

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (24 page)

“It’s you who are needing a bit of help,” he said gently. “You’ll not allow yourself to believe; perhaps you’re afraid to believe that there is more to the world than what you see. There are many things all around us that are old and powerful, and they’re to be respected not feared.”

Morgan forgot to breathe for several seconds. Those were Nainie’s words—exactly what Nainie had once said to her. How could he know, what did it mean? She sucked in a lungful of air just in time to realize Rhys had ahold of her hand. Before she could pull it back, he had placed her fingertips on a scar just under his rib cage.

“You’re a healer, and a fine one. Do you not recognize your own handiwork?”

What?

Morgan saw at once that this wound was different. It was pinkish and raised slightly, fresh knit. She could discern that it had once been sutured with tiny, even stitches. But it was the shape of it that electrified her—a long straight slash with a hook at the end, like the letter

J

. She’d had to make an incision to enlarge the stab wound on the black dog, so she could repair the damage to his heart and lungs. Her finger traced along the scar almost of its own volition. The scar was located in the same place, oriented the same way...

She yanked her hand away as if from a hot stove. “It’s just coincidence. It has to be!” Desperation edged her voice. “Just a crazy and bizarre coincidence, that’s all!” Sliding from the grain bin, she edged around Rhys and backed toward the stable door.

He didn’t move. “I don’t like that you fear me.”

That halted her in her tracks. She marched up to him until they were only inches apart and planted her index finger in the center of his chest. “I. Am not. Afraid. Of

you

,” she said, emphasizing every word. “But I’ll tell you what I am afraid of. I’m afraid that your fantasies are contagious. I’m afraid of buying into your make-believe world. I’m afraid of loving you so much that I tell myself it’s perfectly okay to know absolutely

nothing

about you. And it’s not okay, not at all.”

“You already know everything that’s important about me. I’ve worked every day to prove myself to you, but you refuse to give me your trust.”

“My

trust

? You’re living on my property. That’s a helluva lot of trust, mister. And so was last

night, goddamn it. Now you're messing with my mind again, and I don't like it. I want the lies and the games to stop. I want them to stop
right now
."

He reached for her as if to hold her, but she knocked his hand away and headed for the door once more. She could feel his eyes on her and paused at the threshold to face him. "I want you to leave. Take your fantasies and go play with somebody else's life."
With somebody else's heart
..."Go back to Leo's or go to hell, but don't come back, do you hear me?"

Rhys's face darkened, but he didn't move from the spot, only folded his heavily muscled arms across his broad chest. "I hear you fine. And now you hear
me
, Morgan Edwards. I'm not daft or touched in the head. I'm not a liar. And I'm not playing any foolish games. Do you think what we shared here was just a lark to me? You have my heart, and if I'm not very mistaken, I have yours as well. I want to make a life with you, but there'll be nothing between us without
trust
and
truth
. I've given you both. Where are yours?"

She opened her mouth and closed it again, unable to form a coherent response to such an outrageous question. Truth indeed.
Romans and fairies and death dogs, oh my.
Morgan turned on her heel and marched to the house with the blanket flapping around her, angrier than she'd ever been in her life and glad for it, because it kept the pain in her heart at bay.

SIXTEEN

A
fter slamming the door and locking the dead bolt, Morgan peeked out the window and saw nothing. Rhys hadn't followed her, and for some reason, that made her even madder.
Good. Fine. Dandy.
She stalked to her room, muttering and fuming. Balled up the blanket and threw it into a corner.

She showered in the hottest water she could stand, scrubbing herself furiously as if she could erase the memory of Rhys's touch. Remained under the water until it was too cold to bear, but it failed to cool her anger. Morgan toweled off and pulled on clothes in a fury. What the hell had she been thinking? It had been foolish, absolutely stupid of her to let this man, this

stranger

, stay on her property in the first place. And downright crazy to have sex with him.

Sex.

Her fury suddenly popped like an overfilled balloon, and Morgan sank to the edge of her bed with her head in her hands. It hadn't been just sex, not by a long shot. Not for either of them. Whether she liked it or not, the connection was real and powerful. She felt as if she had known Rhys all her life, in spite of the fact that she'd only just met him. And she loved him—that was certain. She'd always been on the cerebral side, cautious and careful, inclined to consider all the pros and cons and analyze everything to the

n

th degree...

This one time—

just one damn time

—she'd followed her heart, her instincts, and now look at what had happened.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. She was good at analyzing, and if ever a situation called for it, this one did.

Okay, step one: lay out the facts.

That turned out to be harder than she thought, because the

fact

was that Rhys hadn't exactly committed a crime. He hadn't beaten her, stolen from her, cheated on her, or done anything other than work around her neglected farm and care for a wounded horse. In fact, the entire dilemma lay in his outrageous ancient-warrior-becomes-death-dog story.

Well, so what? That made him a goddamn liar, didn't it?

But was it still a lie if he believed it? Everything in his face, his eyes, his body language, said that he was telling the absolute truth. Morgan had never heard of anything like this, had certainly never seen the situation mentioned in the advice column of the newspaper. And as problems went, it seemed insurmountable. She couldn't just ignore it—it would always be the elephant in the room. And who knew what other strange things Rhys believed or what odd behaviors could develop because of it?

It didn't help a bit that her partner, Jay, believed that the intricate silver dog collar proved that Rhys's strange tale was true. Surely Jay was letting his own wishful thinking cloud his judgment—yet his judgment had always proved sound before. She relied on him at the clinic without hesitation. Why should this case be any different?

Was there any chance, any totally wild, billion-to-one chance that Rhys's story

could

be true?

Oh, for pity's sake, now I'm buying into the fantasy.

She snorted, but the derisive sound turned into a snuffle and her eyes filled with unwelcome tears. She sniffed again, loudly, and a mounting headache had her heading to the kitchen for the bottle

of ibuprofen she knew was on the counter. Afterward, she wandered aimlessly to the

living room with a box of Kleenex under one arm and stood staring at her many bookshelves. Sunlight penetrated the venetian blinds on the windows, and bright rays fingered the numberless issues of veterinary journals, enormous resource books on every species of animal, and texts on chemistry, pharmacology, and anatomy.

Nainie had laughingly called her a bookish child, and the evidence plainly showed she still was one. But the titles on the spines had been very different when she was younger. Faery tales, folklore, myths, and legends. Elves, witches, ogres, and dragons. Spells and curses. Good and evil. All just silly fantasy of course, but Morgan still felt a pang of nostalgia. She had loved every single one of them. How many nights had she pleaded with Nainie to keep the light on just a little longer so she could read more of the wonderful stories?

On an impulse, Morgan hurried to the spare bedroom, where about four dozen boxes were stacked against one wall, each neatly labeled in her own handwriting. She'd intended to settle in, of course, to finally free her belongings from storage and to display all her treasures now that she had a house of her own. Yet there were still a lot of boxes whose contents hadn't seen the light of day since she lived in an apartment. There were even

more

boxes that hadn't been opened since Nainie had passed away and left all her things to her granddaughter.

It was a daunting task, and she'd made little progress. Morgan figured she'd be fully unpacked sometime in the next decade or so—if she was lucky. Now the intimidation she usually felt when she entered the room seemed to dissolve. Her anger over Rhys was slowly but surely nudged aside, replaced by a subtle niggling pressure.

Look, look, look.

Giving in to the compulsion, she began opening boxes.

So many letters, photos, and knickknacks. And books, of course—scores of them, many filled with Welsh folklore. Each one was like an old friend, but she wasn't there to read. Instead, she glanced at each title, then reached for the next one. Morgan had no idea what she was looking for, but she couldn't seem to stop. When she'd gone through all the boxes in the guest room, she went to the closet and found more. And still more. By late afternoon, she was sitting in a sea of open boxes and towering stacks of books and papers.

She sighed heavily.

So far, all I've done is make a helluva mess.

But she might as well finish the job.

There were only five boxes left when she discovered something beneath some of Nainie's favorite cookbooks. It was a small jewelry box from Morgan's fifteenth birthday, made from dark wood with a Celtic symbol carved on it. Opening it, she found a tangle of silver necklaces and plastic bracelets, sterling earrings and wild-colored dime-store ones. And right on top, a snapshot of Nainie. Morgan had taken the photo herself with her brand-new camera, surprising her grandmother in the kitchen as she rolled out pie

dough—a slice of everyday life perfectly captured. How many times had she seen her grandmother bake?

She could nearly smell the cinnamon in the air.

Morgan sighed and drew a finger over the photo, gently tracing the shapeless flowered dress, the faded apron, the glasses sliding down Nainie's nose, and the crown of blue-gray curly hair that would never behave. Morgan pulled a tendril of her own wayward hair as emotion washed over her.

"Oh, Nainie, I wish you were here. I miss you all the time." She sniffled hard and rubbed her nose on the shoulder of her shirt. At once she noticed some little white things carefully lined up beside the pastry board. They didn't look quite like dough scraps... Finally Morgan gave up squinting at them and held the photo near the window for better light. She had to get a magnifying glass, however, before the tiny objects resolved themselves into clever knots and triangles and flowers of leftover dough.

"Faery pastries," she murmured, remembering. Every baking day, without fail, Nainie would make a small batch of faery pastries, dripping with honey and raisins. Morgan would receive one on a china saucer with a cup of milky tea. As for the rest, a tiny basket of the diminutive baked goods would grace the back porch at sunset.

An offering for the Fair Ones, Nainie had explained. Some of her words came back to Morgan now.

There are many things all around us that are old and powerful... They're not to be feared but to be respected, and it's long been a gift in our family to know them.

Nainie had believed the faery stories she told her granddaughter. Which made her the only person in the world who could understand what Morgan was going through. Even though her grandmother had passed on, Morgan felt certain that Nainie would be listening and watching over her somehow.

"I'm trying hard not to be stupid here, but you told me that the heart knows things the mind doesn't and to trust my heart even when things didn't make sense." Tears began, only a few at first, and then the floodgates simply burst. "They sure don't make sense right now. There's this man in my life. I think he's a good man, but he's really confused and so am I..."

She poured her heart out to Nainie's photo for a very long time. Talking to the dog yesterday had been good for her, but her heart hadn't been ripped in half at the time. She wasn't much of a crier by nature, but this time she couldn't stop the tears. It wasn't long before the box of Kleenex was empty and she had to switch to toilet paper. Which seemed somewhat undignified, but it was either that or scratchy paper towels.

By the time Morgan was down to hiccups and sniffles, she still had no answers. She loved Rhys, and Rhys, love her though he might, was obviously crazy. It could be the treatable kind of crazy, like schizophrenia or something like that, but he'd have to agree he had a problem. And she didn't see that happening anytime soon.

With Nainie's picture in one hand and the old jewelry box in the other, she got unsteadily to her feet and stumbled to the kitchen to make coffee and pull herself together. The sun pouring in the windows seemed to mock her mood as she propped the photo against the salt and pepper shakers on the table. She stood back and surveyed it, then went back to the guest room and came back with a frame. It was far too large for the precious picture, but it would protect it. She centered the photo on the glass and closed it up, then took the Truman's Farm Equipment calendar down from the wall and hung Nainie's photo in its place.

Maybe I could get Jay to scan it or something.

A larger copy of the photo could hang on that wall permanently.

Nainie in her kitchen and me in mine.