

(Once Upon #3)
Once Upon a
Dream - In Dreams

Nora Roberts

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Prologue

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All he had were the dreams. Without them he was alone, always and ever alone. For the first hundred years of his solitude, he lived on arrogance and temper. He had plenty of both to spare.

For the second, he lived on bitterness. Like one of his own secret brews, it bubbled and churned inside him. But rather than healing, it served as a kind of fuel that pushed him from day to night, from decade to decade.

In the third century, he fell into despair and self-pity. It made him miserable company, even for himself.

His stubbornness was such that it took four hundred years before he began to make a home for himself, to struggle to find some pleasure, some beauty, some satisfaction in his work and his art. Four hundred years before his pride made room for the admission that he may have been, perhaps, just slightly and only partially responsible for what had become of him.

Still, had his actions, his attitude, deserved such a harsh judgment from the Keepers? Did his mistake, if indeed it had been a mistake, merit centuries of imprisonment, with only a single week of each hundred-year mark in which to really live?

When half a millennium had passed, he surrendered to the dreams. No, it was more than surrender. He embraced them, survived on them. Escaped into them when his soul cried out for the simple touch of another being.

For she came to him in dreams, the dark-haired maid with eyes like blue diamonds. In dreams she would run through his forest, sit by his fire, lie willing in his bed. He knew the sound of her voice, the warmth of it. He knew the shape of her, long and slender as a boy. He knew the way the dimple would wink to life at the corner of her mouth when she laughed. And the exact placement of the crescent moon birthmark on her thigh.

He knew all of this, though he had never touched her, never spoken to her, never seen her but through the silky curtain of dreams.

Though it had been a woman who had betrayed him, a woman who was at the root of his endless solitude, he yearned for this dark-haired maid. Yearned for her, as the years passed, as much as he yearned for what had been.

He was drowning in a great, dark sea of alone.

Chapter 1

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It was supposed to be a vacation. It was supposed to be fun, relaxing, enlightening.

It was not supposed to be terrifying.

No, no, terrifying was an exaggeration. Slightly.

A wicked summer storm, a strange road snaking through a dark forest where the trees were like giants cloaked in the armor of mists. Kayleen Brennan of the Boston Brennans wasn't terrified by such things. She was made of sterner stuff. She made a point of reminding herself of that, every ten seconds or so as she fought to keep the rental car on the muddy ditch that had started out as a road.

She was a practical woman, had made the decision to be one quite deliberately and quite clearly when she was twelve. No flights of fancy for Kayleen, no romantic dreams or foolish choices. She had watched—was still watching—such occupations lead her charming, adorable, and baffled mother into trouble.

Financial trouble. Legal trouble. Man trouble.

So Kayleen had become an adult at twelve, and had stayed one.

An adult was not spooked by a bunch of trees and a few streaks of lightning, or by mists that thickened and thinned as if they breathed. A grown woman didn't panic because she'd made a wrong turn. When the road was too narrow, as this one was, to allow her to safely turn around, she simply kept going until she found her way again.

And a sensible person did not start imagining she heard things in the storm.

Like voices.

Should have stayed in Dublin, she told herself grimly as she bumped over a rut. In Dublin with its busy streets and crowded pubs, Ireland had seemed so civilized, so modern, so urbane. But no, she'd just had to see some of the countryside, hadn't she? Just had to rent a car, buy a map, and head out to explore.

But honestly, it had been a perfectly reasonable thing to do. She'd intended to see the country while she was here and perhaps find a few treasures for her family's antique shop back in Boston. She'd intended to wander the roads, to drive to the sea, to visit the pretty little villages, and the great, grand ruins.

Hadn't she booked her stay in a licensed bed-and-breakfast for each night that she'd be traveling? Confirmed reservations ensured there would be no inconvenience and no surprises at the end of each day's journey.

Hadn't she precisely mapped out her route and each point of interest, how long she intended to stay studying each?

She hadn't anticipated getting lost. No one did. The weather report had indicated some rain, but this was Ireland, after all. It had *not* indicated a wild, windy, wicked thunderstorm that shook her little car like a pair of dice in a cup and turned the long, lovely summer twilight into raging dark.

Still, it was all right. It was perfectly all right. She was just a bit behind schedule, and it was partly her own fault. She'd lingered a bit longer than she intended at Powers-court Demesne on her way south. And a bit longer again at the churchyard she'd come across when she headed west.

She was certainly still in County Wicklow, certainly somewhere in Avondale Forest, and the guidebook had stated that the population through the forested land was thin, the villages few and far between.

She had expected to find it charming and atmospheric, a delightful drive on her way to her night's stay in Enniscorthy, a destination she'd been scheduled to reach by seven-thirty. She tipped up her arm, risked a quick

glance at her watch, and winced when she saw she was already a full hour late.

Doesn't matter. Surely they wouldn't lock the doors on her. The Irish were known for their hospitality. She intended to put that to the test as soon as she came across a town, a village, or even a single cottage. Once she did, she'd get her bearings again.

But for now...

She stopped dead in the road, realizing she hadn't even seen another car for over an hour. Her purse, as ruthlessly organized as her life, sat on the seat beside her. She took out the cell phone she'd rented, turned it on.

And swore softly when the readout told her, as it had since she'd driven into the forest far enough to realize she was lost, that she had no signal.

"Why don't I have a signal?" She nearly rapped the phone against the steering wheel in frustration. But that would have been foolish. "What is the point of renting mobile phones to tourists if they're not going to be able to use them?"

She put the phone away, took a deep breath. To calm herself, she closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and allowed herself two minutes of rest.

The rain lashed the windows like whips, the wind continued its feral howl. At jolting intervals the thick darkness was split by yet another lance of blue-edged lightning. But Kayleen sat quietly, her dark hair still tidy in its band, her hands folded in her lap.

Her mouth, full and shapely, gradually relaxed its tight line. When she opened her eyes, blue as the lightning that ripped the sky, they were calm again.

She rolled her shoulders, took one last cleansing breath, then eased the car forward.

As she did, she heard someone—something—whisper her name.

Kayleen.

Instinctively, she glanced to the side, out the rain-spattered window, into the gloom. And there, for an instant, she saw a shadow take shape, the shape of a man. Eyes, green as glass, glittered.

She hit the brakes, jerking forward as the car slid in the mud. Her heart raced, her fingers shook.

Have you dreamed of me? Will you?

Fighting fear, she quickly lowered the window, leaned out into the driving rain. "Please. Can you help me? I seem to be lost."

But there was no one there. No one who would—could—have said, so low and sad, *So am I.*

Of course there was no one. With one icy finger she jabbed the button to send the window back up. Just her imagination, just fatigue playing tricks. There was no man standing in the forest in a storm. No man who knew her name.

It was just the sort of foolishness her mother would have dreamed up. The woman lost in the enchanted forest, in a dramatic storm, and the handsome man, most likely a prince under a spell, who rescued her.

Well, Kayleen Brennan could rescue herself, thank you very much. And there were no spellbound princes, only shadows in the rain.

But her heart rapped like a fist against her ribs. With her breath coming fast, she hit the gas again. She would get off of this damned road, and she would get to where she intended to be.

When she got there, she would drink an entire pot of tea while sitting neck-deep in a hot bath. And all of this... inconvenience would be behind her.

She tried to laugh it off, tried to distract herself by mentally composing a letter home to her mother, who would have enjoyed every moment of the

experience.

An adventure, she would say. Kayleen! You finally had an adventure!

"Well, I don't want a damn adventure. I want a hot bath. I want a roof over my head and a civilized meal." She was getting worked up again, and this time she couldn't seem to stop. "Won't somebody *please* help me get where I'm supposed to be!"

In answer, lightning shot down, a three-pronged pitchfork hurled out of the heavens. The blast of it exploded the dark into blinding light.

As she threw up an arm to shield her eyes, she saw, standing like a king in the center of the road, a huge buck. Its hide was violently white in the slash of her headlights, its rack gleaming silver. And its eyes, cool and gold, met her terrified ones through the rain.

She swerved, stomped on the brakes. The little car fish-tailed, seemed to spin in dizzying circles propelled by the swirling fog. She heard a scream—it had to be her own—before the car ran hard into a tree.

And so she dreamed.

Of running through the forest while the rain slapped down like angry fingers. Eyes, it seemed a thousand of them, watched her through the gloom. She fled, stumbling in the muck stirred up by the storm, her bones jolting as she fell.

Her head was full of sound. The roar of the wind, the booming warning of thunder. And under it a thousand voices chanting.

She wept, and didn't know why. It wasn't the fear, but something else, something that wanted to be wrenched out of her heart as a splinter is wrenched from an aching finger. She remembered nothing, neither name nor place—only that she had to find her way. Had to find it before it was too late.

There was the light, the single ball of it glowing in the dark. She ran toward it, her breath tearing out of her lungs, rain streaming from her hair, down her face.

The ground sucked at her shoes. Another fall tore her sweater. She felt the quick burn on her flesh and, favoring her left arm, scrambled up again. Winded, aching, lost, she continued at a limping run.

The light was her focus. If only she could make it to the light, everything would be all right again. Somehow.

A spear of lightning struck close, so close she felt it sear the air, felt it drench the night with the hot sting of ozone. And in its afterglow she saw that the light was a single beam, from a single window in the tower of a castle.

Of course there would be a castle. It seemed not odd at all that there should be a castle with its tower light glowing in the middle of the woods during a raging storm.

Her weeping became laughter, wild as the night, as she stumbled toward it, tramping through rivers of flowers.

She fell against the massive door and with what strength she had left, slapped a fist against it.

The sound was swallowed by the storm.

"Please," she murmured. "Oh, please, let me in."

By the fire, he'd fallen into the twilight-sleep he was allowed, had dreamed in the flames he'd set to blaze—of his dark-haired maid, coming to him. But her eyes had been frightened, and her cheeks pale as ice.

He'd slept through the storm, through the memories that often haunted him even in that drifting place. But when she had come into those dreams, when she had turned those eyes on him, he stirred. And spoke her name.

And jolted awake, that name sliding out of his mind again. The fire had burned down nearly to embers now.

He could have set it roaring again with a thought, but didn't bother.

In any case, it was nearly time. He saw by the pretty crystal clock on the ancient stone mantel—he was amused by such anachronisms—that it was only seconds shy of midnight.

His week would begin at that stroke. For seven days, and seven nights, he would *be*. Not just a shadow in a world of dreams, but flesh, blood, and bone.

He lifted his arms, threw back his head, and waited to become.

The world trembled, and the clock struck midnight.

There was pain. He welcomed it like a lover. Oh, God, *to feel*. Cold burned his skin. Heat scorched it. His throat opened, and there was the blessed bliss of thirst.

He opened his eyes. Colors sprang out at him, clear and true, without that damning mist that separated him for all the other time.

Lowering his hands, he laid one on the back of his chair, felt the soft brush of velvet. He smelled the smoke from the fire, the rain that pounded outside and snuck in through his partially open window.

His senses were battered, so overwhelmed with the rush of sensations that he nearly swooned. And even that was a towering pleasure.

He laughed, a huge burst of sound that he felt rumble up from his belly. And fisting his hands, he raised them yet again.

"I am."

Even as he claimed himself, as the walls echoed with his voice, he heard the pounding at the door. Jolted, he lowered his arms, turned toward a sound

he'd not heard in five hundred years. Then it was joined by another.

"Please." And it was his dream who shouted. "Oh, please, let me in."

A trick, he thought. Why would he be tortured with tricks now? He wouldn't tolerate it. Not now. Not during his week to be.

He threw out a hand, sent lights blazing. Furious, he strode out of the room, down the corridor, down the circling pie-shaped stairs. They would not be allowed to infringe on his week. It was a breach of the sentence. He would not lose a single hour of the little time he had.

Impatient with the distance, he muttered the magic under his breath. And appeared again in the great hall.

He wrenched open the door. Met the fury of the storm with fury of his own.

And saw her.

He stared, transfixed. He lost his breath, his mind. His heart.

She had come.

She looked at him, a smile trembling on her lips and sending the dimple at the corner of her mouth to winking.

"There you are," she said.

And fainted at his feet.

Chapter 2

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Shadows and shapes and murmuring voices. They swirled in her head, swelling, fading in a cycle of confusion.

Even when she opened her eyes, they were there. Revolving. What? was her only thought. What is it?

She was cold and wet, and every part of her was a separate ache. An accident. Of course, an accident. But...

What is it?

She focused and saw overhead, high overhead, a curved ceiling where plaster faeries danced among ribbons of flowers. Odd, she thought. How odd and lovely. Dazed, she lifted a hand to her brow, felt the damp. Thinking it blood, she let out a gasp, tried to sit up.

Her head spun like a carousel.

"Uh-oh." Trembling now, she looked at her fingers and saw only clear rainwater.

And, turning her head, saw him.

First came the hard jolt of shock, like a vicious strike to the heart. She could feel panic gathering in her throat and fought to swallow it.

He was staring at her. Rudely, she would think later when fear had made room for annoyance. And there was anger in his eyes. Eyes as green as the rain-washed hills of Ireland. He was all in black. Perhaps that was why he looked so dangerous.

His face was violently handsome—"violent" was the word that kept ringing in her ears. Slashing cheekbones, lancing black brows, a fierce frown on a mouth that struck her as brutal. His hair was as dark as his clothing and fell in wild waves nearly to his shoulders.

Her heart pounded, a primal warning. Even as she shrank back, she gathered the courage to speak. "Excuse me. What is it?"

He said nothing. Had been unable to speak since he'd lifted her off the floor. A trick, a new torment? Was she, after all, only a dream within a dream?

But he'd felt her. The cold damp of her flesh, the weight and the shape of her. Her voice came clear to him now, as did the terror in her eyes.

Why should she be afraid? Why should she fear when she had unmanned him? Five hundred years of solitude hadn't done so, but this woman had accomplished it with one quick stroke.

He stepped closer, his eyes never leaving her face. "You are come. Why?"

"I... I don't understand. I'm sorry. Do you speak English?"

One of those arching brows rose. He'd spoken in Gaelic, for he most often thought in the language of his life. But five hundred years of alone had given him plenty of time for linguistics. He could certainly speak English, and half a dozen other languages besides.

"I asked why you have come."

"I don't know." She wanted to sit up but was afraid to try it again. "I think there must have been an accident. I can't quite remember."

However much it might hurt to move, she couldn't stay flat on her back looking up at him. It made her feel foolish and helpless. She set her teeth, pushed herself up slowly. Her stomach pitched, her head rang, but she managed to sit.

And sitting, glanced around the room.

An enormous room, she noted, and filled with the oddest conglomeration of furnishings. There was an old and beautiful refectory table that held dozens of candlesticks. Silver, wrought iron, pottery, crystal. Pikes were crossed on the wall, and near them was a dramatic painting of the Cliffs of Mohr.

There were display cabinets from various eras. Charles II, James I. Neoclassic bumped up against Venetian, Chippendale against Louis XV. An enormous big-screen television stood near a priceless Victorian davenport.

Placed at random were Waterford bowls, T'ang horses, Dresden vases, and... several Pez dispensers.

Despite discomfort, the eccentricity tickled her humor. "What an interesting room." She glanced up at him again. He'd yet to stop staring. "Can you tell me how I got here?"

"You came."

"Yes, apparently, but how? And... I seem to be very wet."

"It's raining."

"Oh." She blew out a breath. The fear had ebbed considerably. After all, the man collected Pez dispensers and Georgian silver. "I'm sorry, Mister..."

"I'm Flynn."

"Mister Flynn."

"Flynn," he repeated.

"All right. I'm sorry, Flynn, I can't seem to think very clearly." She was shivering, violently now, and wrapped her arms around her chest. "I was going somewhere, but... I don't know where I am."

"Who does?" he murmured. "You're cold." And he'd done nothing to tend to her. He would see to her comfort, he decided, and then... He would simply see.

He scooped her off the couch, faintly irritated when she pushed a hand against his shoulder defensively.

"I'm sure I can walk."

"I'm more sure I can. You need dry clothes," he began as he carried her out of the room. "A warm brew and a hot fire."

Oh, yes, she thought. It all sounded wonderful. Nearly as wonderful as being carried up a wide, sweeping staircase as if she weighed nothing.

But that was a romantic notion of the kind her mother lived on, the kind that had no place here. She kept that cautious hand pressed to a shoulder that felt like a sculpted curve of rock.

"Thank you for..." She trailed off. She'd turned her head just a fraction, and now her face was close to his, her eyes only inches from his eyes, her mouth a breath from his mouth. A sharp, unexpected thrill stabbed clean through her heart. The strike was followed by a hard jolt that was something like recognition.

"Do I know you?"

"Wouldn't you have the answer to that?" He leaned in, just a little, breathed. "Your hair smells of rain." Even as her eyes went wide, he skimmed his mouth from her jaw-line to her temple. "And your skin tastes of it."

He'd learned to savor over the years. To sip even when he wished to gulp. Now he considered her mouth, imagined what flavors her lips would carry. He watched them tremble open.

Ah, yes.

He shifted her, drawing her ever so slightly closer. And she whimpered in pain.

He jerked back, looked down and saw the raw scrape just below her shoulder, and the tear in her sweater. "You're injured. Why the bloody hell didn't you say so before?"

Out of patience—not his strong suit in any case—he strode into the closest bedchamber, set her down on the side of the bed. In one brisk move he tugged the sweater over her head.

Shocked, she crossed her arms over her breasts. "Don't you touch me!"

"How can I tend your wounds if I don't touch you?" His brows had lowered, drawn together. She was wearing a bra. He knew they were called that, as he'd seen them worn on the television and in the thin books that were called magazines.

But it was the first time he had witnessed an actual female form so attired.

He liked it very much.

But such delights would have to wait until he saw what condition the woman was in. He leaned over, unhooked her trousers.

"Stop it!" She shoved, tried to scramble back and was hauled not so gently into place.

"Don't be foolish. I've no patience for female flights. If I was after ravishing you, t'would already be done." Since she continued to struggle, he heaved a breath and looked up.

It was fear he saw—not foolishness but raw fear. A maiden, he thought. For God's sake, Flynn, have a care.

"Kayleen." He spoke quietly now, his voice as soothing as balm on a burn. "I won't harm you. I only want to see where you're hurt."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Certainly not."

He seemed so insulted, she nearly laughed.

"I know of healing. Now be still. I ought to have gotten you out of your wet clothes before." His eyes stayed on hers, seemed to grow brighter. And brighter still, until she could see nothing else. And she sighed. "Lie back now, there's a lass."

Mesmerized, she lay on the heaps of silk pillows and, docile as a child, let him undress her.

"Sweet Mary, you've legs that go to forever." His distraction with them caused the simple spell to waver, and she stirred. "A man's entitled to the view," he muttered, then shook his head. "Look what you've done to yourself. Bruised and scraped one end to the other. Do you like pain, then?"

"No." Her tongue felt thick. "Of course not."

"Some do," he murmured. He leaned over her again. "Look at me," he demanded. "Look here. Stay."

Her eyes drooped, half closed as she floated where he wanted, just above the aches. He wrapped her in the quilt, flicked his mind toward the hearth and set the fire roaring.

Then he left her to go to his workshop and gather his potions.

He kept her in the light trance as he tended her. He wanted no maidenly fidgets when he touched her. God, it had been so long since he'd touched a woman, flesh against flesh.

In dreams he'd had her under him, her body eager. He'd laid his lips on her, and his mind had felt her give and arch, her rise, her fall. And so his body had hungered for her.

Now she was here, her lovely skin bruised and chilled.

Now she was here, and didn't know why. Didn't know him.

Despair and desire tangled him in knots.

"Lady, who are you?"

"Kayleen Brennan."

"Where do you come from?"

"Boston."

"That's America?"

"Yes." She smiled. "It is."

"Why are you here?"

"I don't know. Where is here?"

"Nowhere. Nowhere at all."

She reached out, touched his cheek. "Why are you sad?"

"Kayleen." Overcome, he gripped her hand, pressed his lips to her palm. "Do they send you to me so I might know joy again, only to lose it?"

"Who are they'?"

He lifted his head, felt the fury burn. So he stepped away and turned to stare into the fire.

He could send her deeper, into the dreaming place. There she would remember what there was, would know what she knew. And would tell him. But if there was nothing in her, he wouldn't survive it. Not sane.

He drew a breath. "I will have my week," he vowed. "I will have her before it's done. This I will not cast off. This I will not abjure. You cannot break me with this. Not even with her can you break Flynn."

He turned back, steady and resolved again. "The seven days and seven nights are mine, and so is she. What remains here at the last stroke of the last night remains. That is the law. She's mine now."

Thunder blasted like cannon shot. Ignoring it, he walked to the bed. "Wake," he said, and her eyes opened and cleared. As she pushed herself up, he strode to a massive carved armoire, threw the doors open, and selected a long robe of royal blue velvet.

"This will suit you. Dress, then come downstairs." He tossed the robe on the foot of the bed. "You'll want food."

"Thank you, but—"

"We'll talk when you've supped."

"Yes, but I want—" She hissed in frustration as he walked out of the room and shut the door behind him with a nasty little slam.

Manners, she thought, weren't high on the list around here. She dragged a hand through her hair, stunned to find it dry again. Impossible. It had been dripping wet when he'd brought her up here only moments before.

She combed her fingers through it again, frowning. Obviously she was mistaken. It must have been all but dry. The accident had shaken her up, confused her. That was why she wasn't remembering things clearly.

She probably needed to go to a hospital, have X rays taken. Though a hospital seemed silly, really, when she felt fine. In fact, she felt wonderful.

She lifted her arms experimentally. No aches, no twinges. She poked gingerly at the scrape. Hadn't it been longer and deeper along her elbow? It was barely tender now.

Well, she'd been lucky. And now, since she was starving, she'd take the eccentric Flynn up on a meal. After that, her mind was bound to be steadier, and she'd figure out what to do next.

Satisfied, she tossed the covers back. And let out a muffled squeal. She was stark naked.

My God, where were her clothes? She remembered, yes, she remembered the way he'd yanked her sweater off, and then he'd... Damn it. She pressed a trembling hand to her temple. *Why* couldn't she remember? She'd been frightened, she'd shoved at him, and then... then she'd been wrapped in a blanket, in a room warmed by a blazing fire and he'd told her to get dressed and come down to dinner.

Well, if she was having blackouts, the hospital was definitely first on the agenda.

She snatched up the robe. Then simply rubbed the rich fabric over her cheek and moaned. It felt like something a princess would wear. Or a goddess. But certainly nothing that Kayleen Brennan of Boston would slip casually into for dinner.

This will suit you, he'd said. The idea of that made her laugh, but she slid her arms into it and let herself enjoy the lustrous warmth against her skin.

She turned, caught her own reflection in a cheval glass. Her hair was a tumble around the shoulders of the deep blue robe that swept down her body and ended in a shimmer of gold lace at the ankles.

I don't look like me, she thought. I look like something out of a fairy tale. Because that made her feel foolish, she turned away.

The bed she'd lain in was covered with velvet as well and lushly canopied with more. On the bureau, and certainly that was a Charles II in perfect condition, sat a lady's brush set of silver with inlays of lapis, antique perfume bottles of opal and of jade. Roses, fresh as morning and white as snow, stood regally in a cobalt vase.

A fairy tale of a room as well, she mused. One fashioned for candlelight and simmering fires. There was a Queen Anne desk in the corner, and tall windows draped in lace and velvet, pretty watercolors of hills and meadows on the walls, lovely faded rugs over the thick planked floors.

If she'd conjured the perfect room, this would have been it.

His manners might be lacking, but his taste was impeccable. Or his wife's, she corrected. For obviously this was a woman's room.

Because the idea should have relieved her, she ignored the little sinking sensation in her belly and satisfied her curiosity by opening the opal bottle.

Wasn't that strange? she thought after a sniff. The bottle held her favorite perfume.

Chapter 3

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Flynn had a stiff whiskey before he dealt with the food. It hit him like a hot fist.

Thank God there were still some things a man could count on.

He would feed his woman—for she was unquestionably his—and he would take some care with her. He would see to her comfort, as a man was meant to do, then he would let her know the way things were to be.

But first he would see that she was steadier on her feet.

The dining hall fireplace was lit. He had the table set with bone china, heavy silver, a pool of fragrant roses, the delicacy of slim white candles and the jewel sparkle of crystal.

Then closing his eyes, lifting his hands palms out, he began to lay the table with the foods that would please her most.

She was so lovely, his Kayleen. He wanted to put the bloom back in her cheeks. He wanted to hear her laugh.

He wanted her.

And so, that was the way things would be.

He stepped back, studied his work with cool satisfaction. Pleased with himself, Flynn went out again to wait at the base of the stairs.

And as she came down toward him, his heart staggered in his chest.
"Speirbhean."

Kayleen hesitated. "I'm sorry?"

"You're beautiful. You should learn the Gaelic," he said, taking her hand and leading her out of the hall. "I'll teach you."

"Well, thank you, but I really don't think that'll be necessary. I really want to thank you, too, for taking me in like this, and I wonder if I might use your phone." A little detail, Kayleen thought, that had suddenly come to her.

"I have no telephone. Does the gown please you?"

"No phone? Well, perhaps one of your neighbors might have one I can use."

"I have no neighbors."

"In the closest village," she said, as panic began to tickle her throat again.

"There is no village. Why are you fretting, Kayleen? You're warm and dry and safe."

"That may be, but... how do you know my name?"

"You told me."

"I don't remember telling you. I don't remember how I—"

"You've no cause to worry. You'll feel better when you've eaten."

She was beginning to think she had plenty of cause to worry. The well-being she'd felt upstairs in that lovely room was eroding quickly. But when she stepped into the dining room, she felt nothing but shock.

The table was large enough to seat fifty, and spread over it was enough food to feed every one of them.

Bowls and platters and tureens and plates were jammed end to end down the long oak surface. Fruit, fish, meat, soups, a garden of vegetables, an ocean of pastas.

"Where—" Her voice rose, snapped, and had to be fought back under control. "Where did this come from?"

He sighed. He'd expected delight and instead was given shock. Another thing a man could count on, he thought. Women were forever a puzzle.

"Sit, please. Eat."

Though she felt little flickers of panic, her voice was calm and firm. "I want to know where all this food came from. I want to know who else is here. Where's your wife?"

"I have no wife."

"Don't give me that." She spun to face him, steady enough now. And angry enough to stand and demand. "If you don't have a wife, you certainly have a woman."

"Aye. I have you."

"Just... stay back." She grabbed a knife from the table, aimed it at him. "Don't come near me. I don't know what's going on here, and I'm not going to care. I'm going to walk out of this place and keep walking."

"No." He stepped forward and neatly plucked what was now a rose from her hand. "You're going to sit down and eat."

"I'm in a coma." She stared at the white rose in his hand, at her own empty one. "I had an accident. I've hit my head. I'm hallucinating all of this."

"All of this is real. No one knows better than I the line between what's real and what isn't. Sit down." He gestured to a chair, swore when she didn't move. "Have I said I wouldn't harm you? Among my sins has never been a lie or the harm of a woman. Here." He held out his hand, and now it held the knife. "Take this, and feel free to use it should I break my word to you."

"You're..." The knife was solid in her hand. A trick of the eye, she told herself. Just a trick of the eye. "You're a magician."

"I am." His grin was like lightning, fast and bright. Whereas he had been handsome, now he was devastating.

His pleasure shone. "That is what I am, exactly. Sit down, Kayleen, and break fast with me. For I've hungered a long time."

She took one cautious step in retreat. "It's too much."

Thinking she meant the food, he frowned at the table. Considered. "Perhaps you're right. I got a bit carried away with it all." He scanned the selections, nodded, then sketched an arch with his hand.

Half the food vanished.

The knife dropped out of her numb fingers. Her eyes rolled straight back.

"Oh, Christ." It was impatience as much as concern. At least this time he had the wit to catch her before she hit the floor. He sat her in a chair, gave her a little shake, then watched her eyes focus again.

"You didn't understand after all."

"Understand? Understand?"

"It'll need to be explained, then." He picked up a plate and began to fill it for her. "You need to eat or you'll be ill. Your injuries will heal faster if you're strong."

He set the plate in front of her, began to fill one for himself. "What do you know of magic, Kayleen Brennan of Boston?"

"It's fun to watch."

"It can be."

She would eat, she thought, because she did feel ill. "And it's an illusion."

"It can be." He took the first bite—rare roast beef—and moaned in ecstasy at the taste. The first time he'd come to his week, he'd gorged himself so

that he was sick a full day. And had counted it worth it. But now he'd learned to take his time, and appreciate.

"Do you remember now how you came here?"

"It was raining."

"Yes, and is still."

"I was going..."

"How were you going?"

"How?" She picked up her fork, sampled the fish without thinking. "I was driving... I was driving," she repeated, on a rising note of excitement. "Of course. I was driving, and I was lost. The storm. I was coming from—" She stopped, struggling through the mists. "Dublin. I'd been in Dublin. I'm on vacation. Oh, that's right, I'm on vacation and I was going to drive around the countryside. I got lost. Somehow. I was on one of the little roads through the forest, and it was storming. I could barely see. Then I..."

The relief in her eyes faded as they met his. "I saw you," she whispered. "I saw you out in the storm."

"Did you now?"

"You were out in the rain. You said my name. How could you have said my name before we met?"

She'd eaten little, but he thought a glass of wine might help her swallow what was to come. He poured it, handed it to her. "I've dreamed of you, Kayleen. Dreamed of you for longer than your lifetime. And dreaming of you I was when you were lost in my forest. And when I awoke, you'd come. Do you never dream of me, Kayleen?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. There was a storm. I was lost. Lightning hit very near, and there was a deer. A white deer in the road. I

swerved to avoid it, and I crashed. I think I hit a tree. I probably have a concussion, and I'm imagining things."

"A white hind." The humor had gone from his face again. "You hit a tree with your car? They didn't have to hurt you," he muttered. "They had no *right* to hurt you."

"Who are you talking about?"

"My jailers." He shoved his plate aside. "The bloody Keepers."

"I need to check on my car." She spoke slowly, calmly. Not just eccentric, she decided. The man was unbalanced. "Thank you so much for helping me."

"If you want to check on your car, then we will. In the morning. There's hardly a point in going out in a storm in the middle of the night." He laid his hand firmly on hers before she could rise. "You're thinking, 'This Flynn, he's lost his mind somewhere along the way.' Well, I haven't, though it was a near thing a time or two. Look at me, *leannana*. Do I mean nothing to you?"

"I don't know." And that was what kept her from bolting. He could look at her, as he was now, and she felt tied to him. Not bound by force, but tied. By her own will. "I don't understand what you mean, or what's happening to me."

"Then we'll sit by the fire, and I'll tell you what it all means." He rose, held out his hand. Irritation washed over his face when she refused to take it. "Do you want the knife?"

She glanced down at it, back up at him. "Yes."

"Then bring it along with you."

He plucked up the wine, and the glasses, and led the way.

He sat by the fire, propped his boots on the hearth, savored his wine and the scent of the woman who sat so warily beside him. "I was born in magic," he began. "Some are. Others apprentice and can learn well enough. But to be born in it is more a matter of controlling the art than of learning it."

"So your father was a magician."

"No, he was a tailor. Magic doesn't have to come down through the blood. It simply has to *be* in the blood." He paused because he didn't want to blunder again. He should know more of her, he decided, before he did. "What is it you are, back in your Boston?"

"I'm an antique dealer. That came through the blood. My uncles, my grandfather, and so on. Brennan's of Boston has been doing business for nearly a century."

"Nearly a century, is it?" he chuckled. "So very long."

"I suppose it doesn't seem so by European standards. But America's a young country. You have some magnificent pieces in your home."

"I collect what appeals to me."

"Apparently a wide range appeals to you. I've never seen such a mix of styles and eras in one place before."

He glanced around the room, considering. It wasn't something he'd thought of, but he'd had only himself to please up until now. "You don't like it?"

Because it seemed to matter to him, she worked up a smile. "No, I like it very much. In my business I see a lot of beautiful and interesting pieces, and I've always felt it was a shame more people don't just toss them together and make their own style rather than sticking so rigidly to a pattern. No one can accuse you of sticking to a pattern."

"No. That's a certainty."

She started to curl up her legs, caught herself. What in the world was wrong with her? She was relaxing into an easy conversation with what was very likely a madman. She cut her gaze toward the knife beside her, then back to him. And found him studying her contemplatively.

"I wonder if you could use it. There are two kinds of people in the world, don't you think? Those who fight and those who flee. Which are you, Kayleen?"

"I've never been in the position where I had to do either."

"That's either fortunate or tedious. I'm not entirely sure which. I like a good fight myself," he added with that quick grin. "Just one of my many flaws. Fact is, I miss going fist to fist with a man. I miss a great many things."

"Why? Why do you have to miss anything?"

"That's the point, isn't it, of this fireside conversation. The why. Are you wondering, *mavourneen*, if I'm off in my head?"

"Yes," she said, then immediately froze.

"I'm not, though perhaps it would've been easier if I'd gone a bit crazy along the way. They knew I had a strong mind—part of the problem, in their thinking, and part of the reason for the sentence weighed on me."

"They?" Her fingers inched toward the handle of the knife. She could use it, she promised herself. She *would* use it if she had to, no matter how horribly sad and lonely he looked.

"The Keepers. The ancient and the revered who guard and who nurture magic. And have done so since the Waiting Time, when life was no more than the heavens taking their first breath."

"Gods?" she said cautiously.

"In some ways of thinking." He was brooding again, frowning into the flames. "I was born of magic, and when I was old enough I left my family

to do the work. To heal and to help. Even to entertain. Some of us have more of a knack, you could say, for the fun of it."

"Like, um, sawing a lady in half."

He looked at her with a mixture of amusement and exasperation. "This is illusion, Kayleen."

"Yes."

"I speak of magic, not pretense. Some prophesy, some travel and study, for the sake of it. Others devote their art to healing body or soul. Some choose to make a living performing. Some might serve a worthy master, as Merlin did Arthur. There are as many choices as there are people. And while none may choose to harm or profit for the sake of it, all are real."

He slipped a long chain from under his shirt, held the pendant with its milky stone out for her to see. "A moonstone," he told her. "And the words around are my name, and my title. *Draiodoir*. Magician."

"It's beautiful." Unable to resist, she curved her hand around the pendant. And felt a bolt of heat, like the rush of a comet, spurt from her fingertips to her toes. "God!"

Before she could snatch her hand away, Flynn closed his own over hers. "Power," he murmured. "You feel it. Can all but taste it. A seductive thing. And inside, you can make yourself think there's nothing impossible. Look at me, Kayleen."

She already was, could do nothing else. Wanted nothing else. There you are, she thought again. There you are, at last.

"I could have you now. You would willingly lie with me now, as you have in dreams. Without fear. Without questions."

"Yes."

And his need was a desperate thing, leaping, snapping at the tether of control. "I want more." His fingers tightened on hers. "What is it in you that makes me crave more, when I don't know what more is? Well, we've time to find the answer. For now, I'll tell you a story. A young magician left his family. He traveled and he studied. He helped and he healed. He had pride in his work, in himself. Some said too much pride."

He paused now, thinking, for there had been times in this last dreaming that he'd wondered if that could be so.

"His skill, this magician's, was great, and he was known in his world. Still, he was a man, with the needs of a man, the desires of a man, the faults of a man. Would you want a man perfect, Kayleen?"

"I want you."

"Leannana." He leaned over, pressed his lips to her knuckles. "This man, this magician, he saw the world. He read its books, listened to its music. He came and went as he pleased, did as he pleased. Perhaps he was careless on occasion, and though he did no harm, neither did he heed the rules and the warnings he was given. The power was so strong in him, what need had he for rules?"

"Everyone needs rules. They keep us civilized."

"Do you think?" It amused him how prim her voice had become. Even held by the spell, she had a strong mind, and a strong will. "We'll discuss that sometime. But for now, to continue the tale. He came to know a woman. Her beauty was blinding, her manner sweet. He believed her to be innocent. Such was his romantic nature."

"Did you love her?"

"Yes, I loved her. I loved the angel-faced, innocent maid I saw when I looked at her. I asked for her hand, for it wasn't just a tumble I wanted from her but a lifetime. And when I asked, she wept, ah, pretty tears down a smooth cheek. She couldn't be mine, she told me, as much as her heart

already was. For there was a man, a wealthy man, a cruel man, who had contracted for her. Her father had sold her, and her fate was sealed."

"You couldn't let that happen."

"Ah, you see that, too." It pleased him that she saw it, stood with him on that vital point. "No, how could I let her go loveless to another? To be sold like a horse in the marketplace? I would take her away, I said, and she wept the more. I would give her father twice what had been given, and she sobbed upon my shoulder. It could not be done, for then surely the man would kill her poor father, or see him in prison, or some horrible fate. So long as the man had his wealth and position, her family would suffer. She couldn't bear to be the cause of it, even though her heart was breaking."

Kayleen shook her head, frowned. "I'm sorry, but that doesn't make sense. If the money was paid back and her father was wealthy now, he could certainly protect himself, and he would have the law to—"

"The heart doesn't follow such reason," he interrupted, impatiently because if he'd had the wit in his head at the time, instead of fire in his blood, he'd have come to those same conclusions. "It was saving her that was my first thought—and my last. Protecting her, and yes, perhaps, by doing so having her love me the more. I would take this cruel man's wealth and his position from him. I vowed this, and oh, how her eyes shone, diamonds of tears. I would take what he had and lay it at her feet. She would live like a queen, and I would care for her all my life."

"But stealing—"

"Will you just listen?" Exasperation hissed through his voice.

"Of course." Her chin lifted, a little tilt of resentment. "I beg your pardon."

"So this I did, whistling the wind, drawing down the moon, kindling the cold fire. This I did, and did freely for her. And the man woke freezing in a crofter's cot instead of his fine manor house. He woke in rags instead of his warm nightclothes. I took his life from him, without spilling a drop of

blood. And when it was done, I stood in the smoldering dark of that last dawn, triumphant."

He fell into silence a moment, and when he continued, his voice was raw. "The Keepers encased me in a shield of crystal, holding me there as I cursed them, as I shouted my protests, as I used the heart and innocence of my young maid as my defense for my crime. And they showed me how she laughed as she gathered the wealth I'd sent to her, as she leapt into a carriage laden with it and fell into the arms of the lover with whom she'd plotted the ruin of the man she hated. And my ruin as well."

"But you loved her."

"I did, but the Keepers don't count love as an excuse, as a reason. I was given a choice. They would strip me of my power, take away what was in my blood and make me merely human. Or I would keep it, and live alone, in a half world, without companionship, without human contact, without the pleasures of the world that I, in their estimation, had betrayed."

"That's cruel. Heartless."

"So I claimed, but it didn't sway them. I took the second choice, for they would not empty me. I would not abjure my birthright. Here I have existed, since that night of betrayal, a hundred years times five, with only one week each century to feel as a man does again.

"I am a man, Kayleen." With his hand still gripping hers, he got to his feet. Drew her up. "I am," he murmured, sliding his free hand into her hair, fisting it there.

He lowered his head, his lips nearly meeting hers, then hesitated. The sound of her breath catching, releasing, shivered through him. She trembled under his hand, and he felt, inside himself, the stumble of her heart.

"Quietly this time," he murmured. "Quietly." And brushed his lips, a whisper, once... twice over hers. The flavor bloomed inside him like a first sip of fine wine.

He drank slowly. Even when her lips parted, invited, he drank slowly. Savoring the texture of her mouth, the easy slide of tongues, the faint, faint scrape of teeth.

Her body fit against his, so lovely, so perfect. The heat from the moonstone held between their hands spread like sunlight and began to pulse.

So even drinking slowly he was drunk on her.

When he drew back, her sigh all but shattered him.

"A ghra." Weak, wanting, he lowered his brow to hers. With a sigh of his own he tugged the pendant free. Her eyes, soft, loving, clouded, began to clear. Before the change was complete, he pressed his mouth to hers one last time.

"Dream," he said.

Chapter 4

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She woke to watery sunlight and the heady scent of roses. There was a low fire simmering in the grate and a silk pillow under her head.

Kayleen stirred and rolled over to snuggle in.

Then shot up in bed like an arrow from a plucked bow.

My God, it had really happened. All of it.

And for lord's sake, for lord's sake, she was naked again.

Had he given her drugs, hypnotized her, gotten her drunk? What other reason could there be for her to have slept like a baby—and naked as one—in a bed in the house of a crazy man?

Instinctively, she snatched at the sheets to cover herself, and then she saw the single white rose.

An incredibly sweet, charmingly romantic crazy man, she thought and picked up the rose before she could resist.

That story he'd told her—magic and betrayal and five hundred years of punishment. He'd actually believed it. Slowly she let out a breath. So had she. She'd sat there, listening and believing every word—then. Hadn't seen a single thing odd about it, but had felt sorrow and anger on his behalf. Then...

He'd kissed her, she remembered. She pressed her fingertips to her lips, stunned at her own behavior. The man had kissed her, had made her feel like rich cream being gently lapped out of a bowl. More, she'd *wanted* him to kiss her. Had wanted a great deal more than that.

And perhaps, she thought, dragging the sheets higher, there had been a great deal more than that.

She started to leap out of bed, then changed her mind and crept out instead. She had to get away, quickly and quietly. And to do so, she needed clothes.

She tiptoed to the wardrobe, wincing at the creak as she eased the door open. It was one more shock to look inside and see silks and velvets, satins and lace, all in rich, bold colors. Such beautiful things. The kind of clothes she would covet but never buy. So impractical, so frivolous, really.

So gorgeous.

Shaking her head at her foolishness, she snatched out her own practical trousers, her torn sweater... but it wasn't torn. Baffled, she turned it over, inside out, searching for the jagged rip in the arm. It wasn't there.

She hadn't imagined that tear. She couldn't have imagined it. Because she was beginning to shake, she dragged it over her head, yanked the trousers on. Trousers that were pristine, though they had been stained and muddy.

She dove into the wardrobe, pushing through evening slippers, kid boots, and found her simple black flats. Flats that should have been well worn, caked with dirt, scarred just a little on the inside left where she had knocked against a chest the month before in her shop.

But the shoes were unmarked and perfect, as if they'd just come out of the box.

She would think about it later. She'd think about it all later. Now she had to get away from here, away from him. Away from whatever was happening to her.

Her knees knocked together as she crept to the door, eased it open, and peeked out into the hallway. She saw beautiful rugs on a beautiful floor, paintings and tapestries on the walls, more doors, all closed. And no sign of Flynn.

She slipped out, hurrying as quickly as she dared. Wild with relief, she bolted down the stairs, raced to the door, yanked it open with both hands.

And barreling through, ran straight into Flynn.

"Good morning." He grasped her shoulders, steadying her even as he thought what a lovely thing it would be if she'd been running toward him instead of away from him. "It seems we've done with the rain for now."

"I was—I just—" Oh, God. "I want to go check on my car."

"Of course. You may want to wait till the mists burn off. Would you like your breakfast?"

"No, no." She made her lips curve. "I'd really like to see how badly I damaged the car. So, I'll just go see and... let you know."

"Then I'll take you to it."

"No, really."

But he turned away, whistled. He took her hand, ignoring her frantic tugs for release, and led her down the steps.

Out of the mists came a white horse at the gallop, the charger of folklore with his mane flying, his silver bridle ringing. Kayleen managed one short shriek as he arrowed toward them, powerful legs shredding the mists, magnificent head tossing.

He stopped inches from Flynn's feet, blew softly, then nuzzled Flynn's chest.

With a laugh, Flynn threw his arms around the horse's neck. With the same joy, she thought, that a boy might embrace a beloved dog. He spoke to the horse in low tones, crooning ones, in what she now recognized as Gaelic.

Still grinning, Flynn eased back. He lifted a hand, flicked the wrist, and the palm that had been empty now held a glossy red apple. "No, I would never forget. There's for my beauty," he said, and the horse dipped his head and nipped the apple neatly out of Flynn's palm.

"His name is Dilis. It means faithful, and he is." With economical and athletic grace, Flynn vaulted into the saddle, held down a hand for Kayleen.

"Thank you all the same, and he's very beautiful, but I don't know how to ride. I'll just—" The words slid back down her throat as Flynn leaned down, gripped her arm, and pulled her up in front of him as though she weighed less than a baby.

"I know how to ride," he assured her and tapped Dilis lightly with his heels.

The horse reared, and Kayleen's scream mixed with Flynn's laughter as the fabulous beast pawed the air. Then they were leaping forward and flying into the forest.

There was nothing to do but hold on. She banded her arms around Flynn, buried her face in his chest. It was insane, absolutely insane. She was an ordinary woman who led an ordinary life. How could she be galloping

through some Irish forest on a great white horse, plastered against a man who claimed to be a fifteenth-century magician?

It had to stop, and it had to stop now.

She lifted her head, intending to tell him firmly to rein his horse in, to let her off and let her go. And all she did was stare. The sun was slipping in fingers through the arching branches of the trees. The air glowed like polished pearls.

Beneath her the horse ran fast and smooth at a breathless, surely a reckless, pace. And the man who rode him was the most magnificent man she'd ever seen.

His dark hair flew, his eyes glittered. And that sadness he carried, which was somehow its own strange appeal, had lifted. What she saw on his face was joy, excitement, delight, challenge. A dozen things, and all of them strong.

And seeing them, her heart beat as fast as the horse's hooves. "Oh, my God!"

It wasn't possible to fall in love with a stranger. It didn't happen in the real world.

Weakly, she let her head fall back to his chest. But maybe it was time to admit, or at least consider, that she'd left the real world the evening before when she'd taken that wrong turn into the forest.

Dilis slowed to a canter, stopped. Once again, Kayleen lifted her head. This time her eyes met Flynn's. This time he read what was in them. As the pleasure of it rose in him, he leaned toward her.

"No. Don't." She lifted her hand, pressed it to his lips. "Please."

His nod was curt. "As you wish." He leapt off the horse, plucked her down. "It appears your mode of transportation is less reliable than mine," he said, and turned her around.

The car had smashed nearly headlong into an oak. The oak, quite naturally, had won the bout. The hood was buckled back like an accordion, the safety glass a surrealistic pattern of cracks. The air bag had deployed, undoubtedly saving her from serious injury. She'd been driving too fast for the conditions, she remembered. Entirely too fast.

But how had she been driving at all?

That was the question that struck her now. There was no road. The car sat broken on what was no more than a footpath through the forest. Trees crowded in everywhere, along with brambles and wild vines that bloomed with unearthly flowers. And when she slowly turned in a circle, she saw no route she could have maneuvered through them in the rain, in the dark.

She saw no tracks from her tires in the damp ground. There was no trace of her journey; there was only the end of it.

Cold, she hugged her arms. Her sweater, she thought, wasn't ripped. Cautiously, she pushed up the sleeve, and there, where she'd been badly scraped and bruised, her skin was smooth and unmarred.

She looked back at Flynn. He stood silently as his horse idly cropped at the ground. Temper was in his eyes, and she could all but see the sparks of impatience shooting off him.

Well, she had a temper of her own if she was pushed far enough. And her own patience was at an end. "What is this place?" she demanded, striding up to him. "Who the hell are you, and what have you done? How have you done it? How the devil can I be here when I can't possibly be here? That car —" She flung her hand out. "I couldn't have driven it here. I couldn't have." Her arm dropped limply to her side. "How could I?"

"You know what I told you last night was the truth."

She did know. With her anger burned away, she did know it. "I need to sit down."

"The ground's damp." He caught her arm before she could just sink to the floor of the forest. "Here, then." And he lowered her gently into a high-backed chair with a plump cushion of velvet.

"Thank you." She began to laugh, and burying her face in her hands, shook with it. "Thank you very much. I've lost my mind. Completely lost my mind."

"You haven't. But it would help us both considerably if you'd open it a bit."

She lowered her hands. She was not a hysterical woman, and would not become one. She no longer feared him. However savagely handsome his looks, he'd done her no harm. The fact was, he'd tended to her.

But facts were the problem, weren't they? The fact that she couldn't be here, but was. That he couldn't exist, yet did. The fact that she felt what she felt, without reason.

Once upon a time, she thought, then drew a long breath.

"I don't believe in fairy tales."

"Now, then, that's very sad. Why wouldn't you? Do you think any world can exist without magic? Where does the color come from, and the beauty? Where are the miracles?"

"I don't know. I don't have any answers. Either I'm having a very complex dream or I'm sitting in the woods in a"—she got to her feet to turn and examine the chair—"a marquetry side chair, Dutch, I believe, early eighteenth century. Very nice. Yes, well." She sat again. "I'm sitting here in this beautiful chair in a forest wrapped in mists, having ridden here on that magnificent horse, after having spent the night in a castle—"

"'Tisn't a castle, really. More a manor."

"Whatever, with a man who claims to be more than five hundred years old."

"Five hundred and twenty-eight, if we're counting."

"Really? You wear it quite well. A five-hundred-and-twenty-eight-year-old magician who collects Pez dispensers."

"Canny little things."

"And I don't know how any of it can be true, but I believe it. I believe all of it. Because continuing to deny what I see with my own eyes makes less sense than believing it."

"There." He beamed at her. "I knew you were a sensible woman."

"Oh, yes, I'm very sensible, very steady. So I have to believe what I see, even if it's irrational."

"If that which is rational exists, that which is irrational must as well. There is ever a balance to things, Kayleen."

"Well." She sat calmly, glancing around. "I believe in balance." The air sparkled. She could feel it on her face. She could smell the deep, dark richness of the woods. She could hear the trill of birdsong. She was where she was, and so was he.

"So, I'm sitting in this lovely chair in an enchanted forest having a conversation with a five-hundred-and-twenty-eight-year-old magician. And, if all that isn't crazy enough, there's one more thing that tops it all off. I'm in love with him."

The easy smile on his face faded. What ran through him was so hot and tangled, so full of layers and routes he couldn't breathe through it all. "I've waited for you, through time, through dreams, through those small windows of life that are as much torture as treasure. Will you come to me now, Kayleen? Freely?"

She got to her feet, walked across the soft cushion of forest floor to him. "I don't know how I can feel like this. I only know I do."

He pulled her into his arms, and this time the kiss was hungry. Possessive. When she pressed her body to his, wound her arms around his neck, he

deepened the kiss, took more. Filled himself with her.

Her head spun, and she reveled in the giddiness. No one had ever wanted her—not like this. Had ever touched her like this. Needed her. Desire was a hot spurt that fired the blood and made logic, reason, sanity laughable things.

She had magic. What did she need of reason?

"Mine." He murmured it against her mouth. Said it again and again as his lips raced over her face, her throat. Then, throwing his head back, he shouted it.

"She's mine now and ever. I claim her, as is my right."

When he lifted her off her feet, lightning slashed across the sky. The world trembled.

They rode through the forest. He showed her a stream where golden fish swam over silver rocks. Where a waterfall tumbled down into a pool clear as blue glass.

He stopped to pick her wildflowers and thread them through her hair. And when he kissed her, it was soft and sweet.

His moods, she thought, were as magical as the rest of him, and just as inexplicable. He courted her, making her laugh as he plucked baubles out of thin air and painted rainbows in the sky.

She could feel the breeze on her cheeks, smell the flowers and the damp. What was in her heart was like music. Fairy tales *were* real, she thought. All the years she'd turned her back on them, dismissed the happily-ever-after that her mother sighed over, her own magic had been waiting for her.

Nothing would ever, could ever, be the same again.

Had she known it somehow? Deep inside, had she known it had only been waiting, that he had only been waiting for her to awake?

They walked or rode while birds chorused around them and mists faded away into brilliant afternoon.

There beside the pool he laid a picnic, pouring wine out of his open hand to amuse her. Touching her hair, her cheek, her shoulders dozens of times, as if the contact was as much reassurance as flirtation.

She'd never had a romance. Never taken the time for one. Now it seemed a lifetime of love and anticipation could be fit into one perfect day.

He knew something about everything. History, culture, art, literature, science. It was a new thrill to realize that the man who held her heart, who attracted her so completely, appealed to her mind as well. He could make her laugh, make her wonder, make her yearn. And he brought her a contentment she hadn't known she'd lived without.

If this was a dream, she thought, as twilight fell and they mounted the horse once more, she hoped never to wake.

Chapter 5

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A perfect day deserved a perfect night. She had thought, hoped, that when they returned from their outing, he would take her inside. Take her to bed.

But he had only kissed her in that stirring way that made her weak and jittery and asked if she might like to change for the evening.

So she had gone up to her room to worry and wonder how a woman prepared, after the most magical of days, for the most momentous night of her life. Of one thing she was certain. It wouldn't do to think. If she let her thoughts take shape, the doubts would creep in. Doubts about everything that had happened—and about what would happen yet.

For once, she would simply act. She would simply be.

The bath that adjoined her room was a testament to modern luxury. Stepping from the bedchamber with its antiques and plush velvets into this sea of tile and glass was like stepping from one world into another.

Which was, she supposed, something she'd done already. She filled the huge tub with water and scent and oil, let the low hum of the motor and quiet jets relax her as she sank in up to her chin.

Silver-topped pots sat on the long white counter. From them she scooped out cream to smooth over her skin. And watched herself in the steam-hazed window. This was the way women had prepared for a lover for centuries. Scenting and softening themselves for a man's hands. For a man's mouth.

A woman's magic.

She wouldn't be afraid, she wouldn't let anxiety crowd out the pleasure.

In the wardrobe she found a long gown of silk in the color of ripe plums. It slid over her body like sin and scooped low over her breasts. She slipped her feet into silver slippers, started to turn to the glass.

No, she thought, she didn't want to see herself reflected in a mirror. She wanted to see herself reflected in Flynn's eyes.

He felt like a green youth, all eager nerves and awkward moves. In his day, he'd had quite a way with the ladies. Though five hundred years could certainly make a man rusty in certain areas, he'd had dreams.

But even in dreams, he hadn't wanted so much.

How could he? he thought as Kayleen started down the staircase toward him. Dreams paled next to the power of her.

He reached out, almost afraid that his hand would pass through her and leave him nothing but this yearning. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known."

"Tonight"—she linked her fingers with his—"everything's beautiful." She stepped toward him and was confused when he stepped back.

"I thought... Will you dance with me, Kayleen?"

As he spoke, the air filled with music. Candles, hundreds of them, spurted into flame. The light was pale gold now, and flowers blossomed down the walls, turning the hall into a garden.

"I'd love to," she said, and moved into his arms.

They waltzed in the Great Hall, through the swaying candlelight and the perfume of roses that bloomed everywhere. Doors and windows sprang open, welcoming the glow of moon and stars and the fragrance of the night.

Thrilled, Kayleen threw back her head and let him sweep her in stirring circles. "It's wonderful! Everything's wonderful. How can you know how to waltz like this when there was no waltz in your time?"

"Watching through dreams. I see the world go by in them, and I take what pleases me most. I've danced with you in dreams, Kayleen. You don't remember?"

"No," she whispered. "I don't dream. And if I do, I never remember. But I'll remember this." She smiled at him. "Forever."

"You're happy."

"I've never in my life been so happy." Her hand slid from his shoulder, along his neck, to rest on his cheek. The blue of her eyes deepened. Went dreamy. "Flynn."

"Wine," he said, when fresh nerves kicked in his belly. "You'll want wine."

"No." The music continued to swell as they stood. "I don't want wine."

"Supper, then."

"No." Her hand trailed over, cupped the back of his neck. "Not supper either," she murmured and drew his mouth to hers. "You." She breathed it. "Only you."

"Kayleen." He'd intended to romance her, charm her. Seduce her. Now she had done all of that to him. "I don't want to rush you."

"I've waited so long, without even knowing. There's never been anyone else. Now I think there couldn't have been, because there was you. Show me what it's like to belong."

"There's no woman I've touched who mattered.

They're shadows beside you, Kayleen. This," he said and lifted her into his arms, "is real."

He carried her through the music and candlelight, up the grand stairs. And though she felt his arms, the beat of his heart, it was like floating.

"Here is where I dreamed of you in the night." He took her into his bedchamber, where the bed was covered with red silk and the petals of white roses, where candles stood flaming and the fire shimmered. "And here is where I'll love you, this first time. Flesh to flesh."

He set her on her feet. "I won't hurt you, that I can promise. I'll give you only pleasure."

"I'm not afraid."

"Then be with me." He cupped her face in his hands, laid his lips on hers.

In dreams there had been longing, and echoes of sensations. Here and now, with those mists parted, there was so much more.

Gently, so gently, his mouth took from hers. Warmth and wanting. With tenderness and patience, his hands moved over her. Soft and seductive. When she trembled, he soothed, murmuring her name, and promises. He

slid the gown off her shoulders, trailed kisses over that curve of flesh. And thrilled to the flavor and the fragrance.

"Let me see you now, lovely Kayleen." He skimmed his lips along her throat as he eased the gown down her body. When it pooled at her feet, he stepped back and looked his fill.

There was no shyness in her. The heat that rose up to bloom on her skin was anticipation. The tremble that danced through her was delight when his gaze finished its journey and his eyes locked on hers.

He reached out, caressed the curve of her breast, let them both absorb the sensation. When his fingertips trailed down, he felt her quiver under his touch.

She reached for him, her hands not quite steady as she unbuttoned his shirt. And when she touched him, it was like freedom.

"A ghra." He pulled her against him, crushed her mouth with his, lost himself in the needs that stormed through him. His hands raced over her, took, sought more, until she gasped out his name.

Too fast, too much. God help him. He fought back through the pounding in his blood, gentled his movements, chained the raw need. When he lifted her again, laid her on the bed, his kiss was long and slow and gentle.

This, she thought, was what the poets wrote of. This was why a man or a woman would reject reason for even the chance of love.

This warmth, this pleasure of another's body against your own. This gift of heart, and all the sighs and secrets it offered.

He gave her pleasure, as he had promised, drowning floods of it that washed through her in slow waves. She could have lain steeped in it forever.

She gave to him a taste, a touch, so that sensation pillowed the aches. He savored, and lingered, and held fast to the beauty she offered.

When flames licked at the edges of warmth, she welcomed them. The pretty clouds that had cushioned her began to thin. Falling through them, she cried out. A sound of triumph as her heart burst inside her.

And heard him moan, heard the quick whispers, a kind of incantation as he rose over her. Through the candlelight and the shimmer of her own vision she saw his face, his eyes. So green now they were like dark jewels. Swamped with love, she laid a hand on his cheek, murmured his name.

"Look at me. Aye, at me." His breath wanted to tear out of his lungs. His body begged to plunge. "Only pleasure."

He took her innocence, filled her, and gave her the joy. She opened for him, rose with him, her eyes swimming with shocked delight. And with the love he craved like breath.

And this time, when she fell, he gathered himself and plunged after her.

Her body shimmered. She was certain that if she looked in the mirror she would see it was golden. And his, she thought, trailing a hand lazily up and down his back. His was so beautiful. Strong and hard and smooth.

His heart was thundering against hers still. What a fantastic sensation that was, to be under the weight of the man you loved and feel his heart race for you.

Perhaps that was why her mother kept searching, kept risking. For this one moment of bliss. Love, Kayleen thought, changes everything.

And she loved.

Was loved. She repeated that over and over in her head. She was loved. It didn't matter that he hadn't said it, in those precise words. He couldn't look at her as he did, couldn't touch her as he did and not love her.

A woman didn't change her life, believe in spells and fairy tales after years of denial, and not be given the happy ending.

Flynn loved her. That was all she needed to know.

"Why do you worry?"

She blinked herself back. "What?"

"I feel it. Inside you." He lifted his head and studied her face. "The worry."

"No. It's only that everything's different now. So much is happening to me in so little time." She brushed her fingers through his hair and smiled. "But it's not worry."

"I want your happiness, Kayleen."

"I know." And wasn't that love, after all? "I know." And laughing, she threw her arms around him. "And you have it. You make me ridiculously happy."

"There's often not enough ridiculous in a life." He pulled her up with him so they were sitting tangled together on silk roses. "So let's have a bit."

The stone in his pendant glowed brighter as he grinned. He fisted his hands, shot them open.

In a wink the bed around them was covered with platters of food and bottles of wine. It made her jolt. She wondered if such things always would. Angling her head, she lifted a glass.

"I'd rather champagne, if you please."

"Well, then."

She watched the glass fill, bottom to top, with the frothy wine. And laughing, she toasted him and drank it down.

Chapter 6

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All of her life Kayleen had done the sensible thing. As a child, she'd tidied her room without being reminded, studied hard in school and turned in all assignments in a timely fashion. She had grown into a woman who was never late for an appointment, spent her money wisely, and ran the family business with a cool, clear head.

Looking back through the veil of what had been, Kayleen decided she had certainly been one of the most tedious people on the face of the planet.

How could she have known there was such freedom in doing the ridiculous or the impulsive or the foolish?

She said as much to Flynn as she lay sprawled over him on the bed of velvety flowers.

"You couldn't be tedious."

"Oh, but I could." She lifted her head from his chest. She wore nothing but her smile, with its dimple, and flowers in her hair. "I was the queen of tedium. I set my alarm for six o'clock every morning, even when I didn't have to get up for work. I even set alarms when I was on vacation."

"Because you didn't want to miss anything."

"No. Because one must maintain discipline. I walked to work every day, rain or shine, along the exact same route. This was after making my bed and eating a balanced breakfast, of course."

She slithered down so that she could punctuate her words with little kisses over his shoulders and chest. "I arrived at the shop precisely thirty minutes before opening, in order to see to the morning paperwork and check any displays that might require updating. Thirty minutes for a proper lunch, fifteen minutes, exactly, at four for a cup of tea, then close shop and walk home by that same route."

She worked her way up his throat. "Mmmm. Watched the news during dinner—must keep up with current affairs. Read a chapter of a good book before bed. Except for Wednesdays. Wednesdays I went wild and took in an interesting film. And on my half day, I would go over to my mother's to lecture her."

Though her pretty mouth was quite a distraction, he paid attention to her words, and the tone of them. "You lectured your mother?"

"Oh, yes." She nibbled at his ear. "My beautiful, frivolous, delightful mother. How I must have irritated her. She's been married three times, engaged double that, at least. It never works out, and she's heartbroken about it for, oh, about an hour and a half."

With a laugh, Kayleen lifted her head again. "That's not fair, of course, but she manages to shake it all off and never lose her optimism about love. She forgets to pay her bills, misses appointments, never knows the correct time, and has never been known to be able to find her keys. She's wonderful."

"You love her very much."

"Yes, very much." Sighing now, Kayleen pillowed her head on Flynn's shoulder. "I decided when I was very young that it was my job to take care of her. That was after her husband number two."

He combed his fingers through her flower-bedecked hair. "Did you lose your father?"

"No, but you could say he lost us. He left us when I was six. I suppose you could call him frivolous, too, which was yet another motivation for me to be anything but. He never settled into the family business well. Or into marriage, or into fatherhood. I hardly remember him."

He stroked her hair, said nothing. But he was beginning to worry. "Were you happy, in that life?"

"I wasn't unhappy. Brennan's was important to me, maybe all the more so because it wasn't important to my father. He shrugged off the tradition of it, the responsibility of it, as carelessly as he shrugged off his wife and his daughter."

"And hurt you."

"At first. Then I stopped letting it hurt me."

Did you? Flynn wondered. Or is that just one more pretense?

"I thought everything had to be done a certain way to be done right. If you do things right, people don't leave," she said softly. "And you'll know exactly what's going to happen next. My uncle and grandfather gradually let me take over the business because I had a knack for it, and they were proud of that. My mother let me handle things at home because, well, she's just too good-natured not to."

She sighed again, snuggled into him. "She's going to get married again next month, and she's thrilled. One of the reasons I took this trip now is because I wanted to get away from it, from those endless plans for yet another of her happy endings. I suppose I hurt her feelings, leaving the way I did. But I'd have hurt them more if I'd stayed and spoke my mind."

"You don't like the man she'll marry?"

"No, he's perfectly nice. My mother's fiancés are always perfectly nice. Funny, since I've been here I haven't worried about her at all. And I imagine, somehow, she's managing just fine without me picking at her. The shop's undoubtedly running like clockwork, and the world continues to spin. Odd to realize I wasn't indispensable after all."

"To me you are." He wrapped his arms around her, rolled over so he could look down at her. "You're vital to me."

"That's the most wonderful thing anyone's ever said to me." It was better, wasn't it? she asked herself. Even better than "I love you."

"I don't know what time it is, or even what day. I don't need to know. I've never eaten supper in bed unless I was ill. Never danced in a forest in the moonlight, never made love in a bed of flowers. I've never known what it was like to be so free."

"Happy, Kayleen." He took her mouth, a little desperately. "You're happy."

"I love you, Flynn. How could I be happier?"

He wanted to keep her loving him. Keep her happy. He wanted to keep her beautifully naked and steeped in pleasures.

More than anything, he wanted to keep her.

The hours were whizzing by so quickly, tumbling into days so that he was losing track of time himself. What did time matter now, to either of them?

He could give her anything she wanted here. Anything and everything. What would she miss of the life she had outside? It was ordinary and tedious. Hadn't she said so herself? He would see that she never missed what had been. Before long she wouldn't even think of it. The life before would be the dream.

He taught her to ride, and she was fearless. When he thought of how she'd clung to him in terror when he'd pulled her up onto Dilis the first time, he rationalized the change by saying she was simply quick to learn. He hadn't changed her basic nature, or forced her will.

That was beyond his powers and the most essential rule of magic.

When she galloped off into the forest, her laughter streaming behind her, he told himself he let his mind follow her only to keep her from harm.

Yet he knew, deep inside himself, that if she traveled near the edge of his world, he would pull her back.

He had that right, Flynn thought, as his hands fisted at his sides. He had claimed her. What he claimed during his imprisonment was his to keep.

"That is the law." He threw his head back, scowling up at the heavens. "It is *your* law. She came to me. By rights of magic, by the law of this place, she is mine. No power can take her from me."

When the sky darkened, when lightning darted at the black edges of clouds, Flynn stood in the whistling wind, feet planted in challenge. His hair blew wild around his face, his eyes went emerald-bright. And the power that was his, that could not be taken from him, shimmered around him like silver.

In his mind he saw Kayleen astride the white horse. She glanced uneasily at the gathering storm, shivered in the fresh chill of the wind. And turned her mount to ride back to him.

She was laughing again as she raced out of the trees. "That was wonderful!" She threw her arms recklessly in the air so that Flynn gripped the halter to keep Dilis steady. "I want to ride every day. I can't believe *the feeling*"

Feeling, he thought with a vicious tug of guilt, was the one thing he wouldn't be able to offer her much longer.

"Come, darling." He lifted his arms up to her. "We'll put Dilis down for the night. A storm's coming."

She welcomed it too. The wind, the rain, the thunder. It stirred something in her, some whippy thrill that made her feel reckless and bold. When Flynn set the fire to blaze with a twist of his hand, her eyes danced.

"I don't suppose you could teach me to do that?"

He glanced back at her, the faintest of smiles, the slightest lift of brow. "I can't, no. But you've your own magic, Kayleen."

"Have I?"

"It binds me to you, as I've been bound to no other. I will give you a boon. Any that you ask that is in my power to give."

"Any?" A smile played around her mouth now as she looked up at him from under her lashes. The blatantly flirtatious move came to her much more naturally than she'd anticipated. "Well, that's quite an offer. I'll have to consider very carefully before making any decision."

She wandered the room, trailing a fingertip over the back of the sofa, over the polished gleam of a table. "Would that offer include, say, the sun and the moon?"

Look at her, he thought. She grows more beautiful by the hour. "Such as these?" He held out his hands. From them dripped a string of luminous white pearls with a clasp of diamonds.

She laughed, even as her breath caught. "Those aren't bad, as an example. They're magnificent, Flynn. But I didn't ask for diamonds or pearls."

"Then I give them freely." He crossed to her, laid the necklace over her head. "For the pleasure of seeing you wear them."

"I've never worn pearls." Surprised by the delight they brought her, she lifted them, let them run like moonbeams through her fingers. "They make me feel regal."

Holding them out, she turned a circle while the diamond clasp exploded with light. "Where do they come from? Do you just picture them in your mind and... poof?"

"Poof?" He decided she hadn't meant that as an insult. "More or less, I suppose. They exist, and I move them from one place to another. From there, to here. Whatever is, that has no will, I can bring here, and keep. Nothing with heart or soul can be taken. But the rest... It's sapphires, I'm thinking, that suit you best."

As Kayleen blinked, a string of rich black pearls clasped with brilliant sapphires appeared around her neck. "Oh! I'll never get used to... Move them?" She looked back at him. "You mean take them?"

"Mmm." He turned to pour glasses of wine.

"But..." Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, she looked around the room. The gorgeous antiques, the modern electronics—which she'd noticed ran without electricity, the glamour of Ming vases, the foolishness of pop art.

Almost nothing in the room would have existed when he'd been banished here.

"Flynn, where do all these things come from? Your television set, your piano, the furniture and rugs and art. The food and wine?"

"All manner of places."

"How does it work?" She took the wine from him. "I mean, is it like replicating? Do you copy a thing?"

"Perhaps, if I've a mind to. It takes a bit more time and trouble for that process. You have to know the innards, so to speak, and the composition and all matter of scientific business to make it come right. Easier by far just to transport it."

"But if you just transport it, if you just take it from one place and bring it here, that's stealing."

"I'm not a thief." The idea! "I'm a magician. The laws aren't the same for us."

Patience was one of her most fundamental virtues. "Weren't you punished initially because you took something from someone?"

"That was entirely different. I changed a life for another's gain. And I was perhaps a bit... rash. Not that it deserved such a harsh sentence."

"How do you know what lives you've changed by bringing these here?" She held up the pearls. "Or any of the other things? If you take someone's property, it causes change, doesn't it? And at the core of it, it's just stealing."

Not without regret, she lifted the jewels over her head. "Now, you have to put these back where you got them."

"I won't." Fully insulted now, he slammed his glass down. "You would reject a gift from me?"

"Yes. If it belongs to someone else. Flynn, I'm a merchant myself. How would I feel to open my shop one morning and find my property gone? It would be devastating. A violation. And beyond that, which is difficult enough, the inconvenience. I'd have to file a police report, an insurance claim. There'd be an investigation, and—"

"Those are problems that don't exist here," he interrupted. "You can't apply your ordinary logic to magic. Magic is."

"Right is, Flynn, and even magic can't negate what's right. These may be heirlooms. They may mean a great deal to someone even beyond their monetary value. I can't accept them."

She laid the pearls, the glow and the sparkle, on the table.

"You have no knowledge of what governs me." The air began to tremble with his anger. "No right to question what's inside me. Your world hides from mine, century by century, building its pale layers of reason and denial. You come here, and in days you stand in judgment of what you can't begin to comprehend?"

"I don't judge you, Flynn, but your actions." The wind had come into the room. It blew over her face, through her hair. And it was cold. Though her belly quaked, she lifted her chin. "Power shouldn't take away human responsibility. It should add to it. I'm surprised you haven't learned that in all the time you've had to think."

His eyes blazed. He threw out his arms, and the room exploded with sound and light. She stumbled back, but managed to regain her balance, managed to swallow a cry. When the air cleared again, the room was empty but for the two of them.

"This is what I might have if I lived by your rules.

Nothing. No comfort, no humanity. Only empty rooms, where even the echoes are lifeless. Five hundred years of alone, and I should worry that another whose life comes and goes in a blink might do without a lamp or a painting?"

"Yes." Temper snapped off him, little flames of gold. Then he vanished before her eyes.

What had she done? Panicked, she nearly called out for him, then realized he would hear only what he chose to hear.

She'd driven him away, she thought, sinking down in misery to sit on the bare floor. Driven him away with her rigid stance on right and wrong, her own unbending rules of conduct, just as she had kept so many others at a distance most of her life.

She'd preached at him, she admitted with a sigh. This incredible man with such a magnificent gift. She had wagged her finger at him, just the way she wagged it at her mother. Taken on, as she habitually did, the role of adult to the child.

It seemed that not even magic could burn that irritating trait out of her. Not even love could overcome it.

Now she was alone in an empty room. Alone, as she had been for so long. Flynn thought he had a lock on loneliness, she thought with a half laugh. She'd made a career out of alone.

She drew up her knees, rested her forehead on them. The worst of it, she realized, was that even now—sad, angry, aching—she believed she was right.

It wasn't a hell of a lot of comfort.

Chapter 7

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It took him hours to work off his temper. He walked, he paced, he raged, he brooded. When temper had burned off, he sulked, though if anyone had put this term on his condition, he'd have swung hard back into temper again.

She'd hurt him. When anger cleared away enough for that realization to surface, it came as a shock. The woman had cut him to the bone. She'd rejected his gift, questioned his morality, and criticized his powers. All in one lump.

In his day such a swipe from a mere woman would have...

He cursed and paced some more. It wasn't his day, and if there was one thing he'd learned to adjust to, it was the changes in attitudes and sensibilities. Women stood toe-to-toe with men in this age, and in his readings and viewings over the years, he'd come to believe they had the right of it.

He was hardly steeped in the old ways. Hadn't he embraced technology with each new development? Hadn't he amused himself with the quirks of society and fashion and mores as they shifted and changed and became? And he'd taken from each of those shifts what appealed most, what sat best with him.

He was a well-read man, had been well read and well traveled even in his own time. And since that time, he'd studied. Science, history, electronics, engineering, art, music, literature, politics. He had hardly stopped using his mind over the last five hundred years.

The fact was, he rarely had the chance to use anything else.

So, he used it now and went over the argument in his head.

She didn't understand, he decided. Magic wasn't bound by the rules of her world, but by itself. It was, and that was all. No conscientious magician brought harm to another deliberately, that was certain. All he'd done was take a few examples of technology, of art and comfort, from various points in time. He could hardly be expected to live in a bloody cave, could he?

Stealing? Why, the very idea of it!

He sat on a chair in his workshop and indulged in more brooding.

It wasn't meant to be stealing, he thought now. Magicians had moved matter from place to place since the beginning of things. And what were jewels but pretty bits of matter?

Then he sighed. He supposed they were considerably more, from her point of view. And he'd wanted her to see them as more. He'd wanted her to be dazzled and delighted, and dote on him for the gift of them.

Much as he had, he admitted, wanted to dazzle and delight the woman who'd betrayed him. Or, to be honest, the woman who'd tempted him to betray himself and his art. That woman had greedily gathered what he'd given, what he'd taken, and left him to hang.

What had Kayleen done? Had she been overpowered by the glitter and the richness? Seduced by them?

Not in the least. She'd tossed them back in his face.

Stood up for what she believed was right and just. Stood up to him. His lips began to curve with the image of that. He hadn't expected her to, he could admit that. She'd looked him in the eye, said her piece, and stuck to it.

God, what a woman! His Kayleen was strong and true. Not a bauble to ride on a man's arm but a partner to stand tall with him. That was a grand thing. For while a man might indulge himself in a pretty piece of fluff for a time, it was a woman he wanted for a lifetime.

He got to his feet, studied his workroom. Well, a woman was what he had. He'd best figure out how to make peace with her.

Kayleen considered having a good cry, but it just wasn't like her. She settled instead for hunting up the kitchen which was no easy task. On the search she discovered Flynn had chosen to make his point with only that one empty room. The rest of the house was filled to brimming, and in his fascinatingly eclectic style.

She softened by the time she brewed tea in a kitchen equipped with a restaurant-style refrigerator, a microwave oven, and a stone fireplace in lieu of stove. It took her considerable time to get the fire going and to heat water in the copper pot. But it made her smile.

How could she blame him, really, for wanting things around him? Pretty things, interesting things. He was a man who needed to use his mind, amuse himself, challenge himself. Wasn't that the man she'd fallen in love with?

She carried the tea into the library with its thousands of books, its scrolls, its manuscripts. And its deep-cushioned leather chairs and snappy personal computer.

She would light the fire, and enough candles to read by, then enjoy her tea and the quiet.

Kneeling at the hearth, she tried to light the kindling and managed to scorch the wood. She rearranged the logs, lodged a splinter painfully in her thumb, and tried again.

She created a hesitant little flame, and a great deal of smoke, which the wind cheerfully blew back in her face. She hissed at it, sucked on her throbbing thumb, then sat on her heels to think it through.

And the flames burst into light and heat.

She set her teeth, fought the urge to turn around. "I can do it myself, thank you."

"As you wish, lady."

The fire vanished but for the smoke. She coughed, waved it away from her face, then got to her feet. "It's warm enough without one."

"I'd say it's unnaturally chilly at the moment." He walked up behind her, took her hand in his. "You've hurt yourself."

"It's only a splinter. Don't," she said when he lifted it to his lips.

"Being strong-minded and being contrary are two different matters." He touched his lips to her thumb, and the throbbing eased. "But not contrary enough, I notice, to ignore the comforts of a cup of tea, a book, and a pleasant chair."

"I wasn't going to stand in an empty room wringing my hands while you worked out your tantrum."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Disconcerting, isn't it? Emptiness."

She tugged her hand free of his. "All right, yes. And I have no true conception of what you've dealt with, nor any right to criticize how you compensate. But—"

"Right is right," he finished. "This place and what I possessed was all I had when first I came here. I could fill it with things, the things that appealed to me. That's what I did. I won't apologize for it."

"I don't want an apology."

"No, you want something else entirely." He opened his hands, and the rich loops of pearls gleamed in them.

"Flynn, don't ask me to take them."

"I am asking. I give you this gift, Kayleen. They're replicas, and belong to no one but me. Until they belong to you."

Her throat closed as he placed them around her neck. "You made them for me?"

"Perhaps I'd grown a bit lazy over the years. It took me a little longer to conjure them than it might have, but it made me remember the pleasure of making."

"They're more beautiful than the others. And much more precious."

"And here's a tear," he murmured, and caught it on his fingertip as it spilled onto her cheek. "If it falls from happiness, it will shine. If it's from sorrow, it will turn to ashes. See."

The drop glimmered on his finger, shimmered, then solidified into a diamond in the shape of a tear. "And this is your gift to me." He drew the pendant from beneath his shirt, passed his hand over it. The diamond drop sparkled now beneath the moonstone. "I'll wear it near my heart. Ever."

She leapt into his arms, clung to his neck. "I missed you!"

"I let temper steal hours from us."

"So did I." She leaned back. "We've had our first fight. I'm glad. Now we never have to have a first one again."

"But others?"

"We'll have to." She kissed his cheek. "There's so much we don't understand about each other. And even when we do, we won't always agree."

"Ah, my sensible Kayleen. No, don't frown," he said, tipping up her chin. "I like your mind. It stimulates my own."

"It annoyed you."

"At the first of it." He circled her around, lighting the fire, the candles as he did. "And I spent a bit of time pondering on how much more comfortable life would be if you'd just be biddable and agree with everything I said and

did. 'Yes, Flynn, my darling,' you would say. 'No indeed, my handsome Flynn'."

"Oh, really?"

"But then I'd miss that battle light in your eyes, wouldn't I, and the way your lovely mouth goes firm. Makes me want to..." He nipped her bottom lip. "But that's another kind of stimulation altogether. I'm willing to fight with you, Kayleen, as long as you're willing to make up again with me."

"And I'm willing to have you stomp off in a temper—"

"I didn't stomp."

"Metaphorically speaking. As long as you come back." She laid her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes. "The storm's passed," she murmured.

"Moonlight's shining through the windows."

"So it is." He scooped her up. "I have the perfect way to celebrate our first fight." He closed her hand over his pendant. "Would you like to fly, Kayleen?"

"Fly? But—"

And she was soaring through the air, through the night. Air swirled around her, then seemed to go fluid so it was like cutting clean through a dark sea. The stone pulsed against her palm. She cried out in surprise, and then in delight, reaching out as if she could snatch one of the stars that shone around her.

Fearless, Flynn thought, even now, or perhaps it was more a thirst for all the times she'd denied herself a drink. When she turned her face to his, her eyes brighter than the jewels, brighter than the stars, he spun her in dizzying circles.

They landed in a laughing tumble to roll over the soft cushion of grass by the side of his blue waterfall.

"Oh! That was amazing. Can we do it again?"

"Soon enough. Here." He lifted a hand, and a plump peach balanced on the tips of his fingers. "You haven't eaten your supper."

"I wasn't hungry before." Charmed, she took the peach, bit into the sweetness. "So many stars," she murmured, lying back again to watch them. "Were we really flying up there?"

"It's a kind of manipulation of time and space and matter. It's magic. That's enough, isn't it?"

"It's everything. The world's magic now."

"But you're cold," he said when she shivered.

"Mmm. Only a little." Even as she spoke, the air warmed, almost seemed to bloom.

"I confess it." He leaned over to kiss her. "I stole a bit of warmth from here and there. But I don't think anyone will miss it. I don't want you chilled."

"Can it always be like this?"

There was a hitch in his chest. "It can be what we make it. Do you miss what was before?"

"No." But she lowered her lashes, so he was unable to read her eyes. "Do you? I mean, the people you knew? Your family?"

"They've been gone a long time."

"Was it hard?" She sat up, handed him the peach. "Knowing you'd never be able to see them again, or talk to them, or even tell them where you were?"

"I don't remember." But he did. This was the first lie he'd told her. He remembered that the pain of it had been like death.

"I'm sorry." She touched his shoulder. "It hurts you."

"It fades." He pushed away, got to his feet. "All of that is beyond, and it fades. It's the illusion, and this is all that's real. All that matters. All that matters is here."

"Flynn." She rose, hoping to comfort, but when he spun back, his eyes were hot, bright. And the desire in them robbed her of breath.

"I want you. A hundred lifetimes from now I'll want you. It's enough for me. Is it enough for you?"

"I'm here." She held out her hands. "And I love you. It's more than I ever dreamed of having."

"I can give you more. You still have a boon."

"Then I'll keep it. Until I need more." Because he'd yet to take her offered hands, she cupped his face in them.

"I've never touched a man like this. With love and desire. Do you think, Flynn, that because I've never felt them before I don't understand the wonder of knowing them now? Of feeling them now for one man? I've watched my mother search all of her life, be willing to risk heartbreak for the chance—just the chance—of feeling what I do right at this moment. She's the most important person to me outside this world you've made. And I know she'd be thrilled to know what I've found with you."

"Then when you ask me for your heart's desire, I'll move heaven and earth to give it to you. That's my vow."

"I have my heart's desire." She smiled, stepped back. "Tell me yours."

"Not tonight. Tonight I have plans for you that don't involve conversation."

"Oh? And what might they be?"

"Well, to begin..."

He lifted a hand and traced one finger down through the air between them. Her clothes vanished.

Chapter 8

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"Oh!" This time she instinctively covered herself. "You might have warned me."

"I'll have you bathed in moonlight, and dressed in star-shine."

She felt a tug, gentle but insistent, on her hands. Her arms lowered, spread out as if drawn by silken rope. "Flynn."

"Let me touch you." He kept his eyes on hers as he stepped forward, as he traced his fingertips down her throat, over the swell of her breasts. "Excite you." He took her mouth in quick, little bites. "Possess you."

Something slid through her mind, her body, at the same time. A coiled snake of heat that bound both together. The rise of it, so fast, so sharp, slashed through her. She hadn't the breath to cry out, she could only moan.

He had barely touched her.

"How can you... how could I—"

"I want to show you more this time." Now his hands were on her, rough and insistent. Her skin was so soft, so fragrant. In the moonlight it gleamed so that wherever he touched, the warmth bloomed on it. Roses on silk. "I want to take more this time."

For a second time he took her flying. Though her feet never left the ground, she spun through the air. A fast, reckless journey. His mouth was on her,

devouring flesh. She had no choice but to let him feed. And his greed erased her past reason so that her one desire was to be consumed.

Abandoning herself to it, she let her head fall back, murmuring his name like a chant as he ravished her.

He mated his mind with hers, thrilling to every soft cry, every throaty whimper. She stood open to him in the moonlight, soaked with pleasure and shuddering from its heat.

And such was his passion for her that his fingers left trails of gold over her damp flesh, trails that pulsed, binding her in tangled ribbons of pleasure.

When his mouth found hers again, the flavor exploded, sharp and sweet. Drunk on her, he lifted them both off the ground.

Now freed, her arms came tight around him, her nails scraping as she sought to hold, sought to find. She was hot against him, wet against him, her hips arching in rising demand.

He drove himself into her, one desperate thrust, then another. Another. With her answering beat for urgent beat, he let the animal inside him spring free.

His mind emptied but for her and that primal hunger they shared. The forest echoed with a call of triumph as that hunger swallowed them both.

She lay limp, useless. Used. A thousand wild horses could have stampeded toward her, and she wouldn't have moved a muscle.

The way Flynn had collapsed on her, and now lay like the dead, she imagined he felt the same.

"I'm so sorry," she said on a long, long sigh.

"Sorry?" He slid his hand through the grass until it covered hers.

"Umm. So sorry for the women who don't have you for a lover."

He made a sound that might have been a chuckle. "Generous of you, *mavourneen*. I prefer being smug that I'm the only man who's had the delights of you."

"I saw stars. And not the ones up there."

"So did I. You're the only one who's given me the stars." He stirred, pressing his lips to the side of her breast before lifting his head. "And you give me an appetite as well—for all manner of succulent things."

"I suppose that means you want *your* supper and we have to go back."

"We have to do nothing but what pleases us. What would you like?"

"At the moment? I'd settle for some water. I've never been so thirsty."

"Water, is it?" He angled his head, grinned. "That I can give you, and plenty." He gathered her up and rolled. She managed a scream, and he a wild laugh, as they tumbled off the bank and hit the water of the pool with a splash.

It seemed miraculous to Kayleen how much she and Flynn had in common. Considering the circumstance and all that differed between them, it was an amazing thing that they found any topic to discuss or explore.

But then, Flynn hadn't sat idle for five hundred years. His love of something well made, even if its purpose was only for beauty, struck home with her. All of her life she'd been exposed to craftsmanship and aesthetics—the history of a table, the societal purpose of an enameled snuffbox, or the heritage of a serving platter. The few pieces she'd allowed herself to collect were special to her, not only because of their beauty but also because of their continuity.

She and Flynn had enjoyed many of the same books and films, though he had read and viewed far more for the simple enjoyment of it than she.

He listened to her, posing questions about various phases of her life, until she was picking them apart for him and remembering events and things

she'd seen or done or experienced that she'd long ago forgotten.

No one had ever been so interested in her before, in who she was and what she thought. What she felt. If he didn't agree, he would lure her into a debate or tease her into exploring a lighter side of herself rarely given expression.

It seemed she did the same for him, nudging him out of his brooding silences, or leaving him be until the mood had passed on its own.

But whenever she made a comment or asked a question about the future, those silences lasted long.

So she wouldn't ask, she told herself. She didn't need to know. What had planning and preciseness gotten her, really, but a life of sameness? Whatever happened when the week was up—God, why couldn't she remember what day it was—she would be content.

For now, every moment was precious.

He'd given her so much. Smiling, she wandered the house, running her fingers along the exquisite pearls, which she hadn't taken off since he'd put them around her neck. Not the gifts, she thought, though she treasured them, but romance, possibilities, and above all, a vision.

She had never seen so clearly before.

Love answered all questions.

What could she give him? Gifts? She had nothing. What little she still possessed was in the car she'd left abandoned in the wood. There was so little there, really, of the woman she'd become, and was still becoming.

She wanted to do something for him. Something that would make him smile.

Food. Delighted with the idea, she hurried back toward the kitchen. She'd never known anyone to appreciate a single bite of apple as much as Flynn.

Of course, since there wasn't any stove, she hadn't a clue what she could prepare, but... She swung into the kitchen, stopped short in astonishment.

There certainly was one beauty of a stove now. White and gleaming. All she'd done was mutter about having to boil water for tea over a fire and—poof!—he'd made a stove.

Well, she thought, and pushed up her sleeves, she would see just what she could do with it.

In his workroom, Flynn gazed through one of his windows on the world. He'd intended to focus on Kayleen's home so that he could replicate some of her things for her. He knew what it was to be without what you had, what had mattered to you.

For a time he lost himself there, moving his mind through the rooms where she had once lived, studying the way she'd placed her furniture, what books were on her shelves, what colors she'd favored.

How tidy it all was, he thought with a great surge in his heart. Everything so neatly in place, and so tastefully done. Did it upset her sense of order to be in the midst of his hodgepodge?

He would ask her. They could make some adjustments. But why the hell hadn't the woman had more color around her? And look at the clothes in the closet. All of them more suited to a spinster—no, that wasn't the word used well these days. Plain attire without the richness of fabric and the brilliance of color that so suited his Kayleen.

She would damn well leave them behind if he had any say in it.

But she would want her photographs, and that lovely pier glass there, and that lamp. He began to set them in his mind, the shape and dimensions, the tone and texture. So deep was his concentration that he didn't realize the image had changed until the woman crossed his vision.

She walked through the rooms, her hands clasped tightly together. A lovely woman, he noted. Smaller than

Kayleen, fuller at the breasts and hips, but with the same coloring. She wore her dark hair short, and it swung at her cheeks as she moved.

Compelled, he opened the window wider and heard her speak.

"Oh, baby, where are you? Why haven't you called? It's almost a week. Why can't we find you? Oh, Kayleen." She picked up a photograph from a table, pressed it to her. "Please be all right. Please be okay."

With the picture hugged to her heart, she dropped into a chair and began to weep.

Flynn slammed the window shut and turned away.

He would not be moved. He would not.

Time was almost up. In little more than twenty-four hours, the choice would be behind him. Behind them all.

He closed his mind to a mother's grief. But he wasn't fully able to close his heart.

His mood was edgy when he left the workroom. He meant to go outside, to walk it off. Perhaps to whistle up Dilis and ride it off. But he heard her singing.

He'd never heard her sing before. A pretty voice, he thought, but it was the happiness in it that drew him back to the kitchen.

She was stirring something on the stove, something in the big copper kettle that smelled beyond belief.

It had been a very long time since he'd come into a kitchen where cooking was being done. But he was nearly certain that was what had just happened. Since it was almost too marvelous to believe, he decided to make sure of it.

"Kayleen, what are you about there?"

"Oh!" Her spoon clattered, fell out of her hand and plopped into the pot.
"Damn it, Flynn! You startled me. Now look at that, I've drowned the spoon in the sauce."

"Sauce?"

"I thought I'd make spaghetti. You have a very unusual collection of ingredients in your kitchen. Peanut butter, pickled herring, enough chocolate to make an entire elementary school hyper for a month. However, I managed to find plenty of herbs, and some lovely ripe tomatoes, so this seemed the safest bet. Plus you have ten pounds of spaghetti pasta."

"Kayleen, are you cooking for me?"

"I know it must seem silly, as you can snap up a five-star meal for yourself without breaking a sweat. But there's something to be said for home cooking. I'm a very good cook. I took lessons. Though I've never attempted to make sauce in quite such a pot, it should be fine."

"The pot's wrong?"

"Oh, well, I'd do better with my own cookware, but I think I've made do. You had plenty of fresh vegetables in your garden, so I—"

"Just give me a few moments, won't you? I'll need a bit of time."

And before she could answer, he was gone.

"Well." She shook her head and went back to trying to save the spoon.

She had everything under control again, had adjusted the heat to keep the sauce at low simmer, when a clatter behind her made her jolt. The spoon plopped back into the sauce.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" She turned around, then stumbled back. There was a pile of pots and pans on the counter beside her.

"I replicated them," Flynn said with a grin. "Which took me a little longer, but I didn't want to argue with you about it. Then you might not feed me."

"My pots!" She fell on them with the enthusiasm of a mother for lost children.

More enthusiasm, Flynn realized as she chattered and held up each pan and lid to examine, than she'd shown for the jewels he'd given her.

Because they were hers. Something that belonged to her. Something from her world.

And his heart grew heavy.

"This is going to be good." She stacked the cookware neatly, selected the proper pot. "I know it must seem a waste of time and effort to you," she said as she transferred the sauce. "But cooking's a kind of art. It's certainly an occupation. I'm used to being busy. A few days of leisure is wonderful, but I'd go crazy after a while with nothing to do. Now I can cook."

While the sauce simmered in the twenty-first-century pot, she carried the ancient kettle to the sink to wash it. "And dazzle you with my brilliance," she added with a quick, laughing glance over her shoulder.

"You already dazzle me."

"Well, just wait. I was thinking, as I was putting all this together, that I could spend weeks, months, really, organizing around here. Not having a pattern is one thing, but having no order at all is another. You could use a catalogue system for your books. And some of the rooms are just piled with things. I don't imagine you even know what there is. You could use a listing of your art, and the antiques, your music. You have the most extensive collection of antique toys I've ever seen. When we have children..."

She trailed off, her hands fumbling in the soapy water. Children. Could they have children? What were the rules? Might she even now be pregnant?

They'd done nothing to prevent conception. Or she hadn't, she thought, pressing her lips together.

How could she know what he might have done?

"Listen to me." She shook her hair back, briskly rinsed the pot. "Old habits. Lists and plans and procedures. The only plan we need right now is what sort of dressing I should make for the salad."

"Kayleen."

"No, no, this is my performance here. You'll just have to find something to do until curtain time." She heard the sorrow in his voice, the regret. And had her answers. "Everything should be ready in an hour. So, out."

She turned, smiling, shooing at him. But her voice was too thick.

"I'll go and tend to Dilis, then."

"Good, that's fine."

He left the room, waited. When the tear fell from her eye he brought it from her cheek into his palm. And watched it turn to ashes.

Chapter 9

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He brought her flowers for the table, and they ate her meal with the candles glowing.

He touched her often, just a brush of fingers on the back of her hand. A dozen sensory memories stored for a endless time of longing.

He made her laugh, to hear the sound of it and store that as well. He asked her questions only to hear her voice, the rise and fall of it.

When the meal was done, he walked with her, to see how the moonlight shone in her hair.

Late into the night, he made love with her, as tenderly as he knew how. And knew it was for the last time.

When she slept, when he sent her deep into easy dreams, he was resolved, and he was content with what needed to be done.

She dreamed, but the dreams weren't easy ones. She was lost in the forest, swallowed by the mists that veiled the trees and smothered the path. Light shimmered through it, so drops of moisture glittered like jewels. Jewels that melted away at the touch of her hand, and left her nothing.

She could hear sounds—footsteps, voices, even music—but they seemed to come from underwater. Drowning sounds that never took substance. No matter how hard she tried to find the source, she could come no closer.

The shapes of trees were blurred, the color of the flowers deadened. When she tried to call out, her voice seemed to carry no farther than her own ears.

She began to run, afraid of being lost and being alone. She only had to find the way out. There was always a way out. And her way back to him. As panic gushed inside her, she tried to tear the mists away, ripping at them with her fingers, beating at them with her fists.

But her hands only passed through, and the curtain stayed whole.

Finally, through it, she saw the faint shadow of the house. The spear of its turrets, the sweep of its battlements were softened like wax in the thick air. She ran toward it, sobbing with relief. Then with joy as she saw him standing by the massive doors.

She ran to him now, her arms flung out to embrace, her lips curved for that welcoming kiss.

When her arms passed through him, she understood he was the mist.

And so was she.

She woke weeping and reaching out for him, but the bed beside her was cold and empty. She shivered, though the fire danced cheerfully to warm the room. A dream, just a dream. That was all. But she was cold, and she got out of bed to wrap herself in the thick blue robe.

Where was Flynn? she wondered. They always woke together, almost as if they were tied to each other's rhythms. She glanced out the windows as she walked toward the fire to warm her chilled hands. The sun was beaming and bright, which explained why Flynn hadn't been wrapped around her when she woke.

She'd slept away the morning.

Imagine that, she thought with a laugh. Slept away the morning, dreamed away the night. It was so unlike her.

So unlike her, she thought again as her hands stilled. Dreaming. She never remembered her dreams, not even in jumbled pieces. Yet this one she remembered exactly, in every detail, almost as though she'd lived it.

Because she was relaxed, she assured herself. Because her mind was relaxed and open. People were always saying how real dreams could be, weren't they? She'd never believed that until now.

If hers were going to be that frightening, that heartbreaking, she'd just as soon skip them.

But it was over, and it was a beautiful day. There were no mists blanketing the trees. The flowers were basking in the sunlight, their colors vibrant and true. The clouds that so often stacked themselves in layers over the Irish sky had cleared, leaving a deep and brilliant blue.

She would pick flowers and braid them into Dilis's mane. Flynn would give her another riding lesson. Later, perhaps she'd begin on the library. It would be fun to prowl through all the books. To explore them and arrange them.

She would *not* be obsessive about it. She wouldn't fall into that trap again. The chore would be one of pleasure rather than responsibility.

Throwing open the windows, she leaned out, breathed in the sweet air. "I've changed so much already," she murmured. "I like the person I'm becoming. I can be friends with her."

She shut her eyes tight. "Mom, I wish I could tell you. I'm so much in love. He makes me so happy. I wish I could let you know, and tell you that I understand now. I wish I could share this with you."

With a sigh, she stepped back, leaving the windows open.

He kept himself busy. It was the only way he could get through the day. In his mind, in his heart, he'd said goodbye to her the night before. He'd already let her go.

There was no choice but to let her go.

He could have kept her with him, drawing her into the long days, the endless nights of the next dreaming. His solitude would be broken, the loneliness diminished. And at the end of it, she would be there for that brief week. To touch. To be.

The need for her, the desire to have her close, was the strongest force he'd ever known. But for one.

Love.

Not just with the silken beauty of the dreams he'd shared with her. But with the pains and joys that came from a beating heart.

He would not deny her life, steal from her what she had known, what she would be. How had he ever believed he could? Had he really thought that his own needs, the most selfish and self-serving of them, outweighed the most basic of hers?

To live. To feel heat and cold, hunger, thirst, pleasure and pain.

To watch herself change with the years. To shake the hand of a stranger, embrace a loved one. To make children and watch them grow.

For all his power, all his knowledge, he could give her none of those things. All he had left for her was the gift of freedom.

To comfort himself, he pressed his face to Dilis's neck, drew in the scents of horse and straw, of oat and leather. How was it he could forget, each time forget the wrenching misery of these last hours? The sheer physical pain of knowing it was all ending again.

He was ending again.

"You've always been free. You know I have no claim to keep you here, should you choose to go." He lifted his head, stroking the stallion's head as he looked into his eyes. "Carry her away safe for me. And if you go beyond, I'll not count it against you."

He stepped back, drew his breath. There was work yet, and the morning was passing fast.

When it was done, the last spell, the thin blanket of forget spread at the edges of his prison, he saw Kayleen in his mind's eye.

She wandered through the gardens toward the verge of the forest. Looking for him, calling his name. The pain was like an arrow in the heart, almost driving him to his knees.

So, he was not prepared after all. He fisted his hands, struggled for composure. Resolved but not prepared. How would he ever live without her?

"She will live without me," he said aloud. "That I want more. We'll end it now, quick and clean."

He could not will her away, will her back into her world and into life. But he could drive her from him, so that the choice to go was her own.

Taking Dilis's reins, only for the comfort of contact, he walked for the last time as a man, for yet a century to come, through the woods toward home.

She heard the jingle of harness and the soft hoofbeats. Relieved, she turned toward the sound, walking quickly as Flynn came out of the trees.

"I wondered where you were." She threw her arms around his neck, and he let her. Her mouth pressed cheerfully to his, and he absorbed the taste of it.

"Oh, I had a bit of work." The words cut at his throat like shards of glass.
"It's a fine day for it, and for your travels."

"For my travels."

"Indeed." He gave her a little pat, then moved away to adjust the stirrups of Dilis's saddle. "I've cleared the path, so you'll have no trouble. You'll find your way easily enough. You're a resourceful woman."

"My way? Where?"

He glanced back, gave her an absent smile. "Out, of course. It's time for you to go."

"Go?"

"There, that should do." He turned to her fully. Every ounce of power he owned went into the effort. "Dilis will take you as far as you need. I'd go with you myself, but I've so much to see to yet. I saw you have one of those little pocket phones in your car. Fascinating things. I have to remember to get one myself for the study of it. You should be able to use it once you're over the border."

"I don't understand what you're saying." How could she when her mind had gone numb, when her heart had stopped beating. "I'm not going."

"Kayleen, darling, of course you are." He patted her cheek. "Not that it hasn't been a delight having you here. I don't know when I've been so diverted."

"Di... *diverted*?"

"Mmm. God, you're a tasty bit," he murmured, then leaned down to nip at her bottom lip. "Perhaps we could take just enough time to..." His hands roamed down her, giving her breasts a teasing squeeze.

"Stop!" She stumbled back, came up hard against Dilis, who shifted, restless. "A diversion? That's all this was to you? A way to pass the time?"

"Passed it well, didn't we? Ah, sweetheart, I gave as much pleasure as I got. You can't deny it. But we've both got things to get back to, don't we?"

"I love you."

She was killing him. "God bless the female heart." And he said it with a chuckle. "It's so generous." Then he lifted his brows, rolled his eyes under them. "Ah, don't be making a scene and spoil this parting moment. We've enjoyed each other, and that's the end. Where did you think this was going? It's time out of time, Kayleen. Now don't be stubborn."

"You don't love me. You don't want me."

"I loved you well enough." He winked at her. "And wanted you plenty." When the tears swam into her eyes, he threw up his hands as if exasperated. "For pity's sake, woman, I brought some magic and romance into a life you yourself said was tedious. I gave you some sparkle." He lifted her pearls with a fingertip.

"I never asked for jewels. I never wanted anything but you."

"Took them, though, didn't you? Just as another took the sparkles from me once. Do you think, after having a woman damn me to this place, I'd want another around for longer than it takes to amuse myself?"

"I'm not like her. You can't believe—"

"A woman's a woman," he said carelessly. "And I've given you a pretty holiday, with souvenirs besides. The least you can do is be grateful and go

along when I bid you. I've no more time for you, and none of the patience to dry your tears and cuddle. Up you go."

He lifted her, all but tossed her into the saddle.

"You said you wouldn't hurt me." She dragged the pearls over her head, hurled them into the dirt at his feet. She stared at him, and in his face she saw the savageness again, the brutality, and none of the tenderness. "You lied."

"You hurt yourself, by believing what wasn't there. Go back to your tame world. You've no place in mine."

He slapped a hand violently on Dilis's flank. The horse reared, then lunged forward.

When she was gone, swallowed up by the forest, Flynn dropped to his knees on the ground—and grieved.

Chapter 10

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She wanted to find anger. Bitterness. Anything that would overpower this hideous pain. It had dried up even her tears, had smothered any rage or sorrow before it could fully form.

It had all been a lie. Magic was nothing but deceit.

In the end, love hadn't been the answer. Love had done nothing but make her a fool.

Didn't it prove she'd been right all along? Her disdain of the happy ending her mother had regaled her with had been sense, not stubbornness. There

were no fairy tales, no loves that conquered all, no grand sweep of romance to ride on forever.

Letting herself believe, even for a little while, had shattered her.

Yet how could she not have believed? Wasn't she even now riding on a white horse through the forest? That couldn't be denied. If she'd misplaced her heart, she couldn't deny all that she'd seen and done and experienced. How did she, logical Kayleen, resolve the unhappy one with the magnificent other?

How could he have given her so much, shown her so much, and thought of her as only a kind of temporary entertainment? No, no, something was wrong. Why couldn't she think?

Dilis walked patiently through the trees as she pondered. It had all happened so quickly. This change in him had come like a fingersnap, and left her reeling and helpless. Now, she willed her mind to clear, to analyze. But after only moments, her thoughts became scattered and jumbled once again.

Her car was unmarked, shining in the sunlight that dappled through the trees. It sat tidily on a narrow path that ran straight as a ruler through the forest.

He'd cleared the path, he'd said. Well, he certainly was a man of his word. She slid off the horse, slowly circled the car. Not a scratch, she noted. Considerate of him. She wouldn't have to face the hassle that a wrecked car would have caused with the rental company.

Yes, he'd cleared that path as well. But why had he bothered with such a mundane practicality?

Curious, she opened the car door and sliding behind the wheel, turned the key. The engine sprang to life, purred.

Runs better than it did when I picked it up, she thought And look at that, to top things off, we have a full tank.

"Did you want me out of your life so badly, Flynn, that you covered all contingencies? Why were you so cruel at the end? Why did you work so hard to make me hate you?"

He'd given her no reason to stay, and every rational reason to go.

With a sigh, she got out of the car to say good-bye to Dilis. She indulged herself, running her hands over his smooth hide, nuzzling at his throat. Then she patted his flank. "Go back to him now," she murmured, and turned away to spare her heart as the horse pranced off.

Because she wanted some tangible reminder of her time there, she picked a small nosegay of wildflowers, twined the stems together, and regardless of the foolishness of the gesture, tucked them into her hair.

She got into the car again and began to drive.

The sun slanted in thin beams through the trees, angled over the little lane. As she glanced in her mirror, she saw the path shimmer, then vanish behind her in a tumble of moss and stones and brambles. Soon there would be nothing but the silent wood, and no trace that she had ever walked there with a lover.

But she would remember, always, the way he'd looked at her, the way he would press his lips to the heart of her hand. The way he'd bring her flowers and scatter them over her hair.

The way his eyes would warm with laughter, or heat with passion when... His eyes. What color were his eyes? Slightly dizzy, she stopped the car, pressed her fingers to her temples.

She couldn't bring his face into her mind, not clearly. How could she not know the color of his eyes? Why couldn't she quite remember the sound of his voice?

She shoved out of the car, stumbled a few steps. What was happening to her? She'd been driving from Dublin on the way to her bed-and-breakfast. A wrong turn. A storm. But what...

Without thinking, she took another step back down the now overgrown path. And her mind snapped clear as crystal.

Her breath was coming short. She turned, stared at the car, the clear path in front of it, the impassable ground behind.

"Flynn's eyes are green," she said. His face came clearly into her mind now. And when she took a cautious step forward, her memory of him went hazy.

This time she stepped back quickly, well back. "You wanted me to forget you. Why? Why if none of it mattered did you care if I remembered you or not? Why would it matter if I broke my heart over you?"

A little shaky, she sat down on the ground. And she began to do what she'd always done best. Be logical.

Flynn sat as he had on the night it had begun. In the chair in front of the fire in the tower. He'd watched in the flames until Kayleen had gotten into her car. After that, he hadn't been able to bear it, so he had hazed the vision with smoke.

He'd lost track of the time that he'd sat there now, chained by his own grief. He knew the day was passing. The slant of sunlight through the window had shortened and was dimming.

She would be beyond now, and would have forgotten him. That was for the best. There would be some confusion, of course. A loss of time never fully explained. But she would put that behind her as well.

In a year or two, or twenty, he might look into the fire again, and see how she was. But he would never open his mind to her in dreams, for that would be more torment than he could ever possibly bear.

She would be changed a little by what had passed between them. More open to possibilities, to the magic of life. He lifted the strings of pearls, watched them glow in the light of the dying fire. At least that was a gift she hadn't been able to hurl at his feet.

With the pearls wrapped around his fingers, he lowered his face into his hands. He willed the time to come when pain could strike only his mind, when every sense wasn't tuned so sharply that he could smell her even now. That soft scent that whispered in the air.

"Bring on the bloody night," he muttered and threw his head back.

Then he was stumbling to his feet, staring. She stood not three feet away. Her hair was tangled, her clothes torn. Scratches scored her hands and face.

"What trick is this?"

"I want my boon. I want what you promised me."

"What have you done?" His knees unlocked and he lunged toward her, grabbing her hard by the arms. "How are you hurt? Look at you. Your hands are all torn and bleeding."

"You put briars in my way." She gave him a shove, and such was his shock that she knocked him back two full steps. "You bastard. It took hours to get through them."

"Get through." His head snapped back, as if she'd slapped him. "You have to go. Go! Now! What's the time?" He was pushing her out of the room, and when that wasn't quick enough he began to drag her.

"I'm not going. Not until you grant my boon."

"You damn well are." Terrified, he tossed her over his shoulder and began to run. As she struggled and cursed him, he began to fly.

The night was closing in. Time that had dripped began to flood. He went as deep into the forest as he dared. The edges of his prison seemed to hiss

around him.

"There." Fear for her slicked his skin. "Your car's just up ahead. Get in it and go."

"Why? So I can drive a little farther and forget all this? Forget you? You'd have stolen that from me."

"I've no time to argue with you." He grabbed her shoulders and shook. "There is no time. If you stay past the last stroke of twelve, you're trapped here. A hundred years will pass before you can walk away again."

"Why do you care? It's a big house. A big forest. I won't get in your way."

"You don't understand. Go. This place is mine, and I don't want you here."

"You're trembling, Flynn. What frightens you?"

"I'm not frightened, I'm angry. You've abused my hospitality. You're trespassing."

"Call the cops," she suggested. "Call your Keepers. Or... why don't you just flick me out, the way you flick things in? But you can't, can you?"

"If I could, you'd be gone already." He yanked her a few steps toward the car, then swore when the ground in front of his boots began to spark and smoke. That was the edge of his prison.

"Big, powerful magician, but you can't get rid of me that way. You couldn't bring me here, and you can't send me away. Not with magic, because I have heart and soul. I have will. So you tried to drive me away with careless words. Cruel, careless words. You didn't think I'd see through them, did you? Didn't think I'd figure it all out. You forgot who you were dealing with."

"Kayleen." He took her hands now, squeezing desperately. "Do this thing I ask now, won't you?"

"A diversion," she said. "That's a crock. You love me."

"Of course I love you." He shook her harder, shouted so his voice boomed through the forest. "That's the bloody point. And if you care for me, you'll do what I tell you, and do it now."

"You love me." Her breath came out on a sob as she flung herself against him. "I knew it. Oh, I'm so angry with you. I'm so in love with you."

His arms ached to grip, to hold. He made himself push her away, hold her at arm's length. "Listen to me, Kayleen. Clear the stars out of your eyes and be sensible. I've no right to love you. Be quiet!" he snapped when she started to speak. "You remember what I told you about this place, about me. Do you feel my hands on you, Kayleen?"

"Yes. They're trembling."

"After midnight, one breath after, you won't feel them, or anything else. No touch, no contact. You'll pick a flower, but you won't feel the stem or the petals. Its perfume will be lost to you. Can you feel your own heart beat? Beating inside you? You won't. It's worse than death to be and yet not be. Day by day into the decades with nothing of substance. Nothing but what's in your mind. And, *a ghra*, you haven't even the magic to amuse yourself into some sanity. You'll be lost, little more than a ghost."

"I know." Like the dream, she thought. A mist within the mist.

"There's more. There can be no children. During the dreaming nothing can grow in you. Nothing can change in or of you. You will have no family, no comfort. No choice. This is my banishment. It will not be yours."

Though her nerves began to dance, her gaze stayed steady. "I'll have my boon."

He swore, threw up his hands. "Woman, you try me to the bone. All right, then. What will you?"

"To stay."

"No."

"You took a vow."

"And so I break it. What more can be done to me?"

"I'll stay anyway. You can't stop me."

But he could. There was one way to save her in the time left him. One final way. "You defeat me." He drew her close, rocked her against him. "You've a head like a rock. I love you, Kayleen. I loved you in dreams, when dreams were all there was for me. I love you now. It killed me to hurt you."

"I want to be with you, no matter how short the time or how long. We'll dream together until we can live together again."

He took her mouth. A deep kiss, a drugging one that spun in her head, blurred her vision. Joy settled sweetly in her heart.

When she sighed, he stepped back from her. "Five hundred years," he said quietly. "And only once have I loved. Only you."

"Flynn." She started to move toward him, but the air between them had hardened into a shield. "What is this?" She lifted her fisted hands to it, pushed. "What have you done?"

"There's a choice, and it's mine to make. I will not damn you to my prison, Kayleen. No power can sway me."

"I won't go." She pounded a fist on the shield.

"I know it, and understand it as well. I should have before. I would never leave you, either. *Manim astheee hu.*" My soul, he said in the language of his birth, is within you. "You brought me a gift, Kayleen. Love freely given."

The wind began to kick. From somewhere a sound boomed, slow and dull, like a clock striking the hour.

"I give you a gift in return. Life to be lived. I have a choice, one offered me long ago. A hundred years times five."

"What are you... No!" She flung herself at the shield, beat against it. "No, you can't. You'll die. You're five hundred years old. You can't live without your powers."

"It's my right. My choice."

"Don't do this." How many strikes of the clock had there been? "I'll go. I swear it."

"There's no time now. My powers," he said, lifting his arms. "My blood, my life. For hers." Lightning spewed from the sky, struck like a comet between them. "For foolishness, for pride, for arrogance I abjure my gifts, my skills, my birthright. And for love I cast them away."

His eyes met Kayleen's through the wind and light as the clock struck. "For love, I offer them freely. Let her forget, for there is no need for her to suffer."

He fisted his hands, crossed his arms over his chest. Braced as the world went mad around him. "Now."

And the clock struck twelve.

The world went still. Overhead the skies broke clear so the stars poured free. The trees stood as if carved out of the dark. The only sound was of Kayleen's weeping.

"Do I dream?" Flynn whispered. Cautious, he held out a hand, opened and closed his fist. Felt the movement of his own fingers.

The air began to stir, a soft, sweet breeze. An owl called.

"I am." Flynn dropped to his knees beside Kayleen, with wonder in his eyes. "I am."

"Flynn!" She threw her arms around him, dragging him close, breathing him in. "You're real. You're alive."

"I am restored." He dropped his head on her shoulder. "I am freed. The Keepers."

He was breathless, fighting to clear his mind. Drawing her back, he framed her face in his hands. Solid, warm. His.

"You're free." She pressed her hands against his. The tears that fell from her eyes shimmered into diamonds on the ground between them. "You're alive! You're here."

"The Keepers said I have atoned. I was given love, and I put the one I loved before myself. Love." He pressed his lips to her brow. "They told me it is the simplest, and most potent of magic. I took a very long time to learn it."

"So have I. We saved each other, didn't we?"

"We loved each other. *Manim astheee hu*," he said again. "These are the words I give you." He opened his hand and held out the pearls. "Will you take them, and this gift, as a symbol of betrothal? Will you take them, and me?"

"I will."

He drew her to her feet. "Soon, then, for I've a great respect for time, and the wasting of it. Now, look what you've done." He trailed his fingers gently over the scratch on her cheek. "There's a mess you've made of yourself."

"That's not very romantic."

"I'll fill you with romance, but first I'll tend those hurts." He scooped her off her feet.

"My mother's going to be crazy about you."

"I'm counting on it." Because he wanted to savor, he walked for a bit. "Will I like Boston, do you think?"

"Yes, I think you will." She twirled a lock of his hair around her fingers. "I could use someone who knows something about antiques in my family business."

"Is that so? Ha. A job. Imagine that. I might consider that, if there was thought of opening a branch here in Ireland, where a certain wildly-in-love married couple could split their time, so to speak."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

She laughed as he spun her around, pressed her lips to his, and held on tight as they leaped into space and flew toward home.

And happily-ever-afters.