

Broken Dolls

A novel of paranormal suspense
set in the world of The Telepathic Clans

Chapter 1

For the third night in a row, the office light went off at 7:30. Three minutes later, the man I was following walked out the front door of the building wearing his jacket and carrying his briefcase. He turned right, walked two blocks and turned right again. Another block and he walked into a pub. He sat at the same table and ordered shepherd's pie and a pint for the third night in a row.

Following this guy was getting very old.

I tried the shepherd's pie the first night, lamb stew the second. Looking at the menu, I decided on the steak and kidney pie. I didn't have high hopes it would be much better than the previous meals in this place. I wished he'd find a pub with a cook who knew how to cook. Congealed grease is not one of my favorites. If this assignment lasted much longer, I was going to start billing a hazard surcharge for the food. Lousy fish and chips three days in a row for lunch, and terrible shepherd's pie three days in a row for supper. No wonder he was thirty pounds overweight.

He took the Tube to the train and walked in the front door of his house at 10:00, again for the third night in a row.

By the time I got off the train back in London, it was almost 11:00. It would be after midnight when I got home and I needed to be back at his place at 7:00 in the morning.

I ducked into the Hilton to see if I could get a bed for the night. Passing the lounge, I spotted a good-looking Yank drinking alone. Scanning his thoughts, I learned he had finished his meetings for the week. He was looking forward to spending the next three days exploring London without the wife and kids before flying back to the States on Sunday.

I proceeded to the loo and changed clothes in one of the stalls, pulling the travel dress from my bag and shaking it out. I loved that dress. You couldn't wrinkle it with an iron. I replaced it in my bag with my sweater and jeans, shimmied into it and changed shoes. After unbraiding my hair and pulling a brush through it, I drifted back into the lounge and had the barman pull me a pint.

Sitting at the table next to the Yank, I sipped my beer and tried to act bored. It didn't take me long to attract his attention. It never does. There were a dozen people in the room, and every one of them was watching me. My problem is getting men to leave me alone.

Reading his mind and emotions, I could tell he was excited. I boosted my Charisma and added a bit of Empathic Projection to send him feelings of lust. We retired to his room before I even finished my drink.

He was attractive, tall and dark haired with a fit body, but I had to be up early in the morning. I slipped into his mind and triggered his sleep center. I called the front desk to leave a wakeup time and place my breakfast order. Then I showered and slipped between the freshly laundered sheets on the other side of the king-sized bed.

Breakfast the next morning was the best meal I'd had all week, and I had a bounce in my step as I boarded the train. At 7:00, my assignment walked out of his front door and headed to the train. I braced myself for another boring day.

Sitting in the coffee stop across the street from his building, I mused on why his wife thought he was worth keeping, let alone why she thought someone else would want someone so boring. But she was willing to pay, and my rent was due.

It would have been so much easier if he were a norm. I could just read his mind and know if he was screwing around. I'd give her my report, charge her a thousand pounds, and be done with it.

As distasteful as following cheating husbands is, I'd rather be sitting there reading a book than selling my high-end services. It wasn't so bad when I was paid ten thousand pounds to seduce a norm. But with another telepath, unless his shields were leaky, I couldn't be sure if I was seducing a cheater or inducing an honest man to cheat. That was part of why I charged twenty-five thousand for that service. The price discouraged a lot of women, and if it didn't, I made enough to deal with my guilty conscience.

I met the wife of my assignment for lunch on Saturday.

"Meg, I haven't seen anything that would indicate he's cheating on you," I said. "He's working ten hours a day. He goes straight to work in the morning, and in the evening he has dinner at the pub and goes straight home."

His wife was pretty and thirty years younger than he was. I wondered what he'd done to win her in the first place.

"Something doesn't feel right. I know he's hiding something. Can you stay on the job another week?" Meg Whitman asked.

"Yes, but I need the money in advance. I'm burning all of my time keeping him under surveillance. Not to be offensive, but I've had clients try to back out of payment when an investigation doesn't produce any results."

She pulled money out of her wallet and paid me, cash, no arguments. How many people carry five thousand in cash? She'd paid cash up front the previous week as well.

"Miss Kendrick, I'm not crazy and I'm not paranoid. Is there any chance he's carrying on an affair at work?"

"I'm not seeing any evidence of it," I said. "I can see through the window of his office all day, and I've checked his schedule. His presence is accounted for. But I will admit, sometimes an illicit affair may be an occasional meeting. For all I know, he may already have an assignation planned for two weeks from Monday."

I thought back on that conversation the following Thursday when he left his office at 3:00 in the afternoon. He walked five blocks to a hotel, bypassed the front desk, and took the elevator to the fifth floor. I got on with him, but got off at the fourth floor. Pelting up the stairs, I opened the door to the hall in time to see him enter a room. A woman, older and plainer than his wife, kissed him and closed the door.

To my surprise, she was a norm. Now, I'm not prejudiced, but it's generally acknowledged that sex with the most repressed, homely telepath is a lot better than sex with the most beautiful, passionate norm. A telepath shares their emotions and sensations with a sexual partner, enhancing the experience in a way a norm never could. There had to be something else going on there besides the physical aspects of sex.

I extended my awareness, and entered her mind. I had to be careful, because he was in her mind, too. She definitely thought he was the best lover she'd ever had. It didn't take long to figure out why he wanted her. I withdrew, feeling a bit sick.

Shit. How was I going to break this to his wife?

I called Meg Whitman and arranged to have lunch with her the next day. We met in the town where she lived. She chose a nice little café with checked tablecloths and a fresh carnation in a bud vase on every table.

“Your husband is meeting a woman named Gloria Watson at a hotel called the Western Grand. They get together twice a month on Thursday afternoons. She’s a norm and he met her on the Internet,” I told her. She got a bit pale and her mouth set into a grim line. Her eyes got a little glassy.

“Why? Do you know?” she almost whispered.

This was the hard part. I’d hoped she wouldn’t ask, but they always do.

“They’re having sex. Sex that most people would consider rather kinky.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “So he’s going to this woman for something he doesn’t think I’d do.”

“Meg, it’s something you can’t do,” I said. “He uses compulsion on her. What she remembers isn’t what happens.”

The blood completely drained from Meg’s face and she looked sick. “Does he hurt her?” her voice came out thin and shaky.

“Yes, and other things. Are you sure you want to know everything? I don’t consider myself squeamish, but it’s really something I’d rather not talk about. It’s in my report.”

“That bad, huh?” She wiped her mouth with her napkin, her hand shaking, and taking her purse excused herself to go to the ladies’ room.

There aren’t any laws against using compulsion on an innocent norm, primarily because norms don’t know it can be done. It’s frowned upon by telepaths. Of course, all of us know how to do it, but using it on a sexual partner is essentially rape. Considering Meg’s husband’s perversions, it would be difficult to find a willing partner.

We parted ways. If she wanted more details, they were contained in the report I gave her. I urged her to burn it before she read it. I put the really nauseating part in a separate appendix to make that easier. She might burn it, but I was pretty sure she’d read it first. We’re like normal humans in a lot of ways.

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The ten thousand pounds I’d made off Meg Whitman’s pain had me set through this month and probably next, but it wasn’t enough to take a holiday.

It was a lovely late spring day and a lot of other people were on holiday. The streets were packed with tourists. I’m not a big fan of kids, and there were lots of kids out that day.

I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. Meg had eaten at the café, but I just had tea. I wondered if she’d be able to keep it down after she read that report. I stopped into a pub in the West End and ordered a pint and a salad. While I was waiting, I checked my messages. Business was looking good. The first one was a potential client. The second message made me sit up in my chair. I hadn’t heard the voice in ten years, but it wasn’t one I was likely to forget.

The caller spoke in fluent Irish-accented Welsh. A deep, pleasant, calm male voice. I couldn’t ignore the message, mysterious though it was.

“Rhiannon, this is Lord O’Byrne. Please come see me. I have a job for you. A ticket awaits you at Gatwick for a flight at two o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

No one calls me Rhiannon, mostly because I don’t tell people my name. I’ve used the initials R.B. since going away to university. But he’d paid for that university education, and never asked me for anything until now.

I returned the other call, setting up an appointment with the woman later that afternoon.

“How shall I recognize you?” she asked me.

“I’m about five foot eight with ginger hair and green eyes. I’ll be wearing a sweater and jeans.”



I walked into the restaurant to meet my prospective client, scanned the diners and slipped into the booth with her. She started to say something, then her eyes widened and nothing came out of her open mouth.

“Mrs. Sanders? I’m RB Kendrick,” I said, extending my hand.

“Oh, my,” she breathed. “The description you gave me is wholly inadequate.” She stared at me for a minute, then said, “Copper.”

Confused, I looked around. There weren’t any police in there. “Huh?” I said intelligently.

“Your hair. It’s not ginger, it’s like polished copper. It shines.”

Women notice different things than men. As I suspected from our conversation on the phone, Sylvia Sanders was a norm and so was her husband. What I read in her mind matched what she told me verbally. It’s so much easier when clients tell you the truth. I understood why she had suspicions about her husband. The changes in his behavior and schedule screamed other woman to me also.

“So what do you want, Mrs. Sanders? A report, photos, a confrontation? A basic report of what and who he is or is not doing will run a thousand pounds. Photos catching them in the act are another thousand, if I can get them. Unlike the telly, most people don’t conveniently provide evidence in front of windows with the shades open. If you want to confront him in the act, I’ll accompany you for an additional fifteen hundred pounds.”

She blanched at my rates.

“If what he’s doing isn’t obvious, and I have to put him under surveillance for an extended period, my rates are five thousand a week.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” she said with a quiver in her voice. She gave me a thousand and I wrote down all the pertinent information.

“I’ll check on it this afternoon. I’m going to be out of town for a few days,” I told her. “If I don’t find anything by tomorrow morning, I’ll call you when I get back.”

“Thank you, Miss Kendrick. This has been going on for several months. I don’t think it’s going to change.”

“Mrs. Sanders, you need to think about what you’re going to do if your suspicions are correct. Are you going to confront him and hope he ends it? Or do you plan to divorce him? It’s something you should decide before hand.”

“I want a divorce,” she said. “I know he’s cheating on me. He called a little while ago and told me he had to work late this evening.”



Edward Sanders worked about a mile away. I took the Tube to his building. About twenty minutes after I arrived, I saw him come out and head for the Tube station. Obviously, he wasn’t working late.

I followed him and sat behind him on the train. I read his mind to get his destination, then sat back and used my phone to check my email.

When we left the tube station, I took a slightly different route than Sanders to reach the house of his mistress. I stood across the street and watched as she answered the door for him. I could understand why he was attracted to her. She was even more beautiful than what I had expected from the images in his mind.

I read her mind, also. She was the lonely trophy wife of a successful businessman who traveled often. Edward Sanders was good looking, and twenty years younger than his mistress's husband. She wasn't in love with him, but considered him a wonderful diversion. He wasn't in love with her, either, but was infatuated that such a rich and beautiful young woman wanted him.

The shades in the living room weren't drawn, and the amorous couple started their activities immediately upon his entering the house. I pulled my camera from my bag and walked across the street and across her lawn. There was a small tree in an ugly plastic pot sitting in the middle of the lawn, and I had to detour around it.

I could see glimpses of the lovers through the living room window, but reflections in the glass prevented me from a good view. It appeared he was doing her on the dining room table. This was going to be the easiest thousand pounds I'd ever made.

I was so focused on what was going on inside that I didn't see the hole hidden by the small tree sitting in front of it. I should have realized what a potted tree was doing on the lawn. Someone planned to plant it.

I took a step and my left foot found only air. The world spun around and the camera slipped out of my grasp. My chin hit something hard and I bit my tongue.

When I came to my senses, my right leg was sticking straight up and the rest of me lay twisted in the bottom of a hole. My chin felt like it was on fire, and my tongue hurt like mad. It took me some time to get myself situated and crawl out onto the grass. I looked back. The hole was about two feet deep. I spit, and a spot of bright red blood landed on the green lawn.

I picked up my camera and checked it to make sure it was still working. Looking around, I didn't see anyone. I waited until my head stopped spinning, then crept up to the window. They were still going at it on the table. I took some pictures, but had to wait for them to shift positions so I could get his face. After a few minutes, I had all I needed.

A sudden noise behind me caused me to turn around. A white-haired woman with binoculars hanging from her neck stuck her head out of the window of the house next door.

"You clumsy cow," she shouted at me. "Get out of the way. You're blocking the view."

I retreated in a hurry, and she raised the binoculars, trained on the window through which I'd been snapping pictures.

Case closed. I walked back to the Tube and went home, holding a handkerchief to my still-bleeding mouth.

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I stared at myself in the mirror. My chin was scraped from the point up to my swollen lower lip and oozed blood. My tongue still bled and it was swollen so badly I had trouble drinking. It hurt like hell.

Monica? I sent telepathically, **Where are you?**

At the clinic, she replied. **Some of us work for a living.**

I need to come see you. Can you fit me in?

What have you done to yourself this time? she asked, exasperation clearly evident in her mental voice.

Don't ask.

It took me forty minutes to get to the clinic where she worked. Monica is my best friend, one of my only close friends. She's a Healer, a telepath with the Hakizimana, or Healing, Gift. She's also a doctor. I met her when I went to her clinic with a sprained ankle that wouldn't heal. It turned out to be broken.

We go out clubbing and have occasional picnics in the country. We even hit the museums and symphony sometimes. She treats me for free. At least, she doesn't charge me. But she always insists that I tell her how I got banged up. She calls it cheap entertainment.

Her secretary waived me through when I walked in the door. The patients who were waiting gave me nasty looks.

Monica took one look at me and started laughing. "Oh, I can't wait to hear this one. Goddess, Rhi, you look like you fell in a hole."

She healed me, and I felt a lot better. But before she let me escape, she insisted on hearing the whole story. By the time I'd finished telling her about the old-lady voyeur, she was laughing so hard tears were running down her face.

Back at home, I checked the pictures on my camera, preparing to send them to Sylvia Sanders. The first picture horrified me. The camera evidently hit the ground the same time I did. Upside down and crooked, it showed me with my eyes closed, my chin hitting the edge of the hole, and my tongue protruding an inch past my teeth.

I deleted it. If Monica ever saw it, she'd want to blow it up into a poster to hang on her wall.

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## Chapter 2

Arriving in Dublin, I walked through the terminal and into the reception area. People stood around holding up signs with names on them, indicating they were waiting for a stranger. The voluptuous beauty standing near the baggage area didn't need a sign to tell me she was waiting for me. For the knowledgeable, a succubus, or Druid as they prefer to call themselves in Ireland, is hard to miss.

"Miss Kendrick? I'm Morrighan O'Byrne. Do you have any other luggage?" the raven-haired woman with startling blue eyes said. She was dressed in a blue wrap dress and heels. A single strand of pearls hung around her neck. Every man in the place was ogling her.

"This is it," I replied, holding my carryon.

She nodded. "If you'll come with me."

We walked out of the terminal and down the sidewalk to where a black limousine was waiting. Her heels made her close to my height. She was an elegant woman and every detail of her attire was immaculate. I had a hard time imagining her wearing a pair of jeans. She would fit in at the Paris fashion shows or in an old Grace Kelley or Audrey Hepburn movie. I was wearing my usual sweater and jeans, my hair plaited in a braid, and felt a bit shabby walking next to her.

Two men dressed in black lounged against the long car and another man sat behind the wheel. I hadn't seen an O'Byrne Protector in years, but they were instantly recognizable.

It was seventy kilometers from the airport to Wicklow, so I sat back and made myself comfortable.

"That looks painful," Maureen said.

Self-consciously, I touched my chin. "A little bit," I said. "It's healing."

I could tell she wanted to ask how I got hurt, but I didn't volunteer anything and she politely refrained.

"Lord O'Byrne has asked me to give you some background," Morrighan said. "But you'll have to discuss any business arrangements with him."

"You're his daughter, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yes."

“You look a lot like Maureen,” I said.

She looked surprised. “You knew Maureen?”

“We were cousins. I didn’t know her well, though. She was much older than me.” I cocked my head and asked, “Are we related?”

Morrighan shook her head. “My mother is one of the servants.” She gave me a faint smile and changed the subject. “The reason Lord O’Byrne asked you to come is we have a missing girl. He’s hoping you might be able to find her,” Morrighan said.

“How old is she?” I asked.

“Nineteen. She’s a student at Trinity College in Dublin. She disappeared about a week ago. No one was worried at first. You know how it is at that age. But when she didn’t show up for classes on Monday, her roommate called me. No one has seen her since last Friday. She had a date that night.”

“Have you talked with her boyfriend?”

She shrugged. “There is no boyfriend that we know of. We think she had a date. She could have gone hunting.”

“Hunting?” I asked. “She’s a succubus?”

“Yes,” she said, her lip curling slightly in distaste at my use of the vulgar name. “Her name is Myrna Kavanagh. She’s from a small village near Limerick. Her family pledges fealty to O’Byrne.”

“How well trained is she?” I asked. “Not as a succubus, but in the use of her Gifts.”

Morrighan shook her head. “Probably not very well. She grew up in a telepathic village, but you know how it is in such places. She was probably taught how to control her Gifts, but didn’t get real training. There probably wasn’t anyone truly qualified to teach such things as Neural Disruption.”

The O’Byrne Clan was centered at an estate in County Wicklow. A town and several outlying villages were entirely populated by telepaths. But telepaths also lived throughout the rest of the country. Usually they clustered together in villages, but a fair number lived in the cities. Most gave fealty to one of the three main Irish Clans, O’Byrne, O’Neill, or O’Donnell, though some forego the protection and duties of that allegiance.

I knew what growing up in a small village separated from a Clan was like. Myrna probably had only a rudimentary understanding of her Gifts. Summers at the O’Byrne estate had given me the kind of rigorous training the large Clans provide. But I had been lucky. It was the kind of opportunity that probably hadn’t been available to Myrna.

“Was her mother a succubus?” I asked.

“We prefer the term Druid,” Morrighan replied. “When you speak with the Lord and his Lady, they would be offended at the other word.”

It was obvious I’d offended Morrighan.

“I apologize,” I said. “My cousin is a Druid. She was my roommate at university and used the other term, so I guess I’ve gotten out of the habit of polite speech. I’ll try to remember.”

Morrighan shrugged. “Myrna’s mother was a carrier. I don’t think her father was around very much. I think there’s only one Druid in the village where she grew up.”

At first, I didn’t understand what ‘a carrier’ was, but then I realized what she meant. The succubus gene had to be inherited from both parents for the child, always a girl, to have the Gift. As to not having much contact with her father, I was familiar with that. I’ve met my father a few times. He used to stop by occasionally when I was a little girl. Like Myrna and Morrighan, I’m a bastard, and my father never seemed comfortable around me.

“The roommate, is she a Druid?” I asked, switching my terminology.

“No,” Morrighan said. “She’s a Clan telepath. I don’t think they’re very close.”

“Does she have many friends?”

“One close friend. If you decide to help us, I’ll introduce you.”

I don’t know if I let my surprise show. “What makes you think I wouldn’t help you?”

Morrighan had the grace to look embarrassed. “You’re not Clan.”

Okay, time to get a few things straight. I’d never completely understood why Lord O’Byrne treated me so well, or spent a small fortune to pay for my education, but I was damned glad he did. I leaned forward, making sure I had her attention. “Morrighan, I may not have sworn allegiance to Clan O’Byrne, but I owe a great deal to Lord and Lady O’Byrne. They have the right to ask me to jump off a cliff. And if I could figure out a way to do it without getting hurt too badly, I’d probably do it.”

I don’t know what my expression was, but she nodded, her eyes wide. Damn. I get too intense sometimes. Dial it back, RB.

“Was there anyone she was seeing regularly? Any patrons?” I sat back and tried to project a more casual attitude.

Morrighan shook her head. “She’s only nineteen. She doesn’t have any patrons, though I’m sure she was cutting a swath through the college boys.” She paused, and then said, “Rhiannon, I work with the government. My official title is Director of Government Affairs for O’Byrne, Limited. I deal with Parliament and the ministries and sometimes with foreign embassies. I attend a lot of affairs. Receptions, fundraisers, that sort of thing. Myrna thinks it’s exciting, all the power and glitz. I took her to a couple of embassy receptions.” Pursing her lips, she said, “I don’t know who she might have met, and Dublin is a big city.”

I studied the woman in front of me. It had been a long time since Maureen died, over fifteen years. Morrighan looked so much like her, but as beautiful as she was, she lacked something, a special spark perhaps, that her older sister had. I had only met Maureen twice and she was stunning. She stopped conversations and drew the eyes of men and women alike. Succubi are judged primarily on their beauty and sophistication. Morrighan had the latter, but fell below the top tier on looks. She still would have topped the charts in Hollywood.

“Is she very beautiful?” I asked.

A soft, sad smile crossed her face, “Pretty, as we all are. Very young. She’s still so young. She may be beautiful when she matures, but more like me, not in the same class as you or Maureen. She has thick brown hair, cut a little longer than shoulder length. Irish blue eyes. Shorter than I am and a bit thinner. Not as busty. She stands out in a crowd to be sure. But if you put ten Druids in a room, her outstanding attribute would be how young and innocent she looked.”

She projected an image for me, and turning it over in my mind, I thought her description was very apt.

“Beautiful enough to stand out,” I said, “and young enough to attract the wrong sort of attention.”

Morrighan nodded. “There’s something else you should know. We’ve heard reports of attacks on Druids, what you call succubi, in Washington, New York and Paris.”

“Paris?” I tried to remember. There was something about Paris recently in the news.

“Yes, it made the news. There was a pitched battle in the street in broad daylight.”



I remembered seeing something on the telly in the pub at the airport. I'd have to pay more attention. A battle between telepaths would be rather spectacular. We normally try to keep a much lower profile than that.

"That's why Lord O'Byrne is worried," Morrighan continued. "He's afraid Myrna might have been kidnapped."

"Telepaths trying to kidnap succubi, I mean Druids?" That made me feel extremely uneasy. A young girl disappearing was one thing, but a coordinated effort to kidnap women because of their Talents cast a nasty shadow on her disappearance. I suddenly felt cold.

I sat back in my seat and thought about what she'd told me so far. When a succubus has sex with a man, his climax causes a reaction in the succubus. She drains his life energy by about seventy-five percent, which puts him into an immediate stupor until his energy levels can recharge. This can't be blocked by mental shielding, and the succubus can't control it either. It's automatic, and the effect is the same on telepaths as on norms.

"Do you have any idea why?" I asked.

"Clan O'Donnell has evidence that they're being sold in the sex trade," she said.

"That's damn risky. Druids are powerful and dangerous. I wouldn't want to be within fifty yards of you if you were angry."

A couple of millennia ago, the Druids gave the Romans fits. Too few telepaths, too many Romans and we faded into legend and myth.

"Drugs and compulsion," she answered. "Even we can't detoxify some drugs quickly enough to prevent their effects."

That was true, and scary. I filed it away in the back of my mind.

The femme fatale sitting in front of me warred with a vision in my mind of a white-clad Druid priestess.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"No, not at all," Morrighan said. I saw a light in her eyes. She sat up a little straighter and a smile played with the corners of her mouth.

"I have an aunt and a cousin who are Druids. They're professional courtesans. But you don't do that, do you? Are you a priestess?"

The expression on her face softened. "I use my Gifts for O'Byrne. I seduce politicians, businessmen, and others we want to influence. I go hunting because I enjoy the Glow I get from having sex. But yes, I was trained as a Druid, and I preside over the high festivals for Clan O'Byrne. We still hold to the old ways and worship the Goddess."

Not just a priestess, but a High Priestess. Terminology wasn't just trivial to her. Druid hierarchy isn't explicit, but if she presided over ceremonies, it was because the other Druids deferred to her. She was very young for such an honor. I opened my mouth to ask another question and then stopped. I felt my face grow warm. Even for someone as nosy as I am, the question was really out of bounds.

An amused smile blossomed on her face. She regarded me for a full minute.

"Go ahead. Ask."

"I, well, you said you'd been trained. Did you inherit your position from another priestess?"

"What a delicate way of asking the question," she laughed. "Yes, I received the Death Gift from my predecessor."

At the moment of death, Morrighan had held the hand of the old High Priestess. When priestess's soul left her body, her memories had transferred into Morrighan. The memories of the old priestess, and those she had received from her predecessors.

“How long?” I breathed.

“Twenty-five centuries. Unbroken back to the early days of the Tuatha de Danaan,” she said. “Everything since the Cataclysm.”

Goddess. The woman had the memories of all the High Priestesses of Clan O’Byrne. I was looking at someone who held the wisdom of the ages. All I could do was stare at her with my mouth hanging open.



### Chapter 3

The O’Byrne estate near Wicklow looked as picture-postcard lovely as ever. The lawns were manicured, and the flowers were blooming like regiments of soldiers on parade. The gray stone mansion hadn’t changed.

Morrighan led me to a room on the second floor and left me to freshen up. She didn’t say it directly, but her eyes and manner told me she didn’t think I was dressed appropriately to meet the Lord. I took the hint, taking a quick shower and changing into a dress. Looking at the clothes I’d brought, I wondered if they would dress for dinner tonight. On the occasions I’d been there before, I was either a child or still a teenager and the expectations were low. But my mother had always brought eveningwear and dressed for formal dinners.

Shown into the Lord’s study, I stood at the door, studying the man who had paid for my education. He had given me a graduation present that allowed me the freedom to spend a year touring Europe, and always treated me as though I was kin, though we shared no blood. I was a relation of his Lady, but I’d never even visited my relatives at Clan O’Neill.

Fergus, Lord O’Byrne, had a full head of gray hair. Clean-shaven, tall and thin, he didn’t look like a Lord, or one of the most powerful telepaths on the planet. He always had such a kind look on his face and a soft, gentle tone in his voice. Indeed, that is how he had always treated me, with kindness and gentleness. For over a hundred years, he had guided the Clan through Irish independence, two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Silent War between telepaths in the forties and fifties.

“Rhiannon, it’s so good to see you,” he smiled as he rose from his desk, and surprised me by abandoning decorum to cross the room and give me a hug. “Let me look at you,” he said, holding me by the shoulders at arms’ length. “Oh, my, you have certainly grown up. You’re spectacular, my dear. Absolutely stunning. Come, sit and have some tea.”

His gaze dropped slightly from my eyes. “Did someone hit you?”

My face warmed. “Remember when I was a gawky, clumsy teenager, always tripping over my own feet? I grew out of the gawky teenager part.”

The corners of his mouth twitched as he made a valiant effort to keep a straight face. He led me to a small table and motioned to a chair. I poured tea for both of us.

“Thank you for coming,” he said.

Guilt washed over me in a wave. He deserved better than I had given him.

“My Lord, I will always come when you call. I know I’m probably a disappointment to you, but please don’t think I’m ungrateful for all you’ve done for me. I always remember.”

He smiled, “It was my pleasure, my dear. But it’s good to hear you say it. I’ve never thought you ungrateful, and you haven’t disappointed me. You’re still very young, and we live a long time. The Goddess grants us the luxury to be many things in our lives. But I do keep track of you, and am very proud of the reputation you’ve built in your profession. That’s why I’ve asked you here, to engage your services.”

“My Lord, you don’t have to pay me for assisting you.”

Shaking his head, he said, “Nonsense, and don’t argue with me. Your time and expertise have value.” He swept a hand out to indicate the room, the estate beyond the large windows. “I’m not exactly destitute. Rhiannon, don’t ever diminish yourself by giving your services away. People don’t value what they get for free. I believe your normal rates are five thousand pounds a week plus expenses?”

I nodded.

“I’ll give you a twenty-five thousand pound advance, and when the assignment is over you’ll invoice me with an expense report. I want your full attention on this. I believe Morrighan has briefed you. Will you find Myrna for me?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, “I’ll do my best.”

He opened his mind to me and gave me what he knew of the situation. His knowledge of the events in the U.S. and Paris were far more detailed than what Morrighan had told me. Three succubi of Clan O’Donnell had been in Paris on holiday with a small security detail when they were attacked by thirty men from Clan Gordon. None of the attackers had survived.

One thing I learned, peripheral to this issue, was that he’d named a new heir.

“You’ve named a succubus as your heir?” I blurted out, surprised.

He smiled. “We prefer the term Druid, though I know the other word is used outside Ireland. But yes, a truly unique young lady, Maureen’s daughter.”

He seemed to study my face. I squirmed a bit under his gaze, not sure what he sought.

“I think you’ll meet her,” he said, and a shiver ran through me at his tone and the look on his face. “She attracts people. She’s an even more powerful telepath than you are.”

That surprised me. I have never heard of anyone with more than fifteen Gifts, and there aren’t many telepaths I would hesitate to match. I thought about it. A succubus with an additional six Gifts could possibly be stronger than I am.

As I took my leave, he said, “I assume you didn’t bring anything appropriate for dinner this evening.”

I shook my head. Hell, I didn’t own anything he would consider appropriate to wear for a formal dinner. “That’s okay,” I said, “I can eat in the kitchen.”

“No, you can’t. I’ll have Morrighan find something that will fit. You’re kin, not a servant, Rhiannon, and in this house you’ll sit at table.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d never understood why he treated me the way he did. My puzzlement must have shown on my face.

“Rhiannon, I’ve known your mother for seventy years, and my Lady and I have always considered her a good friend. We’ve engaged her services several times, and she’s always acted on our behalf as if she were part of the Clan.”

A brief flash of anger crossed his face, and I could feel the anger with my Empathy, but he suppressed it.

“Your father hasn’t acted toward you with honor. You’re kin to my wife, and we do take honor seriously. I spoke to Corwin about this once, and was very displeased by his response.”

Corwin O’Neill is my grandfather, my father’s father, and Lord of Clan O’Neill.

“You are capable of great things,” he continued. “I want you to consider O’Byrne a friend. No one truly knows the future, and what we do now can change it.” He paused for some time, then softly said, “Rhiannon, you’ve always treated me, not just with respect, but something more. An old man appreciates that.”

Morrighan awaited me in the hall. Looking me up and down, she said, "I might be able to find you a dress, but I won't promise how well it will fit. What size shoe do you wear?"

We went upstairs and rummaged through closets in several rooms. An old gown of Maureen's proved to be almost large enough in the chest, although displaying more cleavage than I think the designer planned, but it was a bit short. Her shoes were too small. I thought it was a little weird that clothes from a woman dead sixteen years were still hanging in her room. A dress from another closet was good for length, but I was afraid I'd split the zipper even if we got it closed. The top was woefully inadequate.

In the end, we took the dress of Maureen's to a seamstress and Morrighan begged her to add some lace for length. She did in just a few minutes. Taking me to her own room, Morrighan sorted through a jewelry box to find accessories for me. My cream shoes, the only heels I'd brought, didn't match the gown, but she decided they went well enough with the green of the dress.

I'd never sat at table in such a formal setting, but I managed not to disgrace myself. Afterward, the women and men retired to separate parlors and Lady O'Byrne introduced me as her niece, which technically I am. After the obligatory glass of sherry, which I despise, Morrighan approached me.

"Would you care to retire to a more comfortable setting?" she asked with a grin. "The hunting here at the estate isn't too bad, though I'm rather tired of the selection. Or we could go to a pub I know near Wicklow. It will have a band and the hunting there is usually quite delicious."

"That sounds good," I smiled a genuine smile for the first time in hours. "I'm really more of a pint-in-a-pub type of girl. This sort of formal decorum isn't really comfortable."

She chuckled, "I can tell. Did you bring a hunting dress? If not, I'm sure we can find something in Maureen's closet, but it will probably be out of date."

I realized she had made a common mistake. "I thought I'd told you. Morrighan, I'm not a Druid. I'm more than happy to go pub-hopping with you, but I'm not a hunter."

Her face blazed crimson. "I apologize. I guess I just assumed ..."

I shook my head. "I have an aunt and a cousin who are. Both my great-grandmothers were. I didn't get the Gift, just the looks. But as to a clubbing dress, I do have something appropriate."

Morrighan chuckled. "I've seen a picture of your great-grandmother, and you certainly did get the looks."

I wasn't quite sure how to interpret that. I assumed she meant my father's grandmother. I had never seen a picture of the old witch and she'd died about the time I was born.

When I came downstairs wearing a green one-shoulder micro-miniskirt, the reactions were fairly typical. The men openly gaped. I'm used to women turning a bit green, but Morrighan surprised me. Instead of envy, or worse, the suppressed anger of jealousy, I thought her smile would split her face.

"May the Goddess protect the men of Ireland," she exclaimed. My mood lightened and I returned her smile. I was beginning to like her.