

Avenging the O'Donnell's

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AVENGING THE O'DONNELL'S

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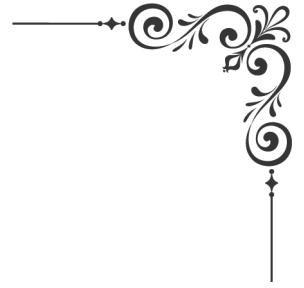
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By Dana Littlejohn



BLURB:

Ian O'Donnell was the only one to survive the massacre of his family. During the long wait to avenge them, he met Charlene and fell in love. With love in his life again, Ian hesitates to do the duty he has patiently waited over a hundred years to do. Will Charlene be the loophole that will allow him to have love and revenge?



Prologue

Dublin, Ireland, 1865

The rain fell steadily, sliding down the glass in consistent currents. Colin O'Donnell's tears mirrored them as he looked outside. The clomping of shoes reached his ears, but he did not turn. After a while, someone cleared their throat. Colin sighed.

"Yes, Tavish?"

"My apologies for disturbing you, Sir. Lord Brodie is here."

Colin wiped his eyes before addressing him.

"Yes, of course, Tavish. Send him in. Thank you."

"Yes, sir."

"Could you send someone in here to stoke this fire as well? The chill in the air is rising a bit quickly."

"Of course, sir."

Colin walked across the large room to two large chairs near the fire. Lord Brodie walked in moments later with his arms wide.

"Colin, me lad, I heard! God be with ye, my friend, to comfort your soul," he said in a booming voice. "She was a wonderful lass, wonderful. I'll be missing her myself."

"Thank you, Gavin."

Gavin gripped Colin in a bear hug, towering over his stocky frame. He grabbed both his shoulders and shook him lightly before sitting in one of the chairs. Two servants entered the room next. One stoked the fire, filling the room with renewed warmth while the other placed a tray with two mugs and two carafes on the small table between the chairs. The servant sat one bottle near the fireplace then handed a mug to his master and the other to his friend. When the fire blazed brightly and the mugs were filled, both servants gave Lord O'Donnell a bow before leaving.

"To your lass, my boy, to your lass," Gavin said, clanking his mug to Colin's.

Colin nodded and took a long drink.

"So, tell me about the babe, Colin. Did the child make it?"

"Yes, yes, the baby is fine. He's a strong lad. We'll be calling him Ian."

"Another lad? Well, done, Colin. That would be number five for you, wouldn't it? My last child was a lad as well, not two months ago. We named him Shane."

Colin nodded as he sipped his drink. "Yes, I heard. Congratulations as well. Perhaps the boys will be friends when they are grown."

"Of course, of course. A grand idea, indeed, you know. 'Tis high time that we combined our families officially," Lord Brodie mentioned as he swirled his cup.

Colin sat back in his chair and looked over his mug at him in the flickering firelight as he went on.

"The Brodies and the O'Donnells are the most powerful families in the province. We and the MacDuffs, that is. It makes sense for us to join forces and our families. Long have we spoken of doing so, Colin."

Colin nodded. "We have indeed, but your last child was a lad, Gavin. Young Ian is but a babe, but he is the only child I have who is not betrothed to a family."

Gavin laughed, a deep hearty sound. "Have no fear, Colin, my boy! I will have my wife with child again soon enough. We Brodies like our families large. We have six children counting this last lad, but my wife is a McNeely. Their daughters are known to be good breeders. Surely, she is good for at least three more."

Colin nodded thoughtfully. *I will have to unite Ian with a family when he comes of age, anyway. The Brodies are indeed a strong family to be connected to. The boy could do worse.*

"Perhaps you're right, Gavin. So be it. At the birth of your next daughter, come to me and we will sign a contract for my Ian. He and your lass will wed when they come of age."

"Consider it done, Colin."

The two leaders clanked their mugs again, sealing their verbal agreement then continued drinking.



COLIN STOOD WHEN TAVISH opened the door, allowing Gavin Brodie to enter. He smiled and extended his hand toward the seat beside him.

"Gavin, it's been a long time. How are you?"

"Yes, yes, time has certainly flown by," Gavin said in a rushed tone.

"Well, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"My daughter is of age, and I have come to sign that contract to combine our families."

Colin frowned as he filled their mugs. "You mean for my lad Ian?"

Lord Brodie's eyes narrowed. He let out a frustrated huff as he sat. "Of course, for Ian."

"Well, Gavin, I'm afraid that's not possible." Colin pushed a mug across the small table then lifted his own. "We have not spoken of a marriage between our children in over twenty years. Ian speaks of love with Lord MacDuff's baby girl. I have given him my blessing. They are to be married in the fall."

Gavin's face distorted for a moment. His eyes flashed and then his rage exploded with an outburst.

"*MacDuff?* How dare you! We have a contract, O'Donnell! My daughter and your son are to combine our holdings."

Colin's eyes widened. He searched his memory as Gavin stood and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Our alliance would make us more powerful than any other family in this province! How dare you dishonor my family and yours by going back on your word!"

Colin scoffed. "You will watch your tone with me, Brodie, and remember that I am lord here."

Gavin returned to his seat. Colin took a deep breath to regain his composure before he spoke again.

"The honor of my family has not been damaged. This is a simple misunderstanding. I heard word that your good wife had given birth to two other sons before this last daughter since my Ian was born."

"Yes, yes, they were weak boys. Both died before the day was over," he explained with a dismissive wave.

Colin shook his head. "I also remember that during the conversation we had so many years ago we were to sign the contract for your daughter and my Ian to be wed just after she was born."

The concentrating look on Gavin's face told Colin he was right, so he continued.

"You cannot claim a bargain made only in words more than twenty years ago, when you never came to seal that bargain, old friend. Ian is past the age of choice." He paused to take a drink. "He has chosen, and I have given my blessing."

A dark, hate-filled scowl covered Lord Brodie's features. "You allowed your son the *choice* of his bride? You are a bigger fool than I thought, O'Donnell."

Colin looked up from his mug. "What?"

Gavin pushed himself from the chair again and stood before Colin.

"Marriage has nothing to do with love! It is about who makes the better match!"

Colin slammed his mug to the table and jumped from his seat to face Gavin's anger straight on.

"Listen here, Brodie. I will have no more of your talk. You have missed your opportunity to bring your lass to my son and join our families! He will marry Lord MacDuff's lass and that is final!"

The door swung open abruptly causing Colin and Gavin to turn.

"Father is everything alright in here?" a young man asked, coming to his side.

"All is well, Leathan. Lord Brodie was just leaving," Colin said, his hard stare never leaving Gavin's eyes.



GAVIN BRODIE LEFT THE O'Donnell castle riding his horse hard toward the Loch Forest.

Dammit all! If the O'Donnells and the MacDuffs join I will never gain the strength needed to conquer my enemies.

"If only I'd been able to convince O'Donnell to let my Bonnie marry his lad. I know the fairy would have accepted the boy as payment. What do I use for payment now?"

His fingers raked the hair away from his face as he slowed the horse to a trot. He stopped the horse close to the lake and dismounted with a sigh. Gathering twigs and leaves, Gavin rekindled the fire he had used on his last visit. Taking a small bag from his pocket, he tossed a handful of its contents into the fire and fell to his knees.

"I call upon the Dark Fairy! Come to me!"

Immediately, the fire rushed toward the sky, burning bright blue. As the flames returned to the ground, a sparkling orange hue took over the blue flames. The sparks in the fire settled, and the water in the lake began to bubble furiously. Gavin sat still on his haunches with his palms resting on his thighs. He stared at the unsteady waves. A large, misshapen form rose from the water, stopping the bubbles. It walked across the surface of the water toward the land. Gavin's heart pounded as it moved closer to him. The moment it touched the land, it reshaped. Its monstrous dimensions changed into the curvaceous form of a woman. Her long legs carried her seductively toward him. The pale blue hair that surrounded her as she moved glowed in the moonlight. She smiled as she approached him. Her beauty so intoxicating his loins immediately responded to it.

"You may rise, my good Lord Brodie. I am pleased that you have returned so swiftly with payment. Perhaps we have time for that dalliance I promised you."

The soft, sensual tones of her voice wrapped itself around his senses. She put her arms around his neck gracefully, pressing her nakedness against him as he stood up. Gavin swallowed hard and spoke slowly.

"I would like that very much, but— I— I have not completed my task."

Her smile faded. "Excuse me?"

"There's a—" He swallowed to moisten his sudden dry throat. "A b-bit of a problem."

"A problem?" she asked innocently, dropping her arms. "I don't have a problem, Gavin. You do." She turned her back to him and walked away.

"Wait, Fairy. I still want your help."

"My dear Gavin, the O'Donnells' blood was payment for that help. What do you have to offer me as payment for your much-needed power and wealth now?"

She waited for his response. He thought for a moment, but no answer came to him. The fairy walked back to him.

"Lord Brodie, you came to me for help because you failed in all your endeavors. You have too many enemies, and your own resources are not enough to help you out of the money troubles you find yourself in. You thought to join yourself with the O'Donnells in hopes their power would help you, but it seems you failed in that as well."

Gavin's shoulders slumped as he nodded. The fairy turned away from him again. At the lake's edge, the fairy stopped to look over her shoulder.

"Unless..."

Gavin gasped and fell to his knees. "Yes. Whatever you desire, good fairy, I will do."

She faced him with a bright smile. "Since you could not bring me the blood of the O'Donnell lad that you so willingly offered, I will accept Brodie blood."

Gavin took in another sharp breath as he touched his chest. "My blood?" he almost whispered.

Her laugh was soft and musical as she walked back to him. "No, Gavin. You're the one who wants my help. Your family, however, are not essential to your plans once you have this money and power you want so badly."

"My *family*? Surely you are joking, fairy?" he asked with a hesitant laugh.

"No, I'm not, and since you make a habit of failing, I want them all," she told him, her tone harsher than it had been.

Gavin clutched his chest. He tried to speak but terror had taken his voice.

"Bring them to me, Lord Brodie, and I will give you the power you crave so badly."

Unthinkable. I cannot sacrifice my family for money.

The fairy caressed his face. He rose to his feet directed by the pressure she placed on his chin. She slipped her arms around his neck. Her dulcet tones returned when she spoke again.

"You could rule this land with the wealth and power I will give to you. If a family is also important to you, you can dispose of your current wife and choose a young one to start another."

Gavin's eyes widened.

"Are you saying you would rather have *this* family instead of your heart's desire?" she asked, touching her lips to his.



"IAN, WE'RE GONERS IF we get caught."

The urgent whisper was accompanied by a hand on his shoulder.

"You told your father hours ago that you were off to bed. If he finds us sneaking into the house at this late hour, it will be our hides."

Ian rolled his eyes. "Relax, Sean, he has never caught us before. Just be quiet now or you will be the reason we are caught tonight."

Ian crept through the back door then tiptoed across the floor to another doorway with Sean close behind him. He started to cross the room but stopped abruptly.

"Sean, something isn't right. Something is missing."

"Yeah, Emma isn't up to scold us for coming home late again," Sean said with a snicker. "I guess our luck is holding up after all."

"Yes, I guess," Ian agreed hesitantly. He strained his hearing then shook his head. "That's just it, Sean. Emma's not here to catch us. She *always* waits up for me. On time or late, it doesn't matter. She won't go to bed until she knows I'm safe at home. You know that."

His friend thought for a moment. "Well, she is getting older. Maybe she was tired and just went to bed early."

"Wait! Listen...do you hear that?" Ian asked in a hushed voice.

Sean looked left then right before closing his eyes. Suddenly he gasped and turned wide eyes to Ian. Ian's heart filled with dread. He returned to the pantry with Sean close at his side. Opening a cabinet, he tossed Sean one of the swords hidden behind some boxes, then took one for himself. As they approached the great room, muffled screams became louder. Ian sent a look to Sean and ran to the steps, taking them two at a time.

At the top of the stairs the broken and abused bodies of the servants lay along the hallway with all sorts of weapons lying nearby. The sight froze them in place, but another shriek shook them alert. Ian scanned the area and then pushed through his fear to hop through the small spaces to move down the hall and burst into a bedroom. A monster, taller than any man, black as night and dripping with what looked like loose mud, held a man aloft by his throat. The creature plunged his fist deep into the man's chest. Horror gripped Ian's heart as he cried out.

"No! *Leathan!*"

The monster flung Leathan's lifeless body across the room. Ian watched his brother's body hit the wall and slide to the floor. The monster moved in his peripheral vision, but Ian could not tear his eyes away from his brother. Tears streamed down his face. Suddenly he was yanked away.

"Come, Ian! We must flee!"

Sean dragged him from the room toward the back steps. The thud of the bodies hitting the walls behind him snapped Ian from his stupor. They entered the kitchen and Ian leaned on the door, closing it behind them. He snatched his hand away from Sean and held it up.

"Wait, Sean, stop. I cannot run away. I must fight!" he said, trying to catch his breath.

"Ian don't be daft! Think, man! Live today, fight tomorrow!"

Ian shook his head. "My family is dead. I have to avenge them."

Sean pointed at the ceiling. "That was the monster from the lake! You cannot defeat it on your own! You must go to your guardian and pray for help."

Ian sighed as a sudden calm came over him. "Sean, listen to me. I cannot leave my family. I must fight with them or die with them. You must go to the glade and summon the guardian while I fight."

"What? No! No, Ian, I won't leave without ya."

Ian grabbed Sean by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Sean! Do as I say! You are my servant!" New tears fell down his face. "And my friend," he continued in a softer voice, choking on the words. "Now please, go to the guardian and beg for her help."

Sean stared at him for just a moment longer then pulled him into a hug. His larger size made the embrace almost painful.

"I pray that the guardian hears the pleas of one who is not an O'Donnell by blood."

"So do I, my friend. So, do I. Now go."

Sean left the room quickly without a backward look. Ian took a deep breath and left the kitchen. Halfway up the stairs, heavy footsteps, muffled screams, and doors slamming reached his ears. The sounds formed images in his mind of the monster going room to room, dispatching anyone he found hiding.

Ian followed the noises, his distress magnifying as he approached the door of the Master chambers. The monster shuffled across the room and snatched a door being torn off its hinges. A woman screamed as the monster pulled Emma from the closet by the throat. Relief passed over her gaze as it shifted briefly on him before her life's light faded.

"No!"

Howling his rage, Ian charged with his sword extended. With all his might, Ian shoved the blade deep into its back. The monster screamed in apparent pain. He slung Emma's body one way and slapped Ian haphazardly across the room the other way. Ian landed on broken furniture and unimaginable pain radiated through his body instantly.

The monster removed the weapon with a loud grunt then turned toward him with the blade in its hand. Ian closed his eyes, bracing himself for what was to come. The blade pierced his gut stabbing into the floor beneath him. Surprisingly, it did not add to his discomfort. The monster lingered for just a moment and then left the room. Ian smiled as a vision his father and brothers came to mind. He felt his consciousness slip away and the pain began to ease.

"In here! He's in here!"

Sean?

He felt his head being lifted to rest on something softer than the floor.

"Oh, my God! Fairy! Quickly!"

Ian gasped as the pressure of the blade was removed from his body. His eyes flickered, but then closed again.

"His heartbeat is very faint, but he lives. The O'Donnells are good and kind people. Don't let their line die this horrible way. Heal him, please," Sean begged.

Fingers touched his forehead so light he barely registered the feeling. Immediately he drew in a deep breath and his eyes popped open. A rush of heat rolled over his body like a wave. The pain ceased and his heart beat with a new vigor. He felt stronger than he ever had. Sean pressed a hand over Ian's torso as he smiled down at him.

"My God, Ian. The bleeding has stopped. The fairy has healed you."

Ian sat up patting his body as well. Scrambling to his hands and knees, he rushed over to his father's body. Cradling his father's head in his lap, he looked toward the fairy.

"Can't you save him also, Fairy? He is my father, the leader of our clan."

The fairy shook her head. "No, Ian O'Donnell, I cannot. It is not meant to be."

Ian nodded, but anguish and frustration brought new screams to the surface. For long moments he cried, rocking his father's head close to him. Finally, he laid his father back on the floor, retrieved his weapon, and moved toward the door.

"Ian, where are you going?" Sean asked, coming to his feet.

"I'm going to avenge my family," he replied calmly.

"Ian, no! The fairy has given you a second chance to live. You cannot squander it!"

Ian turned and opened his mouth to argue his point, but the fairy's calm voice stopped his retort.

"Ian O'Donnell, your family line will not die here, but if you chase the beast now you will erase what I have done. I can give you the means to avenge your family, but it will not happen today. The beast thinks he has destroyed your bloodline. He must continue to believe it is so. All must believe until the time is right."

Ian looked at his father's body again and then at Emma, the only mother he'd ever known. His heart was heavy with his loss. He was exhausted with grief. Turning tear-filled eyes to the fairy, he dropped his weapon and fell to his knees next to it.

"What must I do, Fairy?"

"Although you will not get revenge for your family on this day, I will give you the means to live much longer, until that day comes. Have no fear, Ian O'Donnell, all will be well."

The Fairy cupped both sides of his face and the room began to fill with a soft blue glow. Ian took a deep breath and welcomed the changes that began.



THE MONSTER RETURNED to the lake after killing the O'Donnell clan. The dark fairy appeared from the water, meeting him there. She waved her hand before it, and the beast became a man again.

"It is done, fairy. The O'Donnell clan is no more. I am back for my reward," Lord Brodie said with a slight bow.

"I see. The boldness of your tone tells me you are unaware one still lives."

He snapped upright. "What? That cannot be! I killed them all!"

"I'm afraid that is not so. There was interference from one of my kind. The youngest of the O'Donnells does indeed live. You have failed me again, Lord Brodie."

Lord Brodie fell forward on his hands and knees screaming his frustration. He sighed and shook his head.

"What can I do, Fairy? I have paid a high price for your help. I— I cannot turn back now."

"Your payment to me was also incomplete. You have one son that lives as well."

A gasp left him as he rose unsteadily to his feet. "A son? *My* son...lives?"

"He was not at home when you sent for your family to come to you. I have given you the means to destroy your enemies, and I demand payment for what is already done."

The cold tone of her voice was not lost on Lord Brodie. It sent a chill down his back. He felt exhausted from all the emotions running wild through his body.

My son lives! I cannot try to kill him again.

He fell to his knees again and sobbed. His head hung low when he found his voice again.

“Fairy, if my son kills the last O'Donnell, will you spare his life?”

“You have handed over the lives of your wife and children. You do not wish this last son dead along with his siblings, Lord Brodie?” she asked with mock innocence.

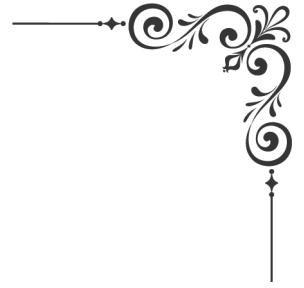
He turned his gaze away from her teasing grin. “No, Fairy, I do not.”

“Very well. He will have the opportunity to redeem his family's honor.” She walked closer to him and helped him to his feet.

He nodded. “Thank you, Fairy.”

“My dear Lord Brodie, there is no need to thank me. I fully intend to take your life instead of his as payment for services rendered.”

Her matter-of-fact tone caused the fear to rise quickly in his heart, removing any doubt that she didn't speak the truth. His eyes widened as her grip tightened around his throat, stopping any chance of protesting as she began her change.



Chapter One

Indianapolis, Indiana, 2025

“Charlene, are you sure? That’s a long way to go alone.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay, but who goes on vacation that far away alone? I mean, what the hell is in Ireland, anyway? Can’t you just take a singles cruise to somewhere tropical like other women do when they’re getting over a guy? You can get you an island cruise and get your groove back.”

“Robin, I talked about taking this trip the whole time we were married. Every time I tried to plan it; he came up with a reason why we couldn’t go. Now that we’re divorced there’s no way I’m not taking this trip.” She went to her desk and rummaged through the top drawer. “See this picture?”

Robin looked at the photograph and shrugged. “It’s a picture of a castle.” She flipped it back and forth. “It’s an old picture of a castle. Where’d you get it?”

Charlene chuckled. “I’ve had it since I was twelve. I pulled it out of a book. That picture has been my driving force. Castles are beautiful structures with a lot of history in them from a time that no longer exists. I love them, but this one is my favorite. I’m going to see this castle. It’s taken me two years to save up for this trip and nothing is stopping me. I’m going to have a blast.”

“I suppose Brian had issues with that?”

Charlene sputtered. “Brian had issues with lots of things. The beauty of divorce is I no longer have to care what Brian has issues with. Besides, he never really shared my interest in castles. In fact, he thought my love for castles was a little strange. I think he even used the word *obsessive* once or twice,” she added with a shrug.

“Obsessive? You? I wonder where he could have gotten that idea,” Robin muttered, looking around the classroom.

Charlene followed Robin’s gaze to the many pictures of castles of different sizes, shapes, and locations along the walls of the room. She quickly flipped over the calendar with a picture of a castle on the current month. Her friend didn’t bother to hide her snicker. Charlene rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, the point is we grew apart. Our main priorities no longer lined up and we didn’t share enough interests to keep us together.”

“That’s probably because you’re more interested in old stuffy castles and the chivalry of men from hundreds of years ago and he was more interested in young girls and strip clubs.”

Charlene stared up at her friend’s laughing grin and smiled. “I can’t fault you on that one. My research with fiction and non-fiction books shows that times were just simpler back then. I would love to experience that kind of life even just for a little while.”

"The men in this time aren't all that bad, Charlene. You just have to learn how to compromise with them."

"Well, I haven't met one in this century or the last that I can say that about. Can you?"

Robin shrugged. "No, but I haven't met all of them. What kind of man are you looking for?"

Charlene straightened out a few papers and slid them into the drawer with a sigh.

"I just want one that treats me like a lady, like I'm precious to him. Someone who makes me feel special. I don't need another one who treats me like he's doing me a favor by being with me. I want him to feel like he's the privileged one, as well. Is that so much to ask for?"

"I see."

Charlene took in a breath. She wasn't really expecting an answer to the rhetorical question, but the unemotional, monotone response she received touched a nerve.

"Are you saying I don't deserve a guy like that?" she asked defensively.

Robin shook her head. "I didn't say that Char—"

"I'm a catch, too, you know," she said, cutting her off. "I'm not bad looking. I have a job, I'm intelligent, I take care of myself... That stinking Brian made me feel like..." She stopped abruptly and took a slow deep breath. "Never mind. Sorry about that. Just thinking about that man takes me from zero to sixty just like that," she added, snapping her fingers. "I need this vacation. All I've done since the divorce was final was work. So, I'm going to take lots of pictures, enjoy some good food, and relax. When I come back, I'll be refreshed enough to start dating."

A quick knock on the door turned Charlene's head. When it opened a woman's face appeared.

"Ms. McDuff? I've got your papers ready for you to post, and Mr. Johnson said he will be happy to take any email questions from your students while you're gone."

"Thanks, Diane." Charlene turned back to Robin. "Now, as for you, Robin Baxter, I have been on vacation for exactly..." she paused to look at her watch and smiled. "Fifteen whole minutes. I have no intention of spending another minute of it at this school." She picked up her briefcase and walked to the door. "Are you going to drop me at the airport or do I just send you a postcard to let you know I made it?" she asked looking over her shoulder.



IN THE TERMINAL OF Dublin International Airport, Charlene spotted a sign with the castle's name on it raised above the people. She pushed through the crowd heading toward it.

"Hi, I'm going to O'Donnell Castle," she told the man holding it.

"Good day to you, lassie! Welcome to Ireland!" the man said loudly. "I am Donovan. I'll be taking ya to the castle."

He took her bags and led the way to his minivan. He chatted openly along the short drive as she snapped pictures as best she could. As the castle came into view, she lowered her camera. As they turned off the main road, the castle's white merlons could easily be seen between the dark green treetops.

"Wow."

Donovan parked out front and left the van. "Castle O'Donnell is a bonnie place. You're going to love it here!"

As he unloaded her bags, Charlene stood in front of the castle-turned hotel, wide eyed, captured by the unique three storied tall building with its wide, floor-to-ceiling windows and the longest lawn she had ever seen. The beautiful top-floor rooms had sculptured terraces that far exceeded her expectations.

"It's a looker, isn't it?" Donavan said, coming to her side.

"It's beautiful and way bigger than I expected. I've only seen old pictures of castles. This is amazing." She pointed to a gargoyle statue sitting on the roof. "Whoa. Is that a gargoyle?"

"Ahh, yes. The O'Donnell Castle is the only one in Ireland that has a guardian gargoyle to watch over its visitors."

"Really?" she said, following him inside.

"Here ya go, lass. I hope ya have a good vacation here."

"Thanks so much, Donavan." She handed him some money as he tipped his hat, leaving her at the front desk.

"Hi, I'm Charlene McDuff. I have a reservation."

"Welcome to O'Donnell Castle Hotel." The man behind the desk tapped on his computer then looked up at her with a smile. "Yes, everything looks complete here. You've chosen one of our balcony rooms on the third floor. Very nice. It comes with a food basket every day of your stay. Here is your key. We hope you enjoy your stay here."

She took the key and smiled. "Thanks, I'm sure I will."

He tapped the bell on the counter. "Take Ms. McDuff's bags to room three-thirty-seven," he said when the bellhop appeared.

Charlene followed the bellhop to the elevator, and then to her room. "Wow, this place is bigger than my first apartment."

She handed him a little money then pulled her bags through the living room into the bedroom. The doors to the terrace were open and the fresh air called to her. A white bistro table set on the stone terrace had a small welcome basket containing fruit, cheese, and a bottle of wine in its center. With a smile she popped a grape into her mouth before returning to the bedroom.

"Mmm, I'm going to feel like a princess sleeping in this bed. I'm going to have to buy something special to sleep in while I'm here," she said, with a laugh in her voice. "My boxers just aren't going to cut it. I'm gonna have to get something pretty and girly," she added with a yawn. "Hmm, maybe I'll take a nap first to test the bed out."



CHARLENE WALKED ALONG the halls with camera in hand. Her mouth hung open in repeated gasps as she took in the beauty around her. The portraits were like a history class. One portrait caught her eye, and she lowered her camera to examine it. An older man sat in a high-backed chair with a sword across his lap. The white shirt, fastened high on his neck, was stark against the multi-patterned skirt he wore. The young boy that stood beside the chair shared the same outfit, bright blue eyes, and red hair.

"Oh, my goodness. Those knobby little knees can't even hold up his socks." She giggled at the sight. "I never really got why a man would want to wear a skirt?" she added rhetorically.

"That is not a skirt, lass. It's a kilt."

Although embarrassment made her cringe, the voice sent a tingly feeling down her spine. Slowly, she turned around to face the source of the soft male voice. She was ready to apologize, but her words died in her throat

as she was captured by the man's masculine beauty. His strawberry blonde hair was cut low but still managed to leave little curls across his forehead. The bluest she'd ever seen pulled on something inside her. Only when his lips stopped moving was, she jarred from her trance.

"Huh? I'm sorry, what did you say?"

The man smiled. "I was merely mentioning the situations in which one would wear a kilt. You have never seen a man in a kilt?"

"Uh, no, well, not outside of pictures I've seen in the hotel, that is."

"You didn't like them?"

"I don't really get it, so I'm not impressed." She sent a quick look at the picture and let out a chuckle. "No disrespect to you if that's your thing, but this boy wearing a kilt has not changed my mind."

The man looked at the picture and chuckled. "Well then, I will have to wear mine for you. This way you can see how a *man* looks in one."

She shrugged and continued down the corridor. "Okay."

"Are you on your way to dinner?"

"Uh, yes, I am."

"Do you know about the party afterwards?"

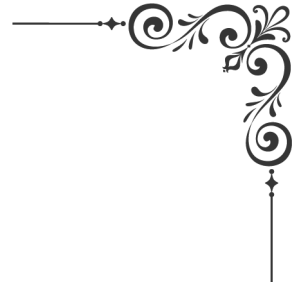
She nodded. "Uh-huh."

He extended his arm. "Great. I would be honored if you'd allow me to escort you to both then, Miss..."

Charlene smiled, accepting his arm. "Thank you. That would be nice. My name is Charlene McDuff. What's yours?"

He stopped walking abruptly and stared at her. The surprised expression on his face lasted for a brief moment before it was replaced by a bright smile.

"Welcome to Castle O'Donnell, Charlene. My name is Ian."



Chapter Two

Ian locked his room door then pushed his bed and curtain across the wall to uncover a hidden door. The dark winding stairs opened to the roof. He walked over to the gargoyle statue, sat next to it, and stroked the monster's head.

"Come forth, my friend. I need to speak with you."

Immediately the gargoyle's eyes glowed to life. The eyes blinked once, then again as the stone began to crack all over. Ian turned away as the stone shattered, spewing pieces of rock in every direction. The gargoyle stretched with a loud screech and flapped its wings. The flapping lifted him from the ledge and then lowered him slowly. When he returned to the ledge, the fangs, horns, and limbs of the beast's form melted away, reforming into a stone man. When the transformation was complete, he turned to Ian and smiled.

"Has it been so long since you have awakened me, my friend? You seem to have aged some."

"Me? It is you that are aged, Sean. You died in battle as an adult with children my age," Ian reminded him with a laugh. "I was there when you fell, my friend."

"Ahh, yes. I was glad that you could stay near me when you were in your wolf form. It was very lonely without your family after the fairy changed you. The fairy was extremely generous by allowing me to be with you after my life ended."

Ian returned to the ledge. "So am I, even in this capacity. I would have gone mad if I had no one at all for all these years."

"How long has it been since you've awakened me this time?"

"About twenty years or so. It was time to leave the castle again. I told the staff that I would be working on my other businesses. After a few years, I sent word that I died and that my son would be taking over."

"How much time has passed since the curse was put in place?"

Ian sighed. "About one husband and sixty years. I find it difficult to keep track of time when I have to be in my wolf form. I catch up once im human again."

"So nothing has changed?"

"The magic remains, but much has changed, Sean. The castle has changed over time. The years out of man form have indeed aged me some, though I do not show all the time that has passed since my birth."

"Has there been any sign of a Brodie so that you may avenge your family and end this?"

He sighed as he gave his answer. "No."

"And no MacDuff either?"

Ian's smile was his only reply. Sean returned his smile and clapped him on the back.

"You *have* met a MacDuff? Saints be praised! Is she the one? What is she like? Tell me, man! I've waited a lifetime," he said excitedly.

Ian chuckled softly. "If you can be very quiet, my friend, I will take you to see her. She is different from the women I have shown you in the past, but it is that difference that appeals to me. Bring your wings forth."

Sean's wings immediately sprang from his back. They extended past his arm span, dark feathers made of malleable stone. Ian walked into his embrace and turned his back to him. Sean gripped his friend's waist and flapped his wings, lifting them from the roof. He followed Ian's directions, circling the castle to the terrace that belonged to Charlene's room. He lowered Ian softly to the ground and landed beside him. Ian found the terrace doors ajar and pushed them open just enough for them to enter. They walked into Charlene's room as she slept behind curtains that appeared to glow in the moonlight.

Slowly, Ian gently pulled the sheer drapes back so that they might peer upon her beauty uninhibited by its gauzy effects. The moonlight touched her brown skin, giving it a golden glow. Her hair fanned out slightly across her pillow as she peacefully slept. Her full lips still looked luscious, holding a touch of the ruby color they had earlier in the evening. The sheet that covered her body hugged her curves seductively.

Ian sniffed the air around her. His nostrils flared taking in the scent that was individually hers along with a lighter scent of jasmine. A low growl grumbled in his throat. Charlene's soft groan pulled him from his thoughts. She turned to her side and grasped her pillow. Ian let the curtains fall back into place and backed away waving for Sean to follow him.

"She is beautiful indeed, Ian," Sean said, returning them to the roof. Do you think she is the one who is meant to be yours?"

"Aye, she could be. She is like no woman I have ever met. Over these long years I have been afraid to let anyone near my heart for fear that a Brodie could come at any time."

Sean nodded. "And now?"

He smiled. "Now... I've spent one day with this woman, and I want her for my own. Her scent seems to wrap itself around my soul. If all I have is a small amount of time with her, I feel it would be worth it."

Sean laughed. "That's what I like to hear. Let's hope you win her over quickly," he said, clapping him on the back.

"I have missed you, my friend. I will hate to lose you when the enchantment is broken."

"I will go in peace knowing you are happy, Ian."

With one last hug, Ian left his friend. Before closing the roof door, he took one last look over his shoulder to see Sean take his place back on the wall and solidify into his former stone form.



CHARLENE SWUNG THE door open. "Yes?"

"Good morning, Ms. McDuff. I have a message for you."

Her brows furrowed. "A message?"

The bellhop handed her an envelope and a rose then tipped his hat. "Have a good day."

"Thank you."

Charlene ran her hand over the shimmering raised letters on the envelope before removing the note.

Charlene,

I had a great time last night and look forward to seeing you again. I would like the pleasure of your company for lunch. I will have a car waiting for you out front at 12:30.

Ian

Charlene couldn't help but smile. "Okay, Ian O'Donnell, I see you. Handsome, fun, and romantic, too. Uh huh, I will definitely be there." She looked at her watch and nodded. "And I still have time for shopping."

She sniffed the flower before leaving it on the bed and then headed to the gift shop. The mannequin on display wore a pair of satiny soft pink boxers and a matching tank top. Charlene paused in front of it.

"Now that's right up my alley."

Inside the store, she pushed through pajamas on different racks as she walked by.

"Really? He was so cute. Rumor is he only comes once a month to oversee the hotel."

"I heard he was single, too."

"Well, he won't be for long if that American woman has anything to do with it. You saw how they were looking at each other last night."

Charlene didn't intend to eavesdrop, but when she heard the woman say, "American woman," she moved closer to hear their conversation more clearly.

"I wonder if he's still here."

"I don't know. I did see a really nice car out front. It might be him leaving."

Charlene sent a quick look at the clock on the wall, snatched an outfit off the rack, and headed quickly to the register.

"Will this be all for you, ma'am?"

"Yes," Charlene said as she reached for her bag.

"No need to pay now, ma'am. We charge it to your room as a courtesy in case you see something you like but don't have your wallet with you."

"Oh, well that's kind of nice."

"We can also deliver to your room if you want to look around the grounds or have somewhere else to go."

"Oh! Now *that* is nice." She paused in thought then smiled. "Yes, please deliver this to my room, three thirty-seven. There's somewhere I want to go."

"No problem."

Charlene left the shop leaving the cashier with a friendly wave, she stopped at the front desk.

"Hi, do you know if Ian O'Donnell is around?"

"Is there a problem I can help you with, Ms. McDuff?"

"No, no problem. I was just wondering if I could catch him. We're meeting for lunch in a bit."

"I see. Well, Mr. O'Donnell was in his office a little while ago. Perhaps he is still there. Down that hall, second door on the left," the desk clerk said with a smile pointing to her left.

Charlene continued through the lobby to the line of offices on the other side. She knocked on the door with Ian's name on the front.

"Ian?"

When no one answered, she pushed the door open.

"Ian?" she called out again as her gaze swept across the room. "Wow. Now this is a big office. Very nice."

A picture on the wall caught her eye and she moved toward. A younger Ian, though not by much, stood beside a stern-looking man. The striking resemblance made her chuckle.

"Oh, yeah, that's definitely his father."

She turned away from the wall to scan the book shelves. Heavy, leather-bound tomes lined them, some spines cracked with age, their titles embossed in gold, written in languages she didn't recognize. One large book sat on the desk beside a second photograph.

The children in the photo looked cheerful as they pointed to the castle behind them. She smiled lifting the picture then she slowly tilted her head scrutinizing the image further. The turrets on top of the castle and the intricate detail on the front that she had admired when she arrived gave her the impression it was the same place she was in, but the castle in the picture looked much older than it did now. The edges of the structure were crumbling as deep green strands of ivy climbed unchecked along the stone walls.

"The castle seems so old," she muttered.

Letting her fingers slide over the glass her gaze fell on the children again. All of the boys had the same features, but the youngest caught her eye and she gasped.

"That can't be little Ian! No way!"

Charlene put the picture down and looked around the room again. So many antiques and memorabilia around gave her pause. Deep in thought she returned the picture to the desk and left the office.



IAN STOOD IN FRONT of the back passenger door. As she walked to the front door, she had a better look at him. The loose-fitting jeans and short-sleeved polo shirt he wore were surely put together for comfort, but they hugged his solidly built body perfectly. He smiled as she approached him, and she was more than happy to return it.

"Charlene, I'm glad you took me up on my offer. Thank you."

"Thank you for the invitation."

He closed the door behind her. Slipping behind the wheel, he turned to her. "You're very welcome. I wanted to make sure you saw our beautiful forests while you were here. Tourists usually make sure they see the more popular attractions and end up missing the smaller beauties we have."

"So, I should bypass all that stuff and see more *off the beaten path* attractions?" she asked with a laughing grin.

Ian laughed as he pulled off into the street. "No, no. This is a beautiful city, and the O'Donnell Castle is a short distance from most of the major attractions. By all means go see Phoenix Park and the St Patrick's Cathedral and be sure to stop by Grafton Street. You'll find anything you could ever want there. The shopping over there is the best. I'm just making sure you get to appreciate the things that are not advertised."

"Thanks. That's really nice of you. I'd love to see some of the less touristy stuff."

"Well, I kind of have my own agenda, too. I wanted to be alone with you again before you got into all the *touristy* stuff. I'd like to get to know you better if that's okay."

She turned to him. "Ian, look, I had a really good time with you last night, and I think I could really like you."

He turned into the forest. "Do I hear a *but* coming?"

She nodded. “*But* I’m only here for two weeks on vacation, remember? Do you think it’s a good idea to try to start a relationship knowing we are on borrowed time?”

“I think it is a good idea to seize the moment. Tomorrow is promised to no one.”

“Well, you’ve got me there.”

Ian drove quietly for a few moments, then sighed and parked near a lake. “Charlene, I cannot go into it now, but I feel like it can work between us. There’s something about you, lass...” he said softly as he caressed her cheek. “Let’s just enjoy the time we do have then we’ll see what happens, eh?” he added with a smile.

The combination of his words and his soft, genuine smile touched her.

“Okay, Ian.”

“Good! Now come on, let me show you one of our hidden beauties.”

He opened the back door and pulled a large basket from the seat before letting her out. The day was warm and sunny. The trees were full and green, and the lake was sparkling and beautiful. She helped him spread the blanket on the ground and sat with her knees underneath her.

“Wow. You were right. This spot is beautiful.”

“So do you.”

Charlene turned a lifted brow to him.

“You look beautiful today, Charlene,” he clarified.

“Thank you, Ian. So shall we do the twenty questions thing to get to know each other better?”

“Sure, we can do that.”

She watched him with new eyes as he spread the food and drink over the blanket. His movements were strong and masculine with such fluid motion making the simplest of tasks look like a sensual gesture. He pulled out a bottle of wine, popped its cork, and then poured her a glass.

“Thank you.”

He nodded his acknowledgement.

“So, how old are you, Ian?”

Ian hesitated, but only for a moment. “I’m forty-two...yes, forty-two,” he answered, with a grin.

Okay, that’s not too bad. Well, I didn’t come to Ireland for a one-night stand, but I hadn’t planned on an instant sexual attraction with someone either.

She took a long sip from her glass. “Wow, Ian, this is delicious.”

“Thank you. It’s a strawberry based wine instead of grapes. The weather can be too challenging here to risk just grape wine.”

Charlene took another sip. “Mmm, you say that you grow them.”

“I do. I own a small vineyard out in Tipperary. I use it for the hotel’s house wine.”

Her eyes widened over the glass as she drank. *Wow. This guy must be loaded, but he seems so...humble.*

Ian waved the large glass toward the lake, rolling the wine inside it. “You know, this is one of my favorite places. It’s so peaceful and beautiful. I’ve watched these trees grow and mature my whole life.”

His hands are so big. They cover the whole damn glass.

“I come here a lot when things at the hotel get overwhelming. It’s close enough to get here and to get back quick when I pull it together,” he added with a chuckle.

I wonder if he would hold onto my breasts with such a firm grip.

As the question swirled around her mind, her body responded to the thought and her panties dampened. Charlene shook her head and lifted her glass again, but she missed her mouth. The rim of the glass hit her nose, and the contents splashed down her body into her lap. The cold liquid soaked her clothes, bringing her back to reality and making her gasp.

Ian jumped up sloshing his own drink. "Charlene! What are ya doin', lass!"

He left his leisurely position, moving quickly on his hands and knees to grab napkins and then over to her, dabbing at her chest.

"Ian—"

He snatched his hand away. "Oh! Dammit! I'm sorry, Charlene. I was just— I wasn't trying to touch— I mean, I was only—"

She squinted at him, trying to decipher what he was saying. His accent seemed even heavier to her as he stutered his words out. Suddenly he stopped and their eyes met for a brief moment before they both burst into fits of laughter.

Charlene picked up a handful of napkins and began wiping herself off as their laughter eased. She uncrossed her legs, straightening them out to dab at her shorts. She looked up at him to say something, but the words caught in her throat. His eyes were locked in on her hands. She moved her hands slowly down the inside of her leg, wiping the liquid away and his head followed her every movement. A soft gasp escaped him as he stared, licking his lips.

Suddenly he shook his head and blinked, then his eyes locked on hers. An entire conversation wordlessly passed between them, and in a split second the decision was made. Together they leaned forward and met in a passionate and hungry kiss, falling onto the blanket. His hands were everywhere, feeling and touching her. He rolled on top of her, grinding his groin against her. She ran her fingers through his hair, and he moaned into her mouth, pressing harder against her. Her hands ran freely against his solid shoulders and back on their way to grab his bottom.

With a cheek in each hand, she pressed him against her even more. The sensual touch of his lips on her mouth and neck, and his insistent grinding against her clit through the thin cloth of her shorts were all coming to a head. Her body tingled as the heat rose within her, climbing higher, raising goose bumps in its wake. She ground her pelvis against his bulging erection. It had been so long since she felt like this. She bit her lip and opened herself to what was coming, anticipating the splendor it would bring.

Abruptly Ian lifted his head and stopped moving, stopped kissing, and stopped touching her. She felt as if someone had dropped cold water on her. He scanned the area looking side to side.

"Ian? What's wrong?" she asked, following his sweeping motion.

The break in his movement pulled her from the fog but left her with unfulfilled need. As the fog cleared, her brain took control of her body.

"Ian," she breathed, trying to catch her breath. "Maybe we shouldn't be doing this here. Not out in the open like this."

She watched him for a reaction. His nostrils flared as he looked around again, squinting. Quickly he backed up off her and stood, sniffing the air.

She sat up just as quickly. "I didn't mean I didn't want to, I just meant..."

Ian looked confused at first, then he smiled. "No, no, Charlene. I know what you meant. I'm sorry, lass, didn't mean to confuse you."

He pulled her to her feet. "You are right. We can't do this here. I was overcome by your effect on me," he kissed her hand, pulling her closer. "A woman like you needs to be in a soft bed with me making you feel sexy and special." Caressing her face he continued. "That's what I want to do for you the first time we're together and every time."

The disappointment Charlene had felt faded when she saw the sincerity in his eyes. Ian's words touched her heart and made her core throb for the need of him. His touch was intoxicating, and she wanted more of it. He placed a soft kiss on her lips, and her heart leaped.

"Let's go back to the hotel and finish this up the right way. I'll get these things together. You just go to the car and wait for me, eh?"

He pressed a soft kiss to her mouth, and she nodded before walking away.



WITH CHARLENE OUT OF sight, Ian turned and walked toward the trees in the distance. He sniffed the air again, then spun. Across from him, a man stood. His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the intruder.

"Shane?" he asked unsure.

The tall, powerfully built man stared at him and nodded slowly. "It's been a long time, Ian."

"Yes, it has."

"I see you have found someone. She is very beautiful. Is she a MacDuff?" he asked calmly as he started to pace back and forth.

The mention of Charlene sent anger surging through Ian's body, and it registered in his voice.

"You are not here to ask about Charlene. Your business is with me."

Shane stopped moving and faced him. "Aye, it is. I will return to this place tonight when the moon is high." He walked away, then stopped short to speak over his shoulder. "Be here," he added with finality.

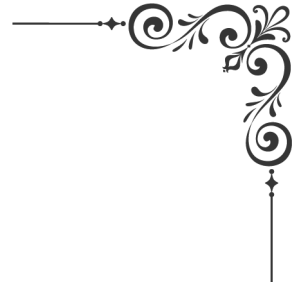
Ian nodded then returned quickly to the picnic area. He gathered everything, stuffing it back into the basket, and rushed to the car.

"Ian, are you okay? What took you so long? I was about to get out and come get you," Charlene asked when he slid in behind the wheel.

"Forgive me, Charlene. I, umm, uh, had to pee. I couldn't hold it. Must have been the wine."

"Umm, okay. Do you still want to come to my room?" she asked reluctantly.

He started the car and smiled. "Absolutely!"



Chapter Three

Charlene entered her room and rushed into the shower. Ian wanted to stop by his room before coming to her. The bag she sent to her room sat on the bed. She dumped it upside down and just as she donned on one of the outfits she heard a knock on the door.

“Charlene?”

She stuffed the other outfit back into the bag then shoved it and the towel under the bed.

“I’m in the bedroom, Ian!” she called back, moving to the vanity mirror to run her fingers through her hair.

Ian appeared in the doorway of her room with a beaming smile. Her breath caught as she eased onto the stool. Ian smoothed the fabric of the black, yellow and green plaid kilt and then removed invisible lint from the crisp white shirt.

“Well, what do you think?”

“Wow,” was all she could manage as she looked him over.

“Thanks. I did say I wanted to wear my kilt for you.”

Charlene ogled him openly. His neatly tucked shirt put his well-formed pecs on display and the kilt was short enough to show the firm thighs she’d spied in his jeans earlier.

“Yes, you did and I’m very glad. I can honestly say you looked nothing like the boy in the portrait. You look fantastic in yours.”

“Thanks. Now, let’s talk about you.” He walked towards. “Stand up for me, Charlene. I want to have a good look at what you’re wearing.”

Charlene smoothed the white lace across her body, she stood before him with her hands at her sides. His touch was soft yet firm as his hand passed over her shoulders.

“I believe it’s my turn to say *wow*. You look incredible.”

He stepped closer, his fingers tracing the delicate, scalloped edges on her breasts and then over the flower details on top of her nipples. She gasped and her body seemed to lean forward on its own, aching for more. He smiled and grasped her breasts firmly. Her mouth fell open again, but nothing came from it. Her brain and her mouth had lost their connection. She licked her lips to try again.

“Ian—”

He touched her lips. “Shh. Let’s speak upon any reservations later. I want nothing from you, Charlene. Just let me love on you.”

He reached around her waist pulling her closer, capturing her lips before she could speak again. His kiss took her breath away. The flimsy lace material was hardly a barrier for the blatant erection that lifted his kilt between

them. Charlene pressed herself against him abruptly, wanting to feel more of him, but instead she knocked them both off balance.

“Ahh!”

She abruptly fell into his arms, and he righted himself before they fell to the floor. He chuckled and helped her to her feet.

“Did you think I’d let you fall?” Not waiting for her to answer, Ian lifted her and carried her to the bed. “As lovely as you look in this outfit, Charlene, I’m going to ask you to remove it. I’m afraid I’m at the point that I will rip it up getting it off you,” he said in a teasing tone.

She giggled. “Thanks for the warning. I really would like to wear it again.” She leaned up and reached between her legs, but he grabbed her hand to stop her.

“You have to unlatch it from *there* to remove it?”

“Uh huh.”

“You should have mentioned that before. Never mind then, I’ll remove it myself,” he said, excited.

She relaxed back into the pillow. Goosebumps rose across her skin when his fingers pressed between her legs. He found the snaps and pulled them apart. Freed from their barrier, his strong fingers passed over the already wet lips beneath. A wave of erotic heat covered her body from head to toe ripping a moan from deep inside of her.

“You have no idea what the sound of your moans does for me, Charlene. The smell of you is driving me crazy.”

Ian lifted his kilt exposing the swollen head of his penis. He kept eye contact with her as he stroked his erection. Charlene’s gaze shifted between his actions and his eyes. His grip slid effortlessly over the firm flesh. Her lids shut as the tingling sensation rose within her and the vision of him stroking his cock stayed in her mind’s eye. After a few moments, Ian’s movements abruptly stopped. Charlene’s eyes popped open.

“What the—? What’s wrong?”

He moaned loudly. “Charlene, I can’t promise...”

“I don’t want your promise, Ian. I want you deep inside me,” she breathed against his neck. “Do it.”

“Charlene...” he groaned.

“Now, Ian. Do it.”

To her surprise, Ian backed up. He reached beneath her waist and flipped her over, then lifted her to her knees then he inserted himself in one smooth motion into her core.

“Oh!” Charlene said at the intrusion from such an exposed position.

She readjusted herself and started moving back against him. His hands held her hips firmly as she took control of the movements. She could hear Ian’s low growls again, and it sent tingles down her spine. She had heard of men who made noises like that when they made love but had never been with one. It was intoxicating to know she was the cause of his wild, erotic noises. Ian’s hands slid up her back to grasp her shoulders, pressing himself deep inside her.

Ian continued to bang inside her. His nuts slapped against her bottom as he gripped her shoulders. The noises he made and the sweet sensations he provided were all too much as, once again, the molten sensation of total release overcame her. As her body convulsed around his engorged organ, Charlene screamed her pleasure into the pillow. The great shuddering and clenching from her slickened walls proved to be intense and too much for him.

He pushed his swollen flesh into her with the slamming thrust of impending climax, and then released his seed with one sweet and final cry collapsing on top of her.

"Charlene," he moaned against her neck after a few minutes. "I'll get up."

She grabbed his arms, latching them underneath her shoulders and interlocking their fingers.

"No, don't get up. You feel good right where you are."

He kissed her cheek. "So do you, but I can't stay on top of you like this for long. I'm much too heavy. Aren't I crushing you?"

She let out a muffled giggle. "Yeah, a little, but I think it's worth it."

He laughed softly in her ear. "Thanks, but I have a better idea, something that doesn't require you to sacrifice your breathing." He pulled his fingers and arms apart from hers then rolled off her.

"Aww man."

He chuckled. "Hold on." He pushed the pillows against the headboard and then leaned against them. "Turn over."

She complied without hesitation, and he pulled her into his embrace. Nestling her face in the crook of his neck, she hugged him, pulling him closer.

"Mmm, you were right, this is better. Ian, that was wonderful," she mentioned with a sigh.

He squeezed her around her shoulders. "Yes, it was, but you were the wonderful one," he replied and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

Ian chuckled. "It's been a long time since I've felt like that. I think I need a nap."

"Mmm, I have an idea. Why don't we do it one more time and then take that nap?" She leaned up to look into his eyes with a teasing smile and added, "That is, if you're up to it."

He laughed again and lifted her on top of him. "I'm ready when you are."



IAN LEFT CHARLENE'S arms reluctantly as she slept peacefully against him. He dressed quickly and made his way back to the forest. When he reached the clearing, he could smell the mixed emotions of the adversary who stood across from him.

"I didn't think you would show, Ian."

"Why wouldn't I show, Shane? I want this to be over. I want my life back."

"I want this over, too. I can't stand living this half existence!"

"You speak to me as if it's my fault that we're here! *Your* family did this to us!" He smacked his chest. "I am here to avenge my family for the monstrous deed that *your* family did to them!"

There was no joy in Shane's chuckle. "Once I kill you, I will take your fortune *and* your woman and my life can truly begin," he said with a sinister smile.

Ian's anger rushed through his body fueling his change. His strawberry blond hair disappeared as light brown fur began to cover his body. Talons pushed out of his fingertips when he fell forward. His body elongated and paws gripped the ground. A tail lunged from his new wolf body and a low growl left his throat when he bared his fangs. Moments later he charged across the clearing, landing on Shane's chest, pushing him to the ground.

This ends tonight, Shane!

Shane's eyes widened with shock at first, but then he let out a cruel, knowing laugh.

"Do you think that I am here by luck, Ian O'Donnell? One cannot live as long as we have without some sort of enchantment or curse in place."

As he thought about Shane's words, Shane abruptly rolled over to his hands and knees. Black fur tore away his clothes and minutes later a large, black wolf stood in Shane's place. Hate filled the narrow eyes that turned toward him.

I've had to walk this cursed life waiting for the chance to find you and end this half existence. I am here to kill you to break this curse so I can get some kind of life back. So, you're right, Ian. This has to end tonight.

The light brown wolf bared his teeth when the words penetrated his mind. The black wolf squared up to face him. The wolves jumped at the same time and met in the air growling and snarling their fury. Spit and fur flew to the left and right as they tore at each other. The light brown wolf that drew first blood sinking his teeth into the soft tissue behind his enemy's ear. Yelping in pain, the black wolf shook him off and then launched a counter-attack. Biting the light brown wolf in the front foreleg, the black wolf shook hard, dragging the darker beast to the ground. The light brown wolf cried out in pain. Both animals rolled across the ground, separating from each other. Breathing hard, they walked in a circle, eyeing one another, bleeding from different areas.

Give it up, Ian. Even when we were young, you could not best me.

We were friends back then, Shane, so those were friendly terms.

We were never really friends, Ian. Our families were prominent in our region, and we met up a lot. The reason we're here now is because your father broke his word.

Ian growled. *That's a lie!*

My father could not repay the debt without his aid and he went back on his word! You have to die like the rest of your family to set things right.

Though Shane seemed sure of his reasons for being there, Ian believed the fairy's story instead of his.

By the way, Ian, that Charlene is beautiful. You always did have good taste in women. I'll take good care of her when you're dead.

Outrage screamed in Ian's mind at the mention of Charlene. He growled and launched himself at Shane again. Landing on top of the black wolf, Ian sank his sharp teeth deep in his throat. He lifted the black wolf's upper body and shook his throat with all his might. The black wolf fought back as hard as he could but could not dislodge his smaller opponent.

The light brown wolf dug deeper, continuing to tear at the black wolf's throat until there was a loud crack. Blood spewed from the wounds across the wolf's snout and let out a high-pitched howl before his body fell hard to the ground. The victorious wolf leaned forward, sniffing his defeated foe. With a snort he backed away changing from the beast back into the man.

Ian retrieved his shirt and then stepped into his pants before going to stand over the wolf's battered body. The black wolf shifted his eyes to meet Ian's gaze.

So, it would seem that some things do change, eh, Ian?

His voice was void of its former smugness when it touched Ian's mind. He could tell Shane was exhausted from the fight and dying from his wounds.

It had to end like this, Shane. I cannot continue to live looking over my shoulder. Charlene offers me a chance to have love and the life that was stolen from me. I know I was meant to be with her. I cannot let you take her from me.

I understand, Ian. The truth is, I grew weary of this half-life long ago. I was not meant to be here. I'm tired of moving from place to place pretending to be older, but not having real life. Thank you for releasing me.

The black wolf took his last breath, and the animal immediately shifted back to the man that was Shane Brodie. Ian took a deep breath. Relief washed over him as he left the clearing to hurry back to the hotel's roof.

"Awaken, my friend. It is over," he said excitedly to the gargoyle. He stroked its head then sat next to it on the ledge. "I have beaten Shane Brodie and avenged my family. I'm finally free, Sean! Free!" His exhilaration kept him from sitting still. He leaped to his feet to walk back and forth before the statue. "Awaken, my friend, so I can tell you of my battle."

Ian waited for the gargoyle to change, but after a few minutes he stopped before the statue. "Sean?"

A bright blue light lit up the entire roof. Ian shielded his eyes and turned away. When the light faded, the fairy stood before him. His breath caught.

"Fairy."

"Well done, Ian O'Donnell. Your duty to your family is completed."

"Thank you, Fairy. I came to tell Sean about my victory, but he does not respond to my call," Ian explained, extending a hand toward his friend.

"No, Ian, he will no longer respond to you. His enchantment ended the moment Shane Brodie's life ended."

Grief clenched Ian's chest. He nodded sadly and touched the stone gargoyle again.

"I will miss him greatly."

"Have no fear. Sean's soul is resting in peace."

"So, what happens to me now?"

"The choice is yours. If you prefer to die on this day as well, you may go in peace to join your family. Or you can live your life this day forward without the curse of the wolf. The decision is yours."

"I wish to live, Fairy," Ian answered without hesitation. "I want to make a life with the woman I met."

"Then you shall live. Charlene McDuff is meant for you. Your differences complement each other, and she needs you as much as you need her."

"Thank you, Fairy. How could I ever repay you for all that you have done for my family?"

A small smile touched the fairy's lips as she raised her arms. The bright blue light returned, blinding him again as she disappeared, her final words lingering behind.

"Live, Ian O'Donnell. It's your turn."

With a final look at his stone friend, Ian left the roof, eager to return to Charlene and begin his new life.

The End

Don't miss out!

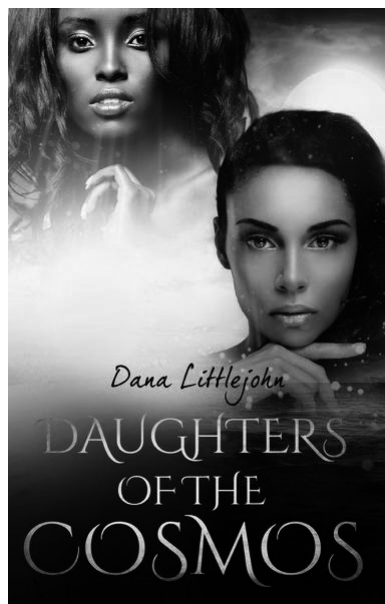
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About the Author

As a young child, I wrote Hickory Dickory Dock type poetry as I doodled all over my papers in school. I still don't know which I did more, but by Jr. high school I wrote more than doodled and even got up the nerve to enter them in a contest or two. But it was my short stories that took all my time and energy.

I showed a few to my friends and they had me doing weekly installments of a story and had passed it around the lunch room. During the 80's; when I was in High School, I tried my hand at rapping. Rap Music was just a toddler with the arrival of the Sugar Hill Gang a few years back and everyone wanted to Rap. So with my 'crew' The Puma Fly Girls, (come on, you had a weird crew name too), we rapped and I wrote the rhymes for myself as Shorty Dee Ski and for another of my girls in my crew. (Don't Laugh. If you are a child of the 80's you were some kind of 'ski' too.)

In 2003, I picked up my pen again and I haven't put it down. Come along for the ride as I go on an imaginary trip into my world. You'll enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

Read more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.