

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (20 page)

“What ails you this night?” he asked.

“

Ails

—I don’t think I’ve heard anyone use that word since Nainie.”

“What

troubles

you then,” he amended, obviously humoring her. “It’s a cool night indeed to be sleeping out of doors.”

“Yeah, well, there’s not much sleeping going on tonight. So I decided to watch the stars instead.”

He nodded. “My mother taught me about the stories in the sky. I like to watch them too sometimes, when my head needs clearing and my heart needs settling.” Before she could think of a response, he was sitting beside her on the porch swing. “You have that look about you,” he said. “A soldier who’s lost a friend in battle.”

Morgan sighed. “I lost two patients today.

Two.

”

“You fought hard for them.”

“How would you know?”

“It’s your way. The best of healers are warriors at heart. I’ve seen it—” Here he stopped and seemed to search for the right words. “I saw you fight for Lucy,” he said at last.

“You gave her everything you had in you. Most would have shaken their heads and given the horse a quick and merciful death. Instead, you fought with skill and with spirit, and now she’ll be sound and whole again.”

“I sure wish the successes took the sting out of the losses. I didn’t win today and it makes me feel like I failed. And I knew these animals, personally—I feel like my patients become my friends. My teachers used to say that I cared too much, that I’d burn out early because of it.”

“You have a heart for animals. If the day should come that you cannot care, that’s the time to be walking away from it. No one can fight for long without a cause they can feel in here.” He put a hand to his chest and slid the other around her shoulders. “And you feel cold to me. How long have you been out here?”

“A while.” Most of the night, actually. She allowed him to pull her close and rested her head on him. Relaxed a little, then a little more. Rhys’s powerful arm around her was warm and solid and oh so welcome. She was tired right down to the bone, physically and emotionally. Not only was she tired of battling the injuries and disease that threatened her patients, she was pretty damn tired of fighting her attraction to this man.

So when he leaned into her, she met him like she met everything else in her life—square on. Except he wasn’t a battle to be won. His lips were firm but soft, and they teased at hers, nibbling at the corners of her mouth, darting the tip of his tongue along her teeth, gently sucking her bottom lip until she shivered—and not from the cold. Arms around her, he grazed his lips along her cheekbones and over her eyelids, glissed them over her brows until the furrows in them relaxed, kissed his way to the peak of her forehead and somehow eased the headache that had been pounding there. Morgan wound her fingers into his hair and drew him back to her lips, lips that were throbbing now, wanting. His mouth settled warmly over hers, gave and filled and soothed and aroused with only kisses...

She came up for air to find that he’d somehow tucked her into his lap. Or perhaps she’d slid into it herself—she didn’t know and didn’t care. Gloriously half-stunned by the storm of sensation he’d caused, she simply settled back against him in delicious warmth and wonder, her head under his chin.

“What do you see in the sky?” he asked. The rumble of his voice, so close she could feel it as well as hear it, was like a caress.

“I always find the hunter, Orion, first, and then I look for his dog.”

Rhys chuckled. “It is no surprise that you should choose that one. What you call Orion, my father called Lludd of the Silver Hand. The god of healing. Lludd has a dog too—right there—a great deerhound that could cure any disease with a lick of his tongue.” He then pointed to the crescent moon. “When the moon is like that, we called it Dwynwen’s Bow. Like most Celtic women, Dwynwen was a huntress and a warrior, but she also became the patron of all sick animals.”

“I sure could have used her help today,” said Morgan.

“Perhaps she
is

helping. Dwynwen also looks after all true lovers. She brings them together and comforts them when they are apart, and strengthens the tie between them. Perhaps she was the one who woke me and told me something was amiss with you.”

True lovers...Uh-huh.

She decided to let that lie for the moment. “Is that why you’re awake? You thought something was wrong?”

“I felt it. So I came.”

It was so matter-of-fact, it reminded her of her grandmother. Always sensing things, knowing things, as if she could pluck the information out of the air. Morgan couldn’t imagine what that would be like—or could she? What about the vivid dreams she’d had

of Rhys before she'd met him? Hadn't she decided they were premonitions of a sort? A ripple of pure pleasure shot through her as she recalled how incredibly sexy those dreams had been—and realized they could be true. If she wanted them to be. If she wanted Rhys.

True lovers

...

Her sensible side intervened at once. She hadn't had enough sleep. She was too tired to make relationship decisions. She had to get up early. And she hadn't known Rhys all that long—and still didn't know much about him. If he remembered his last name, he hadn't announced it. And if he'd forgotten something that basic, what if he'd forgotten he was already married with six kids and a mortgage? With anyone else, she'd just ask them outright. But with Rhys, would she trust the answer?

Fiery arousal fizzled abruptly, doused with the cold water of reality. She could practically hear the hiss of steam as she struggled to her feet.

"I'd best go inside," she said.

He rose as well. "Aye, you've been awake overlong. And I'd best see to Lucy."

Neither of them believed it was best, she thought, as he gathered her in his arms and kissed her forehead. "I hope you rest well," he said and headed down the steps and across the yard.

Damn.

Even in jeans, even when the light was dim, even when she was doing her darnedest to quell her attraction, he still had the best butt on the planet.

It was
so
not fair.

FOURTEEN

M

organ didn't come out to the stable the next night. Or the next. On the third night, she came by to ask Rhys if he still had enough food in his fridge—and of course, he did, but he invented a few things he

needed

just to be sure she'd return. She lingered a few minutes, checking over Lucy's dressings, but he sensed there would again be no companionable visit.

He caught her arm as she turned to leave. "Have I given you offense?"

“No, of course not. I’m just really busy this week, that’s all. I’ve got a new vet joining us on Friday.” She looked uncomfortable and more so when he stroked her upper arm with gentle fingers.

“Glad I am to hear you’re to be having more help—the gods know you’re needing it. But the weight of the world seems on you still. Perhaps I could be lifting some of your burden?”

Morgan shook her head. “Thanks but no. It’s something I have to work out myself. Alone.” She gave him a weak smile and left.

Aye

, he thought to himself as frustration sparked.

You’re working out if I’m mad and if you dare get any nearer to me.

There

was no help for it, however—she’d made it plain that she didn’t want his company while she sorted through her feelings. All he had to offer was patience and more patience.

By all the gods, he was weary of being patient. Leo had encouraged him to court Morgan, but it was impossible to do when she was pushing him away. Or perhaps not...“It’s always those little things, the little attentions that count the most.” According to Leo’s words, maybe there was a way to win Morgan’s approval without actually being present.

It was worth a try.

Despite sleeping poorly all week, Morgan was up and ready for work early. She told herself that she had paperwork to do and supply orders to place and correspondence to attend to at the clinic before the new vet arrived that day...anything but the real reason she’d left so soon the last few mornings.

She still wasn’t ready to face Rhys, not after the night they’d kissed. Her body and her heart definitely wanted a repeat of that evening. Her mind, however, was more troubled than ever.

The front door locked neatly behind her, and she was both relieved and disappointed to see that the porch was bare. Rhys did a huge volume of work around the farm—and really, how had she managed without him? She hadn’t even realized how much there *was*

to do. Yet, he’d found time lately to leave small delights on her doorstep for her. A few stems of late flowers from the nearby woods, a handful of wild strawberries that should have been out of season, a spray of leaves that had changed color early. Even a pair of bright feathers that a blue jay had left behind. It was like finding treasure every day.

Unused to such attention, she had wondered if he was just sucking up to her—after all, he had room and board here, even if it was humble—but was immediately ashamed of the cynical notion. Jay repeatedly told her to trust her instincts, and all her instincts said that Rhys’s offerings were genuine. Of

course

he had a motive. He obviously cared for her and was trying to show it.

Her attraction to him was genuine too. That had simply increased since the evening that Jay and his friends had held practice. She'd studied Rhys's every move that night, done everything but drool over him, for heaven's sake—and she might have done that as well. Small wonder that her system all but hummed with arousal in his presence. Small wonder that she had sought expression the other night in his arms. And her heart had urged her on.

Which led to her current dilemma. Go forward or back? Allow the relationship to progress or run for her life? She felt she didn't know enough about him—and yet he insisted she knew everything that was important.

Stalemate. A lover's limbo if ever there was one.

Grabbing her bag, she hurried out to the driveway. Just as she put the key in the door handle, she saw something on the hood of her car—and froze.

Omigod.

Morgan put a hand to her throat and took an unsteady breath, then another, moving closer until she could touch what was definitely

the

most beautiful carving she'd ever seen, and assure herself it was real.

A mastiff, just like Rhyswr.

At about a foot and a half high, it was large yet exquisitely detailed, right down to the dog's expression. The canine figure was seated but not stiffly so. Instead its position was relaxed, one hind leg tucked sideways—and she couldn't help but smile because Rhyswr had often sat just like that. The grain of the wood was dark. A little mottled too, almost as if the dog was brindle. Reverently, she stroked her hands over the carving and finally picked it up, marveling at the weight of it as she cradled the wooden dog close to her.

Morgan didn't realize a tear was on her cheek until a large thumb gently wiped it away.

"I've been working at this for a long while," said Rhys, nodding at the carving. "I know you've been missing your dog, so I thought to make you one like him. I wasn't after making you sad again."

She laughed a little and swiped her face with her sleeve. "I'm not sad, not at all. It's just that this is so incredible and so perfect and so—

omigod

, I can't believe you made this. It's beyond beautiful. I don't even know how to thank you properly for such an amazing gift."

"I can help you with that," he murmured, and before she could move, he brushed his lips over hers.

Light. Heat.

Unseen sparks flared to life between them, as surely as if a blade had caressed flint,

and every cell in her body leapt with sudden arousal. If she hadn't been holding the wooden dog, she might have thrown her arms around Rhys's neck and—

He stepped back and grinned. "A perfect thanks and plenty. I'll be seeing you tonight."

Both breathless and speechless, she simply hugged the dog to her as he walked away—and was it her imagination or was there a slight swagger in his step? All she knew for certain was that if the kiss had lasted any longer, she'd have made the evening news: "Spontaneous human combustion occurs in Spokane Valley! Story after this commercial break."