceptable to you?"

A moment of rustling, then her bare arm, visible for merely a moment, retrieved the garment from the hook. His body tensed at the sight, knowing the rest of her was just as bare.

"What's not acceptable," she said, coming out of the bath buttoning up the last of the fastenings at the front of her dress, "is that my grandmother set the date for me. And for today, of all days. I look like I've been through hell. How could anything be more humiliating?"

"Ah, well, when put that way, I can see your meaning, but she only means well, sweetness." She was lovely with her hair dancing across her shoulders, the dress clinging tight to her sensuous curves. "You're beautiful," he breathed.

She laughed softly and picked up an earbob from the small box she kept atop the dresser. "Complimenting myself, there's gotta be something wrong with that," she muttered, then looked up at him and froze.

"Tori?"

She jerked around and looked behind her then spun back around to the mirror.

"Tori, what is it? What's wrong?"

"I can see you." The hand holding her earbob

shook as she motioned toward him.

"So you said earlier."

She shook her head slowly. "No, I mean I can really see you. It's as if you were standing—right—behind me."

"You mean I'm clearer than before? Not like a ghost?"

She shook her head again as she backed away. "This is so wrong." Her legs hit the edge of the bed and she sank down on it. "I'm getting worse. That's what it is. I've gone from a voice, to a shadowy reflection, to a full-blown hunk in Technicolor. At this rate, I'll be wrapped in a straight jacket by tomorrow morning."

"Tori, no. Listen to me. You are not insane. I am real. You've got to believe me."

Her frightened eyes lifted and pierced him to his very soul. "You can't be real," she choked out. "You're too nice, too caring, too handsome, and too...perfect to be real. You're an illusion, my fantasy man come to life."

A flash of warmth shot through his soul at her words, yet it was followed by such pain and grief, he thought he might split in two. He could never have her as his own.

She rose from the bed and slipped on her shoes, her movements awkward and unsteady. "I have to make you go away somehow. I—I can't live a fantasy. I have to face reality. Tom didn't want me, but he's not the only man on the planet. There are others. Like the man tonight. I have to give him a chance. I have to let go of my past and my fantasies." She returned to the dresser and shakily put on the earbob and then its mate.

His hands slammed against the glass. "No! Please, Tori, you have to believe me. I—am—real!"

She refused to look at him, concentrating on her task. "No. I have to face my life, the real world as it is. It isn't perfect, but it's all I have."

She turned, lifted her bag from the bed, and left the room. He hurried after her to appear in the small mirror by the door. "Please, love!"

Her tear-filled eyes met his. "Goodbye, Connor. I wish you *were* real. Because I could love you so easily," she said with a strangled voice and fled out the door.

"No!" He fell to his knees, his hands sliding down the glass with an ominous screech. "No," he whispered hoarsely.

A warm breeze, a sensation he'd not felt in centuries dried the lone tear sliding down his cheek. He lifted his head and turned into it, noting its sweet scent. Blindly, he let the breeze pull and guide him through his shadowy world, for this was the only world he would ever know. One without the woman who held his heart, for he knew she would destroy the mirror when she returned.

The date was a disaster. It didn't matter that she was still upset about Connor. *No, not Connor, you're upset because you've gone off the deep end.*

Whatever the reason, it didn't help her blind date any. Jim was, for lack of a better word, a jerk. What had her grandmother seen in him, anyway?

For the umpteenth time, his eyes were pinned on her boobs instead of her face while she talked about her work.

"Then I did a strip tease on top of my boss's desk while wearing a clown nose and paper hat made out of hundred dollar bills," she deadpanned.

"Sounds like you really like your work," he muttered.

What a moron? "Look, Jim, it's been really—interesting meeting you, but I have to be going." *Back to my imaginary man, because I'd rather be crazy and with him than go through another date from hell again.*

He jumped up from his chair as she stood. "Right, I'll see you home."

"No, you don't have to do that. It's so out of your way, and all." They'd met at the coffee shop, a safe public place. At least her grandmother had some sense left. The last thing she needed was for this bozo to know where she lived.

"No it's not out of the way. Your grandmother gave me your number and address in case you failed to show." He grinned down at her, his gaze dropping lower yet again.

"Wonderful. She's such a *dear*," she spoke through clenched teeth, as he walked her to her car. When she talked to Nana in the morning, boy was she going to get an earful.

She watched the headlights in her rearview all the way home, thinking up a dozen different deterrents, and wondering if she'd left her bat by the door. She didn't think she'd actually need it, but a backup plan was always a good thing.

Jim walked along side her to the door and waited as she unlocked it. She almost creamed him with the door as she stepped in and tried to close it before he could get inside.

"Well, thank you for the coffee," she said.

"You're welcome, but I thought maybe we could share something a little stronger." He tilted his head to the side as he looked over her shoulder. "Or maybe watch a movie together or something. It's still early." He lifted his hand

and stroked her shoulder. She cursed herself for wearing the sleeveless sundress.

"It may be early," she edged out from beneath his touch, "but I had a rough day and I'm beat." She faked a yawn, and he moved closer, so much so, she stepped back, then cursed herself for giving him room to move inside.

"I'll rub your back," he said lowly. "And anything else you want." His head dipped low for a kiss as she fumbled for her bat, but it wasn't where she'd left it.

"Shove off, you bilge rat!"

Jim's head snapped up. "What did you say?"

Tori shook her head, unable to find a single coherent word. Had he actually heard Connor, or had she said that? Maybe she was playing out her fantasy man's role.

"I said shove off!"

That did *not* come from her. She couldn't fake a voice that deep if her life depended on it.

Jim looked over her shoulder, his eyes wide. "Hey, man. She told me she was single."

The room tilted and her heart raced. Who was standing behind her?

"You mean Tori's grandmother said she was single. She doesn't approve of me—yet," the familiar voice said from behind her.

Jim looked at Tori still standing frozen in place, too terrified to turn around, not sure what or whom she would see.

"Tori, it was fun," Jim said. "You've got my number in case you change your mind. But you should've said something."

"She was respecting her grandmother's wishes to meet you. And as to your number, she most definitely will not be calling." A large, tan hand gripped the edge of the door.

Tori squeaked.

Jim lifted his hands in surrender and backed off. "Okay, okay. I'm gone." He stepped back and the hand flicked the door closed.

"I'll have to have a long talk with your Nana," the voice said. "That scoundrel tried to seduce you. A blind man could see you weren't interested in his advances."

She swallowed hard, and forced herself to turn around. There he was, six foot plus, broad shouldered with dark wavy hair, and a dimple in his cheek. The man who'd *stood* behind her in the mirror, the one she'd had intimate thoughts about all day and all through her evening with Jim. Her fantasy man was standing in her foyer.

"Connor," she whispered, then fell over in a dead faint.

"I'm happy to see you too, love," he said, as he scooped her up into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

The feel of her warm body nestled in his arms nearly undid him. It had been so very long since he'd touched another human being—a woman, his woman. The one he would love until he took his last breath. It was all so clear to him now. He had been a hard man, one who lived for the day's pleasures and nothing more. He'd used women, hoarded gold, and scoffed at all the lovesick fools he'd ever met. Now he knew what he'd been meant to learn, what the sea witch wanted to teach him. That the giving of one's heart to another while expecting nothing in return was more important, more precious than any metal or easily satisfied lust.

Tori stirred in his arms. He hushed her as he laid her down upon the bed and pressed a chaste kiss to her brow. There would be time for physical pleasures later, he hoped. She'd said she *could* love him, she did not say she did. The

sea witch's whispered words in his ear as he'd materialized in Tori's apartment in front of the small mirror said he had but till the new moon to win her heart, or he would be forced back into the mirror.

He slipped her shoes from her feet and pulled the covers to her chin. "Sleep, love. We will begin tomorrow." He would woo her and win her—he had no choice. For not only did his existence hang in the balance, he would never be able to continue without her.

"It was a dream," Tori murmured as the morning light struck across her face. She propped up on her elbows and squinted at the sunshine. "It had to be."

She peeked beneath the covers and saw her dress still intact. But someone had carried her to bed last night. Her brow furrowed as her head began to ache. If it had been Jim, she wouldn't still be in her dress, and the other side of the bed looked like no one had slept in it.

And yet someone had carried her, and that someone was still in the apartment. She could hear them banging around in the kitchen.

"I still say he slipped her one of those date-rape drugs," a woman said.

"Lynne," she whispered, her hand pressed to her chest in relief. She was probably on her cell talking to Susie, Lynne's sister.

She took a deep breath and crawled out from beneath the covers.

"No, she seemed quite fine when that arse brought her home." The man's voice stopped Tori in her tracks before she could step out of the room. She gulped and ran straight to the bathroom.

Gripping the edge of the sink, she looked at

herself in the mirror. "This can't be happening. He was nothing more than a figment of my imagination, that's all. He can't be real."

"Hey, it's about time you got up." Lynne stepped into the doorway. "I was getting worried."

"I'm fine. I'm absolutely, one hundred percent fine."

"Uh-huh. So if you're so fine, then why do you look like you just had the biggest shock of your life?" She folded her arms with a wide grin. "I mean, if I had mister hunk-of-the-month in my kitchen, I'd be making sure he wasn't going anywhere."

She fumbled with her toothbrush and toothpaste, barely getting the goop on the brush, her hands were shaking so bad. "You mean, Jim?" *Please say yes, please say yes, otherwise I'm bonkers.*

"Jim? Uh-oh. What exactly *did* happen last night?"

"What-da-ya-mean?" she mumbled around the brush.

"Girl, you came home with one man while you had another waiting in the wings. That is so not like you."

She spat out the paste and stared at Lynne in the mirror. "Another?" she squeaked.

"Hey, what is with you this morning?" She put her hands on Tori's shoulders. "Did Jim slip you something in your coffee last night?"

"No. I just—I don't—he wasn't—" She wiped her face off and shook her head. It wasn't possible, he couldn't be real.

"Okay, take it easy. Tell you what," Lynne said, leading her from the bathroom. "Let's get you into some fresh clothes, then we'll both go into the kitchen and see what Connor has

whipped up for brunch. Okay?"

"Connor, oh God."

"Yes, you remember him." She sat Tori down on the edge of the bed. "The big handsome man who scared off that nasty Jim."

"This is insane," she muttered.

"Well, I'd agree with you if I thought we were talking about the same thing." She snorted and glanced at Tori's dress and the half-made-up bed. "Sex obviously didn't happen last night."

Tori groaned, and held her head in her hands.

Lynne got up from the bed and pulled out a pair of her jeans and a tank top. "Yeah, I'd regret that opportunity myself." She tossed them at Tori. "Get dressed and face the music, girl. It's one hell of a sight to see," she said with a laugh.

With a determined nod, she got dressed, tidied her hair and face, and walked out of her bedroom. Then lost her momentum the minute she laid eyes on the man standing in her kitchen. He was beautiful, an exact copy of—a replica of—he *was* the man in the mirror.

His dark eyes glittered when he looked at her, and his smile, devilishly crooked, warmed her to her bare toes. As her gaze traveled over his sculpted body, she noted he wore an off-white cambric shirt, open wide at the neck. Brown breeches hugged his muscular thighs, and a pair of black boots, shined to perfection, stopped just below his knees.

"Good morning, love," he said.

His deep soothing voice sent a sliver of heat down her spine. "G—" she cleared her clogged throat. "Good morning."

"What would you like to eat? I've coffee ready." He reached for the steaming carafe and

poured her a cup. He set it on the table then pulled out her chair.

Lynne nudged her in the back, which meant she was probably standing there like an idiot drooling or something. She took a seat at the table.

"Lynne, would you like another cup?" he asked.

"No thanks, Connor. I've got to run." She stepped to the front door, still visible by Tori, but not by Connor deep in the kitchen, and mouthed something.

Tori squinted, trying to figure out what she was mouthing, but the general idea came through as Lynne rolled her eyes.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Tori. See you later, Connor," she called.

"Goodbye, and thank you for our talk this morning," he said, coming around the partition wall. He took Lynne's hand and kissed the back. "It was an absolute pleasure."

Lynne nearly fell over, while Tori felt like growling. *Geez, aren't we possessive this morning. What next? Are you going to fall at his feet?*

Oh, wait. I already did that.

"Oh, the pleasure was mine," Lynne said on a sigh.

Connor helped her out the door, then came back to the kitchen. "She's a good friend, you're lucky to have her."

"Yeah. Lucky." She tried to cool her heated cheeks, but knew she wasted her time and energy.

He poured another cup of coffee then moved to the table. Her breath locked in her throat when he set the cup down and knelt before her.

"Tori," he said, taking her hands in his. "I

know this is difficult, it is for me as well, but I am real and I am here."

She shook her head. "How? How did it happen?"

He closed his eyes and brought her hands to his lips. "You happened, my love," he murmured against her skin.

"This is crazy." She jumped from her chair and marched into the living room.

He followed. "You freed me, Tori. It's thanks to you that I am here. You wished me from the mirror."

Shaking her head, she sank to the couch. "I don't know if I can handle this."

He sat down beside her with a sigh. "It will take some adjustment. And in time—" He stopped abruptly, dropping his chin to his chest, his gaze focused on her bare feet as she curled them beneath her.

She narrowed her eyes. "You're not telling me something."

His large tan hands pulled her feet into his lap. She tried to ignore how good it felt, the warmth of his body against her skin, and his subtle caresses.

"Tell me, Connor. Now." Before she got too distracted and jumped him.

"You must know that I want you," he said, his voice husky.

Oh gulp. That isn't helping. "Well, um, I guess that's to be expected what with you being alone for two hundred years."

He leaned close and held her chin, looking deep into her eyes. "You are a ten to me, Tori Fraser, never forget that."

She groaned and pressed her heated cheek to the back of the couch. "You watched me primp every day, didn't you?"

He chuckled. "That I did."

She braved a look at him. "Any other humiliating things?"

"No. Nothing worth mentioning." He leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers in a sweet caress. A breathy sigh slipped from her mouth.

As he slowly pulled away, she couldn't contain her growl of disapproval.

He chuckled. "As much as I would like to continue this, I cannot. Not yet. We have much to discuss."

With a huff, she sat back. "Explain."

He ran his hand over the bottom of her foot, not meeting her gaze. "I may be forced to return to the mirror on the new moon."

She pulled her foot from his touch and clutched a pillow to her breast.

"No," she said, her voice tight. It wasn't fair. Why show her the man of her dreams in living breathing flesh only to take him away? Why were all the men in her life, the ones she cared about, always leaving? A tear spilled over the edge of her lashes.

"No, love. Don't cry." He pulled her into his lap. "It's not for certain that I'll leave."

She blinked away her tears. "New rules?"

"Of a sort." He kissed the tip of her nose then tucked her head beneath his chin. One of his large hands held her close, while the other rubbed her thigh.

"Go on," she said, relishing his touch.

"There is something I must do, a task I must accomplish. If I succeed, I can stay and live out my life here. If not, I will return to the glass for eternity."

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "Okay, so what's the task? Between the two of us, I'm sure we can handle it. We got you out of

the mirror, after all," she said with forced bravado.

With a hoarse chuckle he stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I love you. I love you more than anything in this world or the next."

Her mouth fell open and she shook her head. "But that's not possible."

"I believe you said that just last night. And yet, here I am," he said, opening his arms wide.

"But—but—"

"I know for you it has been but a pair of days, yet I have known you for months, and have loved you from the moment I saw you gazing into the mirror. I don't know why, or how, but I do."

She sat stunned, unable to take it all in. Tom couldn't love her, so how could this beautiful man, a man who could have any woman he wanted?

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You're just saying that because—because you're grateful that I wished you out of the mirror. And—and you haven't had a woman in a long time." She jumped to her feet, her legs quivering. "I don't want any sort of thanks, if it's all the same to you, verbal or—or carnal."

"No, love. You must listen." He reached for her and she backed away.

"No, I won't." She clasped her hands over her ears. "I don't want to hear any more lies. You'll leave like he did. You'll go back in the mirror or off with someone else, but you *will* leave." She turned and ran into her room with every intent of slamming the door and throwing herself on her bed to cry until her throat was raw, but Connor refused to allow it.

Hands, strong yet gentle, spun her around and pressed her against his solid chest. His lips

touched her brow. "I love you, now and for always. I cannot say if I will be forced back into the mirror, but I will never leave you for another woman. If I am granted a life here with you, I will love you 'til my dying breath."

She tried to shake her head, but he held it firmly against his shoulder.

"Yes, Tori. It is the truth, and no matter how long or how hard you refuse to believe it, it will always be the truth."

"No one has ever—"

"They have now."

She lifted her face and looked deep into his eyes, searching for answers, seeking the truth, praying it was there. She hadn't lied when she'd said she could love him. The way he spoke to soothe her when she cried in her wine the other night, the way he looked at her from the mirror with caring in his eyes, their simple talk at breakfast the morning before. All ordinary things, but for some reason those few stolen moments meant more to her than any date she'd ever had.

"I don't want you to go."

"Oh, love. The decision is still yours," he said, cradling her face in his hands, their lips a breath apart.

"I don't understand."

He kissed her, a sweet teasing kiss that grew warmer with each passing second. His tongue stole into her mouth, and she was lost in the sweetest pleasure she'd ever known.

He pulled back just enough to speak. "The decision is yours, love."

"I decide you stay," she whispered.

He smiled against her lips. "I'm afraid it will take more than that."

"Well," she said, wrapping her arms around

his neck and taking a few steps back, closer to the bed. "I suppose I could show you how much I want you to stay."

"You've no idea how tempting you are."

"So, what's it going to take?" she asked with a huff. "Do I have to burn some candles and chant like a loon or something?" It wouldn't be the first humiliating thing she'd ever done.

"It's a simple thing, and yet it isn't."

She pulled away and crossed her arms. "I'm not fond of riddles, Connor. Spit it out."

With a nod, he crossed to the window, his hands clasped behind his back. His voice low and soft, he said, "You have to love me with your whole heart."

He had to be loved by her? It was almost too easy, and yet, she feared she wouldn't be able to do it. She'd vowed to never give her whole heart again, not like she had to Tom. It hurt too much when he'd left.

Her gaze strayed to his rigid back. And Connor would leave. Wouldn't he?

"I'll try," she heard herself say.

He turned to face her, a bittersweet smile on his face. "I know you will."

She shook her head in disbelief. "You know too much about me, you know me too well."

"As I said, I have had the pleasure of watching you for months. Now, you can get to know me."

"Until the new moon."

He nodded and took her hand, pulling her from the bedroom. "Let's go get something to eat and plan the rest of our day together."

She laughed. "I take it that it won't be in bed."

"I'm sorry for that. I cannot make love to you before your decision is made."

"Ah," she said, as he led her back to the kitchen. "I take it this has something to do with the seduction of the sea witch's daughter and all that."

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, I'm hoping kisses don't count." She threw her arms around his neck, and laid one on him.

He groaned long and hard, his arms wrapped around her, her hands clenched in his shirt. They came up for air quite a while later.

"I'm glad you never brought a man home in my presence. The thought of you kissing anyone like that would've killed me for certain."

Laughing, they turned to the task of preparing something to eat.

The weeks flew by and Tori was terrified. Her feelings for Connor had strengthened, but she couldn't be sure if her whole heart was involved.

"I'm home," she called out as she closed the front door.

"It's about time," he said, coming around the partition wall. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Everyday after work they would come together for long lengthy kisses, and everyday they got hotter and more dangerous. She couldn't stand much more of this, and knew he was at the end of his rope...and his time. It was the night of the new moon.

"I've made all your favorites," he whispered against her lips.

With her working, and with nothing for him to do to pass the time, he decided to do all the cooking and shopping. It had been an experience, to say the least. She teased him, blaming his lack of food for two hundred years as

the cause, but he found he truly enjoyed the challenges preparing a superb meal presented.

She giggled and stole another kiss or two. "I have a house-husband in the making."

"Husband," he laughed. "I never thought the word would ever be applied to me."

She started to pull away, her face flaming. "Oh, I didn't mean—"

"Easy, love." He pulled her back into his arms and nipped at her neck, finding that wonderful spot behind her ear. "When this night is through, if all goes as I hope, I will be your husband. Make no mistake."

Her heart seemed to grow too big for her chest. "You'd ask me to marry you?"

He looked down at her, his brow furrowed. "Do you still not believe I love you?"

She caressed his cheek, relishing the feel of his clean-shaven face. He always shaved before she got home, claiming he didn't want to leave burns on her delicate skin. He was always doing things like that, along with the cooking and shopping, she even caught him using the vacuum cleaner. A man like him, a hunk-of-the-month as Lynne called him, doing things like that for her seemed surreal. Everything about him seemed like a dream. A dream come true.

"I just feel like...like I don't deserve you."

"No, never say it, sweetness. You deserve so much more. I am the one who does not deserve you. Even if I am allowed to stay, all I can offer you is my own sorry self and some recently learned skills in the kitchen," he said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

"I'm sure, with time, you'd find something to do."

He brushed his lips across hers. "I can think of all sorts of things."

She giggled and swatted his shoulder. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I know," he said with a chuckle. "But I've not wanted to think on it yet. I'd much rather occupy my thoughts with you."

Oh, she loved him so much, but was it with her whole heart? Could they be together?

Would he leave her?

"Come, let's eat." He placed her purse on the small table in the foyer and pulled her into the kitchen.

They had a lovely meal, indeed, he had fixed all her favorites to perfection, but they spoke not a word about what was to come.

The dishes washed and dried, and put away, they settled in front of the television and watched some show or other. Tori couldn't have said what, her mind was too occupied with the clock hand sitting minutes away from eleven, the time of the new moon.

"Connor, how will we know?"

"I suppose I will feel a pull toward the mirror, but I'm not certain."

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. "I love you."

"And I love you. All will be well." He rubbed her back, as she tucked her head beneath his chin.

But a tingling had begun minutes before in Connor's legs. It was slowly working its way up his body, but he hadn't the heart to tell her. He would be gone soon, and he would never fault her for not giving him her whole heart. He knew she'd tried, but she'd been so hurt before, she couldn't risk the pain again.

A sweet scented breeze brushed across them.

"Connor?" She lifted her head and looked around the room. "Do you feel it?"

His gut clenched. "I do."

"What is it? What does it mean?"

He rose and went to the mirror by the door.

"No, Connor." She tugged on his arm, but he continued forward. "I won't let you go. She can't have you!"

Spinning around, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "I will love you forever."

"No! I love you," she cried. But the firm hold they had on one another did no good. The sweet smelling breeze became a salty gale. As if the ocean winds were blowing through her apartment, and Tori found herself holding nothing.

"No!" The once solid, broad-chested man was now sparkles flying with the wind. "I love him, do you hear me? I love him with all my heart!"

A cackle split the air followed by thunder and lightning.

"He will leave you if I grant him mortality," a voice hissed, riding the wind. "'Tis a favor I do you."

"The only *favor* I want is Connor!" She staggered to the wall, her face nearly pressed to the glass, praying she wouldn't find him there.

"He devours women," the voice scoffed. "Then leaves them brokenhearted. You are only another of his conquests."

"I don't care! If he chooses to leave, then so be it. I love him too much to let you condemn him to a shadowy existence!"

The lights flickered and the wind abruptly stopped. She searched the room, but nothing, not a thing was out of place. It was as if the wind hadn't torn through the apartment at all.

And she was completely alone.

She ran back to the mirror but found nothing more than her own reflection. "The bedroom,"

she muttered, and ran to the antique mirror in the other room, but he wasn't there either.

She sank to the edge of the bed and held her face in her hands as sobs rocked her body. She did love him with all her heart, she knew that now, because it was breaking into a million pieces.

Connor didn't know where he was, but he knew he wasn't in the mirror. He felt as if he were floating between worlds.

He looked down and saw Tori crying. He called out to her, but she couldn't hear him. It tore at his heart—wrenching it in two. He should've never stayed with her. He should never have caused her so much grief. He should have left the moment he was freed from the mirror and found someplace to wait out his few days of freedom. He could've watched her from afar, never let her love him.

"I'm sorry, Tori, my love," he whispered. "I shall never forgive myself for causing you so much pain." Tears slid down his cheeks as he watched her, tears for her, not for himself.

The air grew heavy around him. He suspected it was the call of the mirror, but it wouldn't be Tori's. No, he wouldn't stay and torment himself or her with a half-life, even if the witch allowed it. He would sell his soul if need be to save her anymore pain.

A crackle rode on the air with lightning, blinding him. His feet found solid ground, and he staggered with the suddenness of it. Blinking, he cleared the spots from his eyes, and looked before him at an arresting sight. He saw his reflection staring back at him from the antique mirror.

Free. I'm free, once and for all.

He looked down at Tori, who lay curled into a ball on the bed, her face scrunched up and her eyes closed tight as she clung to a pillow. She was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

He bent over her and cupped her cheek. "Don't cry, love."

"Connor?" She opened her eyes and flew off the bed straight into his arms.

Pressing his face to her hair, he inhaled her scent, and said a silent prayer of thanks.

"I thought you were gone," she cried.

"I thought so too," he said, his voice tight.

"She won't—"

He kissed his way to her lips. "She's gone." He slid his hands over her delectable body as he nibbled at her lips. Cupping her breast, he felt the crest pebble beneath his fingertips.

"And you're going to stay?" she asked, her voice breathy and soft.

"I'll not leave you—ever." He moved his mouth down the side of her neck and slid the strap of her tank top aside as he tasted her skin. Pressing his hand against her bottom, he held her against his straining erection.

He'd tormented himself with long lazy kisses for weeks, always keeping his hands in safe areas, but now he was free to love her fully, and he didn't want to waste another minute talking. They could do that later, much later.

She groaned low, and he nearly lost it standing there holding her. In a matter of seconds they were both naked, touching and exploring one another.

"I can't wait much longer, love," he said, his voice raw. She deserved so much more. She believed in him and loved him, and he would give her everything he had. His heart, his soul, his very life, but he could not love her slowly the first

time.

"Neither can I."

He settled himself between her smooth legs, and as their eyes held one another, he plunged into the haven of her body.

Her eyes widened and she arched into him. "Connor," she gasped.

Again and again, he thrust inside her, needing to be closer, climbing ever higher.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her hips. In moments, he would be toppling over the edge with her in his arms.

"Marry me," he growled, as he drove into her.

Her head rolled from side to side with a groan.

Painfully, he slowed his strokes, pulling them back from the edge. He would not give her what she—they both wanted until she agreed. He would have her as his and his alone...or he would die.

"Marry me," he demanded.

She clutched at his shoulders, her face flushed with color. "Don't—stop."

Gritting his teeth, he pulled out of her warmth, hating the sudden loss, but held himself just at her opening.

He kissed her trembling lips. "Marry me, Tori."

One hand sank into his hair and held him firmly to her mouth as she suckled his tongue. She slid the other between them and wrapped her fingers around his heated shaft. He wouldn't hold out against such delicious torment. Pulling his mouth from hers, he snatched her hand away and slid into her warmth with a growl.

"You are mine," he said, his voice raw with need.

"Yours." Together they tumbled over the precipice.

Sated and spent, he rolled to his side, taking her with him, and looked into her eyes. "You didn't believe her when she said I would leave you, did you?"

She caressed his cheek. "It didn't matter if I believed her or not. Because it doesn't matter if you leave or not."

He rolled atop her, pinning her to the bed and cupped her face in his hands. "I—am—not—leaving."

She smiled, soft and sweet. "I know."

"But you said—"

"It doesn't matter if you leave or not, because I know you truly love me. That's all I ever really wanted." She grinned sheepishly. "Although, it took me a while to figure that out. I thought I had to have the guy, the house, the family, even a dog in the yard to be happy. But all I really needed was to know that someone, someone other than family or friends, loved me."

He rested his forehead against hers. "I love you so much, Tori. You saved me, my life, my soul, you've given me—everything." He lifted his head and kissed her. "Will you marry me?"

She giggled and wrapped her arms around him. "I think you asked me that already."

Laughing he rolled to his back with her in his arms. "I did, but all I ever got was a moan."

She smacked his arm and ducked her head beneath his chin. "I was trying to say yes."

"Then say yes now."

She kissed his chest. "Yes," then his neck, "yes," and then his lips, "definitely yes."

He made love to her again, but this time slowly and sweetly, just as she deserved. And for the first time in his life, he understood what true

joy really was.

A word about the author...

Jo currently resides in North Carolina with her patient and supportive family while she juggles her writing career and her position as a programmer analyst. In her early years, she wrote folk songs, poetry, and an occasional short story or two, but never dreamed of writing a book. She didn't even like to read! But one fateful day, she picked up a romance novel and found herself hooked. Not only did she discover the joy of reading, but the joy of writing books. These days, if she isn't tapping away at her computer on a story of her own, she has her nose buried in the latest romance novel hot off the presses, and is enjoying every minute of it.

Visit her website at www.jobarrett.net