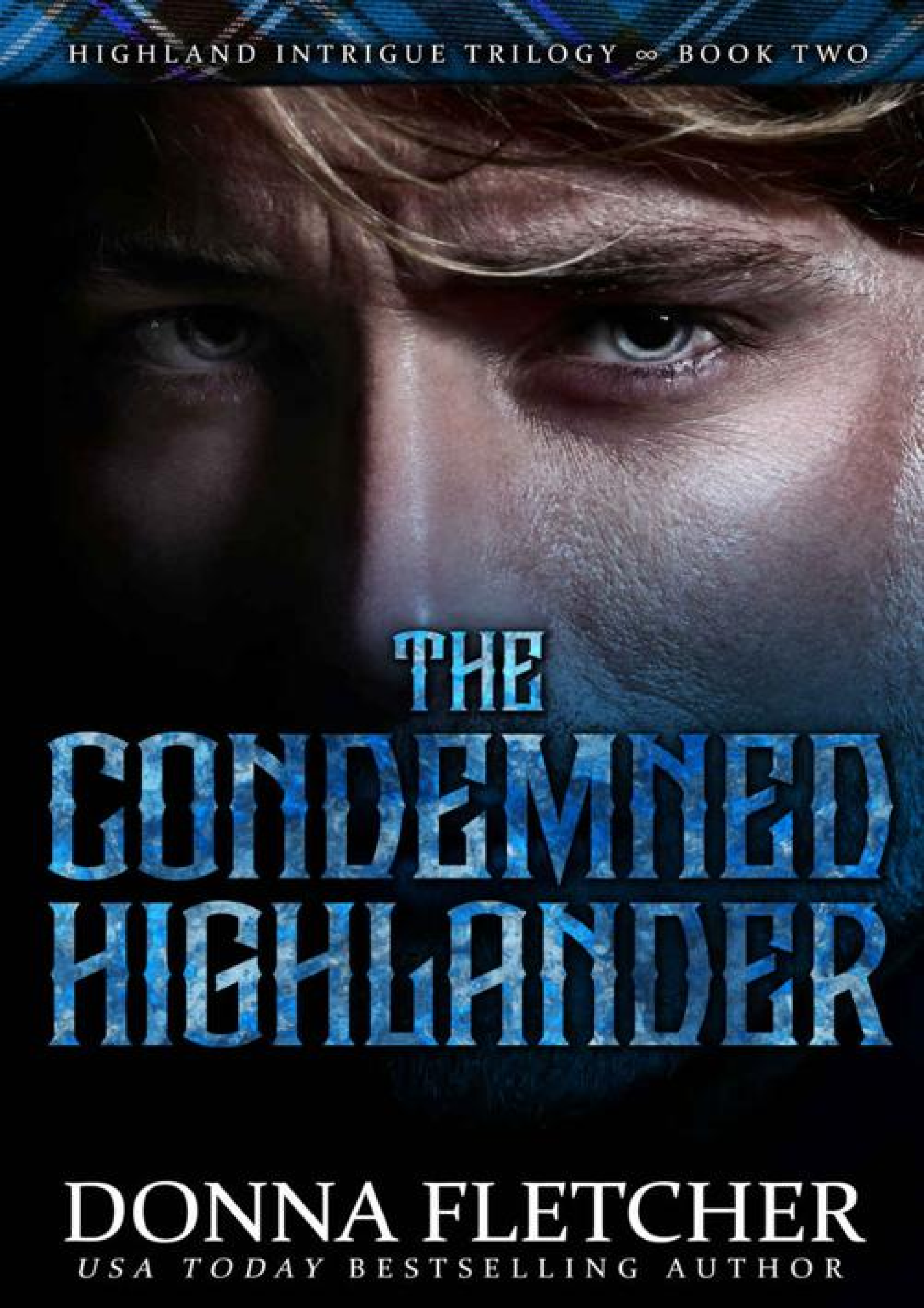


HIGHLAND INTRIGUE TRILOGY ∞ BOOK TWO

A close-up, high-contrast portrait of a man's face, focusing on his eyes and the texture of his skin. He has a serious, intense expression. The top of the image features a blue and white kilt pattern. The title is overlaid in a large, blue, textured font.

THE  
CONDAMNED  
HIGHLANDER

DONNA FLETCHER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# **THE CONDEMNED HIGHLANDER**

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## HIGHLAND INTRIGUE TRILOGY (BOOK TWO)

DONNA FLETCHER

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Also by Donna Fletcher

*The Condemned Highlander*

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Someone was following Annis. She had been aware of it for a while now. Not only had she heard the footfalls, but she had sensed someone. There could be any number of reasons someone followed her, the most worrisome being that someone meant her harm.

Annis shifted the narrow bundle on her back with a lift of the single strap that crossed her chest and ran over her shoulder. Once done, she hoisted her garments just enough so she could run unimpeded if necessary.

It had been over a week since she left Clan Loudon to start her quest. She had taken precautions on the route she traveled to avoid the warriors Chieftain Emory was bound to send in search of her. She had no intentions of allowing anyone to interfere with her plans. She intended to be successful. She had no choice, her sister's life depended on it.

She heard the rustle of leaves not far behind her. The harvest season certainly could produce a good wind now and again but not even a light breeze stirred the air today. She had two choices, keep walking, and wait to see the person's intentions, or she could run to put distance between whoever followed behind her. Or did she dare...

Annis stopped abruptly, spun around, and ordered, "Show yourself, you coward!"

Her hand went to the hilt of the dagger secured in a sheath at her waist and her glance remained steady on her surroundings. A small tingle of fear ran through her, but she



had learned through her own misadventures that a touch of fear proved useful. It kept one alert, and that alertness caught a movement through the branches of a large, gnarled pine tree. The branches had grown strangely, giving the tree a beastly appearance and for a moment, Annis worried what it might spit out.

Annis's hand fell away from the dagger as soon as the woman stepped from behind the tree. Her long, braided, white hair suggested she was a woman of older years, but her face held few lines and wrinkles, and though she was tall, she had no stoop to her shoulders. It was the sight of her well-worn, blackthorn walking stick that poked a memory.

“Cumina?”

She didn't know the woman well, having only gone a couple of times with her sister Bliss when she sought Cumina's knowledge. A knowledge that was often sought in secret since many believed her a witch.

“Aye, it is me,” Cumina said, her steps soft and graceful as she approached Annis. “I didn't mean to alarm you, but when I heard you left on a quest, I had to speak with you. I waited until you completely avoided the men following you so that we could talk without worry.”

Annis spotted a fallen tree and pointed to it. “A short respite would do me good.”

Cumina sat along with Annis. “You are much different from your two sisters, Bliss and Elysia.”

“Aye, so I've been told many times,” Annis said with a smile. “My two sisters are kind and sweet where I have a blunt nature, my all too often unfettered words proving it true.”

“You have a free, spirited nature.” Cumina smiled. “As bold and full of fire as your untamed, flaming red hair.”

Annis grinned as she tugged at a strand of the massive red ringlets that sprang from her head. “Untamed, unruly, does as it will—” she laughed. “It does sound like me.”

“Be proud of who you are. Not many have such abundant courage,” Cumina said. “I know Bliss is very proud of you.”

“Bliss is far braver than me, sacrificing herself and marrying the worst cursed lord of the three so that I wasn’t forced to wed one of them and making sure Elysia wasn’t forced to wed. But Bliss will not survive long if I do not succeed in my quest. The third and last wife of Lord Rannick of the Clan MacClaren, before Bliss, died when she first laid eyes upon him. I pray Bliss will survive long enough for me to help her. Can you tell me anything about this curse that has condemned three men to suffer such hellish lives?” Annis asked anxiously.

“I will tell you what I told Bliss. The most powerful curse there is—is a death curse. When a person uses their last breath to curse someone, it releases tremendous power. Most times the curse is made because of a wrong that was done to someone and the only way to end the curse is to right that wrong.”

Annis nodded. “That is something I have heard over and over again.”

“What you haven’t heard, and many don’t understand, about the curse is that it was not cast with a hateful heart. It was cast with a loving heart and meant to protect and keep safe an innocent bairn. When the king ordered the complete destruction of the Clan MacWilliam, the barely two-day-old bairn had no chance to survive. Her mother, Lady Aila, used the only thing left to protect her daughter.”

“A curse that has condemned my sister to a certain death, unless I can see it broken,” Annis said, growing misty-eyed, something she did far too often. It was a trait that annoyed her and one she fought to contain. Though, Bliss had insisted it meant she had a kind heart.

“The very reason I came in search of you. This quest you take is fraught with perils. The most dangerous one of all—making contact with the witch in the hills. She is no myth. She is real and she is powerful. I warned Bliss that she demands a price for her magic.”

“I will pay whatever she wants to see Bliss safe,” Annis said without hesitation.

“Nay, you will not, for she will take far too much from you,” Cumina warned. “Listen when she speaks and be wise, not quick with your responses. Watch for you see more clearly than most and be mindful of what your eyes tell you.”

“I appreciate your guidance,” Annis said.

“You are a brave soul, Annis, and you will need all of that courage for this quest.”

“It is Bliss who is brave, not me, and I will not fail her.”

“I don’t possess the far sight that some wise women do. I only know that this quest will go far different than you expect,” Cumina cautioned.

Annis was quick to ask, “Can you see if Bliss survives her forced marriage to Lord Rannick?”

“I see nothing but distress at the moment, but that would seem reasonable given her current situation. The witch you seek can tell you much more, but again I warn you she extracts a steep price for her knowledge.”

Annis hurried to her feet, having lingered long enough. “I am good at bargaining.”

Cumina stood. “And the witch has superior powers. Be careful, Annis, and do not let your tongue rule when you meet her.”

Annis tucked the advice away to use when needed as she continued on her way. She had no doubt this would prove a challenging task, but it was also a necessary one since it had been her fault that Bliss had sacrificed herself.

She shook her head annoyed at the memories of how careless she had been when speaking with Lord Brogan. It hadn’t helped upon meeting him that she had fainted from the blood on his face. Too often misty-eyes weren’t the only weakness she had—the sight of blood was the other. An abundance of blood. A small smattering didn’t affect her, but a large amount—she stopped, feeling lightheaded from just the thought of it. Or maybe it was the memory of seeing the blood on Brogan. Her sister Bliss, the clan healer, had been called to

the keep to tend him and she had also been ordered to bring one of her sisters with her.

Bliss had warned her to hold her tongue, draw no attention to herself. Two men had recently arrived at Clan Loudon in their search to find women to wed the three cursed lords, Lord Rannick being the most feared of the three men. He had lost three wives in six years. No woman survived a marriage to him.

Unfortunately, Brogan had enjoyed sparring verbally with her. That soon became apparent to the two men, Lawler and Cadell, who after an extensive search and rejection from clans fearful of being involved in any way with the cursed lords, had to turn to the peasants to find wives. It became apparent that Brogan favored someone—Annis.

She stopped, her hand going to her lips, recalling his kiss. It had been unexpected and more enjoyable than expected. Though, not the words that followed.

*See what you'll miss.*

She shook her head to rid herself of his voice as she continued to walk. "Fool. Fool," she mumbled, though wasn't sure if it was Brogan or herself who she called the fool.

He had been quite adamant that her quest would fail just as his search had failed when he went looking for the witch of the hills. That he had dismissed her quest as useless made her even more determined to prove him wrong.

It had upset Annis to leave her sister Elysia all on her own. She worried what might befall her since she was too sweet and kind. Her only solace was that Elysia would seek a marriage with Saber, a farmer on an outlying croft. It had been obvious that they favored each other and with Saber being a sizeable man, her sister would be safe. Elysia had agreed and Annis hoped that they had wed or would soon wed, or else she would worry for her as she did for Bliss.

Annis kept a steady pace, determined to cover a far stretch today. The hills where the witch supposedly lived was another day or two away, though she had her doubts about the hills

being the correct location and the reason no one had found her there. Had others been misdirected on purpose? Was the witch's true location someplace entirely different?

There was a village not far ahead or so she had heard from the men in her clan. Duff, the builder in the clan, had allowed her to tag along with him when different structures were being built. Her interests differed greatly from most women. Elysia loved to stitch and had a talent for it. Annis, however, had been bored to death and stabbed herself with the needle so many times that Bliss would not let her attempt it again. She was more interested in the construction of the bone needle and had fashioned different shapes and sizes for Elysia. Womanly chores held no appeal to Annis.

The building of things, however, did hold interest to her. A strong interest. She had started young constructing things out of sticks and rocks and whatever else she felt might work. Duff had been amazed at her skill. Unfortunately, things did not go well the day he left her to guide a group of men in the building of a stone shed. She had handled it poorly, making fools of the men instead of stroking their fragile egos. Duff refused to let her tag along with him after that. It was around the same time Lawler and Cadell had arrived and life for her and her sisters had fallen apart.

There was a tale more disputed than believed about someone in the village she sought who had survived an encounter with the witch. Some claimed he told nothing but a wild tale for the attention it brought him while others shivered at the telling of it. She hoped to find the man and judge for herself. It was worth a try, or she would be searching every hill around.

Annis hastened her pace to outrun the gray skies darkening in the distance behind her. She took a chance traveling on her own, no man to protect her. But it was better she did. She had no one to order her about or disagree with her. Any mistakes she made were of her own doing and was a good reason to avoid making mistakes in the first place.

It wasn't until a couple of hours later as she climbed a small rise that she wondered if the village the men had

whispered about actually existed. Then she topped the rise and smiled.

Down below nestled in a small valley sat a village. She let her eyes roam over the few cottages and buildings of various sizes. She saw no indication of allegiance to any particular clan, but then many outlying villages appeared neutral, a good way to gather information to help protect their clan. Annis squared her shoulders and proceeded down the hill.

Though small as villages go, it appeared well kept. The men and women busy with tasks or engaged in conversation eyed her skeptically as she made her way slowly through the village. She had expected someone to approach her, a stranger in their midst, to inquire about her presence, but none did. They kept their distance.

Finally, she spotted an older woman sitting outside her cottage at a small table fashioning a sizeable splinter off a fresh bone into a needle. A common interest always helped to start a conversation with a stranger.

“I can help you with that,” Annis said when she reached the woman.

“How do I know you don’t mean to steal my needles?” the woman accused.

Annis chuckled. “I hate to sew. I haven’t got a lick of talent for it, but I do enjoy making the needles for my sister, who is talented with stitches.”

“Show me,” the woman said, pointing to the needle she was working on.

Annis looked over the stones on the small table used to shape the bone, chose one, and got busy.

The woman watched with interest and her eyes brightened, seeing how skilled Annis was at the task. “Can you do more than one for me?”

“I can get a few done for you,” Annis offered.

“What do you want in exchange?” the woman asked, her eyes skeptical once again.

“Some information and a warm place to stay for the night.”

“What kind of information?” the woman asked, a bit uncertain.

“I heard that a man who supposedly had an encounter with the witch in the hills resides here and I’d like to speak with him.”

The old woman grew cautious. “Why do you want to do that?”

Annis was blunt and honest. “To save my sister, Bliss, who was forced to wed Lord Rannick, one of the cursed lords.”

The old woman’s mouth dropped open briefly, then a smile broke out across her face and tears gathered in her eyes. “Bless your sister Bliss, bless her. We were told that men would be coming here to find wives for the cursed lords and feared one or more of our women would be chosen and with our village part of Clan MacRae, home to Lord Brogan, we would have little choice but to surrender any woman chosen. We were so relieved to learn that a woman had unselfishly offered herself to the cursed lord and that the search for wives for the other two cursed lords had been halted. You are most welcome here.”

“Annis, my name is Annis,” she said, pleased she’d be welcome for the night and surprised that the village was part of Brogan’s clan. Surely, he would have spoken to the man with the tale about the witch. And why had searches for the other two cursed lords been halted?

“Garda,” the woman said, patting her chest, then with a quick wave signaled other women to hurry over. “This is Annis, sister to Bliss, the woman who wed Lord Rannick.”

The women spoke over each other offering their appreciation, and blessing Annis and Bliss, and all offering her shelter and food for the night, though Garda dismissed their offers.

“Annis will stay with me,” Garda said, and no one argued with her.

“What a skilled hand you have with making needles,” one woman said.

“It’s the way you use the stone,” Annis said. “Here, let me show you.”

Annis was eager to ask again about the man she searched for, but she knew if she spent some time with the women, they would be more likely to tell her what she wanted to know without probing. Besides, she did enjoy showing the women how to make hardy-formed needles.

Benches were gathered so all could sit, and cider was offered, a bit bitter to her taste, but it quenched her thirst and that was what mattered.

Talk soon turned to Brogan.

“Did you meet, Lord Brogan?” one woman asked.

“I have and he thinks highly of himself,” Annis said.

The women laughed.

One spoke up. “And for good reason. He possesses the finest features I have ever seen on a man.”

All of them nodded, and one said, “But who wants a husband who never dies?”

“Annis hopes to change that,” Garda said, and every eye turned wide. “She is here to speak with Nolan.”

“He tells tall tales,” one woman said.

“He convinced me,” another offered.

A tall woman shivered. “I would not care to find out one way or the other.”

“Has Nolan even been seen lately?” another woman asked.

A plump woman laughed. “Spread the word someone is here to talk to him about the witch and he’ll appear.”

The women did just that after dispersing, happy with the needles they had made.

A knock sounded on Garda’s door as she and Annis sat down at a small table to enjoy cabbage soup.



Garda went to the door. "That will be Nolan."

A short, wiry man with sparse gray hair bobbed his head. "Heard someone was looking for me, Garda, and that I'd find her here."

"You heard right," Garda said. "Come in and warm yourself with some cabbage soup."

"That's generous of you, Garda, and appreciated," Nolan said with another bob of his head.

Annis smiled as Nolan sat on the bench Garda had added to the table, obviously having expected the man.

"I'm Annis, Nolan, the one looking to speak with you," Annis said with a smile.

"Glad to meet you, Annis," Nolan said and got busy on his soup.

Annis did the same, realizing the man was hungry and would be more forthcoming to questions once he filled his stomach.

"More, Nolan?" Garda asked, the man having emptied his bowl fast.

"If you don't mind? It's delicious soup, Garda," Nolan said and handed the empty bowl to her.

"Would you be willing to tell me the tale about your encounter with the witch in the hills?" Annis asked and was surprised at the question she got in return.

"Why do you want to know?" Nolan asked.

Garda turned a raised brow on him. "What difference does it make to you? You're always willing to recite the tale."

"It makes a difference," he said with a strong nod. "I heard tell that she wants to find the witch and I don't want any part of what might happen to her if she does find her."

"Have no fear of that," Annis said. "I do this of my own accord and lay no blame on you for what may come of it. I want nothing more than to hear your tale."

Garda's brow narrowed this time and she held firm to the bowl of soup, as if letting him know—no tale, no soup.

“At first I thought I was dreaming,” Nolan said quickly, and Garda placed the bowl in front of him and he cupped his hands around it to stop them from trembling. “The mist was so thick I could barely see in front of me, when moments before it had been light. A dream. I told myself it had to be a dream, but I couldn't recall falling asleep.” He shivered and took a sip of the soup. “I had no choice but to stop walking. I couldn't see a thing in front of me. That's when I realized how quiet it was, not a sound to be heard. Not a cry of a bird. Not a scurry of animals. Not even a rustle of the leaves. It had gone completely silent. Life is filled with sounds. It's never silent. That was when I was convinced I was dreaming.”

Annis waited patiently, though eager to hear more as he paused to scoop up some of the cabbage with a chunk of bread.

Nolan wiped his mouth on his worn wool sleeve before he continued. “I was relieved when the mist began to fade. I feared it would swallow me live it was so thick.” He trembled and gripped the bowl again. “That's when I saw the raven perched on a low branch, his beady black eyes staring right at me, silent as can be. I kept a wide berth as I went to walk around it. It squawked and I stilled, and the bird turned its head slowly. I didn't want to look where his beady eyes focused, but when he turned his black eyes on me again and turned his head once more, I knew it was a command, and I turned my head.” He paled. “She stood there swathed in all black, gripping a walking stick as tall as herself, strange symbols carved into it. Her hood was drawn over part of her face, but a cloud partially covered the moon that night making it difficult to see clearly.”

He shook his head slowly and Annis wondered if he even knew he shook it.

“‘I'm lost' came out of my mouth, though I didn't know why I said it. She told me I was treading on her land.” He suddenly hugged himself. “I apologized over and over, fearful of what she might do to me. She raised her stick and warned

me that if I ever happened upon her home again...” He paled and his whole body trembled as did his words when he spoke again. “She told me she would turn me into one of her minions—the ravens that serve her so well.”

A tremble ran through Annis. Was the witch that powerful? Could she turn a human into a bird? Did she even want to find out? *Bliss*. She was doing this to save Bliss.

His eyes turned wide. “Then she parted the clouds overhead to reveal a full moon and it lit a path in front of me. She ordered me to go and never return. I ran as fast as my legs would go and kept running until I collapsed. I rolled on my back, breathless, and fear struck me as I looked up at the sky and saw a half moon. I didn’t know if the witch had used her evil magic to force the moon to turn full or if more time had passed than I realized. Or if it truly had been nothing more than a dream.”

Annis’s flesh prickled along her arms, and Garda’s strong shudder drew her attention even though the woman had heard the tale many times before.

It took Annis a moment to ask, “Can you tell me where this was that you encountered her?”

Nolan shook his head. “I don’t know. I found myself in a village, if it could be called that there were so few dwellings and people. I was on my way here after taking a message to Lord Lochlann from Lord Balloch when I woke from a drunken stupor in the small village. I did recall meeting someone on the road who had shared his ale with me, much more ale than I had realized. I figured I made my way to the village and collapsed. I was given directions to return home and must have gotten lost. I thought myself lucky after my encounter with the witch to find myself on the right path and didn’t waste any time in getting home.”

“Did either lord learn of your encounter?” Annis asked.

Garda responded to that. “That they did, and Nolan was warned to stop spreading such nonsense. That’s why he now keeps the nonsense to the village.”

“Yet you tell me,” Annis said.

“Only to warn you. To make you see what you will face if you dare such an encounter with the witch,” Nolan cautioned.

“I appreciate the warning, but my sister’s life depends on me meeting the witch,” Annis said. “This village you woke in, can you tell me how to get there?”

He nodded. “Aye, I can, but they are a strange lot. You would be wise to be cautious.”

“That I will do,” Annis assured him.

The witch was discussed no more, and Nolan left right after he finished his second bowl of soup. Shortly after, Garda sought her narrow bed and Annis made herself comfortable on the earth floor. She thought sleep would be difficult, her thoughts on what Nolan had told her, but a sound slumber claimed her as soon as she closed her eyes.

The next morning Garda offered her some bread and cheese to take along with her and wished her luck.

“I truly do pray that you can find a way to end this terrible curse that has inflicted so much pain and heartbreak on so many,” Garda said and hugged Annis. “May the forest spirits keep you safe on your quest.”

Several women wished her well as she left the village and she had barely entered the woods when Nolan stepped out from behind a tree, causing her to jump.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he apologized, a nervous tremor to his words. “There is something I must tell you. Something meant for your ears only.”

Curious at the secrecy that he implied, she asked, “What is it, Nolan?”

He kept his voice low. “The witch gave me a message. Warned me not to fail to deliver it. Warned me it was meant for one person’s ears alone. That person is you.”

Annis’s eyes shot wide, startled by the news. “The witch knew my name?”

Nolan shook his head. “Nay.”

“Then how do you know the message is meant for me?”

“The message was clear. The witch ordered me to tell the fiery, red-haired woman that she is waiting for her.”

**W**orry plagued Annis as she walked, Nolan's words remaining strong in her head as did the tears that had gathered in his aging eyes.

"I thought it a dream. I prayed it was a dream," he had said. "Then I saw you, your hair blazing red, and I knew—it had all been real."

A chill had run through her, realizing what it meant for him and for herself. He had come face to face with the witch and had actually survived. Would she be that lucky?

It didn't matter as long as she saved her sister. Bliss had been barely twelve years when their mum had died and with their da having already passed that left Bliss to care for her sisters. She had been a mother to Elysia and Annis at a young age and had done everything to keep them safe, well-fed, and most of all loved. Bliss had a generous heart and gave just as generously of it to people. It was what made her such a talented healer.

Bliss had sacrificed much and now it was Annis's turn to do the same for her.

Annis made her way through the forest. Nolan had been right. Life teemed with sounds. The birds' chatter echoed through the trees. A good breeze rustled the leaves, causing some to fall which in turn caused the crunch beneath her feet from the leaves that already carpeted the ground. And squirrels ran up and down the trees foraging for food to store for the coming winter.

She stopped a moment to listen more closely and enjoyed the melody of the forest, pleased no footfalls disturbed it. She thought once again about Nolan. How strange it must have been for him when complete silence struck, not a sound being heard. Had the forest gone silent in awe of the witch or in fear of her? Was that what heralded the witch's appearance—silence? She shivered in anticipation of meeting the silence.

Chasing the disturbing thoughts, she continued on her way. If she kept her pace, she could reach the village after nightfall, but that was not to her liking. The darkness concealed whether it meant to or not, and she preferred to enter the village in the light of day when, if not all, most was revealed.

She slowed her pace with difficulty since she was used to a brisk gait and found shelter for the night under a grouping of large pines when dusk began to settle over the land. She didn't bother with a fire, unfolding the blanket strapped on her back which also held what food she had and a few other necessities, and tucked it tight around her. A few munches of bread and cheese served for a quick supper and not long after she fell asleep.

Dawn's light woke her and after finishing the cheese and bread Garda had provided, she set off for the village. Nolan had told her to look for the towering pines that appeared to kiss and the village would be there. The pines were as he described them, but she saw no village.

If she hadn't plopped down on the ground annoyed while berating Nolan silently, she would have never seen the narrow path that led through the pines. Their low, sweeping branches almost concealed it entirely.

She made her way along the path, bending her head and nudging branches aside. It led to a clearing where the village sat, though she would not call the five sturdy dwellings and a few shelters, that a good wind would collapse, a village.

Annis approached cautiously, keeping her hand beneath her cloak near her dagger. She was prepared to use it, if necessary, the people she spied a motley bunch.

“What do you want here?”

Annis jumped and turned at the sharp demand to face a woman of sizeable girth. She had a pretty face, at least it would be if she wasn't scowling, and soft blue eyes. Her worn garments appeared beyond repair even for Elysia's talented hand. Her dark hair was piled on her head in a misshapen manor and her plump hands rested on her wide hips as if in warning.

Annis let few people, if any, intimidate her, regardless of their size or manner. Her chin shot up and she took a quick step toward the woman. "I want to know the directions you gave Nolan."

The woman, not intimidated herself, took a step toward Annis. "I know no Nolan."

Annis set her one hand on her hip while keeping her other hand near her dagger. "The gray-haired, skinny man who woke here passed out from drink."

The woman laughed. "That's most men."

"The one you sent to the witch," Annis said.

The woman's laughter ceased, and her eyes narrowed. "You accuse me of being in cahoots with a witch?"

"What's going on, Una?" a man, with similar girth to the woman, approached, his gait relaxed.

"This one here," Una jabbed a finger toward Annis, "is accusing me of conspiring with a witch."

The man turned a troubled expression on Annis. "We have nothing to do with the witch, if she exists at all. This is our home, small as it may be, and we bother no one and we prefer no one bother us."

"You heard, now begone," Una ordered and shooed Annis off with a wave of her hands.

"Tell me the direction you sent the man and I'll leave you in peace," Annis said, keeping an obstinate stance.

"Where the cursed lords should go—to hell," Una said.



“Una, hold your tongue,” the man scolded softly. “We want no visits from them.”

“And I have no wont to say a word to them,” Annis assured the man. “I am only interested in what direction you sent Nolan, the wiry, gray-haired man who unexpectedly found himself here after a drunken stupor.”

The man eyed her suspiciously. “You know the cursed lords?”

Annis saw no reason to lie. “My sister Bliss was forced to wed Lord Rannick. I search for the witch to save her.”

Una’s hand flew to her chest. “The poor soul.”

The man shook his head. “I grieve for you.”

Annis’s stomach knotted, his words making it seem that she was already too late to help her sister.

A chilly wind suddenly swept around them, a far too cold wind for the harvest season, causing them all to shudder.

“Una, fix us all a hot brew if you will before we send the lass on her way with what we know,” the man said.

“Aye, Da,” Una said and turned and headed to the closest dwelling.

He pointed to a bench and Annis followed him over to it.

“Sit,” he offered in a gentle tone. “I am Iver.”

“Annis,” she said and spotted the tiredness on the man’s face, not from lack of sleep, but from years of endless toil and hardship. The curse had taken its toll on more than the three cursed lords.

“Our village thrived at one time.” He waved his hand around after joining her on the bench. “There were many more dwellings. Then the curse was cast and over time everything changed. I will tell you what I tell everyone, including the cursed lords who came searching for the witch. It is a tale that was started when someone spotted an old woman who once lived by the hills.” He gave a nod in the distance.

Annis turned but could see nothing because of a mist that hung there, and she thought of the mist Nolan had told her about.

“You can see the hills when the mist clears, though it lingers most times, which only adds to the tale of the witch in the hills. The tale grew in preposterous proportions until it became a myth more than a tale. The more it was recited, the more people believed it. It was no wonder the cursed lords came in search of the woman, and I could not blame them. Part of me wanted it to be true, wanted the curse to end.” Iver shook his head. “But the old woman was never found.”

Una joined them, handing her da a tankard before handing the other one to Annis.

Annis was happy to take a drink, a chill running through her, and the heat settling in her hands from the tankard promised warmth. However, the hot brew held barely a taste, but then the small group obviously possessed little and still they shared with her.

“Thank you, Una, the brew is pleasing and warms me,” Annis said.

She smiled and Annis was struck by how a smile could transform someone. Una was more than pretty when she smiled.

“You don’t believe the witch exists?” Annis asked, looking to Iver.

“Nay, in all my years living here I have never come across the witch,” he said.

“Then what of Nolan’s tale?” Annis asked.

“He left still feeling his drink. It could be nothing more than a dream or to him a nightmare,” Iver said.

Annis continued to question him, not ready to even consider defeat before she barely had gotten started, especially with Nolan delivering her the message from the witch, if it was true. “You said the cursed lords came looking for the witch. Did the three come together?”

“At first, and they left disappointed. Lord Brogan and Lord Rannick returned but again they left disappointed. Then Lord Rannick came alone.” Iver turned his head away and Una shivered from the memory. “It was after he returned home from his journey across the sea. I could not believe the change in him. A scar marred his fine features and his once fair skin had bronzed from the strong sun of foreign soil. His eyes, though,” —he shook his head— “they were soulless. Whatever humanity that was left in him was gone.”

A sharp stab of fear struck Annis’s stomach, twisting at it. If she hadn’t been gripping the tankard, her hands would have rushed to rub at the pain, little good that it would do. It did, however, strengthen her resolve to see this task done and save her sister.

“Where did this old woman live?” Annis asked.

“At the bottom of the largest hill, which is why she’s called the witch in the hills,” Iver said. “The tale is that she resides inside the hill to keep safe, but if she is a powerful witch, she has no reason to hide or fear others.”

“You waste your time like all the others,” Una said. “And like all the others, you make our lot worse.”

Iver stood and laid a comforting hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Lay no blame on her, Una. Annis wants only to help her sister.”

Annis had to ask. “How does my presence make your lot worse?”

Iver spoke, tears brimming in Una’s eyes as she turned her face away. “Our village was once part of the Clan MacRae.”

“Lord Brogan’s clan?” Annis asked, surprised.

“Aye,” Iver said. “We were one of the outlying villages. We hunted for Lord Balloch, supplying him with meat for the winter and were allowed to keep a portion for ourselves. Then one day a few people took ill at the MacRae keep and they blamed it on the meat, claiming the witch had tainted it. Lord Balloch ordered us to hunt no more and we were scorned and banned from the clan. Lord Balloch ordered us to remain here

and chase anyone away who came in search of the witch. Some here attempted to sneak off and find a better life. But they were caught and returned. There are only a handful of us left and I fear my daughter will be the last and destined to live her days out alone.”

Annis sprang off the bench. “I won’t let that happen.”

Una laughed. “And how will you stop it?”

Annis squared her shoulders. “I will find the witch and see an end brought to this troublesome curse.”

“What makes you think you can do what no one else has done?” Una asked, a hint of hope on her tongue.

Annis thought of the message the witch had given Nolan. “I know something no one else does. Now point me in the direction you pointed Nolan and I’ll be on my way.”

Iver pointed toward the mist. “At the foot of the hill you’ll find a place where two paths cross. You’ll see one is less traveled. That’s the one I told Nolan not to take. It’s not far, though the hills look a distance away. You’ll reach it soon enough. You need to be careful. Lord Balloch sends his warriors now and again to make sure the path shows no signs it’s been traveled. Anyone they find there goes to the keep’s dungeon.”

“I am grateful for the warning,” Annis said and took a drink before handing the tankard to Una. “I will break this curse.”

Tears returned to shine in Una’s soft blue eyes. “I pray you do.”

Annis forged ahead with determination and more than a dash of fear, the forest feeling as if it spread its arms to welcome her. Or did it mean to take her captive?

The mist lifted as she got closer, leaving a clear view of the hills. There was a grouping of three hills, ranging in size from tall to small. Heather covered a good portion of the smaller hill. Trees consumed the lower part of the middle hill, while a mixture of large stones and trees covered the largest hill.

She didn't have far to go to reach the bottom of the hills where she was sure she'd find where the two paths crossed. She was so intent on her task that she hadn't paid attention to the sounds around her. She heard the horses too late to hide.

“STOP WHERE YOU ARE!”

Annis turned to see two warriors approach and was reminded of what happened to those who Lord Balloch's warriors caught—the dungeon. She didn't think about it, she hoisted her cloak and ran for the dense growth of trees. The warriors would have a difficult time getting around them with their horses, giving her time to make her escape.

“YOU WON'T ESCAPE US!”

“SHOW YOURSELF!”

Annis buried herself amongst the preponderance of trees to keep out of sight. Fearing she'd suffer much more than the dungeon from the warriors if they caught her, she searched the ground for a rock that would fit her hand with a good grip. She wasn't foolish enough to believe that her fist could deliver a sufficient punch to a man, but a thick rock would add significant weight to it and give her a chance. At least she wasn't petit like Elysia. She was of fair size and from working with carrying stone and wood to build, her body was hard, whereas most women's bodies were soft, hers had strength to it.

She had seen only two men and if she could catch one unaware with a hefty punch, the other would come to his aid and give her time to put a good amount of distance between them. She only hoped it would be enough.

The forest grew quiet, and she waited. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she caught the sound of footfalls nearly upon her. She responded without thought or hesitation. She swerved around, swinging her fist that gripped the rock with full force.

Her eyes went wide as the man drew his head back to avoid the blow, but it caught the corner of his mouth and he stumbled back.

“Brogan?”

He whipped his head around and he realized too late that blood poured from the side of his mouth. Annis paled, her eyes rolled back in her head, and he barely caught her before she hit the ground.

“Keep your eyes shut,” Brogan ordered when Annis’s eyes began to flutter. “There is too much blood.” He grinned when she groaned, then winced since the grin shot a pain through the wound at his mouth.

He hadn’t been fast enough when he saw her swing coming, not that he thought she could hurt him. He should have realized that there’d be more to Annis’s swing than only a weak fist.

“Is there blood on me?” she demanded to know as she struggled out of her faint.

“Aye, so you will keep your eyes shut and stay as you are until I can clean the blood off myself and you,” he said.

“We’ll take her, Lord Brogan, and put her where she belongs,” one of the warriors said as he approached with a strong gait.

Brogan didn’t know if Annis latched onto his arm without realizing it or on purpose. Either way, she hadn’t hesitated to rely on him to help her. Not that she needed to. He would let no one harm her, not ever.

“She is where she belongs—with me,” Brogan said, his voice a threatening command since the two warriors took a step back and Annis shivered in his arms. “Go and be done with your duties. I have no use of you.” Both men hesitated. “Did you not hear my command?”

One of the men dared to speak. “She hit you, Lord Brogan. Your father will want her punished.”

“That punishment is mine to inflict, not my father’s,” Brogan warned. “Now begone with you or I will inflict punishment on you both for not obeying me.”

The two men almost stumbled over each other as they rushed to their horses.

“What are you doing here?” Annis demanded when she heard the horses gallop away. “And hurry and rid yourself and me of the blood so I may open my eyes. I can feel your silent laugh. What do you find so humorous?”

“I save you from suffering my father’s dungeon and what do you do? You reprimand me.”

“And well I should,” Annis scolded and, keeping her eyes closed tight, she struggled to sit up. “Why didn’t you warn me about your father’s warriors?”

Brogan eased her up, keeping his arm around her after recalling how lightheaded she got after a faint. “I thought you were wise enough not to go on this senseless quest.”

“You took this senseless quest,” she countered, reaching out for his arm when grogginess hit her.

Brogan’s arm went quickly around her, her slim waist fitting easily in the crook of his arm. “I was the one who proved it senseless. Now sit still and rest a moment.”

Annis wouldn’t admit it, not to him, but she was glad he was there. She felt safe with Brogan, though how she felt safe with one of the cursed lords was a complete puzzle to her.

“Were you following me?” Annis demanded and didn’t give him a chance to answer. “Is your blood on my cloak?” Her hands went to the ties at her neck, ready to shed the stained garment. “We need water to be rid of it. You didn’t answer me, were you following me? What are you doing?” she asked, feeling herself suddenly being lifted as Brogan stood and began walking.



“There is a small stream nearby where I can clean us both off.”

“You didn’t answer me,” she said.

“You bombard me with questions that can wait.”

“Nay, they cannot.” She gasped. “The blood! Is it on my face? Tell me if it is on my face.”

“Do you know how easy it is to follow you?” he asked with a laugh.

“I am not easy to follow. I avoided Chieftain Emory’s warriors who came looking for me,” she said proudly.

“They do not know you like I do,” Brogan boasted.

“You do not know me at all,” she argued.

He laughed again. “I challenge you on that. I found you and that’s proof enough.”

Annis gasped again. “The blood—it’s on my face that’s why you chatter on.”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” he asked with another laugh.

Annis shut her eyes tight. “Please. Please get it off me.”

Brogan worried she’d faint again, her face turning pale. “It’s not much at all. I’m stained with the most blood. We are almost at the stream. I will clean you off first.”

“Thank you,” she said in a whisper and rested her head on his shoulder without giving thought to how intimate it might seem.

Brogan quickened his pace and placed Annis under a pine tree, resting her back against the thick tree trunk. “Stay here while I get the water.”

Annis grabbed his arm, fright taking hold of her with her eyes closed and not being able to see. “You’ll come back to me, Brogan?”

“Always, *mo ghràdh*,” he said and kissed her cheek.

Why did her heart and stomach have to falter? So what if he called her my love. He probably said the same to countless women.

He was barely gone when he returned and when his hand slipped beneath her to gently grip her chin, her heart fluttered again. He scrubbed her cheek with a firm hand but used a lighter hand when he ran the cloth over the rest of her face. She almost sighed with relief at his thorough ministrations.

“Once I clean you off, I’ll return to the stream to see to myself. I’ll let you know as soon as my back is to you so you may open your eyes,” he said, making certain to get every last drop of blood off her and realizing that nothing, not blood or grime could mar Annis’s beauty—or her face or her luscious body. And his loins reacted to the thought.

“I am grateful for your help, Brogan, I mean Lord Brogan,” she said, forgetting to address him properly.

“I prefer you call me Brogan. I love the way it sounds on your lips.”

Annis scrunched her nose. “Do you attempt to seduce every woman you meet?”

Brogan leaned down and whispered in her ear, “When I seduce you, you will well know it.”

Annis shivered not only from the whisper of his warm breath along her ear, but his words. *When I seduce you*, left no doubt to his intentions.

“You can open your eyes,” Brogan said.

She hadn’t realized he had left her side, his words had so mesmerized her and that annoyed her. She had to stay focused on her task. She couldn’t fail her sister.

She opened her eyes to see Brogan bent over the stream bringing handfuls of water to his face. She looked away, worried she might catch sight of some blood and gave her garments a quick look. She was a strong, determined woman, so why was she weak when it came to the sight of blood? She wished she knew.

“Are you all right, Annis?”

She looked up to see Brogan standing in front of her. His lip was split but not bleeding and a good-sized wet spot was near one shoulder. He’d done a thorough job of ridding himself of the blood. What caught her eye even more, though, were his features. That he was handsome wasn’t new to her, that she realized just how fine his features were, was new to her. Even the wound to his lip could not distract from a face that surely melted women’s hearts and robbed them of any common sense.

Something she intended not to let happen to her.

“Annis?” he said, squatting down in front of her.

“I am good,” she said quickly, realizing her tongue had, for a moment, lost the ability to speak, and to her great annoyance her heart fluttered again.

“My horse waits for us,” Brogan said with a nod toward a chestnut-colored mare drinking from the stream. “I will see you home safely.”

“I am not going home,” Annis said, sending Brogan to his feet as she scrambled to stand.

Brogan rubbed the back of his neck. The woman could frustrate. “I will not leave you out here in the forest alone on a senseless, foolhardy quest that is doomed to fail.”

“You may have failed—I don’t intend to.”

“You are as impossibly stubborn as the fiery red curls in your hair that refuses to be tamed,” he said, his fingers raking his hair in annoyance and to keep his hand from reaching out and running his fingers through her wild curls and yanking her against him to kiss her—something he’d been aching to do since first kissing her.

“That is why my curls fit me perfectly—they are as untamed as I am,” she said with a sharp lift of her chin.

“Untamed? I don’t think a husband will want to hear that.”

“I have no worries of that since I will never marry.”

“Never say, never, Annis, or fate might decide for you,” he warned.

She went to argue but held her tongue. She was not about to tempt fate.

“Be on your way, Brogan, and leave me be,” Annis ordered.

He laughed. “I am going to leave, and you will be coming with me.”

She released her frustration with a huge sigh. “Nothing will stop me from my quest. Take me home and I will take my leave once you’re gone. I will let no one stop me in seeing this done.” She thought to tell him what Nolan had told her, that the witch waits for her, but she was fairly certain he would dismiss it as a lie. After all, why would the witch want to see her and not one of the cursed lords?

“It’s a pointless quest,” Brogan said. “There is no witch. There is no way to break the curse. We are doomed to suffer.”

Tears rimmed Annis’s eyes. “I will not lose my sister to this dreadful curse that is no fault of hers.”

Instinct had Brogan reaching out to comfort her, but she backed away from him.

“I don’t need your help. I can see to this on my own.” She turned to walk away.

“I cannot let you do that, Annis.”

She turned around. “And I cannot let you stop me.”

“Then I have no choice but to join you.”

His remark left her speechless. Though, it could have been that she was actually relieved he would tag along. She couldn’t discount that his father might send more warriors to see about his son and her as well. If so, she could wind up in a dungeon with no way of helping her sister.

“I will not have you impede my quest,” she cautioned.

“That I have no desire to do. I would prefer to see this over and done as hastily as possible,” he assured her.

She invited with a smile and more relief than she expected. “Then by all means join me.”

Her smile always brought a smile of his own. There was something enticing about it, something that couldn't be resisted, something that beckoned. He mumbled an oath beneath his breath. What was it about this woman that aroused him so easily?

“Did you say something, Brogan?” Annis asked.

“I would be pleased to join you and see this done,” he said, keeping a smile on his face.

“You mean see me fail,” she corrected, her own smile remaining.

“Aye, *mo ghràdh*, so in the end I will be there to console you,” he said with a wink.

“And what will you do if I am victorious?” she asked.

His smile faded. “I would bless you and be ever grateful to you for the rest of our days.”

*Our days.* What did he mean by our days? Once this was done, their paths would cross no more. He would be free to wed a noble woman and with the curse gone, there would be many women who would seek a marriage to him. The thought annoyed her, and it troubled her that it did annoy her.

“We should go,” he said, “the mist thickens.”

“Where the paths cross, that's where I must go,” she hurried to say.

“And take the one less traveled,” he said, and her face could not hide her surprise. “Rannick, Odran, and I were told the same and we followed the path eagerly, hoping, praying, we'd find—salvation.” He shook his head. “It led nowhere. It took us in circles, always coming out in the same place—where the paths cross.”

Annis didn't try to hide her disappointment. “Was there a heavy mist when you traveled the path?”

“Heavy enough to force us to keep a slow pace.”

“A heavy silence?” she asked, recalling what Nolan had told her.

“At times,” he confirmed.

She recalled another part of what Nolan had said. “Did you see any ravens?”

Brogan shook his head. “Not a one.”

*Ravens.* Annis would need to keep an eye out for ravens... the witch’s minions. After all, the witch was expecting her.

“Don’t worry, my mare, Belle, will get us through the mist. She has traveled the path so often that she is familiar with it.”

“Perhaps we should walk it this time,” Annis suggested, recalling how Nolan was on foot when he came across the witch.

Brogan glanced at the overcast sky and calculated in his head. “Walking the path should still have us finish before dusk. Then we can head back to Clan Loudon tomorrow.”

“How many times have you traveled this path?” she asked.

Brogan wondered if she was trying to trick him with the question. If he told her, it had been twelve or more times, she probably wouldn’t believe him. If he told her only a few times, she would tell him it wasn’t enough. However, if he told her a reasonable number it might convince her how useless it was to pursue her quest.

“Five times I tried,” he said proudly.

“Good, then I shall try six times before I will even consider defeat.” She turned and after a quick glance to her surroundings, spotted where she had fled the warriors and headed that way.

Belle nudged Brogan’s shoulder. “I know, she’s a stubborn one, but there’s something about her I can’t seem to resist.”

Belle kept by his side as he followed after Annis.

Once they reached where the paths crossed and started down the one that looked barely traveled, the mist began to thicken.

Brogan grabbed Belle's reins. "Give me your hand, Annis, I'll not lose you in the mist."

Annis did not argue, the thickening mist a concern. She took his outstretched hand and it closed around hers.

"Do not let go," he ordered.

She wondered how she could, he clutched it so tightly. Though, she wouldn't admit it, having him there beside her, his strong hand wrapped around hers, was more comforting than she would have thought. Not that she couldn't complete the quest alone, but his presence did offer more safety than if she were on her own.

The growing mist was making it more difficult to see where they stepped and forced them to slow their pace. Brogan made sure to keep Annis tucked close to him, their arms touching. It was one thing when he was here with Rannick and Odran, each of them able to protect themselves if lost. Not so Annis. He would be beside himself if he were to lose her in the mist.

Annis listened for the silence that Nolan had warned her had appeared just before the witch showed herself, but none came. She continued to hear the melody of the forest clearly. She told herself not to get discouraged, that she had only begun her quest. She need not hurry, but she did have to hurry for Bliss's sake.

*Annis.*

"Aye, Brogan, what is it?" she asked.

"I didn't say anything."

"You called my name," she said.

"Nay, I have not said a word."

A chill ran through her. "I have exceptional hearing. I heard my name called."

"Was it my voice that called out to you?" he asked.

She thought about it a moment. "I cannot say for sure. You are the only one here with me, so I assumed..." She squeezed

his hand. “You did not hear anything?”

“No voice only the usual sounds of the forest,” Brogan said.

“Could you have heard it in your head?” he asked.

“I suppose,” Annis said.

“The mist can do odd things to people, besides disorienting. Shall we be still and see if it can be heard again?”

That he did not dismiss her claim, but paid heed to it, touched her heart and made her appreciate his presence even more. “Aye, we should try that,” she agreed.

Brogan stopped and positioned her protectively between him and the horse. The mist gathered around them, growing thicker at their ankles and rushing up along their legs. If anything, this could frighten Annis enough to deter her from continuing on her quest. At least, he hoped it would.

Annis listened but found it hard to concentrate with the mist appearing to devour them, it almost reaching to their knees.

“I don’t hear anything. We should move on,” Annis said and went to hurry off, the mist suddenly unnerving her.

Brogan yanked her back against him. “You stay by my side. The mist can swallow you whole fast and it will not be easy to find you.”

“Aye,” she said softly, seeing the worry in his soft blue eyes.

They traveled in silence, Brogan listening cautiously for footfalls, worried someone might be nearby, though all avoided this area too frightened to travel this way. He was relieved when the mist began to lift, and they found themselves at the spot they had started—where the paths crossed.

Annis silently berated herself for allowing herself to be frightened and by what? Mist? She could not let the mist make her fearful or she would fail to help Bliss. She had to stay strong.



“We will return tomorrow,” she said.

Brogan’s head snapped to the side to look at her, his eyes wide with surprise. “You want to try again?”

“Five more times,” she said and released his hand to walk ahead of him. “We should spend the night at the small village that belongs to your clan. I am sure Iver and Una would welcome us.” She wasn’t so sure about Una, but it was better than spending the night in the woods.

She worried what could happen with just the two of them alone together, especially since she’d been itching to kiss Brogan since she’d seen him. Not that she dared admit it to herself before now. And what was she thinking anyway? He had wounded his lip and could bleed again, and on her.

Annis stopped and swayed, growing lightheaded at the thought.

Brogan’s arm rushed around her. “What’s wrong?”

“Blood,” she moaned.

“Where?” he asked, looking over her cloak, worried he had missed a spot.

“I was thinking about it,” she said.

“Do not think about it,” he ordered. “And why were you thinking about it?”

She didn’t mind her thoughts or words. “I worried you would bleed if I kissed you.”

“I can oblige you with that, *mo ghràdh*,” Brogan said, as she took quick steps away from him.

Annis attempted to find a good excuse for the remark she’d let slip. “The mist is disorienting as you said.”

“Or it could be that the memory of our last kiss, you enjoyed so much, lingers in your mind and you hunger for that enjoyment again,” Brogan said, thinking how accurately he described how he felt—hungry to taste her lips once again.

Annis laughed. “Hunger? I don’t believe so. Your kiss was not that memorable.”

Brogan laughed briefly, then grinned. “A lying tongue can come back to haunt you, *leannan*.”

“You truly think highly of your way with women, don’t you,” she accused, frustrated that he caught her in a lie, not that she’d admit it.

“I love putting a smile on a woman’s face, bring her joy, see her satisfied,” he said with a playful wink.

“Women,” she snapped. “Not one woman, but multiple women. What of love and being faithful to one woman?”

His playfulness faded. “How fair would that be when I will live on, and she will die. My heart would break a thousand times over to lose the woman I love. I would want to join her in death and would be deprived of it and we both would be deprived of ever seeing each other again.”

“You would love that strongly?” Annis asked, the thought of being loved that passionately left her thinking about such an enduring love. Was it truly possible?

“There is no other way to love. Once I give my heart to a woman, I belong to her and her alone, and she to me. We become one. How then do I ever live without the other half of me?”

Her heart suffered a stinging pain at the thought of losing someone who loved you that much and who you loved with the same passion.

“You truly believe you cannot die?” Annis asked and the sadness in his soft blue eyes answered for him.

“I know I cannot die. I have suffered wounds that would kill most anyone. I have taken falls that should have broken bones. I bled so much once that I thought for sure it was the end, but I survived. People tried to hang me, and the rope broke.” He turned his head away for a moment. “My father ordered the village destroyed for that. I tried to stop him, explain to him that fear drove them to it. He told me fear of his reprisal would have no others trying it again. He was right, though it only instilled more fear. Some believe it a gift not a curse, but I look to the future when all who I love are gone, never to see them again and my heart aches.”

“I will end the curse,” Annis said, the sudden need to help him overwhelming her.

Brogan smiled. “I will forever be in your debt if you do.”

“Besides saving Bliss, having you in my debt forever is something I cannot resist,” she said with a soft chuckle.

“So, you admit you like me,” he said and bumped his arm against hers.

“Who said anything about like? Where did you hear that?” she argued. “Nothing, not a word was mentioned about like.”

Brogan’s laughter echoed through the trees. “Now I know you like me since you protest so vehemently.”

Annis groaned in frustration. “You are completely and utterly impossible.”

“Another lie, Annis. You mean I’m completely and utterly loveable,” he said, continuing to laugh.

She groaned again since he was right. She did like him, though she didn’t understand why she liked him, and it annoyed her even more that she did like him.



UNA WAS one woman Brogan couldn’t melt with a smile. Her glare and pursed lips made it clear that she was not pleased with his presence. Annis was relieved that Iver felt differently or at least made an effort to appear that he did.

“You are welcome here, Lord Brogan,” Iver said. “We don’t have much, but we will share what we have.”

Brogan cast a lingering glance on his surroundings and his eyes said much, at least to Annis. What he saw disturbed him and his remark that followed proved it so.

“Your generosity is appreciated and must be repaid. Who hunts here?” Brogan asked.

“We are no longer allowed to hunt the land, my lord,” Iver said.

“If you hunt with me, you are,” Brogan said. “Two men would be better than one to hunt with me. More game caught, more meat to eat, since I am famished.”

Iver stared at Brogan bewildered.

“We must hurry since light will be lost soon enough,” Brogan said.

Iver shook himself from his stupor. “Aye. Aye, my lord.”

“I will get several fires going,” Una said, her face brightening with a smile.

“I will help,” Annis offered.



THE NIGHT WENT BETTER than Annis had expected. While the few there were grateful for the meat, they were—understandably—concerned with Brogan’s presence. That was until Brogan began entertaining them with humorous tales. As soon as laughter filled the air, other people wandered over, until by night’s end all the occupants of the village—ten—were gathered around smiling and laughing.

Annis caught the disturbed look on Brogan’s face when he saw an old man retreat to a lean-to after several yawns. She, herself, had noticed the dire conditions of the group, since it certainly could no longer be called a village.

“Annis.”

She turned to Iver, leaning close to her to speak.

“You will share the cottage with my daughter tonight,” Iver offered.

“I appreciate the offer, but I can sleep outside by the fire.” Annis did not want to deprive the man of what little comfort he had.

“You do me a favor, Annis. Una has barely any chance to speak with a woman her own age. It would be good for her to share some time with you.”

Annis smiled. “Then I gladly accept your invitation. Where will you sleep?”

“By the fire where Lord Brogan will bed down,” Iver said and lowered his voice. “I’d like to discuss a few things with him. Winter isn’t far off, and we could use some help with repairs to the few dwellings we have, or I fear we will lose some of the older ones this winter as we did the previous winter.”

“I’m sure something can be arranged,” Annis said, though seeing how the small group had been neglected she worried her words might not prove true.

“I believed that once,” Iver said, shaking his head. “More the fool me.”

Annis didn't blame Iver for not trusting after what he'd suffered. She would feel the same. She stood, seeing that Iver, his daughter, Brogan, and herself were the only ones who remained. “We need to get an early start tomorrow and travel the path more slowly this time.”

Brogan stretched himself up to his feet. “Slow or fast, there is nothing to find there.”

“Appease me,” Annis said.

Brogan smiled playfully. “Always.”

Annis grumbled and shook her head. His playful way could be disarming, and his smile distracted far too easily. She hurried to follow Una to the cottage and was relieved once inside, until Una spoke.

“Lord Brogan favors you.”

“He speaks to all women that way,” Annis said, dismissing her claim.

“It's not what he says, it's how his smile changes when he turns it on you, as if his whole world fills with delight and his eyes ignite with sparks of desire. It is obvious how much he cares for you.”

“Lord Brogan cares for many women,” Annis said.

Una pointed to one of the two narrow beds that sat against opposite walls. “You can sleep there. I keep the bedding fresh. I cannot abide dirty bedding. I understand why you deny that you feel the same toward Lord Brogan. It is senseless to care for one of the cursed lords.”

Annis went to correct her and make it clear she felt nothing for Brogan, but something stopped her. There was something she favored about Brogan. That she couldn't understand it annoyed her, but how did she deny the obvious, especially to herself.

“You are lucky. You are beautiful and free to find a good man. I dream—which is all I can do—of finding a good man

who would love me,” Una said as she removed her tunic and leaving her shift on, slipped into bed after removing her boots.

Annis followed, though removed only her cloak and boots before settling beneath a soft wool blanket. “You will find love, Una.”

“I wish I felt as confident as you sound.”

“The curse will be broken, and all will change,” Annis assured her while reassuring herself. It had to or she chanced losing her sister, a thought that struck fear and heartbreak in her.

“I must tell you something, Annis, but you must promise me you won’t tell my da.”

“You have my word, Una.”

“I have walked the less traveled path many times.”

Annis popped up in bed. “You have?”

“Aye, I have, and I am sorry to tell you in all that time I have never come across the witch. I have not told my da since he would worry that Lord Balloch’s warriors would catch me and drag me away to the dungeon. I have learned the way of the warriors. They do not go near the path and rarely linger in the area, too afraid to remain near it, especially when the mist grows thick.”

“Why do you go there?” Annis asked.

“Curiosity, anger, frustration,” Una shook her head. “I do not know. One day I went there and simply started following the less-traveled path. I came upon a lovely stream and sat and began to dream of a good future. I left feeling better—in a way hopeful—than I had in quite some time. On subsequent visits I noticed various healing plants grew in abundance in the area as well as some plants I am not familiar with. While others fear the area, I take comfort in it.”

“You are a healer?” Annis asked.

“I am, thanks to my mum. She taught me. She was fearful I would be left on my own here one day with no healer to help me if necessary.”

“How wise and loving of her. Did she travel the misty path?”

“Nay. She warned me to stay away from it, especially after one of our own was found near it and Lord Balloch’s warriors took the old man away to the dungeon.”

“Lord Balloch sounds nothing like his son,” Annis said.

“To me, he is a cruel man. I should not have said that.” Una chastised herself. “My da warns me that Lord Balloch has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“There is no one here but you and me and I will say nothing,” Annis said.

“I would like to call you friend, Annis, even though when you finish here, we will probably never see each other again.”

“I am pleased to call you friend, Una, and we will see each other often when I am done here, and the curse is broken,” Annis said, her confidence as strong as ever.

“I pray you succeed, Annis. I truly do,” Una said, tears filling her eyes.



ANNIS WAS surprised when she woke the next morning to find herself alone, Una gone. She was even more surprised when she stepped outside to see everyone gathered around a fire, talking with Brogan, some looking hopeful and some skeptical.

She stepped closer, though kept herself out of Brogan’s view, wanting to hear what he was saying.

“I will see the list of repairs you request are done before winter.”

“That is generous of you, Lord Brogan, but will your father agree?” Iver asked.

“I will see that he does,” Brogan said.

“His word is law in the clan,” Iver reminded.



“I will see it done. You have my word,” Brogan promised.

But could he keep that promise or would his father deny him, Annis wondered, and she could see from the look on the surrounding faces that they thought the same.

“Annis,” Una called out with a smile. “Come and enjoy a hot brew and bread.”

“A hot brew will be most welcome on this chilly day, but we cannot tarry. Brogan and I must be off shortly.”

“You will return here when you finish?” Una asked hopefully.

“If you don’t mind our staying here until we finish,” Annis said, taking the tankard the young woman held out to her.

“Truth be told, I enjoy the company,” Una said honestly and with a generous smile.

“We’ll hunt again when I return,” Brogan said. “And if you can gather at least some of what we need to build a shed to hold the meat, we will get started on that as well.

“Build?” Annis asked eagerly.

“That’s right,” Brogan said with a grin. “I forgot you are skilled at building things.”

“I am and I can show you how to build a sturdy food shed,” she said proudly. “But the ground will have to be cleared and made level first.”

It was an hour before Annis and Brogan took their leave, Annis talking with Iver and two other men. They discussed where it was best for the shed to be built, the material they would need, and what had to be done first. She left the men with precise instructions, and Brogan offered Belle’s help if they should need it. Otherwise, his horse would remain where she was enjoying the wild onions in the open area near the few dwellings.

“It is good you help them. They are in need of it, but will your father allow the repairs to be made?” Annis asked as they walked toward the hills.

“I will make sure he does,” Brogan said. “Did you sleep well? I thought you might miss me so much you couldn’t sleep.”

Annis grinned. “I had the most wonderful sleep.”

“So, you dreamed of me then.” He grinned and winced.

“You are smiling far too much. Your wound will bleed again if you are not careful.”

“I do not want to be the cause of you fainting again,” he said, “though it is your fault I smile so much.”

“Is this where you tell me that you cannot help but smile when you look at me because I am so beautiful?”

His grin remained. “Nay, it is usually the unexpected things that come out of your mouth that has me smiling, though I will admit—and not reluctantly—you are beautiful.”

“How odd? I feel the same about you.”

“You think I am beautiful,” he said with glee.

“Nay, it’s the things that come out of your mouth. Though I suppose you do have fine features.”

“You say that with reluctance,” he chided teasingly.

“Because, no doubt, you’ve heard it often enough.”

“But I never cared until now when I heard you say it.”

She turned her head away after catching the passion that suddenly sparked in his blue eyes and made him even more appealing, if that was possible.

“Do not lie and tell me you do not feel the sparks between us, Annis,” he said, aching to take her hand but thinking now was not the time, since he wanted more than to just hold her hand.

Try as she might, Annis couldn’t avoid his eyes when she turned to look at him. Sparks lingered there, and she couldn’t deny they ignited something in her.

As usual words shot from her mouth without thought. “You have experience with that, I do not.”

“You do not need experience to understand how you feel when you are with me, when I hold your hand, or when I kiss you. You only need to feel.”

She stepped to the side to put distance between them as they walked. “You will not kiss me. You will hurt your wound.”

“You want me to kiss you though, don’t you?” he asked and not playfully. “And do not bother to lie. I can tell when you lie. You get a cute little wrinkle in your nose when you lie.”

Annis covered her nose with her hand and Brogan laughed.

“You truly are incorrigible,” she said.

“You pick on me to avoid the question. Do you want me to kiss you again?”

She thought of a suitable response. “Not at this moment.”

“You let me know the moment, *leannan*, and I shall see it done.”

As soon as they started on the path, Annis realized she would not meet the witch today. There was barely any mist, a patch here and there, but no thick mist at all. It did give her a chance to survey the area. It was lush with growth; majestic trees, plentiful plants, and colorful flowers grew in abundance. The squirrels were even chunky, though that could be a sign of a cold winter to come.

They came upon the stream Una had mentioned. It was narrow and ran clear and was no more than ankle deep from what she could see of it. She squatted down and scooped up a handful of water to drink, the taste cold and refreshing.

Brogan went down beside her and did the same, drinking several handfuls.

“We will not find her today,” Annis said. “There is no mist. She travels in the mist. It protects hers.” Her words surprised her, not sure where they had come from or why she had even thought that.

“Rannick, Odran, and I thought the same, but even when the mist came, she was nowhere to be seen,” Brogan said with disappointment.

Annis lowered her bottom to sit on the bank of the stream. “It would stand to reason that if the witch knows how to break the curse, then she could be the one who empowered Lady Aila to cast it.”

“There is that theory,” Brogan agreed, sitting as well.

“Lady Aila must have been desperate to seek the help of a witch.”

“I recall my father saying that the king gave the order and there was no disobeying the king. The order was to be carried out or one would suffer the same fate of the Clan MacWilliam.”

“I wonder why the curse affected you and the other two lords more personally than it did each of your fathers?”

“Our fathers suffered along with our clans. Though, you are right. Rannick, Odran, and I suffered more and wondered the same as you. The only reason we could fathom was that we are the heirs to our clans and our clans’ futures depend on us.”

“Just like the future of the Clan MacWilliam, the bloodline, depended on the two-day-old lass,” Annis said, trying to make sense of an act that had taken place twenty years ago and continued to affect so many today.

“With nothing to find today, we should return and help Iver and the others who prepare for winter. The fat squirrels indicate a harsh one.”

Annis scrambled to her feet. “I will see that the stone shed is constructed well, and you can make sure there is enough meat to fill it.”

Brogan sprang to his feet and startled Annis when he took her in his arms. “How about a gentle kiss, just a light one? If you’d like?”

Not only startled to be in his arms, but startled that she was tempted, much too tempted, and even more startled by her

response. “A light kiss.”

Brogan hugged her waist with his hands, easing her closer to him and nodded as he lowered his mouth and whispered, “A faint one.”

A tingle shot through her, shivering her when his lips barely skimmed hers. It felt like a feather being drawn across them, first one way, then the other. Hungry for more, so much more, she turned her head away, frightened at what she might do.

Brogan placed a kiss on her temple and whispered, “I love kissing you.”

And there went the tingle again, shooting through her with such passion that it almost buckled her knees. She hadn't realized that she gripped Brogan's arms until she saw for herself when she turned her head to look at him.

“I've got you, *mo ghràdh*, and I am not letting you go,” he said and brushed his lips over hers one more time. He waited a moment, needing time himself to gather his senses about him and give him time to get his arousal under control, before stepping away from her and taking her hand.

They walked off together, not saying another word to each other.

They entered the village to shouts and hurried to find out what caused them. Shock brought them to a sudden halt seeing one of four warriors delivering several hard blows to Iver.

Brogan didn't hesitate, he took off. The warrior did not see the fierce blow coming. Brogan sent him sailing into the air and landing on his back, knocked out cold.

“Another one of you,” Brogan yelled, “touch anyone here—ANYONE—and I will see you suffer harshly for it.”

“They are not allowed to hunt,” one warrior said.

Brogan turned to Iver.

“I told him you ordered us to hunt and also hunted along with us, but none believe me,” Iver said, his daughter handing him a cloth to wipe the blood from his mouth.

“Keep your back to Annis, until the bleeding stops. She has a weak stomach when it comes to blood,” Brogan said and turned back to the warriors, his angry eyes falling on a familiar face, a warrior loyal to his father. “This man spoke the truth, Rudd. Harm him, or any in this village, and my wrath will know no bounds. And you can tell my father I said that.”

“You can tell him yourself, Lord Brogan. Your father orders you home and the woman who broke his edict concerning the path brought to the keep and placed in the dungeon.”

**A**nnis avoided glancing at Iver when she approached Brogan and kept her eyes off the man on the ground. She wasn't taking any chances with blood, and she was taking no chance of being sent to the dungeon. That was why she headed for Brogan. She was confident he would not let that happen to her.

She came to a stop beside him, and he immediately reached for her hand and hooked his around it, keeping their joined hands tucked at his side.

"Tell my father that I refused to surrender the woman to you and that I have no intentions of returning home now," Brogan said, his voice turning even more commanding as he finished. "And, Rudd, if you are contemplating using force against me, know that I will not fight to harm—I will fight to kill."

"Your father will not be happy to hear this," Rudd said.

Brogan shook his head and laughed. "My father is never happy with me."

"I have no desire to fight you, my lord, and I believe the men with me feel the same," Rudd said, and the men behind him nodded as did the man on the ground who had come to. "I will deliver your message. Though, I warn you that you will undoubtedly hear from your father."

"Aye, you are right about that," Brogan said. "A drink before you go?"

The men looked ready to dismount and their disappointment was evident when Rudd responded. “Your father will want to hear the bad news right away.”

“I am sure I will see you again, Rudd,” Brogan said, acknowledging that he knew Rudd would return.

Once the man on the ground mounted, the small troop took their leave.

“They will return with more men,” Iver said.

Brogan turned and before responding to the man, he looked to Annis. “No blood. You are safe.”

Annis smiled and squeezed his hand in thanks. She thought he would let go and when he didn’t, she let her hand linger in his, feeling a comfort she wasn’t ready to let go of herself.

“Aye, they will, but it will be my father who returns next with them,” Brogan said and hurried to ease the rash of concerns that spread over the faces of everyone there. “I need him here so I can make sure you get what you need for the winter.”

“He will refuse us. He always does,” the old man who had slept in the lean-to said, rubbing at his white beard.

“It is Lord Brogan requesting help this time, Seward,” Iver said, hopeful.

“Iver is right. It could be different this time,” a woman said, her long gray hair hanging loose from its braid and wearing a worn tunic that at one time must have fit her but now hung too big on her thin frame.

“I hope so, Maddie, I truly do,” Seward said, not sounding hopeful.

“Worry not about it,” Brogan said. “I gave you my word and I will keep it. Now there’s hunting to be done and a shed to build.” As the few people dispersed, he turned to Annis. “I would say we could try again to find the witch, but the hills seem clear of mist today and you have only four times left to travel the path.”



That remark had Annis slipping her hand out of his. “You should have listened better. I said I would try six times before I would consider stopping, not that I would stop completely. Though, I am not opposed to searching at night, Nolan mentioned a full moon.”

“Nolan took his leave from us early,” Iver said. “But he was still well into his cups, so there is no telling if he stopped to rest and woke at night. But there was no full moon that night.”

Annis would question Nolan’s tale from all she’d been hearing if she didn’t have proof. She had gotten a message from the witch. A message Nolan had kept hidden from everyone.

“I would not advise traveling the path in the evening. Between the dark and the mist, you would not be able to see a thing,” Iver cautioned.

“The mist is heavy at night?” Annis asked.

“At the foot of the hills it is. No one goes near it then,” Iver confirmed.

“Nay,” Brogan said when Annis turned to him. “We will not go at night when it will do no good. You won’t be able to see anything and that can prove dangerous.”

Annis did not argue. She would revisit it if necessary. “As you say, Lord Brogan.”

Whenever she addressed him formally, he knew she had something brewing in that mind of hers and he had to be careful—though cautious was more like it.

“I am going to hunt, and you are going to stay here and show how a sturdy food shed is built,” Brogan said.

“Aye, I am,” Annis said with joy, rubbing her hands together, eager to start. She needed a distraction and constructing something, anything, always helped empty her mind and allowed for new thought and new ideas, to enter.

Brogan left with two men to hunt, and she had four men, including Iver, to help with the building. While the men

weren't old, they also weren't young, and the years of living poorly had taken its toll on them. They did not have the strength they once had, which meant the building would go much slower than she hoped it would. It also meant that if Brogan did not get help with constructing sturdy dwellings before the winter hit, the small group would suffer and some would die.

Clearing the area of land went smoothly enough. Annis was surprised there were no complaints from the men when she instructed them or offered advice when placing the stone. They even watched with interest when she demonstrated how to shape some of the stones to fit more tightly together.

Una joined in to help. Her young age and good weight made carrying the stones easier for her than the older men, and she did so with a smile. Annis understood that for the first time in years, Una saw promise for a future and she was eager to participate in it.

Annis gave thought to something similar. She imagined rebuilding the small village, designing it the way she believed it would work best. And with no one but her there with the knowledge to do such a thing, she could take charge of it all. It was as if she was watching her dream come true. Elysia could come live here with Saber, and hopefully there would be a way for Bliss to join them. Here they could have a future.

“You dream awake.”

Annis jumped, not having heard Brogan come up beside her.

“Aye, dreams,” she said, thinking how she could possibly make her dreams come to pass. “You are done hunting already?”

“It has been hours, Annis, and I think your crew grows tired and hungry,” Brogan said with a nod toward the men still working, though having slowed down.

The fatigue on their faces had Annis hurrying toward them. “Enough for the day. Rest while we wait for the meat to cook.”

The men nodded eagerly and walked off, smiling and talking.

She had not realized Una had left, seeing her at the cooking spits helping the other women roast the meat.

“Sit with me,” Brogan said, stretching his hand out to her, and she took hold of it. It pleased him that she hadn’t hesitated, she simply grasped hold of his offered hand as if it was the most natural thing to do. That she was accustomed to it. That she felt comfortable doing so.

He walked with her to sit by one of the fires that sat alone and neglected, the women busy tending the fires that cooked the meats and most of the men gathered around them to talk after a day of work.

He stoked the fire after they sat, its warmth reaching out to wrap around them.

“What was in your thoughts?” he asked.

“A dream I have long had,” she admitted, the idea still nagging at her.

“Tell me about it,” he urged.

He seemed genuinely interested, but once he heard—she spoke her thought. “You will think me foolish.”

“I cannot say that I do not think you foolish at times, but dreams are different—dreams are meant to be enjoyed foolish or not. Tell me.”

She had never thought of dreams that way, but it made sense and she had longed to talk about her dream. And for some unknown reason she trusted Brogan.

“I always wanted to build a cottage where my sisters and I could live comfortably,” she said. “I feel this is a good place for it. I see the promise of a good life here with some work and dedication. And the people here deserve a better place to live. It is also tucked away, private and peaceful.”

“I thought the same myself,” Brogan said, casting an eye around the place.

“You did?” she asked, her brow rising in surprise.

“People avoid this place because of the witch and so it remains secluded. No one would bother me here. I could live peacefully for a change.”

His remark perplexed her. “But your clan’s keep is your home.”

Brogan shook his head. “It never felt like home to me. The Great Hall is constantly filled with noise and chatter, people coming and going. This peacefulness feels like home to me. A place where no one questions me, but simply lets me be, a place—like you—I could call home.”

“Then why chase after so many women? Or travel as you do?”

“Home is not home to me and as for the women...” He smiled and winked. “They chase after me, *leannan*.”

“There you go, thinking highly of yourself again,” she teased.

“The truth cannot be denied,” he said and held back a laugh.

Annis thought about that for a moment. “It is sad to say, but the truth has us both trapped. Even when I free Bliss, she still will be wed to the cursed lord and unable to leave him. Elysia hopefully took mine and Bliss’s advice and wed Saber, providing her with a home. And you will return home, heir to the Clan MacRae. When all is done, I will be the one left with no home to return to.”

“I will not let that happen. You have my word,” Brogan snapped fiercely.

“Be careful what you promise, I may hold you to it,” she warned with a gentle smile. Silence lingered between them for a few moments before Annis spoke again. “Will you take me to see Bliss when the time comes?”

“I will,” Brogan said, not thinking twice on it and understanding what she asked. Annis might plan on being victorious in her quest, but if by chance she failed, she wanted

to make certain she got to see her sister before... he shook the dreadful thought from his head. He feared for his friend. Rannick would never survive losing a fourth wife.



ANNIS WOKE FROM A SOUND SLEEP, almost as if someone had shaken her awake. The evening had gone well. Talk and laughter was shared along with the meal and when she and Una retired for the night, they had spent some time talking. She had enjoyed it as much as Una had. It reminded her of the nights she and her sisters would lie awake talking about everything and anything.

She missed her two sisters terribly. She prayed Elysia had listened to her urging and wed Saber. If not... worry knotted her stomach. She needed to find out about Elysia. If she was not safe, she would bring her here where she could keep watch over her and make sure no harm came to her.

As for Bliss, she worried every day that she would be too late to save her, that the curse would strike her dead. She couldn't bear the thought of losing Bliss and the constant thought of the possibility didn't allow her to sleep. She slipped quietly out of bed, so as not to disturb Una, and into her boots, then grabbed her cloak before heading out the door.

It was dark with clouds holding what partial moon there was hostage. The air bordered on cold, warning of a possible early winter. They would need to work fast to make sure all was made ready for the cold months ahead.

A single fire burned, the flames waning, which meant she had slept for a while. Brogan and Iver slept on either side of the fire, and guilt poked at her for continuing to occupy Iver's bed. It did his aging bones no good to sleep on the cold, hard ground. Brogan was wrapped in a blanket and curled tight by the fire, neither the hard ground nor the cold disturbing him.

Annis turned toward the hills and could barely see them, the darkness affording them privacy and concealing the secret of the witch. She shut her eyes praying she would find the

witch and learn from her what she so desperately needed to save Bliss.

“Annis.”

The soft whisper startled her, but the strong arms that circled her along with the cloak that wrapped around her comforted.

“You cannot sleep?” Brogan asked, drawing her back to close his cloak snug around them both and was glad she sunk willingly against him.

“I slept for a bit, then woke. My mind was far too busy to return to sleep,” she said, amazed by how much she enjoyed being cocooned by his arms and cloak.

She had given brief thought to marrying someday, though more thought to not marrying. She feared a husband would expect wifely things from her and she was not good at wifely things. But she had to admit she did enjoy the light taste of intimacy she had experienced with Brogan.

“You worry for Bliss,” he said, his arms staying snug around her.

“I do,” she admitted. “The curse has claimed Lord Rannick’s three wives. What will stop it from claiming a fourth?”

“You,” he whispered.

“If I am not too late.”

“Do not think that way. Think only on your quest,” Brogan urged.

She turned in his arms, craning her neck back to look at him, his face a mere shadow in the night, though she did catch a spark of his soft blue eyes. “Why encourage me now when you have done nothing but discourage me from the start?”

“You have a will about you, a tenaciousness I have not seen in any other woman. You refuse to surrender to naysayers. You forge ahead determined and with more courage than I see in many men. You are a force to be reckoned with

and if by chance the witch does exist, I believe she will meet her match in you.”

That he believed so strongly in her startled her and also squeezed at her heart. Her response came quick without thought or delay, more instinct—or was it desire?

She kissed him, a strong and eager kiss.

Shock did not stop him from responding. His hand went to the back of her head and his lips returned her eagerness while his tongue slipped through her slightly parted lips. It wasn't only an eager kiss, it was a hungry one, both of them in need of it.

Breathless when it ended, she rested her head on his chest, passion poking at her most intimate places. She was not ignorant of what went on between husbands and wives, Bliss having explained what she had learned from the married and unmarried women she treated. Never, though, did Annis think that a kiss could be so enjoyable and make her body ache with such powerful sensations.

“It is different than I imagined,” she said. “No wonder you kiss so many women.”

Brogan lifted her chin for her to look at him. “I never truly enjoyed a kiss until I kissed you. And nay, I have never spoken those words to any woman.”

“What makes me different?” she asked, hiding her surprise that he answered the question in her mind without her saying a word.

“I care for you, feel for you like I have never felt for another.”

“It surprises you,” she said, hearing it in his voice.

“Very much so. It caught me off guard. I didn't see it coming until you were right there in front of me. It was like a punch to the gut.”

To her, it was slow, pulling her in little by little until... she shook her head. “I have not the time for this. I need my thoughts on saving my sister.”

“This need between us is not going away,” Brogan cautioned.

“You may be right about that, but at the moment, my sister comes first. She stepped out of his arms, the emptiness that met her so overwhelming she almost rushed back into them. Fear of losing her sister stopped her. “You will kiss me no more,” she ordered.

“You kissed me,” he reminded and chuckled when Annis cringed. “And when you say no more, do you mean forever?”

“I never said forever,” she snapped.

“Then how long is no more since you obviously want to kiss me and enjoy kissing me,” he said and raised his hands when she looked ready to argue. “And I enjoy kissing you and would miss kissing you, terribly.”

Annis sighed. “I suppose I should have wed you and been done with it and saved my sister from sacrificing herself.”

“Neither of us wanted to wed,” he reminded and reached out, hooking her around her waist with one arm. “Of course, if we wed now, we could kiss as much as we want, and engage in other delightful husband and wife duties.”

“And that is a good reason for us to wed, because you want to poke me?” she asked bluntly.

“It’s a good start,” he said with a wink.

“You truly are impossible,” she said, shaking her head.

“Let’s discuss it,” he said, and giving her no chance to object escorted her to the fire.

Iver was sitting up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “I thought I heard voices. Is everything alright?”

“It is,” Brogan confirmed. “Annis and I need to talk. Go and seek your bed for the rest of the night.”

Iver looked to Annis with a raised brow.

“I mean Annis no harm, Iver.” Brogan patted his lip that was healing nicely. “And I know from experience she can well take care of herself.”



Annis grinned and raised a fisted hand in proof.

Iver laughed. "Then I will leave you both to talk."

Brogan shared his cloak with Annis once he sat beside her and she welcomed the extra warmth.

Annis resumed their conversation. "I do enjoy kissing you, but how do I know I'd enjoy you poking me?"

Brogan cringed. "First of all, we would not poke, we would make love."

"Don't you have to be in love to make love?" she asked.

Brogan scratched his head. "That's a good question and one I realize I truly cannot answer since I have never been in love. I have cared for the women I have coupled with, but I had no love for any."

"Couple, poke, make love, it's all the same then. That's rather disappointing," Annis said. "And what if you get stuck with a husband or wife, whatever the case may be, who you don't enjoy coupling with?" She scrunched her nose. "How awful that would be."

"I can guarantee you will enjoy coupling with me," Brogan boasted.

"So you say, but I may think differently," she said. "And what if I disappoint you? After all, I have no experience and you might be impatient with my fumbling attempts."

He laughed. "You can fumble all you want with me, *mo ghràdh*."

Annis jabbed him in the side. "You think it's funny now but may not think it funny later. What then? Would you go seek your pleasure with another?" She jabbed him again. "Because if you did, I would give you more than a bloody lip."

Brogan laughed again. "Want me all to yourself, do you?"

"Would you want me all to yourself?" she asked.

His smile disappeared in an instant. "No other will ever touch you but me. You are mine and mine alone. I would kill any man who puts his hand on you."

Why did that spark a bit of joy in her?

“Then you understand why I feel the same,” she said.

“We agree then. Another good start to a marriage.”

Annis yawned and Brogan settled her close against him, giving her a chance to rest her head on his shoulder if she wanted, and he smiled when she did.

“I am not ready to wed,” she said and yawned again. “Though I will admit that you might—might—not make as bad a husband as I first thought.”

“Another good start,” he said and hoped she’d agree to wed him of her own accord before she found out what he had kept from telling her... she was already his wife.

The sky was overcast when Annis and Brogan left for the hills and the mist hung heavy over the top of them.

“Will your father send men to help prepare the small village for winter?” Annis asked as they walked. “If not, I fear the older ones will not survive, especially Seward.”

“When my father arrives here, I will make sure he understands the urgency,” Brogan said with a strong conviction that left no doubt he would see it done.

Annis did not hold as much hope as Brogan. “Yet he has ignored the small group all these years. Why now would it make any difference to him?”

Brogan grinned. “You underestimate my talent to persuade.”

“I hope you are better at it with your father than you have been with me, or it is doomed to fail.” Annis hid her laugh beneath her breath.

“You are a challenge, *leannan*, but I love a challenge.”

*Love.*

Annis had not given much thought to love. At most, it had seemed an inconvenience to her. Something that was not necessary to her life. She had known herself to be a determined lass since she had been young, though some would call it willful. How did she ever accomplish what she hoped, dreamed to accomplish if she wasn't willful? No one would pay heed to her ideas concerning building. Not so, Brogan. He

actually encouraged her. To have a husband who encouraged her passion to construct, would be something she never thought possible and was possibly the reason marriage never appealed to her. She did not want a husband who discouraged or forbid her propensity for designing and building all forms of structures, large or small.

“Do you wish to find love?” she asked.

“Is it that we wish to find love or is it that we wish to be loved?” Brogan asked.

Annis stopped briefly for a moment. “I never thought of it that way. Do you wish to be loved?”

“It would take an extraordinarily brave woman to love me.”

“That is not what I asked, Brogan. Do you wish to be loved?” she asked again.

Brogan threw her question back at her. “What of you? Do you wish to be loved?”

She chuckled. “Does my question frighten you so much that you evade it?”

“Answer me, *mo ghràdh*, and I will answer you,” he challenged.

“I can do that since I do not fear the question. I have never given much thought to love, probably because I have been well-loved by my sisters. And if I were to wed, I would prefer a man who accepted me for the determined woman I am. But I suddenly find myself wondering if perhaps love would make a marriage more worthwhile. To have a man who gave his heart to me, cherished me, protected me—even though I do not shy away from protecting myself—would be a good foundation for a marriage. It would be like constructing a sturdy building. Without a strong foundation, a building would eventually collapse. Love just might be the firm foundation that is needed for a good marriage.” She smiled and poked him. “Your turn.”

Words failed Brogan for the moment, her words striking a powerful chord in him. “I do want to be loved, but as I said once to you, how fair would that be to my wife, knowing I

would live on, and she would die? It is a lot to ask of someone.”

“It isn’t the question you fear, it is the answer. ‘My heart would break a thousand times over to lose the woman I loved.’ Those were your words to me. But you fail to consider how much that woman would love you and how unfair it would be never to let her love you at all.”

Brogan stared at her. Never had he thought of it that way. He had only thought of his own hurt, never considering the pain of his refusal to love the woman who loved him because he knew one day it would be he who lost her.

Annis shook her head. “Now I understand why marriages are arranged. Love can be far too confusing—yet love could be the very thing that makes marriages well-worthwhile.”

The mist suddenly swirled around them and grew denser.

“You will keep hold of my hand,” Brogan cautioned, reaching out to take her hand.

Annis locked her fingers with his tightly. “Do you believe the witch controls the mist?”

“I do not know, though it is believed that a witch’s magic can be strong.”

“I hope you are right,” Annis said, squinting her eyes to see through the thickening mist. “For if she is strong, then she will not have a problem telling me what I need to know.”

“I am being selfish, Annis, when I say I do hope you are successful.”

“You hope, yet you doubt,” Annis said.

“If I had not already walked this path, my hope would be stronger, but a kernel of it exists due to your,” —he chuckled— “willful nature.”

She stopped abruptly, her free hand gripping his upper arm. “Did you see that?”

His body tensed in alarm and his head swerved around, his eyes searching the mist. “See what?”

“A flash of something dark.” Annis turned her head as anxiously as Brogan, glancing around and struggling to see through the mist.

“It could be an animal if it moved fast,” Brogan said, moving his hand to rest on the hilt of his sword at his waist.

“It was fast,” Annis confirmed. “No more than a flash.”

“The mist blinds and that is dangerous. An animal could be lying in wait,” Brogan said, his eyes continuing to search.

“I have only seen small animals,” Annis said more to comfort herself than believing it the truth.

“Wolves,” Brogan whispered.

Annis wondered if she had not been meant to hear that. “I have heard no wolf howls since I have been here.” She cringed since, of course, at that precise moment a wolf’s howl echoed through the misty woods, long and powerful.

“We need to leave here. Wolves travel in packs,” Brogan cautioned.

The sudden thought in her head slipped past her lips. “Maybe the wolf belongs to the witch, and he announces her arrival. Did you ever hear a wolf howl the various times you were here?”

His answer would only make the situation worse, but he could not lie to her. “Nay, I never heard a wolf howl when I was here.”

She squeezed his arm and excitement filled her eyes and words. “She is letting us know she is here.”

“Or she sends her wolf to eat us,” Brogan warned, worried he could be right. “We keep walking.” He tugged at her hand to pick up the pace.

“We need to slow our pace, not go faster, to let her know we are here to speak with her,” Annis said, though had no choice but to keep up with his quicker pace, since his hand remained clamped tight around hers.

“I am not taking a chance with a wolf nearby,” Brogan said.

*Annis.*

Brogan hurried to prevent her from tumbling against him, she stopped so abruptly.

“Did you hear that?” she asked, her eyes as wide as full moons as she cast a glance about. “My name. She called my name.”

Brogan listened but did not think he would hear anything, and he did not.

“You did not hear it, did you?” Annis asked, seeing the dour look on his face. She looked more closely, realizing she could see his face a bit more clearly than only moments ago. “The mist thins.”

Brogan saw it then for himself and he was glad for it. He intended to get them out of there as fast as possible.

Annis looked around as the mist retreated, rolling away as if by command. “She knows I am here to see her. It is only a matter of time before she shows herself. She tapped Brogan’s chest. “Maybe it is your presence that stops her. Maybe she wants to meet with only me.”

“That will not happen. You will never come here alone,” Brogan ordered.

“What was that you told me about never saying never?” she asked sweetly.

“I mean it, Annis. You are not to come here alone,” he commanded.

“You are not my husband and cannot dictate to me,” she argued.

He had to bite his tongue. She would learn soon enough and there was time yet for all hell to break loose.

“Bliss would expect me to protect you,” he said, hoping that by mentioning her sister it would give her pause to think, which it did—in the wrong way.

Annis laughed. “Bliss sacrificed herself to save me from you. She would be telling me to run from you.”

“Not in this situation,” he argued.

He was right about that, and she admitted it. “True enough, but she would also warn me to be careful and not trust lightly.”

“You can trust me, Annis,” Brogan said.

“And what reason do I have to do that?” she asked, not at all accusingly but pragmatically, since she already trusted him but wanted to hear his reason.

“You have my word on it and while the curse has robbed me of much, it has not robbed me of my word. Trust me, Annis, it is the one thing you can be sure of.”

Strangely enough, she was confident of her trust in him.

With the mist lifted, they walked in silence along the path until they both spotted something and stopped to stare down at it.

“Is that what I think it is?” Annis asked.

“Aye,” Brogan said, his eyes focused on the ground. “It is a paw print of a wolf.”



TWO DAYS—TWO DAYS—SINCE she had last explored the path. First, it was the rain and now the mist so heavy at the base of the hills that you could not see where you stepped.

“It will have to wait,” Brogan said and gave Annis’s hand a tug to return to the village.

“She travels in the mist. This is the time to find her,” Annis argued.

“Nothing can be seen, not in front of you or beneath you. There is no telling what might happen, what might attack, what misstep might be taken. We wait and I will hear no more about it,” Brogan said with a command that rose the hairs on Annis’s neck. “I will not have you eaten by a wolf.”



Annis groaned and shook her head when the cry of a wolf echoed along the hills.

“I cannot keep delaying this,” she protested. “Bliss’s life depends on it.”

“Did this man Nolan who told you about the witch mention anything about a wolf?” Brogan asked.

She hated to admit it. “Nay, he made no mention of a wolf at all.” She made no mention of the ravens.

“Then that says much, and you would be wise to think on it,” Brogan said and waited, keeping hold of her hand, worried she would hurry into the thick mist before he could stop her.

“I suppose you are right,” she grudgingly admitted.

“We will try again tomorrow,” Brogan assured her.

Annis nodded, but wondered if there would come a time, she would have to walk the path alone.

Reluctantly, Annis returned to the village, Brogan’s hand firm around hers. They entered the small village to find the people huddled in talk.

“Is something amiss?” Brogan asked as he and Annis approached the group.

The small group exchanged skeptical glances.

Iver was the one who spoke. “We weren’t sure if we should tell you but hearing the cry of a wolf for a second time, we thought it best we did.”

“Tell us what?” Brogan asked.

Iver rushed to say, “The last time the wolf was heard here in the hills was just before Lady Aila cast the curse.”

A chill rushed through Annis along with curiosity. What did it mean? Why had the wolf returned? Or was it the witch who had returned? It would explain why Una never came across the witch when she ventured in that area and why Brogan and the two other cursed lords never found her—she hadn’t been there. If so, what had caused her return?

Annis wanted to discuss it with Brogan but now wasn't a good time. Meat was needed for supper, and she was eager for the work to continue on the stone shed. With that done, they could concentrate on at least making repairs to the existing dwellings.

"I have some thoughts," Brogan said, taking a moment to talk with her before going off to hunt.

"As do I," Annis said excitedly. "You and the other cursed lords never found the witch because—"

"She wasn't here," Brogan said with the same excitement as Annis.

Annis turned a puzzled look on him. "Something has caused her to return."

"You," he said.

Annis shook her head. "Nay, not me. There is more to her return."

"I need to go and get the hunting done so I can return and help get the stone shed completed. Then we can start on something else. Think on it as will I and we will talk later," he said and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Annis rested her hand to her cheek as she stared after him. She didn't mind the kiss, but to kiss her in front of the small group for all to see when she was not his wife was not something he should have done. It had to be obvious to him that she would be intimate with no man unless wedding vows were exchanged. Yet he kissed her as if she already belonged to him? Why? Was he letting her and everyone there know his intentions? Had their talk of marriage and love swayed him toward a decision?

She shook her head. He did not love her—did he? She shook her head again. That was a foolish thought. Though—she was growing accustomed to him and found she enjoyed his company. And she did like when they kissed. Heat rushed to redden her cheeks. Kissing was one thing, coupling another. She might enjoy his company and his kisses, but him touching

her in places she barely touched herself was not something she could fathom.

“You can see that Lord Brogan loves you.”

Annis turned around so fast to face Una that she almost stumbled. “He does not love me.”

Una laughed. “I know little about love, but one would have to be a fool not to see it in his eyes when he looks at you.”

“Una’s right,” Maddie said, joining them. “Lord Brogan loves you powerfully and he does not hide it. The man has lost his heart to you. But he is a cursed lord and unless you succeed in breaking the curse, I would run from him if I were you. Or the curse will touch you as well.”



YESTERDAY HAD PASSED FAR TOO QUICKLY and Annis never got a chance to talk with Brogan about the witch or anything. She had yawned so much after supper that he had gently ordered her to bed, promising they would talk in the morning before they headed to the hills for another wander on the path. She had woken early with thoughts on whether or not she should ask him if he loved her. It seemed logical to find out, yet her reasoning also brought her to the conclusion that he would ask her if she loved him. And she did not have an answer for him—at least not yet. Her decision then had been made easily. She would say nothing and watch to find out if she could see what the others saw—that he loved her.

He was waiting for her when she stepped out of the dwelling.

“The air is chilled this morning,” he said and reached for her hand.

She gave it to him as she always did, though this time she wondered if it was because she had grown accustomed to the gesture or because she wanted to feel her hand in his. It did not take her long to decide. It was because she liked the way his

hand greeted hers, eagerly, wrapping around it snug as though he had missed her and was happy to be joined with her.

“I have started another fire, so as not to disturb Iver,” Brogan said, and they walked over to it. “I am glad you woke so we have time to talk before the others wake.”

Annis spotted an eagerness in his blue eyes that she had not noticed before and it took her only a moment to see something else shining there quite strongly—hope.

“My thoughts have been on the witch all night,” Brogan admitted.

She surprised herself when she asked, “Not me?” She gave a quick chuckle, so it appeared she meant it as humorous. Hadn’t she?

“Was I on your thoughts last night?” he asked with a grin and was taken aback by her response.

“You haunted my thoughts and dreams all night.” She had seen no reason to lie to him or avoid his question as he did hers. And from the expression on his face—sheer shock—she was glad she had. Seeing that, she decided to leave it there and let the thought stir in him. “Tell me about your thoughts on the witch.”

Brogan ran his hand through his hair, her response shocking and delighting him. He wanted to pursue what she had said, find out what thoughts and dreams of him had haunted her, since her remark had not been punctuated with laughter as her previous one. She had been serious, but she had also moved on away from it and he would let it be—for now.

“I wonder if the witch had marked her time and intended to return here now, at this specific time,” Brogan said, having given it much thought.

“If what you suggest is true, then she returns at this particular time for a reason,” Annis said.

Brogan nodded. “A reason that concerns the curse.”

“Why though after all this time? What has changed?” Annis asked, annoyed no answer was forthcoming. She turned

a determined glare on Brogan. “I need to summon her. I need to call out to her when we wander the path today. She needs to know I wish to speak with her.”

“Calling a witch forth can be dangerous,” he cautioned, worried for her safety. “The witch is sure to want something from you.”

“I was warned about that, but Bliss’s bargain was gained at a far higher cost—her life. I will do what I need to do to see her safe.”

“You will not do it without me by your side,” he ordered, his eyes turning stern. “And if you think to trade your life for Bliss’s life, that is not something she would want you to do.”

Annis turned quiet.

“Tell me you will not even consider such a bargain,” Brogan said with a tinge of anger. “It would defeat the whole purpose of reaching out to the witch if you were to die for your sister to go free.”

“But it would not only be my sister who goes free,” Annis said, and seeing the worry and anger in his eyes, kissed his cheek. “You would be free and so would the other two cursed lords. Four people free for one life.”

Brogan grabbed her face in his hands. “Listen well, Annis, your life isn’t less important than mine or anyone else. Bliss would never forgive you for trading your life for hers, and I would see the witch dead by my bare hands if you attempted to do something so foolhardy.” He was no sooner finished, then he kissed her.

The kiss overpowered Annis, it feeling as if he laid claim to her, marked her as his so another could never touch her.

He rested his brow to hers when he ended the kiss. “Give me your word you will not bargain with your life, not for any reason.”

His kiss had set her heart to pounding and left her a bit breathless. She nodded and whispered, “You have my word.”

Yet at that moment she knew that if it came to a choice of saving him, she might have to revoke her promise, and that was when she realized that she just might be falling in love with the condemned lord.

Brogan kissed her quick, relieved she had given her word, though knowing how willful she could be, he intended to keep a more cautious eye on her. “The village stirs. We will talk more when we are alone.”

The sun poked its face out for a short time before an overcast sky hurried over it and the two continued to duel for dominance as morning blossomed.

After the morning meal and Annis got finished explaining what needed to be done on the stone shelter, she and Brogan made ready to leave for the hills. All heads turned when thunder seemed to rumble in the distance, but with the sun having presently conquered the clouds, a storm seemed unlikely.

It took a moment for everyone to realize that it wasn't thunder they heard, it was horses' hooves pounding the earth. Fright filled the few faces there and Una hurried to her da's side, his arm going protectively around her. And Annis hurried to Brogan.

Twenty warriors entered the village led by a man who sat his horse with pride and arrogance. The way fear grew on the faces there, it left little doubt to Annis as to who he was.

The man brought his horse to an abrupt halt in front of Brogan and pointed his finger at him. “You, son, will return home with me, and she,” —he jabbed a finger toward Annis— “will be taken to where she belongs—the dungeon.”

**A**nger smoldered in Annis, but she wisely held her tongue while she silently plotted an escape if things should go bad. She did not believe Brogan would simply turn her over to his father, but his father could command it and Brogan had no chance of stopping twenty warriors, no matter how superior his skill as a warrior.

He could, however, slow them down and hopefully it would give her enough time to run to the hills where the fog would devour her and where the warriors feared to tread.

Brogan took an abrupt step toward his father. “You and I, Father, will talk.”

His father dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “I have no time for talk. You will obey me.”

“Unless you want a bloody fight on your hands, leaving several of your warriors dead, I suggest you take the time and talk with me,” Brogan said, stunning his father and causing the warriors to cast worried glances at each other.

“YOU DARE THREATEN ME?” his father bellowed.

Annis thought the man would explode his face turned so red. Not so Brogan. He remained calm and in command.

“Aye, I do,” Brogan said, and his hand went to grip the hilt of his sword.

His father dismounted, his face continuing to glow red and his nostrils flaring in anger. “Make haste, we leave when you are done talking.”

“We will talk in private,” Brogan said, then turned his attention to the warriors still atop their horses. “Anyone dares to lay a hand on this woman,” —he pointed to Annis— “DIES!”

His father looked ready to dispute his command.

“Don’t, Father, or I will lay half of your troop dead at your feet,” Brogan warned and walked away, leaving his father no choice but to follow.

Annoyance poked at Annis that she could not be privy to what they discussed. This did, after all, concern her, and Brogan had little, if nothing, to bargain with. How then could he stop his father from doing as he commanded?

“If you can make it to the mist, they will not follow,” Una whispered, coming up beside her.

Annis smiled as she turned. “We think alike.”

Una continued to keep her voice hushed. “I am glad you give it thought. Lord Balloch cares for nothing but his rules and strict obedience to them. Fail either, and his punishment is swift and harsh.”

“Even with his son?” Annis asked curious, the man not having shown Brogan anything but anger since his arrival.

“Some believe Lord Balloch is even harsher on his son. They say he wants his son ready and capable of ruling the clan when the time comes and is annoyed that Lord Brogan shows little interest in it.”

Una’s words struck a chord with her. Brogan smiled and charmed, but was there a different man beneath that façade? Would he rule like his father? Did he want to rule Clan MacRae? One thing Annis knew for sure—Brogan was nothing like his father.

“Plans have changed,” Lord Balloch announced once he and Brogan ended their discussion and joined the others. “Rudd, you will remain here with nine men and see to restoring this village under my son’s dictate. I expect you to keep me updated on the progress. Also, I see,” —he gave a



nod to the partially constructed stone shed— “a storage shed is almost completed. See that it is stocked for winter.”

Astounded by Lord Balloch’s orders, Rudd took a moment to respond. “Aye. Aye, Lord Balloch. It will be done.”

Lord Balloch turned a scowl on Annis. “You will serve my son well, or it is the dungeon for you.”

Annis tried to hold her tongue, she truly did, but as usual she failed. “Not likely.”

Lord Balloch’s eyes rounded in shock and anger, and he sputtered as he searched for words.

“I have no allegiance to your clan; therefore, I need not serve your son.”

Brogan ran his hand through his hair, then shook his head. “Let it be, Da.”

“She needs to learn—”

“And she will,” Brogan said and sent Annis a warning look.

She was about to ignore it until she caught the hint of a slight plea in his gorgeous, soft blue eyes and she held her tongue out of consideration for him.

Her silence pleased his father, and Annis locked her lips fearful of what she might spew.

“One other thing, son, before I take my leave,” Lord Balloch said. “Chieftain Cowan of Clan MacFarden is kicking up a fuss with Lord Fergus of Clan MacBridan over some land. I fear it may turn troublesome and if so, Lord Fergus will call on Clan Loudon for help. If that should fail, he will demand his son’s return to settle it. Odran is your longtime friend. If you should hear from him, let him know that trouble is brewing.”

“The problem is that serious?” Annis asked.

Lord Balloch glared at her and turned to his son. “Her tongue is far too free.”

Brogan stepped in front of Annis when she took a rushed step toward his father. “If you hear any more on the trouble between the two clans, let me know.”

Lord Balloch dismissed his son’s concern with a quick wave of his hand. “It is not your concern. It is Fergus’s problem. Cowan should have been dealt with years ago. He thinks himself important when he is actually dispensable. Waste no worry over it.”

Annis watched Lord Balloch take his leave without so much as a good word to his son or a firm pat on the back. The man demonstrated no affection for his son, and it so incensed her that she wanted to grab a rock and throw it at the heartless man.

*Heartless.*

If Lord Balloch was heartless, why had he agreed to leave Annis here in peace and restore the village? She turned to Brogan. “What did you say to your father that had him completely reverse his decision?”

Brogan winked. “I worked my charm on him and promised I will have you tamed in no time.”

Annis got hysterical. She laughed so hard that she had everybody laughing with her, even the warriors.

“My stomach hurts,” Annis said, her hand pressed to her stomach as her laughter finally calmed. That’s when she realized Brogan had not laughed at all, though he was smiling.

Brogan leaned close to Annis to whisper, “I like you wild and free, but if I wanted you tamed, I would see it done, *mo ghràdh*.” He stepped away. “Come, Rudd, we will discuss what needs to be done and you and the others can get started on it.”

Annis set a glare on his back. She was wrong. She was not falling in love with the arrogant man. She could love no man who thought to tame her. And worse—if there could be anything worse than being tamed—he was going to discuss the building of the village when she had confided her thoughts of how she would love to do just that. So much for trust.

“What’s keeping you, Annis? I said *we*, meaning you and me. After all, you are the one with a vision for this village,” Brogan called out.

“Hurry,” Una urged, shooing at Annis. “He respects your talent. My dream is coming true. We will have a home again. Bless you and Lord Brogan.”

Annis had to shake herself before she hurried to catch up with Brogan. Maybe she was too hasty about not falling in love with him. Maybe she would give him another chance.



ANNIS SAT on the ground staring at the hills, mist capping the tops. Another day lost in her search for the witch. After speaking with Brogan and Rudd, the day turned busy. The extra, strong hands had the stone storage shed finished in no time. Now trees were being cut for dwellings and warriors had returned with meat. Una, Maddie, and Luella and Odell, two other women out of the ten people left in the village, were busy cooking it. And with news of Clan Loudon possibly having to battle alongside Clan MacBridan, Annis worried for Elysia’s safety.

It was the first thing she asked when Brogan approached her. “Should I worry for my sister?”

“Walk with me, so we may talk,” he said, holding his hand out to her and yanking her to her feet when she took hold. He wanted time alone with her, something that was going to be difficult to get with his father’s warriors here. He walked them away from the village and into the woods. “The trouble is with Clan MacBridan and Clan MacFarden. Your clan—Loudon—will send warriors to help Clan MacBridan if necessary. It shouldn’t affect your sister,” Brogan explained.

Annis was not mollified. “It would affect her husband, if she wed. Saber would be called away to fight. She would be left on her own.” That Brogan did not respond immediately worried Annis. He either took the time to weigh his words or he believed her worry valid.

“Saber appears to be an honorable man and if he wed Elysia, he will see her kept safe. Though, Elysia is not as fragile as you or Bliss think.”

“She is trusting and far too kind,” Annis argued.

“Which is why others in your clan will protect her.”

Annis looked ready to return to the village. “I should go and bring her here.”

“Nay,” Brogan said and hurried to finish, seeing Annis ready to argue with him. “It is not safe to travel with unrest in the area and it will delay your quest to help Bliss. If we hear of things growing worse, I will go bring Elysia here to you. You have my word on it.”

She nodded, trusting his word. “Now tell me how you managed to change your father’s mind about putting me in the dungeon.”

Brogan chuckled. “I told him there wasn’t a guard in all the world that would be able to tolerate your willful nature.”

Annis jabbed him in the arm. “You said no such thing. Besides, your father would torture me and be done with it. And while I would like to think I would be strong enough to sustain whatever torture I suffered; I am wise enough to know otherwise. However, you do have me wondering why you will not give me a reasonable answer.”

Brogan halted his steps and squeezed her chin playfully. “I told my father I was thinking of taking you as my wife and I needed time with you to see if you would be a feasible choice.”

Annis thought he teased her and was about to jab him in the arm again when she saw he was serious. “Did you say that to appease him?”

“I have given it much thought since we last spoke about marriage and decided you might make a good wife for me after all.” He held up his hand to silence her again when she looked ready to debate it. “But if you say you have no interest in marrying me, I will not force you.”

This was where he had to pray hard, maybe even beg the heavens she would agree, since he would not force her. He did not have to, since she was already his wife. He preferred the choice be hers, but in the end would she understand that or accuse him of manipulating her?

That she did not immediately refuse him or worse laugh at him, gave him hope.

“I am not sure what to say to that,” she admitted. “That my first thought was not to refuse you gives me reason to pause before answering you. What that means I am not sure. I need time to think on it, but right now Bliss must come first.”

“When this is done, we can decide,” he said and turned a sinful smile on her and kissed her gently. “That’s a reminder of what you enjoy about me.”

Annis ran her thumb faintly over his lips as if she needed, wanted, more from him, and the spark his kiss had ignited flared to life. “You make me feel things I do not quite understand.”

He understood the heated passion she felt since he felt it himself and tried to fight it, had been fighting it far too often. But his arousal was gaining strength thanks to their kiss, her innocent touch, and simply being so close to her. He would be wise to return to the village with her, but at the moment passion ruled rather than wisdom.

He slipped his arm around her waist and drew her close against him. “I want to make you feel so much more.”

His lips came down on hers again and she responded with the same overpowering need that he felt, her arms locking around his neck to hold on tight. His hand drifted off her waist to her backside, squeezing it, then urged her forward to meet his hardened manhood.

He almost shattered in pieces when she fit snug against him and he tried to stay still, tell himself it was enough to feel her there tight against his shaft, then she began to move. He tore his mouth off hers.

“You need to stop,” he warned, though he did not want her to.

“I-I do not want to,” she struggled to say. She rested her brow to his chest and moaned. “You feel so good, so thick, so strong, so hard.”

He groaned and warned himself to push her away, but he feared it was too late for that, but it was too soon for this. He reached up and unlocked her arms from around his neck and with a strength he did not think he possessed, stepped away from her.

The bewildered look on her face tore at his heart. “This is not right for your first time.”

Her chest heaved and her eyes widened as understanding dawned on her. Her hand went to rest between her legs, and she gasped. “That’s how it feels?” She shook her head. “I never expected it to drive all rational thought from me, to think of nothing but wanting you inside me.” She kept shaking her head. “It completely consumed me to the point of—” She gasped.

“Surrender,” he finished for her.

“I will not surrender to you,” Annis said, the thought frightening her.

“It is not me who you surrender to,” Brogan said, and her brow narrowed in confusion. “It is yourself.” He wanted badly to take her in his arms, comfort her, satisfy her, but not here, not like this. Her first time should be more than a hasty coupling in the woods. “We should go,” he said, and she nodded.

They returned to the village, keeping distance between them.



ANNIS LAY in bed unable to sleep, her thoughts jumbled. She had talked with Una, rather Una did the talking, excited about the changes taking place and the chance for a different, better

life. Annis was glad to see the young woman happy, she even commented that some of the warriors were fine looking men. Annis agreed with her, though she had not truly taken notice. No man could compare to Brogan, and she did not even care to look at another man.

Una fell asleep shortly after that and Annis was left with thoughts of Brogan and the incident in the woods. She had had no interest in the intimate deed between husband and wife. She had been too busy thinking on constructing things, seeing what was needed to build a sturdy and durable structure. She had no time to think about coupling with a man and why should she, she had had no man to consume her thoughts. Not so now and especially after the incident in the woods with Brogan.

She moaned softly. Never had she experienced such an overwhelming sensation that it all but consumed her. If it felt that amazing, how would the complete act of coupling feel? Of course, now she was curious, though only curious of how it would feel with Brogan. She cringed at the thought of it being with any other man but him.

She bolted up in bed. Was that love, wanting only one and no other?

She dropped back on the bed and let a long, silent moan ripple through her. This was not good. It was not the time for this. She could not let anything interfere with her quest to save Bliss. Tomorrow she would wander that path even if she had to go alone. Maybe it was better she did. Brogan was a distraction. She needed to remain focused.

Annis nodded. Tomorrow she would rise early and make it to the hills before Brogan woke and explore the path alone. She would find the witch and save Bliss.

She moaned silently, wondering if the time would come when she surrendered to herself in Brogan's arms.

**A**nnis slipped quietly out of the cottage, leaving Una snoring lightly. Sunrise was just touching the horizon and with any luck she would reach the hills before the light completely drove the darkness away. She cast a quick glance at the fire where Brogan and Iver slept, but with the fire having died down it was difficult to see them. She did not want to take the chance and make sure he was sleeping, for fear of waking him. It was better to be on her way and, pulling her hood up on her head, she hurried her steps.

She smiled as she reached the outskirts of the village, proud of her victory.

“Thought to sneak away without me, did you?”

Annis scrunched her face in frustration, then turned to face Brogan. He stood with his arms folded across his chest and a devilish grin on his handsome face. “I feared we would be delayed yet another day if I waited for you to wake.”

His finger shot out to point at her. “Your nose wrinkled.”

She stopped her hand from going to her face. She actually did not know if her nose did wrinkle when she fibbed or if he knew her well enough to know when she did fib.

“What happened to the trust you had in me?”

Hurt and annoyance mingled with his words, and she shook her head. “It is not that I don’t trust you.”

“It is just that you believe the witch wants to see only you and I will not let you go there alone,” Brogan said.



“Exactly,” she said, pleased he understood and decided now was a good time to tell him about the message. “I know the witch wants to speak with me and me alone because Nolan delivered a message from her to me, and that message was meant for my ears alone.”

He threw his hands up. “You tell me this just now? How can you believe Nolan? He was recovering from a drunken stupor. Oh, and just to make it clear, you are right. I will not let you go alone. I will not take that chance,” he said with a sternness that bordered on a command.

She groaned, frustrated and let loose her tongue. “You have no right to dictate to me. No right to commandeer my quest. This is for me to believe whoever I wish to believe and to do it the way I choose, not you.”

One wide step with his long legs had Brogan in front of her. “I have every right to keep you from being foolhardy.”

“Nay! You do not, and who are you to decide if I am being foolhardy?” she accused.

*Your husband*, he wanted to shout, but chose a different response, one that would not cause a battle. “Someone who cares deeply for you and lives in fear of you being harmed.”

Her mouth opened to speak, but there was only silence. She shook her head confused. “You care deeply for me?”

“Aye. I know it is difficult for you to believe how a charming man like me can care for such a stubborn woman—OW!” He rubbed his arm where Annis punched him. “You punch me when I tell you I care deeply for you?”

“Stubborn? You tell me you care deeply for me even though I am stubborn?”

He grinned. “I am glad you see the truth for yourself.”

Annis went to punch him again, but he grabbed her wrist and yanked her against him, then lowered his lips to hers. The kiss caught her off guard, yet the power of it, or her own desire, or perhaps a bit of both, welcomed it.

Brogan lingered in the kiss, not eager to end it. When he finally did, he rested his brow to hers to whisper, “I have missed your luscious lips since we last kissed yesterday. Though it was not that long ago, it has felt like ages to me. Kissing you, *mo ghràdh*, is like breathing—I cannot go long without it—without you.”

Words were lost to Annis, Brogan’s words wrapping around her heart to squeeze it tight. How did she respond? She knew not what to say. She chose to be honest. “I do not know what to say.”

Brogan raised his head and smiled. “My kiss and words leave you speechless, that says it all.”

Annis shook her head and laughed lightly. “You find the good in my ineptness.”

“It is easy to find good where so much good already exists.”

“No man has ever spoken with such favor to me.”

“I am not just any man—” Brogan’s smile vanished, and he stepped away from her. He shook his head. “I am a condemned man, and I should warn you away from me.”

Her heart squeezed tight and the need to protect him rose like a majestic beast inside her, and she was reminded that it was not only her sister she needed to save from the curse but Brogan and others as well.

Annis went to him and poked him in the chest. “You forget what a stubborn lass I am. Your warning will do no good.” Brogan’s arm hooked around her waist, and she found herself tight against him once again, a place she truly favored.

“I should chase you away, but God help me, I do not know how I would live without you.”

His words continued to stun her and leave her speechless and with a sense of guilt, since she had no idea how to respond to him. She did not understand all that she felt and until she did, she worried she would say the wrong thing and either he or she would regret it. It was similar to constructing a dwelling, if she placed a stone wrong, the whole dwelling

could collapse, and she did not want Brogan and her to collapse before the first stone was placed.

“I am not going anywhere. Besides, you told your father you had to spend more time with me to see if I would make you a good wife. I need more time to see if you would make me a good husband.”

“Then either trust me or take pity on me, *mo ghràdh*, and do not search for the witch alone,” Brogan pleaded with a grin.

She chuckled softly. “I will do both. Now let’s be on our way before the village wakes and our search for the witch is once again delayed.”

Brogan gave her a hasty kiss, took her hand, and they headed to the hills.

The mist was not heavy nor was it light, but it did linger as they walked along the path that saw few travelers.

Brogan was extra alert, his body taut beside her, his hand firm around hers. She tugged at his hand to stop. “I am going to call out to her.”

He shook his head. “I do not think that is wise. Let her reach out to you.”

“We cannot delay any longer,” Annis argued, and she didn’t. “I am here, and I wish to speak with you.”

Brogan tensed even more, his muscles bunching in his arms and chest as he stepped behind Annis. If anything happened, he could at least shield her with his body, wrapping himself around her.

Annis tried again. “Please. I must talk with you.” When no response came, she got annoyed. “I am not going away. I will come here day after day and call out to you until you have the courage to face me.”

“Do not provoke her, Annis,” Brogan warned.

“Why? I do not fear her. Do you hear that, witch? I DO NOT FEAR YOU!”

Brogan clamped his hand over her mouth. “Do not be foolish and call down her wrath.”

She shoved his hand away, her patience gone. “Call down her wrath? It would do her well to worry about my wrath.”

The mist suddenly parted, rolling away, and there on a tree branch, so close they could reach out and touch it, sat a raven, his beady black eyes focused on them.

“She is here,” Annis said.

Brogan stepped closer to the raven to keep himself between the blackbird and Annis. The bird didn’t budge but his black eyes followed Brogan’s every move.

“Show yourself,” Annis demanded.

Brogan cringed. He was confident in his skills as a warrior, but fighting a witch was different. He feared his skills would be sorely lacking when battling a witch. How then did he protect Annis against magical power?

“I have no time for nonsense. I demand you show yourself,” Annis called out and Brogan cringed again.

*Not yet!*

“What do you mean not yet? I am here and ready to talk with you,” Annis said.

Brogan remained still, his eyes on the raven, listening to Annis but hearing no other.

“I have questions for you. My sister Bliss is in danger. Time is not on her side. We must speak now,” Annis called out. Silence met her demand, and her frustration grew. “Answer me!”

The raven squawked, causing Annis to jump and Brogan to keep her shielded from the bird, not that it was necessary. The raven took flight, flying high, circling, dipping down again near them to squawk once more, then flew off.

“She is gone,” Annis said, disappointed and began to pace in front of Brogan. “She lets me know she is here and that she

will not show herself—not yet. But why not yet? Why does she wait? Why not hear what I have to say?”

“As usual, I did not hear her,” Brogan said. “I have no way of knowing how she sounded; annoyed, angry, calm.”

“Powerful,” Annis said and shivered. “She knows she has the power, that I am defenseless against her and that I have no choice but to wait.” A smile suddenly lit her face.

“What makes you suddenly happy?” Brogan asked, since fear still rippled through him. He could not see, nor could he hear the witch. How did he protect Annis against something he couldn’t see or hear?

“She gave us something very important,” Annis said, as if claiming victory.

Brogan grinned and nodded. “She let us know she is real and since she is real—”

Annis hurried to finish. “There is a chance the curse can be broken.”



THEY WERE ALMOST to the village when Brogan said, “We need to keep this to ourselves. There is no telling what might happen if others learn of it. We also do not know what we will learn ourselves.”

“I agree,” Annis said.

Unease hit them upon their return. Even the MacRae warriors seemed disturbed. Iver and Rudd stood talking while everyone else lingered about.

Brogan was quick to address Rudd when he and Annis reached the two men. “What is it?”

“A raven, my lord,” Rudd said and nodded to a low branch not far from them. “He sat there watching our every move, his black eyes making sure to touch on every one of us. Then his head shot up as if hearing something. He squawked at us, then took flight.”

“A raven is a harbinger of bad things to come,” Iver said and those nearby nodded in agreement.

Rudd kept his voice low. “The men worry, my lord.”

Brogan was not going to take any chances. “We need more men.”

“Aye, we do, my lord,” Rudd said, bobbing his head in agreement. “I can send a man with a message to your father.”

Annis wondered what difference more men would make against a powerful witch, but Brogan’s command seemed to appease Rudd.

“Is today market day at the clan?” Brogan asked.

“I believe so,” Rudd said.

“I will deliver the news to my father myself and see if I can get some craftsmen to return with me. That will give us more experienced hands to help build the village,” Brogan said. “I will take two warriors with me.”

“Aye, my lord, I will see it done,” Rudd said and turned to speak with his men.

“How long will you be gone?” Annis said.

Brogan’s grin bordered on a light laugh. “You truly believe I would go and leave you here on your own?”

“I am not going with you,” Annis said. “Or do you so easily forget my quest?”

Brogan took her arm and walked her a distance away where they could talk privately. “Today we discovered the witch exists and learned there is hope the curse can be broken. And while we are delighted with the discovery those here may not be when they learn of it, for it means a witch does live in the hills. We need to take their mind off that worry. We will take Iver and Una to market and return with items that will put smiles on everyone’s faces. With horses, we will reach my home in a couple of hours. We should be able to return by evening and if we are delayed for any reason, we can leave at sunrise tomorrow and be back in enough time to wander the path once again.”

“You are right,” Annis said. “I am being selfish in my quest. It would do Una good to get away from here even for a short while.”

Brogan took her hand. “You are far from selfish. If it were not for you being here, many in this small group would not survive the approaching winter. Besides, you never know, you may hear something about your sister Elysia or even Bliss.”

Annis’s eyes brightened. “You are right. I never thought of that. And perhaps your father would not mind parting with some cloth so that warm garments can be made for those here.”

“I can see to that and more,” Brogan said, “but we should not delay if we prefer to return before dark.”

Annis tugged at him as she turned to hurry off and he followed, looking forward to the day with her.



“ARE you sure we will be welcomed, Lord Brogan?” Una asked as they approached the village that surrounded the MacRae keep.

“Worry not, Una. I will make sure of it,” Lord Brogan assured her.

Annis noticed how stiff he sat his mare and how his eyes turned watchful, and she wondered just how welcome they truly would be.

Brogan led them through the village to the keep and passed the shocked faces, sneers, and whispers that showed no sign of welcome at all, and Annis feared the day would not go as planned.

Lord Balloch stood on the top step of the keep waiting. Brogan had sent one of his warriors ahead to let his father know they approached.

“Stay as you are until I speak with my father,” Brogan said as they came to a stop at the keep.

“Is there going to be a problem?” Annis asked before Brogan dismounted.

“Not in the least,” he assured her and quickly mounted the steps.

“You bring the ones from the village here when I have ordered their banishment?” his father asked, his anger obvious in the tight set of his jaw.

“If you wish an heir to the Clan MacRae, you will welcome these people,” Brogan said.

“You dare threaten me?” his father said, his anger ready to erupt.

“I warn you, Father,” Brogan said calmly. “Accept them and make certain others do or I will make certain my wife does not get with child.”

“There is no chance yet?” his father snapped. “What do you wait for?”

“For you to do what is right,” Brogan said with an anger of his own. “You can start by greeting Iver and Una warmly so that others may see they are now welcomed here. And while they enjoy market day, you and I will talk. Also, have a cart made ready. There is a list of things I need.”

Lord Balloch guarded his tongue. “I will give you what you need, and you will give me more than one heir. You will have the many sons I never got to have.”

“Daughters as well,” Brogan said with a smile.

“Aye, daughters can greatly benefit a clan through marriage. I will see them married well.”

Brogan almost laughed. Annis would never let their daughters be used in such a way and either would he. “That will be my decision, Father. Now let’s see this done, since I intend to return home today.”

“You are home,” his father reminded.

Brogan looked to Annis and realized at that moment home was wherever she was.



Brogan was not impressed with his father's performance and how he warmly greeted Iver and Una and insisted on strolling through the market with them. He had seen such a performance many times. He believed Iver and Una had as well, for they played their roles with forced smiles.

"I am going to speak with my father. Make certain to behave yourself while on your own," Brogan said with a chuckle and tap of his arm against hers.

"Funny," she said, glancing about.

Brogan could see from the narrow set of her eyes that it wasn't funny to her. "What troubles you?"

"Iver and Una have no coin or anything to barter with," she said and had thought to bring at least one of the coins Elysia had insisted she take when she left. But those were for the witch if needed.

"Iver has coins, I gave him a few for him and his daughter to buy what they wish. And you need no coin, since the merchants will be informed that I will pay for all your purchases."

"That is not necessary," Annis said.

"My choice," he said and nudged her arm again when he would rather take her in his arms and kiss her. But he could not do that here and now—not yet.

Annis saw no point in arguing. Besides, there wasn't anything she needed. She wanted to be done here and return to the village.

"Do not be long," she said, seeing his father approach.

He leaned down to whisper, "I look forward to seeing whatever bauble you find for yourself."

"Bauble. You think I am interested in baubles?" She laughed and walked off.

Annis found herself with a steady smile, watching the joy Una got from being at market. She had taken the day for granted and had even avoided market day at Clan Loudon at

times. But having been deprived of mingling and talking with people, Annis could understand the joy it could bring.

She was also happy to see Iver reunite with old friends and how pleased they were to see him. He seemed to stand straighter and taller, his shoulders broader than she had ever seen them. Brogan had been right. This was a good thing to do today.

People looked at her strangely when she lingered at a merchant's table covered with building tools. She spied a chisel. She always wanted a chisel of her own and he had a gimlet as well.

She picked up the chisel. It felt good in her hand. "How much?"

The young man behind the table looked at her oddly. "Maybe you should let your husband choose the one best for him."

Her chin shot up. "It is for me."

"Annis is a builder," Una said, walking over to stand next to her.

"You are teasing me," the young fella said with a laugh.

"I am not," Una said. "She directs the men in building a fine stone shed for our winter food and will be building dwellings as well."

The young man looked to Annis. "Can you use help? I am good with tools, and I have many as you can see. I grow tired of traveling. It is a lonely lot and a dangerous one. I am Risley and would serve your clan well."

Annis could tell from his calloused and scarred hands that he spoke the truth and though he was slim, there was muscle to his arms. He had good features and kept his brown hair trimmed short. And, of course, there were all those tools.

Una smiled. "He could be of great help to us."

Annis had to agree.

Iver joined them, smiling. "We could use some of those."

“Risley,” she said with a nod to the man, “would like to join our clan.”

His smile faded some. “That would be grand, but, first, he needs to know about our clan.”

Una’s excitement faded more and more as her father explained about their small clan and how the condemned lord was helping them.

Risley scratched his chin. “It would be amazing and challenging to help build an entire village. I would like to be part of it.”

“There is one more thing,” Iver said, and Una’s returned excitement faded again knowing what her da would say. “Our village is not far from where the witch of the hills supposedly lives.”

Risley brushed it off with a wave of his hand. “That is a myth. Whenever you are ready to leave, I will go with you.”

Una’s excitement returned.

Annis smiled, happy for the lass. “How much do I owe you for the chisel?”

“You do not need to purchase it since all the tools will be available to the village to use,” Risley said.

“I always wanted my own,” Annis said.

“Then consider it a gift from me to you for allowing me to join your village,” Risley said and chuckled. “I will deliver it to your home for you.”

They all laughed, and Annis thanked him. She walked off with Iver, leaving Una to talk with Risley.

“I have no words to thank you for this,” Iver said teary-eyed. “My daughter has a future because of you.”

“It is Lord Brogan’s doing, not mine,” Annis said.

“If you had not come to our village and been so insistent, Lord Brogan would have never come there. It is your doing and no other,” Iver said, “and I and the others are grateful.”

Though none say it, we hope you will stay and make your home with us and bring your sisters to live with us as well.”

Annis got teary-eyed. “I would like that.”

Iver was approached by a man he had not seen in years and Annis left them to talk. She wandered through the market and saw Una still talking with Risley and looking happier than she had ever seen her. She was thrilled herself, but for a different reason than Una. It was the prospect of having all those tools to use that put a wide smile on her face.

“My baubles,” she whispered with a laugh.

She looked to the keep and wondered what was delaying Brogan. If they were to return to the village by dark, they would have to leave in the next hour or so. She decided to go to the keep and find out.

Annis entered to find no one about, then she heard the terrifying screams and took off. Horror at what she saw stopped her dead. A woman of importance, from her fine tailored garments, was striking a servant lass with a stick repeatedly as she lay in a ball on the floor, protecting her rounded stomach. She was with child.

Fury raged through Annis, and she did not stop to think. She ran to the lass being beaten and flung herself over her.

“**T**his is a gift, son. You will live long and see the clan prosper and grow.”

“While I watch everyone die around me, Da,” Brogan argued. “And what of me, Da? What happens when I grow old and feeble and there is barely anything left of me? Do I spend eternity rotting away yet never dying? Have you thought of that? Is that the gift you speak of?”

“You do not know if you will age like others and that is why you will sire many children. They will be there to care for you,” his father said as if his words would make it so. “And why haven’t you told your wife that you are her husband? It is time she learns to obey you.”

Brogan almost laughed, Annis and obedience was not synonymous. “My decision, Da.”

The screams penetrated his father’s solar, and Brogan shook his head. “Mother still beats the servants?”

“Only when necessary,” his father said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. “When you get your wife with child, you will come here to live and begin to take more of a role in running the clan.

Brogan had no intentions of returning to live here and he had no intentions of arguing with his father about it. He let it pass, for now.

“How goes the trouble between Clan MacFarden and Odran’s clan?” Brogan asked.

“Not good. Clan Loudon has been charged with sending warriors and it grows more heated.”

The screams grew and Brogan shot to his feet and went to the door.

“The servants are for your mother to handle,” his father shouted and followed after him.

Brogan hated when his mother flew into one of her rages and took it out on any servant in her path. There was not one servant who did not fear her. He had stopped her a few times and he intended to stop her now.

He entered the Great Hall shocked at what he saw. A hot rage raced through him. It was not a servant his mother was striking repeatedly across the back—it was Annis. She laid over a servant protecting her.

“STOP!” Brogan raged, the veins in his neck pounding in fury. He went to his mother, grabbed the stick from her hand, broke it over his knee, and tossed to the flames in the hearth. He hurried to Annis.

“Is there blood?” she asked, keeping her eyes squeezed shut.

A quick glance had him saying, “Nay, no blood.”

She sighed with relief and moved to get up and cringed from the pain that shot through her back.

“Easy,” Brogan said as he eased her gently off the lass beneath her.

“Please, my lord, help me,” the lass begged as Brogan moved Annis off her.

Annis answered for him. “Of course, Lord Brogan will help you. Pack your belongings. You and your husband will come with us.”

Tears trailed down the lass’s face. “My husband took ill and died two weeks ago.”

“Get up, Damia, and return to work,” his mother ordered. “I will deal with you later. Brogan, explain yourself.”

“Please do not tell me that wretched woman is your mother,” Annis whispered when she was finally on her feet.

Brogan nodded as he helped Damia to her feet.

“Please, my lord,” Damia begged in a murmur. “The bairn is all I have left of my husband. I do not want to lose him.”

“You will suffer for speaking to Lord Brogan without permission,” his mother called out.

Brogan wanted to snatch Annis up in his arms and run out of there, though he would not leave Damia behind. He often thought his mother punished the servants who were with child worse than the others. He believed it made her angry to see women round with child when she had been able to only carry and deliver one bairn.

He turned to his mother. “Damia will not suffer, and she will not be remaining here. She will come with me.”

“She most certainly will not,” his mother said, her eyes raging with anger.

Annis could see that at one time Brogan’s mother was an attractive woman, no more. Her face was pinched tight and heavy with wrinkles from scowling so much and her gray hair was pulled back far too tightly, almost as if she was trying to force the wrinkles out of her brow.

“Speak to your wife, Father,” Brogan said, though it was more a command.

“Faline, be still,” Lord Balloch ordered firmly, then whispered something to her.

Brogan’s mother’s eyes went wide, and she cast a slow glance over Annis, shook her head, and walked out of the room.

“Take Damia with you and I expect word from you soon,” his father said, then turned and left the room.



ANNIS'S back stung with every step she took, and she did her best not to let her discomfort show as the small group gathered to make ready to leave.

Una hurried to her and seeing that she had been talking to Damia and the worry in her eyes, it was obvious Una had learned what happened.

“Are you all right?” Una asked when she stopped in front of Annis.

“I am good. How is Damia?” Annis asked, having made sure Damia spoke with Una to see if Damia was in need of a healer.

“She is well, thanks to you. She says she owes you her and her bairn's life.”

“I would argue otherwise if I had not seen how crazed Lady Faline was or felt the fierce strikes of her stick.” She cringed, her back suddenly stinging her.

“I will tend your back as soon as we reach home,” Una said.

“Is there anything you can do for her now, Una?” Brogan asked, coming up behind Annis. “The journey home is bound to cause her more pain.”

“I'm afraid not, but perhaps the healer here could provide some relief for Annis,” Una suggested.

Brogan shook his head. “Nay, I would not trust Annis's care to her.”

“Worry not. I am good, and eager to get home,” Annis said, not comfortable with causing anyone worry. Though, she could not help but think that she wished Bliss was with her. She would see Annis healed well. “Una says Damia does well.”

Una confirmed with a nod.

“Damia does not want to return home with us,” Brogan said.



“She cannot mean to remain here,” Annis said, alarmed at the thought.

“Nay, she asked me if she could go to her family, her sister and her grandfather. They reside at Clan MacClaren,” Brogan said.

“Rannick’s clan,” Annis said

Brogan nodded. “I agreed and I am sending a warrior to escort her there. I told him to find out whatever he could about Bliss.”

A smile burst across Annis’s face and instinct had her ready to reach out and hug him. She stopped when she saw Risley approach, and she was glad she did. It would be wrong to display such intimacy here where tongues would be sure to tell his parents. His father was ruthless enough to use such a display as a way to force them to wed. She did not want to be forced. She would wed a man of her own choice. Her sister had sacrificed for her to be able to do just that and she would not allow her sister’s sacrifice to be for naught.

Risley stepped forward apprehensively. “Excuse me, Lord Brogan, but I have not had the chance to thank you for allowing me to make my home with this group.”

“I asked Risley to join us. He is a craftsman with tools and would be invaluable to us,” Annis said, seeing how uneasy Risley was and no doubt worried that her word would not carry weight with Lord Brogan.

“Welcome, Risley. Your skills will be much appreciated.”

Risley stood speechless for a moment, then bobbed his head repeatedly. “Thank you, my lord. I will serve you well and faithfully.”

Una smiled. “I could ride on your cart with you and tell you all about our wee village if you’d like.” Her eyes darted to Brogan. “If that is all right with you, my lord.”

“I think it is an excellent suggestion, Una,” Brogan said with a nod.

Annis detected the twinkle in his soft blue eyes.

“I would like that,” Risley said, and before turning to walk away with Una, cast a quick look to Annis. “I will see that you get your chisel once we reach home.”

“Home,” Annis echoed softly as he and Una walked away. “He wanted a place to settle, and I did not think you would mind growing the village.”

“Chisel?” Brogan asked, his brow going up. “That is what you bought yourself? And no, I do not mind. A craftsman would serve us well. Again—chisel?”

“It is the perfect bauble,” she said with a grin and a sudden pain clutched at her back so badly she feared her legs would give way.

His hand shot out around her waist to steady her. He wanted to pull her into his arms, but he feared he would cause her more pain. “You cannot travel like this.”

“I would rather bear the pain than remain here,” she said, trying to focus on anything but the scorching pain in her back.

“You will ride with me,” Brogan ordered.

“I would love to agree, but I fear it might prove more painful with me tucked against you.”

He muttered beneath his breath, cursing his mother’s temper. “I would ask you why you so foolishly protected Damia, but knowing you as I do, you did so out of pure fury at seeing her harmed.”

“It was not right. I could not stand there and see her suffer or lose the bairn.” She shook her head. “After meeting your parents, I completely understand why you prefer not to reside at the keep.”

Iver approached. “All is set, my lord. We can leave whenever you wish.”

Brogan nodded and walked Annis to her horse and as gently as possible lifted her onto the animal. He mounted his mare, and the small group began their departure from the village.

The pain began as soon as the horse took a few steps. It was not going to be a pleasant ride, but she intended to bear it as best she could. She focused on the people as they made their way through the village. What she saw on some of their faces did not surprise her. Many looked with envy on Damia. They were not happy here and they would rather brave life with the condemned lord than remain here.

“Was your mother and father always such harsh people?” Annis asked, needing to keep her mind off the pain she suffered.

“My parents have always embraced power, and I believe it disappoints them that I do not. My mother tells me—has quite often through the years—that I am much like her father, Lord Kenneth. He had a tongue that could charm, a smile that melted hearts, and a loving nature. She contends that if it were not for her marriage to my father that her clan would have ceased to exist.” He laughed. “Ironically, she was the cause of its demise. My father swallowed the clan whole, and the Clan Smythe lives no more.”

“Do they not worry about the curse and how you suffer from it?” she asked, to keep from letting a groan of pain escape her lips.

“My father believes it a gift and that the clan benefits from it, since he believes I will forever rule it. I reminded him that I have not stopped aging. What will become of me when my body finally fails me but there is no death to greet me?”

Annis had not thought of that. She assumed he would live and not grow old. What a horrible future to face, but then it was a curse. Her heart broke at the thought of such hideous suffering, and she silently swore she would see the curse ended no matter what it took. No one should be forced to live such a horror.

But had not Lady Aila faced the horror of having her two-day-old daughter ripped from her arms and murdered in front of her? Annis’s heart twisted at the thought, and she could not blame Lady Aila for what she had done. Now, though, it had to

stop. The suffering could not go on any longer. A wrong had to be made right, and Annis was going to see that done.

She winced from a sharp pain that struck her and silently berated herself for letting it slip.

Brogan wanted to swear at the heavens, and he did in the confines of his mind. He hated to see her suffer and hated even more that his mother had caused his wife's unnecessary suffering. "You are in far too much pain. We will stop and you will rest."

"Nay. If we stop, I do not believe I will be able to ride again."

Brogan could deal with his own suffering, but he could not bear seeing Annis suffer. It tortured his soul not to be able to ease her pain. This would be the most painful ride of his life and he had lived through some terribly painful ones. But nothing hurt as much as seeing Annis suffer with little complaint.

Annis was about to tell him to talk with her. Keep her mind off the pain that was never-ending when one of the warriors approached them.

"Someone tracks us, my lord," the warrior said.

"Only one person?" Brogan asked.

"Aye, only one." The warrior shook his head. "It makes no sense. He leaves an obvious trail and yet we cannot find him.

"Give me a moment, then you will show me these tracks," Brogan ordered, and the warrior gave a nod and rode off.

"I am going to send Iver to ride alongside you in case you are in need of anything. I may not return before you reach the village. Have Una tend to you and rest. I will see you when I arrive there."

Annis had a hunch, and she took a chance. "Which cursed lord do you go to meet? Is it the same one you met in the woods at Clan Loudon?"

"You witnessed that meeting?"

The sudden lift of his brow told of his surprise, and she was glad she had followed her hunch. “You did meet with one of the cursed lords.”

Annoyed that she had tricked him and concerned over what she had seen and heard, he asked, “You saw us?”

She wondered over the skepticism in his voice. “I saw you but not who you spoke with.”

“And you heard what?” he asked.

“Little since I could not linger.”

“Leave it that way, Annis,” he warned.

A stinging pain hit her, and she shut her eyes against it.

Brogan warred with himself over leaving her.

Annis forced her eyes open. “Go and do what you must, but first I will have your word on two things.” She did not continue until he nodded. “If it is Rannick, please find out what you can about Bliss. And whether it is Rannick or Odran you meet, say not a word about the witch—yet.” She was relieved when he responded with haste.

“You have my word on both.”

“Then go be done with it,” she said and got annoyed with herself when tears trickled from her eyes. Why did his departure cause her eyes to grow teary? It wasn’t that she had to have him there with her. Or that she would miss him. Or would she?

Brogan brought his mare close to her horse and leaned over to brush a faint kiss across her lips. “I will miss you, *mo ghràdh*.”

Annis pressed her cheek to his and whispered, “Of course, you will. I am irresistible.”

Brogan grinned and returned the whisper, “More than you know, *mo ghràdh*. Much more than you know.”

Annis watched as he went and spoke with Iver then waited for the man to reach her before he turned and rode off.

Iver circled his horse around to ride beside her. “Lord Brogan is a far better and more honorable man than I thought him to be. He has kept his word to us where others have not and he cares, unlike his father. I never expected him to defend me, let alone strike one of his father’s warriors to protect me. The village is indebted to him. And now he returns with more men to help us build and also food and cloth so we will not go hungry or suffer the cold winter.” He smiled. “It is more than my old heart can take, knowing my daughter has a chance at a good life now.”

“Lord Brogan does surprise,” Annis said, seeing what a good man he was through Iver’s eyes. “He has more of a good heart than he allows anyone to see.”

“Or people are too blinded by the curse to bother to see his true nature.”

Annis grinned. “That charming tongue of his might have something to do with it.”

Iver chuckled. “It’s possible.” His chuckle turned to a frown. “Or the terrible things his father did whenever he thought someone even meant his son harm.”

A pain stung her so hard and fast, she grew lightheaded.

“You grow pale, Annis,” Iver said and was quick to call out to the warriors.

Luckily one was close enough to catch her when she toppled to the side in a faint.

**B**rogan was not far from the village. He had hoped to reach the group before their arrival home, but unfortunately, he had not, and his worry for Annis had grown.

His meeting did not go as he had thought and if he had known who wanted to meet, he would not have left Annis. He had been concerned when he followed the trail left for him. The news could not be good if it was Rannick who had tracked him down. He rarely ventured far from his solitary dwelling. The curse had taken enough from him, and he had sworn he would let it take no more. Thus, he lived isolated from others. He had worried it was Odran and he had come to ask him to join the fight over the disputed land. If so, what did he do with Annis in the meantime? He could not let her continue her quest on her own.

Surprisingly, it had been neither friend who had taken him away from Annis.

It had been one of Lord Lochlann's, Rannick's father, warriors and as soon as he recognized him, he had a good idea of why he was there. And he had not been wrong. Lord Lochlann wanted to know what he was doing conducting another worthless search for the witch. It was easy to surmise that Lord Lochlann worried about Rannick hearing of it and possibly joining Brogan on another useless search that would help no one.

Brogan had no intentions of sharing anything with Lord Lochlann. He told the warrior that he was placating Annis and the search would soon come to an end. The warrior had been pleased with the good news he would deliver to Lord Lochlann. Brogan had asked about Bliss, but the warrior insisted he knew nothing. Gossip spread fast in a village and there was no doubt that tongues had to be wagging over Rannick's new bride. Lord Lochlann had probably warned all to hold their tongues concerning the marriage or suffer the consequences. He wished he could have learned even a kernel of news about Bliss that would let Annis worry less for her sister. Unfortunately, he had nothing to tell her.

Night was close to claiming the land when he arrived at the wee village, but excitement filled the air over the amount of food and cloth that was being distributed.

Iver hurried over to him when he dismounted.

"Something wrong, Iver?" Brogan asked, worry strong in the older man's eyes.

"Annis fainted shortly after you left." Iver hurried to finish, seeing how upset Brogan got. "One of your warriors caught her before she toppled off the horse. We made her ride in the cart after that and she was none too pleased about it. But she remained pale, and Una worried she might faint again. Una is tending her now. I will see to Belle for you."

Brogan was quick to hand Belle's reins over to Iver. He headed straight for Iver's dwelling and did not bother to announce his arrival. He opened the door and entered.

A rage so strong swept over him, he thought he would explode when he saw the many welts that marred Annis's bare back.

"My lord," Una said, startled by his entrance.

Annis had swung around from where she sat on the bench, her arm resting over her shift that covered her breasts, the back of the garment laying at her waist. She had removed her tunic and dropped her shift to her waist for Una to more easily tend her wounds. Not use to anyone but her sisters seeing her



naked, she had kept her breasts covered. She was glad she had seeing Brogan standing in the open doorway, appearing as if he was ready to do battle.

“Could you close the door,” Annis said calmly.

Brogan shook his head, attempting to clear his anger as he did as she asked.

The sharp demand in his voice when he spoke next surprised both women.

“I will have a few moments alone with Annis, Una.”

“Aye, my lord,” Una said and was about to drop the cloth in the bucket when Brogan stopped her.

“Wait. Were you about to place that cloth on Annis’s back?”

“Aye, the concoction will help with the swelling and ease her pain,” Una explained.

“Place it on her,” Brogan ordered.

Una appeared hesitant but spoke anyway. “The cloth needs to be refreshed after it is warm to the touch.”

Brogan surprised both women again. “I will see to it if we have not finished talking by then.”

“That is inappropriate,” Annis said, feeling far too vulnerable being half undressed in his presence.

“I do not care if it is improper or if it causes gossip. It is a command and I expect it to be obeyed,” Brogan ordered.

Una bobbed her head and gently placed the wet cloth on Annis’s back, remaining beside her when she let out a startled gasp. “The stinging will dissipate and as the swelling subsides so will your pain.”

All Annis could do was nod.

Once again anger stirred in Brogan, seeing Annis suffer needlessly.

“If Annis should need me, sir, I will be right outside,” Una said and headed out the door.

Annis's head hung down, her fiery red hair concealing the sides of her face. He walked around to squat down in front of her. He reached out and took her clutched hand in his and she latched onto him, squeezing tight.

"My mother will never touch you again, Annis," he said.

She raised her head with a slight wince. "You are right about that, since I have no intentions of ever setting foot in your keep or village again. Did she take a stick to you when you were young?"

"She would not dare. I am heir to the clan, and she would suffer my father's wrath if she did. Not that I never felt his hand, though the times were few."

"I do not care for your parents."

"I do not blame you. There are times I do not care for them either," he admitted. He wanted desperately to wrap her in his arms, comfort her, ease her pain, but that would only cause her more pain. He was relieved that he offered some comfort by the way she clutched his hand. "I would take your pain if I could."

"I would give it to you if I could," she said with a soft chuckle. "You are ruining my reputation by being in here with me half-naked. If either of my sisters hear about this, they will worry. And they each have enough to worry about and contend with, without disparaging news about me. That reminds me, did you learn anything about either of my sisters from whoever it was you met?"

"It was neither Odran nor Rannick." He saw the disappointment in her eyes. "Lord Lochlann sent one of his warriors to find out why I was searching for the witch again."

She sat straight up, throwing her shoulders back and grimaced, closing her eyes against the pain that seared her back and quickly said, "I would ask if you told him of our encounters so far, but I trust your word and know you held your tongue as promised."

She trusted him without question, but how would she feel when she learned what he kept from her. He should tell her

and be done with it, but he did not want her forced to accept their marriage. He wanted the choice to be hers.

“I kept my word to you. I will always keep my word to you. Never doubt that. As far as your reputation, we could easily rectify any damage with an exchange of vows.”

She cringed and squeezed his hand.

“The cloth needs refreshing,” Brogan said, reluctant to release her hand since it locked so tightly with his, hoping he assumed right, and her grimace was not in response to his suggestion.

Annis stopped herself from telling him to get Una. She preferred he stay with her, his presence alone a comfort to her as well as the touch of his hand. Also, she had found herself almost agreeing with him about marriage to save her reputation. Or was it that she was not as resistant to the idea?

“You should lie on the bed. You would be more comfortable, and you could use the rest as well as sleep.”

“The bench is fine,” she said, fearing he would leave Una to tend her once she took to the bed and she was not ready for him to leave her just yet.

He tapped her nose gently. “It was not a suggestion.”

“It sounded like one.”

He smiled. “I was being nice.”

“And make it seem like it was my choice?”

“Exactly, now let’s get you on the bed. It will make it easier to tend your wounds and do not bother to argue when you know what I say makes sense,” he said, his hands going to her waist to help her stand.

“You are not always right.”

“Then it is a good thing I have you around to let me know when I’m wrong.” He eased her up off the bench.

“I will tell you eve—” Dizziness struck her hard and fast and she shut her eyes against it. Instinct had both her hands reaching out and grabbing hold of his arms to steady herself.

His taut muscles brought relief and comfort. He would not let her fall.

He should rot in hell for the slight arousal he felt at seeing her naked, the shift having fallen to her feet. Here she was suffering in pain and his shaft stirs. Never had a woman aroused him as quickly as Annis did on far too many occasions. He fought it though it was not easy, her nipples having turned hard and his urge to taste them overwhelming, not to mention the thatch of red hair between her legs that matched her fiery curls that guarded the entrance to endless pleasure. *Enough*. He had to cover her.

Annis's breath caught when the back of his hand brushed her nipple. Only then did she realize... she was naked. Her eyes shot open to see him ready to reach down for her shift.

"I will do it," she said, stepping away from him.

Brogan grabbed her arm as gently as he could, seeing her unsteady on her feet and without a word spoken, snatched her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her on her side and ordered, "Get on your stomach."

She hurried to do so, her cheeks growing red with embarrassment.

He hastily drew a blanket over her backside and up to her waist, leaving her back free to tend. There would be no sleep for him tonight, not with the lovely images of her naked body taunting him. She had an impressive backside, round and firm, and his fingers were itching to give it a squeeze.

He shook his head, needing the titillating images gone and grabbed the cloth off the ground that had fallen off her back. He dropped it on the bench and took a cloth from the stack on the table beside the bucket and dropped it into it. Once he rinsed it, he returned to the bed and took a look at her back. He was pleased that the welts appeared less angry than before. He hurried to gently place the cloth on her back, hoping it would relieve more of her pain.

Her sigh of relief told him it had.

He squatted down beside the bed, their faces close. “What will Una think when she returns and finds me naked?”

“That I was a gentleman and turned away while you got in bed and covered yourself.”

“With your reputation?” she asked with a laugh.

“Nay, with your impeccable reputation,” he corrected.

“My reputation is not impeccable. Since reaching the age to wed, I have always lacked a suitor. The clan believes I am far too stubborn and far too interested in things that are better left to men, to attract a man of any character or worth.”

“A rogue like me would better suit you and better understand you.” He tucked an irate curl behind her ear, but it would not stay there. It was as stubborn as her and as soft as her as well.

A yawn robbed her of words or was it the tender touch of his hand that calmed her?

“Sleep and I will see you in the morning, *mo ghràdh*” he said and kissed her cheek.

“We will walk the path slow,” she said, fighting to keep her eyes open.

“Sleep and rest,” he said and kissed her cheek again. She would do nothing but rest tomorrow, but that was a fight better left for the morrow. He tried once again to keep the irate strand from falling in her face, but it refused to obey. He let it be, something he felt he would be doing with Annis as well. Let her be who she was.

Brogan stoked the fire and took one more look at Annis, having no desire to leave her. Her cheeks were tinged with what was left of her deep blush when she had realized she was naked. He wanted to see her cheeks blush again, only this time for a far more pleasurable reason.

He stepped outside and Una turned, having waited as she said she would. “There is no reason for me to order you to tend her well. You will do so out of friendship.”

“Aye, my lord, I will. Annis is the first friend I ever had, and I do not want to lose her,” Una said.

“I feel the same way, Una,” he said and walked away. That the realization struck him just then surprised him. He never thought of a woman being his friend, but he shared things with Annis that he shared with Odran and Rannick, trust being one of them. And there was nothing as precious as a friend one could trust wholeheartedly.

Yet he kept a secret from her. He shook his head. This was not going to go well.

**A**nnis stepped out of the dwelling and took a deep breath of the chilled air. It had been two days since the incident with Brogan's mother and to her dismay she had spent one day mostly in bed and the other mostly in bed after attempting to return to her usual activity. Brogan had warned her to rest, but he hadn't stopped her from doing as she pleased, though he had told her the witch would wait. She had not argued that since she had been wise enough to realize she had not healed enough to wander the path. Unfortunately, she had been too stubborn to realize that it was not wise to participate in the building going on.

Brogan had come to her rescue and with a firm arm around her waist, for much needed support, had walked her to Iver's dwelling where he cautioned her to rest. That he had not commanded her to do so, softened her heart and made her see reason. That extra rest, she was certain, had helped and today she woke feeling like her old self.

It was time once again to seek the witch.

"Color has returned to your face, and you do not slouch in pain, though I imagine the pain is not completely gone," Una said, approaching her to hand her a tankard of a steaming brew.

"Aye, I still suffer some pain and my back continues to be sore to the touch, but not enough to keep me abed for another day." Annis took a sip of the brew and smiled. It was potent, thanks to the food staples Brogan had brought to the village.

“Be wise with what you do today, since you still have not fully healed,” Una advised.

“I will make certain to heed your advice as I explore the path today,” Annis said and walked with Una toward the campfires.

“It warms my heart to see the village come to life again,” Una said, a huge smile spreading across her face.

“The building does go well,” Annis said, seeing that much needed repairs were continuing on the existing dwellings and felled trees were being made ready for more dwellings.

“The extra hands go a long way and have kept busy since arriving,” Una said. “Risley’s skillful hands have been most helpful as have the tools he brought with him.”

“Where is Lord Brogan?” Annis asked, not seeing him anywhere.

Una turned and pointed. “Just beyond my dwelling.”

“I will go speak with him,” Annis said and handed the near empty tankard to Una.

“What of food? You have not eaten, and you need to keep up your strength if you wish to fully heal,” Una cautioned. “I will prepare you a small sack of food to take on your wander today, for you will no doubt turn hungry.”

“I am grateful for your concern and the food,” Annis said with a smile.

She found Brogan directing two men in clearing out a fairly large section of land. He smiled and waved when he saw her approach. A catch to her heart halted her steps briefly, the sight of him stealing her breath. His features were far too fine and his body far too appealing. He wore no cloak, and his sleeves were rolled up, and he stood with a confident demeanor. Then there was his smile. It captured and captivated in one glance.

*He has captured my heart.* The thought almost had her stumbling. She had never thought to lose her heart to anyone, let alone Brogan, one of the cursed lords. It troubled and



excited her at the same time, and she silently admonished herself for her thoughts.

“You are feeling well?” he asked when she reached him.

“Much better today. The pain lingers some and I am still sore to the touch, but I feel much stronger today.”

“I am glad, and I am sorry I caused you such pain.”

She tilted her head slightly, her brow scrunching. “You did not cause my pain, your mother did.”

“The curse did,” he corrected. “It follows me everywhere and touches the innocent.”

“What happened to me had nothing to do with the curse. It was the fault of a bad-tempered woman who cares for no one but herself. And I will not have you take the blame for it,” she said with a stern command.

He grinned. “That sounds like an order.”

“If need be, then so be it.” She nodded firmly as if decreeing it. “I am curious. What do you intend to build here? It is a large piece of land for one dwelling, and it sits removed from the other dwellings.”

“My home,” Brogan said proudly. “And I was hoping you would help design it.”

Annis’s mouth dropped open and she stood speechless for a moment. “You intend to make a permanent home here for yourself? What of your clan?”

“Aye, I do, and I do not desert my clan, since these people are part of my clan. I simply choose to live here rather than at the keep.”

“Your father will not be pleased.”

“It is not for my father to decide. Someday I will take his place and when that time comes, I will do what is necessary. Until that day, my home will be here. Who knows, I may even decide to build a keep here.”

“It is a soothing place,” Annis said, staring at the hills. “The hills are a lovely view whether covered in mist or

revealed in all their beauty. You would do well to build the cottage facing the hills.”

“I thought the same. What else would you suggest?”

Annis turned a smile on him. “I have many ideas and I will tell you as we wander the path.”

“Are you sure you feel well enough for the walk?” Brogan asked, his eyes narrowed in concern.

“We can keep a slow pace and rest when necessary and enjoy the food Una is preparing for us,” she said and cast a quick eye to the sky. “There is no sign of rain. If lucky, the sun may even peek through today.”

Brogan looked to the hills. “There is no mist.”

Annis kept her voice low. “People would think me crazy if they heard me say that the mist obeys the witch. But I believe it does and the mist will roll in if she wishes to talk with me.”

Brogan went and grabbed his cloak he had hung on a branch, then returned to take her hand. “Let’s get that food and be on our way.”



“NOT A SPOT of mist to be seen,” Brogan said as he studied the area around him. “Does the path seem more,” —he scratched his head— “of a path, if that makes sense?”

Brogan halted his steps alongside Annis when she stopped, her hand still wrapped in his. He did not intend to let go, worried if he did the mist would roll in quickly and steal her from him.

“I thought the same,” she said, her eyes on the ground. “It appears as though it has been traveled more. How can that be when no one can reach here without passing the village?” She shook her head. “And no one has passed through the village. We were the last ones to walk here.”

Brogan cast a slow glance around. “Maybe there is another entrance to the path.”

“Aye, over the hills,” Annis said, tilting her head back to glance up at the sprawling hill, its very top encased in mist. “That is a dangerous trek I doubt anyone would attempt.”

“I wonder what brought the witch to this particular place?” Brogan said.

“It has to have something to do with the curse.” Annis went to continue walking, then stopped suddenly, squeezing Brogan’s hand. “The bairn. The two-day-old daughter believed dead. She is here in this area.”

Brogan’s skin turned to gooseflesh. Could it be possible? “You think the witch has returned to protect her? And why now after all this time?”

“I do not know her reasoning, but it would make sense of why the witch has suddenly returned.”

“She did tell you *not yet*,” Brogan reminded. “If the lass, Wynda, is here, why does she wait?”

“I do wish she would talk with me, so we can see this done,” Annis said as they continued walking again.

Brogan was glad she included him, that she thought them cohorts in this quest. He could not, nor would he allow her to go off on her own. He would go completely insane with worry.

“What would you ask her?” Brogan said.

“I would want to know if the lass Wynda did survive can she break the curse and if so, how can I find her and how does she break the curse?”

“I want it to believe it is possible—”

Annis interrupted, knowing what he would say. “But you have been disappointed many times before and worry you will be again.”

“You understand.”

“I have been disappointed myself many times, though none can compare with what you suffer. I still understand how you feel. But all those disappointments made me realize one thing

—never would I give up. I would keep trying as long as I had breath in me.”

Brogan chuckled. “You are persistent.”

“Does that annoy you?” Why she asked puzzled her and why she should care how he responded puzzled her even more.

“Actually, I admire your tenacity,” he said with a tender smile. “You let nothing stop you. you forge ahead and see it done no matter what others think. I have met and known many women in my life, but none as remarkable as you.”

Annis laughed. “I am like no other, as my mum often told me, of which she was grateful.”

“I agree with your mum. You are like no other,” he said. *And I am grateful for that, for you belong to me and me alone.* Words he wished to say aloud, but not yet.

Her stomach gurgled loudly.

“You are hungry and so am I,” he said. “The stream is not far ahead. We can stop there and eat.”

They settled near the bank of the stream and feasted on cheese, quail eggs, and dried meat, all provided by Brogan’s father.

Brogan had helped ease her down to sit after she had winced when trying to do so herself. His strong hands had gripped her arms and lowered her slowly and did not release her until she settled comfortably.

“Your tongue must charm far better than I imagined for your father to agree so readily with your requests. I thought he would deprive you of things until his demands were met.”

“He knows what fights he cannot win and avoids them. He also knows I would let no harm befall my clan. I would do whatever was necessary to see it stay strong.”

“Then you will sire an heir?” Another question she had no idea why she asked.

“I would not want a son or daughter to suffer the curse. Odran and Rannick feel the same as I do, that if we are the last

of our clans then the curse dies with us.”

“You believe the curse was not meant for the clans, only the three men who partook in the slaughter?”

“Aye, with a strong leader left to rule, the clans can live on after us.”

“But they would not. No one would want to keep a cursed name, and your father and the other two lords must be well aware of that,” Annis said.

“The three lords all want the clans to continue no matter how many who follow us suffer, not so Odran, Rannick, and me. We want the suffering to end with us. Though, now with a possible chance of breaking the curse, I have hope all that can change for me, and everyone concerned.”

“We will see it done,” Annis said, determined. A sudden thought troubled her. “If your father and the other two lords were to find out that the MacWilliam daughter lived, they would not try to harm her, would they?”

“With King Alexander’s recent death and his young son Alexander III ascending the throne and no other MacWilliam alive, I do not see a threat to the lass. Though, those who supported King Duncan’s right to the throne might find her useful since she would be his bloodline, and possible heir to the throne if no other could be found.”

“Then if her identity was known, she would be in danger,” Annis said.

“If a curse once nearly took her life, then an oath can save it this time. If she has survived all these years, then Odran, Rannick, and I can pledge to keep her lineage a secret.”

Annis rolled her shoulders back in an attempt to ease the ache. “If the lass does live, why do you think your father and Lord Lochlann lied about seeing her killed?”

“They probably thought they had tracked down the right bairn.”

“I wonder if the witch misdirected them,” Annis said. “I cannot wait to meet such a powerful woman.”

“Witch,” he corrected, “and keep that in mind. She is a powerful witch. You must be careful. I will not see you suffer a curse.”

Annis turned a perplexed look on Brogan. “Why would she curse me?”

Brogan laughed. “Because you pestered her to death?”

“Funny,” Annis said and wrinkled her nose at him.

He laughed again. “Try as you might, you are beautiful no matter your expression.”

“I have been told since I was young how beautiful I am and by men and women alike. It means little to me since those people saw only my face and nothing else about me. So, while I do appreciate the flattery, it means little to me.”

He grinned. “I can have you bursting with glee from flattery in no time.”

Annis let loose with a short burst of laughter before saying, “You truly do think highly of yourself.”

Brogan leaned forward, his hand reaching across the cloth that held the food spread on the ground between them and gave the tip of her nose a tap. “Nay, it’s that I know you better than anyone.”

“You think so,” she challenged.

“Nay, *mo ghràdh*, I know so.”

The wink did it. She took on his challenge. “Then by all means have me burst with glee from your flattery.”

“True flattery,” he corrected.

“Of course, what other is there?” she teased playfully.

“This obviously is a challenge and when I win, I expect something in return.”

“Which is?” Annis asked suspiciously, seeing a gleam in his soft blue eyes and wondering if he would ask something she could not give or did not want to give.

“You must flatter me in return, and truthfully.”

What could she possibly flatter him with that was truthful? What did it matter? He would not win. “Since you will not be victorious, I can easily accept the challenge. Now flatter me.”

His eyes roamed over her as if he was searching her body for the words and she tasted victory.

Brogan leaned forward. “Your mind is more brilliant than a man’s when it comes to building.” Her eyes went wide, and her face cracked in a smile. “Never have I heard of such unique construction and thorough detail to the structures you talk of building. The village you construct for us will be a shining example of architecture that all will come to see and praise.”

Annis’s face burst wide with a smile, and she squealed with excitement. “Truthfully?”

“Aye, truthfully. Your talent amazes me, *mo ghràdh*, and I am proud to work with you.”

She squealed with delight and threw herself at him, hugging his neck and kissing his cheeks and lips repeatedly.

Brogan wanted to wrap his arms around her, but he was cautious of her back. His hands went to her waist instead to keep her steady and to keep him from tumbling back from her forceful enthusiasm while he enjoyed her endless kisses. That was until...

Annis leaned away from him, though his hands at her waist kept her close. “You won.”

He grinned. “Aye, I did and with the truth. Now it is your turn.”

She thought she would be stumped as to what to say, but the words flowed freely and truthfully. “When we first met, I thought you nothing more than a foolish charmer. I was wrong. It is a mask you wear. And when I catch a glimpse of the man behind that mask, I see a man who possesses a kind soul and a generous heart that few men ever possess. I find myself drawn to you, eager to see you, spend time with you, talk with you. And you do one thing that no man has ever done for me... you make me smile and often.”

She more than flattered, she stole his heart completely. It would never beat again without her by his side. He responded instinctively. He kissed her.

Her own words touched her as much as they touched him, and her arms tightened around his neck, needing his kiss more than she realized.

Brogan kept his hands at her waist as he eased down on his back, letting her settle on top of him. The kiss took on an urgency, a need that had been awaiting this moment and finally broke loose. It had been pent up since the incident with his mother, growing ever stronger. The kiss was necessary to his breath, to his soul, to his finally feeling whole again.

Annis could not get enough of the kiss. It fed a hungry thirst she had not realized she'd had. She could not get enough of his lips, his taste, the strength of him beneath her. This is what she had been missing since returning home; his kisses, his touch, being close with him. And she had not realized it until this very moment. There had been an emptiness to her the last two days she had not understood. She had thought she had missed her sisters, Bliss always there taking care of her when she got hurt or Elysia sleeping close against her at night. But it was not that at all. It was Brogan. She had missed the closeness they had come to share, had missed it terribly.

Their mouths parted to take a breath.

“If we do not stop now, we will do more than kiss,” he said, leaving the choice to her.

Annis was torn. She wanted to couple with him desperately, but did she dare? Did she want him out of need or out of love? The choice lingered there a moment and the decision was made for her.

They heard the distinct growl of a wolf, and he was not far from them, and either was the mist that rolled in rapidly around them.



**B**rogan hurried to stand, taking Annis with him, his worry growing as the mist suddenly rushed in to capture them. It had taken only moments for it to grow thick, leaving them barely able to see in front of them.

A growling snarl sounded close by, and Brogan's hand went to the hilt of his sword only to recall that he had placed his weapon on the ground when they sat to eat.

"Do not let go of my hand while I reach for my sword on the ground," he ordered.

Annis bent with him as best she could.

He heard her wince and swore unable to find his sword.

"Hurry, it pains me to keep bent like this," she said.

Another quick search and he still could not find it and he could not go without it. "I need both hands. Keep yourself against me. Do not let our bodies separate."

The wolf howled this time and Brogan cursed again. He hurried his search. It was not until he stood with his sword in his hand that he realized he could not feel her against him.

"ANNIS!" he cried out.

"BROGAN," she called back.

Relieved to hear her but frightened beyond belief that he was unable to see her, he called out, "Talk, Annis, and I will follow your voice."

“Brogan,” she called out again and sounded farther away.

“ANNIS!” he called out frantically, fighting to see through the heavy mist.

“Brogan.”

His name was so faint he could barely hear it and he went to call out to her again when he caught the glow of two beady black eyes as they rushed towards him.



“BROGAN!” Annis shouted until her throat pained her. His voice had faded away, but she had not moved. How had they become separated? Her heart pounded in her chest and fear had moisture dotting her brow.

The witch was here, and she had purposely separated them. This was her chance, possibly her only chance to find out what she needed to do to save Bliss and Brogan.

“Show yourself, witch!” Annis bravely called out.

“Foolish or courageous, I cannot decide which one you are.”

Annis turned at the sound of the pompous voice and stared in complete shock at the woman the parting mist revealed. She stood tall, erect, proud as if she were a noble and expected obedience. A staff as tall as herself, was grasped in her right hand. Various symbols had been intricately carved in it, forming a distinct pattern and a shiny stone set atop the staff and was secured with what appeared to be a vine of some kind. Annis thought of Elysia when she spotted the embroidery on the witch’s dark cloak. Elysia would have admired the beautiful designs and the skill it took to stitch them. Her hair was pure white, wisps of it falling across her brow and down the sides while the rest was plaited in an intricate braid that laid over her shoulder down to her waist. What surprised her the most was that though age lines graced her face, they did not hide her soft beauty.

“Did you expect me to be ugly, decrepit, and feeble as most fools believe witches to be?” she asked, continuing to be condescending.

Annis’s chin went up along with her ire. “It is your need to appear important that surprises me.”

The witch’s brow rose. “You do not disappoint, Annis. You are as feisty as I thought you would be.”

“I am determined and will not be deterred from saving my sister Bliss, but first tell me that Brogan has not and will not be harmed.”

“I am not interested in him. It is you, and only you, I will speak to,” the witch said with a sternness that left no doubt she would have her way.

“He is safe?” Annis asked, wanting her to confirm it.

“He is as safe as one can be who is cursed.”

“That does not appease me,” Annis admonished. “Is he safe, or isn’t he?”

Her pompous tone deepened. “Foolish or courageous. I definitely have not decided yet. Brogan is safe... for now.”

Annis felt her heart melt with relief, and she wasted not a minute in asking, “Tell me how to break this curse set upon the three lords.”

The witch waved her hand dismissively. “Not yet. It is not time.”

“Bliss has no time. I must save her,” Annis begged.

Again, the witch dismissed her concern with a dismissive wave. “Bliss is safe for now.”

Annis’s legs grew weak, her body withering with relief.

“You must be aware that I will not part freely with what you seek.”

“I have coins,” Annis said, annoyed she had not brought them with her to show the witch.

“Coins serve no purpose to me.”

Annis recalled Cumina warning her to be careful when bargaining with the witch. Though fearful, she kept her demeanor as strong as possible. “What do you want in return for the information I seek.”

“I have yet to decide.”

“When will you decide?” Annis asked, annoyed and not hiding it.

“When it is time,” the witch snapped.

“The bairn, the daughter of Lady Aila and Lord Brochan, she survived, didn’t she?”

“You are far wiser than those around you, which is why you have little patience with most of them.”

“Your answer is clear—the bairn survived and is now a grown woman. She is the one who can break the curse,” Annis said, her relief growing stronger.

The witch raised her staff, and the mist began to swirl around her. “There is far more danger to this curse than you know. Think wisely on what you seek, for the cost may be deadly.”

The mist swallowed the witch. “We will speak again.”

“When?” Annis called out.

“When I summon you.”

Annis could not see anything, the mist far too thick. She jumped at the sharp squawk of the raven that sounded near her ear and thought she felt its wing brush her cheek.



BROGAN DUCKED as the raven flew at him and kept a keen ear, expecting another attack when the mist rapidly dissipated. He quickly glanced about, searching for Annis. Not seeing her he turned and there she stood in front of him.

He grabbed her and squeezed her tight, her arms going around his waist and hugging him just as tight. He said not a

word and neither did she. They simply stood hugging each other, squeezing tight, holding on, afraid to let go. Afraid to lose each other.

“I will never ever let go of your hand again when we are here,” he said.

She reluctantly moved her head off his chest, his familiar scent of woodfire and earth comforting. “You must. The witch will speak with me and only me.”

“You talked with her? She is real?” he asked, not quite believing it.

“She is real. I met her. She stood not far from me,” Annis said as if she could not quite believe it herself.

Brogan cast a cautious glance around. “You can tell me all of it as soon as we leave here.”

Annis agreed with a nod.

Brogan released her quickly, though grabbed her hand. “Your back. I needed to hold you, feel you against me. I forgot about your wounds.”

Annis shook her head. “Strange, my back doesn’t hurt at all.”

Brogan glanced around once more. “We leave now.”

They kept a good pace and Brogan kept his hand locked firmly around hers. He was not letting her go. Not now. Not ever.

When they left the path and headed toward the village, Brogan said, “Tell me everything.”

“She is not what I expected, and she is bold with her tongue,” Annis said.

Brogan grew alarmed. “Tell me you held your tongue.”

Annis shivered. “At first I did. Her presence intimidates, but my need for answers sharpened my tongue.”

Brogan stopped and took hold of her shoulders. “How many times have I warned you—she is a witch. You are not.

You do not possess her powers. Her harm can be great. I have lived it these many years.”

Annis drifted into the crook of his arm. “And we will see your suffering brought to an end.”

His arm went around her carefully, waiting to see if she winced and when she didn’t, he eased her against him.

“She told me Bliss is safe for now. She said again it is not time, though she did not say when it would be time. She told me we would speak again, that she would summon me when she wished to speak with me. She also told me she did not know if I was foolish or courageous.”

“You are both,” he said hastily and continued to walk, keeping her tucked in the crook of his arm.

Annis smiled. “You have come to know me well.”

“I believe I knew you when we first met, and you fainted.” He laughed. “And when you came to, your tongue was sharp and unafraid.”

“You were—”

“My charming self,” he finished with another laugh.

“Concerned,” Annis corrected. “Your charming nature distracted from the concern you had for me. It did not allow me to see your kind soul.”

“It sneaks out every now and then,” he whispered as if no one was to know. “Tell me more about the witch.”

“She told me there is far more danger to the curse than I know but said no more on it.”

Brogan did not like that, not at all. “I will not see you placed in danger for the sake of the curse.”

“We must do what must be done or many will continue to suffer. Besides, I have you to protect me,” she said with a playful poke to his side.

“Aye, you do, and I will protect you, but I have not the knowledge nor skill to keep you safe against the witch,” he admitted to his own annoyance.

“I cannot say if she wishes me harm. I believe she is here at this time for a specific reason and that somehow, I am part of that reason. We can only wait and see what that might be.”

“I am not a patient man when it comes to your safety. Did she say anything that made you feel you could be harmed?”

*Think wisely of what you seek. The cost may be deadly.*

Her warning rang in her mind.

“Tell me,” Brogan insisted, halting after seeing something had upset her. “And I trust you will not lie to me since I have my eyes on your nose.”

Annis chuckled and covered her nose.

Brogan smiled and brushed her hand away, and said softly, “Tell me, *mo ghràdh*.”

She repeated her exact words since they continued to toll in her mind. “Think wisely of what you seek. The cost may be deadly.”

**B**rogan watched Annis instruct the men in the various repairs that continued to be made to the existing dwellings and also discussing the new ones planned. At first the few men his father had sent with Brogan seemed annoyed at being here, and that a woman instructed them had ignited some tempers, but after barely three days that had changed. He had thought to warn the men, order them if necessary to follow Annis's orders. It had not been necessary. Annis handled the men well, having learned from the last time she had been given an opportunity to instruct men and it not going well. This time, she had taken charge without the men realizing it. He noticed the men began to smile and laugh often, as if both had been foreign to them and now were becoming more commonplace.

It also was not lost on Brogan that the men had realized he was not the hard taskmaster his father was and that discovery had made all the difference.

“A word, my lord,” Rudd said.

Brogan stepped away from the tree he had been leaning against. “What is it, Rudd?”

“The men worry about the raven that shows up now and again to perch on a branch and watch them. They believe the bird is a bad omen.”

“I cannot say I blame them,” Brogan said, having caught the beady-eyed bird staring at him a few times. “But there is



not much that can be done about it. The bird is free to fly where it wishes.”

“The men had thought of—”

Brogan did not let him finish. “If they think to harm the bird in any way, they will suffer harm themselves—at my hands. The raven is not to be touched.”

The screech of a bird had them both dropping their heads back to look at the overhead branches and see the raven sitting there staring down at them, issuing his own warning.

“I will make sure the men understand, my lord,” Rudd said and could not depart fast enough.

Brogan ignored the raven, since he had little other choice, his glance going to Annis. He was not surprised to see her looking to the hills. Three days and no word from the witch had Annis concerned. He was more worried about her meeting the witch again. How did he protect her when he was not able to see her through the mist? And how did he fight against a witch?

He wasn’t surprised when he saw her turn and approach him. He knew what she would say when she reached him—and he was right.

“We will wander the path tomorrow.”

Her stance alone, her hands planted firmly on her hips, and her sharp tone let him know she would not be dissuaded.

He thought to suggest differently but it would be a futile effort. “If that is what you want.”

“I cannot keep waiting. Every day that goes by I worry more and more for Bliss.”

He tried to offer her some solace. “The witch told you she was safe for now.”

“How long is now?” she argued and shook her head. “Nay, I wait no more. I have instructed the men well and Risley knows much about building. He will be able to guide them. We go tomorrow at first light.”

Brogan glanced toward the hills, worried at what tomorrow may bring.



BROGAN TOOK her hand as they approached the mist covered hills, little good that it would do if the witch appeared. But he would hold on to her for as long as he could and he would remain where he stood if she disappeared in the mist, knowing last time she had not been that far from him.

The mist grew heavy not long after they entered the path and Brogan tightened his hand around Annis's. "Watch your tongue with her, Annis."

"Watching my tongue will get me no answers," she said.

"I will not see you harmed," he warned.

"You cannot protect Annis against me."

Brogan stopped along with Annis, both hearing the sharp voice.

"I would think again on that," Brogan threatened.

A disgusted sigh echoed around them. "A man in love is the worst fool to deal with. Begone with you."

Brogan felt Annis's hand slip out of his and he frantically reached for her only to find himself grasping at nothing more than the mist, and he called out, "I am here, Annis."

"Brogan!"

His name faded away and fear squeezed at Brogan's stomach. He could do nothing but wait as the mist grew thicker around him.

Annis watched as the mist parted and once again the witch showed herself. She did not wait to speak her mind. "How long do you expect me to wait?"

"Patience is a virtue," the witch said.

“For those who have time for it. I have no time for patience. Tell me what I need to know or tell me why I must wait for the information,” Annis demanded and for a moment she thought she caught the witch smile.

“You will learn that time is everything concerning the curse and you will do well to pay it mind. However, the time is right for you to leave this area and continue your quest.”

Annis’s eyes lit with excitement. “The MacWilliam bairn lived, didn’t she?”

“Of course, she did,” the witch said, her chin going up a notch. “Those fools thought they could outwit my curse and they suffered for it and will continue to suffer if you do not see this made right.”

“How do I make it right?” Annis asked anxiously.

“Find the lass, and all will come to pass,” the witch said. “You must find the woman who took the bairn. But beware, there are those who will try to stop you. Those who have other plans. See them for who they are.”

“Can you not tell me who they are?” Annis asked, annoyed.

“They hide behind lies, sprout meaningless words, and remain in the shadows. You will need all your courage to find them.”

Annis understood that was all she would share about the unknown people and that was fine with her. Her concern was more for... “And what of Bliss?”

“Your sister has time yet. As the curse unravels you will understand why. But—” She raised her staff. “If the curse is not broken, then no one is safe. Not Bliss. Not you. Not Elysia. And least of all not the three cursed lords.”

“Why did you give Lady Aila the curse?” Annis asked, more curious than she had ever been about it.

“The men deserved what they got. They claimed themselves friends of Lord Brochan, then turned their backs on him and Lady Aila. They were willing to take the life of an

innocent bairn when Lord Brochan had fought beside them to save their families. Lord Lochlann was the worst, having been like a brother to Brochan. I wanted the three lords to suffer more, not so Aila. She wanted her daughter to live, to be able to love, and have a good life.”

“You call them Brochan and Aila as if you knew them well enough to do so,” Annis said.

The witch raised her brow. “Like you do with Lord Brogan?”

“It seems natural to do since I think of him more as a friend.”

The witch’s brow went up even higher. “A friend. I believe you favor him much more than merely a friend, as he does you.”

“We are finding our way,” Annis said. “When this is done, the curse broken, then Brogan and I will see what there is between us.”

“My dear child, if you do not open your eyes to what is in front of you with Brogan, then your quest will certainly end in failure,” the witch warned with sharp annoyance.

Annis took offense to that. “I see Brogan clearly enough. His tongue may charm but he has a good heart, and I know he cares for me. I believe I care for him more than I want to admit, but now is not the time to explore it.”

“For a wise woman, you are a fool when it comes to a man.”

Annis bristled. “I am no fool. I had no want for a husband. I have seen how some husbands treat their wives and their bairns. I would not tolerate such nonsense or abuse. He would be dead and buried fast enough, so I thought it wise to abstain from marriage.”

The witch laughed. “I suppose that would be wise of you.”

“Most men think me beautiful, but none can tolerate me, except Brogan. He is patient and does not grow upset with me —”

“Or your quick tongue and stubborn nature?”

“He possesses that virtue you highly praise... patience,” Annis said in defense of Brogan. “He kept me from being locked in his father’s dungeon and he defended me against his father and mother.”

“His father is a hard taskmaster.” The witch tapped her chin in question. “Why would he surrender to his son so easily?”

“Brogan’s tongue can charm.”

“Lord Balloch is not a man to be charmed easily. It is one reason Lord Brogan avoids his father. The man does nothing but demand from everyone, especially his son. The one command he expects his son to obey is to wed and produce an heir. I ask you again why Lord Balloch would easily surrender to his son’s demand?”

“He sees it as wise,” Annis said, though the witch’s remark did have her giving a second thought to it.

“If you close your eyes to the obvious, how will you ever find the lass I send you to search for?” the witch asked impatiently.

“You talk in circles,” Annis accused, annoyed with herself for not understanding what the witch implied.

“And you allow the obvious to slip right past you,” the witch snapped. “How will you succeed if you remain blind?”

Annis was quick to snap back. “I have had enough of your riddles. Point me where I need to go to find this woman.”

“Be gone. You disappoint me,” the witch said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“You disappoint me as well,” Annis shot back.

The witch’s eyes narrowed. “And how have I done that, Annis?”

“You avoid answers to some of my questions. Do you wish to misguide me for some reason? Or do you not wish me to know that you obviously were more familiar with Lord

Brochan and Lady Aila than you will admit or want anyone to know. And I have to ask myself why?"

"In due time, my dear," the witch said.

"As I told you, I do not have time, especially for nonsense or what is between Lord Brogan and me. My concern is not only to free my sister but Brogan and the other lords as well. So, stop wasting my time and tell me what I need to know to see this task done," Annis demanded.

The witch's face brightened. "Perhaps you are not a disappointment after all, Annis. Head north and those you meet along the way inquire about an older woman who walks with a limp. And since you showed me your true mettle, I will give you this." She reached into her cloak and withdrew a small pouch. "Take this."

Annis took it from the witch.

"You will need it to keep yourself from getting with child while on your quest, since your *husband* is such a virile man. Make a brew and drink it every day though the leaves mixed with your food will work as well."

Annis stared at the witch, her lips moving but words failing her, until finally she said, "Husband?"

"Think on it, Annis, and I will see you again," the witch said, her words fading as the mist slowly receded.

Annis's mind was a jumble of racing thoughts. Several things the witch had said to her returned to haunt her and she began to make sense of them. But it could not be.

The thought struck her hard. She could not be wed to Brogan.

Surely, he would have told her. Yet it all began to make sense. His father not arguing with him about her being taken to the dungeon. How his father so easily agreed to refurbish the small village. That he had told his father to speak with his wife after she had taken a stick to Annis. How Brogan had followed after her—his wife.

Anger bubbled inside her, and she was ready to erupt when the mist cleared.

Brogan stood there, a smile on his face, relieved to see her.

She marched over to him and punched him in the arm. “We are married?”

Brogan rubbed his arm, not that she hurt him. Her fist probably stung more than his arm. “I can explain.”

“You have much to explain,” Annis said, planting her hands on her hips and glaring at him.

Brogan retained his smile, hoping it would help. “It is both our faults we are wed.”

She scrunched her brow and shook her head. “That makes no sense.”

“Think on it, Annis, for I thought the same when I was first told,” he confessed.

“Who told you?”

“Chieftain Emory,” Brogan said. “He caught up with me when I was not far from the keep and explained.”

“I am listening,” she said, fearful the truth would reveal that she was his wife. What then?

“As I said, it was our own doing, which is what Chieftain Emory told me. Once you proclaimed you would wed me, so that Bliss did not have to wed Rannick, and I agreed to the same, to wed you—our fate was sealed. Bliss’s bargain was for you to choose your husband and so you did, and I chose freely to wed you. We accepted each other and the marriage documents were signed and sealed, and we sealed our fate. We are husband and wife.”

Annis shook her head, finding it difficult to believe, and yet finding it plausible.

“I had hoped to get you to agree to wed me before you found out, so that it would be your choice. I believe we make a fine pair and could have a good marriage. I never thought to wed, never found anyone I wished to wed—until you.

Regardless of how we feel, we are wed, and nothing is going to change that.”

“I am stuck with you?” she asked.

He stepped closer to her. “Is that how you think of it? That you are stuck with me? Because the way you return my kisses and the way you respond to my touch tells me otherwise.” His hand grabbed at the back of her neck and yanked her toward him, and his lips came down on hers.

It was not a gentle kiss. It was a possessive one. She could sense the strength of his claim on her and thought that he would leave a mark that let others know she belonged to him. Would others see it or was it that she could feel it?

His hands went to cup her face when he ended the powerful kiss that left her legs weak and her passion strong. He rained kisses along her lips, marking them further and leaving them puffed and tingling, and wanting more.

“There is something between us. You can deny it, fight it, ignore it all you want, but it is not going away. You are going to have to confront it whether you want to or not. You are my wife, and I am your husband.”

Annis had no response to his declaration. She simply stared at him, not a hint at what she should say or do.

Brogan took charge. “We can discuss this later.” He reached for her hand, closing his warm one around her chilled one. “Tell me what the witch had to say.”

Annis found her tongue and her courage, or was it her stubbornness that took hold? She ripped her hand out of his. “Husband or not, you will not dictate to me.” She walked off, her anger mounting, not certain if it was the dictate or his failure to tell her they were wed.

Brogan reached her in a few easy strides and took hold of her arm, bringing her to an abrupt stop.

But before he could speak, Annis did. “You could have told me right away.”



“And have you rant and rage at me that you did not want to be my wife, though I cannot say I would blame you. It is far too much to ask of a woman to wed a man as burdened with a curse as I am.”

“Not only burdened with a curse but with a wife you do not want,” she said, annoyed at the tears threatening her eyes and wondering why she was teary-eyed at the thought.

“I never said I did not want you as a wife,” he said, moving closer to her, ready to catch her tears brimming her eyes.

“You said so that day when we were told we would be wed,” she reminded.

“Aye, to save you from wedding me—a cursed man.”

“I am not fearful of the curse. It was your pompous nature that irritated me,” she said, trying to sniffle back her tears and silently admonishing herself for a sensitive nature that did not pair well with her tenaciousness.

He ran his thumb along the corner of one eye, catching the single tear as it slipped out. “And it was your daring tongue that fascinated me.” Another tear slipped out and he caught it.

“What have I done, Brogan? If I had not been so stubborn and wed you when I was told, Bliss would not be in danger.”

“And the curse would not have the chance to be broken,” he said, his arm going around her. “Fate brought us together for a reason, Annis, and I for one am glad she did. But that can wait for another day. You came to save Bliss and that is what we will do.”

“And save you,” she said, another tear trickling down her cheek to be scooped away by his tender touch. “I will save you as well.”

Brogan stared at her a moment and his words surprised him. “If you break the curse and free me, Annis, I will do the same for you. I will free you from this unwanted marriage.”

Her heart slammed in her chest, and she thought it shattered into a million pieces. The pain she felt at that

moment left no doubt in her mind—she loved Brogan. And there was no way she wanted to lose him, a sobering thought for sure.

“The choice is yours to make. I will leave it to you,” he said and kissed her gently. “That does not mean I will not try to persuade you to remain my wife.”

“And you think you can do that—persuade me?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“Easily, *my ghràdh*,” he said with a chuckle.

“That’s a challenge I accept,” she said and stepped away from him to continue along the path to the village.

“A warning. You have no chance against my charm,” he said as he rushed up behind her. “But enough of that. Tell me what the witch had to say.”

Annis detailed her conversation with the witch about the curse.

Brogan stopped just before they reached the village. “The MacWilliam bairn does live?”

“So says the witch and the old woman with the limp will point us to her. ‘Find the lass and all will come to pass’ is what she said. How, I do not know, and I am not going to concern myself with that right now. First, we must find this woman.” He nodded agreeing, but Annis wondered what he truly thought since his father had lied to him about killing the MacWilliam bairn.

Annis also shared the witch’s warning. “She also told me to beware, that there are those who will try to stop me that they have other plans. She told me to see them for who they are. Though it will not be easy since she cautioned that they hide behind lies, sprout meaningless words, and remain in the shadows.”

“She speaks of people who say and show one thing and mean another. They are not easy to recognize. And what other plans could they have? Many want the curse broken and all the suffering that goes with it finally laid to rest, so they would

have no problem with our quest.” He shook his head. “It makes no sense.”

“She told me in time, all will be revealed. For now, the quest takes us to find the older woman with a limp.”

Brogan took both her hands in his before she could walk away. “I am going to tell everyone we are wed. More protection will be afforded to you that way.” He kissed her before she could protest. “The decision is not open for discussion.”

“What if in the end I choose not to stay wed to you?” she asked, the suggestion alone a troubling thought.

Her words were like a punch to his gut, and he tried not to let it show, but he did not think he was successful. “We will face that if the time comes.”

She had caught the hurt in his eyes though it vanished fast. Did he care enough for her that he actually wanted her as his wife? She thought him a good man, so wouldn't he be a good husband to her? And though she didn't know much about love, she had to admit, at least to herself, that she was falling or had fallen in love with him. If she had found love, would she be foolish enough to let it go? There was time to see how they would fair together. Time to see if what she was feeling for him could be... something she did not want to lose.

**T**hey entered the village and Brogan gathered everyone around.

Brogan kept hold of her hand as he spoke. “I have news. We thought not to share it at first, but with all that has gone on, Annis and I believe it is best you all know.”

Annis was pleased he included her in the decision.

“What I am about to tell you remains here with the group until otherwise told,” Brogan said, glancing around and pleased to see everyone bobbing their heads.

“We can keep a silent tongue,” Seward said with pride and ‘ayes’ rang out in agreement.

“We knew we could trust you,” Brogan said, and smiles broke out on all the faces, even the MacRae warriors.

“Tell us,” Maddie urged.

Brogan smiled and announced gleefully. “Annis and are wed.”

Seeing the joy that filled him as he spoke, Annis believed their marriage truly made him happy.

Cheers filled the air and the men approached Brogan to shake his hand.

Una hurried to hug Annis, then gasped and stepped back. “Forgive my audacity, Lady Annis.”

“Nonsense, Una. We are friends and you will call me Annis like you have always done.” She prevented any argument by reminding, “Our marriage will be known if you address me any other way.”

Una gasped again. “You are right. I did not think.” She smiled. “Annis.”

Annis hugged the woman, Maddie as well when she drifted over, and Luella and Odell also gave her generous hugs. It did Annis’s heart good to have the women there, joyful for her. Her sisters would be joyful if Annis was happy, if the choice had been hers. It actually had been, but for a far different reason. That reason had now changed.

Everyone returned to work while Brogan took Rudd and Iver aside. He let them know that Annis and he would be leaving in the morning to continue their quest. He shared no details but assured them Annis and he would return to make this their home.

Iver was pleased. “I look forward to serving you and Lady Annis.”

Rudd lingered after Iver walked away. “I would like to serve you as well, my lord. Is it possible for me to remain here with you and not return to your father?”

“I was going to speak to you about that. My father urged me to choose a warrior to serve me permanently since I have finally appeased him and wed.”

“I would be honored, sir, to be chosen and I would serve you well,” Rudd said eagerly.

“Good, since I have already chosen you. I will need you to oversee the building and protection of the village while I am gone.”

Rudd squared his shoulders. “You have my word, my lord, that the work will get done and the clan will be well-protected. Some of the other men wish to remain here as well.”

“I see no problem in arranging that. Are any of them wed?” Brogan asked.

“Two, my lord.”

“Once dwellings are built for them, have their wives brought here,” Brogan said. “I know there is much work to be done here and I do want my cottage finished before winter sets in. You will need more hands to accomplish that. Take a message to my father requesting more men and whatever else you need. Also tell him that all goes well, and he will soon have what he wants.”

“Aye, my lord, and may I say again how pleased I am for you and Lady Annis. It is heartening to see a husband and wife who truly love each other. May God bless your union.”

Brogan smiled as Rudd walked away. He was counting on love to seal their marriage, so it was heartening that Rudd had spotted it. He hoped it would not take long for Annis to see it for herself. He may have offered her freedom, he only hoped she realized she was free being wed to him.

Night settled in fast, and all had been made ready for Brogan and Annis to take their leave in the morning.

Annis approached the cottage she shared with Una to find, Iver, Una, and Brogan standing outside it.

Brogan held up his hands as if defending himself. “They insist we have the cottage for the night.”

“Aye, we do,” Iver said.

“It is only right and proper,” Una said with a firm nod that meant she would brook no argument. “You are wed, and you should share a bed, especially after you have been apart since arriving here.” She smiled wide, opened the cottage door, and stepped aside for Brogan and Annis to enter.

Annis froze not sure what to do. She was not ready for this. She looked to Brogan, and he hurried to her, slipping his arm around her and guiding her through the door to close behind them after thanking Iver and Una for their generosity.

A pleasant scent filled the small cottage and the blankets had been turned back on the bed that looked to have been freshened. Annis stared at the bed. She had only shared a bed

with her sister Elysia. She had not given thought to sharing a bed with a man.

Annis turned to Brogan. "I am not ready for this."

"I will not force anything on you, Annis," he said softly, feeling a slight tremble to her body.

She hurried to grab the pouch the witch had given her that she had hung from the hilt of her dagger at her waist. "The witch gave this to me to prevent a bairn from taking root."

"Do you not want bairns?" Brogan asked, slipping his shirt off.

She spoke her concern. "I do not think I would make a good mother."

"Why when you have so much to offer a bairn?" he asked, slipping her cloak off her shoulders and taking the pouch from her hand to place on the table.

"What do I have to offer?" she asked, shaking her head, not agreeing with him and trying to keep her eyes off his defined chest that tempted more than her eyes.

He kissed her cheek. "Your hunger for knowledge. Something many lack and is much in need."

She scrunched her brow confused.

He went to the bed and sat to remove his boots. "You strive to learn and when you have bairns you will share your knowledge to help them grow into fine men and women."

Annis nipped at her lower lip. "You could give me all lads, then I can teach them how to build and you can teach them to master weapons."

His heart beat rapidly that she would even suggest they have bairns. It meant she gave thought to the possibility. "I will do my best to see we have many sons."

She shook her head, realizing what she had said. "This must wait. I cannot be distracted from my quest. Bliss must come first."

He stood and went to her. “You are as ready for sleep as I am and that is what we will do.”

Relief had her nodding.

“Let me help you out of your tunic,” he said, his hands going to her sides to gather the garment in his hands.

She grabbed his hands, her eyes wide with uncertainty.

“Only your tunic, wife,” he said, reminding her they were wed, and all was proper.

She nodded again and Brogan quickly rid her of her tunic, hanging it on one of the pegs on the wall.

He took her hand to walk to the bed, but she would not budge.

Her eyes turned wide. “If we seal our vows, we seal our marriage forever.”

“I can still release you,” he said, the thought not setting well with him.

She shook her head. “Nay. Vows are vows. They must be honored. They cannot be broken.”

“A thought we will keep in mind,” he said. “Now come to bed and sleep.”

“Brogan,” she said on a whisper.

His hand cupped her cheek and he kissed her gently. “You have my word, though it is most difficult to give, that I will do nothing more than sleep beside you tonight, unless you decide otherwise.”

“I am not ready,” she said firmly and for a third time and wondered if it was an excuse.

He tugged her to follow him to the bed. “We sleep.”

He took her boots off to place them with his by the fire and ushered her into bed, but she backed away.

“I will not sleep by the wall.”

“You want to be able to escape me?” he asked with a chuckle and climbed into bed, rolling over by the wall.



She followed him into bed, clinging to the edge. “I will not be trapped.”

Brogan was about to wrap himself around her and stopped. “You are never to feel trapped with me. I will never hold you against your will.”

Annis turned on her side to face him. “Your word on that.”

“You have my word,” he said, placing a gentle hand at her waist. “A kiss goodnight?”

Did she trust herself? His kisses sparked a passion in her that she feared she might not be able to contain. Yet, surprisingly, lying here close to him was more pleasant than she expected.

She moved closer to him. “One kiss.”

Brogan brought his lips to hers, reminding himself to be gentle and brief, but once their lips touched, passion chased all other thoughts away.

Annis sighed when his lips rested upon hers and gently coaxed her lips to respond, not that she needed much coaxing. The last few days they barely had had time alone and she had missed his kisses and the way they would tempt and tease her. And the way he had made her feel that day in the woods continued to linger in her mind. She might have said she was not ready for this, but it was more that she was not ready for what might come of this.

At the moment, she did not care, all that mattered was their kiss and the pleasure it brought.

She cuddled closer to him, and his arm went around her to hug her against him. He loved the feel of her and though he would prefer her naked, this was at least a prelude to future intimacy. He just needed to keep control of his raging desire for her.

He could have gone on kissing her, coaxing and teasing her into submission, but that was not what he wanted from her. He did not want her surrender... he wanted her to love him freely.

He kissed her brow after he ended the kiss and hearing her sigh of disappointment was pleased to know she had enjoyed the kiss as much as he had. He was also surprised when she rested her head on his shoulder.

“You are a decent man, Brogan of the Clan MacRae,” she said, cuddling against him.

“Shhh, you will damage my reputation,” he whispered on a chuckle.

“The damage was done when we wed. You are bound to me now and no other,” she warned with a tap to his naked chest.

That she laid claim to him did much for his ego, but far more for his heart. “Aye, wife, I am bound to you.”

A thought struck her that brought light tears to her eyes. They were not bound together until their vows were sealed. Was she ready to commit to a life with him when Bliss’s fate had yet to be decided? Too many thoughts, too many decisions, not enough clarity for either.

His hand caressed her arm, leaving a tingle to whisper through her.

“Sleep, wife,” he said softly, his arm snug around her. “Tomorrow is another day.”



ANNIS FOUND herself teary-eyed once again when she bid goodbye to Una and the others in the village. They all wished her a safe journey and hoped that she would not be gone long from home.

That they had made it known that this was her home and they looked forward to her return is what caused her tears. She had unexpectedly found a home. She just hoped her new home would include her sisters.

Annis was pleased her quest would continue on a horse. It would enable her to go farther in a given day than when she

walked. Brogan helped her mount before mounting Belle and they were soon on their way.

They had not spoken much this morning, Annis having woke before Brogan to find herself straddled nearly on top of him and his manhood poking her and causing all sorts of mayhem in her nether regions. She had quickly disentangled herself, dressed, and rushed out of the cottage to the welcoming brisk air.

Brogan cast a glance to Annis, seated rigid on her horse and lost in her thoughts, and he wondered if her thoughts mirrored his own. He had woken with a raging need for his wife after finding her wrapped tightly around him and that private little place of hers he so desperately wanted to get to know had been far too close to his manhood, which of course rose to the temptation.

He had been relieved when she had slipped out of bed and left. Her absence cooled his ardor, and he was able to get out of bed.

He did not see any point in ignoring last night and asked, "You slept well."

Her shoulders relaxed and she turned a smile on him. "I slept better than I thought I would."

"I have a soothing effect on you," he teased and was surprised when she agreed.

She chuckled. "You do and a prickly effect as well."

"That is good, it keeps you alert."

"Something we both need to remain on this quest," she reminded, her mind far too occupied with thoughts she had little time for. The witch existed, which meant it was possible to break the curse and he needed his concentration on that and was glad he turned the conversation to the problem at hand.

"My father and the other lords believed it was Gunna, Lady Aila's servant, who gave her the power to curse them. But the witch admits she gave Lady Aila the power to cast a curse. How was she able to meet with the witch in the hills?"

“I thought the same,” Annis admitted. “How had Lady Aila made contact with the witch? How had she even known about her? The witch made no mention of it, but do you think Gunna could be the woman with the limp we search for?”

“I suppose it is possible, though I find it difficult to believe that she would have remained in this area. If she valued her life and that of the bairn, she would have left here many years ago.”

“Perhaps she has returned with the bairn, now a full-grown woman, for a reason,” Annis said.

“What might that be?” he asked, though he had a good idea.

“Revenge? Justice?”

Annis’s words echoed his thoughts.

They rode in silence for a while, Brogan keeping a keen watch on their surroundings.

Annis finally asked, “Are there any villages nearby?”

“There are crofts scattered here and there and a small village or two on the outskirts of my clan.”

“What clans border Clan MacRae land?” she asked.

“Clan MacClaren, Rannick’s clan, borders us to the north, Clan MacBridan, Odran’s clan, to the south, and smaller clans flank us to the east and west, Clan MacFarden, the one stirring trouble with Clan MacBridan, being one of them.”

Curiosity had Annis asking, “What of the Clan MacWilliam? What happened to their land?”

“The land was divided between the three cursed lords.”

“Equally?” she asked, her curiosity far from settled.

“More was granted to the Clan MacClaren since Lord Lochlann had led the group against the Clan MacWilliam. And the reason many believe the Clan MacClaren suffered worse than the other two clans.”

Brogan suddenly rose up on his horse, his head turning as if expecting to see someone.

“What is it?” Annis asked, casting a glance about as well.

“Do you hear that?” Brogan asked, his eyes darting about.

Annis listened and was about to shake her head when she caught a sound, a rumble of sorts. She listened intently, trying to make out the sound and smiled. “The rumblings of a cart along the rutted path.”

“A cart that draws near,” Brogan said, keeping a watchful eye.

“Someone we can inquire about the woman with the limp,” Annis said, pleased.

Brogan was not as pleased. “Or trouble heads our way. You will watch your tongue with strangers.”

Annis bristled. “Is that an order?”

“It is a strong suggestion, *mo ghràdh*,” Brogan said with a wink.

“You think I would speak unwisely to strangers?”

Brogan grinned. “The fun of having you as a wife is that I never know what you will say or do. I only ask that you take pity on me, since if you stir someone’s ire, it will be me who defends and protects you.”

“I do not need you to fight my battles,” Annis said with a proud lift of her chin.

“We are wed which makes your battle my battle.”

Before Annis could say that his battles were hers as well, she spotted the cart in the distance.

“Keep a keen eye around you. Thieves sometimes send out a lone traveler to trick others,” Brogan warned.

Annis did as he said, not that he had to tell her. She had thought the same herself, having heard tales from travelers who stopped by her old clan.

It wasn't long before they were nearly on top of the cart, a lone man sitting atop it and keeping the lone horse to a slow gait.

"A fine day to you," the elderly man said with a nod when they approached.

"A fine one to you as well," Brogan said. "A moment if you would?"

The man eased the horse to a stop. "What may I do for you, kind sir?"

"We search for an old woman with a limp. By chance would you have seen her?" Brogan asked.

The elderly man scratched his head, giving it thought and Brogan reached in his cloak and pulled out a coin to hand to the man. "For your troubles."

The man's aged face brightened. "Most generous of you, my lord, but I can be of no help. I have crossed no paths with a woman who limps."

Brogan continued speaking with the man, asking a few more questions.

"You questioned him wisely," Annis said, impressed when they were once again on their way. "At least we know where not to go since she has not been seen there. Hopefully, we will come across some news about the woman with a limp sooner rather than later." She gave her head a tilt when she cast a quick glance at him. "Do you doubt the witch's word that the MacWilliam bairn lives?"

"What I question more is that if she truly lives, that means my father lied and that has me wondering why?"

She offered an explanation she was certain he must have thought himself. "Not necessarily. He could have believed that the bairn he and Lord Lochlann killed was the MacWilliam bairn."

"I would argue since my father is no fool and would have wanted to make certain he murdered the correct bairn." He

cringed at his remark. “I cannot imagine taking the life of a wee bairn.”

“An honorable man would not, he would find a way to avoid it,” she said.

“You do not believe my father honorable?”

“I do not believe any of the three cursed lords who took part in that horrible day are honorable.”

“If anything, you are honest, wife.” He smiled not only at her truthful response but how good it felt to call her wife.

“Always, husband,” she said with a grin.

Two words he hoped he would hear for years to come. Nay, that was not true. Two words he *intended* to hear for years to come. He did not intend to let her go, not ever. He loved her far too much.

“I would never grow tired of hearing those words fall from your lips.”

His smile was soft and there wasn't a hint of teasing to his words—he meant them. She did not know how to respond and was relieved he saved her from doing so.

“The forest grows dense from here on, a perfect spot for thieves. We need to remain alert,” Brogan warned. “If we are attacked along the way, you must flee while I fight. And you must fight the urge to faint if there is blood, for you will leave yourself vulnerable.”

Fear mingled with courage at the possible thought. Strangely, it was not the thought of blood that worried her, it was what could possibly happen to Brogan.

The words shot from her mouth. “I will not leave you.”

“Aye, you will,” he ordered sternly. “I will survive, and I will see that you do as well, but if you faint while I am fighting, I cannot come to your rescue. And I will not have that. You will do as I say. You will ride off and hide and stay hidden until I come to find you. I will have your word on that.”

“I cannot give it,” she said with a forceful jut of her chin.  
“I do not know what I would do in such a situation.”

Brogan went to argue when out of the corner of his eye, he caught the first man fall from the tree just missing him from being dragged off his horse. He did not wait for others to attack, he smacked Annis’s horse on his rump, and the animal raced off.



**A**nnis was a distance away before she got her horse under control and she was spitting mad, not to mention frightened half out of her wits. She turned the horse and saw Brogan fighting three men. He felled one man with his sword and knocked another down with the hilt of the sword. The man staggered to his feet and Brogan elbowed him in the jaw when he got close as he fought the other fellow off quite brilliantly with his sword.

Two more men stepped out from behind trees and Annis's heart leapt in fear. Were there more lying in wait? She was no match for those men. They would easily overtake her, but she could not leave Brogan to fight on his own. When another man stepped out of the woods, it was no longer a decision of if she should wait.

She hurried off the horse and, fashioning part of her cloak in a sack to hold the only weapon that would serve her well, rushed to collect rocks. With the rocks weighing her down, she led her horse to a boulder that she managed to climb up on to mount the animal easily.

She grabbed the reins and was ready to join the fight when she heard the now familiar squawk of a raven. She looked up and there in the tree sat not one, but three ravens. Had the witch sent them?

Not feeling the least bit foolish, she spoke to them. "I need help if I am to find the woman the witch instructed me to find."

The largest of the three ravens squawked again as if in response.

She nodded at the bird. "Follow me." And they did.

"No blood. No blood. You will see no blood," she whispered as she urged the horse into a run and gripped a rock in her hand.

She eyed the fight, seeing what man to strike first and avoiding any chance of hitting Brogan. She spotted one that kept back from the others. He waited, letting the others fight, letting Brogan grow tired so he would be able to strike when Brogan was at his weakest. She thought him a fool. Seeing how Brogan fought with tremendous strength and agility, he would outlast the less skilled men.

Annis gave a quick glance to the sky and the ravens flying overhead. Though they couldn't hear her, somehow, she knew they would know when she ordered, "Attack all but Brogan."

The ravens dipped as they squawked loudly, and her target turned at the perfect time. She threw the rock with all her strength, and it caught him in the head, and he went down hard. She did not look at him or the other men on the ground. She rode straight past them and once she cleared the fighting, she turned the horse around ready to attack again.

The ravens pecked at the men but avoided Brogan. They had understood her. One man was swinging his sword at a raven who was relentless in his attack. She smiled. It might be foolish to think, and laughable as well, but she thought the raven had moved him away from the others leaving him open for her to attack, and she did.

She got him in the head as well and by the time she turned the horse around once again, it was to see that Brogan had finished off the other men. She approached slowly, knowing blood had to have been spilled.

"Do not come any closer," Brogan called out when she was still a distance away. "And we are going to have a serious talk about you obeying my orders."

“I will not be made a widow when I am barely a wife,” she said loud enough for him to hear her.

“You forget I am the condemned lord,” he reminded as he dragged one of the men, she had knocked unconscious, to a tree.

“That does not mean you cannot be seriously injured and suffer horribly before you heal,” she argued, the thought unsettling her stomach.

“You do have a good point,” he agreed begrudgingly and dragged the other man who had suffered the same fate at her hands to the opposite side of the tree. “I need to search for the rope they brought with them, since they no doubt planned to take at least one of us captive.” And Brogan had no doubt of who that would be—Annis. The thought of what she would have suffered at their hands had him wishing he could kill the men all over again. “Call out if either of them stirs. The others have no life left in them and you definitely don’t want to look upon them.”

“As you say, husband,” she called out with a grin.

He scowled as he shook a finger at her. “We are definitely going to have that talk.”

“And I will listen to your words well,” she assured him.

“You will obey them,” he ordered with a shout and disappeared behind a tree.

Annis kept watch for any movement from all the fallen men, taking no chances. She might be smiling and teasing Brogan, but inside she was shaken over what had happened and what might have happened. She had not expected the possibility of losing Brogan, even though he insisted he could not die due to the curse, to frighten her as much as it did. The thought frightened her as much as the thought of losing either of her sisters.

Brogan emerged from behind the trees with a length of rope that he used to secure the two still unconscious men to the trees. He then dragged the bodies of the dead men into the woods.

Annis tossed the unused rocks into the woods and searched the trees for the ravens, but they were nowhere to be seen.

“Did you see the ravens?” Annis asked.

“I thought I heard a raven. There was more than one?” he asked as he scooped his cloak off the ground. He gave it a shake and used part of the hem to wipe his face and hands.

“There was,” she said and smiled softly at his thoughtfulness in wiping off what blood may be on him.

“The witch sends you help on our quest,” he said, sounding unsure of his own conclusion.

“If she does, I am grateful, for the ravens helped save you from serious injury.”

He scrunched his brow in question. “Why though when she helped curse my family to begin with?”

Annis had no answer, for she questioned the same herself.

A groan had both their glances going to the tree where the men were tied. The man Annis had first knocked out with the rock was starting to come to.

Brogan went to him and kicked him in the thigh. “Open your eyes.”

The man’s eyes shot open as if just realizing what had happened and that he could not move, though he winced from the pain afterwards.

“Mercenaries or thieves?” Brogan demanded.

“A bit of both,” the man said reluctantly.

“What are you doing in this area?”

“Chieftain Cowan sent out word for men to fight in battle with him. He offered good coin for it, since it is rumored that Lord Odran will soon join the fight.”

Brogan glared at the man, disturbed by the news, since he was aware that his friend Odran wanted no more to do with battle and had chosen a life away from his clan. Not that Brogan thought it would last. Odran’s father, Lord Fergus,

wanted for his son what Brogan and Rannick's fathers wanted for their sons... wives and heirs to carry on the clan names.

Brogan's scowl turned to such a vicious sneer that it had the man yanking his head back to bump against the tree trunk. "Come near me or that woman," —he pointed to Annis— "and you die, and it will not be a merciful death."

The man nodded, his eyes wide with fear, and Brogan walked away to mount his horse.

"You are going to leave me here like this, tied to the tree?" the man asked, panic in his voice.

"You are not alone. One fellow who managed to survive keeps you company on the other side of the tree. You are lucky I did not kill you when I had the chance and do not make me regret that I didn't," he snapped.

Anger flared in the man's nostrils.

"If you can break free before nightfall and escape the animals that come out to hunt, heed my warning, and go back to where you came from. You do not want to fight Lord Odran and his men. He and his men are more vicious and skilled than any warrior you have ever met."

Annis turned her horse and followed alongside Brogan, relief that it was done, sending a slight shiver through her.

"You were not hurt?" he asked as their horses ambled along.

"Nay, I was not harmed," she confirmed.

"Good because right now I want to throttle you for not obeying me and putting yourself in danger," he scolded.

Annis's eyes narrowed. "You would raise a hand to me?"

He laughed. "I fear I would lose it if I did."

"Then you but tease me?" she asked, for she would not tolerate a husband whose hand struck at will.

"What you did frightened me beyond words. My only thought was to keep you safe and away from the sight of blood. When you came charging back on your horse, I feared I

would lose you and,” —he grinned— “even though you do have a few faults, I would miss them as much as I would miss you.”

His words warmed her heart. “Then you obviously understand why I returned to help you. I could never stand by when you are under attack by so many men and do nothing. I would face blood itself to see you kept safe.”

That blood would not stop her from helping him said more to him than she realized and at that moment he loved his wife even more if that was possible. But he would wait to tell her that. Instead, he teased, or was it that he wanted his words to hold the truth? “Your words tell me you love me, wife, but I knew it all along. I am just too irresistible not to love.”

She released a groaning sigh and shook her head. “You are impossible.”

“Impossibly charming,” he corrected with a stunning smile.

She shook her head again. Or was it that his words were more truthful than teasing that annoyed her?

“Admit it, my smile dazzles you,” Brogan reached out to elbow her in the arm.

She tossed an unexpected threat at him. “If we are to stay wed, it will be only me you dazzle with that smile.” And truth be told his smile did dazzle.

That she considered remaining wed to him thrilled him, but he had to tease. “Laying claim to me, are you?”

“You are my husband, and I would expect you to behave like one,” she warned.

He could not resist. “And you are my wife and I expect you to see to your duties—all of them.” He immediately regretted his words, seeing how her shoulders sagged with the weight of them. He was quick to assuage her. “I but tease.”

“Truthfully?” she asked.

He would not lie to her. “I will not deny I ache to make love to you, but I do not want our lovemaking to be a duty for

you. I want it to be something we both enjoy. We both look forward to. We both find pleasure in.”

“But if we consummate our vows then our marriage is sealed. I cannot, nor will I, leave you. I respect vows too much to do that,” she said.

He loved that his wife was honest and blunt with him. “Then we make love when you are willing to seal our vows permanently.” He was surprised by what she said next.

“You woke something within me that day we shared a touch of intimacy. She looked away; the memories of his hard shaft pressed tight against her stirring her passion. “I did not know intimacy could feel so wonderful, though I believe it would only feel that way with you.” She cringed at the brief thought of another man’s hands on her. “I do not even want to think of sharing such an intimate act with another man.”

“Either do I,” he said, his anger simmering at the thought.

“I also do not like the thought of you doing that with another woman,” she admitted to her own surprise.

“You are all I want and all I need, Annis,” he said.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I honestly do not know,” he said, giving his head a scratch. “It actually puzzles me and yet it is something I cannot deny, nor do I want to. I am not at all familiar with love. I am more familiar with arranged marriages than those who wed for love. My parents made it clear from when I was young that my marriage had to benefit the clan.”

“Your parents must be disappointed then, that you are wed to a woman of little significance.”

Brogan laughed. “You are by no means a woman of little significance.”

“I certainly am no woman of worth to your clan.”

“It is your worth to me that matters and to me you are priceless.”

Tears pooled rapidly in her eyes, and she felt foolish that his endearing words could touch her heart so easily. “You tease again.”

Brogan smiled and leaned over to catch the few tears that trickled out of her eyes. “I speak the truth and your heart knows it, that is why you tear so easily at my truthful words.” He smiled. “And why your forthright nature questions it.”

“You think you know me so well?” she asked, annoyed that he did.

“I think we both have come to know each other more easily than either of us had expected, though there is lots more to learn and I do look forward to learning everything about you,” he said with a playful smile.

His mischievous smiles always felt like a tickle to her side that forced her to smile in return and not at all begrudgingly. “I look forward to the same.” She decided to tease as well. “This way I can point out your faults that need correcting.”

His soft blue eyes lit with delight, and he laughed. “You cannot think that I actually have any faults.”

“Not *any* faults, *many* faults.”

He laughed again and pressed a hand to his chest. “You wound me, wife, to think I have many faults. Name one fault of mine.”

A list went through her head, but not one slipped past her lips. Were his faults what actually charmed? She had never met anyone who could make people smile as easily as he did. He had a way of making people feel comfortable around him like an old friend they could talk with about anything. It struck her then, a thought she had had after speaking with him a few times after first meeting him.

She spoke without thinking. “Your smile prevents others from seeing your loneliness.” She struck a chord, seeing his body tense.

His smile vanished. “That is not a fault. It is survival.”

His tone warned her to leave it alone—for now.



It brought their playful banter to a quick end.

Brogan had never let anyone see past the shield he had erected through the years, yet Annis had managed to do just that. It had been a necessity to his survival, though lately with Annis at his side he had found the shield less necessary. But that did not mean he had any intentions of removing it completely. It served a purpose, and it would remain.

Annis watched the light sky turning gray, though her thoughts were not on a possible approaching storm. They were on her husband. He was right about them learning about each other, though her open and blunt nature was easy for people to see her for who she was. Not so Brogan. He had shielded himself with a stunning smile and charm, a mask of sorts so no one could actually see his pain and the loneliness that went with it. The curse had done more damage to him than he allowed anyone to see.

If she had not been so intent on her quest, she would have recognized it. Or was it that feelings for him had surfaced and robbed her of clarity? It did not matter. She would learn more about him in due time. She had to if she intended to stay wed to him.

She wanted to sigh with frustration. How many times did she need to warn herself that her quest came first, that all else had to wait?

*Foolish.*

What she needed to see, to admit, was that quest or not, the issue with Brogan was not going to wait. And it shouldn't. It all was involved somehow and instead of looking at it separately she had to see it as a whole, only then would she be able to fit all the pieces together. Brogan's voice broke through her thoughts, and she was grateful, needing a reprieve from them.

“The gray clouds grow darker. We will need to find shelter soon. There is a croft about an hour away. I have stopped there before when traveling and was given shelter.”

Annis kept her tongue from asking what kind of shelter he had been offered there and wondered if she would meet one of the many women that he had been intimate with.

**S**he regretted her jealous thought when she met the old man and woman who worked the croft. They were kind and generous and she was more surprised when Brogan asked them if they required any help while he was there.

The man was reluctant to say, not so the woman.

“He is too proud to admit we do not have the strength we once had. I am not, since I worry what the years will bring when we cannot work the land anymore,” the woman said.

Annis hurried to say, “There is room in our flourishing village. You both are welcome there where others can offer help when needed.”

The older woman got teary-eyed and looked to Brogan and Annis understood she looked to him for permission. Strange how she did not see him as others did... a noble to be obeyed. It struck her then, Brogan may have eased her worries some of being his wife, but the magnitude of being Lady Annis cast a sudden doubt as to whether she wanted such a life.

Brogan smiled at the couple while wondering over the sudden change in his wife. No one probably noticed it. Even the slight nibble to her lower lip could barely be seen as could the tension in her squared shoulders. He would find out as soon as they were alone.

“It would be a pleasure to have you, Cala, and Phineas, join us in the village. Various dwellings are being built, the village is taking shape and preparing for winter. I will send my men to collect you when a dwelling is available for you.”

“That is most kind of you, my lord, and we accept your generous offer with much gratitude,” Phineas said, worry wrinkling his brow. “But I fear your father, Lord Balloch, would not want us deserting the croft.”

“You have nothing to worry about from my father, Phineas. I will see to that. And while your gratitude is appreciated, do not forget that it is my responsibility to protect and provide for all in Clan MacRae. Now before the skies open up and drench us, it is best my wife and I seek shelter.” He turned a quick glance on a small dwelling that had seen better days.

“Your wife?” Cala said with a clap of her hands and a joyful smile. “Good gracious, my lord, that is wonderful news. Congratulations.”

“It is,” Brogan said with a wide grin. “Lady Annis let me know that even though I have many flaws she wed me anyway.”

Annis jabbed him in the side with her elbow and realized her mistake when the couple’s eyes turned so wide, she thought they would pop from their heads.

“He needs a good poke every now and then,” Annis said, and her face turned scarlet when the older couples’ mouths dropped open, and Brogan laughed.

Brogan’s arm shot around her, and he hugged her to his side. “It is priceless to have a wife who keeps a smile on a husband’s face.” He realized how his remark sounded as soon as the words left his mouth and Cala’s cheeks blossomed with a deep blush. Words rushed out again hoping he would not put his foot in his mouth again. “I am blessed that Annis agreed to wed me.”

Cala’s eyes softened as she smiled, and her hand went to rest against her chest. “May you both be blessed with much love. It is the one thing that helps you celebrate the good and survive the bad in this life.”

Phineas wrapped his arm around his wife. “Cala is right. Love is one thing that endures in the most difficult times. May

you both know enduring love and much happiness.”

Their generous blessing touched Annis’s heart. They obviously loved each other deeply to speak so generously of love. But Brogan and her marriage had not been forged in love. Could they find love regardless? Was she falling or had fallen in love with Brogan? Could he possibly feel the same? And why was love so confusing?

“Our cottage is yours for the night, my lord and lady,” Phineas offered.

“Nay, Phineas. While it is generous and gracious of you to offer us your home, Annis and I will seek shelter in the dwelling like I have done before.” Brogan raised his hand when the old man went to argue. “It is the way it will be, and I will hear no more on it.”

Phineas nodded. “As you say, my lord, but please let us provide you with some food and drink.”

“That I graciously accept and one other thing, Phineas. Have either of you seen a woman with a limp pass this way? We have a message to give her.”

Annis was impressed with how graciously he treated the older couple and that he gave them a reason for why they were searching for a woman with a limp. It put them at ease to answer.

Cala looked to her husband. “That woman who stopped here requesting a drink for her parched throat, she had a limp. When was that two or three days ago?”

Phineas rubbed his chin. “I do not believe it was more than two days.”

“She was a pleasant, quiet woman, not saying much, but with her pronounced limp it surely could not be easy walking any distance.”

“Did she mention her destination?” Brogan asked.

“She said the strangest thing when I asked her where she was going.” Cala shook her head. “She said she was following the ravens.”



ANNIS SAT on the blanket she spread on the ground in the far corner of the shed. She had gone over the place with a keen eye and decided the corner was the best spot where they would not get wet when the rain started, and so far, they hadn't.

Brogan sat beside her munching on the fresh bread Cala had insisted he take along with a small jug of cider. "Do you think the ravens guide the woman to her destination?"

"Guide her, keep her safe, it is curious as to what they are capable of doing," she said. "Though, right now, my concern is the information the woman can give us, and I believe that information will lead us to the MacWilliam lass."

"Find the lass and all will come to pass," Brogan repeated what the witch had told Annis. "Will it all come to pass on its own? Or is there more for us to do? And does the MacWilliam lass know her heritage or is she as blind as the rest of us?"

"Never-ending questions that can only be answered one at a time or they will overwhelm us and cause chaos. Take the ravens, they helped me to protect you. They give direction to the woman with the limp, so she knows where to go. I would say the ravens are our friends and we'd be wise to pay them heed. I suppose with that in mind we can surmise that the witch helps us."

"Does she? Why help you break a curse that she helped create? Or does she lead me, Odran, and Rannick to our doom?"

Annis had not given that thought and his suggestion disturbed her. Could she be leading him into a trap? Could finding the MacWilliam lass bring more harm than good? What then would be her sister's fate?

"I wish I had all the answers," she said, frustrated. "I want you and Bliss kept safe. Is it possible to have both? I do not know, and I will not know unless I try. Hopefully, the woman with the limp can help enlighten us."

“I want to believe, to trust,” he said, though skepticism marred his every word. “But I still have doubts, so I say we remain cautious. Enough talk of that for now, tell me what troubled you when speaking with Cala.”

A crack of thunder startled her, or was it that Brogan had noticed her worry? Was he that preceptive or had he gotten to know her far better than she had realized?

Brogan moved the food and drink that sat between them aside and planted himself beside her. “Is it the thunder or me that frightens you?”

“I do not frighten that easily.”

“I know, so what frightened you?” he asked, tugging playfully at one of her springy curls. He did not need to remind her to be honest with him, he knew she would be.

She gladly let him know her concern. “The magnitude of being Lady Annis. You were born a noble, not so me. You were taught what you needed to know in your world as I was taught what I needed to know in mine. The difference between our worlds is like a great chasm that is impossible to merge. I fear I will be completely inept as Lady Annis and while you might think it will not matter to you, what if a day comes that it does? What do we do then?”

He took her hand in his, giving it a firm squeeze. “You and you alone is what matters to me. Anything else can be seen to and dismissed without worry.”

She relished the way his warmth and strength seeped into her. “It is a far different life than I am accustomed to.”

“We do well together. We will see that it does,” he assured her.

She felt comfortable enough with him to voice her other thoughts. “I suppose it would be wise of me to remain wed to you. You do not discourage me from my interests. You let me be me.”

“Always,” he assured her, then grinned. “And do not forget how much you like my kisses. It is good to have a husband who knows how to kiss well.”

“There you go singing your praises again,” she said with a soft chuckle.

“You cannot deny that you enjoy my kisses,” he said with a nudge of his elbow to her side.

“I do not deny it, but... I have nothing to compare it to.” She meant it as a playful tease, but the sudden scowl that surfaced on Brogan’s face told her he did not find it amusing.

“No one, not a soul, will kiss you, only me,” he ordered and tapped her lips with his finger. “Your lovely lips belong to me and no other. I was the first to kiss you and I will be the last man to kiss you.”

Annis did not know quite what to make of his words. Could it be a hint at love? Or was he being overly possessive? Or was it a sign of a demanding husband? He surprised her again when he shot to his feet and ran his hand through his hair as he paced in front of her.

“I have little to offer you being a cursed man and if we fail to break the curse, I will have even less for you are aware that I refuse to father any bairns and see them suffer. The only thing I can give you is more love than you ever thought possible.” He raked his hair with his fingers again. “I never thought love truly existed. I never saw it between my parents or with many other couples, but then noble marriages are arranged, and how does one fall in love with a stranger. I discovered the answer when I found you. You were like a light in the darkness to me and I could not help but be drawn to it—to you. But does an honorable man make the woman he loves suffer a marriage to him when he is cursed?”

Annis’s heart began to beat wildly.

Brogan dropped down beside her, not able to contain himself any longer. “I am selfish. I know I offered you freedom, but I love you too much to let you go, Annis. I love you with all my heart. This time spent with you has made me realize that I do not want to spend a day without you, even though you do not hold your tongue as you should, but I can rectify that. OW!” he cried out with a laugh when she punched him in the arm, not that he felt it. “I am teasing you.” He



snatched her around the waist and settled her in his lap. “I would not change a thing about you. I especially love your fiery red hair.” He buried his face in the soft curls and smiled when he lifted his head. “It is wild like you and soft like you, a perfect blend for a wife.” He kissed her gently. “I love you, Annis, with every beat of my heart and every breath I take, and I do not ever want to lose you, for without a heartbeat and a breath I would die.”

He cupped her face and kissed her gently, then rested his brow to hers for a moment.

Annis felt his reluctance to move his face away from hers, but he did, giving her a chance to respond. “Never, ever, would I have thought in my wildest dreams or nightmares,” — she chuckled— “would I have given thought to wed you, but now your love has stirred in me something I have tried to ignore or deny.” She shook her head. “I believe I have fallen in love with you, and I do not have the slightest idea how it happened. I only know that I miss you when you are not near and my mind thinks more on you than anything, and when I am in bed at night, I wish you were there beside me, your arms around me.” She sighed. “My concern is that how can I love and remain wed to you when Bliss sacrificed for me, so I was not forced to wed you? How can I hurt her like that?”

“Bliss wanted you to wed a man of your choice. She would be happy and relieved that you wed me because you love me and chose to wed me, not that you were forced to wed me. And I give you my word that I will do everything I can to see that no harm comes to Bliss. But you know yourself that your sister would be happy you wed a man you love and who loves you with all his heart.”

Brogan was right. Bliss would be happy for her and yet she could not help but feel she betrayed her sister by falling in love with Brogan.

He took hold of her face again. “We can have a good life, Annis. You can oversee the building of our home and the village. Our home we build together, and if Rannick refuses to take Bliss as his wife, having sworn never to wed again, she will have a home with us in the village.”

The thought that she could provide a home for Bliss filled her with joy. “That would make me so happy. Elysia and Saber could join us as well and my sisters and I would be together again.”

Brogan made no remark about Saber and Elysia. In time she would learn the truth about Saber, but it was not for him to say. He had given his word.

“Then it is settled,” Brogan said, making it clear, leaving no doubt. “We remain wed.” A scrunch of her brow had him asking, “You do not agree?”

“You will not try to tame me.” It was not a question.

He laughed and kissed her. “The last thing I want to do is tame you, wife. I love you for who you are and always will.” To his surprise and disappointment, she wiggled out of his arms to stand. What she did next shocked him.

Annis slipped off her tunic. “We need to consummate our vows so nothing or no one can separate us.”

**B**rogan was all for consummating their vows, but in a shed that leaked rain from the rainstorm that pounded overhead was not exactly what he had in mind. But what difference did it make when they had declared their love for each other. That was all that mattered. That and that she had agreed willingly to their marriage had his shaft aching so hard for her that he thought he would wither from the pain.

“You are sure?” he asked, wanting her to have no regrets for her hasty decision.

“We must if we are to remain together or we risk losing what we have found,” she said as if she was doing it because it was the most sensible thing to do.

Brogan got to his feet and stilled her hands when she went to remove her shift. “But is it what you want? Do you want to make love with me?”

She blinked several times as she stared silently at him and her pause had him holding his breath.

Annis finally found her voice. “I have seen animals rut and while I think the act itself is—strange—it has its purpose. I have consumed the leaves the witch advised me to take daily to prevent conception. It is wise of us to wait to have a bairn not knowing what fate either of us might meet. However, I am glad we build our marriage on love. It is a firm foundation and will serve us well.”

That she viewed their marriage as a structure she would construct did not surprise him though it did please him. It was

important to her that the dwellings she built were strong and durable, which meant she was building their marriage with the intention it would endure through the years.

He kissed her gently, then his hands went to her shift. “Let me, wife.”

As soon as her shift hit the ground, her hands went to his garments to help him out of them. Once they were both naked, he scooped her up in his arms. Her skin was like ice against his skin that had heated with passion and was close to consuming him. He laid her down gently on the blanket they had spread out on the ground. He would heat her with fiery passion and love... until it consumed them both.

A crack of thunder was ignored as Brogan’s lips came down upon his wife’s eager ones. He did not want to hurry. He wanted their first time together to be something that would linger lovingly in their memories for years to come, a memory that would bring a smile to their faces when they were withered with age.

“I love kissing you,” he said when he moved his mouth off hers.

“And I love when you kiss me. Though, I warn you that if you do not keep me thoroughly kissed, I will chase after you for kisses,” she said with a light laugh.

“And I will let you catch me every time.”

Her smile faded slowly. “Be patient with me. I know nothing of coupling.”

He kissed her again. “It comes more naturally than you would think and knowing you as well as I do, you will no doubt ask questions along the way.”

“You do not mind if I do?” she asked, appearing relieved.

Brogan could not help but chuckle. “You are a gem, wife, and nay, I do not mind your questions, though I prefer you to keep them silent until we are done.”

“But what if—”

“Trust me, wife, you will be glad for it,” he said, not giving her a chance to finish speaking.

“I worry, though, that I may—OH!”

Brogan’s mouth had settled over her nipple, his tongue wasting no time turning the partially hard bud solid. The sweetness of her nipple pleased his tongue and he feasted on it for some time before taking the bud between his teeth and nipping lightly.

Her groans and the way she arched her back, raising her chest up to him was proof of her own pleasure and he settled his mouth on her other breast. She arched a bit higher, and he suckled the nipple as if he could not get enough. His hand drifted slowly down from her breast to caress her slim waist and over the generous curve of her hip before he caressed farther down to her firm backside. He squeezed her cheek tight as he pushed her bottom up against him so that she could feel the thickness of his shaft.

“Ohhhh!” she moaned with a pleasure she did not know existed and kept her back arched so that his mouth did not leave her breast. And she welcomed the feel of his solid manhood, rubbing eagerly against her.

His mouth left her breast and his pleasure-soaked eyes settled on hers as his hand found its way between her legs and he slipped his fingers inside her. “Mine,” he whispered.

She responded without thought. She hurried her hand between them to grab his shaft tight. “Mine,” she said and not in a whisper.

He almost gasped, she held him so tight and just as he expected, movement came to her naturally and she began to slide her hand up and down his shaft. Damn, but it felt good, and he dropped his brow to rest against hers and closed his eyes.

“Damn, that feels good,” he whispered, and his fingers once again began to move inside her.

Annis groaned not only at the intense delight his talented fingers sent shooting through her body, but from the feel of his

shaft growing and pulsating in her hand. It had her eager to find how the size and strength of his manhood would feel inside her.

Brogan raised his head and ordered, "Let go or I will spill my seed in your hand when I would rather spill it inside you."

Annis let go instantly. "I want to feel you inside me."

Brogan groaned. "We have just gotten started."

"I cannot wait. I need you inside me," she ordered.

His thumb worked its way through her thatch of red hair to tease her sensitive nub. "I can satisfy you more than once."

She grabbed his arm to move his hand off her, but she could not budge it. "Nay, Brogan. Our marriage must be consummated for our vows to be sealed, so no one can take you from me."

His hand stilled and he leaned his face close to hers. "I would kill anyone who dares to take you from me."

She took his face in her hands. "I love you, Brogan, now and always."

His heart filled with a love and a joy he had never known, not until this fiery-haired beauty entered his life. Good God, how he loved her. He went to tell her, but she pressed her fingers to his lips.

"Now, husband, I need you now," she urged, spreading her legs.

Sweet wetness greeted the tip of his shaft as he rested it at her entrance, and he fought the overpowering urge to sink into her and feel her close around him. "Hold on to me," he ordered.

Her hands rushed and took hold of his muscled arms as best she could.

"Tell me if I hurt you," he said.

She shook her head. "You won't."

“You will tell me,” he ordered, gritting his teeth against the pulsating strength of his needy shaft.

Annis raised her bottom and wiggled her backside and the tip of his shaft slipped in. “Now, Brogan. Now!”

He surrendered to her demand and as he slipped in intending to go slow, her backside shot up and plunged him deep inside her.

She let out a cry, he thought of pain, then she began to move beneath him.

He moved as well, his strong arms stiff on either side of her, keeping him hovering above her as he drove in and out of her, setting a rhythm for them that he increased slowly.

Her sheath was tight and wet and felt so amazing that he was sure he would never get enough of her. But the best part was that being inside her was that for the first time in a very long time, or perhaps forever, he did not feel alone. He felt he was part of her. He felt he was loved.

Annis held on to him tight and moaned with a pleasure that built as Brogan’s tempo increased. She raised her backside slamming against him, urging him to go faster.

Brogan caught her eyes with his. “I do not want to hurt you.”

“I am not fragile,” she assured him.

He grinned. “Hold on, wife.”

Annis did just that and lost herself with every powerful thrust until...

*Plunk!*

The fat raindrop hit her forehead and she ignored it, but then another followed and another. Brogan’s head was tilted back as he moaned with his own pleasure, leaving the raindrops to miss him and hit her.

She ignored them, not wanting to disturb his enjoyment or her own, or the need that overpowered her, but raindrops

increased coming faster and faster and she realized that the hole in the roof was growing wider.

“Brogan!”

His head shot up and when he saw her rain-soaked face, he quickly moved to cover her.

“You have to hurry,” she urged. “The hole in the roof grows bigger.”

“I will move us.”

“NAY! NAY!” She moved urgently against him.

Brogan realized she was too close to climax, but then so was he. It would take merely seconds and he pounded into her with an urgency they both felt.

Annis cried out as she exploded with such intense pleasure that she thought she might faint, and it grew when she heard Brogan join her.

At that moment, part of the roof above them collapsed, pouring rain down upon them and roof debris.

Brogan hurried and lowered himself down over her, covering her entirely with his body, while they both shuddered from their explosive climaxes. After a few moments, he felt her tremble beneath him, and he worried that she might have gotten hurt.

He raised himself above her. “Annis?”

She was laughing. “This wonderful night is going to live long and happily in my memory.” She grabbed his face and kissed him and laughed again. “You are getting soaked. We should move now.”

He laughed as well, realizing he had given them both what he had hoped, a memory they would never forget. He kept her covered from the rain as best he could until they found a dry spot in the dwelling.

“Our love-making brought us luck,” she said as she dried herself with a blanket that had not gotten wet.



“Luck?” he asked, thinking how luck had avoided him these many years.

“Aye,” she said cheerfully as she snatched up her shift. “If we had not made love, we would have been fully dressed and our garments would be soaked.”

Brogan’s brow shot up. “You’re right. We were lucky.” He winked. “In more ways than one.”

She laughed and fell into his arms. “I love you, husband, and we will have a good life, together.”

He hugged her tight to make sure he wasn’t dreaming that this was real, that their love was real, and he prayed—prayed harder than he ever did—that she was right, and they would have a good life together.

**A**nnis scoured the sky for the ravens as they left the croft the next morning, hoping the ebony birds would guide them to the woman with the limp. But the skies and trees remained empty, not a raven in sight.

Brogan had wanted to repair the roof for the elderly couple, but both had insisted it was not necessary. They had not made use of the dwelling in years. They had taken their leave with promises that Brogan would send word when all was ready for the couple to move to the village.

“I do hope the ravens return,” Annis said as their horses kept a steady gait.

“Perhaps they show themselves only when needed,” he said then quickly asked, “You are not too uncomfortable to ride?”

She tilted her head at him. “Why would I be uncomfortable to ride?” She shook her head. “Oh!” It dawned on her what he meant, and his concern touched her heart. “It is thoughtful of you to ask, but I suffer no discomfort from making love. Actually, I feel better than I have ever felt.”

Brogan grinned. “I will make certain that I keep you feeling better and better.”

“There you go thinking highly of yourself,” she said with a laugh. “Though, this time you have a right to, and I eagerly look forward to you making me feel better and better.”

“You have my word on that wife,” he assured her, intending to find an isolated and safe spot to spend the night so he could keep his word to her.

Her thoughts quickly shifted to their quest. “Have you been to this village we go to?”

“I have, but it is not truly a village. It has but two structures. One is a place to purchase food and drink and the other a place where you can learn where coins can be had.” He turned a stern eye on her. “I warn you now to stay close by my side. It sits on the border of two clans so neither clan cares much about it, leaving it on its own. With no one to control it, there are no rules to govern it. It is pretty much a lawless place and a place where people only stop for a short while.”

“What brought you there before this visit?”

“I was searching for Rannick.”

“Why would he go there?” she asked.

“He heard word there was a mercenary group forming to go across the sea to fight for coins. He wanted to join them.”

“I assume he left before you could stop him since it is known his father sent men to return him home.”

Brogan turned quiet.

“Your silence tells me there is something you do not wish me to know. I will have no secrets between us, husband,” she said sternly.

“I will keep none from you,” he said, glad he had someone to share things with after spending years of keeping things to himself because he trusted few people. “I went to find Rannick to join him.”

Annis gasped. “You intended to travel to a foreign land to fight?”

He nodded. “I would not see my friend go alone. I feared he would never return.”

She gasped again. “You think you cannot die so you wanted to go to let death touch you and not him.”

“Death cannot claim me,” he reminded.

Annis shook her head. “I do not believe that. No curse can cheat death.”

“Then how do you explain how death has avoided me?”

“Sheer good fortune,” she snapped.

“Good fortune?” He scowled. “With the many times I have come close to death, you believe it was good fortune that saved me?”

She nodded firmly, wanting to believe her own words, needing to. Her heart would break to think otherwise. “I do. I believe you are a most fortunate man.”

“How can you believe such nonsense when you, yourself, fight to break the curse?”

Tears troubled her eyes. “I have to believe it, for to think the opposite tears at my heart.”

Brogan positioned Belle to bring Annis’s horse to a stop, then he quickly snatched Annis off her horse to rest in front of him on his horse.

He wiped away the few tears that trickled from her eyes. “You are right, wife. I am a most fortunate man, and you are proof of that. I am most fortunate that you came into my life, that you love me, and that you agreed to be my wife.” He kissed her gently.

Annis sniffled back her tears after he kissed her. “Aye, you are most fortunate to have me as your wife and I will see that good fortune stays with you.”

“As long as I have you, I will always have good fortune,” he said and kissed her cheek.

She tried to sniff back her tears again, but his remark touched her heart too deeply and tears streamed down her cheeks. “I am a strong woman and yet I cry easily. It is most baffling and annoying.”

He wiped at her tears again. “I love that you cry with ease. It proves what a truly loving and caring heart you have. It

means even more to me now that you have given your heart to me.”

She smiled and sniffled again. “You best take care of my heart.”

He kissed her quick again. “It is as safe as you are tucked in my arms and where I intend to keep you until we reach the village.”

“I will not argue with that since it is where I want to be and where I love to be,” she said and settled comfortably against him. “Now tell me more about this village.”



“YOU WILL REMAIN by my side at all times,” Brogan reminded with a quick glance to Annis on her horse that meandered alongside his.

Annis nodded, having no problem in heeding his words after seeing the people who frequented the place. There was not a beggar or unfortunate among them. They were hardy men and women who knew exactly what they were doing and why they were there.

“How much for the fiery-haired one?” a large man whose beard reached to his sizeable stomach called out.

“Your life if you dare touch my woman, Grendel!” Brogan threatened with a yell.

Annis shivered as whispers rushed around the area. “Let’s hurry and be done here.”

“I should not have brought you here. I should have come myself,” Brogan said, voicing his thoughts and annoyed he had not given it prior consideration.

“I would not let you come alone here,” she said with a fierceness that had Brogan’s brow going up. “And I do not care if you have come here alone before now. It is different now. You are my husband, and I will see you kept safe.”

The woman stole his heart over and over again. Never had he felt so cared for and so loved.

“You do warm my heart, wife,” he whispered, not wanting anyone to hear, fearful of what might happen if it was known they were wed.

Annis kept her voice low. “Then let’s be done here so we can find a secluded spot for the night, and I can warm something else of yours.”

Brogan had to keep his mouth from falling open. She delivered her remark without a smile or a wink, as if it was the most natural thing to say. Unfortunately, her suggestions aroused his shaft, and this was not the time or place for it. Brogan silently let loose with several curses while forcing his thoughts on anything but her intentions.

He directed them to a spot where other horses were left grazing.

“The horses will not be stolen?” Annis whispered once off the horse.

“An unspoken code among all here. Anyone steals one of the horses and they die,” Brogan said and took her hand. “You are going to hold your tongue and let me talk. I want us gone from here as soon as possible.”

“Aye, as soon as possible,” she repeated, wishing they were already on their way and voiced a thought that came to her. “I do not think the woman with the limp would have stopped here.”

“You never know. If it was information she was seeking, this was a good place to find it,” Brogan said. “And with the extent of travel all here do, there is a good chance one may have come across her.”

Brogan spoke with a few men and women, but none had seen a woman with a limp.

“Let me see if Grendel knows anything,” Brogan said. “You do well with your silence, though I know it is not easy for you. We will be finished soon and be on our way.”

Annis nodded, pleased that he acknowledged how difficult this was for her and, keeping hold of his hand, walked with him to the fire pit where Grendel and two women stood.

Annis listened while the two men talked. She had hoped the large man would reveal news that would help them but when their conversation was nothing but mundane, she turned her head to cast an eye about.

Her attention quickly settled on a young lad, maybe ten years, though no more than twelve years. His garments had seen better days and it had been more than days that he looked to have washed. He was talking to a few men and looked to be pleading. From what she could hear, the lad seemed to be asking about work, any kind of work. Something about his mum being ill and he needed to help her. The men laughed at him and accused him of telling tales.

Annis's stomach churned, fearing what might happen to the lad. She grew alarmed when one of the men grabbed the lad and started chopping off his shoulder-length hair with his knife. The thin lad was no match for the man and Annis had all she could do not run and help the lad. If she did, it would put both her and Brogan in danger.

Unfortunately, when the man finished chopping the lad's hair, leaving it to stick out from his head in uneven tufts, he threatened him perhaps because the lad stuck his chin up and showed no fear.

"Let's see what else we can chop off you," the man said with a laugh as he pointed his knife right between the lad's legs.

That did it for Annis. There was no way she could stand by and see the lad harmed. She yanked her hand out of Brogan's and ran.

"You are such a weak-arse pansy that you have to pick on a young lad," she screamed, running at the man and planting herself in front of the lad.

The man with the knife stared at her in bewilderment.

“Are you so envious of the lad’s shaft that you have to cut it off?” she challenged with a fiery fury.

The man’s face bloomed red, and his hands shoved his plaid aside and took hold of his shaft. “You will be tasting my sizeable shaft soon enough.”

“You call that sizeable?” Annis said with a laugh and everyone around her laughed.

She saw the blow coming and tried to avoid it, but it caught the corner of her eye and she stumbled and before she could right herself, she saw the fellow’s fist coming at her again. A rough shove had her stumbling and she winced when she saw that Brogan took the blow for her.

The man grinned and waved Brogan on. “I win. I keep your woman.”

Brogan returned his grin. “I win. You die.”

Two fellows that were with the man stepped up beside him.

“Three,” Brogan laughed. “You think to beat me with three useless men?”

All hell broke loose after that. People gathered around to watch and cheer for who it did not seem to matter. Brogan easily got the knife off the man, tossing it aside. His fists were quick, delivering solid blows. He landed more on the three men than they did on him.

Cheers rang out each time a punch or kick was landed, no matter who landed it.

“Wow! Your man is quick and skilled with his punches.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” she ordered the lad keeping her eyes turned away.

“He knocked him out!” the young lad cheered, jumping up and down.

Annis dared a peek every now and then, fearful she would spot enough blood to have her fainting and that would only make things worse.



“He got another one,” the boy cheered, raising his fist in excitement, the crowd cheering along with him. “He’s got the last in a head lock. OW!” He cringed and a cheer sounded.

“What happened?” Annis asked anxiously.

“The fellow has long arms and caught your man in the nose.”

She winced. “Is there blood?”

“Aye, there is—WHOA! Your man has him by the neck choking him. He’s surrendering, begging is more like it. Your man threw him to the ground—wait, he has his boot on his chest and he’s pointing a finger at him. Looks like he’s giving him a warning.

Annis wished she could hear what he was saying but the cheers were too loud.

“Has the blood been wiped from his nose yet?” Annis asked, desperate to turn and see what was going on for herself.

“Nay, and he just turned to the man who hit you.”

A hushed silence settled over the crowd, leaving Annis able to hear Brogan.

“I should cut your shaft off for showing the pitiful thing to her.”

The crowd laughed.

“The fellow is trembling,” the lad said with a chuckle.

“But since everyone now knows what a wee, woeful shaft you have, and you know how tongues love to wag, there won’t be a woman far and wide who will want to bother with it. So, I will leave you to your misery.” He turned away, stopped, then turned back again. “One more thing.” He grabbed the guy by the shirt and threw a punch. The crack to his nose was loud enough that everyone winced. “I took pity on you and let you live this time, if there is a next time—you die.”

More cheers rang out.

“Someone gave your man a cloth and he’s wiping the blood off now,” the lad said. He turned a quick look on Annis.

“I thought your man looked familiar to me. He’s the condemned Highlander, isn’t he? More fools them for going up against him.”

“Has he cleaned the blood off yet?” Annis asked, ignoring the lad’s question.

The lad scrunched his nose. “Why do you keep asking about blood?”

“I have an aversion towards it.”

“Don’t we all,” the lad said with a laugh.

Annis poked him in the arm. “Answer me.”

The lad rubbed his arm and took a look. “No blood on him, but you best keep your eyes off the others. Wait. He is headed our way.”

Annis sent a blessing to the heavens for that.

“Time to leave,” Brogan said.

“Not soon enough for me,” Annis said and turned to face Brogan. “The lad comes with us. I have a task for him.”

He gave a nod and blood suddenly ran from his nose. “Damn,” he mumbled as his hands reached out to grab his wife.



ANNIS FELT the continuous bounce as she fought to open her eyes and clear her fuzzy head. Where was she? What happened? She finally got her eyes open and had to blink several times before she realized she was staring at the ground, and it was moving. It took a moment for another realization to hit—she was being carried over someone’s shoulder. She raised her head a bit and to her relief saw Brogan’s horse, Belle, and her horse following behind them.

“Will I get coin for this task? I need it. My mum and I need food.”

“You will be paid for the task.”

Annis smiled hearing Brogan tell the lad that he would compensate him for the task that she had for him, though she would see to that herself.

She tapped on Brogan's back. "You can put me down now."

"Aren't you going to ask if the bleeding stopped?" Brogan asked.

"Has it? Are you all right?" Annis asked anxiously.

That had Brogan stopping, and he eased her on her feet. She scrunched her eyes to peer cautiously through them as she tilted her head up to look at him.

"I am good now, but I cannot promise my nose will not bleed unexpectedly again."

Her eyes shot open when she spotted not a trace of blood. "Is your nose broken?"

The concern in her eyes touched his heart. "Nay, he did not break it. He just caught it the right way to send it bleeding."

She cringed. "I could not leave the lad to get hurt."

"Is that an apology for being foolish and not obeying my word?" he asked with a grin.

"Aye," she admitted. "I am sorry you were harmed."

"I stood a chance against those men, the lad did not." He tucked one of her stubborn curls behind her ear only to have it spring free. "But let me see to it the next time, since I have no doubt there will be a next time."

"I cannot promise since I sometimes speak and react without thought, but I will do my best."

Brogan laughed. "Only sometimes?"

She jabbed him playfully in the arm. "You cannot say I did not warn you about me."

He took her hand and laughed again. "Your own words did that when we first met. Now about your eye."

Her hand shot to her eye, recalling the punch she almost avoided. "It does not hurt."

"It looks like it does. The bruise is spreading from the corner to under your eye. Are you sure it does not pain you?" He had been furious when he had seen the blow nearly knock her down. He was ready to kill the man and he still wished he had, but it would have only brought more trouble down on them.

"A bit sore to the touch is all," she assured him, thinking how gallant he had been in saving her. He had not hesitated. He had come to her rescue, and he always would. The thought warmed her heart.

"About that task?" the lad asked.

"Let's get a distance away from here before we discuss that," Brogan said. "Can you ride lad?"

The lad nodded and in no time, they were on their way, the lad on one horse and Annis and Brogan on Belle.

It was an hour later before they stopped and by then Annis had learned that the lad's name was Dugan and that he and his mum were homeless and were in dire need of food and shelter.

"I want you to take a message to my sister Elysia. She resides at Clan Loudon. Do you know where that is?" Annis asked.

Dugan nodded. "I do. It is not far from where me and my mum have camped."

"I will see you compensated," Brogan said.

"Not necessary," Annis said and took a coin from a small pouch tucked at her waist. "Show Elysia this coin and tell her it was payment to you for bringing her a message from her sister Annis. She will not take it from you, and she will feed you and give you food to take to your mum."

"Truly?" Dugan asked as if he could not quite believe it.

"Truly," Annis confirmed with a smile.

“What’s the message?” he asked, taking the coin from her and keeping his fingers tight around it.

“Tell her I said that all goes well, and I am sure my mission will be successful, and she is not to worry.”

“You have my word that I will get your message to Elysia. I best not waste time. I have been away from my mum too long already.”

“I would spare you a horse lad, but we need them both,” Brogan said.

“Not a problem, my lord. I am fast on my feet, and I know when to hide, and I will not let anything stop me from getting to my mum,” he said with a stubborn jut of his chin.

“Be careful,” Annis urged, and she and Brogan watched as the lad took off in a sprint that surprised them both.

“Not to fear. He will see it done since he appears to be as stubborn as you an—OW!” He laughed and rubbed his arm, not that she hurt him. She never did. He just found it amusing to tease her. “You did not let me finish. “He is as stubborn and honorable as you.”

Annis smiled. “He does seem like a good lad, and I have no doubt Elysia will see that he and his mum are offered a home at Clan Loudon.”

“Your sister does have a kind soul.”

Annis got teary-eyed with thoughts of her sister. She missed both her sisters which reminded her that she had a quest to see finished.

“Onward with our search for the woman with a limp since we had no luck at that place,” she said and went to her horse.

Brogan smiled. “Maybe you didn’t but I did.”

Annis hurried to her husband. “You found out something? How? From whom? When?”

“From Grendel and it was the reason I was too late to save you from that first punch,” he said, annoyed that he had not reached her fast enough.

“You saved me and that is all that matters. Now what did Grendel tell you,” she asked, eager to hear.

Brogan grinned. “He told me where to find the woman with the limp.”

“**T**he woman is traveling with a merchant?” Annis asked, shaking her head. “How do we ever find her if she travels with a merchant?”

Brogan looked pleased with himself. “Grendel told me that he had spoken with the merchant and the woman not that long before he reached the village and that they were traveling in the direction we had already come from.”

“Why did we not come across them?”

“They were following the stream. We were not.”

“So, we return the way we came but by a different route?” she asked doubtfully. “Are you sure you can trust what he told you?”

“Grendel knows if he speaks the truth to me that, in turn, I owe him a favor. We have done it before and it has worked out well for us both,” Brogan explained.

Annis shot question after question at him. “Did he say where she had come from, if she had traveled far with the merchant, if she planned on staying with him?”

“For obvious reasons,” —he looked directly at her bruised eye— “I did not get the chance. We can get the answers directly from her when we catch up with the pair. We will head in that direction now, though I doubt we will reach them today. I know a place we can shelter for the night and start at dawn.”

“I feel as though the witch sent us in circles, but why?” Annis shook her head again. “There must be a reason for it.”

Brogan would not say what he was thinking, for she no doubt thought the same. He kept from smiling when she spoke both their thoughts.

“Do not dare think this quest senseless or that the witch plays tricks on us. She wants us to find not only the woman with the limp but the bairn who has now grown into a woman.” She tapped her chin. “I cannot help but keep wondering why? Why, after presenting Lady Aila with the curse to protect the bairn, does she now want to see it undone?”

He wanted the answer to that himself.

Annis’s eyes settled on him for a few moments before she asked, “How does my eye look?”

“The bruise grows deeper,” he said and wished he had done more damage to the man than he had.

“I thought as much, yet your bruises have done nothing more than turn a pale yellow. They heal already while mine worsen.”

“It is just the way it has always been with me. My body heals remarkably fast and there have been times I was extremely grateful for that,” he admitted, memories of previous injuries surfacing to remind him.

“It pains my heart to think of what you must have suffered through the years,” she said, fighting back the tears building in her eyes.

He knew she disliked the frequent tears that often threatened her, but that her tears pooled for him said much about how much she loved him. “I believe you are the only one who is pained by my suffering.”

“Surely, your mother must have suffered along with you. I no doubt would embarrass myself with copious tears seeing a child of mine take ill or be injured.”

His wife would make a good mother. He only hoped he would not have to prevent her from being one.



“To my mother, my pain was a temporary inconvenience and there was no need for her to waste time with worry.”

“You have me now,” she said as if it made all the difference. “I will worry endlessly over you and do not bother to tell me otherwise.”

He smiled, not only at her remark but at the thought that he was not alone anymore. “On that I will not argue with you, wife.” He felt the blood slip from his nose, and he swiftly turned his head away and ordered. “Do not look!”

Annis kept her eyes turned away from him, though she wished she could do otherwise and voiced her annoyance with herself. “I should be able to help you, not turn away from you.”

“Have you always been this way with blood?” he asked, cleaning his face with the end of his cloak and reminding himself to clean it when they settled by the stream.

“As long I can remember. the sight, sometimes even thought—”

The faintness of her voice had him turning with worry and his hand reached out to take hold of her arm. “Tell me about the cottage you will build for us.” She turned and he did not like how pale she looked from just the thought of blood. “We may need extra rooms with all the bairns we will have.”

Her eyes turned fearful. “There is blood when giving birth.”

He silently cursed himself for not thinking of that and thought quickly. “Bliss would make sure you do not see a speck of it.”

“What will I do if our bairns bleed? How will I ever properly care for them?” Tears threatened her and she got angry. “This has to stop. I cannot continue to be so weak when it comes to blood or get teary-eyed over nonsense.”

“Whether you want to admit it or not, you are a sensitive woman.”

Annis gave him a look of disgust. “That is a terrible thing to say to me.”

He laughed. “You want honesty, wife. And your delicate side certainly does not pair well with your stubborn, demanding side.”

She was ready to jab him in the arm but smiled instead. “You are a wise husband to annoy me and force my thoughts elsewhere.”

He was relieved that color had returned to her face and intended to make sure there was no more talk of blood. “There is much building to be done before winter sets in, especially with others from the clan joining us and the elderly couple as well and whoever else you may invite.”

“Our village will be a welcoming one,” she said her smile growing, and they continued the safe discussion.

They stopped before dusk at a small dwelling in need of repair and their glance went to the roof. They both smiled.

Annis voiced what they both thought. “The roof has no holes in it. We can make love tonight without fear of it collapsing on us.”

Brogan grinned and winked at her. “We do not have to wait until tonight.”

“Hurry then, and let’s get the horses settled and wood for the fire,” she urged and slid off her horse.

That she was as eager as he was to make love, fueled his own desire. They worked well together and were done in no time—the horses settled and a fire going in the small hearth. Unfortunately, to Annis’s disappointment the narrow bed was in dire need of repair if they were to sleep there, and the earth floor needed to be cleared of debris.

Brogan saw her regret and hurried an arm around her waist. “We do not need a bed or the floor.” He nibbled at her slender neck, enjoying the mewling sounds he caused.”

“Where then?” she asked, his teasing nibbles tormenting her nether region while thoughts of making love with her

husband had turned her wet and impatient.

He kissed her soundly, further flaring her passion, then he swung her up and around and planted her backside in the middle of the table. “Up with your legs and your garments,” he ordered.

She did so without question and a smile, her passion flaring when he helped shove her garments out of the way and spread her legs. She watched him push his plaid aside and his manhood sprung free; hard, thick, and ready.

“Lie back.”

Another command she eagerly obeyed, and he grabbed her backside and pulled her forward, his shaft probing between her legs, and she groaned with anticipation.

“Your so damn wet,” he said, the tip of his shaft being devoured by her moistness.

“I cannot wait. We can linger later. I need you now,” she demanded.

Brogan was glad she was as impatient as he was and that she was also right about lingering later in their lovemaking since he intended to make love more than once to her tonight.

He shoved into her, and she cried out.

“OH!” she said with a joyous smile.

She flamed his passion even more and he shook his head. “This is going to be quick, wife.”

He gripped her backside as he pounded into her over and over.

“Do not stop. Please do not stop. It feels so good,” she urged and wrapped her legs around his waist, hugging him to her.

Brogan thought he would come there and then, but gratefully he didn't. He wanted to soak every pleasurable drop of passion he could from her and explode in a blinding climax together.

Her moans grew as he slammed into her repeatedly and her climax came on her with a sudden explosion. She cried out, feeling herself erupt over and over in the most exquisite pleasure.

He loved the look on her face as she came, pure joy and satisfaction, though he had wanted to come with her and was surprised when she cried out.

“Do not stop, please do not stop!”

He smiled that she would climax again, and he grabbed her around the waist and yanked her off the table to rush and brace her against the door. “Hold on,” he urged, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Her moans grew with each forceful thrust, and she climaxed with a scream in his ear as he burst with such fierce pleasure that he joined her with his own roar. It was his last thrust, that final push that yanked everything out of him when he heard the crack.

He raised his head, having rested his brow against the door right beside his wife’s face and saw that her eyes had rounded, having heard it as well.

The second crack came before he could yank them away and the door split in two sending them sprawling outside on the ground.

“Annis!” Brogan cried out, rising up quickly after landing on top of her, worried he had hurt her, her arms no longer around his neck. Her laughter told him otherwise.

“Do you think we will ever make love without incident?” she asked between laughs.

He grinned and kissed her. “We can try later.”

“I will remind you of that.”

He kissed her quick. “Believe me, wife, you won’t have to.” He eased off her and onto his feet and reached down to take her hand and ease her up. “Are you sure I did not hurt you, landing on you as I did?”

“Nay, I am good,” she assured him and wobbled some when she got to her feet.

“You are going to sit on that lone chair in the dwelling while I see us settled for the night,” he said, giving her a stern look.

Annis laughed. “That look will do you no good.”

“It was worth a try,” he said with a wink. “But spare me the worry and do as I ask.”

“I will leave everything to you,” she said and kissed his cheek. “Though you made need help repairing that door.”

In the end, the door was beyond repair especially with dusk upon them and night not far off. By the time Brogan found and cut some large tree branches to cover the open doorway and repair the bed so they could at least sleep in it for the night, darkness had fallen.

Annis had managed to find a sparse and broken broom and swept the debris to a corner of the dwelling. She placed one of their blankets on the lumpy bedding and moved the lone chair to the side of the bed where she also placed the cloth that held what was left of their food.

Brogan joined her on the side of the bed, and they ate the cheese and bread.

“Our quest is like a puzzle,” Annis said and nibbled at the cheese.

Brogan tore the piece of bread in half to share with her. “The problem is we do not have all the pieces to the puzzle.”

Annis ate the last of the cheese she held as she took the piece of bread from him. “And we must wait for the one piece to take us to the next. It is frustrating and taking far too much time. She shook the bread at him. “She is a witch. She should have known exactly where the woman with the limp was and —” A sudden thought turned her silent for a moment. “Why didn’t she know and why doesn’t she know where the bairn might be? Or does she know?”

“Why not tell you then?” Brogan asked, wondering himself.

“To bide time?” Annis questioned, shaking her head. “But for what? What could she be waiting for?”

“The woman with the limp might have the answers.”

“I hope so,” Annis said and having taken only a small bite of bread handed the piece to her husband. “Eat. I do not want anymore.”

He took it from her and finished it and seeing her drift in thought, asked, “What suddenly troubles you?”

“Bliss,” she said on a sigh. “Do you think Bliss has any chance of having Lord Rannick get her with child? I fear what she might suffer if she fails to deliver what she promised.”

“I tried to tell Lawler that it was useless. Rannick would never plant his seed in any woman again. I believe he agreed with me. Though he did not voice it, he did say he had orders that he must obey.”

“I have worried what Lord Rannick might do to my sister and now I wonder what will happen to her if she does not get with child.”

“Lord Lochlann demands obedience, though Lady Helice, Rannick’s mother, often tempers her husband’s demands. I do not think she will allow any harm to come to Bliss if she should fail to get with child,” Brogan assured her.

Annis rested her head against her husband’s arm. “We have never been parted, Elysia, Bliss, and I, until now. It is strange not to have them near, not to see them every day, talk with them, laugh with them... I miss them.”

“I do not know what the future holds for us all, but I will give you my word that if for any reason either of your sisters are unable to make their home with us, I will make certain you see them often when all this is done.”

She raised her head and smiled. “You are a good husband.” She poked him lightly in the side. “I thought for sure if we were forced to wed it would be a constant battle.”

He kissed her brow. “You would have realized soon enough that you loved me.”

She laughed softly. “There you go thinking highly of yourself again.”

“I am just too adorable not to love,” he said with a wicked grin and a wink.

Her smile faded and she placed her hand upon his cheek. “I do love you, Brogan. No matter what happens, always remember that.”

All he could think was that she sounded as if they would soon go into battle, and she was worried she would not survive. He cupped her chin tightly in his hand. “We will live a long life together. I will have it no other way.”

“Aye, I pray it will be so, but you still need to know that whatever happens in our life, I love you now and forever.”

His lips came down on hers with a fierce possessiveness, as if somehow his kiss could share the curse with her, and death would not touch her. They would be together always, never separated, then it struck him. He eased the kiss to rest his brow to hers. He was being selfish. He would not see her suffer as he had. He loved her too much.

He grinned. “I love you more.”

She poked his chest. “I think not.”

He whispered in her ear, “I know so and I will show you.” His hand went to the back of her neck to hold it firm as his mouth covered hers and his arm went around her waist, just before he dropped back on the bed, taking her with him.

The kiss was a prelude of things to come, and passion was quick to stir in Annis.

“I want you naked this time,” he said, and he yanked her up on her feet, quickly shedding her garments before yanking his off and tossing them aside. His hands caressed her breasts, ran down along her slender waist and over the curve of her hip and gripped her backside to push her against his hard

manhood. Then he kissed her slow and easy before lifting her in his arms to lay her gently on the bed.

It was a slow coming together, each exploring the other with tender touches and kisses.

Annis's hands roamed with curiosity and love. She had always cringed at the thought of making love and she had avoided thinking about how it would be like to touch her husband's naked body. She had convinced herself it would not be necessary. She would simply submit as a dutiful wife did and lay beneath her husband until he was done.

How wrong she had been about that, but then she had not counted on Brogan.

She wanted to touch him, explore every part of him, put her mark on every part of him. She gripped his stiff shaft and looked him in his gorgeous blue eyes. "Mine. Only mine."

He loved that she lay claim to him, that she enjoyed exploring him, that she freely loved him.

"Always," he whispered and kissed her, enjoying every gentle caress that tempted and sparked their passion.

Brogan had never lingered with a woman. He had wanted no attachments. He would make certain their coupling was satisfying for them both, but in the end, there had always been something missing.

He knew what that was now. Love.

"I love you, Annis," he whispered in her ear, needing to tell her again. Or was it he who needed to hear it?

"Not as much as I love you," she whispered and rained kisses on his lips as her hand played along the silky, smoothness of his hard shaft.

"As much as I favor your touch, I would much rather be inside you."

"Then why do you wait, husband?"

Brogan didn't. He slipped over her and into her gently and with ease. He groaned as her wetness welcomed him and, once



he was sheathed fully inside her, she closed tightly around him as if she didn't intend to let him go.

Annis sighed, loving the feel of him sinking deep inside her, settling there where he belonged. She squeezed his shaft, hugging it tight and keeping him snug. He started moving and the world around her faded away as his thrusts turned potent and she was soon lost in an oblivion of pleasure.

Slow. Fast. Slow. Fast.

Brogan did not want it to end. The satisfaction—the pleasure—was nothing like he had ever experienced, and he knew it would always be this way with her. The thought further flared his already fiery passion.

It soon turned frenzied, and Annis thrust her hips up to meet his powerful plunges and it was not long before she climaxed along with her husband. She smiled when his moan drowned out hers, making her release all the more enjoyable.

They lay side by side after sanity returned—the bed too narrow for any other position.

He tucked a springy curl that fell along the side of her face behind her ear as he often did and watched it spring free. He knew it would and he supposed that was why he did it. He would be worried if it didn't since it always reminded him of her resilience and was one of the reasons he loved her so much.

He startled when she hurried to rest her hand on his arm to push herself up to sit.

She glanced around the room with wide eyes.

He grew alarmed. "What is it?"

She turned a gleeful smile on him. "Nothing. We made love and nothing happened."

That's when they both heard the ropes under the lumpy mattress give way.

Brogan's hand shot out to snatch her around the waist and deposit her on top of him just as they fell through the bed together.

“Thank you for taking the brunt of the fall,” Annis said with a soft laugh the next morning as they continued on their journey.

“It was my turn since you took the previous one,” Brogan said, glad his wife saw humor in their mishaps and did not think their lovemaking cursed. He thought that too soon.

“Do you think the curse plagues our lovemaking?” she asked seriously, then burst out laughing and waved her hand dismissing it. “An absurd thought. The little mishaps will cease once we can make love in a secure dwelling.”

His wife saw logic where he saw the curse interfering in every aspect of his life. This was one time he hoped her logic proved true.

They took the route along the fast-moving stream as if it was rushing to get somewhere important. Annis wished her quest would go as fast.

Her glance fell on the path and her eyes lit with excitement. “Wheel tracks,” she cried out, pointing to the ground. “We need to pick up our pace before they get too far ahead of us, and we chance losing them.”

Brogan agreed with a nod, and they were soon traveling at a faster pace.

The day wore on with disappointment. Following the tracks, then losing them and finding no traveling merchant. They would have to stop soon since dusk wasn’t far off.

“We will crest that small hill and settle for the night by the stream,” Brogan said as disappointed as his wife was since he wanted this done sooner than later as much or possibly more than her.

Annis nodded, annoyed, though that changed as soon as they reached the top of the small hill and spotted the cart camped for the night by the stream. Anticipation squeezed as they followed a worn path down the hill and dismounted to approach the campsite.

The man shot to his feet and uncertainty sparked in his eyes as soon as he spotted Brogan and Annis approach.

His portly shape and well-tended garments were evidence of a successful merchant. His gray hair—neatly secured at the nape of his neck—and gray bushy eyebrows along with his many wrinkles declared his advanced age. However, it was the woman Annis was more interested in and was disappointed to see that she was sleeping near the fire wrapped snug in her cloak. It would be rude of her to wake the woman.

The man’s nervous demeanor calmed some when his glance fell on Brogan.

“Lord Brogan, how may I be of service to you?”

“You have me at a disadvantage, sir. You are familiar with me while I am not so with you,” Brogan said, not taking his eyes off the man. Grendel had warned him that the merchant could be a sly one.

“I am Fenton, my lord, a lowly merchant who has stopped by Clan MacRae often to sell my wares. I would be pleased to have you and your friend join me for the night. Darkness will fall soon and there is more safety with others.”

Brogan took the opportunity to acknowledge the sleeping woman. “Your friend will not mind?”

“Luna is a poor woman who I took pity on and graciously agreed to transport to the next village. The pitiful soul suffers with a bad limp which makes it difficult for her to travel. Please do join me, Lord Brogan. I have a delicious fish stew ready to eat.”

“I appreciate your generosity, Fenton,” Brogan said.

“I am only too pleased to serve you, my lord. Sit. Please sit,” he said with a respectful nod. “Your companion can serve you.”

Anger flashed in Annis’s eyes and Brogan was quick to reprimand the man. “Lady Annis is my wife.”

“Forgive me, my lord, and congratulations. Your father and mother must be thrilled,” Fenton said.

Brogan could tell that the man’s wise smile was false. He would need to keep an eye on him. He took his wife’s arm to assist her to sit by the fire while he saw to the horses.

Fenton did most of the talking while they ate, boasting about his travels and the many important people he had met.

“Your name is widely known, my lord. All are curious about you,” Fenton said.

Grendel had been right about the merchant. He was a sly one. He was looking for information and being a merchant, he imagined the man saw information as a commodity to sell.

“You mean they are curious about the curse,” Brogan corrected.

“Aye, that they are,” Fenton said with a nod.

Brogan said no more, which meant he would hear no more about it. He wasn’t surprised when his wife spoke up, having wondered how she kept from saying anything before this moment.

“Where do your travels take you now?” Annis asked.

She had maintained an unusual silence, watching the man as he spoke with her husband. He was more than a simple merchant. His fine garments hinted at that. What he sold bought far more wealth than mere wares. He was a procurer of information.

“I have a few more stops in the area, your home being one of them, Lord Brogan,” he said with a pleasant smile.

Annis was well aware that he avoided actually answering her and that his face seemed stuck in a perpetual smile, meaning it wasn't real. She decided to test her theory of what he truly sold.

She slipped her hand in her husband's and gave it a light squeeze, hoping he would understand what she was about to do. "Would you go fetch the blankets? I grow cold."

Brogan eyed her suspiciously for a moment but the way she had squeezed his hand, he understood that she asked for his trust, and he gave it to her.

"Anything for you, my love," he said and kissed her cheek.

"Kind, sir," she said, getting Fenton's attention as soon as her husband was out of sight. "Have you by chance heard any news about Lord Rannick? I heard a rumor but do not know if I trust the source."

His eyes turned wide, and his grin faltered. "What news is that?"

Annis shook her hand in front of his face. "I do not like to spread falsities about people."

"But I heard something as well, perhaps we can share what we have heard and see if it is the same," he suggested.

She looked over her shoulder as if fearful of her husband's return. "Someone told me I could make good coin with what I know."

"I can get you more than good coin if the information proves worth it," Fenton said, his own eyes keeping a watch for Brogan.

"Tell me what you know first," she bargained.

Fenton was quick to share. "A wife has been forced on Lord Rannick and her death is expected any time now."

Annis almost gasped but forced it back. Her theory was correct. The man dealt in information, but she would not let him deal in her sister's life.

She shook her head. "I heard differently."

Fenton grew more interested, moving from where he sat opposite the fire from her to sit beside her. “What have you heard? I may be able to get you good coin for it.”

Annis sent a glance over her shoulder again, hoping it alerted her husband not to return yet. “I heard his new wife does well and there will soon be news of an impending bairn.”

Fenton drew his head back in shock. “Who did you hear this from?”

“I will not divulge names, but I can affirm that it was someone extremely close to Lord Rannick’s wife. Is it worth any coin?”

He reached in the pouch at his waist and gave her a gold coin. “There are those who will want to hear that.”

Annis pretended to grow excited and hugged the coin in her hand. “You are so generous. Thank you. Thank you.”

Fenton waved her praise away and returned to sit opposite the fire from her lost in his thoughts.

Brogan returned, draping the blanket around his wife who appeared visibly shaken. She had heard something that upset her, but he could not take a chance and ask at this moment. It would have to wait and that annoyed him.

Fenton returned to talking about his travels and when they bedded down for the night, Brogan wrapped himself tightly around his wife.

“You will tell me what was said tomorrow,” he whispered in her ear. “Now, sleep. I will watch over you.”

She cuddled against him, feeling safe in his arms and snug against his strong, warm body, and she soon was sound asleep.

Not so Brogan. He did not trust Fenton and they were far too vulnerable camped out in the open. He ran different scenarios through his mind, determining an escape route for each one. His wife’s safety was all that mattered. He would not see her harmed and the way she slept peacefully in his arms meant she trusted him to keep her safe. He had no intentions of letting her down.

He had learned to exist on little sleep when in battle. Often, he had only a short reprieve before fighting would start again. He would sleep lightly, alert to all around him, ready to draw his sword against the enemy. Those skills would serve him well tonight.

As the night went on, his wife stirred restlessly in his arms. Her worries had invaded her sleep and he did all he could to calm her. He slept lightly and briefly on and off throughout the night. When dawn barely peaked on the horizon, he heard Fenton quietly rise and he watched through narrowed eyes, that appeared to rest in sleep, as he gathered his blanket and slipped silently away.

He reluctantly unwrapped himself from around his wife and when she attempted to blink sleep out of her eyes, he whispered, "Stay as you are. I will return shortly."

Her eyes closed, though he doubted she would return to a deep sleep. His steps were light, though it did not matter. Fenton was too busy hitching his horse to his cart to hear him.

"Leaving us?" Brogan asked and Fenton cried out in fright.

He placed his hand to his chest as he turned to face Brogan. "You frightened the wits out of me."

"Why do you sneak off?" Brogan demanded.

"Forgive me, my lord, but I have wares to sell and the old woman with the limp slows me down. I knew if I left, you would see her safely to where she wishes to go. I do not mean to be cruel, but I must tend to my business."

"I want my coin back."

Both men turned to see the old woman standing there, Annis stood beside her.

"I paid good coin for you to take me to my destination. I will have it back since you failed to deliver me where we agreed."

"I took pity on you and barely charged you anything," Fenton argued, keeping his eyes off Brogan.

Brogan threw the man's words back at him. "I thought you said you took pity on her poor soul and helped her out of the goodness of your heart?"

"He has no heart," Luna said. "He sells whatever he can get his hands on. If I were not so old, he would sell me too."

Fenton shook his head. "She knows not what she says, and I need to be on my way." He hurried up onto the cart's seat.

"Give her the coin she paid you," Brogan ordered sharply.

Fenton didn't argue. His fingers fumbled nervously as they dipped into his purse at his waist and withdrew a coin and threw it at Luna.

Brogan grabbed the horse's bridle. "Go pick up the coin and hand it to Luna."

Fenton looked ready to argue, thought better of it and hurried off the cart to do as Brogan demanded.

"Do not show yourself at Clan MacRae again," Brogan warned.

"That would be a decision left to your mother," Fenton said with a lift of his chin.

"And pummeling you into the ground would be a decision left to me if I see you there again," Brogan threatened with an anger to his voice that had Fenton nodding profusely. "Be off with you and do not ever let me see your face again in these parts." As the cart rumbled away, Brogan looked to Luna. "We will take you where you need to go."

Luna held out the coin to him.

"I do not want your coin. You have something else we want—information. Give us that and I will see you safely to your destination."

She nodded, agreeing.

Brogan stoked the fire, the morning having dawned with a heavy chill, then helped Luna to sit close to the heat of the flames. She wasted no time in stretching her slim hands out to the warmth.



Annis draped a blanket around the woman's shoulders after seeing her shiver, then sat with her husband opposite her. She cast a curious glance over her, trying to determine if she had ever seen her before. Gray had devoured the few long, curly strands of red hair left, but surprisingly her face held few wrinkles. She had no stoop that came with age, though her limp was heavily pronounced. No memory recalled ever seeing her yet somehow, she seemed familiar to Annis.

"You are both kind," Luna said with a nod. "Now tell me what you want from me."

Annis spoke up and bluntly. "Information on the MacWilliam bairn whose life was to be taken about twenty years ago—but lived."

"Why would I know anything about that?" she asked innocently.

Again, Annis was blunt. "Because the witch in the hills sent me to find you."

That Luna did not respond with shock or denial, told Annis that she was no innocent.

Luna's glance shifted to Brogan. "If I share what I know, will you offer me protection, my lord?"

"There is a village by the hills not far from where the witch lives where you will be safe," he said.

"How can you be sure?" Luna asked.

"It is my village, and I will see no harm comes to you," he said. "But what of your destination?"

"It matters not. I will go where I will be safe," Luna said and turned her attention back to Annis. "First, I must make you aware of Fenton. He is not a merchant of wares, but of information. He would pay dearly for what I am about to tell you."

"I thought the same myself and put my theory to a test." Annis glanced quickly at her husband. "That is why I sent you to fetch the blankets last night. I told him I had information and wondered if I could get coin for it. He paid me one coin."

“I had thought that myself,” Brogan admitted and did not ask what information she gave Fenton. She obviously did not want to say in front of Luna. Something Fenton said suddenly came to mind.

*I stop often at Clan MacRae.*

Had he stopped to learn information, or had he delivered information? And if so, to who?

Annis took hold of her husband’s hand as she said, “Please share with us what you know of the MacWilliam bairn.”

Luna cast leery eyes around the surrounding area.

“Fenton does not linger,” Brogan said confidently. “He was anxious to leave this morning, which means he is eager to sell the news Annis has shared with him.”

Luna nodded and her shoulders visibly relaxed. “I can tell you what was told to me recently. The MacWilliam bairn lives. Lady Aila’s servant, Gunna, got the bairn to safety, but knowing they would be after her, she gave the lass to a childless couple. Lord Lochlann and your father, Lord Balloch, claim they killed the lass and possibly Gunna, since she was never seen after that,” Luna said.

“Who told you this?” Annis asked.

“That is the strange part. A woman crippled with age approached me one day and told me.” Luna shrugged. “I do not know why she chose me to tell. I have shared it with no one, fearful if I did—I would suffer for it. Meeting you and having you ask me about it, I see the information was meant for you.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Annis asked, disappointed, having believed the woman with the limp would have had more information concerning the MacWilliam lass for them.

“Aye,” Luna said with a nod, though appeared reluctant to say.

“Tell us,” Brogan ordered.

Luna nodded. “The woman says that Gunna lives and has returned to save the lass from the three lords one last time.”

**T**hey made it home without incident, a gray sky having followed them all the way.

Annis was more surprised to see that much work had been accomplished in the short time they had been gone, but that was thanks to the added men sent from Clan MacRae. She was more than pleased to see that her instructions on where and how the various dwellings were to be built had been adhered to. Her surprise grew when she spotted several young women who must have come with the MacRae men. What pleased her the most, though, were the smiles and laughter that were heard upon entering the village.

Cheers went up and people hurried toward them as soon as Annis and Brogan were spotted. Men hurried to assist Luna off the horse and to take and tend Belle after Brogan lifted Annis off the mare.

“You speak with Una, and I will talk with the men to see what has gone on here in our absence,” Brogan said, keeping his voice low. “I know you are as anxious as I am for you to speak with the witch, but it is best we wait until tomorrow.”

She nodded, agreeing. Besides, it was later in the day, dusk not that far off. It would leave no time to talk with her, if the witch could be found at all.

The women were quick to help Luna and she was soon sitting by a fire, a blanket wrapped around her, and food and drink offered to her. Annis noticed that she listened and offered little about herself. The only thing that was known

about her was that she had no family and that her limp was caused by an injury many years ago. Annis thought there was more to the woman than she offered.

Annis wandered away from the campfire, tugging Una along with her. “It appears that much has gone on here since our departure.”

Una glowed with excitement. “It has been wonderful. More men than expected arrived from Clan MacRae and I was surprised to see several women with them. We thought the women would wait until sufficient dwellings were built, but they came anyway. While the men work on the dwellings, the women have seen to stitching garments from the cloth they brought with them. We have also worked to stock the stone shed with food for the winter. We will not starve or die from the cold this winter, and most of all, we will not be alone—thanks to you.”

Annis returned Una’s smile, more pleased for the young woman than for the compliment. “Much building has taken place.” She turned her head surveying the many partially constructed dwellings.”

“They work from dawn until dusk. They want dwellings completed for all before the cold sets in.” Una pointed to a new dwelling that looked comfortable for one person. “That is Seward’s new home, and he is thrilled. And he helps every day as best he can to get more dwellings built for others. He is very proud as we all are of our new village. We are enormously grateful to Lord Brogan, but we all are forever grateful for the day you arrived here.”

“As am I, for I have made good friends.” She grinned. “Now tell me how Risley does?”

Una’s cheeks flushed. “He works hard, and he also teaches the men how to use the tools correctly. It has helped the building go faster.”

“And?” Annis urged and Una’s cheeks flushed deeper.

Una gave a hasty look about and kept her voice low. “We have kissed, several times, and every one of them was more

delightful than the last one. He wants to wed once he builds a cottage for us and have many bairns and teach his skills to them, even the lasses. He is impressed with your talent for building.”

“I believe I can learn much from him myself, and I am thrilled for you, but is it what you want—to wed Risley?”

Una smiled. “We may have just met but I find a comfort with him I have never known, and I rush out of bed in the morning eager to see him. And I love when he takes my hand in his and when he steals an unexpected kiss.” Her smile grew and she nodded. “Aye, I want to wed Risley.”

“I am happy for you and Risley. Soon the village will be filled with the laughter and squeal of happy bairns,” Annis said.

“You and Lord Brogan will help with that as well. Our bairns will grow up together.”

Annis smiled and nodded, but her heart hurt. That was what she and her sisters had planned—their bairns to grow, play, laugh together. It had her asking, “Have you heard any news of Clan Loudon.”

Una nodded and her voice turned to a whisper. “Aye, though the news is weeks old. Clan Loudon was attacked.”

Annis paled and a painful grip squeezed at her stomach.

“Lord Odran, the one they call the silent lord, was quick to end the attack and from what has been heard all is well. Though, Chieftain Emory succumbed to wounds he suffered when fighting.”

Annis closed her eyes for a moment against the news, silently praying that Saber had kept her sister safe.

“Una,” a woman summoned cheerfully.

“Is there anything else, my lady?” Una asked.

Annis wanted to remind her not to call her my lady, but instead she shook her head. “Nay, nothing more, Una.” She watched Una hurry off happily and laugh lightly when the woman said something to her, then they hurried off.

Again, she was reminded of her sisters and what they had shared, and she was also reminded that it was unlikely she would share such closeness with the women here since she was Lord Brogan's wife. Her heart hurt at the loss not only of her sisters, but of the camaraderie of the village women.

Her feet were ready to rush off and find her husband, but she refused to let them move. Brogan would tell her everything he knew, and she much preferred he tell her when they were alone, since she was already on the verge of tears with worry for Elysia.

She had to get her mind off such dire thoughts. She forced them to turn on thoughts that would easily engage her—building. She looked over the progress of the building again and a thought came to her that had her hoisting the hem of her garments and taking quick steps away from the village.



BROGAN KEPT an eye on his wife as he talked with Rudd. He was sure Una shared the same news with Annis as Rudd had with him, though his news was more in-depth. He was glad for the victory for his friend, Odran, but that victory could also cost him a degree of happiness he had found. He would tell his wife the truth now. She deserved to know. He had given his word to Odran to keep his secret, but it was no longer necessary with his friend having saved Clan Loudon from attack.

His brow narrowed slightly when he saw his wife hike her garments and rush away from the village, only to stop when she was a short distance on the outskirts to view the village from there. He knew her well enough to know that the news about Clan Loudon had upset her and to not let it devastate her, she had turned her mind to the one thing that would help combat her worries—building.

“Your father demands your presence upon your return,” Rudd said.

That drew Brogan's attention. “Did he say why?”

“He did not,” Rudd said. “When will you want to leave, my lord.”

Brogan grinned. “Come now, Rudd, you know me better than that and I dare say you have no desire to return there. You seem quite comfortable here.”

Rudd nodded again. “I will not deny it, my lord. But I serve you and I go where you go.”

Brogan laid a firm hand on his shoulder. “This is my home, Rudd, and presently I am not going anywhere. Though, the quest may take Annis and me away again. If so, I will take a group of warriors with me this time. But not you, Rudd. You will remain here and oversee the village.”

Rudd drew his shoulders back. “I would prefer to go with you.”

“You serve me better here. Now, I must speak with my wife.”

Rudd gave a respectful nod and Brogan went to join his wife as she continued to survey the village.

Brogan wanted to take her in his arms but did not want to disturb her intense concentration, so he kept his hands at his sides. He had to smile when she planted herself against his side and he gently circled her waist with his arm and gave it a tender squeeze.

“There is a building that must be constructed before winter,” she said.

That she avoided mentioning the news Una had surely told her made him realize she did not want to speak of it just yet and that was fine with him.

“What dwelling do you envision?” he asked.

“A longhouse where the village can come to eat, share talk and laughter, and can house those that have yet to have a dwelling of their own.”

“A wise idea,” he said amazed how his wife’s mind imagined things.



Annis went on to detail her thoughts. “A fire pit in one area and a fireplace of sturdy stone in another so that the dwelling is well-heated against the cold and also two places where food can be cooked. Tables and benches will need to be built as well and beds for those in need.”

“The men will need to start on that right away if it is to be finished before winter.”

“Aye, they will. Leave them to build only a portion of our home. The rest can be finished come spring and summer,” she said.

“I have no argument with that since the space will keep us close throughout the winter,” he said with a smile and a playful wink.

Annis looked up at him, her eyes still intense. “We have a reason to keep close—love.”

“Damn if your words do not steal my heart even more, wife.” He kissed her, a gentle though deep kiss, meant to express his love.

Annis rested her head on his chest once the kiss ended, needing time to catch her breath and calm the passion it had stirred. It also gave time for thoughts of her sisters to rush back at her.

“I should not be so happy with you, husband, when my sisters could be suffering terribly.”

He could not keep the news from her that would ease some of her worry. “I have no word on Bliss, but I can tell you that Elysia is safe.” His wife’s eyes lit with delight, causing his to do the same.

“You are sure?” she asked.

“I would not lie to you, wife,” he said.

“Tell me all you know,” she said eagerly.

He kissed her brow. “Later when we are alone. Right now, the lord and lady must join the people in a small celebration of our return home.”

Annis saw the excitement on the faces that gathered around the two fires and agreed with a nod and took hold of her husband's hand.

Smiles greeted them as they joined everyone and just as drinks were passed around—the first squawk was heard. It was followed by a second, then a third, then a fourth...

Everyone huddled together around the fires, frightened by the growing number of ravens circling overhead.

Annis stepped forward and called out, "What do you want?"

The circle of birds flew to form a line that pointed to the hills.

Annis looked to Brogan. "The witch summons me."

“How is it you always get your way?” Brogan asked, shaking his head and keeping his hand clamped firmly around his wife’s as they set foot on the path to the witch.

“I am persuasive,” Annis said, glad for the brightness of the nearly full moon that lit the path well enough.

“You mean relentless,” he corrected, the snap of a branch causing him to cast a cautious glance about. “This is madness. Anything can be hiding in the darkness that surrounds us.”

“You truly think the witch would summon me and leave me unprotected?” she asked as though it were a logical conclusion.

“You... not me,” he clarified.

“We are one. She hurts you, then she hurts me, and I will make that clear, though I believe she is already aware of it.”

He was a bit more skeptical than his wife. Besides, he did not trust the witch. How could he when she had empowered the curse that had brought him and others endless suffering?

“If she wants to see you so badly, where is she? Where is the fog?”

“You think I need fog to appear?”

Instinct had Brogan stepping in front of his wife to shield her as the witch suddenly appeared a short distance in front of them.

“Good to know you would die for her,” the witch said.

Annis hurried in front of her husband and shook a finger at the witch. “You dare hurt my husband and I will see you suffer for it.”

The witch laughed. “I am trembling with fear.”

“You two are much alike,” Brogan said, wondering how to deal with both stubborn women.

The witch looked at Brogan as she slowly stretched her arm out from her side and pointed. “Go wait over there while I speak with Annis.”

“I do not take well to orders,” Brogan threatened.

The witch scowled. “In that we are alike. Go! Wolf will keep you company.”

Red eyes glared in the darkness before a large wolf appeared.

“Not much of a name,” Brogan said.

“It suits him well since he is leader of his pack. Would you like to meet them?” the witch asked with a sneer.

“Stop threatening my husband,” Annis warned.

“Or what?” the witch challenged, a glare in her eye most people would fear.

Brogan understood that his wife was not like most people—she would not back down from the powerful woman. He took her by the shoulders, forcing her to turn and look at him. “I will wait where she says. I can see you from there.” He kissed her cheek and whispered, “Watch your tongue.”

Annis kept an eye on her husband until he sat on a flat boulder and the wolf eased his backside down not far from Brogan to stare at him.

Annis turned to the witch. “That wolf better not harm my husband.”

“As long as your husband gives him no reason, he will be safe. Enough of such nonsense, I summoned you for a reason.

“You found the woman with the limp?”

Annis nodded. “I did and we brought her here to the village, but she is of little help. A woman crippled with age told her that the MacWilliam bairn lives and that Gunna gave the little lass to a childless couple since she knew she would be hunted, then she disappeared. She also said that Gunna has returned to protect the lass from the three lords one last time.”

“And so it begins,” the witch whispered.

“What begins?”

“The wrong being righted and ultimately the demise of the curse,” the witch said.

Annis shook her head. “I do not understand. This woman, Gunna, will see the wrong made right?”

The witch cast an annoyed look on Annis. “You are not paying attention. The curse was cast. The only thing that could stop it was the death of the MacWilliam lass. Gunna made certain that did not happen. She disappeared, sacrificed everything to see the MacWilliam lass kept safe.”

Annis began to understand. “And now that the time draws near for the wrong to be made right, she has returned to make certain her promise to Lady Aila is kept. But how does she save the lass this time?” Her eyes shot wide. “Gunna is here to protect the lass’s identity.”

The witch smiled.

Anger flared in Annis. “If that is so, she will stop me from finding her.”

“You will need to ask Gunna that.”

“Why send me to find the woman with the limp if it is Gunna I must speak with?” Annis demanded.

“The woman with the limp provided you with information you needed.”

“All she said was that the bairn was given to a childless couple,” Annis said. “How does that help me find Gunna or the child when it was near to twenty years ago?”

“Think on it, Annis,” the witch snapped.

Annis snapped back. “Bliss has no time for me to think on it.”

“She has no time for you not to think on it. Need I remind you that if this curse is not broken, Bliss will not be the only one to suffer being wed to a cursed lord—you will as well. And worse, any bairns born of your union.”

“I will make certain I conceive no bairn if that should come to pass,” Annis said with an obstinate toss of her chin.

“Bairns are a stubborn lot. They decide when they will be born, and you will not stop it. So, do what must be done to find the MacWilliam lass.”

Annis repeated what the witch had previously told her. “Find the lass and all will come to pass. It sounds easy and yet —”

“It is not,” the witch said. “Remember there are those who hide in the shadows and want something far different than you. Lies come easily to them. Listen and you will hear it for yourself. It grows late and the hills can be dangerous at night. There is a small dwelling just past the stream where two boulders hug like a loving couple. Seek shelter there tonight.”

“I do not understand,” Annis said shaking her head. “You are a witch. You know things. Why do you not know where the bairn is?”

“You and others may call me a witch, but I am a woman wise with vast knowledge—knowledge that is feared rather than embraced and understood. Even with all the knowledge I have gained, there are still some things I do not know. But that does not stop me from finding out.”

Annis smiled. “So basically, you are sending me to collect knowledge.”

The witch returned the smile. “There are times you do not disappoint, Annis. Embrace the knowledge you collect. All of it will serve you well.”

“There is something that nags at me, that does not seem quite right.”

“What is that?” the witch asked.

“The servant Gunna’s unrelenting mission to keep the MacWilliam bairn safe. What servant would surrender her life for a lord or lady’s bairn? It makes no sense, unless...” Annis spoke with confidence. “I or my sisters would surrender our lives to keep a niece safe or disappear and leave all who I love behind and return when needed. Gunna was not Lady Aila’s servant—she was her sister, wasn’t she?”

The witch stared at Annis for several moments, then she nodded. “You are perceptive, and you unravel secrets quickly. Be careful, for some secrets will bring danger.”

The darkness seemed to reach out and swallow her or had she retreated into it, for the next moment she was gone.

“Annis.”

Brogan stood a short distance from her. “The wolf left.”

“So did the witch,” she said and stretched her hand out to him to steady herself, a tremble running through her legs.

His arms went around her, alarmed at the tremor in her body and relieved when she sagged against him in relief.

“Gunna, the servant who hid the MacWilliam bairn, is Lady Aila’s sister,” she said.

“I never heard my father make mention of that.” Brogan wrapped himself tighter around his wife as lightning flashed in the sky. “We need to get back to the village, the thunder rumbles closer.”

“No one knew of it,” she said and slipped her arm around her husband’s. “The witch said we should take shelter in a small dwelling by the stream. Come, it is where to boulders hug like a loving couple.”

Brogan set a good pace, prepared to scoop his wife up and carry her if the dark clouds got any closer to swallowing the nearly full moon and snuffing out what light guided them.

As the first fat raindrops fell, Annis spied the dwelling and as Brogan rushed them inside, the sky opened up and soaked the earth. Wood sat in the hearth ready to spark to life and a bed was freshly prepared with linens.

“It seems we were expected,” Brogan said.

Annis paced by the bed while Brogan saw to getting a fire started.

“Something is not right,” Annis said.

“What do you mean?” Brogan asked as the fire caught and its warmth was soon filling the room.

Annis stopped pacing. “The witch is keeping something from us, I can feel it. Why not tell me that Gunna was Lady Aila’s sister? And if your father did not know of it, why had it been kept a secret? And who exactly knew about it?”

Her annoyance was palpable. It sparked around him like a flame that had yet to catch.

“There is much more to this than she tells me. Why is that? Why does she choose to keep things from me? What is she afraid of?”

“You cannot mean to think she is fearful,” Brogan asked, the thought absurd.

Annis turned on her husband, agitated. “I tell you there is more to what surrounds this curse than she says.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“Her avoidance,” Annis said. “It is like she wants me to know something yet needs me to find it out myself.”

“Why would she want you to do that?”

“I do not know,”—she threw her hands up in frustration—“though I wish I did. And what about those who lie to us that she continues to warn about? Who are they and what do they lie about?”

Brogan felt the guilt like a stab to his gut. “There is something I have not told you.”



Her stomach twisted. “You have lied to me?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “It was a secret I was bound to, but no longer.”

“What secret?” Annis shook her head. “Tell me before I go mad with worry.”

“Weeks ago, Lord Odran rescued Clan Loudon from attack.”

“Una told me, and I was sorry to hear that Chieftain Emory succumbed to wounds received in battle.” Her eyes turned wide. “Something has happened to Elysia?”

There was no other way to tell her, and she had a right to know. “Saber hid his true identity. He is Lord Odran—the silent Highlander.”

Annis staggered back, the news shocking. “The very thing Bliss fought so hard to protect us from, marrying any of the cursed lords. Now all three of us are wed to them. I am assuming Elysia now knows her husband’s true identity?”

“There is no hiding it now with Lord Odran having saved Clan Loudon from defeat.”

“I do not only fight to keep Bliss safe but Elysia as well,” she said, realizing how important her quest had become. She shook her head. “Elysia chose to wed Saber—Lord Odran—of her own free will and sealed her fate, didn’t she?”

“Aye, she did,” Brogan said, “and from what I have heard they truly love each other.”

Annis sat on the side of the bed. “Elysia did favor Saber and he was kind and gentle with her.” Her head shot up to glare at her husband. “Tell me Lord Odran is no different than Saber.”

“I can tell you that Saber’s love for your sister is no different than Odran’s,” Brogan said.

Her mind was filled with far too many disturbing thoughts. She needed to let them go like she did when something she was constructing posed a problem. She would give it time, move away from it so she could better understand it and see it

more clearly before solving the issue. That is what she needed to do now—clear her head.

“Make love to me,” she demanded.

Brogan’s brow shot up. He knew what she wanted from him. He had sought it himself often enough when his mind troubled him. Meaningless coupling.

“Nay,” he snapped. “I will not couple with you meaninglessly, so you can avoid what troubles you. Our love means more to me than that.”

“I cannot believe you refuse to make love with me,” she said, more than a bit shocked.

“I cannot believe you would ask me to pointlessly couple with you,” he shot back, annoyed.

She drew back her head as if he had struck her. “Pointlessly couple? Is that what you think I want from you? What I need from you?” She silently cursed the tears that gathered in her eyes.

He had been rash in refusing her. But how did he explain how her words had stung and brought back memories of how he had lost himself in women whose names and faces he could no longer recall. He did not want that with her and if he had not allowed his memories to sting, he would have realized their lovemaking would never be pointless.

“I spoke out of turn,” he said, rushing his fingers through his hair, not sure how to right the hurt he had caused her. The tears that glistened in her eyes ready to spill stabbed at his heart. She cried easily, often at foolish things, but this time he had caused her tears and that was something he never wanted to do.

“You spoke out of turn. I spoke out of love. If I cannot come to you in need...” She shook her head. “I never gave thought, not for a moment, that you would deny me.”

Brogan hated himself at that moment and all he wanted to do was snatch her up in his arms and beg her forgiveness for being such a fool.

“Annis,” he said and stepped toward her.

Her hand shot up stopping him. “I need a moment of privacy.” She went to the door.

“It’s raining,” he reminded, the fear she would run from him once she stepped outside squeezing at his heart.

“I need a moment alone,” she insisted and swung open the door.

Brogan let loose with a curse as he went after her. She was several steps ahead of him. The dark clouds rushed across the moon, leaving intermittent flashes of light.

“ANNIS,” he yelled, cursing his foolishness that drove her away from him.

She stopped and turned and just then light peeked through the clouds and his heart shattered seeing the sorrow on her lovely face. But what broke his heart even more was that she stretched her arms out to him, forgiving him, giving him another chance. He seized it and was about to rush to her when a dark figure emerged in haste from behind her and snatched her away.

“**B**ROGAN! Annis screamed as she struggled against the thick arm locked tight around her middle as she was dragged backward.

The man’s hand slammed across her mouth but not high enough to completely cover it. It gave her time to bite down with force on the skin between his thumb and pointer finger.

His scream echoed through the hills and woods.

Annis drove her elbow back and stamped down on his boot with equal force. His grip on her weakened but he did not let go.

She screamed out again. “BROGAN!”

“ANNIS!”

He was close, but would he be able to find her in the rain and dark. She had to keep fighting, keep the man from dragging her farther into the woods, away from her husband.

She threw her head back and caught the man in the face.

He cried out and swung her around, his fisted hand heading straight at her face.

She ducked just in time and with his strong swing missing her, he lost his balance and stumbled. It gave her enough time to kick him hard enough in the leg to send him to the ground.

He cursed and spat as he struggled to his feet. “If you were not worth so much unharmed, I’d—”

He suddenly turned silent, his mouth dropping open, and his eyes bulged with fear. Annis swerved around expecting to see her husband, but it was not her husband that had frightened him silent. It was several pairs of red eyes glaring at them from the darkness.

“Wolves,” he said, his voice quivering, and he took a step back. “They can have you.”

“They are not here for her.”

Annis almost collapsed with relief hearing her husband’s commanding voice.

The large wolf that had kept Brogan company earlier stepped out of the woods snarling; his teeth bared. Two more wolves followed, flanking his sides.

Annis was not sure what to do. Thankfully, her husband did. He came up behind her, his arm going around her waist.

“Step back with me. They are not here for us,” he said.

Annis realized he was right. The witch had sent them to protect her and Brogan.

“Do not leave me to them,” the man begged.

“What do you want with my wife,” Brogan demanded.

“There is good coin to be had to abduct her,” the man said, keeping his eyes on the wolves.

Brogan continued to demand answers. “And do what with her?”

“I do not know. We have not received word of her fate yet.”

“We?” Brogan snapped.

“Mercenaries hired for the job.”

His wife trembled against him, and he asked what she no doubt thought herself. “Others are here with you?”

The man shook his head. “Nay, not here. I drew the short stick. None wanted to come here—home of the witch.”

“Where do they wait?” Brogan demanded.

“Keep the wolves from me and I will tell you,” the man bargained.

“They are not mine to command,” Brogan said.

The wolves’ snarls increased as did their steps toward the man.

“I beg you, help me,” the man pleaded.

Brogan clamped his arm firm around his wife’s waist and lifted her enough so that her feet did not touch the ground, then he took cautious steps back.

“You sealed your fate when you trespassed on the witch’s land,” Brogan said. He swept his wife up into his arms and rushed off, leaving the man to his fate.

The man’s screams filled the night and Annis buried her face against her husband’s chest, trying not to think of the man’s horrible fate.

After entering the dwelling, Brogan leaned back against the closed door, keeping his wife firm in his arms and allowing his breathing and fear to calm.

Annis kept her arms snug around his neck, not wanting to let go. That she had almost been taken from her husband sent a shiver of pure fear through her. The thought of never seeing him again, never feeling his hand close around hers, never enjoying another of his kisses, or the pleasure of his intimate touches made her realize the depth of her love for him.

“Our garments are wet,” he said.

Annis raised her head. “We should shed them so they can dry.”

“Aye,” he said, images of his wife standing in front of him naked rushing into his head. He tried to chase them away. It would do him no good to strip and have his shaft fully erect in front of her after what she had been through. But he could not stop the ache, the need for her. He realized then how she must have felt earlier and how selfish he had been to refuse to make love with her.

He did not wait, did not seek permission, or offer an explanation, he pressed his lips to hers and ravished her mouth with a kiss he sensed they both needed.

Annis could barely catch her breath, he kissed her with such hunger and command. He left no doubt as to his passion, it boiled to a point where it would be too hot to handle, and the thought sent a shiver of anticipation through her.

She had to tear her mouth away to get a much-needed breath and his lips went directly to her neck, nipping, nibbling, kissing, and fueling her passion.

He carried her to the bed and dropped her down on it, pushing her garment out of the way and spreading her legs before dropping down over her, his hands braced on either side of her. He rested his face close to hers, his blue eyes fired with a scorching passion.

“Never. Never walk away from me like that again. It felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest.” He shut his eyes a moment. “And when you disappeared into the darkness, I feared hell itself had opened up and took you from me. I will not lose you, Annis.”

She gasped as he sunk his shaft into her with a deep and hard thrust. It was what she had wanted from him, needed from him—to forget everything else and know their love was strong no matter what was happening around them. That nothing—no one—could take that away from them.

“You are all I want. All I need. All I love,” she said, tears tickling her eyes.

His manhood stilled and throbbed inside her impatiently, and taking a strong breath to temper his desire, he rested his brow to hers. “Your demand taunted old memories and I foolishly failed to see that your need for me was driven by love.”

Annis smiled. “It is time to make new memories that will drive the old ones away.” She wrapped her legs around him. “Do not keep me waiting, husband, my need for you—only ever you—is insatiable.”

He did not keep her waiting. He could not, his own need just as voracious for her.

Annis knew it would be quick, the incident having fueled their love and fear of losing each other. Each deep, forceful thrust she felt assured her of their love, of their need to join, to know they had survived the ordeal.

She burst in a climax that stole her breath and pounded her heart until she thought it would explode, and he tossed his head back and released a feral roar as he joined her, letting her know he felt the same.

When she was finally able to speak, Annis said, "We need to shed our garments."

He lifted his head to grin at her. "Cannot get enough of me?"

She poked him and chuckled. "Never. But it is a more practical reason I say that."

He realized then their garments were wet, and he hurried off her and the bed, reaching to take her hand and pull her up. He rid himself of his clothes quickly, then set about helping her off with hers. They worked together spreading their garments over the benches and table Brogan moved closer to the hearth so the heat could dry them.

Annis grabbed the bowl of cheese and bread on the table and hurried to the bed to slip beneath the blanket and made a face when her feet hit a wet spot.

Brogan rectified that by replacing the wet blanket with the dry one at the end of the bed, then he crawled beneath to join his wife, sitting with her back braced against the pillows.

"Do you think we are safe here? Or will the mercenaries send another man when this one fails to return?" she asked, cuddling in the crook of her husband's arm.

"With him having drawn the short stick says that none wish the task of stepping foot on the witch's land, and they will give his return time. The rain and darkness would also have someone thinking twice. Not to mention the howl of the wolves."



“The wolves howled?” she asked and perked her ears to listen.

“Several times, but you were far too engaged to notice,” he said with a playful wink.

She frowned. “You were not too engaged to notice?”

“I was definitely engaged, but I also kept an alert ear for other sounds to keep us safe.” He laughed. “Until the end, when our lovemaking completely consumed me, but by then the wolves had calmed and I knew all was well.”

Annis let her head fall back on his shoulder. “The mercenaries must be the danger the witch warned me about. Who do you think hired them to abduct me? And whatever do they want with me?”

“There has been talk through the years that there are those who want me, Odran, and Rannick dead so the curse can die with us. We paid it little heed, but of late I believe that perhaps there is more to it. With you being my wife, there is a chance of you bearing a child and the curse continuing.”

“All the more reason to see the curse broken,” Annis said.

“All the more reason for you to stay close to me and take no chances,” he ordered.

She grinned and poked him in the chest. “I do not mind in the least staying close to you.”

“That is what I like, an obedient wife. OW!” He laughed when she playfully punched him in the arm. His laughter ceased when he gripped her chin in his hand. “I may laugh, but this is serious, and I need to make sure I keep you safe. You will do as I say and not fill my days with worry.”

“I will do my best not to worry you,” she said. “But I cannot let this threat stop me from my quest. We need to find the couple who Gunna gave the MacWilliam bairn to.”

“Does nothing frighten you?” he asked, running his finger tenderly along her cheek.

“Aye, losing you and my sisters which is why I cannot let anything else frighten me. I must see this done.”

“*We* must see this done,” he corrected, proud his wife had such courage, yet worried over her at the same time.

She turned questioning eyes on him. “Am I a good wife?”

Her question surprised him. “Why would you ask that?”

“As I once told you, I never gave thought to marrying and even less thought to wifely duties. I do not know how to stitch, at least properly, and trust me when I say you do not want me to cook for you. I had even cringed at the thought of coupling, though my thought on that has completely changed.”

He turned a wicked grin on her. “Thanks to me.”

“There you go thinking highly of yourself again,” she said with a playful twinkle in her eyes.

“The truth speaks for itself.” He kissed her before she could respond. He finished with a soft brush of his lips across hers. “We not only need to continue the quest, but we also need to find out who hired the mercenaries to capture you.”

“It might have been wiser for us to keep the man alive so we could find out more,” she said.

“It was not our choice to make,” he reminded.

With the witch having spoken to her about knowledge, the man’s death left her with a question. “Why would the witch see the mercenary dead before gaining information?” She answered for herself. “I suppose she did not want to take the chance that either of us could be harmed.” She waited to hear her husband’s thought on it and when he remained silent, she cast a curious eye on him. “You always have an opinion. Why the silence?”

He tilted his head and smiled. When he smiled at her like that, with love in his soft blue eyes for her—only her—her heart fluttered wildly, as it did now.

“I haven’t told you recently how beautiful you are.” He tugged at one of her many springy, red curls.

She swatted at his hand. “You do not answer me. Why?”

He tugged at her curl again. “You will not like my answer.”

“I will like it even less if you do not answer me,” she said, leaving him to tug at her curl. “Besides, would you like it if I kept something from you?”

He shook his head and kissed her. “You win, wife. You always do.”

“Then tell me.”

He tucked her close, resting his hand with a squeeze at her waist. “When you were snatched away from me, I knew a rage I never felt before. All I could think about was making the man suffer who dared to take you from me. That rage grew as I searched for you. I wanted to rip him apart until there was nothing left of him. I spotted the wolves and knew they would lead me to you. I also knew that they would do far more damage to your abductor than I could and that pleased me.”

Annis shivered and Brogan drew the blanket up around her.

“You are always safe when you are with me, wife, on that you have my word,” he whispered and kissed her gently.

“Of that I have no doubt.”

“Then why do I see doubt in your eyes?” he asked, then grinned. “Knowing you, wife, as I do, the doubt does not concern me and, if I ventured a guess, I would say your doubt centers on how we are going to find the mercenaries.”

She smiled. “You do know me well.”

“I think perhaps I should get to know you even better,” he said, his hand roaming down over the gentle curve of her hip.

“Not fair. You know I cannot resist you and you know we must find the mercenaries to find out who hired them to abduct me or there will be more attempts to do so,” she warned, annoyed her body was responding to his caresses and knowing it would not be long before her hand roamed over him. And she knew the exact spot she intended to caress.

“We can discuss it later,” he said, leaning down to nibble at her neck.

She knocked the wood bowl, with what little food was left in it, off the bed as she worked her hand down his body to settle over his already erect shaft and stroke it gently, teasingly.

“Your word on something, husband,” she said, feeling him grow hard in her hand.

“Anything,” he said, his hand going to caress her breast.

“You will take me with you when you go hunt for the mercenaries.”

His head shot up from where he nibbled at her neck. “You will not—”

“AHA! I knew it,” she said, poking at his chest. “You plan to go find them without me.”

“Listen to me good, wife,” he ordered. “There is no way you are going with me when I go after the mercenaries.”

Annis sat straight up. “And who will you entrust to keep me safe?”

Brogan went to respond and stopped, struggling to find an answer.

“There is no one,” she challenged.

A thought came to him, and he spoke it before giving it any consideration. “I will take you to my family’s keep. You will be safe there.”

She laughed. “I would rather be locked away in the dungeon.”

“That can be arranged,” he threatened.

“You would not dare,” she warned, poking at his chest again.

He grabbed her finger. “I gave you my word I would keep you safe and I will do it no matter what it takes.”

“Then your word settles it. You will take me with you since you said yourself that I am always safe when I am with you.”

He shook his head. “You tricked me, wife.”

She grinned wide. “I did and you will keep your word for you are an honorable man.”

He smiled, a wicked smile as he eased her back on the bed. “Now let me repay you in kind.”

Annis chuckled softly. “Be careful or you may find yourself tricked again—though this time you might enjoy it.” Her hand shot down and grabbed his shaft firmly.

Brogan gasped and Annis chuckled.

**A**n overcast sky greeted them the next morning and lingered as they walked to the village.

Brogan kept his hand wrapped firmly around his wife's, not that he had to. She gripped his hand with a strength that surprised him and made him realize her intention. Any assailant would be forced to pry her hand out of his to separate them. It made him worry a little less, but only a little.

“We need to see to those mercenaries, so they do not slow down or interfere with our quest,” Annis said.

He had recognized from first meeting Annis that she had a sharp mind. And as always, she approached most everything as she did when constructing a dwelling, piece by piece. So, any advice she offered he gladly considered.

“I was thinking,” she said and glared when he smiled at her. “Why are you smiling?”

“I feel lucky to have you as my wife,” he said and raised their locked hands to kiss hers.

Annis stopped abruptly. “Lucky! If you feel lucky perhaps the curse has been broken, or could it be losing its power?”

“Lately, I have been happier than I can ever remember,” he said, the thought surprising and he tugged her hand to continue walking.

“Find the lass and all will come to pass,” Annis repeated what the witch had told her. “What if the witch means something different?”

“What else could she mean?”

Annis shook her head. “I do not know. Maybe something has already been set in motion and by the time we find the MacWilliam lass all will come to pass. What I do know is that we should be careful who we trust.”

“I agree. A good sum of coins can tempt the most loyal man or most any stranger,” Brogan said, the thought sparking his anger.

“We will see what the mercenaries have to say,” Annis said.

This time Brogan stopped abruptly. “You should not go with me.”

“Why not? We simply offer them more coin not to take me captive.”

“You do not think like a mercenary. Such a ruthless man would not only take our coins but turn around and take you captive anyway and get even more coins,” he explained and watched her brow scrunch in concentration. He started them moving once again, the open area around them leaving them much too vulnerable for a surprise assault.

She smiled after a few moments. “I got it. We set a trap. We let them capture me—”

He came to a jarring halt, yanking her to land solidly against his chest. “Are you completely insane?”

“It is a logical plan,” she said.

“It is a foolish plan,” he argued.

“Why? Do you think you would be unable to rescue me?”

He lowered his face close to hers. “I would go through hell itself to rescue you, but do you have any notion at all of what could happen to you before I got to you?”

“Nothing would happen. The mercenary made mention that if I was not worth so much unharmed that he would have... he never got to say since that was when he spotted the wolves,” she said. “So, it seems that whoever has paid for me

to be abducted wants me delivered unharmed. Therefore, the plan is logical.”

Brogan planted his face even closer to his wife’s, the tips of their noses touching. “Hear me good, wife... that is never going to happen.” He stepped around her to tug her alongside him, his strides strong.

Annis hurried to keep step with him.

“Not another word about it,” he ordered when she went to speak.

She bit her tongue. It would do no good to continue to discuss it when he was obviously angry with her suggestion. She hoped he would come to see reason and he would discuss it later with her, though she intended to leave him no choice.

The village was a buzz with concern when all found out that Annis had almost been abducted and saved by the wolves. They were worried for her and fearful that the wolves had returned.

“A bad omen,” Seward said, shaking his head.

“He is right,” Iver agreed. “It does not bode well.”

“Post extra guards around the village,” Brogan said with a look to Rudd. “And let it be known that no one is to wander off alone until I can be sure it is safe.”

“Aye, my lord,” Rudd said and went off to see to it done.

“Mercenaries are a ruthless lot. They care for nothing but the coin they can earn,” Iver said. “Only the foolhardy deal with them.”

“Or those who have no choice,” Seward said.

“I intend to have more warriors brought here. You will be safe,” Brogan said, having decided on that last night when he had laid awake after they had made love for a second time. He refused to take any chance of losing his wife. If need be, he would surround her with warriors until this matter was settled. He almost laughed at the thought, knowing exactly what Annis would have to say about that.



“Aye, Lord Brogan, will keep us safe. We have nothing to fear,” Iver said. “Now it is time to get back to work. We have many dwellings that need to be finished before winter sets in.”

Everyone drifted off, talking, whispering, and no doubt worrying.

“Let me get you a hot drink, my lady,” Una said and hurried off before Annis could refuse.

Annis found herself alone with Luna.

“It is nice to see how much you and your husband love each other. I was lucky enough to know two good loves in my life,” Luna said.

“Two?” Annis asked, curious.

“My husband got sick and died when we were wed for barely two months. The second man I found love with was far different from my husband, but a good and loving man.”

Annis wanted to ask what happened to him, but heartfelt memories had tears pooling so heavily in the woman’s eyes that she did not want to cause her any more pain.

“You are building a good home here. Your talent is everywhere I look.”

Annis beamed with pride and cast a glance around. The village was beginning to take shape. “My sister Bliss tells me I was constructing things as soon as I was able to walk. She told me that I would get terribly upset when my rock buildings crumbled and set to building them again and again until they remained sturdy. My sister Elysia tried to teach me how to stitch and realized soon enough I was better at fashioning her stitching needles than sewing with them.” She chuckled, recalling the day.

“You miss your sisters,” Luna said.

Annis nodded. “Very much and I hope it isn’t long before we are reunited.”

“I hope as well since I lost a sister and miss her every day,” Luna said tearfully.

Una returned and handed a tankard to Annis and one to Luna.

“Aren’t you going to join us?” Luna asked.

“It is time to take food to the men,” Una said.

Luna looked ready to get to her feet. “I can help.”

“Nay, you can sit and rest your leg. I have more than enough help,” Una said.

“I will join you after finishing this fine brew,” Annis said, enjoying the flavorful brew.

“Take your time, my lady. There are many hours of work ahead of us today.” With that Una took her leave.

Luna hugged her tankard. “May I ask you something, my lady.”

Annis disliked being referred to as my lady. It simply did not suit her. She was as far from a noble as one could be, but out of respect for her husband, she held her tongue.

“You may, though I cannot promise I can answer it,” Annis said truthfully, since there were things that were private to her.

“The witch—you have met her?” Luna asked in a whisper as if it was a secret.

It was suspected in the village that she had met the witch. She shrugged neither admitting or denying it.

Luna nodded and whispered, “I wonder what she is like?”

She laughed. “I would venture to guess that she is stubborn. Commanding. Irritating—” She stopped abruptly, one word echoing in her head. “Fearless. She would be fearless.”

“You sound as if you would admire such a woman,” Luna said.

Annis was about to laugh when a sudden thought struck her. A thought that startled her. “I would admire such a woman. It takes courage to be different, to be truthful to yourself. I was fortunate that I had my sisters who encouraged

and helped me to pursue my interest in building, though it was frowned upon by most. A woman, like the witch, stands alone and yet she stands strong and embraces her strengths. So, oddly enough, I do admire the witch.”

“Where does your task take you next?” Luna asked.

“I do not know. That is something Brogan and I have yet to decide.”

Luna smiled gently. “You work well together.”

“We do and my husband is a good man for tolerating me.”

“Be still my heart, is that praise I hear from my wife?” Brogan said with a chuckle as he approached.

“Praise where praise is due,” Annis said, placing her tankard on the ground and going to her husband to be wrapped in his strong arms.

Brogan kissed her brow. “I knew there was a reason I wed you.”

“To stroke your enormous ego?” Annis asked with a teasing laugh.

“Well, there is that, but also that you are always truthful with me.” He kissed her again, though this time on the lips, a soft, loving kiss. “Come with me, wife, we have things to discuss.” He looked to Luna. “Have you been appointed a chore or task?”

“I have, my lord. I help Maddie with the stitching. Her hands are not as nimble as they once were, and I still have a fine hand at it. All thanks to my sister, who taught me the skill. Bless her soul,” Luna said.

Tears tickled Annis’s eyes as she closed her fingers around her husband’s when he took her hand and they walked off. “I feel for Luna. She has lost two loves and her sister. I am glad she now has a home here where she will be embraced as family.”

“We will have a good, happy village here,” he said, reaching out to catch a tiny tear that lingered at the corner of her left eye.

“I hate that I am moved to tears so easily.”

“It is a sign of a good, loving heart,” Brogan reminded.

“It is a sign of weakness,” Annis protested.

“I disagree. It takes a strong heart to shed a tear when no one else does.” He grinned. “And I would dare anyone to suggest that you are weak.”

“You are a good husband,” Annis said seriously.

Brogan slapped his hand against his chest. “My wife praises me again. I am blessed.”

Annis jabbed him in the side with her elbow. “Be thankful or it will be years before you hear it again.”

Brogan laughed. “Now there’s the wife I know and love.”

She shook her head but smiled at his playfulness. “Enough nonsense. There are things to discuss.”

Brogan was about to tell her what he had discussed with Rudd when she suddenly yanked her hand out of his and hurried off.

“Nay! Nay! Do not do it that way, it will not hold,” Annis called out and she rushed toward the men.

Brogan smiled and followed slowly behind her. Where she got such a talent for building, he wished he knew. It was as if she had been born with it. He watched how she showed the men how certain stones needed to be shaped to fit and how they needed to be positioned so they would remain sturdy.

She held a stone while Risley chiseled a section, explaining as he worked. “You will see how this makes for a tighter fit—OH!”

Brogan pulled away from the tree he was leaning against and hurried to his wife as soon as he heard her cry out. When she held up her hand and he saw blood covering her one finger, he sped to her and caught her just as her body slumped in a faint.

“UNA!” Brogan cried out as he rushed through the village with his wife cradled in his arms.

Una rounded a dwelling. “Take her to my cottage, my lord.” She quickly ran ahead of him to open the door.

Annis began to stir when Brogan placed her on the bed.

“She cannot see the blood. She will faint again if she does,” Brogan said and reached for her hand.

Una was quick to fetch a bucket of water and with Brogan’s help cleaned the blood off, so she could examine the wound.

“A minor wound that needs to be wrapped after salve is applied to it and it will heal nicely,” Una informed him.

“See it done,” Brogan ordered, sitting on the edge of the bed and keeping his wife’s hand cradled in a cloth in his lap.

Annis’s eyes fluttered, fighting to open.

“A minor wound, wife. You are good and your finger will be wrapped soon,” Brogan explained. “Keep your eyes on my face when you open them.”

“There you go again, thinking I cannot get enough of your fine features,” Annis said, a slight smile touching her lips as she slowly opened her eyes.

“How could you not when I am such a handsome devil?” he teased.

Annis chuckled.

“This may sting a bit, my lady,” Una warned as she made ready to apply the salve.

“My husband’s attempt at humor stings much more,” Annis said playfully, then winced when the salve settled into the wound.

“You wound me, wife,” Brogan said at his wife’s teasing stab, though more so for the pain she felt.

Annis remained silent as Una wrapped her finger, the cloth going down to circle her wrist and be tied to hold it firmly in place.

“Does any blood seep through?” Annis asked, her eyes still focused on her husband’s face.

“Once cleaned, it barely bled, but I bandaged it with extra cloth to make certain none will seep through,” Una said.

Brogan held her bandaged finger up for her to see for herself. “All good.”

A knock sounded at the door and Una went to answer.

“Whatever is wrong with me?” Annis said, shaking her head. “I must find a way to stop this weakness.”

“My lord,” Una said, preventing Brogan from responding to his wife. “It is Risley. He asks about Lady Annis and wishes to apologize.”

“For what? He did nothing wrong,” Annis said, recalling the incident, but not the bloody part. “Bring him here.”

Risley entered, pale and his hands trembled. “I am so sorry, my lady.”

“Nonsense, Risley. Accidents happen with tools. It was no one’s fault. Worry not about it,” Annis said, annoyed that her faint had brought the young man such worry. “Now you must return to work and think no more on it. There is much work to be done.”

“Aye, my lady, and thank you.” Risley bobbed his head as he backed out of the cottage.

Una gathered the bucket and bloody cloths and took her leave as well.

“Help me up,” Annis said, reaching out to her husband.

“You feel well enough?” he asked and eased her hand away to settle both his hands at her waist to lift her to sit up.

“A minor wound to my finger does not require bed rest,” she said, though remained as she was, a slight lightheadedness having taken hold of her.

“Yet you pale again,” he said, concerned.

She rested her hand on his arm. “I am not fragile, Brogan. Please do not treat as if I am.”

“I know you are not fragile, but that does not mean I do not worry about you when something like this happens.” His face suddenly brightened. “I have a thought. I do not know if it would work, but you never know it might. And what harm is there in asking.”

“What is it?” Annis asked excitedly.

“The witch. Why not ask her if she can help you?”

Annis’s eyes went wide. “That is brilliant. I will ask her.” She pushed at him to move off the bed.

Brogan held her firm. “I did not mean now. We will not be going anywhere until Rudd returns with more warriors. And do not bother to argue with me on this.”

“We can at least visit with the witch. The warriors cannot go there with us. She will not show herself and it will anger her.”

“I wonder how the mercenary got on her land without being detected,” he said.

“I will ask her,” Annis said. “Now please move so I can get up and make sure everyone knows I am well.”

“Don’t you want to know what Rudd and I discussed?” he asked, trying to delay her.

“That can wait until later. This is more important. I do not want the men to think me weak.”

Brogan could argue with her and make sure the men did not think that, but he would not do that to her. This was for her to do and so he moved off the bed and reached out to help her to her feet.

“I will be close by if you need me,” he said.

She smiled. “Something I can count on—for you to catch me when I faint.”

He kissed her gently. “Always.”



LATER THAT NIGHT they lay in bed, Brogan nibbling teasingly at her neck as his hand stroked her naked body.

“So, Rudd will ask your father if there has been any news of mercenaries in the area?” she asked, trying to concentrate on what he had told her about his earlier conversation with Rudd. “And he will return with more warriors, and you think your father may return with him to see things for himself and speak with you.”

“Aye, that is all, so let’s not waste any more time on it. There are more important matters on hand,” he said, teasing her nipple hard with his fingers.

Her sigh was more a moan as she relaxed against him.

“Finally, you have no choice but to surrender,” Brogan said playfully and was about to kiss her when she sprang up in bed.

“Of course, why did not I see it?” she said, shaking her head.

Brogan groaned, his stiff shaft not happy about the sudden interruption. “See what?”

Annis turned a beaming smile on him. “I know where Gunna hides.”

That caught Brogan’s curiosity and he sat up beside her. “How do you know?”

“You just said no choice and Seward said earlier that when a person is left no choice they turn to—” She clapped her hands. “The mercenaries. Gunna hides among the mercenaries.”



**A**nnis did her best to hide her annoyance the next morning. She had wanted to visit with the witch again and speak with her about Gunna, but Brogan's father arrived with the extra warriors, delaying, and possibly, preventing her from talking with the witch today.

"You and your wife must return home with me," Lord Balloch said, after dismounting his horse and striding over to his son, a stern look sharpening his features. Brogan went to speak, and his father raised not only his voice but his hand to ward off any protest. "I command it!"

"You can command all you want, Father, I will do as I please," Brogan said with a chuckle that was more sinister than funny. This time Brogan's hand shot up when his father went to argue. "If you have not noticed, my wife and I are building a fine home here."

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Lord Balloch brushed aside his son's remark. "Your home is at the keep where you will one day rule. Clan MacRae is your legacy and those who come after you. You have a responsibility and with the news I just received, you have no choice but to do as I command."

"What news?" Brogan asked.

"Lord Odran and his wife were nearly killed, and Lord Fergus recovers from wounds meant for his son," Lord Balloch announced.

Annis stepped forward, fear racing through her. "Was my sister harmed?"

“Nay, she and the bairn do well,” Brogan’s father said.

“Bairn?” Annis asked, her eyes turning wide.

Lord Balloch was about to shake his head, then stopped. “You were not to be made aware of it yet, but since I had a slip of the tongue you might as well know. Lady Elysia is with child.”

Annis took another step toward Lord Balloch. “How did Lord Odran take that news?”

“With joy and worry from what I have been told.” He turned his attention to his son. “Lord Odran now rules Clan MacBridan, Lord Fergus having handed the reins over to his son.”

Annis could care less about that. All she was concerned about was her sister. “Was the culprit caught?”

“He is dead. A brave, young lad named Dugan helped save your sister.” Lord Balloch shook his head. “I still cannot believe Cadell betrayed us as he did and all for the sake of some coins.”

Annis sent a silent prayer to the heavens that Dugan had not only gotten her message to Elysia but that he had been there to help save her life. She was about to ask about Cadell, but her husband spoke first.

“Are you saying Cadell tried to kill Odran and Elysia?”

“Aye, it was Cadell which is why you and your wife need to return home immediately where I can make sure you are both kept safe from the mystery group that seeks to see you, Odran, and Rannick dead and your wives as well.”

“Then why didn’t the man who attempted to abduct my wife simply kill her. He made it known that his purpose was to capture her unharmed.”

“I do not know, and I do not want to find out. I want you both safe. I will send warriors to comb the land to see what they can find out,” Brogan’s father said.

Annis stepped away from Lord Balloch. “I am not going with you. I have a quest to finish, and I intend to finish it.”

Lord Balloch turned to his son. “She is your wife, see that she obeys.”

“I go with her,” Brogan said, taking his wife’s hand in a firm grip.

“It is a senseless quest,” his father argued.

Brogan itched to confront his father with the truth that the MacWilliam lass had lived, but if it was discovered, word spread, she could be hunted down—death once again her fate.

“Think what you will, Father, it is a quest I intend to continue.”

“It is foolhardy of you to put your wife in such peril.” Lord Balloch shook his head. “What if she is with child?”

Annis was about to let him know he did not have to worry about that, but a tug from her husband’s hand had her holding her tongue.

“I will keep my wife safe,” Brogan said.

“From what I heard it was wolves that kept your wife safe,” his father argued. “What if next time the wolves turn on you? And what are you doing walking the witch’s land? It is an evil place, and you should avoid it.”

“I see someone has shared the news with you,” Brogan said, wondering if the person had done so willingly or had his father coerced the information from him, a thought he would need to keep in mind.

“My warriors know what will happen to them if they are not loyal to me,” his father confirmed.

“So that is why you allowed so many to reside here—to report all news to you,” Brogan said, wondering how many of his father’s warriors were truly loyal to him since he was such a hard taskmaster.

“You are my only son, my only child, I would be remiss in my duties as a father and leader of the clan not to see the heir to Clan MacRae kept safe.”

“The curse has seen to that for you. I have survived all manner of wounds and illnesses. You need not fear losing me.”

“You certainly have made sure to test that theory through the years,” his father accused. “And you continue to test it.” He shook his head. “There is no talking to you. No matter how many times I remind you of your duty, you ignore it. One day you will have no choice. I will be gone, and you will rule.”

“Aye, I will rule—my way,” Brogan said.

“Go then and do what you will since you refuse to see reason, but I would hurry if I were you if you believe your quest will end this curse, since word has reached me that Rannick’s new wife does not do well.”

“What to do you mean Bliss does not do well?” Annis demanded, a chill of fear turning her cold.

“I do not know the particulars, but it would not surprise me if Rannick had something to do with it since he swore that he would never wed again,” Lord Balloch said and cast a scowl on Annis. “Go and play your game. I just hope you are willing to pay the price it costs you.”

“Is that a threat, Da?” Brogan snapped.

“It is a warning. What happened when you, Odran, and Rannick began questioning the curse, looking for answers? Life worsened for all of you. The curse has been cast. The bairn is dead. Nothing can change that. I only want what Odran and Rannick’s fathers want, my son safe and for my clan to live on through him in spite of the bloody curse.”

Brogan wondered why his father continued to lie about the bairn being dead. Or didn’t he know the truth?

“Lord Lochlann and Lord Fergus and I have tried to find out about this unknown group of people who wishes to see the curse end with the death of our sons and our clans wiped from history. Lord Cowan was one of them.”

“Was?” Brogan asked.

Lord Balloch nodded. “He made the mistake of trying to harm Odran’s wife and he killed him.”

Annis's stomach roiled, though she was grateful Lord Odran protected Elysia. At least she knew Elysia was safe with him, but then the way Saber, Lord Odran—would she ever get used to calling him by that name—looked at her sister anyone could tell he more than favored her.

“Try as we might, neither Lord Lochlann or Lord Fergus or I can seem to discover who leads this group who seeks to end this curse by seeing our sons dead.” He shook his head. “I cannot understand why Annis would be abducted unharmed. This group that threatens would want her dead so she would bear no heir. It makes no sense she was not harmed. Whoever leads this group hides his identity well and will stop at nothing to see victory.”

“After what has gone on the last few months, I reached the same conclusion,” Brogan said.

“And yet you still put your wife in harm's way?” his father asked, annoyed.

Annis's chin shot up. “No one—absolutely no one—will stop me from seeing my sisters kept safe.”

Lord Balloch's eyes narrowed in annoyance as he looked to his son. “A stubborn woman does not make a good wife.”

Annis could not hold her tongue. “You speak from experience?”

“Watch your tongue with me!” Lord Balloch warned.

“And watch how you speak to my wife, Father!” Brogan threatened.

“You deserve better than a peasant,” his father snapped.

Brogan released his wife's hand and went to stand inches from his father, the man having to crane his neck back to meet his son's eyes. “What I truly do not deserve is a woman as remarkable, intelligent, and beautiful as Annis. If anything, the curse has gifted me a courageous wife, one who will work tirelessly to free me and others from the curse you and the other two lords caused to fall upon your families.”

“We followed the king’s orders,” his father argued, defending his actions.

“And killed a long-time friend and would have killed his barely two-day-old bairn if her mother had not unselfishly given her life so her daughter had time to slip away.”

His father raised his voice in anger. “You know nothing of that time and the horrors that were forced on so many to survive, and I will not argue over it now. What is done is done.”

“And I will undo it,” Annis said, causing both men to turn and look at her. “I will free my husband from the hell he has lived since that day and give him something you and your wife never did—love—and lots of it every day for the rest of our lives together and beyond.”

Lord Balloch did not hide his snarl as he spoke. “Love interferes with everything. It turned Lord Brochan into a fool and over what—a remarkably beautiful peasant who he refused to keep as a mistress? He should have wed the king’s niece when the offer was proposed. No, not Brochan, he refused, and he also opposed the expansion of the king in the Highlands.” He shook his head. “Brochan sealed his and his clan’s fate. The king could not ignore the insult or the refusal to accept his rule in the Highlands. The king made an example of the powerful Clan MacWilliam so no others would oppose him. After that, I was glad I had given no thought to love when I wed. Love causes nothing but pain and often betrayal.”

“Who is the woman who loved and betrayed you?” Annis asked.

Lord Balloch’s startled expression surprised his son. Brogan was even more surprised that his father responded.

“I was young and foolish as was she. My father warned me, but I refused to listen and then one day, when we were to meet, I received a message from her. Good-bye. That was all she said. I searched for her, fearing my father might have harmed her, though he gave his word he had not. She was gone.”

“And she took your heart with her,” Annis said, seeing the hurt in the man’s eyes even after all these years.

“I am grateful she did,” Lord Balloch said with a cold emptiness. “Love is for fools.”

“Then I am a fool, Father, and just so you know, if Annis was ever to disappear, I would search for her until my dying day,” Brogan said.

“I thought the same once, but my father helped me to see the foolishness of such a senseless quest.”

Something poked at Annis, the bitterness in Lord Balloch toward the woman he had loved and his decision to side with the king and to betray a long-time friend. She wondered if there was a connection. Naturally, she had to satisfy her curiosity.

She asked in such a way, placing blame on the woman, that Lord Balloch would easily respond. “Who was this woman who betrayed you?”

“Verbena,” he snapped. “And she was the reason I warned Brochan no good would come of his love for Aila.”

“Because the women were both peasants?” Brogan asked.

“Nay, because Verbena and Aila were sisters.”



ANNIS WAITED at the foot of the three hills while her husband issued orders to the warriors that accompanied them there. Fear was on every one of the ten warriors’ faces. She was glad Brogan had not been foolish enough to have the warriors travel the witch’s path with them. It would not end well if he had done that, but her husband was no fool. Having the warriors stationed here was enough to deter anyone from attempting to abduct Annis.

A raven suddenly squawked overhead and flew along the path as if letting her know the witch grew impatient.

The warriors, however, turned frightened eyes on what to them was an evil omen.

Annis had no fear, and she was as impatient as it seemed the witch was. She began to walk slowly along the path, knowing her husband would follow shortly.

“Do not dare take another step without me!” Brogan called out in warning.

She stopped and turned. He had not moved from where he stood or had he taken his eyes off his men. Yet, he still managed to catch her movement, which proved he kept a steady eye on her. She could not be upset with that. He protected her, which made the quest safer for her.

“Hurry,” she called out, letting him know she had waited long enough.

A few minutes more and he was by her side and took her hand. “I told them to camp that we would not return until morning.” He winked at her. “I want time alone with you since I do not know where our quest will take us from here.”

“I would like that since I feel the same, though after speaking with your father, I believe there is more to what happened all those years ago than we have been told.”

“As usual we think the same,” he said, and they both looked overhead when the raven squawked again as if hurrying them along.

“Lady Aila had two sisters, Gunna and Verbena. Gunna took on the role of a servant to help her sister, what then did Verbena do?” she asked, searching for an answer.

“She was gone by then if my father spoke truthfully. Maybe Verbena did nothing,” Brogan suggested, keeping a keen eye on his surroundings especially since his wife was too caught up in her thoughts to pay mind to anything else.

“That is not possible. Her sister would have been there for her,” Annis insisted.

“Not all sisters are close like you and your sisters.”



“You could be right, but I do not believe so. The three women were peasants and would need to rely on one another and with Aila marrying a noble, she would be able to help her sisters.”

Brogan shook his head. “So, Lady Aila made her sister a servant?”

“Or did anyone know Gunna was Lady Aila’s sister? Your father made no mention of it. He referred to Gunna as a servant,” she reminded and turned wide eyes on him. “Maybe Gunna resided elsewhere and returned when trouble rose to help Aila and she gave the bairn to Verbena, who had already left the area, to raise. That the bairn was given to a childless couple could be nothing more than a ruse to distract.” Her eyes lost their excitement. “Nay, that would be foolish to give the bairn to a woman your father would recognize when they chased after the bairn.”

“Do you think I have all day to wait for you?”

Brogan and Annis looked to see the witch standing in the distance, her tall walking stick gripped tightly in her hand.

Annis left her husband’s side and walked right up to the witch. “Thank you for helping us last night. We are grateful.”

The witch’s annoyance tempered some. “Why do you return so soon to see me? You have a quest to finish.”

“I wondered about something. You did not send me to find Gunna and now I know why.”

“Do you now?” the witch said with a hint of haughtiness.

“I do,” Annis said with a smile that hinted at satisfaction. “She hides with the mercenaries.”

“They can be an evil lot,” the witch warned.

Annis’s thought rolled off her tongue. “Yet she has lasted all these years with them. And what of Lady Aila’s other sister—Verbena—what happened to her? Surely, she helped Lady Aila in some way.”

“She is long gone,” the witch said.

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that.” Tears pooled in her eyes. “That leaves Gunna all alone except for her niece the MacWilliam lass. No wonder she protects the woman. It must be so difficult for her losing her sisters. I would be heartbroken to lose mine.”

“You shed tears too easily, a foolish weakness,” the witch scolded.

Brogan suddenly appeared at his wife’s side. “Tears prove that she has a kind heart and even kinder soul, which this quest proves as well. She does it for the love of others without thought to herself.”

“I did not ask for your thought,” the witch cautioned.

“It matters not to me. I will defend my wife, witch or no witch,” Brogan warned.

The witch’s eyes narrowed. “I have never met people more obstinate than you two.”

“That is good,” Annis said. “It means we will see victory in our quest.”

The witch raised her walking stick and a raven suddenly flew around her head to perch on the top of it. “He will travel with you and do his best to warn you and keep you safe, since you intend to meet with the mercenaries.”

“Do you know why the mercenaries want Annis?” Brogan asked.

“Someone fears Annis will ruin plans long in the making,” the witch said.

“It has nothing to do with the group who wants me, Odran, and Rannick dead?” Brogan asked.

“You need to look closer to find that answer,” the witch advised. “Though, end the curse and the plan will fail.”

Annoyance marked Annis’s words. “You can’t be more specific?”

“Patience, Annis. Until you understand the why of it all, you will not find what you seek,” the witch warned.

Annis was ready to argue when she felt her husband's hand rest on her shoulder and she calmed, with some effort.

"There is something I wish to ask of you," Brogan said.

"What is it?" the witch asked, annoyed as if she could not be bothered with his request.

"Annis has a problem when it comes to the sight of blood—she faints. It worries me what could happen to her in a given situation. Is there any way you can help her with that?"

"A memory has taken hold and will not let go. Face that memory and the sight of blood will bother you no more. But beware, Annis, it will unlock a secret you may not be ready for," the witch warned. "Now go and enjoy the night in the dwelling here on my land. The wolves will keep the area safe. You have the courage to do what others failed to do, Annis. See this quest done and bring peace to all."

Annis had not noticed the mist that had rolled in and thickened around them, but her husband must have for his arm coiled tight around her as it swallowed the witch.

Brogan was grateful the mist dissolved as rapidly as it had come upon them and naturally, the witch had gone with it.

Annis turned her head to look at her husband. "Time to make plans for my abduction."

“Never!” Brogan said as they walked to the dwelling. “Never would I intentionally place you in such danger. Besides, you cannot be sure Gunna is with the mercenaries.”

“I tell you, it is the one place no one would expect her to hide, and no one would dare attempt to look,” Annis said confidently.

“While that does make sense, what does not make sense is having you intentionally abducted by them. It is never going to happen, wife,” he warned. “We will find another way.”

“Of course, another way can be found, but how long will it take us? How much more time do we waste?”

“I do not care. I will not chance losing you to save others,” he said with a growl, his temper mounting.

“You refuse to see reason,” she accused and snatched her hand out of his to hurry several steps ahead of him.

“And you are being unreasonable,” he said with an angry shout.

She stopped and turned to argue, “I am more reasonable than you.”

He smiled and laughed as he drew close to her. “That is the first untruth you have ever told me, wife.”

She loved his smile and laughter; both always sent a flutter of pleasure through her... but not this time. “You call me a

liar?"

He stopped in front of her. "You honestly think yourself more reasonable when it comes to this matter?"

She threw her arms up in frustration that he simply refused to see reason. "We have no more time to waste. It has taken longer than I had hoped. I am relieved to know Lord Odran keeps Elysia safe. But every day that goes by I fear more and more for Bliss's safety, especially with what your father had to say about her."

His heart ached for her, seeing the pain and torment this quest had caused her—he had caused her. For if had not been for the curse, she would not have suffered or continue to suffer so badly and yet if it hadn't been for the curse, he would have never met her, and his heart ached even worse at the thought.

He had to make her see reason. "Believe me, I understand that, but what if the plan goes array and you are harmed or worse killed? What happens to your sister then?" He bit his tongue trying to keep from saying it since it sounded selfish, but he couldn't hold back. "What happens to me? How do I sleep at night without you in my arms or wake in the morning and not find you there wrapped around me? How do I live life without you?"

Tears gathered in Annis's eyes and as they began to run down her rosy cheeks, she flung herself into her husband's arms.

Brogan caught her, his arms shooting around her to hold her tight, keeping her there against him, never letting her go... if only it was that simple.

She raised her head, tears continuing to fall. "I know the same fear, but mine comes from leaving you caught in this curse, never free of it, left to suffer forever. My heart breaks at the thought and I cannot, will not, let that happen to you. This curse must be broken if we are to have a life—a good life—together."

He rested his brow to hers and shut his eyes for a moment. "I am truly blessed with a wife who loves me with the courage

and strength that you do, and it also frightens me to the depths of my soul the chances you are willing to take for those you love.”

“Finally, you see the wisdom of my plan,” she said, relieved.

“I have always seen the wisdom of your plan, but it still is not one I am willing to take,” he said and pressed a firm finger to her lips when she went to argue. “We will make a small change to it. I will be abducted with you and do not bother to argue with me on this. We do it my way or not at all.”

“As you say, husband,” she said and while it was not as planned, at least she would have a chance to infiltrate the mercenaries and find Gunna.

Relief washed over and through him. “You do realize that Gunna is here to protect the MacWilliam woman. She will not give up the woman’s identity easily and years with the mercenaries may have hardened her resolve even more.”

“I must convince her that we mean the woman no harm and have no intentions of revealing her identity to anyone and that I only want to speak with her. I pray that I can persuade her.”

“Then watch that sharp tongue of yours, wife,” he warned with a chuckle.

Annis frowned. “My tongue is not sharp. It is blunt.”

He laughed again. “That it is and can do much more damage than a sharp one.” He was surprised when he did not receive a punch in the arm, not that he would mind. He thought them more as love taps since they never truly caused him any pain. He was, however, cautious about the wicked grin she turned on him. And when she ran her tongue over her lips slowly, he knew what was on her mind and his shaft hardened fast.

“And here I thought you loved my tongue,” she said in a tempting whisper.

“You play with fire, wife,” he warned.

“So, I have ignited you?” she asked, her smile tempting.

“Nay,” he said and scooped her up to toss her over his shoulder. “You have set me ablaze, wife.” He smacked her backside playfully. “Now you will learn what it is to play with fire.”



THERE HAD BEEN a frenzy with their lovemaking as of late. Maybe it was because they had little time alone together or when they did have precious time, like now, they had to stay alert to their surroundings.

It did not matter to Annis as long as she got to make love with her husband. She had come to enjoy—much more than she expected—the intimacy of marriage. It was a time she could honestly say she felt his love in his every touch and kiss and in the way he made sure to pleasure her. Even in their frenzied lovemaking, when his touch and kisses were more than gentle, there was a comfort—a trust—she would have never thought possible. It filled her heart with deep happiness and brought a strange comfort to her soul.

It was that demanding touch now, after stripping her naked, that fired her passion, his fingers teasing her nipples a bit roughly. Or was it the way, after discarding his own garments, his fingers slipped between her legs to delve inside her and torment her with a taste of what was to come? Or maybe it was the way his hands moved quickly to settle at her waist and lifted her feet just enough off the ground to move her to the bed as his mouth ravished her with kisses that stole her breath? Or how when he dropped her on the bed, following her down that his arm slipped around her waist and with a possessive lift of her body settled her beneath him perfectly.

There was no denying he was in command of their lovemaking and there was no denying that she loved every moment of it.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck, his teeth nipping down it and along her shoulder and back up again to

tug gently at her ear before he whispered, "I am going to make you come hard, harder than you have ever come."

The thought his enticing words provoked rushed a desire through her that left her wet, so wet that she feared she would come much too soon.

His lips teased at her nipples, moving from one to the other, licking, suckling, nipping as his hand squeezed each breast, forcing the hard bud to attention.

Annis slipped her hand down to try and take hold of his shaft, but he pushed it away.

"Nay, not tonight, my love. Tonight, I command our lovemaking," he ordered.

And he did with every demanding kiss and intense intimate touch.

Annis was soon lost in a feverish pleasure, her moans filling the cottage and a shout of delight when her husband's manhood thrust with force inside her. She loved the feel of his powerful shaft and the way he moved with strength and determination.

Her eyes rested on his, the usual soft blue color now deeper and filled with an intense passion that sparked with love. She fought back the happy tears that sprang to her eyes. Now was not the time for them, but they were insistent and fell from her eyes of their own accord.

His movements stilled when he spotted her tears. "Annis, do I hurt?"

Concern could be heard in his voice and seen in his narrowed brow, which only made her cry more. She shook her head, too choked up to speak.

"Tell me why you cry." He wiped at her tears and went to slip his shaft out of her.

"Nay," she cried, grabbing tight hold of his arms so he could not move, not that it would help. He could easily break her hold on him, but thankfully he didn't.

"Tell me," he insisted, continuing to wipe at her tears.



“Happy tears,” she managed to say with an awkward smile.

He shook his head, a smile starting to spread across his face. “You make me love you more each day.”

Annis sniffled back her subsiding tears. “Do not stop. I love the feel of you inside me.”

He brought his mouth to hers for a searing kiss and began to move inside her once again.

She was grateful his shaft had remained stiff, but then his passion overpowered just as much as hers did, and it did not take much to reignite it—his kiss alone did that.

His thrusts soon turned more potent, and she responded raising her hips to meet his robust tempo.

She moaned or was she crying out his name, she could not be sure, and it did not matter. She was lost in a whirlwind of pleasure. It built and built and built, and she knew that he would do as he said—make her come harder than she ever had.

Annis screamed out his name when she exploded in such a powerful climax that she thought it would surely kill her.

When his wife let loose with a fiery roar, he let loose with one of his own and shattered in a forceful climax that nearly buckled his legs. He shuddered as the last of his climax drifted away along with some of his strength.

“Good Lord, husband, that was unbelievably fantastic,” she said through quick breaths.

He slipped out of her and dropped down beside her, needing to regain his strength. “Love... it makes a difference.”

Annis turned on her side to face him, resting her hand on his chest. “You are right. It does and I am so happy I found love with you.”

“Only with me. Only ever with me,” he said and cringed at his own words. “If I were to die young you will find a good man to protect you and keep you safe, though you do not have to love him. At least, not the way you love me.”

She sat up and poked him in the chest. “You are far more generous than me, since if I die young, I expect you to retreat to a monastery and become a monk.”

Brogan grabbed her hand to prevent any more pokes, jabs or punches, and laughed. “A monk, you say?”

“That’s right, a monk,” she said and poked him in the side with her other hand. “So, you better keep me safe, or you are doomed to a celibate life.”

He laughed and she poked him again which made him laugh even harder, and before she could poke him again, he grabbed her other hand and yanked her across his chest.

His laughter died and his eyes narrowed. “I want only you, wife. No other woman would be as entertaining.” He laughed again.

“Just you wait until my hands are free,” she threatened.

He yanked her closer. “I do so love you, wife.” He kissed her gently. “Every beat of my heart beats with love for you and always will.”

It was as if Annis could feel his love flow over and through her, and she sighed, “You redeem yourself, husband.”

He released her hands and eased her off him to settle her against his side, then pulled the blanket over them, her body taking on a slight chill.

Annis yawned. “I cannot wait until there is no worry left about the curse and life becomes more peaceful like this moment.”

“I am as impatient as you are for that,” he agreed, keeping her tucked close against him.

She tilted her head to look at him. “I am happy with you, and I know Elysia is happy with Lord Odran. I fear Bliss will never find happiness with Lord Rannick, but I do hope and pray that when the curse is broken, she can at least find peace.”

Silence grew around them and they hugged tight as they drifted off to sleep, ready to continue their quest tomorrow.



*THE HORRIFIC SCREAMS bounced off the trees in the thick forest, sending the echo far into the distance. Birds took flight, animals ran, and even the sun took cover behind a dark gray cloud.*

*A huge hand clamped over the small bairn's face when she opened her mouth to cry out, sending a fright through her.*

*"Silence," the voice warned in a whisper, "or her screams will not stop."*

*The wee lass locked her lips closed as tears ran from her eyes. She wanted the screams to end. Wanted the men to stop hurting the woman.*

*"Be brave." the voice whispered.*

*The wee bairn kept silent, fearful if she said a single word the woman would suffer even more. She raised her hands to cover her ears, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not drown out the sound of her suffering.*

*"Stay strong, little one," the voice urged near her ear.*

*The words drifted past her hands and into her ear and she stiffened, resolving to stay strong.*

*After what seemed like forever, the screams stopped.*

*"Kill her and be done with it," a man commanded.*

*The wee bairn gasped, but the hand over her mouth tightened, stopping the gasp from escaping. The large hand hurt smashed against her mouth, but she kept silent.*

*"She will not last. The wolves will feast on her," a man said. "Besides, she is not who we search for, and we waste time here."*

*The bairn listened as the ground thundered with horses' hooves and faded in the distance.*

*"Stay here," the man ordered when the horses could be heard no more. "Do not move and do not make a sound."*

*The bairn watched past the bushes and trees as the man made his way to the woman, slowly and cautiously. He cast a suspicious glance around before he finally ran to her side. Words were exchanged that the bairn could not hear, then he lifted her in his arms and brought her to where the bairn waited.*

*The wee bairn was anxious to see the woman. She wished the man would hurry and get out of the way. When he finally did, the bairn stepped forward. Her eyes turned wide, and a scream started deep down in her tummy. She clamped her small hand over her mouth to stop her scream.*

*Blood—so much blood—the woman was soaked in it.*

*Her wee hand fell away from her mouth, and she screamed.*

“Annis! Annis!”

Her eyes shot open to see her husband and she threw her arms around his neck and clung tightly to him.

Her horrific screams had woken Brogan and he had turned in bed, reaching for his sword, thinking they were being attacked. When he realized his wife was dreaming, he took hold of her arms and called to her in an effort to wake her from her nightmare.

“It is all right. You are safe,” he assured her, stroking her back and keeping a firm hold on her. “It was a nightmare, nothing more than a nightmare.” He felt her shake her head and he eased her away from him enough so he could look into her eyes. They were filled with fright. “Tell me.”

“Blood,” she said and turned pale.

“Do not think on that,” he ordered. “Tell me what else there was.”

“A woman’s horrific screams. Men hurting her. A man who covered a wee lass’s mouth to keep her quiet.” She shook her head again and paled even more. “Blood. So much blood.”

“No more,” he ordered. “Think no more on it, at least not now.”

Annis nodded, not ready to revisit her nightmare and search for answers.

“You are safe, my love, you are safe,” Brogan assured her as he eased her to lie back on the bed, keeping her tucked against him. “Sleep. I will keep your nightmares at bay.”

Her husband did just that. No more nightmares haunted her the rest of the night and she woke the next day, the disturbing nightmare filling her thoughts.

“You want to tell me about it?” he asked as they ate the food that had been there since last night.”

“Eventually, but not yet,” Annis said. “It is time to find the mercenaries and see what they know and hopefully find Gunna.”

“It may not be easy to get her to tell you where she left the bairn. Besides, the bairn is a grown woman by now. She could be anywhere.”

Annis disagreed. “Nay, with how important it was to Gunna to keep the bairn safe, she would have found a way to keep watch on her all these years.”

Brogan grabbed his wife’s cloak off the chair after he extinguished the fire in the hearth and draped it around her shoulders to tie at her neck. He kissed her quick. “You will stay close to me.”

She nodded and, after seeing to his own cloak, they left the dwelling.

A raven circled overhead as they walked along the path and she wondered, did it follow, or did it warn?

Her answer came soon enough as they reached Brogan’s warriors camped a short distance away.

Brogan rushed her behind him, seeing the band of mercenaries that surrounded his warriors.

A man approached Brogan on a horse. “Stay behind me,” Brogan ordered over his shoulder to his wife.

Annis did not argue. After seeing the troop of mercenaries, most of their faces marred with more than one scar and with hardened and soulless looks in their eyes, she was glad her husband had insisted she would not face such men alone.

Brogan did not take his eyes off the man. His slow approach, his alert eyes, and the way he sat his horse with relaxed confidence spoke of victory. The man had subdued Brogan’s warriors without anyone being harmed.

His gray hair that faintly touched his shoulders and the identical gray in his close-cropped beard and moustache and the wrinkles that dug into his face along with a few scars betrayed his age but also identified him as a seasoned warrior. His lean body advised that age or not, the man had retained his strength.

“Both of you, and your men, will come with me,” the man ordered.

“What do you want from us? Brogan demanded.

“It is not what I want from you. It is what you want from me,” the man said. “We leave now.” He signaled with his hand and one of his men approached with a horse. “One horse for you both. One of your men will remain behind and you will order him to return to the village and let them all know that if

they dare search for you that I will ride on the village and kill everyone there.”

From the empty look in the man’s eyes, Brogan knew he would do as he threatened, and fear spiked in him. How would he ever keep his wife safe from these men? If he had had time to devise a plan for them to be captured, he would have had a good chance of seeing her kept from harm—not so now.

After Brogan mounted the horse and got Annis settled safely in front of him, she whispered, “Something is amiss with this.”

“What do you mean?” he asked as he directed the horse to his men.

“Why take you and your men if I am the only one who they were hired to abduct? And the leader said it was what we wanted from him not what he wants from us. And how does he even know we want something from him?”

His wife was right. He had been so concerned with her safety that he had not given thought to anything else. How did the mercenaries know they wanted something from them? Who had provided information to the group about where he would be? Who had betrayed him?

Brogan instructed one of his men as he had been directed to do and had added, “Do nothing and tell no one beyond the village.”

The warrior nodded and was warned to wait until they were out of sight before returning to the village or risk losing his life.

Brogan assessed the group as they rode away. Eight mercenaries in all had overpowered his ten skilled warriors.

His wife voiced his thoughts. “The mercenaries must be highly skillful to have defeated your warriors and with harm to none. And how did they know where to find us?”

“I have thought the same. My father takes pride in his exceptionally skilled warriors. My only guess at their defeat was that someone provided the mercenaries with information. Though, Rannick once warned me that mercenaries are an evil

bunch, never to be trusted. Their first and only thought is how much coin they can get. Pay them and they would do anything.”

“How does Rannick know this?” Annis asked with a suspicious worry.

“Rannick spent time with the mercenaries and has first-hand knowledge of them.”

The thought did not set well with Annis. “Why did he do that?”

Brogan silently cursed himself for letting that bit of information slip. He should have known it would worry his wife. But she had the right to know, and he would be honest with her since he would expect the same from her.

“Rannick once thought that if he immersed himself with evil, he could find a way to defeat the evil curse.”

Annis shook her head. “A foolish thought. He should have examined the curse more wisely.”

“What do you mean? Rannick, Odran, and I spent endless time examining the curse,” he said. “The conclusion was obvious. The curse is evil, and evil is difficult to defeat.”

“I will not argue that to you the curse is evil. But it was not cast with hate or an evil heart. It was cast with a mother’s love for her bairn, to protect her. You, Odran, and Rannick should have looked to love to understand it.”

“That is pure nonsense,” Brogan argued.

Annis gasped and gave his arm a squeeze. “I am a fool I should have realized it sooner.”

His wife’s revelations had proven helpful and correct, so he was eager to hear what thought had struck her. “What is it?”

“With the curse cast with a loving heart then it will take a loving heart to break the curse.”

He shook his head. “I do not follow.”

“I am not sure myself,” she admitted. “I only know that it is a battle of evil versus love that will see this curse broken



forevermore.”

“Evil seems to be winning,” Brogan said with disappointment.

Annis grinned. “Never underestimate love, husband. After all, I did fall in love with you and tamed your evil ways.”

Heads turned when he laughed.

“You are the only one who could make me laugh while held captive by a band of mercenaries.”

Her grin softened. “And you are the only one who I know will keep me safe when captured by a band of mercenaries.”

He was not as confident as she was, though he would do whatever was necessary to keep her from harm.

She grinned again. “But fear not. I do not think this group means us harm.”

“Enough talking and laughing,” the leader shouted. “Keep silent or I will cut your tongues out.”

“Not a wise move, since then we will not be able to negotiate with you,” Annis called out to her husband’s dismay.

“Order your wife to hold her tongue,” the leader shouted.

Brogan laughed. “You might do me a favor by cutting her tongue out.” He laughed harder when Annis jabbed him in the chest.

“Cut out my tongue and I will return the favor, but it will not be your tongue I slice off,” Annis threatened the leader.

Brogan tried to cover his wife’s mouth with his hand to stop any more threats she might fling at the man, but she swatted his hand away. Some of the men laughed, not so the leader. He had turned his horse and was headed their way.

He was about to warn his wife to hold her tongue, but he was not quick enough.

Her chin shot up. “You know what I want from you—Gunna. Take me to her. I wish to speak with her.”

Brogan was ready to leap off the horse to protect his wife as he watched the leader's dark eyes narrow and roam slowly over Annis. If he were to attack, he could count on his men to join in, but he would do that only if he had no other choice, for it would leave his wife in harm's way.

"Hold your tongue until we stop next, then I may give you what you want," the leader ordered.

Brogan tightened his arm around his wife's waist in warning when he felt her body tense, ready to lash out at the man.

Annis's response was to clamp her lips tightly shut and glare at the leader.

"Women," the man said and shook his head and rode away.

Not another word was spoken, Annis using the forced silence to focus on achieving her goal. She had built a firm foundation for her quest, and she would not see it crumble now.

It was not long at all before they made their way through a heavily forested area of the woods and came upon a camp that sat in a small clearing.

Two men waited there, adding more fighting power to the mercenaries, but Brogan was a superior swordsman so he could count himself as more than one man. He would bide his time and see what the leader intended, giving him time to form a plan and escape if necessary.

Annis barely dismounted when she rushed over to the leader. "Where is she? Where is Gunna hiding?"

"All in good time," the leader said and pointed to the campfire. "Sit."

Brogan had come up behind his wife and his hands were quick to lodge at her waist. "Come warm yourself against the chill that has settled in."

"She is in our grasp," Annis whispered as they walked away.

“Gunna may not be as forthcoming as you want,” Brogan warned, taking hold of her arm. He intended to keep his hands on her the whole time they were there, fearful of what might happen. “She has kept the MacWilliam lass, her niece, safe all these years. She will not falter now.

“I will find a way to convince her,” Annis said and sat on the ground to stretch her chilled hands out to the fire to warm. A coldness had settled in the air, reminding that winter was on the way. If she did not see this done before it arrived, snow could delay her quest, a thought she did not want to give possibility to.

Brogan sat beside her, his eyes constantly surveying the area, having recalled something else Rannick had warned him about. Mercenaries often hid some of their men in the woods around their camp in case something unexpected should happen. Were there more ruthless mercenaries watching them from the woods?

As soon as the leader sat opposite them, Brogan asked, “Who are you?”

“Troy, I am the leader of these brave men,” he boasted. “But let’s not waste time with pleasantries. I am not the mercenary hired to abduct your wife.”

“Then why are we here?” Brogan asked, not sure whether to believe the man or not, Rannick’s warning about not trusting mercenaries still clear in his head.

“You are here because of Gunna. We protect Gunna. She has been good to me and my men, tending us when needed through the years; from seeing to our wounds and ills, to preparing food, and mending our garments.”

“You describe a servant,” Annis said, her own words reminding her of how Gunna had taken on the role of a servant to help her sister, Lady Aila.

“I can assure you that Gunna is no servant.”

Annis had tempered her patience long enough, though wisely let her words sound like a plea. “I need her help.”

“First, you need to be aware of the danger you face. Skelly is the leader of the mercenaries who has been hired to abduct and kill you.” Troy scowled. “He is an evil bastard. If he gets his hands on you, he will not kill you. He will have his fun with you, then sell you on the foreign market. Though, with your tongue as quick and sharp as it is, he will not hesitate to cut it out and suffer no loss since there are men who prefer such a woman. And if your husband is caught with you?” He looked to Brogan. “They will enjoy trying to kill you repeatedly since it is believed you cannot die, though it does not mean you cannot suffer.”

Annis leaned her arm against her husband’s and took hold of his hand, locking her fingers with his. The images of what might have happened if they both had been abducted by Skelly’s crew sent a bolt of fear through her that roiled her stomach. Bliss had warned her many times of her impatience and of being rash in making decisions that needed more time and careful thought. This incident made her realize the truth of her sister’s words.

“You expect me to believe that you have no desire for this coin offered for my wife’s life when you admit you go where the work takes you?” Brogan asked.

“A request from Gunna I could not refuse,” Troy explained.

“To not harm us?” Annis asked, her heart thumping hard in her chest. If it was so, then there was a good chance the woman would help her.

“Aye, that is what she asked of me,” Troy confirmed.

“She will speak with me then?”

Troy nodded. “In her own time.”

“You took Gunna in even knowing men of power were in pursuit of her?” Annis asked, eager to gain what information she could in case she should need it.

“Gunna came upon us by accident, or so she says,” Troy said with a smile. “She made no mention of the MacWilliam bairn. I figured out myself who she was and when I confronted

her, she refused to speak of it. At first, I wasn't going to let her stay with us. The men and I did not want her problem to become ours." He turned quiet for a moment. "After some thought, we changed our minds. She has been with us ever since and not one of us regret our decision."

Annis dug for more information. "Have you remained in this area the whole time or have you recently returned here?"

"You ask too many questions," Troy said.

"I will ask thousands of questions if it helps save my sister."

"Then save your questions for Gunna since she is the one with the answers," Troy advised.

"When may I speak with her?" Annis asked more at ease now that she knew she would be able to speak with the woman.

"Soon."

The one word shot relief and joy through Annis. Finally, it was all coming together. She would see it done. She would keep Bliss safe and also save her husband.

"I assume then we have your word you will not harm us?" Brogan asked.

"You ask a mercenary for his word?" Troy snickered.

Brogan grinned. "I ask the man who kept a woman from harm all these years when he would have been paid handsomely to do otherwise."

Troy's eyes narrowed. "You protect family. I protect mine and Gunna is family."

Annis had watched the man as he spoke and had noticed how when he mentioned Gunna his eyes narrowed, and his voice took on a defensive tone as he did now.

It might have been wiser for her to hold her tongue instead of blurting out her sudden thought. "You love Gunna."

Troy looked to Brogan. "She really does not know when to hold her tongue, does she?"

“It explains everything,” Annis said, ignoring the two men as she verbally worked through her thoughts. “You said it yourself that you were not going to let Gunna stay at first. What could have changed your mind? Love. Love changes everything and there is no fighting it. Love conquers all.” Annis turned a smug smile on her husband. “I told you... love will conquer this evil curse.”

“Love is strong,” Troy agreed, “but I have seen evil that no love can defeat. Evil eats at the soul until there is nothing left and at that point, it is the devil who owns you and nothing can change that.” He turned a brief nod on Annis. “You need to understand that when it comes to your sister, you may well succeed in breaking this curse, but know that in Rannick’s efforts to free himself from evil only plunged him deeper into its dark depths and now his soul belongs to the devil and always will.”

Brogan expected his wife to shed tears after hearing that her success could also mean failure, leaving her sister to suffer. Her actual response set a fright in him.

“I intend to save my sister one way or the other and if Rannick remains evil, then there is only one thing left for me to do to see my sister safe. I will kill Rannick and not shed a tear for him.”

Troy smiled. “You and Gunna will get along well.”

Brogan shook his head. If Gunna was anything like his wife, he would have his hands twice as full. He had had enough of the mercenary being in charge. He stood and took his wife along with him.

“I have had enough. I will see my wife kept safe and that means we return home. Bring Gunna there so she may talk with Annis,” Brogan commanded with a strength that dared to be challenged.

Troy got to his feet about to respond when a scream echoed through the woods.

“ATTACK!”

**B**rogan drew his weapon and saw all the men there do the same. His eyes skirted the area for a place to hide his wife, but there was no time. Vicious roars split the air as men came out of the woods. Fear ripped through his stomach, knowing blood would flow soon and Annis would faint and could easily be dragged away from him.

“Do not faint,” he ordered his wife before he turned his sword on a man charging at them.

Annis watched in horror as swords clashed and men fell. It was obvious they were after her, but with Brogan and Troy flanking her they were keeping the men from reaching her. She did her best to avoid any sight of blood, keeping her glance from settling on anything but the striking swords.

Several mercenaries suddenly descended on Brogan and Troy, and they fought bravely, but there were too many of them. Annis thought quickly and ignoring her own safety, she whipped off her cloak, flung it near the fire so the wool would catch and as the flames devoured it, she flung it at two mercenaries that bared down on her husband. The fire did as she hoped it would do, it caught their plaids and set them ablaze.

The men around them hurried to get away so the flames wouldn't catch them. Two were not successful and screams filled the air along with the stench of burning flesh.

The fighting continued and Annis did her best to keep herself safe between her husband and Troy so no one could

reach her. Then what she feared might happen did. A man fell in front of her, blood covering his chest.

Her head began to spin, and her arm was suddenly yanked.

“Fight it,” her husband ordered, and his hand fell off her arm.

She was about to when suddenly something rammed not only into her but her husband and Troy as well. She fell, her face landing on the bloody chest of the dead man. There was no fighting the faint that rushed over her and forced her into total darkness.

Brogan scrambled to his feet having been hit by a force of several men, their intentions obvious and the strategy successful—to separate him from his wife.

Two men charged at him with swords before he could reach his wife draped over a dead man, her face buried in the blood on his chest. He had little time to save her, and Troy would be of no help, fighting off the other men.

He swung his sword with speed and accuracy, but more men came and when he finally maneuvered enough to catch a glance of his wife, it was to see her being carted off over the shoulder of one of the mercenaries.

Brogan let out a horrific roar that stilled the mercenaries for a moment and gave him time to finish off the two in front of him. He didn't waste a minute; he took off after his wife. He tracked the heavy footsteps and roared again when he came to a spot where horses had waited and now were gone.

He would never catch them without a horse. He turned and ran back to find the fighting had ended. Of course, it would. They got what they came for. Dead and wounded lay scattered about, those foes who survived running off.

Brogan ran to Troy. “I need a horse.”

“You cannot go alone. Skelly will have men waiting in the woods to capture you and you will be no good to your wife once captured,” Troy said. “We need to see how many men are able enough to join us.”



Anger raced like a fiery liquid through him, setting him ablaze. He had to get to his wife before it was too late, before they took her far enough away from him that it would take days or weeks, or more to find her. By then she would have suffered endless pain and humiliation. But he also knew Troy was right. He could not do this alone. He wished his friends Odran and Rannick were here. He could trust them to help him save Annis. But they weren't and he had no choice but to trust Troy.

"We have little time," Brogan reminded him.

"Then we better hurry."

Brogan rounded up his men to find he had lost two and one was too injured to fight, but not too injured to return to the village and gather more men. He was glad Troy had lost only one man and though a couple were left injured, they wrapped their wounds tight and were ready to join in the hunt.

"While Skelly is no fool, he thinks highly of himself," Troy said as he and Brogan mounted their horses. "Your capture would be a prize to him that he might not be able to resist."

That news brought some relief and a quick plan to Brogan. "You think he will wait somewhere for his men to bring me to him?"

"It is a possibility and I know what you think to do to save time," Troy said. "You want to be captured and taken to your wife without them knowing we follow. The only problem with that is you don't know if they will harm you, since they believe you cannot die."

"It is a chance I am willing to take," Brogan said.

"And what if they harm you so badly, you are useless to your wife?"

"Then you will give me your word that you will see her kept safe," Brogan said. "Though, if you say Skelly thinks highly of himself then I suspect he will be the one who wants to deliver endless pain on me. Either way, as long as my wife is safe, I care not."

“Your love is strong for her.”

“Always, and she knows I will come for her. So, let us not waste another moment.”



SPLINTERS OF LIGHT tried to pierce Annis’s eyes and she cringed, not from that, but from the pain in her arms and shoulders. Where was she? What happened?

A slap to her face that shot her head to the side had her eyes shooting open and everything rushed back to her. She almost gasped at the sight of the man on a horse in front of her. Scars marred his face, and a large scar ran a path through a swath of hair on the one side of his head. He wore no cloak against the chill, exposing his lean body heavy with muscle. But it was his eyes that truly frightened, dark and empty, pure evil.

It took her a moment to realize that rope bound her wrists and she hung from a branch of a tree, her feet dangling a good distance off the ground.

Annis didn’t need to guess who the man was, and she held her chin high. “Brogan will rescue me and kill you.”

Skelly laughed. “That he will attempt to rescue you is something I count on. But he will fail, and I will make certain his wounds keep him from doing anything but watch in torment as I have my way with you. Then he will watch again as I cut out your tongue and sell you on the foreign market.”

If she was going to lose her tongue, she would make sure to have her say beforehand. “You are an idiot if you believe that.” Another slap to her face flung her head to the side. When she regained her senses, she laughed. “Only a coward strikes a woman who cannot strike back.” A solid punch to her arm had her swinging and she cringed at the pull in her arms, though her mouth would not remain silent. “That proves you are even more of a coward.”

“We will see how brave your mouth is when I have my way with you,” Skelly threatened.

Annis laughed. “So, your only way to get pleasure is to force a woman—another sign of a coward and a man with a wee shaft.”

That got her a punch to the stomach since several of the men laughed. The pain radiated through her entire body, and she silently warned herself to hold her tongue. But, of course, she did not pay heed to her own warning.

As soon as she caught her breath, she said, “And that punch only proves you have the tiniest of shafts.”

Strong laughter erupted this time and Skelly turned swiftly on his horse to cower the men with a vicious snarl.

“Now I know why he wants you dead,” Skelly said when he turned back to face her.

“Who wants me dead?” Annis asked, anxious to learn the culprit’s identity.

Skelly grinned. “The one who will bring an end to the cursed lords.”

Annis pondered his response. Why would he say bring an end to the cursed lords and not bring an end to the curse?

He laughed and sent her swinging again, the pain tearing through her arms and shoulders. Brogan would come for her of that she had no doubt, but she feared what her rescue might cost him.

Annis was brought to a sudden stop, Skelly holding tight to her legs. Her stomach roiled badly, and she could feel all color drain from her face.

“Nothing more to say?” Skelly asked with a laugh.

Annis leaned her head forward struggling to speak and Skelly stretched up on his horse to hear what she would say. She smiled and let her roiling stomach loose right in his face.

Skelly spit and sputtered and grabbed the end of his plaid to wipe at his face with disgust and anger.

“Did no one warn you about my wife’s mouth?”

Skelly turned a savage look on Brogan being led into the clearing by a group of men, his wrists secured with rope and several bruises marring his face.

“You may suffer her untamed mouth, but I will not,” Skelly all but raged and turned, his hand raised to deliver a vicious blow to Annis.

“TOUCH MY WIFE AND I PROMISE YOU THAT YOU WILL SUFFER A LINGERING AND GODAWFUL PAINFUL DEATH!”

Her husband’s powerful roar sent a shiver through Annis and surprisingly stopped Skelly from striking her.

Skelly turned a laugh on Brogan. “It will not be me who suffers as you watch what I do to your wife.” He wiped at his face again. “Cut her down. We leave since the fool does not realize he walked right into my plan, and I am well aware that his men follow behind him.”

A man climbed on the branch and cut the rope as Skelly waited beneath to catch Annis and grab her to drape over the front of him on the horse.

“Get him on a horse. We need to move fast,” Skelly ordered, and his men hurried to see it done.

Brogan worried that Troy might be too far behind, though he worried more about his wife. Fury had raced through him, and he had wanted to charge at Skelly when he saw Annis hanging by her wrists from the branch of a tree, though seeing her vomit in Skelly’s face appeased him some but concern for retaliation had him worrying again. Then there were the bruises on her face. He definitely was going to make Skelly suffer—endlessly.

He had allowed the idiots who captured him to rough him up a bit and they were so pleased with themselves that they never bothered to look for any other weapons but the sword he had carried. He figured his hands would be tied once caught, so he had tucked a small dagger in his waistband, the blade

pointing up. He was paid little heed while they rode, which gave him enough time to cut at the rope that bound his wrists.

Troy had alerted him to a signal he would give when they were nearby, and he listened praying it would come soon. He wanted this done and his wife back safely in his arms.

The signal came just as he sliced the last of the rope, though made it appear as if it was still intact. He kept his eye on Skelly in the lead. He would speed off once the attack came, no doubt his plan from the beginning. He would leave his men behind and get the coin for himself. Skelly had made one mistake. He had misjudged Brogan's love for his wife and his tenacity to see her safe. Brogan would be right on Skelly's tail and when he got his hands on the man, he intended to see him suffer unmercifully.

The attack came with speed and surprise, Troy and Brogan's men descending on them with fierce roars and swinging swords. And just as Brogan suspected, Skelly took off with Annis. He stopped briefly to grab a sword from Troy before following after the mercenary.

Brogan kept on his tail, urging his horse faster and moving closer and closer to him. Skelly suddenly veered into a dense part of the woods making it difficult to keep sight of him and to follow. He lost Skelly for only a moment, though it seemed longer, then came upon him again and Brogan's heart slammed against his chest—Annis was no longer with him.

"ANNIS! ANNIS!" he shouted and when she did not answer his stomach knotted and fear raced up to choke him. He called out again. "ANNIS! ANNIS!"

That she did not answer meant either she was unable to, or she was dead.

Brogan brought his horse to an abrupt halt, his only thought to find his wife. There would be time to chase after Skelly.

"I always wanted to see if you could really die," Skelly shouted after stopping and turning his horse around. "Let's

find out!” His legs dug into the sides of his horse to speed toward Brogan.

Brogan didn't want to spare the time to fight the man. His only worry was for his wife, but he had no choice and while he would have loved to have made the man linger in pain, he had no time. Skelly would suffer a swift death.

Brogan raised his sword ready to meet the man head on when an arrow struck Skelly in the neck, sending him flying off his horse. Not sure if he was under attack, he dropped off his horse and took cover. He had to find Annis.

“Lord Brogan!”

Brogan was never so relieved to hear a familiar voice and he hurried out from behind the tree. “Rudd, what are you doing here?”

“I did not wait when the message came from the man you sent. I gathered a group of men and hurried after you and Lady Annis. When we came upon the injured men, they told us who you went after, and we followed.”

“Did you see where Skelly left Annis?” Brogan asked anxiously.

Rudd shook his head. “I never saw Lady Annis.”

“We need to search,” Brogan commanded.

“I will get more men to help,” Rudd said.

“There's no time for that. They will catch up soon enough. We search now,” Brogan ordered.

They barely began to search when Troy and others appeared, and they all spread out.

Brogan's heart pounded in his chest. He couldn't lose her. He couldn't. He tried to reason with himself as he searched. She couldn't be far. Unless Skelly handed her over to someone else and that thought sent his heart plummeting.

He tried to retrace the route to the spot where he had lost Skelly, but the area revealed no sign of his wife. He wanted to

roar with rage to the heavens. With so many searching the area how could she not be found?

*Someone doesn't want her found.*

The sudden thought sent a dread through Brogan. Was someone here responsible for what had happened? Was someone here working with the mercenaries? Who could he trust?

He had to find Annis. He couldn't trust anyone else finding her. They could mean her harm.

Brogan could hear the crunch of leaves beneath the endless boots of those that searched, and it made him take a different course and listen for a single tread of boots... the one who knew where his wife could be found. The one leading away from the others.

He had realized that if his wife was able that she would have called out to him, which meant she had somehow been silenced, left helpless, and that thought tore at his heart. He tread the woods lightly, listening, waiting for that step that would... he heard it.

Not a soft tread but an anxious one and he followed it. He kept his footfalls light, not so the footfalls he followed. They remained anxious and rushed an indication that he had little time to see to his task before discovered.

The footfalls stopped suddenly, not so Brogan, he followed the soft echo of the leaves and turned at a large boulder to see his wife lying unconscious on the ground and standing over her with a dagger tight in his hand, stood...

“RUDD!”

The man he had thought a friend glared at him. “She must die if the plan is to succeed.”

Brogan was too far away to stop him from harming Annis. He had to get closer. “What plan?”

“A wise one and one that is needed to save many,” Rudd said, confident in his belief.

“Who has decided that?” Brogan asked, advancing slowly.

“The one who leads us,” Rudd boasted.

“And who is that?”

“You will learn in time,” Rudd assured him and pointed the dagger at Annis. “If Skelly had done what had been agreed to, I would not be left with this distasteful task. I do like Lady Annis, but she must die.”

“Why?” Brogan asked, a few more steps and he’d be close enough to lunge at Rudd.

“She has interfered with the plan. She must die.”

“If you kill her, I will kill you,” Brogan warned.

“I am counting on it, for I will surrender no information to you.”

Brogan went to take another step.

“Stay where you are. I know what you do, and I will not let you stop me from my mission. The mercenary may have failed but I won’t. There is too much at stake. The plan will know victory and it will reverberate through the Highlands for years to come.”

Brogan had to keep him talking. “You fired the arrow that killed Skelly?”

“The fool was supposed to kill her in front of me so I could confirm her death, then he would get his coin after his man failed to kill her on the witch’s land. I had made it so easy for him providing him with what plans I knew. It infuriated me to learn he had changed my orders. But then it was never his intention to follow them. His only interest was you. He wanted what you had... eternal life.” Rudd shook his head. “He thought ripping your heart out of your chest he would have it for himself.” He shook his head again. “I had no choice but to kill him.”

This curse had not only caused many to suffer, but it had also turned sane men insane. And there was no dealing with a madman, a thought that raced fear through Brogan. There would be no talking Rudd out of his task. He would see it done... he would kill Annis.



“Her death is a worthy one,” Rudd said. “You will see the wisdom of it.”

Rudd raised the dagger ready to drop and plunge it into Annis.

The ravens came from out of nowhere, dropping from the sky to jab Rudd with their beaks.

Brogan rushed at Rudd to reach the man and with one good blow to his jaw knocked him out cold. He would not escape an easy death, not before he got more information out of him.

He dropped down beside his wife, her body lifeless. He feared the worse and placed a hand to her face. It was warm and her chest rose and fell in a peaceful rhythm. She was alive and he intended to see she stay that way.

“**Y**ou need to wake up, wife. You have a quest to finish,” he said as they rode toward the village with his wife in his arms. He wanted to hear her snap back at him, argue with him, tease him, tell him how much she loved him. “You have rested enough. Wake up!”

She laid still in his arms, not a muscle moved nor did her eyes flutter. She was as still as death itself and he had the urge to shake her awake. She remained that way all the way home.

He was in a hurry to get her to Una and left all but two of his warriors to see to returning Rudd to the village. His warriors had been shocked and angry over Rudd’s betrayal and fearful that they also might be accused of treachery. Unfortunately, Brogan wasn’t sure who to trust.

He was relieved when the village came in sight, and he directed the horse straight to Una’s cottage. People soon gathered outside the cottage once they learned what had happened to Annis.

“I need to get her out of these bloody garments and to clean the blood off her face before she wakes,” Brogan said, entering the cottage cradling his wife in his arms.

“I will fetch water,” Una said and hurried off.

Brogan laid her on the bed to more easily and gently strip her garments off. She had some bruises on her arms and legs and a sizeable bruise on her one side. Her wrists were rubbed raw from the rope, and he could see bruises peeking out from under the blood left on her face.

Una returned and he was quick to ask, “She has a bruise on her side. Will it cause a problem?” It troubled him since he had seen men die of bruises there though they were much deeper in color. He pulled the blanket back for her to see.

Una looked at the discolored area and felt around it. “I don’t believe so but sometimes the insides suffer more than it shows. I would tell her to rest until the bruising fades a good bit.”

“I will see that she does,” Brogan said.

“I can also fix a brew she can drink that might help, but...”

“Tell me, Una,” Brogan said when Una hesitated.

“If she does not wake by nightfall, I would take her to the witch. There are herbs that grow on her land that I have no knowledge of, but she does.”

“She will wake,” Brogan said as if he commanded it, but he would keep Una’s suggestion in mind. If she did not wake, he would take her to the witch and, if necessary, he would beg her to help his wife.

“Her wounds tell me that she suffered many punches, but until she wakes and tells me more, I can do nothing for her,” Una explained. “I will prepare a brew and bring it to you for when she wakes.”

Brogan tucked the blanket over his wife’s bare shoulders and laid a cloth over that before he rinsed a cloth in the bucket of water, then he talked as if she was awake to hear him as he began to gently wash her face.

“You have much courage, wife, though if you had minded your tongue more you would not have so many bruises. But that is something I do not think you will ever do—mind your tongue. You say what you will when you will, and that is what I admired about you when we met—your tenacious courage. It should serve you well now to wake from this forced sleep.”

He rinsed the cloth again and winced when he cleared the blood from the one side of her face to reveal a good-sized bruise. He wished Skelly was still alive so he could kill him slowly and painfully.

“Wake, Annis, and speak with me. I miss you teasing me, telling me how much you love me, and I especially miss you telling me what a handsome and wonderful husband I am.” He chuckled, waiting for her to tell him that there he goes thinking highly of himself again, but he was met with silence.

He continued to talk as he finished cleaning her face and moved the bucket away from the bed when he was done. It was growing late. Dusk would be on them soon and she still had not woken. The only thing he could think to do for the moment was to slip in bed beside her and take her in his arms and hold her. And that was what he did.

He closed his eyes against the million thoughts and fears that rushed through him and thought only of how his wife slept comfortably in his arms and how she would wake, and the nightmare would end.

*Wake up, Annis. You need to wake up. You cannot leave us. Elysia and I need your help. Please, Annis. Please do not abandon us. Do you hear me, Annis? You must wake up. Wake up now before it is too late. WAKE UP NOW!*

Annis’s eyes opened and for a moment fear gripped her. Where was Elysia and Bliss? Why did they need her help? Then she felt the strong, warm arm that cradled her against the solid, warm body and her fear calmed. She was in her husband’s arms.

Everything rushed back at her at once muddling her thoughts and she buried her face against her husband’s chest.

“Annis?” Brogan whispered, waking, not sure if it was a dream that he felt his wife move.

She looked up at him, her heart overflowing with joy and relief to be in his arms. “I knew you would rescue me.”

He pressed a kiss to her brow, keeping his lips there, while he silently thanked the heavens that she finally woke.

She moved her head when his lips left her brow and winced.

“You have a bump on the side of your head.”

“Rudd,” she said anxiously, it was all coming back to her. “He and Skelly argued, and Rudd slammed me in the head with a rock.

“We got him, thanks to the ravens,” Brogan said, furious the man had dared to harm his wife.

“I remember now, but why?” she asked.

“He told me that someone, who he refused to name, has a plan, and your death is part of that plan.”

“Elysia! She almost lost her life as well.” She gasped. “Bliss must be warned. Her life is in peril as well, not only being wed to Lord Rannick but from this mysterious group of insane people.”

“I will send a message to Rannick first thing tomorrow,” Brogan assured her.

“This is not done, is it?” she asked.

“I wish I could say differently, but it is not done.” He ran his hand softly along her arm. “We must find who is responsible before you or either of your sisters are harmed.”

“It would do us well to break the curse, then this group will have no reason to come after any of us.” His questioning eyes disagreed. “You do not think so?”

“I cannot be sure of anything. I am only glad we managed to take Rudd alive. He knows much about this mysterious group and the leader, and I intend for him to tell me.”

“Troy and his men?” she asked.

“I had them return here so that Una could tend the wounded and you can talk more with him and hopefully he trusts us enough to reveal where we can find Gunna.” His hand shot up when she went to speak, knowing she would have endless questions. “Before anything else, I want Una to see how you do. After that we can continue to talk.”

“Aye, husband,” she said, knowing it was pointless to argue.



IT WASN'T long after Una examined Annis and asked several questions that she advised, "You should remain abed."

"She will remain abed today," Brogan assured Una as he stepped out of the shadows where he had waited impatiently to know his wife did well. He scowled seeing that one of her wrists was wrapped with a clean cloth.

"A closer look showed that the one wrist was worse than the other," Una explained, seeing where his glance had landed. "I put a yarrow salve on it. It should heal well. I will brew more of the ragwort root which will help with any bruising inside and out. Other than that, rest is what will serve her best, my lord."

Brogan sat on the edge of the bed after Una left and leaned down to brush his lips lightly across hers. "There will be no argument about it. You will stay abed today and rest."

Annis sighed, content with her husband there beside her. "No argument, husband. I am tired and my body aches. I will do as Una advises and rest."

It troubled him that she did not argue with him, which meant she suffered more than she would admit. And that she did not reach out to rest her hand on his chest or rest it against his arm was also proof that she was in pain.

Annis saw the worry in the way his whole face seemed to scrunch. "I will suffer less if you smile, since your gorgeous smiles always brighten my day."

His face burst into a smile. "I do have a gorgeous smile."

Annis laughed and winced, her hand going to her side. "Do not dare stop smiling. A small pain is nothing to the joy your smile brings me." She moved her hand slowly to poke, with effort, at his chest. "Now tell me what weighed so heavily on your mind while you waited in the shadows."

Brogan took gentle hold of her hand to kiss, then place on her chest, since he saw how much effort it took for her to poke

him. He knew the familiar gesture was to calm his worry and that she would brave the pain to ease his concern spoke of how much she loved him, and it warmed his heart.

Brogan shared his thoughts. “It makes sense that the group who wishes the curse to end with me, Odran, and Rannick is the one who hired the mercenaries to abduct and kill you. But they will not stop if we do not cut off the head of the group.”

“The curse was a heavy burden to place on you and the other cursed lords to see the clan’s name carried on. Surely, it would have been easy for your fathers to have more bairns to help so the burden would not be carried by only one.”

“A thought that had been considered, but when several miscarriages were suffered by all three wives, it was believed the curse would allow no more bairns to be born. And I also think the sorrow of losing those bairns brought an end to the effort as well.”

“The curse had a wide-reaching effect on many,” Annis said.

“Far too many and it still does,” Brogan said unable to keep the annoyance from his remark.

Annis understood he blamed himself for what had happened to her, and she would argue it with him, but it would be useless. Instead, she said, “Which is why our quest expands to finding the leader of this mysterious group.”

“When you are well-healed,” he commanded, but with a smile. “You need to sleep.” He tucked the blanket up over her shoulders. “There are guards posted at the door. No one enters without my permission.”

“Can you trust them?”

Brogan smiled. “I do not think we have to worry about Seward or Maggie. And Maggie assured me that her scream would wake the dead if necessary.”

Annis laughed and winced.

Brogan kissed her brow. “Sleep, wife, we will talk later.”

Her eyes closed and Brogan left, pleased that he heard a slight snore by the time he reached the door.

Seward and Maggie greeted him when he stepped outside and assured him that they would alert him if anyone, but Una, tried to disturb Lady Annis.

Brogan was eager to speak with Rudd now that he knew his wife would heal. He would get the information out of the man no matter the cost.

The villagers paused in their tasks to inquire about Lady Annis and wish her well. Risley asked that she be told the building is going well and he is following her plans as instructed. Brogan knew she would be happy to hear that.

Troy approached him with a smile. "This is a nice village you have here. My men and I might stay for a while."

"Are you asking permission to remain here?" Brogan said.

"Since you lost your right-hand man, I thought you might need a new one."

Brogan snickered. "And I should trust a mercenary?"

"I believe I have proven you can trust not only me but my men as well and time will confirm that."

"You and your men are skillful warriors, but what of Gunna, will she agree to reside here as well?" Brogan asked, reminding the man that everything depended on finding Gunna.

"That will be her decision."

"Then I hope to see her soon, for Annis is not well enough to chase after her," Brogan said, knowing Annis's quest would have to wait while she healed. Something she would not be happy to hear.

"Very soon," Troy said.

Brogan was pleased with his response and knew his wife would be as well. "Join me while I speak with Rudd."

"A test to see how well I would serve you?" Troy asked.



Brogan shook his head. "I do not think you serve anyone."

"You are right. I don't serve anyone, but I do make a trustworthy friend."

"We will see about that," Brogan said, though he had a feeling the man spoke the truth.

Rudd was where MacRae warriors had left him, tied to a stake in the ground.

"I will tell you nothing," Rudd said defiantly.

Brogan was more confident. "In time you will."

Rudd laughed. "You will not stop this. The plan will succeed, and a great power will arise from its depths. And I take great pride in being part of it."

"You failed and those who come after you will fail, for there is one thing you have failed to consider," Brogan said.

Rudd laughed. "You are wrong. Everything was considered."

Brogan shook his head. "Nay, you failed to account for the tenacity and courage of three sisters."

"They will soon be gone, each one of them," Rudd said.

"If the other two women are like Annis, you do not stand a chance," Troy said with a smug grin. "And you will talk. Torture always loosens the tongue."

Rudd smiled. "You will not torture me."

Troy laughed. "Do tell me how you think you will escape torture?"

Rudd's smile widened. "Death."

Brogan realized what he meant. "Cut him down," he shouted at the guards.

Troy realizing it as well drew his sword.

They were too late. An arrow landed in Rudd's chest, killing him instantly.

**A**nnis looked at the bed, having no desire to climb in it, even though she had not fully healed yet. She was wise enough to know it would take time. Three days was not enough to recover from her ordeal. More rest was needed. That, however, was not what kept her from avoiding her bed tonight.

It was the nightmares.

If they could be called nightmares, since she had them whether she slept day or night. It was the same one over and over again. The woman screaming and all the blood, but it never went beyond that.

Brogan's arms slipped around her waist and eased her back against him. "It grows late, and you need to sleep. You have slept only a few hours here and there. You will not fully heal if you do not rest."

Aches and pain continued to torment her, but those she could deal with, not so the nightmares.

"Her screams fill my head." She turned around in her husband's arm. "I do not know who this woman is or the little lass who cries. Who can this woman be? Why do I have these nightmares about them?"

Brogan wished he knew how to ease her burden, but he had no clue how to help her. He could only hold her and ease her out of the nightmares when they attacked her and that had been far too often.

“Talk to me of other things so my thoughts may settle elsewhere,” she said, resting her head on his naked chest.

“Once in bed,” he said and lifted her in his arms to place her gently on the bed and followed after her to pull two blankets over them.

Annis cuddled against him, her shift a barrier between them. She wished they could make love, but her body was not ready yet. They had discovered that yesterday when passion poked at them. Brogan stopped when she cried out in pain and had since been careful about touching her and he had wisely made her leave her shift on.

“When you fully heal, we will make love all night,” he had assured her, but she had cried anyway.

Brogan made sure to keep her close. She would fall asleep fast, still exhausted and healing from her ordeal. The nightmares would start a couple of hours after that and wake her throughout the night. He would soothe and comfort her through each one, and silently curse himself as he did, for this was all his fault. She suffered because of the curse, and it tore at his heart.

Her even breathing soon told him she was asleep, and it didn't take long for him to join her.

*The screams echoed through the woods and the little lass covered her ears.*

*“Be brave,” the man said and left her.*

*She watched through the bushes as the man went to the woman, stopping to look cautiously around before reaching her and lifting her in his arms. Her cries were muffled as he made his way back to the little lass.*

*Tears fell as she stared down at the woman the man laid on the ground and when he pulled back the cloak and raised her garment, the little lass screamed seeing the woman's crushed leg.*

Annis lunged up in bed, Brogan following her.

“Annis.”

She struggled to get out of bed.

Brogan stopped her. "What are you doing?"

"Please, I must," she said anxiously.

He did not know her intentions but her anxious eyes had him saying, "Let me dress and get shoes on you and I will take you where you want to go."

Brogan asked no questions. He dressed quickly and got shoes on his wife and wrapped her cloak around her, then opened the door and walked out into the night.

He was surprised to see Troy standing by the fire.

Annis went to him. "She left, didn't she?"

"She had to. Time draws near. She must keep her promise to her sister," Troy said.

"Why didn't she tell me who she was? Why didn't she help me? I would not see the MacWilliam lass harmed."

Brogan shook his head. "Gunna was here?"

"She has been here for a while," Annis said. "I know what the nightmare was trying to tell me. I do not know who the lass in my dream was, but the woman screaming was Gunna. All the blood I saw was from her mangled leg that left her with a limp."

Brogan glared at Troy. "Luna is Gunna?"

"Aye, she is," Troy confirmed.

"Why did Gunna come here?" Brogan asked.

"For help," Troy said to Brogan's and Annis's surprise and continued to explain. "I returned with Gunna to check on the MacWilliam lass after a few months to make sure no one had discovered her identity. We discovered the couple she had given the child to had died and we could not find out where the MacWilliam lass had been taken. We could not stay in the area. It was too dangerous for Gunna and the bairn. We returned periodically to search, but with no luck. When word reached her that you searched for the lass, she needed to know what you had discovered."

“I discovered nothing,” Annis said, annoyed.

Troy shook his head. “Not so. Meeting you gave her what she needed—how to keep the lass safe.”

“How does meeting me do that when I do not know where the lass is or even who she is?”

Troy went on to explain. “There was one thing that we found out about the MacWilliam lass when searching for her. You see, the bairn was not the only lass given to the childless couple, two other lassies were as well so no one would ever know which one was the MacWilliam lass. We discovered all three bairns remained together. The one lass stood out from the other two. Her hair was a mass of springy red curls that could never be tamed.”

Brogan’s eyes spread wide. “Are you saying that my wife is the MacWilliam lass?”

Annis shook her head. “That is utter nonsense. My hair is just like my mother’s hair.”

“That may be, but the woman was not your mother,” Troy said. “And whether you are the MacWilliam lass or not, I could not say, since I was not present when the three lassies were placed with the childless couple.”

The shocking news left his wife trembling and Brogan rushed his arm around her to hold her tight.

Troy continued. “Gunna explained that even though your father,”—he gave a nod to Brogan— “and Lord Lochlann concocted the tale about them killing the bairn, she feared they would secretly continue their search. It is why the other two lassies were placed with the bairn.”

“So, not only me or one of my sisters is the MacWilliam lass, but we also do not share the same bloodline,” Annis said, trying to comprehend the startling news. Her anger suddenly sparked. “It matters not to me what you say, Elysia and Bliss are my sisters.”

Troy nodded. “From speaking with you, Gunna realized you have a bond as strong as sisters, but she was not surprised since you three are cousins.”

“Cousins?” Annis shook her head, the news once again startling her. “That would mean that one of us is...” Annis kept shaking her head.

Brogan finished for his wife. “One of them is Gunna’s daughter?”

Troy nodded. “Aye, one is Gunna’s daughter. She feared her daughter would meet the same fate as Aila’s daughter since she helped her sister sneak the bairn away.”

“Who is the other lass’s mother?” Brogan asked.

“It must be Verbena,” Annis said turning her head to her husband. “Don’t you recall what your father said about her being Aila’s sister?”

“That’s right,” Brogan nodded, recalling.

“Before you ask,” Troy said, “I know nothing about Verbena. Gunna rarely mentions her.”

“Luna—Gunna—made mention of a sister she had lost, so I assume she had died.” Annis shook her head. “I need to talk with my sisters.”

“Gunna told me you would say that, but she advised against it at the moment,” Troy said and quickly raised his hand to ward off a protest from Annis. “Let me explain.” He continued when Annis nodded. “Everyone knows you search for the MacWilliam bairn, and rumors spread that you have spoken with the witch. Many will assume you found what you searched for and return with news to your sisters. That will put you in extreme danger, for there will be those who hunt you for that information alone and your life is already in danger from some insane people out to kill you.”

“They wish me dead so I do not produce an heir, but if the curse is broken, their cause ceases to exist,” Annis said. “Who then would hunt me?” Her eyes went wide. “Oh good Lord! The three of us are wed to the very men who want one of us dead.” She shook her head. “No one must know, not even my sisters. This must remain with us.” Tears filled her eyes. “How do I save any of us now when I cannot reveal what I know?”

“Find the lass and all will come to pass,” Brogan repeated what the witch had told his wife. “You found the lass for the person who was meant to find her—Gunna. Now all will come to pass.”

“He is right,” Troy said. “You did find the lass and Gunna herself told me that all has been set in motion for the curse to finally end and for everyone to be free.”

“Love is what breaks the curse.” Annis wiped at her tears. “Gunna said all has been set in motion. Perhaps Bliss is the MacWilliam lass and once Rannick falls in love with her, the curse will be no more. The right will have been made wrong, for the son of the man who betrayed his friend has fallen in love with the lass his father would have seen dead, and he now will protect her.”

“You cannot warn your friend,” Troy said with a glare at Brogan. “I see in your eyes you want to.”

“It might make a difference,” Brogan said, Troy right in what he thought. “If Rannick knew he had a chance to break the curse—”

“Nay,” Annis said anxiously. “It will not work that way. Rannick cannot know. Love must come freely. Besides, we do not know if Bliss is actually the MacWilliam bairn. All has been set in motion as Gunna said. We must not interfere with it. I know you feel as if you betray your friend, but I feel I do the same to my sisters.”

His wife was right. They both shared the burden. Brogan did, however, suggest, “We should speak to the witch. She may be able to tell us more.”

“Aye,” his wife eagerly agreed.

“The witch is gone,” Troy said.

“How would you know that?” Brogan asked.

“She goes to help Gunna.”

“And we are to take your word on this?” Brogan said, annoyed.

Troy shrugged. "Find out for yourself, but she can do no more here. She is needed elsewhere. Besides, have you heard any ravens squawk of late or wolves howl since you rescued your wife?"

"The witch must believe us safe if she leaves no ravens or wolves to protect us," Annis said.

"Or she knows you are safe with your husband and me and my men here to protect you," Troy suggested.

Brogan smiled and shook his head. "That is why you stay here... to protect us."

"Gunna requested it and I saw no reason to deny her. Besides, my men and I are tired of the constant travel. It will be nice to settle for a while or maybe permanently." Troy nodded at Brogan. "Since, as we discussed, you need a righthand man you can trust and rely on."

Leave it to his wife to see good reason as to why the man should stay.

"Gunna will return here with Troy staying," Annis said.

"You are sure?" Brogan asked.

"Gunna told me she was lucky to find a second love in her life though he was far different than her first. She loves Troy and will return for him, and he loves her and will wait for her as she keeps her promise to her sister and sees her niece finally safe and protected."

"Your wife is a knowledgeable woman," Troy said.

"Far more than me," Brogan said with a laugh.

Troy grinned. "I will agree with that."

Annis smiled, remnants of tears glistening on her cheeks. "You two will get along well."

"It is agreed then," Troy said. "I will remain here with you and wait, and what we discussed here tonight will remain among the three of us."

"Aye," Brogan said.



“Aye,” Annis agreed, “though word must be sent to my sisters that I continue the search so that nothing seems different.”

“I will see it done,” Brogan said.

“One of my men can take the message to Elysia,” Troy offered.

“And why would I send one of your men?” Brogan asked.

“Because Elysia received word that you and Annis were captured by mercenaries and at least a mercenary can assure her that no harm came to neither of you.”

“How do you know this?” Brogan asked and shook his head. “Never mind. At least I know you will be a good source of knowledge.”

“Truthful knowledge,” Troy confirmed.

A chilly wind sent the campfire flames dancing and Annis shivered.

“It grows late and cold. I will see you in the morning and give the message to your man to take to Lord Odran. One of my warriors will take the message to Lord Rannick,” Brogan said.

“As you say, my lord,” Troy said with a grin and a slight bob of his head.

Annis leaned heavily on her husband, exhaustion weighing her down, as they walked back to the cottage. “I believe you can trust Troy,” she said in a whisper.

“Time will tell, though I hold the same opinion,” Brogan said.

They settled back in bed, Annis pressed contentedly against her husband’s side and his arm holding her snug.

“Are you all right, wife?” Brogan asked.

She answered honestly. “I do not know. I am still too shocked from the news to comprehend it all. And it troubles me that I have no choice but to keep it from my sisters when they have a right to know.”

“Your silence protects them,” he reminded.

“For now, but you know that if at any time it proves differently, then I will go myself to tell them the truth.”

“I understand, for I feel the same about Odran and Rannick. I do not like keeping such important news from them, but I do see the wisdom of it at least for now,” he said, caressing her arm gently.

“My heart broke when my mum died. If it had not been for Bliss, I do not know what would have happened to Elysia and me. We are family. We are sisters no matter what I am told and we will always be sisters. As for the mum who gave me life, I do not know what to think. I do not know her, though I know one thing about whoever she may turn out to be. She sacrificed everything to keep me safe which means she loves me deeply.” She got teary-eyed again. “I wonder if she cries as easily as I do.”

“Perhaps your building skills come from your father,” Brogan suggested.

Tears began to fall. “An hour ago I knew who I was, now I no longer know who I am.”

Brogan lifted her chin for her to look at him. “I know who you are, wife. You are a kind and caring soul, wise beyond your years, a skilled builder, a loving sister, tolerant of a husband who thinks highly of himself, and who speaks her mind—even if it is foolish to do since your husband suffers for it, OW!” Brogan laughed and suffered the jab that he barely felt, happy to hear his wife laugh along with him.

“You are incorrigible, but I love you anyway,” Annis said.

Brogan kissed her lips lightly. “And I you, wife, now and always. “Know that whatever may come of all this, you remain my wife and we will have a good life together and have a gaggle of bairns. Hopefully many sons for I will need help in protecting the daughters who inherit your—OW!” He laughed at another painless jab. “You did not let me finish. Your beauty... I was going to say your beauty.”

“You lie to me, husband?” Annis said. “I see your nose twitch.”

Brogan laughed along with his wife. “I love you more every day, Annis.”

“I cherish your love and will need it, for a fear what the days, weeks, months ahead may bring.”

“We will end this, Annis,” Brogan said, hugging her close against him., “and our children will have a tale to tell of how love conquered evil.”

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