

## Prologue

*Ireland—766 AD*

The woman was small, slight and very young. Sighing in exhaustion, she settled onto her side, pillowing her head on her arm. Her long black hair hung in limp strands around her pale, drawn face.

An intense fire crackled in the stone hearth, its earthy scent mingling with the pungent odors of sweat and blood. Haunting shadows leapt along the walls, mimicking her painfully slow movements. Outside, the thunder rolled, echoing the cries she'd made earlier, uttered like an evil omen, as luminous fingers of lightning viciously scratched at the skies.

She shivered, snuggling deeper under the animal pelts covering her. Her body ached; her eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot from lack of rest. Drawing her knees up to her chest to preserve her body's heat, she ran her hand over her stomach, over the flat plane where a mountainous belly once ruled. A frail smile crossed her delicate features. Her labor had been long and difficult, lasting through nearly two nights. She needed sleep, but sleep would have to wait.

She wanted to think of her babies. Her heart swelled with pride and love, a secret rush of pleasure coursing through her. She had done as she must—she'd hidden herself from those who would destroy her kind and given birth to two healthy offspring. Both babies slept peacefully beside her, well swaddled, suckled by the milk in her ample breasts, their small bodies perfect in every detail.

Two babies. A girl and a boy. One blonde, one dark.

She frowned. A dream-vision granted to her by the Goddess Cerredwen had foretold she would give birth to a leader who would carry her legacy, bringing peace to her race and the three worlds.

The prophecy had not foretold she would have two babies. Worried, she began to pray.

*Great Mother, guardian of your children,  
I beg your wisdom.  
Inspire my dreams;  
Bring me knowledge,  
Give me the key—  
which child to choose...*

## Chapter One

The flight into Belmonde, Virginia, was a blur. Julianne Blackthorne spent most of the journey in the washroom, carefully retouching the layers of cosmetics she wore. Without them, she looked vulnerable, haggard and drawn, and she wasn't ready for anyone to see her up close.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing at Belmonde in five minutes. Please make sure your seats and tray tables are in the upright and locked position and your seatbelts are fastened." The voice on the intercom was cold and lifeless, an impassionate end to an uneventful trip.

Arranging her belongings, Julianne returned to her seat. If any of the other passengers in the first class section recognized her, they were polite enough to keep to themselves. In fact, she rarely drew a second glance, reassuring her she was not the horrible ogre she believed herself to be.

Despite her success at disguising her flaws, she was still a bundle of raw nerves. Strands of her copper hair clung to her perspiring face and neck. She simply could not relax. How could she? In a matter of minutes, she was due to meet the family her mother had left behind over twenty years ago.

It had all begun with a letter.

Julianne slipped her hand into her purse, brushing the tips of her fingers over the stiff expensive paper. The cloying scent of vanilla had tickled her senses when she'd first opened the envelope. She'd instantly recognized the handwriting;

*Grandmother Anlese.*

Oh, God. The past had just circled around and nipped her hard. Her mother, Cassandra, had received many letters like this through the years. Receiving one would send her into a frenzy. She'd tear the letters up and throw them away, unread. *I was a toddler when Mom left. I barely remember this woman.*

Julianne's vision grew misty as unbidden tears rose. She drew her hand out of her purse as if bitten. Cassandra Blackthorne was years into her grave. After her mother's death, the letters had ceased to be delivered.

Regret was always best when examined in retrospect. Her mother had not been a stable person. Cassandra had been mentally ill. What had frightened her away from her family might have been nothing more than her own schizophrenic mania in action.

"I have to believe it will be all right," Julianne murmured to herself. Besides, she had no other place to go.

When it was time to deplane, she took a deep breath. She wanted to be calm. Disciplined. She drew her purse onto her shoulder and clutched her cosmetics case. The butterflies in her stomach wouldn't cease fluttering as she walked down the canopied ramp and into the main terminal. Immediately, she searched for signs of photographers, ready to dash into the nearest ladies room if any came after her. There were none. Her destination had been well concealed from the prying press.

Sighing in relief, she surveyed the unfamiliar area. Other travelers milled past her, forcing her to follow their migration. Friends and families around her met and greeted, chattering in animated conversation.

Doubling her pace, she passed passengers hurrying to board outgoing flights. Weaving her way around jostling bodies, she realized she had not a clue as to who was supposed to meet her. She thought about buying a ticket back to California. What would it hurt to have a ticket in hand? If she wanted to leave, her exit would be assured.

She dug her billfold out of her purse. Opening it, she was dismayed to discover thirty-two dollars and fifty-eight cents—hardly enough to purchase a ticket.

"Shit." Her hands quivered a little, and it took a moment for her to fight off the crushing sense of helplessness. She was dead broke, part of the reason she'd agreed to return to Virginia.

That, and the fact that her ex-husband had tried to kill her.

Julianne winced, remembering the headlines splashed across the gossip sheets. Articles printed on the

glossy pages had detailed the assault. Two days after she'd demanded a divorce, James Hunter had accosted her outside a popular Miami hot spot. Brandishing a box cutter, he'd viciously exacted a twisted revenge—carving deep gashes into her face before horrified onlookers could stop him.

Though the disjointed memories were blurred, she'd never forget the searing pain of the razor. When she'd separated from James, she hadn't thought he'd follow through with his threats to get even with her.

Looking back, she knew their marriage had been a damned union from the beginning. James had introduced her to cocaine in the Singapore nightclub where they'd met. She'd experimented to please him, believing it impossible to get hooked if she used it sparingly. She had been wrong. The drug had turned them both into junkies. The night James slashed her face had been her second trip to the hospital in less than two months. Both times, she'd nearly died, and both times, she'd been fueled on cocaine.

Bitter recriminations ricocheted through her brain. She'd had enough of men using her. She'd supported James for years. It was her money, her celebrity that had allowed them to live in style. And James Hunter hadn't wanted to let that go without a battle.

Her skin, so warm only moments ago, grew chilled. *Those photos he took would've gotten him a tidy sum from any porno publisher.*

Julienne shook her head, as if unable to comprehend her ex-husband's actions. In one mighty stroke, he had destroyed her modeling career. In the wake of the attack, her contracts had been cancelled. A model with a scarred face no longer projected the image of beauty.

Since admitting and seeking treatment for her own addiction, her life hadn't been pleasant or easy. Withdrawal meant rules. Rules meant structure. Structure meant recovery. Recovery meant continuation. Not an easy battle when utterly bankrupted by scandal and divorce. Surviving hadn't ended the conflict over her weakened spirit. It would take time to regain a healthy balance in her life.

Her grandmother, Anlese, had paid James' price for the damning negatives. Her generosity had, however, come with a price. Julienne had to pay them back by coming home.

Sadness washed over her like the consuming waves of an angry ocean. Oftentimes, it felt as if she did not belong in this world. Through her twenty-four years, she'd always felt different, isolated and alone. Was it because something had always been missing in her life? A sane mother? A stable home? She'd had neither.

Julienne reached for the cross hanging at her throat. She was not a particularly religious person, but the crucifix offered a bit of solace. She wished things could be different, but she couldn't dwell on that now. In Virginia was a life waiting to be reclaimed as her own. Whether or not she remained was yet to be determined. By the time she was through, who she was and where she was headed with her future would be clarified.

"It's going to be all right," she murmured to no one.

Lost in a sea of travelers, she noticed a small group of people coming together, pointing her way. Panic seized her heart, squeezing until she was sure she would lose her breath. Did they recognize her? Her fame, although notorious of late, had to be intriguing to people in a small community, where gossip was a mainstay over afternoon tea. She tensed when an elderly woman broke away and approached her. The smile on her face was warm and welcoming.

*Grandmother?*

"Hello, dear. My name is Edith Danridge, and you look lost." She was beautifully dressed; her soft Southern accent was one of education and refinement.

"I am." Hiding the disappointment in her eyes, Julienne returned a grateful smile. The woman was trying to be kind. The least she could do as a stranger was to greet the locals. She was grateful no one had recognized her yet. She was just another anonymous nobody in the crowd.

"Then perhaps you need the comfort of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Julienne glanced down at the literature. Her hopes sank like a stone in water.

*THE PATH TO SALVATION*, it read.

Disappointed, she shook her head in a polite decline of the material. "Thanks, nice of you to offer."

"Is someone coming to meet you?" Edith asked, trying to engage her in conversation. "You seem so alone."

"My grandmother, I think. Perhaps you know her. Anlese Blackthorne."

Edith Danridge drew back a bit upon hearing her answer, her lips forming an O of silent surprise. A

shadow of uncertainty flashed across her features.

“Yes, I know your family.” Her body language became defensive, as if she was afraid of being attacked. Her voice was strained.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her.” Julianne was puzzled by the abrupt change in attitude. It was as if a chill wind had blown without warning through the terminal. “My mother’s name was Cassandra. Did you know her?”

“Yes, I remember Cassandra. She didn’t have a chance...” Edith Danridge unexpectedly glanced over her shoulder toward her group, who were also handing out church literature, as if afraid they would hear her. “...belonging to them. You don’t, not yet.” She raised a hand and curled her fingers around the gold cross hanging from Julianne’s neck. “Keep faith, and don’t let them destroy you the way they did her.”

Julianne drew back, sucking in a startled breath. The nearness of this strange old woman made her extremely uncomfortable. The thin chain around her neck snapped, the ends dangling from the stranger’s hand.

“I-I don’t understand.”

Edith Danridge ignored her. As if in a daze, she stared at the broken necklace.

“Too late.” The necklace slid from her fingers, falling to the floor at her feet. “You belong to the devil.” Giving Julianne a frightened glance, she turned and scurried away, murmuring, “God help us all.”

Julianne stood motionless until jostled into action by passersby.

*She’s nuts*, she told herself. She tried not to let the woman’s words affect her. Nevertheless, such strange pronouncements were unnerving. *A fanatic*. She knelt to retrieve her jewelry. *Spends too much time in that church of hers*.

“There’s Miss Julie.” A man’s voice wafted through the airport and caught her ear.

Julianne stood, looking for the person who’d spoken her name. A young black man stood on the periphery of the departing passengers, at an angle where he could survey the entire room in a single glance. He wore crisp new jeans and a matching shirt, and held a well-worn felt hat in his hands. He stood ramrod straight as he searched the concourse with keen interest.

When his gaze located Julianne, he leaned slightly to his left and spoke to someone concealed behind an outspread newspaper. The paper came down immediately. Folding it with four crisp movements of precise economy, the second man dropped it into the nearby wastebasket.

Julianne felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck rise. *That can’t be him*, she thought. *Not Morgan Saint-Evanston. It can’t be*.

Morgan Saint-Evanston was the reason her mother had left town. Julianne had always suspected he might be her father. *But that’s impossible*, she thought upon seeing him for the first time. *He’s too young...by about twenty years*.

His complexion was cream-colored, his eyes almost black. His black, collar-length hair was layered and unruly, threaded with silver at his temples and bangs. At a glance, he appeared to be about thirty. A closer look revealed crows-feet etched at the outer corners of his eyes. Around his mouth were a few deeper character lines and small scars. He was admirably muscled, his posture regal, as if he was always in command despite what fate might otherwise dictate.

He cut an impressive figure, elegantly dressed in a charcoal-gray suit, coat tailored, trousers sharply creased, silk vest worn over a crisp white shirt open at the neck, no tie. A gold watch chain bridged the pockets of his vest. All-in-all, his finery was immaculately tailored and smartly worn.

As he approached, Julianne felt as if someone had led her to the top of a cliff and then, without warning, pushed her off. Somehow, she’d managed to catch the edge, but she was still left to dangle helplessly high above the ground.

A hurried working of mental math told her that, judging by his appearance, he’d have been sixteen, maybe a bit younger, when she had been born. It was not entirely impossible, from a biological point of view, for a teenage boy to impregnate a young woman. Cassandra had been only eighteen when she’d given birth.

Her mother hadn’t just hated Saint-Evanston. She’d feared him and she’d run away from him until the effort had killed her.

Julianne drew in a fortifying breath, digging into pockets of memory she’d almost forgotten existed. It was difficult, having the perspective of a grown woman and the agonies of a child conflict within one’s mind.

She could not help but notice that people were falling back to make room for him. A current of apprehension rippled through the masses as he advanced, as if some silent command demanded none should cross his path. Even his companion followed a courteous distance behind.

He stopped within a few feet of her. He gave a slight nod of his head in acknowledgement. "*Ce'as mile fa'ithe, leanabh.*"

Julienne blinked, uncomprehending, puzzled. The odd words jarred, seeming to carry the whisper of familiarity, much like the strains of a long-forgotten tune. One could hum a few notes but never entirely capture the haunting melody. "What did you say?"

"A hundred thousand welcomes," he repeated, this time in English.

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't understand." Her brow wrinkled in question. "You expected me to?"

"When you were small, I used to speak Gaelic, the Irish language, to you." His earnest gaze raked over her, measuring every inch of her body. In heels, she towered almost half a head over him. "But you are not so little now."

His words were tinged with an Irish brogue, precisely spoken as if to avoid mangling the English language. His voice had a pleasing timbre, even in cadence and tone, in intimacy and confidence. She surmised he could undoubtedly manipulate it with ease to make anyone believe he was sincere, even when he was not.

"N-no, sorry. I don't remember you." She immediately noticed that he did not offer his hand or any other physical contact. Despite his salutation, his behavior was guarded, his penetrating stare intense and aggressive, displaying no emotion.

"Why not, *caile*?" he asked. "Am I so forgettable?"

*Caile*—girl. That one she did recall. "It's been a long time since I was three years old." Her face flushed with self-consciousness.

"No matter, now that you have come back," Saint-Evanston said. If he had any further feelings about her arrival, he revealed nothing. There was absolutely no outward sign of affection, and his reception was an indifferent one. Could she blame him? Benefit of the doubt would advise her that perhaps he was also unsure of how *she* would greet him. After all, he and her mother had parted on embittered terms.

"I'm not sure it was right to try and come home." Julienne fidgeted with the case she carried. Why was it so hard for her to look him in the eye? His gaze, so direct and unblinking, unsettled her. He looked at her as if he owned her, body and soul. All at once, Julienne wished she had not agreed to come to Virginia. She wasn't ready to confront him. How could she be?

"If you wish to leave, you are free to do so." Saint-Evanston gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. He seemed unwilling to commit any sentiment to her presence. He retrieved a gold watch from the pocket of his vest and flicked open its face to check the hour. "I do not intend to stand here all day waiting for you."

He snapped the watch shut and turned, walking briskly away. His meaning was clear. He had no patience for a spoiled little girl.

That said, Saint-Evanston and his companion strode quickly across the airport, forcing Julienne to lengthen her steps to keep up with them. "Hey! Wait!" She pointed as they passed into the baggage area. "I need to get my things."

"I'll get them, Miss Julie," said the young black man.

Ahead of them, Saint-Evanston did not bother to slow his pace. Apparently, such things were of no concern to him. Julienne struggled not to frown. "Thank you, Mister—?"

"Tobias Greenwood, ma'am," he said, reaching for the small tote she carried.

Julienne hesitated, then handed Tobias her claim tickets and, after a moment, her cosmetics case. He took the stubs and trotted off in another direction while a crowd of people forged past them, struggling with luggage, children and the general inconvenience of travel. She pushed through the bodies, hurrying to catch Saint-Evanston before she lost sight of him as he turned a far corner. Her heels clicked loudly on the slick tile as she trotted up beside him, waiting until they were out of earshot before breaking the awkward silence his last remark had caused between them.

"I'm sorry," she said, out of breath, trying to repair the rift she had managed to create. She had not come home to make enemies. "I should be grateful to have family at all. I just lost my head. Nothing's been right for me lately."

He did not slow his stride or even glance her way. "I quite understand."

"I don't think you do," she panted, wishing he would stop for ten damned minutes and let her catch her breath.

"I was trying to be nice." His tone indicated he was addressing her out of courtesy only.

His words rankled. "You don't have to be nice to me. I didn't ask to come here."

Saint-Evanston halted as they were about to exit the terminal. "Then go, *caile*," he said, his patience apparently at an end. "There is nothing stopping you."

She took another step back, and then a third. But not a fourth. A nauseous feeling churned in her stomach. She strained to see beyond the haze floating in front of her eyes. Tears struggled to escape; however, she refused to let him see her cry.

"I can't leave," she finally admitted, lowering her voice to almost a whisper. "I haven't got any money."

He reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew a slim black leather wallet.

"Ah, so it is a matter of money." He pitched it at her. "Here. This should solve your problem."

Julienne clumsily caught it. Giving him a wary look, she assessed its contents like the streetwise urchin Cassandra had raised—twenty crisp one-hundred-dollar bills and a row of credit cards. She slid one of the cards out of its pocket. A corporate American Express. *Blackthorne Enterprises, Inc.* She flicked out a second card. Platinum Visa, ditto the cardholder. Cold, hard cash and a sheaf of credit cards. She doubted any of them had a credit limit. She noted there was no driver's license or any other form of identification. Odd. Had he prepared this specifically to give her?

"There is your freedom," he prompted with elaborate mockery. His intense features displayed no sympathy.

Julienne replaced the cards. "What's your point? Is this about how indebted I am to you now? You bought the negatives to hold over my head, didn't you? Fine, then. You now have a piece of Julienne Hunter. It's all you'll get of me. Ever." She brandished his wallet. "As for this, I've earned it just by coming here today. I'll be sure to spend it all."

A cunning glint sidled into the depths of his eyes. "I notice that you are not leaving." Check, and mate. He was competing in the game of one-upmanship with consummate skill. And he was playing to win.

"Now I know why my mother hated you," Julienne snapped, intending the statement to sound bitter. Instead, her tone was tinged with a longing and loneliness that betrayed the hollow void in her soul. *Turn around*, she thought. *Claim your bags and walk away. Forget them all.*

Still, she made no move. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew why she was unable to leave. She desperately wanted someone to take care of her, love her unconditionally. She sought the security missing from her life since she was a child. She had come to Virginia harboring the small but strong hope that these people held it for her.

Saint-Evanston consulted his watch a second time, indicating that further conversation was at its end. "Tobias will be waiting. Come along."

## Chapter Two

“This is your home, lass,” Morgan said some time later, as Tobias stopped the car at the open gates of an immense plantation.

Julienne leaned forward until she was practically sitting on the edge of the seat. She craned her neck to take in as much of the view as the limited confines of the Rolls allowed. Her hands were clenched tightly in her lap, fingers laced. Her knuckles showed white with the great stress engulfing her. Her stomach was tied in a thousand knots, her emotions doubly so.

“I know I’ve been here before,” she murmured in a reverent voice. “I wish I remembered it.” She had spent the first three years of her life on the plantation. Despite the absence of familiarity, this place proved she indeed had a viable past.

Inside the boundary of a six-foot stone fence, elegant beauty surrounded a whitewashed, three-tiered manor. It nestled like a jewel amidst the splendor of sculpted gardens where an amazing variety of plants grew in lush abundance. Bluegrass stretched as far as the eye could see. The late flowers of summer were still in bloom, their delicate colors not yet yielding to the coming fall. Colorful petals quivered gently in the scented breeze, rustling the long limbs of weeping willows scattered among magnolia trees and towering, majestic old oaks.

The heart of the plantation, Blackthorne Manor, stood like a fortress, a proud memorial of a South that had been humbled but refused to be broken. The house evoked the spirit of the splendid antebellum era that had flourished more than one hundred and fifty years ago. The ample dwelling had been footed in some of the richest earth in the state, one of the original thirteen in the Union, soil which in bygone days produced bountiful crops of cotton and tobacco. In the last seventy years, the farmland had not been cultivated.

Wrought iron fences led to the grounds at the back; outside them, trees and blackberry brambles mingled with wild ivy that threatened to smother everything entangled in its choking stems. Blackthorne Manor was truly isolated, gradually acquiescing to the wilderness that wanted it back.

“What do you think?” Saint-Evanston’s question prompted her to look into his compelling eyes.

“It’s beautiful.” Words seemed inadequate to fully express her feelings.

He leaned back against the leather seat, observing her reaction. His disposition had mellowed since he left the city, but not enough to allow an easy familiarity to develop. He wore imperturbable stoicism like an elegantly tailored garment.

Julienne used his retreat into silence to examine her impressions of the man thus far. It seemed to her he was taking great care to remain aloof and detached. Moreover, he couldn’t quite conceal the fact that he was ambiguous about welcoming her thread into Blackthorne’s fabric. She wondered why he’d even bothered contacting her. Was it because he harbored a deep guilt about the past? Perhaps a past he could not let go of until he’d made amends to Cassandra’s daughter?

To better take in the sights outside, she lowered the tinted window. He shot her a glance of disapproval as the day’s brilliance flooded the dim interior. He lifted a hand to visor his eyes and frowned, indicating the open window with a wave of his hand.

“Please, *caile*, the sun irritates me.”

Julienne gave him a questioning look. She’d noticed he had an aversion to the daylight when they’d exited the airport. Given his pale complexion, it was clear he did not spend his days outside. Perhaps he was allergic to the elements, or had vision trouble.

She closed the window. “How many years has our family lived here?”

He lowered the hand shading his eyes. “Over two centuries, since the bloodline emigrated from Hibernia.”

Julienne’s forehead wrinkled over the unfamiliar word. “Hibernia?”

“What the Romans called Ireland. Look at your flame-red hair and green eyes. You hail from good Irish stock.”

Julienne smiled, pleased by his offhand compliment. She felt the ice between them thawing a bit. He was slowly exhibiting some acceptance of her, without flinging a verbal barb immediately after.

“I want to know more about my family.” A wistful tone colored her words. “What an incredible history this place must have.”

“Indeed, it does.” His expression was finally showing a bit of interest and animation.

Encouraged by his reaction, she urged him on. “Tell me about the house. It’s magnificent.”

Saint-Evanston shifted so he could look directly at her, crossing his legs and lacing his fingers around one knee. “The foundation of the manor you see now is built of stone quarried in the late sixteenth century. It has burned down several times through its history; once in the Revolution and twice when the Unionists set it afire in the war between the North and the South. In all the fires, only the original stone walls were untouched. The main house was rebuilt a final time at the turn of the twentieth century.”

“Quite a history.”

“I know it extensively.” Saint-Evanston pinned her under his direct stare. “And stories about the ancient Blackthorne clan abound. The local people claim Celtic pagans created this place as their sanctuary.”

“Pagans? As in witches and the like?” She recalled her encounter with the woman in the airport. *They destroyed your mother with their practices. You’re next. Mark my words.* She was sure she hadn’t misheard. Were the practices she spoke of...*witchcraft*? Surely, the idea was ridiculous. After all, this was the twenty-first century, not Salem during the witch trials.

“And the like,” he said with a nod. “Many believe their occult influences linger here to this very day.” He did not offer clarifying details.

Mulling over his last comment, she reached into her purse for her first cigarette since boarding the flight to Virginia. She removed the last one from its rumpled pack and placed it between her lips. “You mind?”

He gave a conciliatory wave. “If you must.”

“Thanks.” While Julienne searched for her lighter in her purse, she asked, “Do you believe the stories?” She glanced up to see a shadow of unease cross his features. As quickly as it had come, though, it vanished.

“I am half-Irish. We believe all tales of supernatural lore. It is in the blood.”

“Ah.” Finding the lighter, Julienne lit her cigarette and coughed when the first smoke hit her lungs. She doubted he believed at all. Morgan Saint-Evanston didn’t strike her as the type who’d have the patience for elaborate rituals, be it established church or pagan. He struck her as someone more analytical, ready to debunk myth rather than create it. She also suspected he did not go out of his way to accommodate those who did not interest him. Allowing people to perpetuate the tales probably amused him.

“Well, I can hardly let a lady indulge alone,” Saint-Evanston said. He unexpectedly leaned forward and snagged her cigarette. Tearing off the filter and discarding it, he lifted it to his lips and took a deep drag, exhaling a cloud through his nostrils with the finesse of an experienced smoker. Settling back, he gave a quick artful wink through the drifting curls of smoke.

“Hey!” she said with a frown. “That’s my last cigarette.”

“Really?” he asked, raising his brow. “It is my first in three years.”

“So you were a smoker.” Julienne was secretly delighted. At last, he was showing a bit of personality. She would have gladly sacrificed a whole carton of smokes if it meant he would lighten up and pull that feather out of his uptight ass. *And he smokes without a filter*, she noted. *Damn, he must like them strong.*

“Filthy habit,” he opined, ignoring her statement. “I can see you are going to cause me to resume this vice.”

“Who says you have to start again?”

“Weak of will.” He reached toward the ashtray and flicked off the ash. “I cannot resist sin.”

“I see,” she said, as if in serious thought. “Since your Irish half is wound so freaking tight, it must be the other half luring you into such temptation.”

His expression turned moderately puzzled.

“You’re half-Irish,” she said. “And what else?”

A hint of suspicion clouded his eyes. “Why do you wish to know?”

“You said it first. Jesus, can’t you answer a simple question without trying to talk your way out of it?”

He considered the cigarette in his hand, watching the thin haze it emitted drift up and dissipate. “To assuage your curiosity, I am also Spanish. Basque.”

“Born in Ireland?”

His easy mood vanished. “For the love of the gods, must you keep prodding? Of course, I was born on the old sod, as were some of your own ancestors. Now, are you quite satisfied?” His brisk tone made it crystal-clear he did not want his privacy further invaded.

Julienne pulled back, reminding herself that thawed ice could also be dangerously thin. She was treading too heavily.

The car began to move again, as Tobias slowly began to maneuver it along the narrow, winding drive leading toward the manor.

“What about you and my mother?” Julienne asked Saint-Evanston. The words popped out of her mouth before she could stifle them. She was relieved. She’d finally gotten the courage to ask *the* question. His expression harbored a shadow of guilt before he visibly donned his mantle of poise.

“What happened is a long story.”

She could have sworn his tone was laced with regret and longing. Had she hit a nerve that was still raw? “Going away from here killed her,” she said quietly.

“I did not force her to leave.” His voice was low, patient. “She went of her own will.”

“She cursed your name. You know that.”

“*Is aithne dbomb.*” Then, realizing he had lapsed back to his native tongue, he repeated in English, “I know, lass.”

“Why?”

“You are so much like Cassandra. *Creoi-wannalagh.* Stubborn, impenitent wench she was.”

“Am I?” Julienne thought she caught contrition in his words. In that brief second, she believed that he and her mother had been passionately involved.

“Indeed, you are her very image.” He glanced away, as if wanting to banish Cassandra’s memory from his mind.

“Can I ask you something, Morgan?” It was the first time she’d dared to use his name in a familiar way. “Did you...did you love my mother?”

“I can only tell you to remember how she felt about me.”

Julienne’s skin grew warm. His reply brought a hitch to her throat. “She hated you.” She stared at her lap when she spoke. For the first time, she noticed she was still holding his wallet. She offered it back to him without a word.

He tucked the wallet back into his coat pocket. “I know.”

She swallowed, trying to hide her disconcertment. “Why?” Again, that question.

He leveled his unflinching gaze at her. “Because I am every bit the bastard I am sure Cassandra told you I was.”

“But you will tell me why she— *me*— left here?”

“Absolutely—but today is not that day. When I am ready, Julienne, I shall tell you what happened.”

“Everything?” The facts that had emerged thus far seemed curiously skewed. Just why and how, she had yet to put her finger on. Information was what she needed. Answers. He had them. She wanted them. She’d have to keep digging, keep asking questions. That would be the only way to discover the truth.

“Aye,” he said. “Before I leave here, you shall know the entire story.”

“You’re leaving? When?” Her mental trolley suddenly stalled, and she pressed her lips in a tight frown. His statement caught her totally off-guard. She didn’t know why, but the news dismayed her. How long had he been planning his departure? Did his leaving hinge upon her arrival?

“October,” he replied.

Julienne counted off the days remaining in the month. The first of October was only three weeks away. “Where will that leave me?”

“Anywhere you want to be.”

“Why are you leaving?”

“I have other interests to manage that will require my attention.” He flagged a hand to indicate outside of the car. “This is your inheritance. Once I depart, ownership of this place will pass to you.”

“Me?” She stared at him, startled.

“Anlese is an old woman now, unable to manage the needs of a large estate such as this by herself,” he said. “It was why we decided you should return to claim your legacy. Everything you see around you and before you is your heritage.”

“Is my grandmother unwell?”

“She has slowed down these last few years.” He did not give specific details. “She is still fairly active for her age, as much as one can be. You will find her to be no bother.”

“I look forward to getting to know her again. I have so many things I want to ask her.”

Saint-Evanston smiled at her somewhat mysteriously as the Rolls came to a halt at the front entrance of the manor. “That is good, *caile*,” he said. “Your grandmother has been waiting a long time to see you.”

## Chapter Three

The large front door opened as if on cue and a team of servants emerged from the house. Men came from the gardens, straggled over to have their look, then joined the receiving line, waiting to be introduced to the new mistress. Under such close scrutiny, Julianne trembled.

Tobias came around the car, opened the rear door and gave a courtly bow. Taking his outstretched hand, grateful to have his support, she leaned heavily against his arm as she stood, allowing him to lead her toward the servants. She glanced back when Morgan climbed out of the car. His sunglasses were in place, and she noticed he grimaced, as if the bright sunlight bothered him despite the dark lenses. He did not look at her as he offered perfunctory introductions.

“Julienne,” he began formally, nodding to direct her gaze toward a young black woman dressed in a yellow dress. “This is Tobias’s wife Melissa. She directs the house servants. Tobias is manager of the overall estate. He keeps it running day-to-day.”

Julienne nodded, wondering what she should say. She decided it was better to remain silent.

Morgan proceeded to the next people in line. “These two are the Losch family, Georg and Gretl. Maintenance and kitchen, respectively.”

Georg Losch quickly snatched off his straw hat, revealing a pate lined by thin strands of sandy hair. He shifted from foot to foot and shoved his hands nervously into the deep pockets of his coveralls. Heavily tanned from his hours in the sun, his skin was leathery, and his hands were callused from hard work.

“It’s a pleasure to have you here, *fräulein*.” Herr Losch’s smile was warm and tender. He started to offer a handshake then withdrew it because of the grime imbedded in his skin and under his fingernails. “I also work the gardens,” he explained.

Julienne offered a hesitant smile. “Thank you, Mr. Losch. The grounds are absolutely lovely. You have a true gardener’s green thumb.”

Georg Losch’s smile filled his face. He reached for the arm of the woman standing next to him. “This is Gretl, my wife. She will cook good food for you.”

Indeed, it looked as if Gretl heartily enjoyed her own cuisine. Short like her husband, she looked soft and doughy. A scarf covered most of her golden curls. She had a kind face with blue eyes and red cheeks.

“Welcome, ma’am.” She curtsied, as if in the presence of royalty and Julianne noticed her accent was not as pronounced as her husband’s. “We’re glad you decided to come.”

“I’m glad to be home.” She looked askance at Morgan.

Anxious to escape the stark illumination of the sultry Southern day, Saint-Evanston sped up the introductions. There were twelve servants in all, including the Losch’s two daughters and one son, who lived on the grounds and worked with them to keep the plantation running smoothly. The rest of the staff was employed part-time.

“There is one more to be met,” sang an elegant voice tinged with the slow-molasses quality of a deep Southern accent.

Julienne tensed when a silver-haired woman stepped onto the verandah. Her skin was pale, her face wrinkled with age. She was tiny and fragile-looking. Most stunning were her eyes, a sparkling crystal blue that spoke of an inherent compassion and hard-earned wisdom. Leaning heavily on a cane, she navigated the five wide steps, using her free hand to lift the long skirts of the elegant day gown she wore.

Joining the group, she said, “If I know Morgan, he failed to offer the proper greeting, dear girl. I am Anlese, your grandmother. Welcome home, Granddaughter.”

“Why, th–thank you,” Julianne stammered, taken aback by the heartfelt warmth of the woman’s words.

“It’s about time we got you home.” Anlese offered a wide grin, as gleeful as a cat that’d just finished a bowl of cream and was licking its chops. “I despaired of ever seeing you again in my lifetime.”

Julienne gingerly clasped her grandmother’s hand, afraid she would crush the delicate bones. She needn’t

have worried, for Anlese's grip was firm. Although her fingers were somewhat gnarled with arthritis, her nails were professionally manicured and painted with a pale pink polish. Her lightly powdered skin was dry and scented with vanilla. Just as her letters had once been.

Morgan seemed unmoved by the reunion. "Are you planning to keep us out in the sun all day, Anlese? This glaring light is unacceptable." He spoke with tense directness.

Anlese laughed, a vivacious sound of merriment, a relieving contrast to Morgan's austere seriousness. "I know you wish the sky would turn forever dark." She leaned closer to Julianne. "He hates the sun," she whispered. "Haunts the night like a wolf."

"I have no doubt he barks at the moon," Julianne said, smiling.

Anlese agreed with delight. "Something close to it."

"Really, these introductions have gone on too long. Please proceed, Anlese." Morgan snapped his fingers and indicated to the staff that it was time to get back to work. "*Goll er oai*. I do not pay you people to stand around." Brisk words of Gaelic were interspersed with enough English for people to understand the gist of his wishes. It was absolutely clear that he expected instant obedience from his employees.

As the servants hurried back to their jobs, the Loschs' son, Erich hurried to the task of retrieving Julianne's luggage, catching the keys Tobias tossed to him.

Anlese acceded graciously to Morgan's temperamental mood. "I'm glad you have come home," she said to Julianne. "We will take care of you here. Now, let Morgan help you settle into your rooms. I'll be up later with a fine cup of tea, and then we will talk. We have a lot of years to catch up on, dear."

"Thank you."

"Help her." Morgan gestured to Tobias, who offered Anlese his free arm.

"Thank you, Tobias," Anlese said as the young man assisted her up the steps.

"Shall we go in?" Morgan said to Julianne, quickly ascending the steps. "*Goaill toshiaght er dy seyr*." He motioned impatiently when she hesitated. "Enter freely, girl. You are home now."

Julianne climbed to the verandah; he allowed her to go in first. Taking a fortifying breath, she passed over the threshold and into the house she had been taken from as a child more than twenty years earlier. Would she remember any details of living within these walls?

Apprehension and the twinges of animosity returned when she entered the foyer. Sheer grandeur surrounded her, so majestic her heart leapt at the marvel of the stunning architecture. Her high heels echoed on the white marble floor. Jaw agape and eyes wide, she paused to better take in the rocaille ceilings that overlooked arched alcoves and beautifully paneled walls. High windows had narrow panes of champagne-colored glass, nine to the sash, eighteen to the window, flooding the foyer with a soothing, complimentary illumination.

In plan and structure, the manor exhibited severe austerity. Everything was white: floor, walls and ceiling; the plush cushions on carefully placed antique chairs; the magnolia blossoms in their cut-crystal vase on the clear glass table. Even the grandfather clock was fashioned exquisitely from bleached wood. All white, or nearly so. Fabulous paintings hung on the walls, but none depicted the current generation of Blackthornes.

The foyer was a meticulously arranged showplace, beautiful, yet devoid of spirit. Elegant, but cold, like an illustration bearing the warning that you could look but not touch. It was a place to exist in, not to live in; hardly a home but, rather, a shrine.

Intimidated by its frigid perfection, Julianne shivered and rubbed her hands over her arms to still the rising goose bumps on her skin. The foyer was cold, an icy breeze echoing the wintry decor. She was sure she could feel something else in the room, some presence feasting off her growing sense of unease. She had the unsettling impression of being weighed down. She frowned, puzzled by her feelings.

Unexpectedly, dizziness washed over her. She felt...what? Disoriented? No. Not disoriented—*distorted*, as if she had passed through an invisible barrier. Everything around her seemed to grind to a halt, motionless and silent. Her sense of perception became muted. Dread cloaked her, an oppressive mantle wrapping its long arms tight, smothering and then consuming her.

A shadowy movement caught the corner of her eye. Stiffening, she turned in time to see something fall from the ceiling not far from her. It landed hard against the floor, emitting a plopping sound. She found and focused on the small round drop, startlingly red against the white marble.

*What the hell? Paint?* There wasn't a sign of red in the entire foyer.

As she gaped at the perfect little bead, another joined it, and then a third. *Drip...drip...drip...* A shower of droplets began to rain down, each hitting louder and harder than the last. One by one, they pelted the floor, spreading a pool of crimson across the virgin white marble. Growing in depth and dimension, the puddle began to advance. It spread, shimmering in the light, until it touched the tip of her left shoe.

Blood.

“Oh, God!” She retreated to avoid the gore. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pressed both hands to her face, shocked by the clamminess of her skin. A headache was building behind her eyes, the pain dulling her ability to think straight. Her knees wobbled.

Morgan’s voice broke through her haze. “You are unwell?”

She peered through her meshed fingers to find him standing beside her, his hand just inches from touching her shoulder, his expression of concern conflicting with his attempts to remain indifferent to her distress. Her gaze darted to the floor.

Sparkling white marble. Pristine. There was no blood. The floor was clean. Nothing was out of place.

*What the hell just happened?* she thought. Her mind spun in confusion, searching for a reasonable explanation for what she’d seen. Had it been a trick of the light?

“I’m fine.” She lowered her hands. It wouldn’t do to tell him about the blood. He would think she was hallucinating. After all, she was fresh out of rehab. How could he not be suspicious that she might lapse back into addiction? She was consciously aware she would have to prove herself cured. *And that means not suffering from mind-bending fantasies*, she reminded herself.

Feeling a sensation of wet on her upper lip, she pressed her fingers under her nose. When she drew her hand away, she could see blood staining the tips. A whimper of dismay escaped her throat. Her nose was bleeding, and she hadn’t even been aware of it. Her face grew red, the heat of embarrassment creeping up her neck and flushing her skin.

Morgan reached inside his breast pocket and withdrew a clean handkerchief. “I do not think you are fine.” His voice was oddly gentle as he offered it to her. “If you feel the need for medical attention, a physician can be summoned.”

She accepted the handkerchief to staunch the trickle. “No.” She daubed delicately at her nose, glad the blood wasn’t gushing. *Just a bit, nothing to panic over. Must have been the change in air pressure from the flight.* “I just need a little rest. Today’s been hard on me.”

“No doubt.”

She folded up the handkerchief so the bloodstain would not show, too embarrassed to offer it back to him. “Would you mind showing me to my room? I’m really tired.”

“Of course.” With a slight shrug of his shoulders, he gestured toward the staircase. “Your rooms are on the second floor. This way.”

As they began to ascend to the second level, Morgan said, “I have decided you are to have Cassandra’s suite. The rooms have been empty a long time. The suite is away from the main traffic of the house, so you will be less disturbed.”

“It was thoughtful of you to consider me.” Her head swiveled in every direction, trying to gauge the dimensions of the huge house as she followed him down a long hallway that branched off in several directions. One would have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs not to get lost in its immense, maze-like depths.

He led her around a corner and down another, shorter hall before he swept open twin doors, ushering her into a lavish suite. The four large rooms were furnished in the decor of a bygone era. Beneath her feet, plush carpeting stretched out in an ocean of pale blue. Thick, rich wallpaper patterned with soft pink rosebuds gave the illusion the ceiling was higher than the eyes perceived. Blue velvet draperies hung over the windows, and double French doors that led out onto a “Juliet” balcony, the heavy material tied aside to let the sun and air stream in. When the draperies were let down, the room would be dim and deliciously cool, even on the hottest of evenings.

The seventeenth-century French Baroque furniture was old, elaborately carved and polished to a mirror-like sheen. The treasure of the suite was the huge canopied bed jealously guarded by matching bed tables. Antique oil-burning lamps only added to the enchanting ambience of the suite. It was like stepping back a hundred years in time.

Tactfully, things Cassandra had acquired in her life here had been left with the furnishings. As she walked

around the rooms to take in their individual tones, Julianne tenderly touched items her mother must have used when living there. One in particular caused her vision to grow misty. It was a comb from a silver vanity set. Anlese must have given it to Cassandra, because it was inscribed with an appropriate endearment from a mother to a daughter.

*Mom didn't love her enough to take this, she thought miserably. I don't understand. This suite is so beautiful, Grandmother so sweet. How could she not have wanted to come home?*

Julianne set the comb down. She didn't want to fall apart, feel the ugly grief twisting her heart with cruel hands. To hide her face, she stepped to the nearest window. She stared out over the tangle of gardens below.

"It's beautiful here." She briskly wiped tears from her eyes with the tips of her fingers. "I don't know how Mother could have left it behind."

But she did have a suspicion about why Cassandra had abandoned the plantation. Her mother had lived for the night. Big cities, bright lights, strange men. She'd craved crowds, bodies packed into a steaming room pulsing with loud music and shouting voices. An unwilling accomplice in her mother's disintegration, Julianne had been forced to go along, watching and then, later, repeating her mother's ruinous life.

Morgan's voice came from behind. "Let go of the past."

"I want to," she said in a rush of breath, almost a sigh. "But it's always there, dogging my every step. I've had everything these last few years, yet it all came to nothing. It's like seeking the Emerald City, only to find it's nothing more than dust pouring through your fingers."

She walked unsteadily to the bed and sank limply down on its comforting support. The unbidden tears continued to fall down her face, sobs shaking her frail body. She cried in grief, in loss for the past and in terror of the future she could not see. Had fate also written her off as a lost cause? She wiped her eyes with his handkerchief. Traces of her makeup stained the white material. Another chip in her mental stack was lost as her façade continued to crumble.

Saint-Evanston crossed to the bed. One of his hands curled around the bedpost as he rested his head in repose against the wood. "Even stone becomes dust. Fame. Fortune. Beauty. All erode under the unrelenting hand of time. None of it is meant to last forever."

Unsettled by his direct gaze, Julianne turned away to look at the carpet. Her hand lifted self-consciously to her scarred cheek.

Morgan reached out unexpectedly. His hand slid under her chin, tilting her head to a sharp angle so he could take in a full view of her face. The pressure of his fingers was sure, certain, that of a man who knew how to caress a woman's skin.

"You think you are *gra'na*, ugly, now? Believe me when I say they do not show as badly as you believe. You are still *brionnach*."

A shiver rushed up her spine at his touch, bringing an unexpected infusion of pleasure. Her eyes searched his. Was he being sincere? She thought he was.

"What does that word mean?" she asked.

A lazy smile drew up the corners of his fine mouth. "I am trying to say that you are a lovely young woman." He let his hand drop, taking with it the pleasing sensations it had delivered. "You don't believe me?"

"No." She blushed, flustered by his words and her body's reaction to his nearness. She drew in a deep breath to steady herself. His voice had carried an unexpected hint of warmth, his words caressing her as gently as the brush of a feather. "I'm just very skeptical of men and their motives anymore."

Morgan abruptly straightened away from the bedpost. Brows drawing down over his hooded obsidian eyes, hackles going up, he withdrew, gliding like an affronted feline out of her reach. She could see as well as sense the tension in him.

"There is no solace I can offer you," he said in his brisk, forthright way, reinstating the impenetrable barrier of indifference he'd greeted her with in the airport. For some reason known only to him, he'd let it slip briefly. He seemed to be regretting it, as if he were determined not to show he harbored benevolent characteristics.

Julianne was confused, wondering what she'd done to put him off. A thousand recriminating thoughts hammered deep inside her skull. "Oh." What else could she possibly say? Nothing. Not a damned thing. Lips pursed tight in frustration, she surveyed the room, determined not to let her hovering tears fall. She gritted

her teeth, setting her resolve, too prideful to let him know he'd wounded her.

To cover the awkwardness between them, he fished his pocket watch out of his vest and flipped open the lid to look at the time. "I believe Anlese mentioned tea. She should be joining you shortly." He shut the watch and returned it to the pocket in one fluid move.

"It's a good English tradition, done Southern style, I suppose," Julianne remarked.

His gaze turned cool, as detached as his manner. "The Irish dislike the English and their traditions, so I will not be taking tea with you."

That said, Morgan exited the suite, closing the doors behind him.