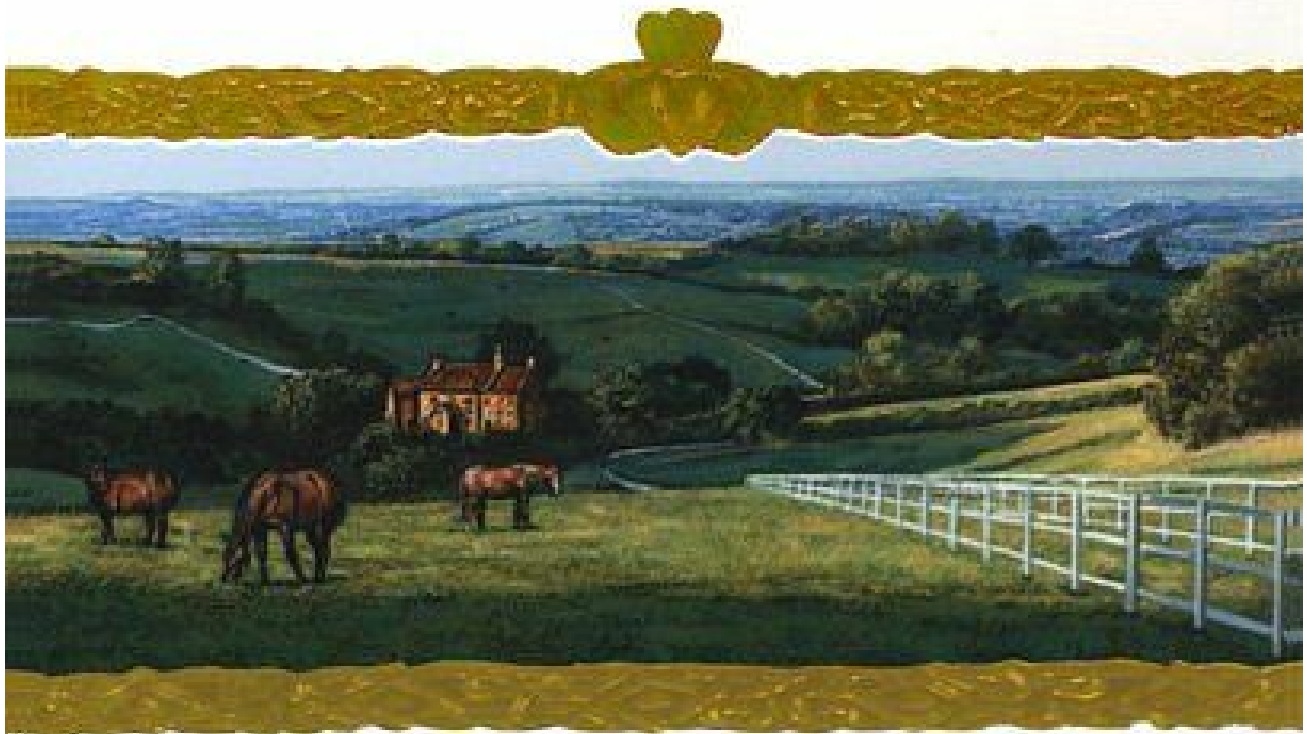


#1 *New York Times*
bestselling author

NORA ROBERTS



EVER AFTER

Nora Roberts - Ever After

CHAPTER 1

"This," the old woman said, "is for you."

Allena studied the pendant that swung gently from the thickly braided links of a silver chain. Really, she'd only come in to browse. Her budget didn't allow for impulse buys-which were, of course, the most fun and the most satisfying. And her affection for all things impulsive was the very reason she couldn't afford to indulge herself.

She shouldn't have entered the shop at all. But who could resist a tiny little place tucked into the waterfront of a charming Irish village? Especially a place called Charms and Cures.

Certainly not Allena Kennedy.

"It's beautiful, but I-

"There's only one." The woman's eyes were faded and blue, like the sea that slapped and spewed against the stone wall barely a stone's throw from the door. Her hair was steel gray and bundled into a bun that lay heavy on her thin neck.

She wore a fascinating rattle of chains and pins, but there was nothing, Allena thought, like the pendant she held in her bony fingers. "Only one?"

"The silver was cured in Dagda's Cauldron over the Midsummer's fire and carved by the finger of Merlin. He that was Arthur's."

"Merlin?"

Allena was a sucker for tales of magic and heroics. Her stepsister Margaret would have sniffed and said no, she was simply a sucker.

"The high king's sorcerer wandered through Ireland in his time. It was here he found the Giant's Dance, and coveting it for Arthur,

floated it away over the Irish Sea to Britain. But while he took magic from this land, some he also left." Watching Allena, she set the pendant swaying. "Here is some, and it belongs to you."

"Well, I really can't-" But Allena trailed off, her gaze locked on the pendant. It was a long oval, dulled and tarnished a bit, and centered in it was a carving in the shape of a bursting star.

It seemed to catch the murky, cloud-filtered light coming through the small shop window, hold it, expand it, so that it glittered hypnotically in Allena's eyes. It seemed the star shimmered.

"I just came in to look around."

"Sure and if you don't look, you can't find, can you? You came looking, all the way from America."

She'd come, Allena tried to remember, to assist Margaret with the tour group. Margaret's business, A Civilized Adventure, was very successful-and very regimented. Everyone said that Allena needed some regimentation. And Margaret had been clear, brutally clear, that this opportunity was her last chance.

"Be organized, be prepared, and be on time," Margaret had told her as she'd sat behind her polished desk in her perfectly terrifying and perfectly ordered office in New York. "If you can manage that, there might be a chance for you. If you can't, I wash my hands of you, Lena."

It wouldn't be the first time someone had washed their hands of her. In the past three years she'd lost three jobs. Well, four, but it didn't seem necessary to count those hideous two days she'd spent as assistant to her uncle's mother-in-law's sister.

It wasn't as if she'd spilled ink on the white Valentino gown on purpose. And if the Social Dragon hadn't insisted that she use a fountain pen-I mean, really-for all correspondence, there wouldn't have been ink to spill.

But that wasn't the point, she reminded herself as she stared at the pendant. She'd lost that job and all the others, and now Margaret was giving her a chance to prove she wasn't a complete moron.

Which, Allena feared, she probably was.

"You need to find your place."

Blinking, Allena managed to tear her gaze away from the pendant and look back into the old woman's eyes. They seemed so kind and wise. "Maybe I don't have one."

"Oh, there now, each of us has one, but there are those who don't fit so easily into the world the way others see it. And us. You've only been looking in the wrong places. Till now. This," she said again, "belongs to you."

"I really can't afford it." There was apology in her voice, even as she reached out. Just to touch. And touching, she felt heat from the silver, and terrible longing inside her. A thrill raced up her spine even as something heavy seemed to settle over her heart.

It couldn't hurt to try it on. Surely there was no harm in just seeing how it looked on her, how it felt.

As if in a dream, she took the chain from the old woman, slipped it around her neck. The heaviness in her heart shifted. For a moment, the light through the window strengthened, beamed brilliantly over the trinkets and pots of herbs and odd little stones crammed on the shelves and counters.

An image swam into her mind, an image of knights and dragons, of wild wind and water, of a circle of stones standing alone under a black and raging sky.

Then a shadow that was a man, standing still as the stones, as if waiting.

In her heart she knew he waited for her, as no one had before and no one would after. And would wait, eternally.

Allena closed her hand over the pendant, ran her thumb over the star. Joy burst through her, clear as the sunlight. Ah, she thought. Of course. It's mine. Just as I'm his, and he's mine.

"How much is it?" she heard herself say, and knew no price would be too dear.

"Ten pounds, as a token."

"Ten?" She was already reaching for her purse. "It has to be worth more." A king's ransom, a sorcerer's spell, a lover's dream.

"It is, of course." But the woman merely held out her hand for the single note. "And so are you. Go on your journey, a chuid, and see."

"Thank you."

"You're a good lass," the woman said as Allena walked to the door. And when it shut, her smile turned bright and crafty. "He won't be pleased, but you'll bring him 'round by Midsummer's Eve. And if you need a bit of help, well, that will be my pleasure."

Outside, Allena stared at the sea wall, the dock, the line of cottages as if coming out of a dream. Odd, she thought, hadn't that all been wonderfully odd? She traced a finger over the pendant again. Only one, cast in Dagda's Cauldron, carved by Merlin.

Of course, Margaret would sneer and tell her that the old woman had a dozen more in the stockroom ready to pass them off to birdbrained tourists. And Margaret, as always, was probably right. But it didn't matter.

She had the pendant and a wonderful story to go with it. And all for ten pounds. Quite a bargain.

She glanced up now, wincing. The sky was heavy with clouds, and all of them were thick and gray. Margaret would not be pleased that the weather wasn't falling in line with today's plans. The ferry ride to the island had been meticulously arranged.

Tea and scones would be served on the trip over, while Margaret lectured her twenty-person group on the history of the place they were about to visit. It had been Allena's job to type up Margaret's notes and print the handouts.

First stop would be the visitors' center for orientation. There would be a tour of a ruined abbey and graveyard, which Allena looked forward to, then lunch, picnic style, which the hotel had provided in hampers. Lunch was to last precisely sixty minutes.

They would then visit the beehive cottages, and Margaret would deliver a lecture on their history and purpose. The group would be allotted an hour to wander on their own, into the village, the shops, down to the beach, before gathering at four-thirty on the dot for high tea at the restored castle, with, naturally, another lecture on that particular spot.

It was Allena's job to keep all of Margaret's lecture notes in order, to help herd the group, to watch valuables, to haul parcels should there be any, and to generally make herself available for any and all menial chores.

For this she would be paid a reasonable salary by Margaret's definition. But, more important, it was explained, she would receive training and experience that, her family hoped, would teach her responsibility and maturity. Which, by the age of twenty-five, she should have learned already.

There was no point in explaining that she didn't want to be responsible and mature if it turned her into another Margaret. Here she was, four days into her first tour and already something inside her was screaming to run away.

Dutifully, she quashed the rebellion, glanced at her watch. Stared at it, dumbfounded.

That couldn't be. It was impossible. She'd only meant to slip into the shop for a few minutes. She couldn't possibly have spent an hour in there. She couldn't-oh, God, she couldn't have missed the ferry.

Margaret would murder her.

Gripping the strap of her bag, she began to run.

She had long, dancer's legs and a slim build. The sturdy walking shoes Margaret had ordered her to buy slapped pavement on her race to the ferry dock. Her bag bounced heavily against her hip. Inside was everything ordered from the Civilized Adventure directive and a great deal more.

The wind kicked in from the sea and sent her short blond hair into alarmed spikes around her sharp-boned face. The alarm was in her eyes, gray as the clouds, as well. It turned quickly to despair and self-disgust when she reached the dock and saw the ferry chugging away.

"Damn it!" Allena grabbed her own hair and pulled viciously. "That's it and that's all. I might as well jump in and drown myself." Which would be more pleasant, she had no doubt, than the icy lecture Margaret would deliver.

She'd be fired, of course, there was no doubt of it. But she was used to that little by-product of her professional endeavors. The method of termination would be torture.

Unless- There had to be another way to get to the island. If she could get there, throw herself on Margaret's stingy supply of mercy, work like a dog, forfeit her salary. Make an excuse. Surely she'd be able to come up with some reason for missing the damn ferry.

She looked around frantically. There were boats, and if there were boats, there were people who drove boats. She'd hire a boat, pay whatever it cost.

"Are you lost, then?"

Startled, she lifted a hand, closed it tight over her pendant. There was a young man-hardly more than a boy, really, she noted-standing beside a small white boat. He wore a cap over his straw-colored hair and watched her out of laughing green eyes.

"No, not lost, late. I was supposed to be on the ferry." She gestured, then let her arms fall. "I lost track of time."

"Well, time's not such a matter in the scheme of things."

"It is to my sister. I work for her." Quickly now, she headed down toward him where the sea lapped the shore. "Is this your boat, or your father's?"

"Aye, it happens it's mine."

It was small, but to her inexperienced eye looked cheerful. She had to hope that made it seaworthy. "Could you take me over? I need to catch up. I'll pay whatever you need."

It was just that sort of statement, Allena thought the minute the words left her mouth, that would make Margaret cringe. But then bargaining wasn't a priority at the moment. Survival was.

"I'll take you where you need to be." His eyes sparkled as he held out a hand. "For ten pounds."

"Today everything's ten pounds." She reached for her purse, but he shook his head.

"It was your hand I was reaching for, lady, not payment. Payment comes when you get where you're going."

"Oh, thanks." She put her hand in his and let him help her into the boat.

She sat starboard on a little bench while he cast off. Closing her eyes with relief, she listened to the boy whistle as he went about settling to stern and starting the motor. "I'm very grateful," she began. "My sister's going to be furious with me. I don't know what I was thinking of."

He turned the boat, a slow and smooth motion. "And couldn't she have waited just a bit?"

"Margaret?" The thought made Allena smile. "It wouldn't have occurred to her."

The bow lifted, and the little boat picked up speed. "It would have occurred to you," he said, and then they were skimming over the water.

Thrilled, she turned her face to the wind. Oh, this was better, much better, than any tame ferry ride, lecture included. It was almost worth the price she would pay at the end, and she didn't mean the pounds.

"Do you fish?" she called out to him.

"When they're biting."

"It must be wonderful to do what you want, when you want. And to live so near the water. Do you love it?"

"I've a fondness for it, yes. Men put restrictions on men. That's an odd thing to my way of thinking."

"I have a terrible time with restrictions. I can never remember them." The boat leaped, bounced hard and made her laugh. "At this rate, we'll beat the ferry."

The idea of that, the image of her standing on shore and giving Margaret a smug look when the ferry docked, entertained Allena so

much she didn't give a thought to the shiver of lightning overhead or the sudden, ominous roar of the sea.

When the rain began to pelt her, she looked around again, shocked that she could see nothing but water, the rise and fall of it, the curtain that closed off light.

"Oh, she won't like this a bit. Are we nearly there?"

"Nearly, aye, nearly." His voice was a kind of crooning that smoothed nerves before they could fray. "Do you see there, through the storm? There, just ahead, is where you need to be."

She turned. Through the rain and wind, she saw the darker shadow of land, a rise of hills, the dip of valley in shapes only. But she knew, she already knew.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

Like smoke, it drifted closer. She could see the crash of surf now and the cliffs that hulked high above. Then in the flash of lightning, she thought, just for an instant, she saw a man.

Before she could speak, the boat was rocking in the surf, and the boy leaping out into the thrashing water to pull them to shore.

"I can't thank you enough, really." Drenched, euphoric, she climbed out onto the wet sand. "You'll wait for the storm to pass, won't you?" she asked as she dug for her wallet.

"I'll wait until it's time to go. You'll find your way, lady. Through the rain. The path's there."

"Thanks." She passed the note into his hand. She'd go to the visitors' center, take shelter, find Margaret and do penance. "If you come up with me, I'll buy you some tea. You can dry off."

"Oh, I'm used to the wet. Someone's waiting for you," he said, then climbed back into his boat.

"Yes, of course." She started to run, then stopped. She hadn't even asked his name. "I'm sorry, but-" When she rushed back, there was nothing there but the crash of water against the shore.

Alarmed that he'd sailed back into that rising storm, she called out, began to hurry along what she could see of the shore to try to find him. Lightning flashed overhead, more vicious than exciting now, and the wind slapped at her like a furious hand.

Hunching against it, she jogged up the rise, onto a path. She'd get to shelter, tell someone about the boy. What had she been thinking of, not insisting that he come with her and wait until the weather cleared?

She stumbled, fell, jarring her bones with the impact, panting to catch her breath as the world went suddenly mad around her. Everything was howling wind, blasting lights, booming thunder. She struggled to her feet and pushed on.

It wasn't fear she felt, and that baffled her. She should be terrified. Why instead was she exhilarated? Where did this wicked thrill of anticipation, of knowledge, come from?

She had to keep going. There was something, someone, waiting. If she could just keep going.

The way was steep, the rain blinding. Somewhere along the way she lost her bag, but didn't notice.

In the next flash of light, she saw it. The circle of stones, rising out of the rough ground like dancers trapped in time. In her head, or perhaps her heart, she heard the song buried inside them.

With something like joy, she rushed forward, her hand around the pendant.

The song rose, like a crescendo, filling her, washing over her like a wave.

And as she reached the circle, took her first step inside, lightning struck the center, the bolt as clear and well defined as a flaming arrow. She watched the blue fire rise in a tower, higher, higher still, until it seemed to pierce the low-hanging clouds. She felt the iced heat of it on her skin, in her bones. The power of it hammered her heart.

And she fainted.

CHAPTER 2

The storm made him restless. Part of the tempest seemed to be inside him, churning, crashing, waiting to strike out. He couldn't work. His concentration was fractured. He had no desire to read, to putter, to simply be. And all of those things were why he had come back to the island.

Or so he told himself.

His family had held the land, worked it, guarded it, for generations. The O'Neils of Dolman had planted their seed here, spilled their blood and the blood of their enemies for as far back as time was marked. And further still, back into the murky time that was told only in songs.

Leaving here, going to Dublin to study, and to work, had been Conal's rebellion, his escape from what others so blithely accepted as his fate. He would not, as he'd told his father, be the passive pawn in the chess game of his own destiny.

He would make his destiny.

And yet, here he was, in the cottage where the O'Neils had lived and died, where his own father had passed the last day of his life only months before. Telling himself it had been his choice didn't seem quite so certain on a day where the wind lashed and screamed and the same violence of nature seemed to thrash inside him.

The dog, Hugh, which had been his father's companion for the last year of his life, paced from window to window, ears pricked up and a low sound rumbling in his throat, more whimper than growl.

Whatever was brewing, the dog sensed it as well, so that his big gray bulk streamed through the cottage like blown smoke. Conal gave a soft command in Gaelic, and Hugh came over, bumping his big head under Conal's big hand.

There they stood, watching the storm together, the large gray dog and the tall, broad-shouldered man, each with a wary expression. Conal felt the dog shudder. Nerves or anticipation? Something, all Conal could think, was out there in the storm.

Waiting.

"The hell with it. Let's see what it is."

Even as he spoke, the dog leaped toward the door, prancing with impatience as Conal tugged a long black slicker off the peg. He swirled it on over rough boots and rougher jeans and a black sweater that had seen too many washings.

When he opened the door, the dog shot out, straight into the jaws of the gale. "Hugh! Cuir uait!"

And though the dog did stop, skidding in the wet, he didn't bound back to Conal's side. Instead he stood, ears still pricked, despite the pounding rain, as if to say hurry!

Cursing under his breath, Conal picked up his own pace, and let the dog take the lead.

His black hair, nearly shoulder-length and heavy now with rain, streamed back in the wind from a sharply-honed face. He had the high, long cheekbones of the Celts, a narrow, almost aristocratic nose, and a well-defined mouth that could look, as it did now, hard as granite. His eyes were a deep and passionate blue.

His mother had said they were eyes that saw too much, and still looked for more.

Now they peered through the rain, and down, as Hugh climbed, at the turbulent toss of the sea. With the storm, the day was almost black as night, and he cursed again at his own foolishness in being out in it.

He lost sight of Hugh around a turn on the cliff path. More irritated than alarmed, he called the dog again, but all that answered was the low-throated, urgent bark. Perfect, was all Conal could think. Now the both of us will likely slip off the edge and bash our brains on the rocks.

He almost turned away, at that point very nearly retreated, for the dog was surefooted and knew his way home. But he wanted to go on-too much wanted to go on. As if something was tugging him forward, luring him on, higher and higher still, to where the shadow of the stone dance stood, singing through the wind.

Because part of him believed it, part of him he had never been able to fully quiet, he deliberately turned away. He would go home, build up the fire, and have a glass of whiskey in front of it until the storm blew itself out.

Then the howl came, a wild and primitive call that spoke of wolves and eerie moonlight. The shudder that ran down Conal's spine was as primal as the call. Grimly now, he continued up the path to see what caused young Hugh to bay.

The stones rose, gleaming with wet, haloed by the lightning strikes so that they almost seemed to glow. A scent came to him, ozone and perfume. Hot, sweet, and seductive.

The dog sat, his handsome head thrown back, his great throat rippling with his feral call. There was something in it, Conal thought, that was somehow triumphant.

"The stones don't need guarding," Conal muttered. He strode forward, intending to grab the dog by the collar and drag them both back to the warmth of the cottage.

And saw that it wasn't the stones Hugh guarded, but the woman who lay between them.

Half in and half out of the circle, with one arm stretched toward the center, she lay on her side almost as if sleeping. For a moment he thought he imagined her, and wanted to believe he did. But when he reached her side, his fingers instinctively going to her throat to check her pulse, he felt the warm beat of life.

At his touch her lashes fluttered. Her eyes opened. They were gray as the stones and met his with a sudden and impossible awareness. A smile curved her lips, parted them as she lifted a hand to his cheek.

"There you are," she said, and with a sigh closed her eyes again. Her hand slid away from his cheek to fall onto the rain-trampled grass.

Delirious, he told himself, and most likely a lunatic. Who else would climb the cliffs in a storm? Ignoring the fact that he'd done so himself, he turned her over, seeing no choice but to cart her back to the cottage.

And when he started to gather her into his arms, he saw the pendant, saw the carving on it in another spit of lightning.

His belly pitched. His heart gave one violent knock against his chest, like an angry fist.

"Damn it."

He stayed crouched as he was, closing his eyes while the rain battered both of them.

She woke slowly, as if floating lazily through layers of thin, white clouds. A feeling of well-being cushioned her, like satin pillows edged with the softest of lace. Savoring it, she lay still while sunlight played on her eyelids, cruised warm over her face. She could smell smoke, a pleasant, earthy scent, and another fragrance, a bit darker, that was man.

She enjoyed that mix, and when she opened her eyes, her first thought was she'd never been happier in her life.

It lasted seconds only, that sensation of joy and safety, of contentment and place. Then she shot up in bed, confused, alarmed, lost.

Margaret! She'd missed the ferry. The boat. The boy in the boat. And the storm. She'd gotten caught in it and had lost her way. She couldn't quite remember, couldn't quite separate the blurry images.

Stones, higher than a man and ringed in a circle. The blue fire that burned in the center without scorching the grass. The wild scream of the wind. The low hum of the stones.

A wolf howling. Then a man. Tall, dark, fierce, with eyes as blue as that impossible fire. Such anger in his face. But it hadn't frightened her. It had amused her. How strange.

Dreams, of course. Just dreams. She'd been in some sort of accident.

Now she was in someone's house, someone's bed. A simple room, she thought, looking around to orient herself. No, not simple, she corrected, spartan. Plain white walls, bare wood floor, no curtains at the window. There was a dresser, a table and lamp and the bed. As far as she could tell, there was nothing else in the room but herself.

Gingerly now, she touched her head to see if there were bumps or cuts, but found nothing to worry her. Using the same caution, she

turned back the sheet, let out a little sigh of relief. Whatever sort of accident there'd been, it didn't appear to have hurt her.

Then she gaped, realizing she wore nothing but a shirt, and it wasn't her own. A man's shirt, faded blue cotton, frayed at the cuffs. And huge.

Okay, that was okay. She'd been caught in the storm. Obviously she had gotten soaked. She had to be grateful that someone had taken care of her.

When she climbed out of bed, the shirt hung halfway to her knees. Modest enough. At her first step, the dog came to the door. Her heart gave a little hitch, then settled.

"So at least you're real. Aren't you handsome?" She held out a hand and had the pleasure of him coming to her to rub his body against her legs. "And friendly. Good to know. Where's everyone else?"

With one hand on the dog's head, she walked to the bedroom door and discovered a living area that was every bit as spartan. A couch and chair, a low burning fire, a couple of tables. With some relief she saw her clothes laid over a screen in front of the fire.

A check found them still damp. So, she hadn't been asleep-unconscious-for long. The practical thing to do, now that she'd apparently done everything impractical, was to find her rescuer, thank him, wait for her clothes to dry, then track down Margaret and beg for mercy.

The last part would be unpleasant, and probably fruitless, but it had to be done.

Bolstering herself for the task, Allena went to the door, opened it. And let out a soft cry of sheer delight.

The watery sunlight shimmered over the hills, and the hills rolled up green in one direction, tumbled down in the other toward the rock-

strewn shore. The sea reared and crashed, the walls of waves high and wonderful. She had an urge to rush out, to the edge of the slope, and watch the water rage.

Just outside the cottage was a garden gone wild so that flowers tangled with weeds and tumbled over themselves. The smell of them, of the air, of the sea had her gulping in air, holding her breath as if to keep that single sharp taste inside her forever.

Unable to resist, she stepped out, the dog beside her, and lifted her face to the sky.

Oh, this place! Was there ever a more perfect spot? If it were hers, she would stand here every morning and thank God for it.

Beside her, the dog let out one quiet woof, at which she rested her hand on his head again and glanced over at the little building, with its rough stone, thatched roof, wide-open windows.

She started to smile, then the door of it opened. The man who came out stopped as she did, stared as she did. Then with his mourn hard set, he started forward.

His face swam in front of her. The crash of the sea filled her head with roaring. Dizzy, she held out a hand to him, much as she had to the dog.

She saw his mouth move, thought she heard him swear, but she was already pitching forward into the dark.

CHAPTER 3

She looked like a faerie, standing there in a wavery sunbeam. Tall and slender, her bright hair cropped short, her eyes long-lidded, tilted at the tips, and enormous.

Not a beauty. Her face was too sharp for true beauty, and her mouth a bit top-heavy. But it was an intriguing face, even in rest.

He'd thought about it even after he'd dumped her in bed after carrying her in from the storm. Undressing her had been an annoying necessity, which he'd handled with the aloof detachment of a doctor. Then, once she was dry and settled, he'd left her, without a backward glance, to burn off some of the anger in work.

He worked very well in a temper.

He didn't want her here. He didn't want her. And, he told himself, he wouldn't have her, no matter what the fates decreed.

He was his own man.

But now when he came out, saw her standing in the doorway, in the sunlight, he felt the shock of it sweep through him—longing, possession, recognition, delight, and despair. All of those in one hard wave rose inside him, swamped him.

Before he could gain his feet, she was swaying.

He didn't manage to catch her. Oh, in the storybooks, he imagined, his feet would have grown wings and he'd have flown across the yard to pluck her nimbly into his arms before she swooned. But as it was, she slid to the ground, melted wax pooling into the cup and taking all the candle as well, before he'd closed half the distance.

By the time he reached her, those long gray eyes were already opening again, cloudy and dazed. She stared at him, the corners of her mouth trembling up.

"I guess I'm not steady yet," she said in that pretty American voice. "I know it's a cliché, and predictable, but I have to say it—where am I?"

She looked ridiculously appealing, lying there between the flowers, and made him all too aware she wore nothing but one of his shirts. "You're on O'Neil land."

"I got lost—a bad habit of mine. The storm came up so fast."

"Why are you here?"

"Oh, I got separated from the group. Well, I was late-another bad habit-and missed the ferry. But the boy brought me in his boat." She sat up then. "I hope he's all right. He must be, as he seemed to know what he was doing and it was such a quick trip anyway. Is the visitors' center far?"

"The visitors' center?"

"I should be able to catch up with them, though it won't do me a lot of good. Margaret'll fire me, and I deserve it."

"And who is Margaret?"

"My stepsister. She owns A Civilized Adventure. I'm working for her-or I did work for her for the last twenty-three days." She let out a breath, tried the smile again. "I'm sorry. I'm Allena Kennedy, the moron. Thank you for helping me."

He glanced down at the hand she held out, then with some reluctance took it. Instead of shaking it, he pulled her to her feet. "I've a feeling you're more lost than you know, Miss Kennedy, as there's no visitors' center here on Dolman Island."

"Dolman? But that's not right." The hand in his flexed, balled into a little fist of nerves. "I'm not supposed to be on Dolman Island. Oh, damn it. Damn it! It's my fault. I wasn't specific with the boy. He seemed to know where I was going, was supposed to be going. Or maybe he got turned around in the storm, too. I hope he's all right."

She paused, looked around, sighed. "Not just fired," she murmured. "Disinherited, banished, and mortified all in one morning. I guess all I can do is go back to the hotel and wait to face the music."

"Well, it won't be today."

"Excuse me?"

Conal looked out to sea, studying the crashing wall of waves. "You won't find your way back today, and likely not tomorrow, as there's more coming our way."

"But-" She was talking to his back as he walked inside as though he hadn't just sealed her doom. "I have to get back. She'll be worried."

"There'll be no ferry service in these seas, and no boatman with a brain in his head would chance the trip back to the mainland."

She sat on the arm of a chair, closed her eyes. "Well, that caps it. Is there a phone? Could I use your phone to call the hotel and leave a message?"

"The phones are out."

"Of course they are." She watched him go to the fire to add some bricks of turf. Her clothes hung on the screen like a recrimination. "Mr. O'Neil?"

"Conal." He straightened, turned to her. "All the women I undress and put into bed call me Conal."

It was a test, deliberately provocative. But she didn't flush or fire. Instead her eyes lit with humor. "All the men who undress me and put me into bed call me Lena."

"I prefer Allena."

"Really? So do I, but it seems to be too many syllables for most people. Anyway, Conal, is there a hotel or a bed-and-breakfast where I can stay until the ferry's running again?"

"There's no hotel on Dolman. It's a rare tourist who comes this far. And the nearest village, of which there are but three, is more than eight kilometers away."

She gave him a level look. "Am I staying here?"

"Apparently."

She nodded, rubbing her hand absently over Hugh's broad back as she took stock of her surroundings. "I appreciate it, and I'll try not to be a nuisance."

"It's a bit late for that, but we'll deal with it." When her only response was to lift her eyebrows and stare steadily, he felt a tug of shame. "Can you make a proper pot of tea?"

"Yes."

He gestured toward the kitchen that was separated from the living area by a short counter. "The makings are in there. I've a few things to see to, then we'll talk this out over a cup."

"Fine." The word was rigidly and properly polite. Only the single gunshot bang of a cupboard door as he started out again told him she was miffed.

She'd make the damn tea, she thought, jerking the faucet on to fill the kettle, which was no easy matter since the cast-iron sink was loaded with dishes. And she'd be grateful for Conal O'Neil's hospitality, however reluctantly, however rudely given.

Was it her fault she'd ended up on the wrong island? Was it her fault she'd gotten turned around in a storm and passed out and had to be carted back to his house? Was it her fault she had nowhere else to go?

Well, yes. She rolled her eyes and began to empty the dishes out of the sink so that she could fill it with soapy water and wash them. Yes, technically it was her fault. Which just made it all the more annoying.

When she got back to New York she would be jobless. Again. And once more she'd be the object of pity, puzzlement, and pursed lips. And that was her fault, too. Her family expected her to fail now-flighty, scatterbrained Lena.

Worse, she realized, was that she expected it, too.

The problem was she wasn't particularly good at anything. She had no real skill, no craft, and no driving ambitions.

She wasn't lazy, though she knew Margaret would disagree. Work didn't frighten her. Business did.

But that was tomorrow's problem, she reminded herself as she dealt with the dishes and waited for the kettle to boil. Today's problem was Conal O'Neil and how to handle the situation she'd put them both into.

A situation, she thought, as she went about stacking dishes, wiping counters, heating the teapot, that should have been thrilling. A storm-swept island; a handsome, brooding man; a cozy, if rustic, cottage isolated from the world.

This, she decided, perking up, was an adventure. She was going to find a way to enjoy it before the axe fell.

When Conal came back in, the old teapot was sitting snugly in a frayed and faded cozy. Cups and saucers were set on the table, and the table scrubbed clean. The sink was empty, the counters sparkling, and the chocolate biscuits he'd had in a tin were arranged prettily on a plate.

"I was hungry." She was already nibbling on one. "I hope you don't mind."

"No." He'd nearly forgotten what it was like to sit down and have tea in tidiness. Her little temper snap appeared to be over as well, he noted. She looked quietly at home in his kitchen, in his shirt.

"So." She sat down to pour. The one thing she was good at was conversation. She'd often been told she was too good at it. "You live here alone?"

"I do."

"With your dog."

"Hugh. He was my father's. My father died some months back."

She didn't say she was sorry, as so many-too many-would have. But her eyes said it, and that made it matter more. "It's a beautiful spot. A perfect spot. That's what I was thinking before I fell into your garden. You grew up here?"

"I did."

"I grew up in New York, in the city. It never fit, somehow." She studied him over her teacup. "This fits you. It's wonderful to find the right fit. Everyone in my family fits except me. My parents and Margaret and James-my brother and sister. Their mother died when Margaret was twelve and James ten. Their father met my mother a couple of years later, then they married and had me."

"And you're Cinderella?"

"No, nothing as romantic as that." But she sighed and thought how lovely it would be. "Just the misfit. They're all brilliant, you see. Every one of them. My father's a doctor, a surgeon. My mother's a lawyer. James is a wildly successful cosmetic surgeon, and Margaret has her own business with A Civilized Adventure."

"Who would want an adventure civilized?"

"Yes." Delighted, Allena slapped a palm on the table. "That's exactly what I thought. I mean, wouldn't regimenting it mean it wasn't an adventure at all? But saying that to Margaret earned me a twenty-minute lecture, and since her business is thriving, there you go."

The light was already shifting, he noted, as a new sea of clouds washed in. But there was enough of the sun yet to sprinkle over her hair, into her eyes. And make his fingers itch for a pencil.

He knew just what he would do with her, exactly how it would be. Planning it, he let his gaze wander over her. And nearly jolted when he saw the pendant. He'd all but forgotten it.

"Where did you get that?"

She'd seen those vivid blue eyes travel down, had felt a shiver of response, and now another of relief that-she hoped-it was the pendant that interested him.

"This? It's the heart of my problem."

She'd meant it as a joke, but his gaze returned to her face, all but seared the flesh with the heat of it. "Where did you get it?"

Though the edge to his voice puzzled her, she shrugged. "There was a little shop near the waterfront. The display window was just crammed with things. Wonderful things. Magic."

"Magic."

"Elves and dragons, books and jewelry in lovely, fascinating shapes. A hodgepodge, but a crafty one. Irresistible. I only meant to go in for a minute. I had time before we were to meet at the ferry. But the old woman showed me this, and somehow while we were talking, time just went away. I didn't mean to buy it, either. But I do a lot of things I don't mean to do."

"You don't know what it is?"

"No." She closed her hand over it, felt that low vibration that couldn't be there, blinked as something tried to slide in on the edge of her vision. "It feels old, but it can't be old, not valuably old, because it only cost ten pounds."

"Value's different for one than for another." He reached out. It was irresistible. With his eyes steady and level he closed his hand over hers that held the pendant.

The jolt snapped into her, sharp as an electric current. The air seemed to turn the blue of lightning. She was on her feet, her head tipping back to keep her eyes locked with his as he shoved back from the table with enough violence to send his chair crashing.

That same violence was in him when his mouth crushed hers. The need, so bright, so strong, so right, whipped through her even as the wind rushed sudden and sharp through the window at her back. Her hand fisted in his hair, her body lifted itself to his.

And fit.

The pounding of her heart was like a song, each note a thrill. Here, with him, it was enough, even if the world crumbled to dust around them.

He couldn't stop. The taste of her was like water, cool and clean, after a lifetime of thirst. Empty pockets he hadn't known he carried inside him filled, bulged, overflowed. His blood was a rage of heat, his body weak with wanting. He gathered the back of the shirt in his bunched fingers, prepared to rip.

Then they dropped the pendant they held between them to reach for each other. And he snapped back as if from a blow.

"This is not what I want." He took her shoulders, intending to shake her, but only held her. She looked dazed. Faerie-struck. "This is not what I'll accept."

"Would you let me go?" Her voice was low, but it didn't quaver. When he did, and stepped back, she let out a short, quiet breath. There was no point in being a coward, she told herself.

"I have a couple of choices here," she began. "One is I hit my head when I fell and I have a concussion. The other is that I just fell in love with you. I think I prefer the concussion theory, and I imagine you do, too."

"You didn't hit your head." He jammed his hands in his pockets and strode away from her. The room was suddenly too small. "And people don't fall in love in an instant, over one kiss."

"Sensible ones don't. I'm not sensible. Ask anyone." But if there was ever a time to try to be, it was now.

"I think I should get dressed, take a walk, clear my head or whatever."

"Another's storm's brewing."

Allena tugged her clothes off the screen. "You're telling me," she muttered and marched into the bedroom.

CHAPTER 4

Conal wasn't in the cottage when she came out again, but Hugh sat by the fire as if waiting for her. He got up as she came through and pranced to the door, turning his big head so that his eyes met hers.

"Want a walk? Me, too."

It was a pity about the gardens, Allena thought as she paused between them. She'd have enjoyed getting down into them, yanking out those choking weeds, pinching off deadheads. An hour's pleasant work, she thought, maybe two, and instead of looking wild and neglected, those tumbling blossoms would just look wild. Which is what was needed here.

Not her job, she told herself, not her home, not her place. She cast an eye at the little outbuilding. He was probably in there doing-whatever the hell he did. And doing it, she imagined, angrily.

Why was there so much anger in him?

Not her problem, she thought, not her business, not her man.

Though for a moment, when their hands and mouths were joined, he had seemed to be.

I don't want this. I don't want you.

He'd made himself very clear. And she was tired of finding herself plopped down where she wasn't wanted.

The wind raced in off the sea, driving thick black-edged clouds toward the island. As she began to walk, she could see the pale and hopeful blue being gradually, inevitably consumed.

Conal was right. A storm was coming.

Walking along the shoreline couldn't do any harm. She wouldn't climb the hills, though she longed to. She would just stick to the long curve of surf and sand and enjoy the jittery thrill of watching the fierce waves crash.

Hugh seemed content to walk at her side. Almost, she thought, like a guard.

Eight kilometers to the nearest village, she remembered. That wasn't so very far. She could wait for the weather to clear, then walk it if Conal wouldn't drive her. There'd been a truck parked between the cottage and the outbuilding, a sleek and modern thing, anachronistic but surely serviceable.

Why had he kissed her like that?

No, that wasn't right. It hadn't been his doing. It had simply happened, to both of them. For both of them. There'd been a roar in her head, in her blood, that she'd never experienced before. More than passion, she thought now, more than lust. It was a kind of desperate recognition.

There you are. Finally. At last.

That, of course, was ridiculous, but she had no other way to explain what had spurted to life inside her. And what had spread from that first hot gush felt like love.

You couldn't love what you didn't know. You couldn't love where there was no understanding, no foundation, no history. Her head told her all these sensible, rational things. And her heart laughed at them.

It didn't matter. She could be conflicted, puzzled, annoyed, even willing to accept. But it didn't matter when he didn't want her or what had flamed to life between them.

She stopped, let the wind beat its frantic wings over her, let the spray from the waves fly on her. Overhead a gull, white as the moon, let out its triumphant scream and streamed off in the current of electric air.

Oh, she envied that freedom, for the heart of flight was inside her. To simply fly away, wherever the wind took her. And to know that when she landed, it would be her place, her time, her triumph.

But you have to live in the present, don't you, Lena? Her mother's patient and puzzled voice murmured in her ear. You have to apply yourself, to pay attention. You can't keep drifting this way and make something of yourself. It's time you focused on a career, put your considerable energy into making your mark.

And under that voice, unsaid, was You disappoint me.

"I know it. I'm sorry. It's awful. I wish I could tell you how awful it is to know I'm your only failure."

She would do better, Allena promised herself. She'd talk Margaret into giving her a second chance. Somehow. Then she'd work harder, pay more attention, be responsible, be practical.

Be miserable.

The dog bumped his head against her leg, rubbed his warm fur against her. The small gesture comforted her and turning away from the water, she continued to walk along its verge.

She'd come out to clear her head, she reminded herself, not to fill it with more problems. Surely there couldn't be a more perfect spot for easing heart and mind. Under those threatening skies, the rough hills shone, the wicked cliffs gleamed. Wildflowers, dots and splashes of color, tangled in the green and gray, and she saw a shadowy spread of purple that was heather.

She wanted to gather it, fill her arms with it, bury her face in the scent. Delighted with the idea, she turned to scramble over rocks where sprigs of it thrived in the thin soil, then higher to mounds bumpy and thick until the fragrance of it overpowered even the primitive perfume of the sea.

When her arms were full, she wanted more. Laughing, she hurried along a narrow path. Then stopped dead. Startled, she shook her head. She heard the oddest hum. She started to step forward again, and couldn't. Simply couldn't. It was as if a wall of glass stood between her and the next slope of rock and flowers.

"My God, what is this?"

She lifted a trembling hand, sending sprigs of heather falling, then flying free in the wind. She felt no barrier, but only a kind of heat when her hand pressed the air. And try as she might, she couldn't push through it.

Lightning burst. Thunder rolled. Through it, she heard the sound of her name. She looked down to the beach, half expecting to see dragons or sorcerers. But it was only Conal, standing with his legs spread, his hair flying, and his eyes annoyed.

"Come down from there. You've no business clambering up the rocks when a storm's breaking."

What a picture she made. He'd come after her out of responsibility, he liked to think. But he'd been dumbstruck when he'd seen her walking the cliff path in the eerie light, her hair fluttering, her arms overflowing with flowers. It made him want to climb after her, to whirl her and her flowers into his arms, to press his mouth to hers again while the wind whipped savagely over them.

Because he wanted it, could all but taste her, his tone was blade-sharp when she met him on the beach. "Have you no more sense than to pick flowers in such weather?"

"Apparently not. Would you walk down there?"

"What?"

"Just humor me, and walk down the beach five more feet."

"Maybe you did rattle your brains." He started to grab her hand, pull her away, but she took a nimble step aside.

"Please. It'll only take you a minute."

He hissed out an oath, then strode off, one foot, two, three. His abrupt halt had Allena closing her eyes, shivering once. "You can't do it, can you? You can't go any farther than that. Neither could I." She opened her eyes again, met his furious ones when he turned. "What does it mean?"

"It means we deal with it. We'll go back. I've no desire to find myself drenched to the skin a second time in one day."

He said nothing on the way back, and she let him have his silence. The first fat drops of rain splattered as they reached the cottage door.

"Do you have anything to put these in?" she asked him. "They'll need water, and I'd like to keep my hands busy while you explain things to me."

He shrugged, made a vague gesture toward the kitchen, then went to add more turf to the fire.

It was a downpour. The wind rose to a howl, and she began to gather vases and bottles and bowls. When he remained silent, scowling into the fire, she heated up the tea.

He glanced over when she poured the cups, then went into the kitchen himself to take out a bottle of whiskey. A healthy dollop went into his own tea, then he lifted a brow, holding the bottle over hers.

"Well, why not?"

But when it was laced, she picked up the flowers instead of the cup and began to tuck them into vases. "What is this place? Who are you?"

"I've told you that already."

"You gave me names." The homey task calmed her, as she'd known it would. When her gaze lifted to his again, it was direct and patient. "That's not what I meant."

He studied her, then nodded. Whether she could handle it or not, she deserved to know. "Do you know how far out in the sea you are?"

"A mile, two?"

"More than ten."

"Ten? But it couldn't have taken more than twenty minutes to get here-and in rough weather."

"More than ten miles out is Dolman Island from the southwest coast of Ireland. Here we straddle the Atlantic and Celtic Seas. Some say the silkies come here, to shed their hides and sun on the rocks in human form. And the faeries come out of their rafts under the hills to dance in the moonlight."

Allena slipped the stems of shorter blossoms into a squat bottle. "Do you say it?"

"Some say," he continued without answering, "that my great-grandmother left her raft, her palace under the hill, and pledged herself to my great-grandfather on the night of the summer solstice while they stood by the king stone of the dance on the cliffs. One hundred years ago. As a hundred years before, another with my blood stood with his woman in that same place to pledge. And a century before that as well, and always on that same night in that same place when the star shows itself."

She touched her pendant. "This star?"

"They say."

"And in two days it's the solstice, and your turn?"

"If I believed my great-grandmother was other than a simple woman, that I have elfin blood in my veins and could be directed to pledge to a woman because of the way a star shines through the stones, I wouldn't be in this place."

"I see." She nodded and carried one of the vases into the living room to set it on a table. "So you're here to prove that everything you've just told me is nonsense."

"Can you believe otherwise?"

She had no idea what she believed, but had a feeling there was a great deal, a very great deal, that she could believe. "Why couldn't I walk away from here, Conal? Why couldn't you?"

She left the question hanging, walked back into the kitchen. She took a sip of her tea, felt the hot flow of whiskey slide into her, then began to select her other arrangements and put them where she liked. "It would be hard for you, being told this story since you were a child, being expected to accept it."

"Can you accept it?" he demanded. "Can you just shrug off education and reason and accept that you're to belong to me because a legend says so?"

"I would've said no." Pleasing herself, she set bottles of heather on the narrow stone mantel over the simmering fire. "I would have been intrigued, amused, maybe a little thrilled at the idea of it all. Then I would have laughed it off. I would have," she said as she turned to face him. "Until I kissed you and felt what I felt inside me, and inside you."

"Desire's an easy thing."

"That's right, and if that had been it, if that had been all, we'd both have acted on it. If that had been all, you wouldn't be angry now, with yourself and with me."

"You're awfully bloody calm about it."

"I know." She smiled then, couldn't help herself. "Isn't that odd? But then, I'm odd. Everyone says so. Lena, the duck out of water, the square peg, the fumbler always just off center. But I don't feel odd or out of place here. So it's easier for me to be calm."

Nor did she look out of place, he thought, wandering through the cottage placing her flowers. "I don't believe in magic."

"And I've looked for it all my life." She took a sprig of heather, held it out to him. "So, I'll make you a promise."

"You don't owe me promises. You don't owe me anything."

"It's free. I won't hold you with legends or magic. When I can leave, if that's what you want, I'll go."

"Why?"

"I'm in love with you, and love doesn't cling."

Humbled, he took the heather, slipped it into her hair. "Allena, it takes clear eyes to recognize what's in the heart so easily. I don't have them. I'll hurt you." He skimmed his fingers down her cheek. "And I find I'd rather not."

"I'm fairly sturdy. I've never been in love before, Conal, and I might be terrible at it. But right now it suits me, and that's enough."

He refused to believe anything could be so simple. "I'm drawn to you. I want my hands on you. I want you under me. If that's all, it might not be enough for you, or for me in the end. So it's best to stand back."

He walked to the peg, tugged down his slicker. "I need to work," he said, and went out into the rain.

It would be more than she'd had, she realized, and knew that if necessary, she could make it enough.

The storm was only a grumble when he came back. Evening was falling, soft and misty. The first thing he noticed when he stepped inside, was the scent. Something hot and rich that reminded his stomach it was empty.

Then he noticed the little changes in the living room. Just a few subtle touches: a table shifted, cushions smoothed. He wouldn't have noticed the dust, but he noticed the absence of it, and the faint tang of polish.

She'd kept the fire going, and the light, mixed with that of the candles she'd found and set about, was welcoming. She'd put music on as well and was humming along to it as she worked in the kitchen.

Even as he hung up his slicker, the tension he'd carried through his work simply slid off his shoulders.

"I made some soup," she called out. "I hunted up some herbs from the kitchen bed, foraged around in here. You didn't have a lot to work

with, so it's pretty basic."

"It smells fine. I'm grateful."

"Well, we have to eat, don't we?"

"You wouldn't say that so easy if I'd been the one doing the cooking." She'd already set the table, making the mismatched plates and bowls look cheerful and clever instead of careless. There were candles there, too, and one of the bottles of wine he'd brought from Dublin stood breathing on the counter.

She was making biscuits.

"Allena, you needn't have gone to such trouble."

"Oh, I like puttering around. Cooking's kind of a hobby." She poured him wine. "Actually, I took lessons. I took a lot of lessons. This time I thought maybe I'd be a chef or open my own restaurant."

"And?"

"There's a lot more to running a restaurant than cooking. I'm horrible at business. As for the chef idea, I realized you had to cook pretty much the same things night after night, and on demand, to suit the menu, you know? So, it turned into one of my many hobbies." She slipped the biscuits into the oven. "But at least this one has a practical purpose. So." She dusted her hands on the dishcloth she'd tucked into her waistband. "I hope you're hungry."

He flashed a grin that made her heart leap. "I'm next to starving."

"Good." She set out the dish of cheese and olives she'd put together. "Then you won't be critical."

Where he would have ladled the soup straight from the kettle, she poured it into a thick white bowl. Already she'd hunted out the glass dish his mother had used for butter and that he hadn't seen for years. The biscuits went in a basket lined with a cloth of blue and

white checks. When she started to serve the soup, he laid a hand over hers.

"I'll do it. Sit."

The scents alone were enough to make him weep in gratitude. The first taste of herbed broth thick with hunks of vegetables made him close his eyes in pleasure.

When he opened them again, she was watching him with amused delight. "I like your hobby," he told her. "I hope you'll feel free to indulge yourself with it as long as you're here."

She selected a biscuit, studied it. It was so gratifying to see him smile. "That's very generous of you."

"I've been living on my own poor skills for some months now." His eyes met hers, held. "You make me realize what I've missed. I'm a moody man, Allena."

"Really?" Her voice was so mild the insult nearly slipped by him. But he was quick.

He laughed, shook his head, and spooned up more soup. "It won't be a quiet couple of days, I'm thinking."

CHAPTER 5

He slept in his studio. It seemed the wisest course.

He wanted her, and that was a problem. He had no doubt she would have shared the bed with him, shared herself with him. As much as he would have preferred that to the chilly and narrow cot crammed into his work space, it didn't seem fair to take advantage of her romantic notions.

She fancied herself in love with him.

It was baffling, really, to think that a woman could make such a decision, state it right out, in a fingersnap of time. But then, Allena Kennedy wasn't like any of the other women who'd passed in and out of his life. A complicated package, she was, he thought. It would have been easy to dismiss her as a simple, almost foolish sort. At a first and casual glance.

But Conal wasn't one for casual glances. There were layers to her—thoughtful, bubbling, passionate, and compassionate layers. Odd, wasn't it? he mused, that she didn't seem to recognize them in herself.

That lack of awareness added one more layer, and that was sweetness.

Absently, with his eyes still gritty from a restless night, he began to sketch. Allena Kennedy from New York City, the square peg in what appeared to be a family of conformists. The woman who had yet to find herself, yet seemed perfectly content to deal with where she'd landed. A modern woman, certainly, but one who still accepted tales of magic.

No, more than accepted, he thought now. She embraced them. As if she'd just been waiting to be told where it was she'd been going all along.

That he wouldn't do, refused to do. All his life he'd been told this day would come. He wouldn't passively fall in, give up his own will. He had come back to this place at this time to prove it.

And he could almost hear the fates giggling.

Scowling, he studied what he'd drawn. It was Allena with her long eyes and sharp bones, the short and shaggy hair that suited that angular face and slender neck. And at her back, he'd sketched in the hint of faerie wings.

They suited her as well.

It annoyed the hell out of him.

Conal tossed the pad aside. He had work to do, and he'd get to it as soon as he'd had some tea.

The wind was still up. The morning sun was slipping through the stacked clouds to dance over the water. The only thunder now was the crash and boom of waves on the shore. He loved the look of it, that changing and capricious sea. His years in Dublin hadn't been able to feed this single need in him, for the water and the sky and the rough and simple land that was his.

However often he left, wherever he went, he would always be drawn back. For here was heart and soul.

Turning away from the sea, he saw her.

She knelt in the garden, flowers rioting around her and the quiet morning sun shimmering over her hair. Her face was turned away from him, but he could see it in his mind. She would have that half-dreaming, contented look in her eyes as she tugged away the weeds he'd ignored.

Already the flowers looked cheerful, as if pleased with the attention after weeks of neglect.

There was smoke pluming from the chimney, a broom propped against the front wall. She'd dug a basket out of God knew where, and in this she tossed the weeds. Her feet were bare.

Warmth slid into him before he could stop it and murmured welcome in his ear.

"You don't have to do that."

She looked up at his voice, and she was indeed happy. "They needed it. Besides, I love flowers. I have pots of them all over my apartment, but this is so much better. I've never seen snapdragons

so big." She traced a finger on a spike of butter-yellow blooms. "They always make me think of Alice."

"Alice?"

"In Wonderland. I've already made tea." She got to her feet, then winced at the dirt on the knees of her trousers. "I guess I should've been more careful. It's not like I have a vast wardrobe to choose from at the moment. So. How do you like your eggs?"

He started to tell her she wasn't obliged to cook his breakfast. But he remembered just how fine the soup had been the night before. "Scrambled would be nice, if it's no trouble."

"None, and it's the least I can do for kicking you out of your own bed." She stepped up to the door, then turned. Her eyes were eloquent, and patient. "You could have stayed."

"I know it."

She held his gaze another moment, then nodded. "You had some bacon in your freezer. I took it out last night to thaw. Oh, and your shower dripped. It just needed a new washer."

He paused at the doorway, remembered, as he hadn't in years, to wipe his feet. "You fixed the shower?"

"Well, it dripped." She was already walking into the kitchen. "You probably want to clean up. I'll get breakfast started."

He scratched the back of his neck. "I'm grateful."

She slanted him a look. "So am I."

When he went into the bedroom, she did a quick dance, hugged herself. Oh, she loved this place. It was a storybook, and she was right in the middle of it. She'd awakened that morning half believing it had all been a dream. But then she'd opened her eyes to that misty

early light, had smelled the faint drift of smoke from the dying fire, the tang of heather she'd put beside the bed.

It was a dream. The most wonderful, the most real dream she'd ever had. And she was going to keep it.

He didn't want it, didn't want her. But that could change. There were two days yet to open his heart. How could his stay closed when hers was so full? Love was nothing like she'd expected it to be.

It was so much more brilliant.

She needed the hope, the faith, that on one of the days left to her he would wake up and feel what she did.

Love, she discovered, was so huge it filled every space inside with brightness. There was no room for shadows, for doubts.

She was in love, with the man, with the place, with the promise. It wasn't just in the rush of an instant, though there was that thrill as well. But twined with it was a lovely, settled comfort, an ease of being, of knowing. And that was something she wanted for him.

For once in her life, she vowed, she wouldn't fail. She would not lose.

Closing her eyes, she touched the star that hung between her breasts. "I'll make it happen," she whispered, then with a happy sigh, she started breakfast.

He didn't know what to make of it. He couldn't have said just what state the bathroom had been in before, but he was dead certain it hadn't sparkled. There may or may not have been fresh towels out the last time he'd seen it. But he thought not. There hadn't been a bottle of flowers on the windowsill.

The shower had dripped, that he remembered. He'd meant to get to that.

He could be certain that it was a great deal more pleasant to shower and shave in a room where the porcelain gleamed and the air smelled faintly of lemon and flowers.

Because of it, he guiltily wiped up after himself and hung the towel to dry instead of tossing it on the floor.

The bedroom showed her touch as well. The bed was tidily made, the pillows fluffed up. She'd opened the windows wide to bring in the sun and the breeze. It made him realize he'd lived entirely too long with dust and dark.

Then he stepped out. She was singing in the kitchen. A pretty voice. And the scents that wafted to him were those of childhood. Bread toasting, bacon frying.

There was a rumble he recognized as the washer spinning a load. He could only shake his head.

"How long have you been up and about?" he asked her.

"I woke up at dawn." She turned to pass him a mug of tea over the counter. "It was so gorgeous I couldn't get back to sleep. I've been piddling."

"You've a rare knack for piddling."

"My father calls it nervous energy. Oh, I let Hugh out. He bolted to the door the minute my feet hit the floor, so I figured that was the routine."

"He likes to run around in the mornings. Dog piddling, I suppose."

It made her laugh as she scooped his eggs from skillet to plate.

"He's terrific company. I felt very safe and snug with him curled up at the foot of the bed last night."

"He's deserted me for a pretty face." He sat, then caught her hand.

"Where's yours?"

"I had something earlier. I'll let you eat in peace. My father hates to be chattered at over breakfast. I'll just hang out the wash."

"I'm not your father. Would you sit? Please." He waited until she took a seat and for the first time noticed nerves in the way she linked her fingers together. Now what was that about? "Allena, do you think I expect you to cater to me this way? Cook and serve and tidy?"

"No, of course not." The lift had gone out of her voice, out of her eyes. "I've overstepped. I'm always doing that. I didn't think."

"That's not what I meant. Not at all." His eyes were keen, part of his gift, and they saw how her shoulders had braced, her body tensed. "What are you doing? Waiting for the lecture?" With a shake of his head, he began to eat. "They've done what they could, haven't they, to stifle you? Why is it people are always so desperate to mold another into their vision, their way? I'm saying only that you're not obliged to cook my meals and scrub my bath. While you're here you should do what pleases you."

"I guess I have been."

"Fine. You won't hear any complaints from me. I don't know what you've done with these humble eggs unless it's magic."

She relaxed again. "Thyme and dill, from your very neglected herb bed. If I had a house, I'd plant herbs, and gardens." Imagining it, she propped her chin on her fist. "I'd have stepping-stones wandering through it, with a little bench so you could just stop and sit and look. It would be best if it was near the water so I could hear the beat of it the way I did last night. Pounding, like a quickened heart."

She blinked out of the image, found him staring at her. "What? Oh, I was running on again." She started to get up, but he took her hand a second time.

"Come with me."

He got to his feet, pulled her to hers. "The dishes-"

"Can wait. This can't."

He'd already started it that morning with the sketch. In his head, it was all but finished, and the energy of it was driving him, so he strode quickly out of the house, toward his studio. She had to run to keep up.

"Conal, slow down. I'm not going anywhere."

Ignoring her, he shoved open the door, pulled her in after him. "Stand by the window."

But she was already moving in, eyes wide and delighted. "You're an artist. This is wonderful. You sculpt."

The single room was nearly as big as the main area of the cottage. And much more cramped. A worktable stood in the center, crowded with tools and hunks of stone, pots of clay. A half dozen sketch pads were tossed around. Shelves and smaller tables were jammed with examples of his work. Mystical, magical creatures that danced and flew.

A blue mermaid combed her hair on a rock. A white dragon breathed fire. Faeries no bigger than her thumb ringed in a circle with faces sly. A sorcerer nearly as tall as she, held his arms high and wept.

"They're all so alive, so vivid." She couldn't help herself, she had to touch, and so she ran her finger down the rippling hair of the mermaid. "I've seen this before," she murmured. "Not quite this, but the same feeling of it, but in bronze. At a gallery in New York."

She looked over then where he was impatiently flipping through a sketch pad. "I've seen your work in New York. You must be famous."

His answer was a grunt.

"I wanted to buy it-the mermaid. I was with my mother, and I couldn't because she'd have reminded me I couldn't afford the price. I went back the next day, because I couldn't stop thinking about it, but it was already sold."

"In front of the window, turn to me."

"That was two years ago, and I've thought about her a dozen times since. Isn't it amazing that she was yours?"

Muttering an oath, he strode to her, pulled her to the window. "Lift your head, like that. Hold it there. And be quiet."

"Are you going to draw me?"

"No, I'm after building a boat here. Of course I'm drawing you. Now be quiet for one bloody minute."

She shut her mouth, but couldn't do anything about the grin that trembled on her lips. And that, he thought, was precisely what he wanted. Just that trace of humor, of energy, of personal delight.

He would do a clay model, he thought, and cast her in bronze. Something that gleamed gold and warmed to the touch. She wasn't for stone or wood. He did three quick studies of her face, moving around her for a change of angle. Then he lowered his pad.

"I need the line of your body. Your shape. Take off your clothes."

"Excuse me?"

"I have to see how you're made. The clothes are in the way of you."

"You want me to pose nude?"

With an effort, he brought himself back from his plans, met her eyes. "If this was a matter of sex, I wouldn't have slept on that rock in the corner last night. You've my word I won't touch you. But I have to see you."

"If this was a matter of sex, I wouldn't be so nervous. Okay." She shut her eyes a minute, bolstered her courage. "I'm like a bowl of fruit," she told herself and unbuttoned her shirt.

When she slipped it off, folded it, set it aside, Conal lifted a brow. "No, you're like a woman. If I wanted a bowl of fruit, I'd get one."

CHAPTER 6

She was slim, leaning toward angular, and exactly right. Eyes narrowed, mind focused, he flipped up a fresh page and began.

"No, keep your head up," he ordered, faintly irritated that she should be so exactly right. "Hold your arms back. Just a bit more. Palms down and flat. No, you're not a flaming penguin, spread your fingers a little. Ah."

It was then he noticed the faint flush spreading over her skin, the stiffness in her movements. Moron, he told himself and bit back a sigh. Of course she was nervous and embarrassed. And he'd done nothing to put her at ease.

He'd grown too used, he supposed, to professional models who undraped without a thought. She liked to talk, so he would let her talk.

"Tell me about these lessons of yours."

"What?"

"The lessons. You said you'd taken a number of lessons on this and that. What was it you studied?"

She pressed her lips together, fought back the foolish urge to cross her arms over her breasts. "I thought you said I wasn't supposed to talk."

"Now I'm saying you can."

She heard the exasperation, rolled her eyes. What was she, a mind reader? "I, ah, took art lessons."

"Did you now? Turn to the right just a bit. And what did you learn from them?"

"That I'm not an artist." She smiled a little. "I'm told I have a good eye for color and shapes and aesthetics, but no great skill with the execution."

Yes, it was better when she talked. Her face became mobile again. Alive again. "That discouraged you?"

"Not really. I draw now and then when I'm in the mood."

"Another hobby?"

"Oh, I'm loaded with them. Like music. I took music lessons."

Ah, she was relaxing. The doe-in-the-crosshairs look was fading from her eyes. "What's your instrument?"

"The flute. I'm reasonably adept, but I'm never going to have a chair with the Philharmonic."

She shrugged, and he bit back a sharp order for her not to change the line.

"I took a course in computer programming, and that was a complete wash. As most of my business courses were, which scuttled the idea I had of opening a little craft shop. I could handle the craft part, but not the shop part."

Her gaze was drawn back to the mermaid. She coveted that, not just the piece itself, but the talent and vision that had created it.

"Stand on your toes. That's it, that's lovely. Hold a minute. Why don't you take on a partner?"

"For what?"

"The shop, if it's what you want. Someone business-minded."

"Mostly because I have enough business sense to know I could never afford the rent in New York, the start-up costs." She moved a shoulder. "Overhead, equipment, stock. I guess running a business is a study in stress. Margaret always says so."

Ah, he thought, the inestimable Margaret, whom he'd already decided to detest. "What do you care what she says? No, that's not right. It's not quite right. Turn around. You have a beautiful back."

"I do?" Surprise had her turning her head to look at him.

"There! Hold that. Lower your chin a little more to your shoulder, keep your eyes on me."

That was what he wanted. No shyness here. Coyness was something different altogether. There was a hint of that in the upward angle of her gaze, the tilt of her head. And just a bit of smugness as well, in the slight curve of her lips.

Allena of the Faeries, he thought, already eager to begin in clay. He ripped the sheets off the pad, began tacking them to the wall.

"I'll do better with you as well as the sketches. Relax a minute while I prep the clay." As he passed, he touched a hand absently to her shoulder. He stopped. "Christ, you're cold. Why didn't you say something?"

She was turning toward him, a slow shift of her body. "I didn't notice."

"I didn't think to keep the fire going." His hand skimmed over her shoulder, fingers tracing the blade where he imagined wings. "I'll build one now." Even as he spoke he was leaning toward her, his eyes locked on hers. Her lips parted, and he could feel the flutter of her breath.

He jerked back, like a man snapping out of a dream. Lifted his hand, then held them both up, away from her. "I said I wouldn't touch you. I'm sorry."

The rising wave of anticipation in her broke, then vanished as he walked away to yank a blanket from the cot. "I wish you weren't. Sorry, I mean."

He stood with the table between them, the blanket in his hands, and felt like a man drowning. There was no shyness in her now, nor coyness. But the patience was there, and the promise.

"I don't want this need for you. Do you understand?"

"You want me to say yes." She was laid bare now, she realized. Much more than her body laid bare. "It would make it easier if I said that I understand. But I can't, I don't. I want that need, Conal. And you."

"Another place, another time," he murmured. "There'd be no need to understand. Another place, another time, I'd want it as well."

"This is here," she said quietly. "And this is now. It's still your choice."

He wanted to be sure of it, wanted to know there was nothing but her. "Will you take that off?"

She lifted a hand to the pendant, her last shield. Saying nothing, she slipped the chain over her head, then walked to the table, set it down. "Do you think I'll feel differently without it?"

"There's no magic between us now. We're only who and what we are." He stepped to her, swept the blanket around her shoulders. "It's as much your choice as mine, Allena. You've a right to say no."

"Then-" She laid her hands on his shoulders, brought her lips to within a breath of his. "I've also a right to say yes."

It was she who closed that tenuous distance so mouths and bodies met. And she who let the blanket drop when her arms went around him.

She gave, completely, utterly. All the love, so newly discovered in her heart, poured out for him. Her lips seduced, her hands soothed, her body yielded.

There was a choice. She had made hers, but he still had his own. To draw back, step away and refuse. Or to gather close and take. Before his blood could take over, before it was all need and heat, he took her face in his hands until their eyes met again.

"With no promises, Allena."

He suffered. She could see the clouds and worry in his eyes, and said what she hoped would comfort. And be the truth as well. "And no regrets."

His thumbs skimmed over her cheeks, tracing the shape of her face as skillfully as he'd drawn it on paper. "Be with me, then."

The cot was hard and narrow, but might have been a bed of rose petals as they lay on it. The air was chill, still damp from the storm, but she felt only warmth when his body covered hers.

Here. At last.

He knew his hands were big, the palms rough and calloused from his work, and very often careless. He would not be careless with her, would not rush through the moment they offered each other. So he touched her, gently, giving himself the pleasure of the body he'd sketched. Long limbs, long bones, and soft white skin. Her sigh was like music, the song his name.

She tugged off his sweater, sighing again when flesh met flesh, and again murmuring his name against the pulse of his own throat. With

only that, she gave him the sweetness he'd denied himself. Whatever he had of that simple gift inside him, he offered back.

Under him she lifted and moved as if they'd danced this dance together for a lifetime. Flowed with and against him, now fluid, now strong. And the quickening pulse that rose in her was like his own.

Her scent was soap, her taste fresh as rain.

He watched her glide up, the faerie again, soaring on one long spread of wings. As she crested, her eyes opened, met his. And she smiled.

No one had brought her so much, or shown her how much she had to offer. Her body quivered from the thrill of it, and in her heart was the boundless joy of finding home.

She arched up, opened so he would fill her. As he slid inside her, the beauty dazzled, and the power hummed.

While they took each other, neither noticed the star carved in silver, glowing blue as flame.

She lay over him now, snug under his arm with her cheek upon his chest. It was lovely to hear how his heart still pounded. A kind of rage, she thought, though he'd been the most tender of lovers.

No one could have shown her that kind of caring if there wasn't caring inside. And that, she thought, closing her eyes, was enough.

"You're cold," he murmured.

"Am not." She snuggled against him and would have frozen to the bone before she let him move. But she lifted her head so she could grin at him.

"Allena Kennedy." His fingers trailed lightly down the back of her neck. "You look smug."

"I feel smug. Do you mind?"

"I would be a foolish man to mind."

She bent down to kiss his chin, a sweet and casual gesture that moved him. "And Conal O'Neil is not a foolish man. Or is he?" She angled her head. "If we can't go beyond a certain point and walk to the village, wouldn't it follow that no one from the village can come here?"

"I suppose it would."

"Then let's do something foolish. Let's go swim naked in the sea."

"You want to swim naked in the sea?"

"I've always wanted to. I just realized it this minute." She rolled off the cot and tugged at his hand. "Come be foolish with me, Conal."

"Leannan, the first wave'll flatten you."

"Will not." Leannan. She had no idea what it meant, but it sounded tender, and made her want to dance. She raked both hands through her hair, then the light of challenge lighted her eyes. "Race you."

She darted off like a rabbit and had him scrambling up. "Wait. Damn it, the seas are too rough for you."

Bird bones, he thought, snatching up the blanket on his way. She would crack half a dozen of them in minutes.

No, she didn't run like a rabbit, he realized. She ran like a bloody gazelle, with long, loping strides that had her nearly at the foaming surf. He called out her name, rushing after her. His heart simply stopped when she raced into the water and dived under its towering wall.

"Sweet Jesus."

He'd gotten no farther than the beach when she surfaced, laughing. "Oh, it's cold!" She struggled to the shallows, slicking her hair back, lifted her face, her arms. For the second time his heart stopped, but now it had nothing to do with alarm.

"You're a vision, Allena."

"No one's ever said that to me before." She held out a hand. "No one's ever looked at me the way you do. Ride the sea with me."

It had been, he decided, much too long since he'd been foolish. "Hold on, then."

It tossed them up, a rush of power. It sucked them down into a blind, thundering world. The tumult of it was freedom, a cocky dare to fate. Wrapped around each other, they spun as the waves rolled over them.

Breathless, they surfaced, only to plunge in again. Her scream wasn't one of fear, but a cry of victory as, latched around him, she was swept into the air again.

"You'll drown us both!" he shouted, but his eyes were lit with wicked humor.

"I won't. I can't. Nothing but wonders today. Once more." She locked her arms around his neck. "Let's go under just once more."

To her shrieking delight, he snatched her off her feet and dived into the cresting wave with her.

When they stumbled out, panting, their hands were linked.

"Your teeth are chattering."

"I know. I loved it." But she snuggled into the blanket he wrapped around them both. "I've never done anything like that. I guess you've done it dozens of times."

"Not with the likes of you."

It was, she thought, the perfect thing to say. She held the words to her for a moment even as she held him. Hard against her heart.

"What does leannan mean?"

"Hmm?" Her head was on his shoulder, her arms linked around his waist. Everything inside him was completely at peace.

"Leannan. You said that to me, I wondered what it means."

His hand paused in midstroke on her hair. "It's a casual term," he said carefully. "A bit of an endearment, is all. 'Sweetheart' would be the closest."

"I like it."

He closed his eyes. "Allena, you ask for too little."

And hope for everything, she thought. "You shouldn't worry, Conal. I'm not. Now, before we both turn blue out here, I'll make fresh tea, and you'll build up the fire." She kissed him. "Right after I pick up some of these shells."

She wiggled away, leaving him holding the blanket and shaking his head. Most of the shells that littered the beach had been broken by the waves, but that didn't appear to bother her. He left her to it and went into the studio to tug on his jeans.

She had a pile of shells when he came back, offering her his sweater and her pendant.

"I won't wear it if it bothers you."

"It's yours." Deliberately, as if challenging the fates, he slipped it around her neck. "Here, put this on before you freeze."

She bundled into it, then crouched to put the shells into the blanket. "I love you, Conal, whether I'm wearing it or not. And since loving you makes me happy, it shouldn't worry you."

She rose. "Don't spoil it," she murmured. "Let's just take today, then see about tomorrow."

"All right." He took her hand, brought it to his lips. "I'll give you a promise after all."

"I'll take it."

"Today will always be precious to me, and so will you."

CHAPTER 7

She dug out an ancient pair of Conal's jeans, found a hunk of frayed rope, and went to work with scissors. As a fashion statement the chopped jeans, rough belt, and baggy sweater said Island Shipwreck, but they did the job.

As he insisted on making the tea this time around, she busied herself hanging the wash. And dreaming.

It could be just this way, she thought. Long, wonderful days together. Conal would work in his studio, and she'd tend the house, the gardens- and, oh, the children when they came along.

She would paint the shutters and the little back porch. She'd put an arbor in front, plant roses-the only roses she would have-so that they'd climb up and twine and ramble and it would be like walking through a fairy tale every time she went into the house.

And it would be her fairy tale, ever after.

They would need to add rooms, of course, for those children. A second floor, she imagined, with dormer windows.

Another bath, a bigger kitchen, but nothing that would take away from the lovely cottage-by-the-sea feeling.

She'd make wonderful meals, keep the windows sparkling, sew curtains that would flutter in the breeze.

She stopped, pegging a sheet that flapped wetly. Her mother would be appalled. Household chores were something you hired other people to do because you had a career. You were a professional-something.

Of course, it was all just fantasy, she told herself as she moved down the clothesline. She had to make a living somehow. But she'd worry about that later. For now, she was going to enjoy the moment, the thrilling rush of being in love, the jittery ache of waiting to be loved in return.

They would have today, and their tomorrow. Whatever happened after, she'd have no regrets.

With the last of the laundry hung, she stepped back, lifted the basket to rest it on her hip. She saw Hugh prancing down the hill.

"Well, so you decided to come home. What have you got there?" Her eyes widened as she recognized the brown bulk he carried in his mouth. "My bag!"

She dropped the basket and rushed to him. And Hugh, sensing a game, began to race in circles around her.

Conal watched from the doorway. The tea was steeping in the pot, and he'd been about to call to her. Now he simply stood.

Sheets billowed like sails in the wind. He caught the clean, wet scent of them, and the drift of rosemary and lemon balm from the herb bed she'd weeded that morning. Her laughter lifted up, bright and delighted, as she raced with the dog.

His tattered old jeans hung on her, though she'd hacked them off to above her ankles. She'd rolled up the cuffs, pushed up the sleeves on his sweater, but now as she ran around with Hugh, they'd come down again and fell over her hands. She hadn't put on her shoes.

She was a joy to watch. And when, he wondered, had he stopped letting joy into his life? The shadow of his fate had grown longer with each passing year. He'd huddled under it, he thought now, telling himself he was standing clear.

He had let no one touch him, let nothing be important to him but his work. He had estranged himself from his father and his home. Those had been his choices, and his right. Now, watching Allena play tug-of-war with the big dog in a yard filled with sun and sailing white sheets, he wondered for the first time what he'd missed along the way.

And still, whatever he'd missed, she was here.

The pendant was here.

The solstice was closing in.

He could refuse it. He could deny it. However much this woman called to his blood, he would, at the end of that longest day, determine his own fate.

It would not be magic that forced his destiny, but his own will.

He saw Allena yank, Hugh release. She stumbled back, clutching something to her chest, then landed hard on her back. Conal was out the door and across the yard in a single skipping heartbeat.

"Are you hurt?" He issued one sharp order to the dog in Gaelic that had Hugh hanging his head.

"Of course not." She started to sit up, but Conal was already gathering her, stroking, murmuring something in Gaelic that sounded

lovely. Loving. Her heart did one long, slow cartwheel. "Conal."

"The damn dog probably outweighs you, and you've bones like a bird."

"We were just playing. There, now, you've hurt Hugh's feelings. Come here, baby, it's okay."

While Conal sat back on his heels and scowled, she hugged and cuddled the dog. "It's all right. He didn't mean it, whatever it was. Did you, Conal?"

Conal caught the sidelong glance the dog sent him, and had to call it smug. "I did."

She only laughed and kissed Hugh's nose. "Such a smart dog, such a good dog," she crooned. "He found my bag and brought it home. I, on the other hand, am a moron. I forgot all about it."

Conal studied the oversized purse. It was wet, filthy, and now riddled with teeth marks. That didn't seem to bother her a bit. "It's taken a beating."

"I must've dropped it in the storm. Everything's in here. My passport, my credit cards, my ticket. My makeup." She hugged the bag, thrilled to have her lipstick back. "Oh, and dozens of things. Including my copy of Margaret's itinerary. Do you think the phone's working now?"

Without waiting for him to answer, she leaped up. "I can call her hotel, let her know I'm all right. She must be frantic."

She dashed into the house, clutching the bag, and Conal stayed as he was.

He didn't want the phones to be working. He didn't want that to break their bubble. Realizing it left him shaken. Here, he thought, at the first chance to reach out of their world, she'd run to do it.

Of course she had. He pressed his fingers to his eyes. Wouldn't he have done the same? She had a life beyond this, beyond him. The romance of it had swept her away for a while, just as it had nearly swept him. She would get her feet back under her and move on. That was as it should be. And what he wanted.

But when he rose to go after her, there was an ache inside him that hadn't been there before.

"I got through." Allena sent him a brilliant smile. She stood by the counter, the phone in her hand and what appeared to be half her worldly goods dumped on the table. "She's checked in, and they're going to ring her room. I only hope she didn't call my parents. I'd hate to think they'd-Margaret! Oh, I'm so glad you're-"

She broke off again, and Conal watched the light in her eyes go dim. "Yes, I know. I'm so sorry. I missed the ferry and-"

Saying nothing, he moved past her and got down mugs for tea. He had no intention of leaving her to her privacy.

"Yes, you're right, it was irresponsible. Inexcusable, yes, that, too, to leave you shorthanded this way. I tried to-"

He saw the moment she gave up, when her shoulders slumped and her face went carefully blank. "I understand. No, of course, you can't be expected to keep me on after this. Oh, yes, I know it was against your better judgment in the first place. You were very clear about that. I'm sorry I let you down. Yes, again."

Shame, fatigue, resignation closed in on her, a dingy fog of failure. She shut her eyes. "No, Margaret, excuses don't matter when people are depending on you. Did you call Mom and Dad? No, you're right. What would have been the point?"

"Bloody bitch," Conal muttered. They'd just see how Margaret liked being on the other end of a tongue-lashing, he decided, and grabbed

the phone out of Allena's hand. The buzz of the dial tone left him no victim for his outrage.

"She had to go," Allena managed. "Schedule. I should-Excuse me."

"No, damned if I will." He took her shoulders in a firm grip before she could escape. There were tears on her lashes. He wanted Margaret's neck in his hands. "You'll not go off to lick your wounds. Why did you take that from her?"

"She was right. I was irresponsible. She has every reason to fire me. She'd never have taken me on in the first place without family pressure."

"Family pressure? Bugger it. Where was her family concern? Did she ask if you were all right? What had happened? Where you were? Did she once ask you why?"

"No."

A tear spilled over, slid down her cheek and inflamed him. "Where is your anger?" he demanded.

"What good does it do to be angry?" Warily, she brushed the tear away. "I brought it on myself. I don't care about the job. That's the problem, really. I don't care about it. I wouldn't have taken it if I'd had a choice. Margaret's probably right. I bungle this way on purpose."

"Margaret is a jackass."

"No, really, she's not." She managed a wobbly grin. "She's just very disciplined and goal-oriented. Well, there's no use whining about it." She patted his hand, then moved away to pour the tea. "I'll call my parents after I've settled down a little, explain- oh, God."

Pressing her palms to the counter, she squeezed her eyes shut. "I hate disappointing them this way. Over and over, like a cycle I can't

break. If I could just do something, if I could just be good at something."

Shaking her head, she went to the refrigerator to take out last night's soup to heat for lunch. "You don't know how much I envy you your talent and your confidence in it. My mother always said if I'd just focus my energies instead of scattering them a dozen different ways, I'd move beyond mediocre."

"It should have shamed her to say such a thing to you."

Surprised by the violence in his tone, she turned back. "She didn't mean it the way I made it sound. You have to understand, they're all so smart and clever and, well, dedicated to what they do. My father's chief of surgery, my mother's a partner in one of the most prestigious law firms on the East Coast. And I can't do anything."

There was the anger. It whipped through her as she slammed the pot on the stove. Pleased to see it, Conal folded his arms, leaned back, and watched it build.

"There's James with his glossy practice and his gorgeous trophy wife and certified genius child, who's a complete brat, by the way, but everyone says she's simply precocious. As if precocious and rude are synonymous. And Margaret with her perfect office and her perfect wardrobe and her perfect home and her perfectly detestable husband, who won't see anything but art films and collects coins."

She dumped soup into the pot. "And every Thanksgiving they all sit around patting each other on the back over how successful and brilliant they are. Then they look at me as if I'm some sort of alien who got dumped on the doorstep and had to be taken in for humanitarian purposes. And I can't be a doctor or a lawyer or a goddamn Indian chief no matter how hard I try because I just can't do anything."

"Now you should be ashamed."

"What?" She pressed her fingers to her temples. Temper made her dizzy, and fuzzy-headed, which is why she usually tried to avoid it.
"What?"

"Come here." He grabbed her hand, pulled her into the living room.
"What did you do here?"

"About what?"

"What are the things you did in here?"

"I- dusted?"

"To hell and back again with the dust, Allena. Look here at your flowers and candles and your bowl of broken shells. And out here."

He dragged her to the door, shoved it open. "Here's a garden that was suffering from neglect until the morning. Where's the sand that was all over the walk that I didn't even notice until it was gone? There are sheets drying in the wind out back and soup heating in the kitchen. The bloody shower doesn't drip now. Who did those things?"

"Anyone can sweep a walk, Conal."

"Not everyone thinks to. Not everyone cares to. And not everyone finds pleasure in the doing of it. In one day you made a home out of this place, and it hasn't been one in too long, so that I'd all but forgotten the feel of a home around me. Do you think that's nothing? Do you think there's no value in that?"

"It's just- ordinary," she said for lack of a better word. "I can't make a career out of picking wildflowers."

"A living can be made where you find it, if a living must be made. You've a need to pick wildflowers and sea-shells, Allena. And there are those who are grateful for it, and notice the difference you make."

If she hadn't loved him already, she would have fallen at that moment with his words still echoing and his eyes dark with impatience. "That's the kindest thing anyone's ever said to me." She laid her hands on his cheeks. "The very kindest." Softly, she touched her lips to his. "Thank you."

Before he could speak, she shook her head, then rested it on his shoulder.

CHAPTER 8

They shut out the world. Turned off time. Conal would have bristled at the idea that they were making a kind of magic, but for Allena there was no other word for it.

She posed for him again, in the studio where the afternoon sun slanted through the windows. And she watched herself be born in clay.

Because she asked, he told her of his years in Dublin. His studies and his work. The lean student years when he'd lived on tinned food and art. Then the recognition that had come, like a miracle, in a dingy gallery.

The first sale had given him the luxury of time, room to work without the constant worry of paying the rent. And the sales that followed had given him the luxury of choice, so that he'd been able to afford a studio of his own.

Still, though he spoke of it easily, she noticed that when he talked of Dublin, he didn't refer to it as home. But she said nothing.

Later, when he'd covered the clay with a damp cloth and washed in the little sink, they went for a walk along the shore. They spoke of a hundred things, but never once of the star she wore against her heart, or the stone circle that threw its shadows from the cliff.

They made love while the sun was still bright, and the warmth of it glowed on her skin when she rose over him.

As the day moved to evening, the light remained, shimmering as though it would never give way to night. She entertained herself mending the old lace curtains she'd found on a shelf in the closet while Conal sketched and the dog curled into a nap on the floor between them.

She had the most expressive face, he thought. Dreamy now as she sat and sewed. Everything she felt moved into her eyes of soft, clear gray. The witch behind those eyes had yet to wake. And when she did, he imagined that any man she cast them on would be spellbound.

How easily she had settled in-to him, his home, his life. Without a break of rhythm, he thought, and with such contentment. And how easy it would be to settle in to her. Even with these edgy flashes of need and desire, there was a comfort beneath.

What was he to do about her? Where was he to put these feelings she'd brought to life inside him? And how was he to know if they were real?

"Conal?" She spoke quietly. His troubled thoughts were like a humming in the air, a warning. "Can't you put it aside for now? Can't you be content to wait and see?"

"No." It irritated him that she'd read his mood in his silence. "Letting others shape your life is your way, not mine."

Her hand jerked, as if it had been slapped, then continued to move smoothly. "Yes, you're right. I've spent my life trying to please people I love, and it hasn't gotten me anywhere. They don't love me enough to accept me."

He felt a hitch in his gut, as if he'd shoved her away when he should have taken hold. "Allena."

"No, it's all right. They do love me, under it all, just not as much, or in the same way, or- however I love them. They want things for me that I'm not capable of-or that I just don't want for myself enough to make a real effort. I can't put restrictions on my feelings. I'm not made that way."

"And I can." He rose, paced. "It's not a matter of feelings, but of being. I can't and won't be led. I care for you more than should be possible in this short a time."

"And because of that you don't trust what's happened, what's happening between us." She nodded and, clipping the thread, set her needle aside. "That's reasonable."

"What do you know of reason?" he demanded. "You're the damnedest, most irrational woman I've ever met."

She smiled at that, quick and bright. "It's so much easier to recognize reason when you have so little yourself."

His lips twitched, but he sat down. "How can you be so calm in the middle of all this?"

"I've had the most amazing two days of my life, the most exciting, the most beautiful." She spread her hands. "Nothing can ever take that away from me now that I've had it. And I'll have one more. One more long and wonderful day. So-" She got to her feet, stretched. "I think I'll get a glass of wine and go outside and watch the stars come out."

"No." He took her hand, rose. "I'll get the wine."

It was a perfect night, the sky as clear as glass. The sea swept in, drew back, then burst again in a shower of water that caught those last shimmers of day and sparkled like jewels.

"You should have benches," Allena began. "Here and here, with curved seats and high backs, in cedar that would go silver in the weather."

He wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself, for he loved to sit and watch the sea. "What else would you have, were you me?"

"Well, I'd put big pots near the benches and fill them with flowers that spilled out and spiked up. Dark blue crocks," she decided, then slanted him a look. "You could make them."

"I suppose I could. Flowerpots." The idea was amusing.

No one had ever expected flowerpots from him before. He skimmed a hand over her hair as he sipped his wine and realized he would enjoy making them for her, would like to see her pleasure in them.

"Dark blue," she repeated, "to match the shutters when they're fixed up with the paint I found in the laundry room."

"Now I'm painting shutters?"

"No, no, no, your talents are much too lofty for such mundane chores. You make the pots, sturdy ones, and I'll paint the shutters."

"I know when someone's laughing at me."

She merely sent him a sly wink and walked down toward the water. "Do you know what I'm supposed to be doing tonight?"

"What would that be?"

"I should be manning the slide projector for Margaret's after-dinner lecture on megalithic sites."

"Well, then, you've had a narrow escape, haven't you?"

"You're telling me. Do you know what I'm going to do instead?"

"Ah, come back inside and make wild love with me?"

She laughed and spun in a circle. "I'm definitely putting that on the schedule. But first, I'm going to build a sand castle."

"A sand castle, is it?"

"A grand one," she claimed and plopped down on the beach to begin. "The construction of sand castles is one of my many talents. Of course, I'd do better work if I had a spade and a bucket. Both of which," she added, looking up at him from under her lashes, "can be found in the laundry room."

"And I suppose, as my talent for this particular art is in doubt, I'm delegated to fetch."

"Your legs are longer, so you'll get there and back faster."

"Can't argue with that."

He brought back the garden spade and the mop bucket, along with the bottle of wine.

As the first bold stars came to life, he sat and watched her build her castle of sand.

"You need a tower on that end," he told her. "You've left it undefended."

"It's a castle, not a fortress, and my little world here is at peace. However, I'd think a famous artist could manage to build a tower if he saw the need for one."

He finished off his glass of wine, screwed the stem in the sand, and picked up the challenge.

She added more turrets, carefully shaping, then smoothing them with the edge of her spade. And driven by his obviously superior talent with his hands, began to add to the structure, elaborately.

"And what, I'd like to know, is that lump you've got there?"

"It's the stables, or will be when I'm finished."

"It's out of proportion." He started to reach over to show her, but she slapped his hand away. "As you like, but your horses would have to be the size of Hugh to fit in there."

She sniffed, rocked back on her heels. Damn it, he was right. "I'm not finished," she said coolly. She scooped up more sand and worked it in. "And what is that supposed to be?"

"It will be the drawbridge."

"A drawbridge?" Delighted, she leaned over to study the platform he fashioned with his quick, clever hands. "Oh, that's wonderful. You're definitely sand castle-skilled. I know just what it needs."

She scrambled up and raced to the house. She came back with some wooden kitchen matches and a bit of red ribbon that she'd cut in a triangle.

"Chain would be better, but we'll be innovative." She poked the tip of the long match into the side of the drawbridge, slid the other end into the castle wall. "Fortunately, the royal family here is having a ball, so the drawbridge stays down." She set a second match in the other side.

She broke a third match, looped her ribbon around it, then hoisted her makeshift flag on the topmost tower. "Now that's a sand castle."

She plucked up the bottle of wine and poured for both of them. "To Dolman Castle." A dream, she thought, they'd made together.

After clinking her glass to his, she drew up her knees and looked out to sea. "It's a beautiful night. So many stars. You can't see sky like this in New York, just slices of it, pieces between buildings, so you forget how big it is."

"When I was a boy, I used to come out at night and sit here."

She turned her head, rested her cheek on her knee. "What else did you do when you were a boy?"

"Climbed the cliffs, played with my friends in the village, worked very hard to get out of chores that would have taken less time and less effort than the eluding of them took. Fished with my father."

He fell into silence, and the depth of it had Allena reaching out to take his hand. "You miss him."

"I left him, alone. I didn't know he was ill that last year. He never told me, never once asked me to come back and tend to him. He died by himself rather than ask me for that."

"He knew you'd come back."

"He should have told me. I could've brought him to Dublin, gotten him to hospital, for treatments, specialists."

"It's always so much harder on the ones who're left behind," she murmured. "He wanted to be here, Conal. To die here."

"Oh, aye, to die here, that was his choice. And knowing he was ill, and frail, he climbed the cliffs. And there at the stone dance is where his heart gave out. That was his choice."

"It makes you angry."

"It makes me helpless, which is the same thing to me. So I miss him, and I regret the time and distance that was between us-the time and distance I put between us. I sent him money instead of myself. And he left me all he had. The cottage, and Hugh."

He turned to her then and pulled the chain at her neck until the pendant slid clear. "And this. He left this for me in that small wood box you see on the dresser in the bedroom."

The shiver raced over her skin, chill and damp. "I don't understand."

"His mother had given it to him on his eighteenth birthday, as it had been given to her. And he gave it to my mother on the day he asked her to marry him, at the stone circle, as is the O'Neil tradition. She wore it always. And gave it back to him, to hold for me, on the night she died."

Cured in Dagda's Cauldron. Carved by the finger of Merlin. "It's yours," she murmured.

"No. No longer mine, never mine as I refused it. The day I buried my father, I came here and I threw this into the sea. That, I told myself, was the end of things."

There's only one, the old woman had told her. It belonged to her. She had found it, or it had found her. And led her, Allena thought, to him. How could she feel anything but joy at knowing it? And how, being who he was, could Conal feel anything but anger?

For her it was a key. For him a lock.

Allena touched his cheek. "I don't know how to comfort you."

"Neither do I." He rose, pulled her to her feet. "No more of this tonight. No more castles and stars. I want what's real. My need is real enough." He swept her up. "And so are you."

CHAPTER 9

She couldn't sleep. No matter how short the night, she couldn't bear to waste it in dreams. So she lay quiet, and wakeful, reliving every moment of the day that had passed.

They'd ended it, she thought now, with love. Not the slow and tender sort they'd brought each other the first time. There'd been a desperation in Conal when he carried her into bed from the beach. A kind of fierce urgency that had streaked from him and into her so that her hands had been as impatient as his, her mouth as hungry.

And her body, she thought, oh, her body had been so very alive.

That kind of craving was another sort of beauty, wasn't it? A need that deep, that strong, that willful could dig deep and lasting roots.

Why wouldn't he let himself love her?

She turned to him, and in sleep he drew her against him. I'm here, she wanted to say. I belong here. I know it.

But she kept the words inside her, and simply took his mouth with hers. Soft, seductive, drawing what she needed and giving back. Slow and silky, a mating of lips and tongues. The heat from bodies wrapped close weighing heavy on the limbs.

He drifted into desire as a man drifts through mists. The air was thick, and sweet, and she was there for him. Warm and willing. And real.

He heard her breath catch and sigh out, felt her heart beat to match the rhythm of his own. And she moved against him, under him, bewitching in the dark.

When he slid into her, she took him in with a welcome that was home. Together they lifted and fell, steady and smooth. Mouths met again as he felt her rise up to peak, as he lost himself, gave himself. And emptied.

"Allena." He said her name, only her name as he once more gathered her against him. Comforted, settled, he slipped back into sleep never knowing that she wept.

Before dawn she rose, afraid that if she stayed beside him any longer in the dark she would ask—more afraid that if he offered some pale substitute for love and lifetimes, she would snatch at it, pitifully.

She dressed in silence and went out to wait for the dawn of the longest day.

There was no moon now, and no stars, nothing to break that endless, spreading dark. She could see the fall of land, the rise of sea, and to the west the powerful shadows of the jagged cliffs where the stone circle stood, and waited.

The pendant weighed heavy on her neck.

Only hours left, she thought. She wouldn't lose hope, though it was hard in this dark and lonely hour to cling to it. She'd been sent here, brought here, it didn't matter. What mattered was that she was here, and here she had found all the answers she needed.

She had to believe that Conal would find his in the day that was left to them.

She watched dawn break, a slow, almost sly shifting of light that gave the sky a polish. Mists slipped and slid over the ground, rose into the air like a damp curtain. And there, in the east, it flamed, gold, then spread to red over sky and water, brighter, and brighter still, until the world woke.

The air went from gray to the shimmer of a pearl.

On the beach, the castle had been swamped by the tide. And seeing what could be so easily washed away broke her heart a little.

She turned away from it and went back inside.

She needed to keep her hands busy, her mind busy. She could do nothing about the state of her heart, but she wouldn't mope, today of all days.

When Hugh came padding out, she opened the door so he could race through. She put on the kettle for tea. She already knew how Conal liked his, almost viciously strong with no sugar or cream to dilute the punch.

While it steeped, she got a small pot from a cupboard. Conal had mentioned there were berries ripening this time of year. If she could find them, and there were enough, they'd have fresh fruit for breakfast.

She went out the back, past the herb garden and a huge shrub covered with dozens of conical purple blossoms that smelled like potpourri. She wondered how they would look dried and spearing out of a big copper urn.

Ground fog played around her ankles as she walked and made her think it was something like wading in a shallow river. The wind didn't reach it, but fluttered at her hair as she climbed the gentle rise behind the cottage. Far off was the sound of Hugh's deep-throated bark, and somewhere nearer, the liquid trill of a bird. Over it all was the forever sound of the sea.

On impulse, she slipped off her shoes to walk barefoot over the cool, wet grass.

The hill dipped, then rose again. Steeper now, with the mist thickening like layers of filmy curtain. She glanced back once, saw the cottage was merely a silhouette behind the fog. A prickle over her skin had her pausing, nearly turning back. Then she heard the dog bark again, just up ahead.

She called out to him, turned in the direction of his bark, and kept climbing. On the top of the next rise was a scattering of trees sculpted by wind, and with them the bushes, brambles, and berries she hunted.

Pleased with her find, she set down her shoes and began to pick. And taste. And climb still higher to where the ripest grew. She would make pancakes, she thought, and mix the berries in the batter.

Her pot was half full when she scrambled up on a rock to reach a solitary bush pregnant with fat fruit of rich and deep purple.

"The most tempting are always the ones just out of reach."

Allena's breath caught, and she nearly overturned her pot when she saw the woman standing on the rough track on the other side of the bush.

Her hair was dark and hung past her waist. Her eyes were the moody green of the ocean at dawn. She smiled and rested her hand on Hugh's head as he sat patiently beside her.

"I didn't know anyone was here." Could be here, she thought. "I-" She looked back now, with some alarm, and couldn't see the cottage. "I walked farther than I realized."

"It's a good morning for a walk, and for berry picking. Those you have there'd make a fine mixed jam."

"I've picked too many. I wasn't paying attention."

The woman's face softened. "Sure, you can never pick too many as long as someone eats them. Don't fret," she said quietly. "He's sleeping still. His mind's quiet when he sleeps."

Allena let out a long breath. "Who are you?"

"Whoever you need me to be. An old woman in a shop, a young boy in a boat."

"Oh." Surrendering to shaky legs, she sat on the rock. "God."

"It shouldn't worry you. There's no harm meant. Not to you, or to him. He's part of me."

"His great-grandmother. He said-they say-"

The woman's smile widened. "They do indeed."

Struggling for composure, Allena reached under her sweater, drew out the pendant. "This is yours."

"It belongs to whom it belongs to- until it belongs to another."

"Conal said he threw it into the sea."

"Such a temper that boy has." Her laugh was light and rich as cream over whiskey. "It does me proud. He could throw it to the moon, and still it would come to whom it belongs to when it was time. This time is yours."

"He doesn't want to love me."

"Oh, child." She touched Allena's cheek, and it was like the brush of wings. "Love can't be wanted away. It simply is, and you already know that. You have a patient heart."

"Sometimes patience is just cowardice."

"That's wise." The woman nodded, obviously pleased, and helped herself to one of the berries in the pot. "And true as well. But already you understand him, and are coming to understand yourself, which is always a more difficult matter. That's considerable for such a short time. And you love him."

"Yes, I love him. But he won't accept love through magic."

"Tonight, when the longest day meets the shortest night, when the star cuts through with power and light, the choice you make, both you and he, will be what was always meant to be."

Then she took Allena's face in her hands, kissed both her cheeks. "Your heart will know," she said and slipped into the mist like a ghost.

"How?" Allena closed her eyes. "You didn't give us enough time."

When Hugh bumped his head against her legs, she bent down to bury her face in his neck. "Not enough time," she murmured. "Not enough to mope about it, either. I don't know what to do, except the next thing. I guess that's breakfast."

She wandered back the way she had come, with Hugh for company on this trip. The fog was already burning off at the edges and drawing into itself. It seemed that fate had decreed one more clear day for her.

When the cottage came into view, she saw Conal on the little back porch, waiting for her.

"You worried me." He walked out to meet her, knowing his sense of relief was out of proportion. "What are you doing, roaming away in the mist?"

"Berries." She held up the pot. "You'll never guess what I-" She trailed off as his gaze tracked down to the pendant.

"I'll never guess what?"

No, she thought, she couldn't tell him what had happened, whom she had seen. Not when the shadows were in his eyes, and her heart was sinking because of them. "What I'm going to make for breakfast."

He dipped a hand into the pot. "Berries?"

"Watch," she told him and took her gatherings into the house. "And learn."

He did watch, and it soothed him. He'd wakened reaching for her, and that had disturbed him. How could a man spend one night with a woman, then find his bed so cold, so empty when she wasn't in it? Then that panic, that drawing down in the gut, when he hadn't been able to find her. Now she was here, mixing her batter in a bowl, and the world was right again.

Was there a name for this other than love?

"You really need a griddle." She set the bowl aside to heat a skillet. "But we'll make do."

"Allena."

"Hmm?" She glanced back. Something in his eyes made her dizzy. "Yes?" When she turned, the pendant swung, and caught at the sunlight.

The star seemed to flash straight into his eyes, taunting him. Without moving, Conal took a deliberate step back. No, he would not speak of love.

"Where are your shoes?"

"My shoes?" He'd spoken with such gentle affection that her eyes stung as she looked down at her own bare feet. "I must have left them behind. Silly of me."

"So you wander barefoot through the dew, pretty Allena?"

Words strangled in her throat. She threw her arms around him, burying her face at his shoulder as emotions whirled inside her.

"Allena." He pressed his lips to her hair and wished, for both of them, he could break this last chain that held his heart. "What am I to do about you?"

Love me. Just love me. I can handle all of the rest. "I can make you happy. If only you'd let me, I can make you happy."

"And what of you? There are two of us here. How can you believe, and accept, all I've told you and be willing to change your life for it?" He drew her back, touched a fingertip to the pendant. "How can you, Allena, so easily accept this?"

"Because it belongs to me." She let out a shaky breath, then took one in, and her voice was stronger. "Until it belongs to another."

Steadier, she took a ladle from a drawer and spooned batter into the skillet. "You think I'm naive, and gullible, and so needy for love that I'll believe anything that offers the possibility of it?"

"I think you have a soft heart."

"And a malleable one?" The cool gaze she sent him was a surprise, as was her nod. "You may be right. Trying to fit yourself into forms so that the people you love will love you back the way you want keeps the heart malleable. And while I hope to be done with that, while I'm going to try to be done with that, I prefer having a heart that accepts imprints from others."

A patient heart, she thought, but by God if it was a cowardly one.

Deftly, she flipped the pancakes. "What hardened yours, Conal?"

"You've good aim when you decide to notch the arrow."

"Maybe I haven't reached into the quiver often enough." But she would now. Movements smooth and unhurried, she turned the pancakes onto a platter, spooned more batter into the pan. "Why don't you ever speak of your mother?"

Bull's-eye, he thought, and said nothing as she set him a place at the table.

"I have a right to know."

"You do, yes."

She got out honey, cinnamon, poured the tea. "Sit down. Your breakfast will get cold."

With a half laugh, he did as she asked. She was a puzzle, and why had he believed he'd already solved her? He waited until she'd emptied the skillet, turned it off, and come to the table to join him.

"My mother was from the near village," he began. "Her father was a fisherman, and her mother died in childbirth when my own mother was a girl. The baby died as well, so my mother was the youngest and the only daughter and pampered, she told me, by her father and brothers."

"You have uncles in the village?"

"I do. Three, and their families. Though some of the younger have gone to the mainland or beyond. My father was an only child."

She drizzled honey on her pancakes, passed the bottle to Conal. He had family, she thought, and still kept so much alone. "So you have cousins here, too?"

"Some number of them. We played together when I was a boy. It was from them that I first heard of what runs in me. I thought it a story, like others you hear, like silkies and mermaids and faerie forts."

He ate because it was there and she'd gone to the trouble to make it. "My mother liked to draw, to sketch, and she taught me how to see things. How to make what you see come out in pencil and chalk. My father, he loved the sea, and thought I would follow him there. But she gave me clay for my eighth birthday. And I—"

He paused, lifted his hands, stared at them through narrowed eyes. They were very like his father's. Big, blunt, and with strength in them. But they had never been made for casting nets.

"The shaping of it, the finding what was inside it— I was compelled to see. And wood, carving away at it until you could show others what you'd seen in it. She understood that. She knew that."

"Your father was disappointed?"

"Puzzled more, I think." Conal moved his shoulders, picked up his fork again. "How could a man make a living, after all, whittling at wood or chipping at hunks of rock? But it pleased my mother, so he let it be. For her, and I learned later, because in his mind my fate was already set. So whether I sculpted or fished wouldn't matter in the end."

When he fell silent, looked back at the pendant, Allena slipped it under her sweater. And feeling the quiet heat of it against her heart, waited for him to continue.

CHAPTER 10

"After me, my parents tried for more children. Twice my mother miscarried, and the second, late in her term- damaged her. I was young, but I remember her having to stay in bed a long time and how pale she was even when she could get up. My father set a chair out for her, so she could be outside and watch the sea. She was never well after that, but I didn't know."

"You were just a boy." When she touched a hand to his, he looked down, smiled a little.

"Soft heart, Allena." He turned his hand over, squeezed hers once, then released. "She was ill the summer I was twelve. Three times that spring, my father took her on the ferry, and I stayed with my cousins. She was dying, and no one could find a way to save her. Part of me knew that, but I pushed it out of my mind. Every time she came home again, I was certain it was all right."

"Poor little boy," Allena murmured.

"He doesn't deserve as much sympathy as you think. That summer, when I was twelve, she walked down to the sea with me. She should've been in bed, but she wouldn't go. She told me of the stone dance and the star and my place in it. She showed me the pendant you're wearing now, though I'd seen it countless times before. She closed my hand around it with her own, and I felt it breathe.

"I was so angry. I wasn't different from the other lads I knew, no different from my cousins and playmates. Why would she say so? She told me I was young to have it passed on to me, but she and my father had discussed it. He'd agreed to let her do it, in her time and her own way. She wanted to give me the pendant before she left us."

"You didn't want it."

"No, by God, I didn't. I wanted her. I wanted things to be as they were. When she was well and I was nothing more than a lad running over the hills. I wanted her singing in the kitchen again, the way she did before she was ill."

Everything inside her ached for him, but when she reached out, Conal waved her off. "I shouted at her, and I ran from her. She called after me, and tried to come after me, but I was strong and healthy and she wasn't. Even when I heard her weeping, I didn't look back. I went and hid in my uncle's boat shed. It wasn't till the next morning that my father found me.

"He didn't take a strap to me as I might have expected, or drag me home by the ear as I deserved. He just sat down beside me, pulled me against him, and told me my mother had died in the night."

His eyes were vivid as they met Allena's. She wondered that the force of them didn't burn away the tears that swam in her own. "I loved her. And my last words to her were the bitter jabs of an angry child."

"Do you think-oh, Conal, can you possibly believe those words are what she took with her?"

"I left her alone."

"And you still blame a frightened and confused twelve-year-old boy for that? Shame on you for your lack of compassion."

Her words jolted him. He rose as she did. "Years later, when I was a man, I did the same with my father."

"That's self-indulgent and untrue." Briskly, she stacked plates, carried them to the sink. It wasn't sympathy he needed, she realized. But plain, hard truth. "You told me yourself you didn't know he was ill. He didn't tell you."

She ran the water hot, poured detergent into it, stared hard at the rising foam. "You curse the idea you have-what did you call it-elfin blood-but you sure as hell appear to enjoy the notion of playing God."

If she'd thrown the skillet at his head he'd have been less shocked. "That's easy for you to say, when you can walk away from all of this tomorrow."

"That's right, I can." She turned the faucet off and turned to him. "I can, finally, do whatever I want to do. I can thank you for that, for helping me see what I was letting happen, for showing me that I have something of value to give. And I want to give it, Conal. I want to make a home and a family and a life for someone who values me, who understands me and who loves me. I won't take less ever again. But you will. You're still hiding in the boat shed, only now you call it a studio."

Vile and hateful words rose up in his throat. But he was no longer a young boy, and he rejected them for the sharper blade of ice. "I've told you what you asked to know. I understand what you want, but you have no understanding of what I need."

He walked out, letting the door slap shut behind him.

"You're wrong," she said quietly. "I do understand."

She kept herself busy through the morning. If she did indeed go away the next day, she would leave something of herself behind. He wouldn't be allowed to forget her.

She hung the curtains she'd mended, pleased when the sunlight filtered through the lace into patterns on the floor. In the laundry room she found tools and brushes and everything she needed. With a kind of defiance she hauled it all outside. She was going to scrape and paint the damn shutters.

The work calmed her, and that malleable heart she'd spoken of began to ache. Now and then she glanced over at the studio. He was in there, she knew. Where else would he be? Though part of her wanted to give up, to go to him, she did understand his needs.

He needed time.

"But it's running out," she murmured. Stepping back, she studied the results of her labors. The paint gleamed wet and blue, and behind the windows the lace fluttered in the breeze.

Now that it was done and there was nothing else, her body seemed to cave in on itself with fatigue. Nearly stumbling with it, she went into the house. She would lie down for a little while, catch up on the sleep she'd lost the night before.

Just an hour, she told herself and, stretching out on the bed, went under fast and deep.

Conal stepped back from his own work. His hands were smeared with clay to the wrists, and his eyes half blind with concentration.

Allena of the Faeries. She stood tall, slim, her head cocked slyly over one shoulder, her eyes long and her mouth bowed with secrets. She wasn't beautiful, nor was she meant to be. But how could anyone look away?

How could he?

Her wings were spread as if she would fly off at any moment. Or fold them again and stay, if you asked her.

He wouldn't ask her. Not when she was bound by something that was beyond both of them.

God, she'd infuriated him. He went to the sink, began to scrub his hands and arms. Snipping and sniping at him that way, telling him what he thought and felt. He had a mind of his own and he'd made it

up. He'd done nothing but tell her the truth of that, of everything, from the beginning.

He wanted peace and quiet and his work. And his pride, he thought, as his hands dripped water. The pride that refused to accept that his path was already cut. In the end, would he be left with only that?

The emptiness stretched out before him, staggeringly deep. Were these, then, after all, his choices? All or nothing? Acceptance or loneliness?

Hands unsteady, he picked up a towel, drying off as he turned and studied the clay figure. "You already know, don't you? You knew from the first."

He tossed the towel aside, strode to the door. The light shifted, dimmed even as he yanked it open. Storm clouds crept in, already shadowing the sea.

He turned for the cottage, and what he saw stopped him in his tracks. She'd painted the shutters, was all he could think. The curtains she'd hung danced gaily in the rising wind. She'd hung a basket beside the door and filled it with flowers.

How was a man to resist such a woman?

How could it be a trap when she'd left everything, even herself, unlocked and unguarded?

All or nothing? Why should he live with nothing?

He strode toward the cottage and three steps from the door found the way barred to him. "No." Denial, and a lick of fear, roughened his voice as he shoved uselessly at the air. "Damn you! You'd keep me from her now?"

He called out to her, but her name was whisked away by the rising wind, and the first drops of rain pelted down.

"All right, then. So be it." Panting, he stepped back. "We'll see what comes at the end of the day."

So he went through the storm to the place that called to his blood.

She woke with a start, the sound of her own name in her ears. And woke in the dark.

"Conal?" Disoriented, she climbed out of bed, reached for the lamp. But no light beamed when she turned the switch. A storm, she thought blearily. It was storming. She needed to close the windows.

She fumbled for the candle, then her hand jerked and knocked it off the little table.

Dark? How could it be dark?

Time. What time was it? Frantically she searched for the candle, found a match. Before she could light it, lightning flashed and she saw the dial of the little wind-up clock.

Eleven o'clock.

No! It was impossible. She'd slept away all but the last hour of the longest day.

"Conal?" She rushed out of the room, out of the house, into the wind. Rain drenched her as she ran to his studio, fought to open the door.

Gone. He was gone. Struggling against despair, she felt along the wall for the shelves, and on the shelves for the flashlight she'd seen there.

The thin beam made her sigh with relief, then her breath caught again at what stood in the line of that light.

Her own face, her own body, made fanciful with wings. Did he see her that way? Clever and confident and lovely?

"I feel that way. For the first time in my life, I feel that way."

Slowly, she shut the light off, set it aside. She knew where he'd gone, and understood, somehow, that she was meant to find her own way there, as he had, in the dark.

The world went wild as she walked, as wild as the day she had come to this place. The ground shook, and the sky split, and the sea roared like a dragon.

Instead of fear, all she felt was the thrill of being part of it. This day wouldn't pass into night without her. Closing her hand over the star between her breasts, she followed the route that was clear as a map in her head.

Steep and rough was the path that cut through rock, and slippery with wet. But she never hesitated, never faltered. The stones loomed above, giants dancing in the tempest. In its heart, the midsummer fire burned, bright and gold, despite the driving rain.

And facing it, the shadow that was a man.

Her heart, as she'd been told, knew.

"Conal."

He turned to her. His eyes were fierce as if whatever wild was in the night pranced in him as well. "Allena."

"No, I've something to say." She walked forward, unhurried though the air trembled. "There's always a choice, Conal, always another direction. Do you think I'd want you without your heart? Do you think I'd hold you with this?"

In a violent move she pulled the pendant from around her neck and threw it.

"No!" He grabbed for it, but the star only brushed his fingertips before it landed inside the circle. "Can you cast it off so easily? And

me with it?"

"If I have to. I can go, make a life without you, and part of me will always grieve. Or I can stay, make a home with you, bear your children, and love you for everything you are. Those are my choices. You have yours."

She held out her arms. "There's nothing but me here to hold you. There never was."

Emotions tumbled through him, end over end. "Twice I've let the people I loved go without telling them. Even when I came here tonight I thought I might do so again."

He pushed dripping hair away from his face. "I'm a moody man, Allena."

"So you told me once before. I never would have known it otherwise."

His breath came out in a half laugh. "You'd slap at me at such a time?" He took a step toward her. "You painted the shutters."

"So what?"

"I'll make you pots in dark blue, to fill with your flowers."

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

She opened her mouth, closed it again, took a careful breath. "Because I painted the shutters?"

"Yes. Because you would think to. Because you mended my mother's curtains. Because you pick berries. Because you swim naked in the sea. Because you look at me and see who I am. Whatever brought you here, brought us here, doesn't matter. What I feel for you is all there is. Please, God, don't leave me."

"Conal." The storm, inside her and around her, quieted. "You only have to ask."

"They say there's magic here, but it's you who brought it. Would you take me, Allena?" He reached for her hand, clasped it. "And give yourself to me. Make that home and that life and those children with me. I pledge to you I'll love you, and I'll treasure you, ever hour of every day." He lifted her hand, pressed his lips to it. "I'd lost something, and you brought it back to me. You've brought me my heart."

So, she thought, he'd found the key after all. "I'll take you, Conal, and give myself to you." Her eyes were dry and clear and steady. "And everything we make, we'll make together. I promise to love you now and ever after."

As she wrapped her arms around him, the mists cleared. In the dark sea of the sky a star began to pulse. The fire shimmered down to a pool of gold flame, tipped red as ruby. The air went sharp and cool so the stones stood out like a carving in glass.

And they sang in whispers.

"Do you hear it?" Allena murmured.

"Yes. There." He turned her, held her close to his side as the shimmering beam from the midsummer star shot through the stones and like an arrow pinned its light to its mate on the ground.

The pendant burst blue, a clean fire, star-shaped and brilliant. While star joined star, the circle was the world, full of light and sound and power.

Then the longest day passed, slipping into the shortest night. The light rippled, softened, faded. The stones sighed to silence.

Conal drew her farther into the circle. The fire rose up again, and shot sparks into her eyes, stroked warmth over his skin. He bent to

pick up the pendant, and slipping the chain around her neck, sealed the promise.

"This belongs to you, and so do I."

"It belongs to me." She pressed their joined hands against it. "Until it belongs to another. I'll always be yours."

She kissed him there, inside the echo of magic, then stepped back. "Come home," she said.

Some say that the faeries came out of their raft to celebrate and danced round the midsummer fire while the star showered the last of its light. But those who had magic in their hearts and had pledged it left the circle, walked from the cliffs and along the quiet beach to the cottage with dark blue shutters that waited by the sea.

The End