

THE PHOENIX CHARM by HELEN SCOTT TAYLOR

CHAPTER ONE

The sun sank into the Atlantic, painting the water molten gold and casting a warm glow over the granite manor house set atop the rocky cliffs of Cornwall. After years of neglect, Trelvelion Manor, ancestral home of the Cornish pisky troop, now thrived under the care of the new pisky king and queen. Sun sparkled off the tiny diamond panes of glass in the windows. Tumbling creepers dotted with purple and yellow flowers clothed the walls, while granite tubs on the terrace overflowed with scarlet, pink, and white geraniums.

Seated on a Windsor chair at the table in the library, pisky wise woman Cordelia Tink paused at her work and glanced out the open window, inhaling the floral-scented air. She ran her hand down the crease of the huge leather-bound book laid on the table before her and took a moment to reread the last few paragraphs she'd written. With a sigh, she set aside her pen and rubbed her eyes.

The task of recording the history of the pisky troop fell to her, but she would have gladly handed the job to another of the piskies. Two years ago, Niall and Rose O'Connor, the new pisky king and queen, had rescued the troop from thirty years of imprisonment in the shadowy nothingness between life and death called *in-between*. Today, Cordelia had finally summoned the strength to relive her failure to protect her people from that horror and enter an account in the pisky annals.

Lazing in the last few rays of sunlight on the desk at Cordelia's side, her gray cat Tamsy opened one eye. She peered at Cordelia critically and flicked her tail. "You're right, poppet." Cordelia nodded to her cat. "Enough doom and gloom for one day." Cordelia closed the book with a thud and pushed it away.

She stroked the soft fur on Tamsy's belly and smiled at the rumbling purr of response. What she needed was something to take her mind off the past—something pleasurable. Just the word "pleasure" summoned the image of Michael O'Connor's seductive smile in her mind. A

quiver of awareness ran across her skin, light and tickly as the brush of a feather. She'd once seen him do that—trail a feather across a woman's naked body...

Cordelia screwed her eyes closed, trying to rid herself of the image she'd seen while foretelling his future. Instead, the memory became clearer, his long naked body spread languorously on the sheets while he brushed the feather over the woman's breasts.

Cordelia stood and swiped her hands down the front of her dress to rid herself of the tingling sensation tightening her skin.

Although the pisky king Niall O'Connor was not Cornish, but half noble Irish Tuatha Dè Danaan and half leprechaun, he was a strong, caring leader they could depend on. How the womanizing rascal Michael could be related to Niall, let alone be his twin brother, baffled her.

She pressed her hand to her bodice where the hot thud of Michael's psychic presence beat in her chest like a second heart. She was powerful enough that fairy glamour didn't affect her, with one darned annoying exception—Michael O'Connor.

Unwillingly, her eyes rose to the silver divination dish she used to foretell the future. The skin on her scalp prickled and her cheeks warmed as she tried to pretend she wasn't thinking of doing what she *was* thinking of doing.

“Not again. I promised myself I'd abstain.” Despite the firmness of her tone, her feet were already moving toward the door. She pulled it open just enough to poke her head out and check that the hall was empty. The ancient oak creaked as if trying to alert someone to her wicked intent. She drew back quickly and turned the long iron key, grimacing at the thunk of the lock.

Pressing her back to the door, she rubbed her temples. In anticipation of what she was about to see, the sensual water nymph allure she'd inherited from her mother churned within the confines of the restrictive magical wards painted on her skin.

She drew a slow, deep breath and stared through the dust motes dancing in a shaft of sunlight at her divining dish. Were the gods themselves tempting her to indulge? Surely everyone was allowed one illicit pleasure—even she.

Tamsy sat up and watched with enigmatic gray eyes as Cordelia gave a defiant huff and marched back to her seat. She lit the three fat white candles floating in the silver, water-filled

dish. Within seconds, wide ribbons of smoke rose before her.

Raising a hand, she sketched a magical symbol in the air. The smoke stilled and glazed over into a mirror. Her insides trembled expectantly while she concentrated on Michael's psychic signature and waited for an image of his future to appear in the shiny surface.

She pressed her fingers to her lips as the picture became clearer. When she peeped into Michael's future, half the time she saw him performing routine activities at the pub he owned in a nearby village, the other half...

Her breath caught. She stared, too entranced to blink as an image of Michael's naked shoulders and lean back filled her scrying surface. Muscles rippled beneath smooth skin when he moved. His biceps clenched as he lifted a hand and flicked back a handful of dark wavy hair from his face.

A woman appeared before him, an indistinct form clothed in muted colors. When Cordelia watched Michael, she chose to ignore the identity of his numerous human lovers. All her attention focused on him.

Cordelia's heart thudded as he prowled forward, faded jeans riding low on his hips. Slowly, sensuously, he ran his hand down his ribs, over his abdomen, flicked open the buttons on his fly one by one with a little flourish of his hand like a magician performing a trick. Although it was no white rabbit he was about to pull out. As the last button popped and the jeans slid lower, a small needy sound escaped Cordelia's lips.

Heat flashed across her flesh, gathered and swirled, a hot whirlpool in her belly. Her sensual water nymph allure flowed closer to her skin, preparing to draw in and capture the man she desired. When the energies met the barrier of the magical Celtic symbols painted on her skin, her temperature shot up as though she were trapped in a pressure cooker.

She flapped a hand in front of her face, fanning herself. If she kept watching Michael, she would expire from lust.

Although she was burning up, a breath of chill through the window raised goose bumps on her arms. She caught a whiff of something rotten on the breeze and reluctantly dragged her eyes from Michael to glance out at the twilight sky.

When she looked back to the divination mirror, darkness oozed across the gilded smoke

like oil on water, obscuring Michael and his faceless woman. Cordelia blinked in surprise and leaned closer to get a better view. A howl issued from the murky surface, a mournful wail that slashed fear through her. Her cat shot to its feet, fur on end, puffed up to twice her normal size. Hidden within the mirror's shadowy image, other creatures joined the lament until the eerie clamor of baying filled the room.

Tamsy scooted off the table and crouched beneath a chair in front of the huge stone fireplace, but Cordelia had no time to comfort her. She stared at her divination mirror, searching the gloom for any clue to the meaning of the augury. Was this still Michael's foretelling? Had another possible future for him intruded? The hair on her neck prickled when pairs of small red dots appeared. They looked like animal's eyes glowing evilly in the darkness.

Her fists curled against the table as the memory of being imprisoned in-between crawled back to haunt her. Then, on the edge of perception, a whispered name snapped her to attention, trapped the breath in her lungs.

Gwyn ap Nudd.

The King of the Underworld.

Her concentration shattered. The murky image dissolved with a pop, scattering wisps of smoke. Her eyes watered, and she waved a hand to clear the air. The thought of the red-eyed creatures unsettled her, but more worrying was the fact that the whispered words had not come from the mirror. Someone nearby in Cornwall had actually spoken the name Gwyn ap Nudd.

She thrust out her awareness, tried to identify who'd called the King of the Underworld. Behind the deep pulse of Michael's psychic signature, the members of the Cornish pisky troop filled her senses with the white noise of their presence. Cordelia focused on the lingering chill of the dreadful name.

She was sure the call had not originated from inside the manor. She puffed a misty sigh of relief in the cold air, wishing the granite fireplace held a roaring fire instead of a stoneware pot full of dahlias.

What would happen if the Welsh King of the Underworld answered the summons and came to Cornwall? Niall and Rose had left for two weeks to search for displaced piskies in America, leaving her in charge. Why on Earth did this have to happen now? Cordelia glanced at

the Queen Anne clock on the oak mantelpiece. They'd already be in the air over the Atlantic. The earliest she could call them for advice would be the following day.

She traced her finger across a lacy layer of ice that had formed on the water in her divination dish, and shivered. When the pisky troop had been trapped thirty years ago, she should have foreseen the danger, but she'd been so distracted by the old king's death, she had let her duties slide. This time she wouldn't let the piskies down.

She glanced at the rows of massive leather-bound tomes holding records of pisky life going back centuries. She must find out quickly if the piskies had any history of conflict with Gwyn ap Nudd or the Welsh fairies in his domain.

Tamsy slunk out from beneath the chair and jumped on the desk. She padded closer, mewed softly, and butted her forehead on Cordelia's chin.

Cordelia laid her cheek against Tamsy's shoulder and considered what to do. She couldn't check through a whole shelf of books in one night on her own.

She winced. "Oh, rats' tails!" If she needed help, the logical choice was Michael. Not only was he the pisky king's brother, but while the king and queen were away, he was responsible for their twin boys. He had a right to know immediately if the children might be in danger.

With luck, she might catch him upstairs putting the babies to bed before he went down to the great hall below the manor house for the night's entertainment. In Ireland, he'd been Seanchai, the official storyteller in the Irish fairy court. Now that he lived in Cornwall with the piskies, he'd fallen into the routine of telling a tall tale to the assembled troop most evenings.

Cordelia stood and peered at her rosy cheeks in a small mirror near the door and thanked the gods that Michael would never guess the reason she was flushed. She fastened the three small buttons on the front of her dress, closing the garment to her throat.

When she reached the nursery, she found Michael's leprechaun half sister Ana dozing in a chair beside the cot, keeping watch over the babies. But no sign of Michael.

She huffed as she closed the door. Tamsy wound between her legs and looked up at her with inscrutable gray eyes. "All right, I know. I'll have to look for him in the great hall."

After she descended the stairs, she strode purposefully along the moth-eaten carpet

runner covering the passage. She'd rather stick pins in her eyes than walk into the packed hall and interrupt Michael when he was telling a story, but if she wanted his help, she had no choice.

When she reached the top of the narrow staircase that led beneath the house, she paused for Tamsy to catch up, and grabbed a fortifying breath. Then she descended to the rooms carved from the granite underneath the manor grounds. At the bottom, she grasped the doorknob for a couple of heartbeats before she pushed the door open.

The jaunty beat of Irish music assailed her.

She slipped in and pressed her back to the wall, hugging the shadows. Rising on tiptoe, she peered between the tall brown-haired piskies. Most of them worked the land, turned wood or forged metal, and lived in cottages around the estate. Many were still dressed casually in work clothes, but a few had donned brightly colored jackets and hats in anticipation of the rowdy evening that always ensued when Michael told one of his bawdy tales.

A lump formed in her throat when she glimpsed Michael O'Connor on the far side of the room putting a mug down on the bar. His shaggy dark hair shone in the low light. The divine masculine shape of his wide shoulders and narrow hips silhouetted against the lamplight sent a hot shiver through her. How she hoped she could get the image of him naked out of her mind before she talked to him.

Michael grabbed the hand of an older pisky woman. She grinned up at Michael like a teenager on her first date and giggled as he spun her into a dance. The piskies clapped to the beat. Cordelia plucked at the neck of her dress, the collar tight on her clammy skin. Despite its size, the confounded hall was always stuffy in the evenings.

Tamsy pressed her silky body against Cordelia's legs. Relieved at the distraction, Cordelia scooped the cat into her arms. She rested her cheek on Tamsy's head and watched the laughing crowd of piskies.

Mewing, Tamsy turned a speculative eye on Cordelia. "I know." She buffed the top of the cat's head with her fingers. "No need to bully me. I'm about to ask him."

Michael had escorted his partner to her seat and was now weaving between the tables toward his storytelling stool. As usual, the spiky auburn hair of her ward, Thorn, marked his presence a few steps behind Michael. She wished Thorn had chosen a more suitable male role

model: Niall for instance. But at least Michael had generously taken the young man under his wing. She couldn't fault him for that.

Cordelia threaded her way through the crowd. When people noticed her, they stepped aside with deferential nods. She pasted on her serene wise woman mask and held her head high.

When she entered the brighter circle of light near the bar, Michael looked toward her. He caught his bottom lip between his teeth and flicked up his eyebrows in question. Cordelia nodded in answer to his unspoken query. He grinned the wide seductive smile that had women falling at his feet.

Streamers of heat unfurled inside her, rippled beneath her skin. Her heart raced and she gritted her teeth. She could hardly think straight when she got close to Michael. But she'd eat worms before she admitted as much. The reprobate was already far too cocky.

He held out his arms and shimmied sideways between the tables, heading in her direction. The disreputable faded jeans he wore were the ones she'd just watched him unbutton. Cordelia swallowed. She wanted to look away; she really did. But his fairy glamour entranced her so much, she couldn't fight the compulsion to stare.

Since St. Patrick's Day, he'd insisted on wearing a green trilby with shamrocks embroidered on the band. He turned to face her, tilted the hat at a rakish angle on his mop of dark wavy hair, and captured her with his sinful blue gaze.

"You be wanting me, darlin'?"

Cordelia opened her mouth to answer, but there didn't seem to be any air in her lungs. She sucked in an embarrassing gasp that made Michael's lips twitch. "I need to speak to you on troop business."

Michael reached out and rubbed a finger underneath Tamsy's chin. The cat tipped back her head and purred, vibrating against Cordelia's chest.

"Here's me hoping you might be wanting me for something a tad more interesting." As his finger lazily caressed Tamsy's fur, he glanced up at Cordelia from beneath his lashes. A hot spurt of desire shot through her body, making her legs tremble.

This is ridiculous.

Fantasizing about him in private was one thing, being seduced by his glamour like a

gullible human was another. After the effort her grandmother and father had put into hiding her uncontrollable sensual allure, she couldn't let them down and shame herself—again. The price she'd paid the one time she defied them still haunted her night and day. Cordelia tightened her arms around Tamsy, shielding herself. The poor creature squeaked and Cordelia hastily loosened her grip.

“This is no time for joking. It's a matter of urgency.” Someone chose that moment to reduce the volume of the music. Her final word came out rather louder than she intended. A few anxious glances shot her way.

She smiled reassuringly. The last thing she wanted was panic.

With a nod toward the exit she said, “Come upstairs where we can talk in private.” She ignored the wicked sparkle in Michael's eyes.

“Your wish is my command, darlin'.”

In the two years since she'd met Michael, Cordelia could count on one hand the times they'd exchanged more than a polite greeting. Yet the way he called her darling with that deep Irish lilt to his voice was exactly the way he spoke to the women she watched him take to bed. She reached the door and ascended the first few steps, then paused and looked back at him. “I'd rather you didn't call me...darling. I don't feel the name's appropriate.” And if he kept speaking to her in that tone of voice, she was likely to muddle fantasy with reality.

He grinned up at her, mischief twinkling in his eyes.

With a sigh of exasperation, mostly at her own ludicrous reaction to him, she hurried up the stairs, promising herself she was strong enough to ignore his glamour.

He grinned as he stopped in the doorway at the top and rested his shoulder against the frame. “Maybe I should call you sugarplum? You have the sweet ripe fullness of fruit ready to be—”

“Michael!”

In the silence that followed her explosive retort, all she could think was ready to be what? A small part of her wished she hadn't interrupted him.

And she hated that she fell for his suggestive banter.

Anger bubbled up, giving her words a harsh edge. “Just call me *Cordelia* in a normal tone

of voice like everyone else.”

He flicked up his eyebrows, unabashed.

“Enough nonsense.” Cordelia smoothed her skirt, reluctant to admit she needed his help. “While I was foretelling in the library, darkness invaded my divination mirror. I also heard someone whisper the given name of the Welsh King of the Underworld.”

The mischievous half smile that always hovered on Michael’s lips dropped away. He pushed off the door frame and straightened, his expression serious.

“When did this happen, lass?”

“About fifteen minutes ago.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, turned, and glanced up the stairs. “Ruddy Badba,” he cursed. “I hope the babies are safe.”

Before she could reassure him that she’d just visited the nursery and the boys were fine, he took off, running up the stairs two at a time. She stared up at the landing while he put his head in the nursery door.

Thirty seconds later, he closed the door quietly and descended more slowly, a look of relief on his face.

“The babies are still there. When we tried to put them to bed, I half expected them to disappear and reappear somewhere else.” At Cordelia’s raised eyebrows he continued. “The rascals have just discovered they can walk unseen like me father.”

Cordelia shook her head in disbelief. Rose had told her the children took after their air elemental grandfather. But it had never occurred to her the children would exhibit the rare air elemental gift of walking unseen: disappearing and reappearing in another place.

“What sort of threat do you think Gwyn ap Nudd could be?” Michael asked.

“We’ve had no dealings with him during my life, but it’s possible he holds an ancient grudge against the piskies. You know what long memories these immortals have.”

He nodded and something dark passed behind his eyes. “Aye, I know.”

When Michael and Niall had lived in the Irish fairy court, Niall had apparently had problems dealing with the self-obsessed Irish fairy queen. Perhaps life had been just as difficult for Michael.

“I want to check through the pisky troop records for references to Gwyn, but there are at least fifty volumes in the library. I need another set of eyes to help me.”

Michael took off his trilby and ran his hand through his hair, lifting the luxuriant chestnut waves off his face, then letting them tumble back. All thought deserted her as she watched the silky strands settle against his skin.

“‘Tis not a problem, lass. I’ll gladly offer you me eyes. I read fast, so we’ll be through the books in no time.”

Cordelia blinked, pulled her attention back to the conversation. Michael O’Connor might be a master storyteller, but the possibility of his speed-reading seemed as unlikely as his sprouting wings. “Great. Thank you,” she uttered, feeling a touch guilty for doubting his word when he’d offered to help. “I’d rather not involve anyone else until we know if the danger is real.”

Michael nodded and popped his green hat squarely on his head. “We don’t want to go causing alarm, to be sure.”

He extended an arm graciously in the direction of the library and smiled, a hint of mischief creeping back into his expression. “Lead on, sugarplum.”

For a moment, Cordelia debated whether to argue over her name. With a sigh, she decided she must choose her battles, and this wasn’t important. She marched off toward the library, acutely aware of him striding behind her, probably ogling her bottom.

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Michael enjoyed the view as he paced along the hall to the library. Cordelia Tink might be uptight, but she had a damn fine arse. Although she’d covered herself from head to foot in a nondescript gray dress, it hugged every curve—and she had plenty of curves to hug. Her waist nipped in neat and small, accentuating the sweet roundness of one of the sexiest rumps he’d ever seen.

Realizing she’d halted, he raised his eyes to find her peering at him over her shoulder with a frown.

Oops.

He did the same thing he always did when he was caught out--grinned, infusing the expression with glamour.

She rolled her eyes and pointed at the massive green leather-bound books that filled the bottom two shelves of the wall facing the fireplace. "We need to start from...here," she said, resting a hand on a book.

Michael dragged out five volumes and hefted them onto the desk where she'd cleared a space. "A bit dusty." He wiped his hands on his jeans and then drew in a deep breath.

Her hand shot up. "Don't you dare."

Confused, he let the air go.

"You'll spread dust everywhere if you blow it." She marched to her desk, pulled a duster from the drawer, and arched an eyebrow at him.

He stepped away, leaned an elbow on a chair back, and watched while she dusted each book, shaking the cloth out the window at regular intervals. Niall was always full of praise for Cordelia's prophetic skills and thoughtful advice. But on the one occasion Michael had approached her because he thought having his future read would be fun, she'd nearly bitten his head off. According to her, she wasn't a carnival sideshow for his entertainment.

Her gaze flicked up to him, then darted back to her book. She was attractive in a repressed way, as though she didn't want anyone to notice. But whatever she wore, she couldn't hide the fact she had a damn fine body, and incredible hair. Up close, he could distinguish pale gold strands mingled with the dark, and her braid was as thick as his wrist. He imagined her naked, her loose hair draping her shoulders like a cloak. He pressed his lips together to keep from smiling. She'd be all covered up, but he'd bet her nipples would poke through.

"Michael."

He jumped guiltily.

"Are you going to help me or not?" She held out a dusted volume.

Book in hand, he settled in one of the wing chairs before the fireplace. He'd tried not to worry about Gwyn ap Nudd, but the possibility his nephews were in danger flipped his stomach with a sick lurch. He pictured the sleepy little lads snuggled together in the cot they shared. The

mantle of responsibility hung awkwardly on his shoulders, but he would do whatever was necessary to protect them. He loved the boys. Besides, Niall would string him up if he let anything happen to them.

Taking a steady breath, he focused his concentration on the key words to search for, then scanned the first page, flipped it over, scanned the next page, flipped, read, flipped, read—

“Michael! If you’re not going to take this seriously, I’ll find someone else to help.”

He blinked, adjusting his gaze. “Crikey O’Reilly, lass, I can’t go any faster.”

Confusion swept the annoyance from her face. She set down her book and swiveled in her chair to face him. “You’re reading the pages?”

“Aye.” He grinned. “I’m thinking you didn’t believe me when I said I could read fast?”

She opened her mouth—closed it again without making a sound, her gray eyes huge and soft. Beautiful eyes. Not like the normal pisky earth elemental brown or hazel. Somewhere in her lineage, she must have an ancestor who was not a Cornish pisky.

Cordelia swallowed audibly. “You’re sure you know what’s on each page?”

“Aye.” He gave her a moment to absorb the truth.

She stared at him as though he’d suddenly grown an extra head, but in a good way, as though the extra head impressed her more than the original. The possibility that reading fast would impress females had never occurred to him. Actually, he didn’t need any help attracting women. His local fame for telling tall tales meant there were always eager human women crowding his bar on the lookout for fun. Using his fairy glamour it was oh so easy to send them home with lovely memories but no recollection of his face or name.

Cordelia cleared her throat and turned back to her page. Michael settled again and did the same. When he finished the book, he placed it back on the shelf, and selected another from the pile. He forbore to comment that Cordelia was only on the tenth page of her first book. Ms. Starchy Pants would not appreciate the comparison.

As he prepared to start his second book, the library door cracked open. His friend Nightshade, the vampiric fairy, poked in his head. The lamplight cast a sheen on his ebony skin, and his silver eyes glinted with predatory satisfaction. Michael suppressed a sigh. Since he’d allowed the nightstalker to bite him and forge a blood bond between them two years ago,

Nightshade hardly let him out of his sight. The way the vampire watched his every move was worse than being handfasted to a jealous woman.

Nightshade sauntered in, bare-chested, his wings folded tight to his back. He tilted his head and with one hand swept his long black hair off his face “I wondered what had become of you, bard. They’re asking for you in the great hall.”

Michael smacked his forehead. “I can’t believe I’ve gone and forgot about tonight’s tale. You’ll have to tell one.”

The vampiric fairy gave Michael an incredulous look.

“Erm, you’re right. ‘Tis a bad idea.” Although Nightshade’s mother had been a pisky, and his nightstalker father had left before his birth, Nightshade had confided that he’d always felt like an outsider. Thirty years ago, he’d betrayed the piskies and conspired with an evil druid to trap them in between life and death. He’d later repented and helped Niall and Rose free the troop, but the piskies had never forgiven him.

“Could Thorn tell a story? He’s listened to you often enough.” As Nightshade spoke, Thorn’s cheeky grin appeared around the door.

“I’ve been down to the hall and told them you’re busy tonight and won’t be back.” Thorn’s green eyes sparkled with mischief. “They assumed I meant busy with the babies.”

Thorn dogged Michael’s heels, but the lad was full of fun. He’d just turned twenty and needed some mates to have a laugh with. Michael had no idea what had happened to the young man’s parents. Cordelia seemed to be his surrogate mother.

Thorn grinned. “Hello, Dee. What you doing?” Without waiting for her to answer, he hurried to Michael’s side and stared eagerly at the book on his lap. “Can I help?”

Cordelia released a resigned sigh, nodded, and placed a hand on the pile of books. “Grab one each and make yourselves comfortable. We’re looking for any reference to Gwyn ap Nudd, Welsh King of the Underworld.”

Thorn lifted a book and took the chair across from Cordelia. Nightshade remained standing, hands on hips. “Why?”

Cordelia rubbed her temples. When her eyes met Nightshade’s, the tension in the room thrummed. “Someone nearby called his name this evening. I need to know if he has any reason

to threaten the piskies.”

Nightshade remained rooted to the spot. Cordelia stared at him, her soft gray eyes now hard as flint, her lips pinched. The antipathy rolled off her in waves, far stronger than the other piskies’ dislike. Michael’s curiosity pricked to know what had happened between them to cause such hostility.

When Nightshade continued to glare at Cordelia, Michael decided that as he was blood-bonded to the vampire, he might as well make use of the connection. “You going to be helping us or not, boyo?” he asked softly.

The tension snapped when the nightstalker turned to him, his gaze softening. “Whatever you want, bard.” He gave Michael’s shoulder an affectionate squeeze, then hefted two volumes off the table before claiming the seat beside Michael.

Michael purposely avoided Cordelia’s questioning gaze. He did not want to explain his relationship with Nightshade. Ms. Prim and Proper would disapprove of the fact that he’d enjoyed the illicit pleasure of a vampire’s bite.

He resumed flipping pages. He knew little about the Welsh fairy king, but as Cordelia had observed, these immortals could be difficult. Growing up in the Irish fairy court, Michael had learned to survive the whims, wiles, and spiteful temper of the Irish fairy queen. If Gwyn were at all like the Queen of Nightmares, he did not want to meet him anytime soon.

CHAPTER TWO

Nightshade stared blankly at a page of pisky history. How could he read a word when Michael sat in a chair beside him? The sweet blood surging beneath his skin was pure temptation.

He craved him.

He craved the touch of his fingers, the musky fragrance of his skin, the musical Irish lilt of his voice.

Nightshade’s gaze rose inexorably to Michael’s face. The ceaseless twist of pain and

anger in his gut eased when he saw the characteristic half smile curving Michael's lips. Nightshade even managed a smile himself as he watched the gentle slide of Michael's fingers caressing the book's pages with the finesse of a lover's hand.

Love—an impossible concept to fathom. This burning desire for Michael that defined Nightshade's life, ruled his actions, his thoughts, was surely no more than an addiction: an obsession with the heady burst of energy he felt after he took Michael's blood.

An obsession with someone he could not control.

The blood bond Nightshade had forged when he first bit Michael two years ago should have held Michael in thrall. Yet inexplicably, Michael remained in command, dictated when and where he'd submit, kept Nightshade trailing after him like a dog on a leash, forever hungry.

After adjusting his position to flex his wings, he read a few lines, reread them, closed his eyes.

The burn of a gaze made him raise his head. Cordelia stared at him through narrowed eyes. If he were not Rose and Niall's friend, she'd throw him out of the troop. She'd always hated him.

Maybe he had earned the piskies' animosity for being misguided enough to help imprison them, but even when he was a child, they had not accepted him as one of their own. He yearned to belong, even if just to one person.

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Cordelia tried to focus on her book, she really did. But concentrating was impossible with a nightstalker in the room. The sweet scent of the almond oil he rubbed on his wings nearly made her gag. The scars on her neck tingled, and she made a conscious effort to relax her tense hands.

After a few minutes of fighting the urge to look at him, she gave in and raised her eyes. There he sat, legs slung over the arm of the chair, wings twitching like a huge bat. He glanced at Michael with a soft smile as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. In reality, he was just like his father Dragon—a predator likely to fall into a blood lust and strike when they least expected. She wanted him gone, banished. Until then, she'd never feel safe.

She dragged her eyes away and gave her attention to the book.

Once she settled, Michael looked up. "I'm sensing something odd."

Cordelia concentrated on the plethora of psychic feelings bombarding her senses, checking for unusual energies. "I don't think there's anything out of the ordinary." As if to make a liar of her, Tamsy leaped onto the desk and puffed herself up like a brush. She hissed, the sibilant sound lowering to a growl in her throat.

"Wretched cat. That's all we need," Nightshade complained.

"Shh." Cordelia flapped a quieting hand. Foreboding prickled across her skin. She blended her mind with Tamsy's, jolted in shock at her cat's spiky fear. Cordelia examined the corners of the room and the shadows for movement.

"Shit. I feel something too now." Nightshade leaped to his feet, assuming a combative posture.

They all froze in place, the air vibrating with tension while everyone watched for intruders.

A spark caught the edge of Cordelia's vision. Three points of light appeared in the center of the room, grew brighter, then morphed into shining orbs floating at head height.

"*Tylwyth Teg*," Michael whispered.

Servants of the Welsh King of the Underworld. An icicle of fear pierced Cordelia's solar plexus. Without taking her eyes from the shining spheres, she stood and gathered Tamsy safely in her arms, ignoring the prick of claws.

The orbs burst into millions of points of light that coalesced into three *Tylwyth Teg*, two males and one female. With ash-blond hair, they were whip thin and renowned to be just as nasty.

Standing in the center of the room, the Welsh fairies took only an instant to gather their senses before they focused their pale blue eyes on Nightshade, obviously discounting the rest of them as a threat.

They were taller than Cordelia had imagined, the males over six feet, the female not far behind. All three wore black leather; the dark clothes intensified the impact of their pale skin and hair. They looked eerily like ghosts made flesh.

She held Tamsy tight, steadied herself. “What do you want?”

Instead of answering, the male with dark runes tattooed on his cheekbones stepped toward Nightshade and brandished fingers tipped with wicked silver spikes. “*You* are not required, nightstalker.” He nodded at the door. “Leave us...slowly.”

The stalker faced them down, wings slightly extended for balance, the tense muscles in his chest and belly gleaming and hard as armor.

Cordelia’s breath locked in her throat. She thrust a warning look at Thorn, indicating he should stay safely behind the table.

Although Cordelia distrusted Nightshade, if a fight ensued, he could probably take all three Teg. She stepped forward. “Nobody leaves,” she said, managing to keep a surprisingly steady voice.

None of the Teg responded.

Nightshade rattled his thumbnail across his teeth in a derisive gesture. “You leave us, Teg. *You are not required.*”

Hostility vibrated through the air, escalating with each tripping heartbeat.

With slow, smooth movements, Michael closed his book, placed it on the floor at his side, and stood. His usual half smile on his lips, he doffed his green trilby and bowed. “Grand as it is to welcome our friends from the valleys, ‘tis normal for guests to come knocking at the front door.”

Looking bemused, all three of the intruders relaxed. The tension drained out of Cordelia’s neck and back; a subtle sense of well-being flooded through her. Storytellers often possessed a silver tongue, all the better to manipulate the emotions of their audience. She wasn’t surprised Michael displayed the gift. But she’d never before been on the receiving end of such an effective use of mood control.

The tallest male marked with the black runes recovered first. He swung around to face Michael and inclined his head. “I bring greetings from the Welsh fairy king.”

“I return them in the spirit in which they’re given,” Michael replied.

Cordelia stifled an impatient breath. Yes, we all hate each other, but gods forbid we forget the ritual greetings.

“Am I addressing the pisky king?”

Michael gave a genuinely amused if slightly incredulous chuckle. “Who is it wanting to know?”

Head high, the leader slapped a hand on his chest. “I am Arian of the Tylwyth Teg, here on the orders of our king, Gwyn ap Nudd. We three are gatekeepers to the Underworld. This is Dai, and this Olwyn.” He indicated the other male, then the female.

For long seconds nobody moved or spoke. Cordelia found her voice first and asked the question they must all be thinking. “Why has he sent you?”

Irritation blended with frustration inside her when all three Teg ignored her and continued to stare at Michael. “Are you the pisky king?” Arian asked again.

Michael shook his head.

Arian glanced from face to face, eyes narrowed suspiciously. He flexed his fingers, the silver spikes rattling together like bones. “Where is the pisky king?”

Cordelia glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Flying over Iceland, I should think.” She raised her eyebrows. “I’m the pisky wise woman. I’ve been left in charge. Either you deal with me, or you come back in two weeks when the king gets home.”

He flicked her an impatient look as though he thought she was joking. When she remained quiet, he compressed his lips and turned back to Michael.

She straightened her shoulders, tense again now that the effect of Michael’s verbal tranquilizer had worn off.

Arian thought he could treat her with disdain, did he? “What business do you have in Cornwall?” she demanded, her voice sharp.

Once again, he ignored her question and concentrated on Michael, a frown creasing his brow. “Who are you?”

Michael gave the Teg an enigmatic look, laden with enough glamour to entrance a football team. Nightshade gave a small needy grunt. Cordelia clutched the table as tendrils of desire snaked through her. Thorn appeared unaffected, and the Teg remained unmoved.

Cordelia gritted her teeth. Losing her temper would not help anyone. “He’s the king’s brother,” she said.

Surprise flashed across Arian's face. "Why then are you not leader in his stead?"

Michael scratched his head, tilting his hat off center, and summoned a crooked grin. "Now that's a good question, boyo. Me brother and I have never quite seen eye to eye on subjects like responsibility and work—"

"Enough!" Arian squinted at Michael, obviously trying to decide if he were purposely making a fool of him. Then he turned to Cordelia, his face set in resignation. "Gwyn ap Nudd sends greetings to the pisky king. Or in this case"--he flicked his silver-tipped fingers at her--"his...representative. A few hours past, someone opened an unauthorized gateway to the Underworld."

The blood drained out of Cordelia's head, leaving her ears humming.

She clutched her cat like a lifeline as an image filled her mind of dark, hideous creatures pouring out of the Underworld into Cornwall. She'd be powerless to protect the piskies—again. The breath stalled in her lungs. Then steadying strength flowed into her from Tamsy.

This was worse than she'd imagined. A million times worse.

While she struggled to breathe, Michael fixed his gaze on the three intruders and spoke. "Tell me exactly how this happened." Gone was the playful tone. His demand cut through the silence sharp as a honed blade. The compulsion of his silver tongue dragged at her mouth to answer, making her mumble nonsense.

All three Teg started talking at once until Michael pointed at Arian. "You speak."

But all he told them was that Gwyn sensed the gate open and dispatched the gatekeepers to close the breach.

Suddenly the female hissed, an eerie sound that set the hairs prickling all over Cordelia's body. "Shield yourselves," she whispered to her companions. "He spins silver shackles with his words."

All three Teg glowed, their skin luminous as though they were about to change back into orbs of light, but didn't complete the transmutation. The leader pointed at Cordelia accusingly. "You piskies must have opened the gate."

She shook her head; her stomach knotted at the loathing in his eyes. "Would we be sitting here reading if we knew monsters from the Underworld could be skulking around outside?"

He grunted. “The pisky king is liable because this happened in his domain. Protocol demands you accompany us when we attempt to close the gate.”

“No.” Michael stepped in front of her. “I’ll be coming with you.”

Cordelia tensed as Michael tried to take over. Then she realized Michael O’Connor was protecting her. She stared at the dark T-shirt stretched across his muscular shoulders. Why would he volunteer to take her place? She’d expect Niall to do such a noble thing, but Michael? She raised a hand, hesitated, then did what she’d dreamed of doing—touched him. Warmth flowed into her hand, zinged up her arm and through her body, defying the restrictive wards painted on her skin.

He was dangerous to her equilibrium. So dangerous, she shouldn’t have anything to do with him.

“Michael.” His name fell from her lips as a reverential whisper. He turned, so close his arm brushed her dress. She placed her tingling hand back on Tamsy. “I accepted responsibility for the troop. I’ll accompany the Teg. You have other duties.”

“The babies,” he whispered, his gaze clouding.

As if thinking of the children could summon them, Michael’s nephew Finian materialized on the carpet in the middle of the room.

In a flash, Cordelia recalled Michael’s comment about the babies taking after his father and being able to walk unseen, disappearing from one place and appearing in another. What a terrible moment for Niall’s son to practice his new power.

Michael lunged toward the baby, but Olwyn was closer. She snatched Fin up beneath the arms and held him while he twisted and kicked, reaching his chubby arms out to Michael, and crying.

Michael halted, still as a statue, palms spread in a calming gesture. “Don’t you go hurting the lad. Give him to me.”

Arian stood between Michael and Olwyn and flexed his spiked fingers. “The child is of the pisky king’s blood?”

Fear blossomed in Cordelia’s chest. Why did the gatekeeper want to know Fin’s bloodline?

Michael's strained breaths filled the silence.

Arian jerked a single nod, obviously satisfied he was right. "The child comes too."

"No," Michael and Cordelia answered in unison.

The Teg leader appeared to grow in stature. Cordelia realized he'd floated a couple of inches off the ground. He pointed toward the door. "You both come with the child, or we take the child alone."

"Only if you give him back to me now." Compulsion laced Michael's voice, but all three Teg glowed, protecting themselves from the effect of his silver tongue.

Fin wailed and wriggled in Olwyn's arms. Arian glanced over his shoulder at her and nodded. She stepped forward and held out the child.

Michael clutched Fin tightly to his chest, his large hand cradling the boy's golden head against his shoulder. "All right, lad. 'Tis all right, you are."

He looked down at Cordelia. "If there's an open gate to the Underworld in Cornwall, it must be closed," he whispered. "I'm thinking we should go with them. Not risk a fight. Especially now Fin's involved."

She nodded, thoughts and emotions tangled so she couldn't separate the threads.

Michael headed for the door, giving the Teg his back to shield the baby as he passed them. Cordelia followed. "You stay here," she threw over her shoulder when she heard Thorn's footsteps behind her. He groaned in answer but the footfalls ceased. She had enough to worry about without adding Thorn's welfare to the equation.

* * * * *

Cordelia sat in the back of the Range Rover with Tamsy on her lap and Finian strapped in a baby car seat on her left. Michael drove, with Arian sitting in the front passenger's seat beside him.

They traveled along the narrow Cornish lanes, the high banks on either side of the road blocking the moonlight. Michael kept up a stream of cheerful banter for Finian about everything from Winnie the Pooh to what dinosaurs ate. Despite this entertainment, Finian whimpered and

whined, holding out his arms every time Michael glanced around.

When Cordelia tried to wipe Fin's nose, he batted her hand away and cried louder. In the end, she gave up, her chest aching to see the stream of tears running down his plump pink cheeks, wetting his blue sleeper. She stroked Tamsy, wondering if she lacked some vital maternal ability. Not that she would ever need to be maternal. She could never have an intimate relationship with a man. The nearest thing she'd have to a son was her ward, Thorn.

She leaned forward and peered out the windshield at the two spheres of light scooting through the darkness ahead of the car like sentient fireworks. "Are you sure they know where they're going?"

Arian gave her an indignant glare. In the dark, his pale blue eyes glowed eerily. "In our light form all gatekeepers are attuned to the Underworld. They can sense the illegal breach."

Illegal breach. Pompous oaf. Cordelia focused on her irritation, let the anger hold back her fear. She hung on to Tamsy, and braced herself against Fin's seat as the car swerved around a sharp bend in the road. Up ahead, the light orbs paused at a farm gate. Cordelia swallowed, her throat tight with anxiety as Michael swung the SUV onto a bumpy track. She peered out the windshield. "Can you sense if anything dangerous has escaped from the Underworld?"

Arian gave her a derisive glance. "Nothing leaves the Underworld without the king's permission."

The tension in Cordelia's shoulders eased a bit, even though her annoyance escalated. He could have told her that earlier. "Why are you so worried about this gate, then?"

His eyes flicked from her face to her cat, as if he thought the cat were the more intelligent. "A gate provides entry as well as exit, *wise woman.*"

"You think someone might try to sneak *into* the Underworld? Are you mad?" she asked. Michael met her gaze in his rearview mirror and rolled his eyes in sympathy. She exhaled, releasing much of her anxiety.

The headlights illuminated a granite farmhouse tucked against a grassy hill.

"There're no lights in the windows," Michael observed, with a glance at Arian. "I can't sense any humans, so I'm thinking 'tis safe to stop here."

How could he sense humans? She'd never heard of such a thing. Fairies sensed each

other's psychic signature, but humans didn't have a strong enough presence to detect.

"All out," Arian commanded.

"'Tis best Cordelia stays here with Finian. But I'll be coming with you," Michael said, walking around the car as she climbed out.

Relieved she could stay with Fin, she stretched her legs and surveyed the murky outline of the rolling hills and spiky trees.

"The child comes," Arian said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"I'm not agreeing. Not in a month of Sundays," Michael said.

Before Cordelia could climb back inside the car, Michael shut the door so Arian couldn't reach Fin. The two light orbs transformed into Dai and Olwyn, and all three gatekeepers advanced on Michael.

He maintained his relaxed pose. "The child will be staying in the car," Michael stated in a voice laced with so much compulsion, Cordelia momentarily lost all sense of where she was, concern for Fin's safety flooding her mind.

Although the Teg were now wise to Michael's silver tongue, even they paused and looked bewildered.

Arian recovered first. He stepped forward, but instead of going for Michael, he grabbed Cordelia's arm, catching her by surprise. Shock sparked along her nerves as he yanked her toward him, slamming her back to his chest, gripping her upper arms in a punishing hold. His hands pressed deathly cold against her skin. Goose bumps raced up and down her arms.

"Bring. The. Child." The chill of Arian's breath numbed the back of her head.

All traces of humor fell from Michael's face and he stilled. Even the breeze that had been flirting with his hair disappeared. "I'll not let you go putting the child in danger."

"He'll be safe," Arian ground out. "But if you defy me, the woman will not." His spiky silver fingertips slid around her throat. Points of pain pierced her neck, needled into her head. She clenched her teeth to stop from crying out.

Michael's stricken gaze darted from her face to Arian's grip on her neck, and his jaw tensed. "You have made enemies this night." He cut the gatekeeper a threatening sideways glance and then opened the car door.

Arian thrust Cordelia away. She huddled beside Michael against the car, her thoughts mired in shock.

“You all right, lass?” Michael stroked her cheek, then gently pushed her head to one side and examined her neck.

She rubbed her throat, and her fingers came away sticky with blood. Then she caught sight of Arian’s impatient expression. With a stuttering breath, she straightened. “I’m fine. I love being assaulted at night in the middle of nowhere.”

“She’ll live. Stop making a fuss.” Arian took a step toward the car and Fin.

Michael moved to cut him off. “Don’t even think about touching him.”

Despite her bravado, Cordelia trembled. A premonition of disaster drifted through her like a ghost while she watched Michael release Fin from his seat and gather the sleepy child into his arms.

They trudged across a wet, muddy field, water seeping into her shoes, dirt sticking to the hem of her dress. The Teg seemed to have no trouble seeing in the dark. Thank the Luna goddess the moon was waxing gibbous, nearly full. Every time the clouds broke for a few seconds, the moon gave just enough light to see where they were heading.

The clouds parted and Cordelia’s pulse leaped at the sight of a monstrous creature crouched on the hilltop. With a shot of relief that almost buckled her knees, she realized the shape was an excavating machine abandoned beside the dark maw of a hole.

“We’ve arrived,” Dai announced. But there was nothing to see. Cordelia had expected a dark swirling breach in the air, or at least something resembling a gate. They gathered along the muddy rim of the wide trench. Dai pointed to a toppled megalith half submerged in water lying in the bottom of the hole.

“Ruddy Badba. There are two humans near the stone.” Michael pushed Fin into her arms and ran along the edge of the trench toward the rock.

“Humans,” Olwyn said with distaste. “Probably dead. The gate must have drained the life from them when they uncovered it.”

Fear slashed through Cordelia. She stepped back, clutching Fin as he twisted in her arms to watch Michael. “Keep away from the megalith, Michael,” she shouted after him. “It can suck

the life out of you.”

She wasn't sure whether he heard her or not. But he didn't jump into the trench, just crouched on the lip, and peered at the two humans lying in the muddy water.

Olwyn and Dai jumped into the hole. Amazingly, they made no splash. They floated a little above the ground, keeping their black boots dry. Cordelia flexed her toes inside her sodden, dirty leather pumps with a touch of resentment.

Arian approached her, his eyes shining like an animal's in the dark.

She had to focus her will to stand her ground and not back away. “Please bring the two humans up here so we can check if they're alive,” she asked.

He didn't even acknowledge her request. With a sneer, he narrowed his eyes to malevolent glowing slits. “I need some of the child's hair.” He lifted a hand toward Fin. Cordelia stumbled back out of reach, nearly tripping on her dress's soggy hem.

She hugged Fin protectively, his chubby legs wrapped around her, his warm, tearstained cheek pressed into her neck. “Why?”

By now, she should have known better than to expect an answer. Arian lunged after her, grabbing at the little boy's head and yanking his hair.

Fin's scream rent the damp night air, sending crows flapping into the sky from the shadowy silhouette of an oak tree.

“You damn—”

Before she finished her sentence, Michael jumped in front of her. He shoved Arian in the chest, making him stagger back a step. “If you've hurt the baby, fella, I'll—”

“I've only taken some hair.” Arian raised his fist, displaying the fluttering golden strands. “There's always a price to pay when a gate's opened unlawfully. Be thankful I did not demand blood of the pisky king's line.”

As he turned away, Michael shouted, “I'm the king's brother, you oaf. If you were needing hair or blood, you should have taken mine.”

When Arian reached the lip of the trench, he glanced back over his shoulder and shrugged. “You denied responsibility.” Then he leaped down, soundlessly, and joined Olwyn and Dai.

Michael reeled around as though drunk and slammed the heel of his hand against his forehead in time with his words: “When. Will. I. Learn.”

“Michael.” Cordelia hitched Fin onto her hip and grabbed Michael’s arm before he thumped his head again. “You couldn’t have known he’d hurt the baby.”

He stilled, his angry breaths filling the silence. She released his arm and it dropped to his side. Heaving a sigh, he wrested Fin from her arms, hugging the child desperately, eyes closed. “Sorry, lad. I’m sorry.” Fin’s whimpers faded as he snuggled closer to Michael.

Cordelia turned away, her heart pinching, unable to bear the anguish on Michael’s face. He might have his faults but he certainly loved his nephew. She glanced behind her to where Tamsy had remained on the fence near the car. At the edge of her mind, she sensed the warm reassurance of her familiar’s presence.

“Look,” Michael said, still clutching Fin tightly.

The three gatekeepers had spread out across the trench. Arms stretched wide, they started to chant and glow.

“Damnation. They haven’t moved the humans.” Michael groaned. With soft words of reassurance, he detached the clinging child and pushed him into Cordelia’s arms.

“Leave them, Michael.” She tried to grab him but he was already striding toward the trench.

He paused on the lip of the hole. “Pass up the humans,” he bellowed. The angry compulsion in his tone thumped into Cordelia’s chest like a fist. She closed her eyes, struggled to drag air into her lungs. By the time she was aware of her surroundings again, a shining mantle of light extended from the gatekeepers’ hands, shrouding the trench.

Michael had disappeared.

With an anguished cry, Cordelia ran forward and saw Michael wading through the water in the hole toward the humans. He caught hold of one, then grabbed the arm of the second, and started pulling them back to the edge of the trench.

The sheet of light spread farther, gaining speed as it dipped toward the ground on the opposite side of the megalith.

Michael would be trapped.

She screamed his name. Fin wailed, flailed his arms, and wriggled so much she struggled to keep hold of him.

Michael ran, the sloshing sucking sound of the mud marking his progress. He literally threw first one human, then the other out of the trench, then vaulted up the earthy bank and collapsed on his back beside her. The glowing mantle extending from the gatekeeper's hands blazed incandescent. Cordelia screwed her eyes closed and struggled to hold on to the squirming baby. Suddenly her arms were empty, clutching at thin air.

Her eyes sprang open. Temporarily blinded by the burst of light, she dropped to her knees, scrabbled around in the mud, feeling for the child. When she grabbed a warm body, she thought she had him, but she was grasping Michael's arm.

"Finian," she cried on a sob. "Where's Finian?"

The Teg had disappeared. Silent darkness pressed around them. Michael pulled away from her and sat up. "What do you mean where's Finian?"

She shook her head, a useless gesture in the dark but she couldn't seem to stop. "I had him; then my arms were empty."

Slowly her eyes recovered from the blinding flash. She started to pick out shapes in the dark: the ragged outline of trees and bushes on the hill, the excavator on the other side of the trench.

Michael rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled between clods of earth toward the lip of the hole. A strangled sob broke from his throat. A sound that clawed her heart, burned tears in her eyes.

She gathered her dress out of the way and shuffled on her knees through the mud to Michael's side. At the sight of Fin, her muscles locked, paralyzed with shock. He sat in the mud where the humans had been minutes before, deathly still, eyes open, mouth frozen in a silent cry, right beside the fallen megalith that led to the Underworld.

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