

The background of the cover is a romantic scene. On the left, a man with long dark hair, wearing a green and white kilt, looks towards the viewer. On the right, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a purple dress, is seen from behind, holding the man's hand. They are standing on a rocky outcrop under a starry night sky. The overall mood is ethereal and romantic.

THE
HIGHLANDER'S
FURY

MAEVE
GREYSON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE HIGHLANDER'S FURY

A SCOTTISH FANTASY ROMANCE

A MACKAY CLAN LEGEND

MAEVE GREYSON



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Highlander's Fury

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Contact Information: maeve@maevegreyson.com

Author Maeve Greyson LLC

55 W. 14th Street

Suite 101

Helena, MT 59601

Learn more about Maeve and her books at <https://maevegreyson.com/>

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Her smile was the first thing Faolan noticed, full lips with a sensuous pout,

upturned with an air of generosity. She nodded and smiled her welcome to all in the room as she moved gracefully through the archway.

Faolan followed the curve of her high cheekbones, his chest tightening at the intelligence sparkling in her gaze.

Her eyes shimmered golden. They burnished warm as honey-flavored brandy swirling beneath the glow of torch light. Her sleek black curls piled high upon her head, held in place by a golden circlet. Her crimson gown fit her narrow waist and flattered the curve of her hips. Her neckline plunged low enough to quicken her intended's heart but still modest enough to befit a maiden. She was taller than he'd thought she'd be. He could've sworn his informants had reported Dierdra Sinclair a wispy, elfin lass.

The woman before him stood tall and willowy. The top of her head neared his shoulders and Faolan stood well over six and a half feet tall.

She moved with the fluid grace of one accustomed to being among crowds. She nodded and greeted each person she met with perfect ease. There was nothing simple-minded about this lass in anything she did. She carried herself with an air of surety. This woman knew her place in the world.

Faolan ground his teeth as the realization hit him: Dierdra Sinclair was not in need of saving. Faolan's gut wrenched. He'd been played the fool, a duped pawn set into place for the taking.

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PROLOGUE

“**W**hat the hell did ye find wrong with that one? She’s a well-bred lass with a tempting dowry, and ye’re a blind man if ye missed those breasts.”

Faolan ignored the advisor, staring down at the sea where it white-capped against the blackened walls of the keep. Damn, the man’s voice scraped his nerves raw. He’d give his best dagger if the old fool would cease this endless prattle.

“Ye must marry, Faolan. Ye know as laird, ’tis your duty to your clan. Do ye no’ wish to leave an heir to protect us when ye’ve gone?”

“Shut up, Fergus! I weary of your banter. ’Tis all ye’ve blathered about since Father died and I’ve heard all I intend to hear.” Scraping his fists atop the roughened stone battlement, Faolan glowered at the gray-haired man. “If ye’re a wise man who values his hide, ye’ll haul yer nagging arse down off this roof and find someone else to nettle.”

Fergus widened the stance of his knobby, bowed legs and puffed out his chest as he stood his ground. A stubborn glint flashed in his watery blue eyes as he jutted his grizzled chin a bit higher. He hooked his thumbs into the top of his kilt. “I’ll no’ leave here until ye tell me why ye refused Lady McGonagall. Colum, Ranald, and I struggled with that alliance for months. Ye’ve no’ exactly made this easy, ye understand?”

“Who the hell is the laird here and who is the damned advisor?” Faolan clenched his teeth as a distant streak of lightning flickered across the horizon. Frustration pounded against his senses, lengthening into icy claws of dread.

He lifted his face to the rising wind, narrowing his eyes to the roiling

storm clouds gathering to the north. One deep breath of the electrified wind told him he neared disaster. He'd managed a bit of control over his emotions. He would be damned if he lost his temper over this sorry business and unleashed a raging tempest.

Glancing to the sky, the old advisor retreated a step, coughed, and took a fortifying breath before stepping forward again. "Ye know I mean ye no dishonor, Faolan. But 'tis time ye chose a wife. I understand why ye find it so difficult. But 'tis not like we've offered unsavory prospects."

Faolan thought back over all the women Fergus and the other advisors had selected. No, he couldn't say they hadn't been comely maids. Hell's fire. He wanted nothing to do with a wife. Uneasiness chugged in his gut as the agitated gaze of the spindly legged old man bored right through his center. Fergus meant well, as did all the MacKay advisors. Faolan snorted as bitterness lashed through his thoughts. The advisors had their sights on increasing the strength and wealth of the clan. They sought security and advantageous alliances. They wouldn't give up until he was shackled to a plump, healthy dowry.

As another flash of lightning lit the clouds off to the east, Faolan smiled. He knew the path clear as day. Every muscle in his body relaxed with his newfound plan.

He exhaled a relieved breath and leaned back against the wall. It all seemed so simple. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Let them accomplish their obsession to saddle him with a wife. He knew the perfect choice. "Fergus, never mind about Lady McGonagall. I'd prefer not to go into details as to why she wasna the one. But there is a lass I would like for ye to approach. In fact, their lands adjoin ours."

"Their lands adjoin ours?" Fergus frowned, scrubbing a gnarled, shaking hand across the gray stubble peppering his chin. "Ye canna mean..." Fergus's jaw dropped and he stared at Faolan with an unblinking stare.

"Aye." Faolan nodded. "Speak with her father immediately. I hear Gordon Sinclair has searched for a husband for Dierdra for years and her bride price is famed to be quite promising."

"But she is—" Fergus stammered.

"Yes," Faolan interrupted. "She is exactly the one I need."

CHAPTER
ONE

Ciara leaned against the doorpost in front of the preoccupied man, shifting her awareness as easily as a sigh. She ensured she didn't cast the slightest shadow across the pristine office floor. She held her breath to suppress a giggle. The fool hadn't the slightest inkling of her presence. With a lazy blink, she kept herself invisible to her prey hunched behind the gleaming desk.

Repositioning against the door facing, Ciara allowed herself a languid stretch. The man ignored her, intent on his computer screens. After all these years, the sheer ease of it almost filled her with boredom. Bending particles came as simple as drawing breath. Blinding mortals to her presence was second nature. She so enjoyed stalking her victims before moving in for the kill. Once she punished her chosen sinners, the thrill of the hunt disappeared.

And there he sat in his cold, stark office, her latest offender, totally oblivious to the silent blast of his personal judgment horn. Ciara had struggled with indecision before settling on this particular man. There had been so many from which to choose. The twenty-first century was rife with black-hearted mortals consumed by insatiable greed and cruelty. She'd grown so weary of all the horrors she'd seen. Their continued creativity at torturing each other sickened her beyond reason.

This one had infuriated her for hours. She'd fumed and shifted between the dimensions while he'd thoroughly enjoyed watching the people he'd fired make their final trip out the door. She'd nearly revealed herself when he laughed aloud as they stumbled with their pitiful cardboard boxes holding their personal belongings. He had snickered and clinked his coffee cup against the glass of the window in a toast as the cabs had passed them by.

Yes. He was the one. She would punish this mortal tonight. Her rage had seethed into vindictive surety when she'd overheard his latest phone conversation. He'd cinched a deal with another corrupt soul to store barrels of hazardous chemicals in an adjoining state's closed landfill. He'd save the company millions by disposing of chemicals illegally in an abandoned dump. Transporting the chemicals wasn't a problem either. He had the transportation cabinet of his home state splitting the kickback with the transportation cabinet on the receiving end.

Ciara decided this mortal deserved a most painful death. She would terrorize him first, build the suspense, and then end it with a slow and agonizing finale. She hadn't decided how she would finish him off. She'd just play that one by ear. She would wait until the last office worker had left for the day and then playtime would begin.

Keeping her essence suspended between the dimensions, Ciara hovered through the halls until the only sound heard through the sterile building was the clicking echo of a single computer keyboard. The *tick tick tick* came from the lush corner office at the farthest end of the hall. The hour had grown late and her excitement had built as all the worker bees from the rows of identical gray cubes slogged their way through the elevator doors.

Now Ciara studied her prey as he leaned back in the squeaking depths of his plush leather chair. His eyes narrowed and the light of the monitors lit up his face as he scanned the reports flashing across the three computer screens lined across the gleaming black desk. With a cynical curl of his lip and a click of the mouse, he smiled and leaned closer to the screen on the right. From the gleam in his eye, Ciara knew the greedy bastard had found another set of victims.

"Let's see what you're up to now, my fool," Ciara purred as she entered his mind.

In the annals of his thoughts, she read his plan to drain his employees' retirement accounts. Ciara's rage boiled through her veins when she saw his plot of funneling the income into an overseas resource where the shareholders would be none the wiser. Then he would shut down another division and pocket more millions by laying off hundreds of workers.

Ciara recoiled from the CEO's mind as though she'd just touched a piece of rotted flesh. This mortal sickened her. He was just as evil as a serial killer. He had made his execution even easier. It was time she made her presence known.

She materialized in the doorway, still leaning against the frame, drumming her fingertips atop her folded arms. “The levels of greed to which you humans rise never cease to amaze me.”

Startled, the man jerked, his eyes squeezing closed as though she had struck him. Choking on the mouthful of coffee he’d just gulped; he spewed a shower of the amber liquid as he threw the cup across the room. “Who the hell are you?” he sputtered and coughed. “How did you get in here?”

Ciara slipped out of the doorway and sauntered into the room. She adored the sound of fear in her victim’s voice. It played sweeter than the softest aria to her ears. Shrugging her long braid over one shoulder, she smoothed a hand down her hip as she purred, “I am known by many names. But for the purpose of our little meeting, why don’t you just call me ‘Vengeance’?”

With a shaking hand, he fumbled at the receiver of the phone. The man’s face whitened when he held it to his ear.

“What’s wrong, baby? No dial tone?” Ciara stretched across the desk, plucked the receiver out of his hand, and swung it like a pendulum in front of his face. Oh, she loved it when their eyes rolled back in their heads and their faces paled to that lovely shade of pasty gray.

He ripped his cell phone out of his pocket; his eyes widened as the words *No Service* lit up across the readout on the screen.

Yanking open the side drawer on his desk, he glanced first at Ciara then looked down. He withdrew a pistol with a shaking hand and pointed it at her chest. “You take one more step and they’ll write any name you want on a toe tag for the morgue.”

Oh, this one played the cat-and-mouse game better than the time she had tortured that serial rapist. Ciara smiled her most wicked smile. She loved it when they got cocky! Tossing her head back, she spread her arms wide, then released her best chilling laughter to echo off the wall to wall windows as she gave a teasing wiggle of her hips. “Take your best shot, baby. Do you think you can hit me from here or do you need me to take a few steps closer?”

Beads of sweat appeared across the man’s face then rolled down his heavy jowls as he shook the muzzle of the gun in her face. “Don’t think I won’t kill you. I own the mayor of this city and every cop in the surrounding precincts. With my money, I don’t have to worry about prison. I can do anything I want.”

With a bored roll of her eyes, Ciara leaned forward and rested her hands on his desk. Wriggling her nose, she brought her face so close she almost

touched the tip of his nose and crooned, “Go ahead, sweetheart. Do whatever you like. After all, you should get the most out of your last few moments on earth. Consider it your last wish before your execution. Kind of like having your last meal before you fry.”

The man jerked as though trapped in an uncontrollable seizure. He emptied the chamber of the gun. As he fired the last round, his jaw fell to his chest, and he let the pistol crash to the floor.

Ciara waited, tapping her red, manicured nails atop the computer monitor. With a bored yawn, she stretched and smoothed the dents from the bullets out of her shirt then bestowed a wicked smile upon him. “Okay. My turn! Now let’s figure out the best way to punish you for all your naughty little deeds. Where shall we start this evening? There are so many fun things to choose from.”

Scooting back from his desk, he back-pedaled his chair into the farthest corner against the darkened window. The wild-eyed man stared up into her face, his hands white-knuckled into fists on the chair. “Who the hell are you? What do you want? You want money? I’ve got a ton of cash over in the safe. You want drugs? I can get them too. Just tell me what you want. Whatever you want it’s yours. Just leave me the hell alone!”

Ciara couldn’t resist a sadistic laugh as she circled her way around the desk. Good. The fool finally understood he should fear her. Let the games begin. “I already told you what I want, baby. You really should pay attention when your executioner is speaking. You can call me Vengeance. I am here to administer justice. I want nothing from you but pain and a great deal of suffering. You’ve not only raped the earth with the illegal chemicals you’ve dumped but you’ve robbed and cheated your own kind. You’ve stolen the meager wages your employees have slaved for and you’ve left them in complete ruin and disgrace. Many have suffered pain, starvation, and even death by your hand. Tonight, it’s *your* turn to pay up.”

She held the shaking man transfixed in her gaze as she rested her hands on the arms of his chair. “Tonight, we’re going to discover your greatest fears and then we’re going to see how well *you* face them.”

The man lunged at her throat. His beefy hands shook as he grabbed her by the neck; his eyes widened as he crashed back against the wall.

Ciara loved it when they looked so surprised. Just another perk of being an immortal Fury. They never realized how powerful she was until it was much too late. Dragging him up from the floor, she settled him back into his

chair then took his fleshy chin in her hand. She lifted his face, turned him first one way, then the other, studying him as though she held the jowls of the prize pig at the fair. Her eyes narrowed as she gazed into his watery little eyes. “So, you fear losing your money. Well, no big surprise there. What else? I know a man like you must have many fears.”

Ciara grabbed his tie and wheeled him like a pull toy back to the front of his desk. With a flick of her hand at the computers, she brought up his accounts on all three wide screens. With a laugh, she zeroed them all out.

“Watch this.” She winked at him and brought the screens up again one at a time. She pointed to each of the monitors and yanked his face closer to the desk as she explained, “Pay attention, now. Okay, that account has now transferred all funds to the World Wildlife Fund. This account has transferred all funds to Feed the Children and last but not least, this account has replenished your employees’ 401k’s with an added bonus to a new healthcare package.”

The man sputtered as the tie tightened around his neck, his face turned a reddish purple and a vein in his forehead visibly throbbed.

Ciara grinned and yanked again.

The man clawed at the choking knot at his throat. “Fine. Now just let me go. You’ve paid me back, now just let me go and get the hell out of my life.”

“Oh, I think not.” Ciara clucked her tongue and forced a chiding frown across her face as she spun him back and forth in the chair. She pulled the tie even tighter, perched on the edge of the desk, and crossed her legs in his face. “We’re not done. You see, I discovered one more fear while slumming around in your mind.”

After kissing the tips of her fingers, she slowly traced them down the side of his face. In the wake of her touch, a trail of blistering pustules festered across his skin.

“You see, I discovered your greatest fear next to losing your money is the fact you seem to be deathly afraid of the toxic chemicals your company dumps into the earth. You’re afraid you’re going to end up with cancer and your flesh will rot off your bones.”

The CEO paled even further, to an ashen, unhealthy gray. His breath came in quick, uneven gasps and his eyes whitened as they rolled back in his head. As he fell over limp, the only thing keeping him in his chair was Ciara’s relentless grip on his tie.

“Dammit! Don’t you dare die until I give you permission.” Ciara yanked

on the man's body and pushed him back in the chair. She pounded on his chest. The color drained even further out of his skin. His lifeless body slumped over to one side.

“Ye seem to be losing your touch, Vengeance. Ye used to keep them terrified for hours before ye allowed them to die.” Alec's sarcasm floated down from the rafters where he sat preening the pinfeathers beneath one of his out-stretched wings.

With a disgruntled huff, Ciara didn't bother looking up at the raven. Alec always had impeccable timing. “Don't start with me, Alec. I'm in a black mood since I've just been robbed of my night's entertainment.”

Brushing her hands together, she stared down at the man. He lay twisted in a pitiful lump, hunched over sideways in his chair. Ciara scowled as she circled his body. With a growl, she kicked at his foot. It would take just a twitch of her brow to rip his limbs from his body, just one tiny twitch. But he'd robbed her of any satisfaction in the act since he'd taken the coward's way out. “Why have they evolved into such piteous creatures, Alec? Why have they become so ruined with greed and cruelty?”

Alec hopped down from his perch on the rafter and onto the desk. He stared at the man slumped over in the chair. “It's just their nature to be greedy. I can't believe ye would even bother asking after all these centuries of punishing them for their wicked ways.”

Alec jerked his glossy black head, then cast a nervous glance around the room. He resettled his wings across his back and strutted his way across the desk. “Some of them, I mean. Only some of them are born to be greedy. Ye have also met a good many of them through the years that ye have found to be pure of heart. Remember there were plenty of good ones too.”

Alec hopped closer. He stretched and flapped his great, dark wings their full span. His ebony feathers shone beneath the fluorescent lights. “By the way, I have a message for ye. The mothers bid ye come to them before the next new moon.” He swaggered along the edge of the desk, speared a paperclip in his beak, and tossed it across the room.

Ciara smoothed an escaped curl away from her face as she turned to study Alec where he rummaged through the shiny objects scattered across the desk.

The news of a summons from the keep of the goddesses did not bode well at all. And why was he acting so nervous? The bird weighed each of his words before he spoke as though fearing he might be overheard. Something was up. There was no way this summons could be good news. Ciara slid her

hands into the back pockets of her jeans and sauntered closer to the fidgeting raven.

“Why do they want me to return to the keep? What did they tell you, Alec?”

Pecking at the keys on the computer keyboard, Alec paused in his rifling to fix her with a beady eyed glare. “All I know is they want to speak with ye, and they ask that ye come to them with all due haste. Ye know they are not in the habit of taking me into their confidence. I’m no’ exactly their favorite being.”

“That’s never stopped you from finding out the truth before. Remember the Stones?” Ciara gave him an encouraging wink as she nudged the great black bird. Alec had stolen the secret of bending time and space from Brid and shared it with the mortals. Ciara shivered when she remembered Brid’s anger. It was a wonder Alec had survived.

“Aye. I remember the Stones. It’s a wonder I am standing here talking to ye at all. I’m surprised they didna curse me into some sort of recurring wart on the crack of some Highlander’s arse. At least all they did was ban my ability to return to human form.”

Ciara glanced down at her clothing and groaned. She’d have to discard her favorite twenty-first century clothes. The silky black T-shirt, the curve hugging jeans...the enlightened plane would literally shudder if she didn’t change her apparel. Once she’d shown up donned in skintight leather and the veils of the keep had frozen into solid sheets of the blackest ice. The coldness of the goddesses’ combined disapproval had frosted everything over within the enlightened plane for eons.

“Alec, I know you. There is no way you would just blindly follow their commands. You’ve never been able to mind your own business. Your inability to adhere to complete obedience is what stripped you of your powers to return to human form in the first place. I can see the wheels turning in that wicked little mind of yours. Now tell me what you know.”

Alec shifted from the shape of a raven into the form of a peaceful snowy owl. With an innocent blink of his wide owl eyes, he swiveled his head away. “Ciara—I mean, Vengeance—I am truly hurt that ye’ve taken such a tone with me. Haven’t I served ye faithfully all these years, for more centuries than I care to recall?”

Suspicion surged through her being. *Ciara?* He’d called her Ciara. Ciara shoved her face so close it almost touched the snowy owl’s hooked beak.

“Ciara? No one’s called me by that name in centuries! Not even Cerridwen or Brid. Out with it, Alec! Tell me what you know about this summons, or I swear to you, I will seal the veil to this world when I leave and you’ll be trapped here forever in this madness.”

She couldn’t believe he’d called her that! She had abandoned her given name eons ago when she’d grown so frustrated with the charge she’d been given. At first, she’d felt honored when the goddesses had asked her to travel through the worlds, righting wrongs and punishing evil. However, as the ages passed, the corruption coursing through the many worlds in her care had only grown more severe.

The futility of it all ate away at her heart. She’d had to abandon most of the worlds and concentrate on saving just one. It had torn at her very being to abandon so many innocents. But the evil and greed taking over the realities was more than she could master alone.

Ciara had settled on saving Danu’s mortals. She’d seen the depths of love and creativity these complex beings could attain. But as the world matured, the humans changed for the worse, and Ciara couldn’t understand why.

Her prey tonight was just one example. He was just one of the millions who’d been eager to destroy and corrupt without a second thought. He’d destroyed the lives of his own as well as the lives of countless other creatures unfortunate enough to cross his path. Ciara hadn’t found a shred of remorse in his heart. His soul festered black and rotten. Without hesitation, he’d reduced the lives he’d tainted to mere numbers flashing on a screen.

Ciara had grown weary; her retaliations became more futile with every passing century. She might save a few innocents with her actions, but she had begun to think her quest a waste of time. With every tyrant she felled, ten more sprang to take their place. Danu’s world had become a place of darkness.

Drawing a shaking breath, Ciara extended her arm to the owl and glanced around the bleak heartlessness of the corporate office. “I’m sorry, Alec. You know I would never abandon you to this hopeless world. But please, I *need* you to tell me what they want. I know you have to have an inkling of what they’ve plotted. You’ve always been my best spy.”

Alec returned to his favorite shape of a raven and hopped onto her arm. He stretched and rubbed his beak against her chin, as he chirruped in her ear. “I know ye wouldna leave me behind in this place. Ye still have a heart as big as the universe even though ye think ye buried it long ago. But truly, Ciara,

all I can tell ye is they say they have a new charge for ye, and it seems much better than this sorry business ye already do. They said something about changing the course of mankind's destiny. I swear to ye that is all I truly know."

"Mankind's destiny," Ciara repeated, her gaze falling to rest on the lump of the dead man sprawled across the floor. "Mankind's destiny is to be consumed by his own greed until he destroys everything in his path."

Alec churled and crooned, rubbing his feathered head against her cheek. "Come with me, Ciara. At least hear what they have to say. They know ye need a respite from your charge. They know ye wear thin with this duty they've given ye. Perhaps they just want to ease your pain and give ye a bit of rest."

Ciara drew a heavy breath. "All right, Alec. Let us leave this place and see what they have to say. Perhaps the goddesses have thought of a better way to save this misbegotten world and all that's in it."



CIARA SHIFTED into the dimension in front of the gilt-encrusted mirror gracing the entryway wall. She examined her glamour one last time to ensure she'd not throw the fortress into another ice age. Her properly clothed reflection smiled back at her with an approving nod. Her mothers would find this attire acceptable, much better than the leather chaps and spike-heeled boots of her last visit. Brid hadn't quite appreciated the biker chick look.

Smoothing her hands through the fluttering layers, Ciara twirled in front of the mirror. The silken gown floated around her body, the deep violet veils swirling about her curves highlighting her fair, creamy skin. She'd wrestled her mane of dark curls into an intricate braid pulled away from her face. She'd seen the Goddess Brid restrain her own flaming tresses into this same complicated weave resembling the knots of the Celts. Ciara patted her hair and turned once more in front of the mirror.

Yes. She felt sure her mothers would approve of this presentation. She'd modeled her proper appearance after her mothers' attire. They might be immortals but they never changed when it came to style.

Drawing a deep breath, Ciara closed her eyes and shivered before turning to make her way out to the balcony. The scent of heather wafted through the

air mixing with the briny crisp air filtering in from the sea. Ciara smiled. Visions of magical Alba danced through her mind at the very scent. Brid and her beloved Scotland. Even here in the goddesses' keep, Brid kept her favorite things close to her heart by stroking the senses.

Ciara tapped her fingertips atop the railing of the balcony and glanced around the keep. This was ridiculous. Just because immortals had an eternity, why did they always make everyone wait? She peered through the corridors, fidgeting back and forth across the balcony. They asked her to hurry and yet now they made her wait. With a sigh, Ciara paced, flipping her hands through the layers of her gown. Some things never changed. They had summoned her, said it was urgent, and now there was no sign of anyone about. Ciara huffed, drumming her fingers along the railing a bit harder. Cerridwen and Brid always had a flair for the dramatic.

She paced back and forth across the striated black-marble floor, her footfalls clicking with every step. It had been several centuries since she'd been back to the goddesses' keep but very little about the fortress had changed. Watching the three obsidian dragons holding the brazier of eternal burning coals in the center of the room, Ciara darted back and forth across the room at different speeds until she bored with taunting the beasts. Their glowing red eyes followed her every move. She'd never truly trusted those three. She'd seen Cerridwen leaning close to them once and nodding as though they'd whispered in her ear.

At the sight of the crimson veils fluttering down from the unseen ceiling, Ciara's curiosity grew. The brilliant veils rippled and billowed in the gentle breeze sifting in from the sea. The mother goddesses' mood determined the color of the veils. Whatever was going on, Mother Brid's emotions must be in a stir to color the keep in such a vivid hue.

The black marble floors, the matching columns, and wide steps sparkled with flecks of silver and gold but at least the keep itself appeared to be warm. That in itself was a good sign. If the mothers were displeased, the entire keep would be a solid sheet of ice.

Alec lit upon the banister, strutting and cocking his raven's head first one way then the other. He grumbled a low chirrup when he glanced across the room and spied Cerridwen's sow and hen. At the sight of Cerridwen's favorite creatures, Alec puffed out his chest and preened his feathers into glistening blue-black perfection.

Cerridwen's glossy black hen crooned and chortled as she pecked about

the room. After much strutting about, she appeared to decide there was nothing of interest among the glittering striations of silver in the marble. With a contented churdle, she snuggled down into the nest of satiny pillows beside the softly snoring sow.

“It is beyond me what Cerridwen sees in those creatures. They have absolutely no personality whatsoever.” Alec kept his coarse voice low as he pressed his beak to Ciara’s ear.

Ciara leaned close, nodding in the direction of the cauldron. She turned to whisper next to the ruffled feathers of his head. “You had best mind your thoughts as well as your tongue, jealous Alec. Cerridwen doesn’t need to overhear your voice to know what’s in your heart.”

Rich laughter danced upon the air as a hauntingly beautiful voice floated through the veils. “Ye were always wise to our ways, dearest Ciara. Alec would do well to mind your words.”

Ciara and Alec turned to greet the voice’s owner as the goddess Cerridwen emerged from her private chambers deeper within the keep. Black silk floated around the lissome goddess’s body like dark mist swirling through a stand of trees. Her long hair flowed around her pale, delicate face, the dark tresses mirroring her sparkling black eyes.

“Mother Cerridwen, you honor me with your words. ’Tis so good to see you again.” Ciara bowed her head and held out both hands to the goddess, awaiting her welcoming embrace.

“And what about me, my child? Have ye no greeting for your other mother who helped draw ye from the mists?”

Brid’s coppery, bright hair also flowed free, her fiery locks lifting as though caught in a delicate breeze. Her deep green eyes shone with love and pride as she held her arms wide for Ciara’s embrace.

“Mother Brid.” Ciara rushed to embrace the powerful goddess and pressed an affectionate kiss on each of her ivory cheeks. “I didn’t realize until I saw you both how long it had been since I’d last felt your embrace.”

Brid grasped Ciara’s shoulders and held her back, looking her up and down with a critical gaze. “I’m verra glad to see ye’ve discarded the leather attire and befitted yourself with much more appropriate wear.”

A caw of laughter echoed through the chambers. Alec ducked his head as the three women spun on him with reproving glares. “Sorry, won’t happen again. I’ll just be over here on the balcony looking out at the lovely waves.”

Ciara hid her smile behind her hand. She rubbed the tip of her nose as she

turned to face Brid and Cerridwen. “Tell me, my mothers. What is so important that you would summon me here before the next new moon?”

Cerridwen inclined her head, as she floated over to her cauldron. She beckoned for Ciara and Brid to follow. “Ye never were one to dance about with words, Ciara. Ye always did get straight to the marrow.”

Brid rested her hand on Ciara’s shoulder, motioning toward the dark water within the massive cauldron. As all three women stared down into the inky depths, images stirred upon the surface.

A desolate world, void of any life at all, floated burned and gray upon the surface of the water. The land lay bleak, sterile, and inhospitable. Ruins of buildings, blackened spikes of trees, and nothing but barren ground appeared as far as the vision spanned.

Brid shuddered as she peered down at the image. She wilted against the rim of the cauldron as though the sight of the destroyed world below sapped the very strength from her body. “This is one possibility of mankind’s future, of Danu’s world, if we are unable to change the current course of events. The mortals’ world and all life upon it will cease to exist. When the destruction is complete that plane of existence will be permanently removed from among the Veils of Realities.”

With a heavy sigh, Ciara lifted her gaze. She hugged her body against the chilling desolation portrayed within the vision. “I don’t doubt this, my mothers. And I don’t think this destiny is far from where I have been battling in the year 2011.”

Cerridwen reached out and stirred the waters to dispel the dire prediction. With a steady hand, she passed her palm above the cauldron as though soothing a nightmare from the mind of a child. As she did this, another image shimmered, a brighter world filled with hope. This world spawned green and full of life. Joy swelled in the colorful auras surrounding every being on this new plane. “If we can ensure the Auld Ways are never forgotten, if we can strengthen the respect for Danu’s earth, we can nurture the reality ye now see and watch it come to pass upon this plane.”

Ciara pressed her palms against the cool rim of the cast iron cauldron as she surveyed the peaceful world. With a sigh, she pondered the image on the waters. “I’ve been battling the malevolence and greed down through the centuries and haven’t been able to change a thing. I’ve tracked them all down and destroyed them in their nests. It hasn’t made a difference. It hasn’t changed the course of events or swung the odds a bit in our favor.”

Brid wrapped an arm around Ciara's shoulders and gave her a consoling hug. "Ye've fought valiantly against every evil in the world. No one denies ye have been loyal to your charge. But Cerridwen and I have thought of another way that we could possibly change the course of this world."

At Brid's nod of encouragement, Cerridwen passed her hand over the waters once again. A new image shimmered into view. Wild. Furious. Pure, unadulterated strength. The man's aura pulsated power and control. Sleek black brows knotted over angry flashing eyes. Hair the black of a raven's wings perfectly matched his surly demeanor. His square jaw was shadowed with a day's growth of beard. Nostrils flared on a slightly crooked nose that must have been broken at some earlier time. Full, sensuous lips curled back into a sneer. Teeth clenched in barely held rage. Ciara didn't know who this compelling human was but it was obvious he was sorely displeased.

"Who is he?" Ciara leaned closer to the waters. This mortal might be worth her interest.

Brid smiled, nodding her approval. "That is the chieftain of Clan MacKay, their powerful and well respected leader, Faolan."

Now she knew they plotted something. Brid loved dabbling with Scotland. Straightening from the cauldron's edge, Ciara crossed both arms over her chest and fixed the smiling goddesses with a suspicious glare. "Laird Faolan MacKay. And in what year exactly does Laird MacKay reside and what does he have to do with your solution for Danu's world?"

Cerridwen circled the massive black cauldron, bent to scoop her hen from the nest of pillows, and cradled the chirruping bird to her chest. "Ye are currently looking at the year 1415 in the Highlands of our beloved Scotland. As to our solution, perhaps Brid could explain the plan we've put together better than I."

Brid turned to glide across the polished floor and held out her hand for Ciara to join her at the balcony. Gazing out across the mist swirling over the dusky waves, she smiled as the whorls of sparkling fog formed into her beloved eternal spirals. "The MacKay family has been very dear to my heart now for many a year. Many of their clan are mystically blessed, and they have kept the legends and rituals alive. However, Faolan has experienced a great deal of loss in his life. Grief and heartache have turned him away from the Ways. He has abolished the workings of magic and ritual among the clan and has forbidden the practicing of the old religions."

Ciara ran her hands across the smooth surface of the railing; the velvet-

like marble soothed her emotions with its cool, solid touch. The life force embedded deep in the stone called out to her, begging her to save the beloved earth and all its denizens. “So, you want me to talk to him? Convince him to turn back to the Ways? You do realize diplomacy is not one of my strongest traits? And just how exactly is getting one man to return to the old religions going to save the fate of the world?”

Ciara tapped her fingertips on the railing. She couldn’t believe they’d called her back through the veils for this. She could’ve vanquished at least three dozen unrepentant mortals and punished who knows how many lower level immortals in the time she’d been here at the keep. Why had they called her here for this task? Cerridwen and Brid were slipping.

Cerridwen joined them at the railing after shooing the fussing black hen back through the veils into the room. Cerridwen’s gaze met with Brid’s and she gave a subtle nod.

“We need a child, Ciara. Fathered by the magical wolf of the MacKays and blessed with the talents of an immortal mother. Such a child could help ensure the old religions would never be forgotten and the magic would never die.” With this statement, Brid faced Ciara and waited for her reaction.

They couldn’t be serious. Ciara opened her mouth then closed it again. No. Surely, they had something else in mind. Her mothers couldn’t possibly be suggesting what she thought they had just said. She looked to Cerridwen and then turned back to Brid. Taken aback at what she thought Brid proposed, she repeated the words to ensure she understood what Brid had in mind. “Fathered by the wolf? Born of an immortal mother? Are you actually asking me to join with that mortal from the Highlands and bear the man a child?”

“Is he not pleasing to the eye, Ciara? Any man able to hold such fury must be capable of great passion as well.” With a wave of her hand, Cerridwen floated the cauldron to where they stood so they could gaze once more down upon his image.

Faolan MacKay electrified the waters. He was dark and dangerous, a delightful temptation to watch. The man towered over most in his clan, the breadth of his shoulders balancing his mountainous height. Ciara’s palms itched to touch the cut of his muscles straining against the leather of his tunic. Her gaze traveled lower, appraising his fine narrow hips and his powerful, well-muscled legs. Cerridwen was right. Faolan pleased the eye and Ciara would bet her finest torque he pleased in bed as well.

Before Ciara pulled herself away from Faolan's mesmerizing image, Brid hastened to continue. "Faolan has truly grown into the meaning of his name: the loner, the ever watchful wolf. He has sworn never to love or sire children of his own due to what he has perceived as the unfair suffering of his parents and siblings. He blames love and magic for all the problems in his family's lives when these energies are actually the only salvation for what seeks to destroy his world." Brid edged closer to Ciara as she spoke and leaned over the cauldron's edge. "We are asking ye to assume the role of his betrothed. You can temporarily replace the woman selected to be his wife. Seduce him, Ciara, consummate the vows, and bear him a fine gifted son. Once this task is complete, we will return the mortal woman to his side and ye will be free of your obligation."

Ciara couldn't believe what they were asking of her. She was a warrior. A Fury. She wasn't a wife and mother! So flustered by their plan, she reverted to her comfortable T-shirt and jeans. Glancing down at her curves straining against the thinly stretched cotton, she scrubbed her face with her hands. In an instant, the airy violet gossamer veils returned to swirl about her body. "The MacKay has sworn never to love and yet you say he's betrothed? Why can't we just let human nature take its course? Let him lie with the woman, get her with child and then you can train the boy in his dreams." Ciara huffed an escaped curl out of her eyes. She waited for them to see the perfect reasoning of her easy solution. She couldn't understand why they'd interrupted her from scouring evil from the world when it was obvious this duty was not her calling.

Without a word, Cerridwen passed her hand over the cauldron and dispelled the image of the striking Scot. Her summons to the cauldron replaced Faolan MacKay's handsome scowl with the vision of a slight, wispy maid wandering through the dimly lit hall of a dreary stonewalled keep. "This is Chieftain MacKay's betrothed. Her name is Dierdra Sinclair. Look closely, Ciara. Do ye notice anything different about this frail young lass?"

With growing uneasiness at the focusing vision, Ciara leaned closer and studied the image of the girl floating before her. As the picture cleared, she understood. Her heart sank the longer she watched the girl until she finally raised her head to meet Cerridwen's gaze. "She is one of the touched. A pure innocent. What kind of man would agree to marry such a woman? Is he a brute predisposed to raping children?"

Brid raised her hands. She interceded with a firm shake of her head. "No.

Ye must not think ill of Laird MacKay. He felt wedding the Sinclair lass the perfect solution for both their problems. She is the wife he can ignore, and he is the husband who will never harm her. His advisors arranged the match for the benefit of the clan. The Sinclair's bride price and their adjoining lands were far too great an enticement for the MacKay advisors to resist. Faolan agreed to the match to silence the avaricious men so they would leave off with their insistence that he must wed. He has yet to meet the sweet Dierdra but his spies assured him of her innocent state. Their first meeting is set for tomorrow eve at their betrothal feast. We know if we do not intercede, he will never consummate the vows and there will never be a child. And remember, the child we need born of this union must not only hold the MacKay magic but also the powers of an immortal mother. The responsibilities of this child will be great and the bloodline he begins must be strong. His strength and knowledge must be immense to pass down to future generations."

Ciara's irritation waned a bit at Brid's assurances of Faolan's reaction to Dierdra. Once more, she leaned over the cauldron and watched the vacant-eyed maiden bend to stroke a mewling cat. Ciara reached down and dipped her fingers across the water to bless the child with her touch. "And if he never consummates the vows, this innocent could possibly fall from his protection. There are many more men who would gladly spoil her without a thought of shattering her soul."

Ciara plunged her hand deeper into the water and erased the image from view. "Tell me this, my honored mothers. If I bear the man's child, what happens then? Once I've done this thing you've requested of me, then what will happen to this unlikely pair...not to mention what will happen to the child? I'm not worried about falling in love. This weakness called love is a human problem. And I'm not concerned about The MacKay since you tell me he's hardened his heart. I am worried about who will care for my child once I have gone from their midst. I will not leave my own innocent abandoned and unprotected in Danu's dangerous world."

Brid nodded in agreement with Ciara's words as Cerridwen returned the prophetic cauldron to its platform in the corner. "We know ye would never be in danger of falling in love with the man. Ye have reminded us quite frequently of your immunity to the mortal's weakness of love. And we also know ye would never abandon a child, especially a son of your own.

"Ye will stay with the MacKays until the child is seven years of age and nearly ready to be fostered and trained. Then we will return Dierdra back to

her husband's side where she will be safe from the evils of the world. We will protect her with a glamour identical to your likeness. We will hide her delicate fae-like form. No one will doubt the lass is truly his wife since she will look just like you and will have obviously borne him a son. The union will be safe from any of the accusations of non-consummation that might have otherwise occurred. Faolan will be a bit confused at first when we return the lass to his side. However, since he has sworn never to love, he will leave the lass to herself and his sense of honor will force him to protect her. All will be in place and we will have our gifted child to ensure the safety of future generations."

Ciara paced across the balcony, warring with indecision over what she should do as she stared out across the glistening mists. She watched the dance and swirl of the silver-gray fog upon the waters as she listened to the sea below. A little over eight mortal years spent wed to the mortal MacKay. Not to mention having to seduce the man. No more judgments, no more executions, just perform the role of dutiful wife to a temperamental laird and bear the man a son.

A delicious flush surged through her body as she remembered his image in the cauldron. She hardly considered the seduction of Faolan MacKay an unpleasant possibility. From the looks of the man, she had to admit she looked forward to exploring his *merits*.

It wouldn't be the first time she'd seduced a mortal. She'd occasionally treated them to erotic dreams. The joinings had been amusing enough ways to pass a lonely night but they'd left her with an even greater wariness of the complex beings. The men had become obsessed with her immortal passions. They'd become addicted to her visits to the passages of their minds as though she were a drug. She'd finally stopped indulging in this form of amusement. She'd feared some of them would surely go mad.

Eight or so years and bear the man a child. Then return the innocent Dierdra to her untouchable husband's side. The child would be safe. By seven years of age, Ciara could have him well versed in the basics of the mystics. He'd also be old enough to be fostered out to train in the more human realities of fifteenth-century Scotland.

Dierdra would be safe from any accusations of not having consummated the union. Faolan could return to his detached scowl and this could possibly set the world's salvation in motion. With a little more guidance down through the generations, they could change the course of the world.

Her palms still rested upon the soothing marble. The call of the earth pulled at her very essence. She would do this. She would follow the wishes of her mothers. She would accept this task with honor.

She sealed her fate with a decisive nod and turned to face the awaiting goddesses. “I will do this thing you ask of me. I will bring this child into the world. All I ask is that you allow me to visit Dierdra in a dream to ease her into what will occur.”

Cerridwen and Brid smiled as they nodded in unison. Brid stepped forward and took Ciara’s hands between her own. “We are proud of ye, Ciara. Ye have made the right choice. Ye have our blessings to perform this task as ye will. By accepting this charge, ye not only help Danu’s world in its survival but ye protect the very legends of the Auld Ways themselves. When ye are ready to set these energies in motion, call out to us across the realms. Then we shall open the portals wide to allow Alec to carry Dierdra to the Land Beyond the Mists.”

CHAPTER
TWO

“Damn, the woman is out of control,” Faolan muttered as he stomped through the arch. The servants had scrubbed the great hall of the MacKay keep within an inch of its life. Under the command of Mistress Sorcha, no corner or crevice was safe from scrutiny.

As overseer of the care and upkeep of the castle, Mistress Sorcha ruled with a firm and unrelenting hand. Heaven help the servant foolish enough to ignore any instruction given. If unlucky or daft enough to be caught slacking, they’d best be giving their soul to their maker, for Mistress Sorcha would surely have their arse.

Faolan groaned, giving a look at the floors, wondering if it was safe to step any farther. *God’s beard.* ’Twas a sorry day when a man feared walking in his own keep.

The lads had swept the great stones free of the soiled rushes and scoured them with lye and boiling water. Wrinkling his nose, Faolan cringed; the bite of the lye nearly burnt his eyes from the sockets. His keep would never smell the same. What the hell was the woman thinking? The slabs shone in the glow of the burning torches as though the stones had just been set.

“This is such a waste of time and manpower,” Faolan grumbled as he stomped his way toward the kitchens. He shook his head as he watched a serving lad scurry by with two buckets of steaming water to the other side of the room.

The servants scalded and rubbed down the tables and benches until not a drop of grease stained the boards. They had cleaned and greased the irons upon the hearths; the tools and huge swinging arms holding the black pots glistened in the flickering light. The hearths had been shoveled clear of

excess ash and debris. Fresh split wood stood stacked at the ready. The maids had drawn down the tartans and banners from the rafters and beaten the dust from them before they'd been re-hung.

The surrounding hills had supplied overflowing baskets of heather. The fragrance wafted throughout the keep. Faolan rubbed the back of his hand across his nose. His stomach clenched at the scent of the sweet perfume; he preferred the acrid sting of the burning lye. The scent of the heather reminded him of his parents' funeral. The fragrance brought back the darkness of that day and the stabbing loneliness still echoing through their empty chambers.

Ivy, the symbol of eternal fidelity, wound its way into every nook and crevice. Braided boughs of the emerald leaves formed an archway at the head of the hall. Fidelity. Faolan snorted. What a mockery. There would be no question of faithfulness in this union.

Casks of wine and barrels of ale lined the farthest wall and stood in neat piles beside the stairs. More stood at the ready, stored in racks in rooms offset from the hallway. The banquet required the meat of three wild boars; a successful hunt produced the necessary pigs. They now turned on spits above open fire pits behind the kitchens. Faolan spared an approving nod at the red-faced lads stationed at the fire pits. Sweat poured in rivulets down their faces as they kept the massive sides of meat sizzling and turning over the glowing coals. Breads, cheeses, and fruits of the season piled high upon serving boards along the tables. Not a spot was empty on any of the sideboards in the kitchen. All stood ready for the start of the celebration. Faolan hoped his clan was happy. This damn betrothal was finally set. *All this food.* Faolan clenched his teeth. His clan could've survived on it for half the winter.

Faolan paused just outside the kitchen doorway and peered around the corner. He'd learned long ago if he wanted to know what was truly going on in his keep, all he had to do was listen at the doorway of his own kitchens.

Mistress Sorcha made one more round through the kitchens, her ample girth swishing her black skirts upon the floor. She hefted a long-handled ladle from its hook upon the mantel and slid the heavy lid from the pot. Her eyes narrowed as she tested a bubbling broth hissing above the fire. "Bring me the dried rosemary hanging from the farthest shelf and fetch me the crock of salt."

A spindly kitchen maid hopped from the bench where she'd sat scrubbing the skins from a pile of carrots. She returned with the herbs and the crock of salt, holding them aloft until Mistress Sorcha had taken what she needed.

With a satisfied nod, Sorcha smiled her approval at the maid and replaced the ladle upon the hook. “Everything must be perfect. The clan has long waited for the day The MacKay would take a wife.”

“The clan has long waited for additional money to be added to the coffers,” Faolan mumbled under his breath. At least this would silence his advisors; it was either marry or murder the bastards. Faolan’s stomach growled as he shifted positions; Sorcha’s stew smelled delicious.

As she returned the crock of salt to its designated shelf, the kitchen maid scurried back to the bench and the enormous heap of carrots. “Have ye seen Laird MacKay’s betrothed, Mistress Sorcha? Is she a fine woman worthy of our chieftain’s good name?”

Faolan leaned closer, biting back a bitter laugh to be sure he heard what Sorcha replied.

At the girl’s question, Sorcha’s smile faded. “Lyla, I have heard the chatter of the chambermaids and I will have none of it repeated. I havena seen the lady, myself. But I am certain she will be a perfect match for our fine laird.”

Faolan’s heart warmed as he overheard her words. The one bright spot in this sorry mess was Sorcha’s loyalty to her laird.

With a curt nod toward a basket of vegetables sitting beside the doorway, Sorcha ended the direction of Lyla’s conversation. “Now make haste, Lyla. The feast will be upon us soon and ye have yet to chop all the vegetables for the other stewpot. Once ye have finished with the carrots, be sure to brush the dirt from the mushrooms that ye spread upon the shelf in the larder yesterday eve. I will be needing them for the gravies for the meat. They must have something to sop with their bread.”

As she re-tied her apron around her ample hips, Sorcha headed out of the kitchens toward the great hall. As she barreled through the archway, she nearly bumped into Faolan as he slipped away from the door. “Such a fierce look! M’laird, what appears to be amiss? What have we forgotten for your celebration?” Sorcha rushed to his side, knotting her apron between her hands as her gaze darted about the room.

Raising his hands as though to ward off her words, Faolan looked around the room at all the preparations and swallowed a groan of disgust. “Ye have done well, Sorcha. Be at peace. As usual, all is perfection.”

Sorcha tightened her lips into a worried line and patted her graying hair back from her weathered face. “Forgive me, my chieftain. But for a man

who's about to meet his betrothed, ye seem sorely troubled.”

Faolan scrubbed the stubble of his beard as he sank to the bench and dropped his head between his hands. “Sorcha, ye have been like a mother to me ever since my own mother jumped to her death. Even before then, ye relentlessly spoiled me whenever I wandered into the kitchens. However, in this matter, ye canna help me, nor can I seek your counsel. I have agreed to this match for the good of the clan and that is all that best be said.”

Sorcha knotted her hands in her apron, fixing him with a worried scowl. “Blessings to ye, m’laird. Trust that all will be well. I shall leave ye in peace. I shall be in the kitchens if ye need me. All ye need do is call.”

Faolan raised his head. He glanced across the room and took in the betrothal decorations with a snort of disgust. This was such a mockery. His clan sought to celebrate the securing of lands, cattle, and possible future holdings. They didna give a damn if he took a wife.

Faolan had never met Dierdra Sinclair, but he’d received reports from his informants about her simple mind and her childlike ways. Her father had been trying to marry her off for years, but her affliction had made a desirable union difficult to obtain. An avaricious man, Gordon Sinclair not only wanted rid of his vacant-eyed child, but as chieftain of the Sinclair clan, he wanted to profit from the match by obtaining an alignment with a stronger clan. In his view, the fact that his daughter might have the mind of a child had nothing to do with her ability to breed.

When Faolan had learned of Gordon Sinclair’s offer and the innocence of his only child, Faolan had agreed to the match for two very simple reasons. If he took Dierdra to wife, it would silence the incessant droning of his advisors for him to marry. It would also protect the childlike Dierdra from the dangers of a less scrupulous man, one who might not give a second thought to raping a helpless innocent.

The match with the reportedly sweet, daydreaming Dierdra would perfectly suit Faolan’s needs. He’d sworn he’d never open his heart to the pain he’d see his parents suffer. Because of the passion they felt for each other, their lives had met a tragic end: his father murdered while protecting his mother and then his mother had taken her own life. Faolan had sworn he’d never bring a child into the world just to abandon it when his own life ended. Love and children brought nothing but pain and suffering. Someone else could take the lairdship.

Faolan rose from the table, rolling his weary shoulders to work out the

tension knotted through his muscles. He'd much rather be in the courtyard, slicing the air with his sword as he practiced with his warriors. With a resigned sigh, he plodded to the staircase leading to his private rooms. He stopped by the stairwell and tucked a cask of ale under one arm. This one belonged to him. *Lore, I need a drink.* His mood darkened as though he headed for the gallows rather than to meet his bride. It was time he readied for his betrothal banquet and resigned himself to his fate. In but a few short hours, he promised himself to a wife, whether he wanted one or not.



THE STUMP of a sputtering candle on the splintered table beside the bed fought against the shadows of the room. The darkness reeked of damp mold-covered stones and the mustiness of mildewed cloth. A dwindling fire hissed in the neglected hearth with barely enough coals to heat the surrounding stones. A moth-eaten tapestry was wedged in the cracked masonry around one narrow window in a meager attempt at blocking the bone-chilling wind.

As Ciara swirled her energy into the room, she flared into an enraged vortex of white-hot fury. If not for fear of ruining the goddesses' well-laid plan, she would've avenged the innocent girl imprisoned in the stale, dank room. Nothing would've pleased her more than terrifying the soul who had so cruelly neglected such a helpless innocent.

Ciara trembled with anger as she formed beside the crumbling frame with a ratty sheet meant to be a pitiful bed. She forced herself to take several deep, calming breaths before she attempted to connect with Dierdra's dreaming mind.

"Dierdra," Ciara breathed to the slumbering girl shivering on her side. "Dierdra, open your mind to me, child. My name is Ciara. I want to be your friend and tell you about a wonderful adventure I have for you."

Pale eyelashes fluttered on the pink of her cheeks as Dierdra nestled her tousled head deeper into the threadbare pillow. The faintest of smiles pulled at the corners of her mouth as her mind hearkened to Ciara's call.

A shimmering mist of swirling greens and blues flowed around Ciara's body as she made her way deep into Dierdra's mind. Iridescent sparks of chaotic energy and light gained momentum in their fevered dance the farther she traveled into the innocent's dream. She found the girl at the edge of a

bubbling stream. Dierdra laughed as she sat wiggling her toes in the gurgling water. Ciara smiled as she noted Dierdra's once confused gray eyes now shone clear and sparkled with happiness. The vacant haze of uncertainty appeared unable to touch her while she walked the dream plane of her chosen reality.

Dierdra waved aside her floating skirts and patted the glowing mossy ground beside her. She scooted over and made room for Ciara. With a smile up into Ciara's face, she held out a trusting hand. "In my dreams, I understand the way of things. In here, I'm not afraid I might say the wrong thing or seem quite such a simple soul as I do on the other side."

Ciara lowered herself to settle on the bank beside her and dipped her bare feet in the swirling water of the bubbling stream. "I wish you didn't have to be afraid, Dierdra. However, you know the earthly plane can be a cruel place for the touched who decide to explore that reality. There are too few there capable of understanding how special the touched truly are. Danu's world can sometimes be a cold and lonely place for special ones such as you."

Dierdra looped a silvery blonde tress behind one ear as she sadly smiled down into the gurgling water. "My mother was a witch who was determined to bring me into the reality of her physical world. She met me when she conjured me in a vision and knew I was her chosen child. She couldn't bear our separation and longed to cradle me in her arms. Our energies were as one while she traveled through the cosmos and she knew I'd be lost to her upon her awakening. She didn't realize some wouldna be able to accept me when they saw me for what I truly was. My father had her killed when she laid me in his arms and he saw I was one of the touched."

Ciara's reflexive thirst for vengeance tightened in her throat as she remembered the starkness of the innocent girl's existence. She struggled to tamp down her protective rage and her desire to strike down the cruel Sinclair. She had to concentrate on remaining in Dierdra's mind. Negative energy would only confuse Dierdra's thoughts and flush her out of the girl's consciousness. She reached out to smooth her fingers through the girl's silvery hair as she ground her teeth and steadied her temper. "I'm so sorry, Dierdra. I'm so sorry you had to suffer the loss of your mother and grow up in the household of such a cruel and vicious man."

A serene smile lit Dierdra's face as she gave Ciara a reassuring shrug and tucked a flower into Ciara's dark hair. "Don't be troubled, my brave new friend. My mother's soul is now free to travel where it will. Nothing can ever

harm her again. As for my father, I feel nothing but pity for the man for he will never know true peace in his heart. His soul will soon arrive in the depths of the abyss. That place is far worse than anything he could ever do to me.”

Ciara’s heart caught at Dierdra’s benevolence. So mistreated and yet still so pure. Ciara took a deep breath. She covered Dierdra’s fragile hand with her own as Dierdra trailed a willow branch in the stream. “Dierdra, would you like to spend a little while in the Land Beyond the Mists? Would you like to visit the land known only to the immortals?”

Dierdra dropped her stick and clapped her hands as she bounced up and down beside the spring. “Oh yes! I’ve been longing to know more of that place since I was just a wee bairn. Before my mother’s soul left me, she sang a lullaby to me of the Land Beyond the Mists. I never dreamed I’d live to see it. Only the immortals live beyond those gates. My mother’s lullaby is the only song I’ve ever heard and I’ve always kept it in my heart.”

Again, Ciara swallowed hard at the lump of emotions aching in her throat. How could one who had only known suffering still be at peace with such a cold cruel world? “Dierdra, I need to explain to you exactly what will be done. While you’re spending a bit of time away from this world, I’ll be here making people believe that you’ve never left. I’ll be the one to marry the MacKay chieftain and I’m going to bear him a child. Then no one can ever say you’re not really his wife and force you to leave the safety of the MacKay keep. When you return, they might think you’re not well. However, they’ll never doubt you’re truly his wife. You’ll never be locked away for being different or treated unfairly ever again.”

Ciara watched Dierdra’s face to see if she understood. She needed Dierdra to understand and remember the truth. While Dierdra appeared quite lucid in her current state, Ciara knew Dierdra would revert to her usual state of confusion as soon as she awoke from the dream.

Dierdra hummed to herself and ran her fingertips across the petals of an oversized rose she held to her nose. “Ciara, ye know it doesna matter how they treat my body. Ye know they can never touch my soul.”

Ciara took a deep breath. She’d never been the patient sort but she didn’t dare get flustered. She didn’t have the time to argue with such philosophical logic but she wanted to be sure the information seeded somewhere in Dierdra’s subconscious mind. The girl would need to have the basic knowledge of what had happened to be able to cope with life when she

returned to the harsh reality of the world. It would be eight odd mortal years later. It would be difficult enough for Dierdra to adapt. Somehow, Ciara had to seed what was going to happen deep within Dierdra's mind.

With a placating nod, she eased the rose out of Dierdra's hands and leaned forward until she was almost nose-to-nose with Dierdra. "You are absolutely right. They can never touch your soul, but if we're able to outsmart them, then getting through this life won't be such a trial. Wouldn't it be much more pleasant to be physically comfortable until it's time to move on to the next plane and the newest adventure?"

Dierdra's clear gray eyes darted about the forest of her mind as though searching among the swaying trees for an answer. At last, as though a ray of sunlight settled upon her face, she gifted Ciara with a smile. "I agree with ye completely, my new friend Ciara. We will play our game of hide-and-switch to trick those who don't understand me. When do we get to start our game? When do I get to pass to the land of the immortals?"

Finally. Exhaling as though she'd been holding her breath, Ciara raised one hand to summon Alec from just beyond the other side. "My friend Alec the raven is here to guide you. He will take you through the mists and get you settled. First, could you please stand and let me have a good look at you? I need to make sure we're able to look just alike whenever it's time for us to return to our own lives.

Dierdra jumped up from her seat on the mossy bank and raised her arms in the air. As she spun around, she lifted her face so Ciara could study her appearance.

Long blonde hair the color of spun silver framed her small oval face. Spidery blue veins traced just beneath her skin, which was as translucent as the finest bone china. Her tiny frame danced as delicately as an elfin maiden. She reached just above Ciara's waist. She had nary a curve. She could barely make a shadow so slight was her tiny body. Dierdra seemed almost ethereal in her appearance so fragile and wispy was her form.

Ciara circled the tiny maid, her fingers tapping out her thoughts against her chin. She bit her lip and turned to Alec waiting on a branch in one of Dierdra's imaginary trees. "The goddesses were right. She will have to be the one hidden by a glamour. I was going to try to assume her form but I don't think I can make it work. I don't think I'd be able to contain my energy within such a fragile form for such an extended period. She is so tiny, so *airy*. Since I'm a Fury, I don't think there is any way I could maintain such a level

of tight control over all my conflicting energies.”

“Don’t worry, Ciara. No one has seen me but Father and it’s been years since he set foot in my rooms.” Dierdra bent to pick a handful of flowers from a nearby bank, skipping away as she pulled the petals from the stems.

“What?” Ciara blinked at Dierdra then hurried to follow the maid deeper into her mind. “What do you mean no one’s seen you? Are you telling me, he’s kept you locked away your entire life? How did you receive your food? Clothing? How have you survived?”

Dierdra spun in a circle, skipping along the path. She laughed as she let the flowers flutter to the ground. “The doors to my chambers are usually kept locked from the outside. Sometimes the servants forget and I wander the hallways until someone happens to hear me. The servants always leave the food tray in an anteroom and my seamstress is a deaf-mute who lives in fear of my father’s wrath. My father forbade anyone to ever look upon me or allow any around me who can speak. He told them my beauty was too great to behold but I know ’twas because I am simple. I once had a servant who could actually speak, but I havena seen her in several years.”

Ciara’s frustration mounted as though she were about to burst into a lightning storm. If not for the fact she’d given her mothers her word, she’d hunt down Gordon Sinclair this very night and rip his soul from his body. Ciara promised herself when this current task was over, she’d be having a word or two with the cruel Sinclair. She eased her anger by thinking of several choice ways she’d torment the man before he died.

However, that still didn’t solve the problem of what form she should take since at some point in time Dierdra would have to return. As an experiment, she passed her hands over Dierdra’s body, then stood back to survey the results.

With a croaking screech of approval, Alec cawed from the tree. “Well done! The lass looks just like ye.” Hopping farther down the branch, he cocked his sleek black head and peered closer into Dierdra’s face. “But the eyes aren’t right. Her eyes are still gray, they’re no’ the golden color like yours. Other than that, ye look quite the same. Wave your hand again over her eyes.”

Ciara shook her head and stroked her chin as she circled the smiling Dierdra who could now pass as her twin. “I can’t change the eyes. The eyes are the reflection of her soul. I can no more change her eyes then I can my own.”

“Are we ready now? Can we go to the other side? Are ye ready to take my place?” Dierdra hopped up and down on each foot as though she were a child begging to go to the fair.

Ciara motioned Alec over and gently took Dierdra’s hand. “If you’re ready, Alec will be your guide. Take care, my innocent, we will return to fetch you soon.”

Dierdra gave Ciara an affectionate peck on the cheek. “Goodbye, brave Ciara! I shall see ye soon!”

CHAPTER
THREE

With a thunderous scowl, Faolan glowered at his reflection in the polished shields lining the room. He had not been so dressed since his parent's burial. He wore the regal splendor befitting the laird of a powerful Highland clan. His family tartan hung low about his hips; his dress sporran rested to the side. The well-oiled ceremonial dirk was tucked into its band. Rather than the usual snow-white tunic, his was a rich black silk given to him by his seafaring brother. His sleek black hair was restrained back into a warrior's braid, secured tightly with a silver band. The MacKay crest pinned his plaid to his shoulder. He supposed his colors served him well.

Faolan drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. The chair. The seat of authority, where every MacKay chieftain had listened to arguments between his people, elicited judgments, and where every MacKay laird had greeted his bride upon her arrival at the betrothal feast. He sucked in a deep breath and glared around the room.

Faolan wished for the hundredth time he was somewhere else. If not for the fact that the girl would suffer, he'd have slipped away and disappeared into the Highland wilderness. As far as he was concerned, his yammering advisors could all go straight to hell. However, he wouldn't do that to the poor innocent lass. His well-paid spies had confirmed the reports. Dierdra Sinclair was a child trapped in a woman's body.

The Sinclair clan would arrive soon and with them, his future bride. Faolan had overheard the chambermaids guess at Dierdra Sinclair's appearance. No one could recall ever seeing the lass in the twenty-odd years

that she'd been alive. Her father claimed he kept her locked away due to her unbelievable beauty. But the rumors of her clouded mind had been impossible to squelch. Even though the man had executed the poor child's mother and any servant heard speaking of the child, Gordon Sinclair had been unable to keep her affliction as hidden as he'd kept her face.

“What a dark scowl for a man who is about to meet his betrothed. Ye had best find a bit of a smile, my fine chieftain, or the lass will think ye truly are a quarrelsome beast.”

From behind the dais, came the unmistakable deep brogue of Faolan's closest friend, Maxwell Sullivan. “If ye scare the poor lass at the betrothal feast, ye will play hell consummating the union.”

“Maxwell, it might do well for ye to realize I am still looking for a warrior to send to the northern seas in search of my brother's lost ship. Is it true ye still turn as green as the hills just by watching water slop around in a bowl?” Faolan cut his eyes over at his friend to ensure Maxwell understood the thinly veiled threat. Faolan didn't bother waiting for an answer. “Ye know my reasons for agreeing to this match. I see no reason to act some besotted fool.”

Maxwell settled into one of the lesser ranking chairs upon the dais and leaned closer as he spoke. “I know your reasons. I canna say I understand them but ye can trust me to support ye in your decision. Who knows? Maybe the lass will turn out to be fair and not as simple as the rumors say.”

Barking dogs and shouted greetings announced the Sinclair entourage's arrival. The raucous hum of the crowd fell to a low curious murmur. Every head in the room turned to the floral archway, straining to be the first to see the chieftain's future wife.

Her smile was the first thing Faolan noticed. Full lips with a sensuous pout upturned with an air of generosity. She nodded and smiled her welcome to all in the room as she moved gracefully through the archway.

Faolan followed the curve of her high cheekbones, his chest tightening at the intelligence sparkling in her gaze. Her eyes shimmered golden. They burnished warm as honey-flavored brandy swirling beneath the glow of torch light. Her sleek black curls were piled high upon her head, held in place by a golden circlet. Her crimson gown fit her narrow waist and flattered the curve of her hips. Her neckline plunged low enough to quicken her intended's heart but still modest enough to befit a maiden. She was taller than he'd thought she'd be. He could've sworn his informants had reported Dierdra Sinclair a

wispy, elfin lass. The woman before him stood tall and willowy. The top of her head neared his shoulders and Faolan stood well over six and a half feet tall.

She moved with the fluid grace of one accustomed to being among crowds. She nodded and greeted each person she met with perfect ease. There was nothing simple-minded about this lass in anything she did. She carried herself with an air of surety. This woman knew her place in the world.

Faolan ground his teeth as the realization hit him: Dierdra Sinclair was not in need of saving.

Faolan's gut wrenched. He'd been played the fool, a duped pawn set into place for the taking. Whether by his advisors or by the Sinclair clan, he had no idea. However, he promised himself he would damn well find out before the evening ended.

Faolan leaned close. He buried his fingers deep in Maxwell's arm as his voice leveled to an enraged hiss. "Maxwell, what do ye know of this? This is not the woman I expected to show up at my keep."

Maxwell pursed his lips, chuckling as his gaze ran up and down the Sinclair maid's shapely form. "If ye don't want her, I would be more than happy to take her off your hands. I've never had a problem appreciating a fine woman. And from where I sit, she's a fine and comely lass, indeed."

Releasing his friend's arm with a shove as the entourage reached the dais, Faolan shot Maxwell a silencing glare. He swallowed a growl and clenched his teeth as he stiffly rose from the chair. He didn't know who this woman was, but he was positive she wasn't the type he needed.

"Welcome to MacKay keep." With a curt nod of his head, Faolan addressed the rotund man fidgeting next to the exquisite woman. He'd never liked Gordon Sinclair and despised the man's ill treatment of his wife and child. The man's incessant greed also preceded him. As far as Faolan was concerned, Gordon Sinclair was a waste of the air that he breathed. Now the man would be his father-in-law. This day was not getting any better.

Gordon Sinclair pulled his gaze away from his avaricious perusal of the MacKay hall. With a sniff and a nod, he dipped his multiple chins and squinted up at Faolan. "I thank ye, Laird MacKay. And we also thank ye for the fine escort through your lands on our journey to bring ye this most precious gift." He cleared his throat as he rested his hand on the small of his daughter's back and gave Dierdra a slight shove forward. "Allow me to introduce ye to your betrothed, Dierdra Mairi Ciara Sinclair, my most

beloved daughter.”



AS WE REHEARSED, fool. Good job. Say it correctly. Ciara stroked Sinclair’s mind one last time before fixing Faolan with her most beguiling smile. Her flesh crawled at the weight of Sinclair’s clammy paw on her back; she promised herself she’d wreak vengeance on him later.

The Sinclair faltered, swiping his sweaty face with a pudgy hand after he spoke as though trying to wipe confusion from his mind.

Ciara sidled a glance at him beneath lowered lashes, reinforcing her hold on his mind. She’d stormed with rage when she’d entered his memories and discovered he’d never referred to his child as anything other than an “it.”

Ciara had planted the words and thoughts The Sinclair needed. Gordon Sinclair would never believe she was the despised daughter he’d kept imprisoned in the crumbling tower of his castle for the past twenty years. Controlling the man’s mind was child’s play for Ciara. It was much like guiding a blind hog to the feeding trough. The most difficult part about the task was staying her hand from annihilating his soul. Her palms itched to strike him down. Even now, she remembered all she had seen.

While inside his mind, she’d witnessed his cruel memories. She saw what he’d done to his unsuspecting wife and child. She had witnessed the narrow-mindedness of the man and the selfishness of his heart. Ciara hungered to unleash his punishment. She ached to strike him dead.

She witnessed that once he discovered the condition of his daughter, he would’ve exposed the babe to the elements, and would’ve let the fierce Highland winter silence her mewling howls. However, the fact that he feared the powers of his magical wife was all that kept the girl alive all these years. Even though he’d had her mother drowned in the loch for witchcraft, Gordon Sinclair still feared the protection spells surrounding his daughter. The last defiant act Almena Sinclair had done was shield her daughter from her husband’s hand.

A sudden awareness of shifting energies pulled Ciara from her silent plotting. Reaching out with her essence, her aura stroked her handsome husband-to-be. She caressed Faolan’s soul with the power of her mind. She sensed the energies surrounding the man respond to her aura’s touch. As she

found herself appraised by the dark brooding man, a delicious shiver tickled up her spine.

Faolan's eyes flashed and his gaze locked with hers, his jaw rippled as he clenched his teeth. Silent laughter bubbled in her throat. His expression said he sensed the energies as well. With a stiff bow, he brushed the tips of his fingers against her outstretched hand. "Mistress Dierdra, 'tis a pleasure to meet ye. Welcome to Castle MacKay."

Ciara strained to keep from smiling at the MacKay chieftain's obvious discomfort. She slid her hand deeper into his moist palm as she floated closer to him. Murky colors of unease swirled and shifted in Faolan's aura. The poor man was miserable. Did he find matrimony so undesirable? "Please, Laird MacKay, I would ask that you call me Ciara. That is the name my mother always used."

As Faolan inched a step back in retreat, Ciara caught her breath.

He cleared his throat and repeated his formal welcome. His head snapped forward with a stiff nod as though attached by a rusty hinge. "Lady Ciara, welcome to the MacKay keep. Welcome to your new home."

As he tried to retreat another step, he lurched to a stop as he bumped into a body. Maxwell had come to stand right behind him on the dais.

Ciara couldn't resist a wicked smile. Now Faolan couldn't escape her.

With a subtle bow of her head in her "father's" direction, Ciara edged away from Gordon Sinclair. She could no longer stomach the warm, wet weight of his hand where it rested on the small of her back. It was all she could do to keep her powers in check and refrain from destroying the man on the spot. She eased her way over to Faolan's side and linked her arm through his. Arching a brow, she inclined her head toward her future husband and dismissed Gordon Sinclair. "I am now where I am meant to be. I am well pleased with this match, Father, and I am thankful for your wisdom in securing my future."

Gordon Sinclair's pockmarked jowls jiggled as he returned to appraising the room. He licked his lips and cast a glance at the tables like a pig jostling for position at the trough.

Ignoring Ciara's words, he fixed his beady eyes upon Faolan and waved a meaty hand through the air. "God's teeth, man! Where is the priest? Let us have this betrothal done and over with so we can proceed to the food and drink!"

Faolan's eyes flared at the rudeness of the potbellied Sinclair and he

stiffened at Ciara's side. Drawing a deep breath, he covered Ciara's hand in the crook of his arm and forced himself to meet her gaze. "Shall ye join me at the ivied archway, Lady Ciara? The priest awaits to hear our troth."

"I would be honored." Only she found herself biting back laughter when she realized she led the way. Glancing back, she nearly gasped when she saw Maxwell bump Faolan once to get him moving forward.

Pulling him along, Ciara bit her lip to keep from giggling aloud and wondered if Cerridwen and Brid enjoyed the entertainment from their viewpoint of the cauldron. This is ridiculous. It was like leading a bull to slaughter. She looked around the room then looked up at Faolan's face and barely shook her head. *His clan is celebrating and he's behaving as though he's about to lose his head.* Risking a glance around the hall again, Ciara smiled at the throng of faces.

Apparently, not a person in the clan wanted to miss the chieftain's betrothal.

The round-eyed priest stood awaiting the couple beneath the flowery arch. Beads of sweat peppered across his brow as he worried with his beads. His eyes flitted around the room, growing a bit rounder at the many ancient carvings in honor of the mother goddesses. The MacKay clan had been followers of the old religion since the rites and rituals had been born.

Ciara glanced at the shining steel blades of a cross looming on the farthest wall. Newly forged, the soldering connecting the hammered pieces wasn't even old enough to show signs of rust or oxidation. *Surely, Faolan didn't believe switching to Christianity would make the goddesses leave his clan in peace?*

Faolan and Ciara made their way to stand in front of the priest and waited for him to begin the ceremony. Ciara stifled an impatient huff as the holy man rifled through the prayer book held between his shaking hands.

As far as she was concerned, the sooner he got this ceremony over with the better. Then she could begin the enjoyable part of her duty. She was ready to begin the seduction. She had promised her mothers eight years to this task. As far as she was concerned, that was being generous. Ciara realized eight years was a brief speck in the life of an immortal, a mere batting of an eye. Being bound to a mortal for that set time had her chomping at the bit.

With a covert glance up through her lashes at her husband-to-be, Ciara smiled to herself. At least he pleased the eye, although he tended toward the dark and brooding side. Ciara swallowed a sigh and recalled she'd always

been attracted to that sort of mortal. Dark hair, dark eyes, and a surly mood to match. Nothing stirred her passions more than a formidable challenge.

She'd sensed as she entered the keep that Faolan not only exuded power by his mere presence but also commanded a deep respect from all in his clan. However, she'd also detected this respect had been earned; the MacKay clan was well pleased with their laird. She'd detected a high level of love in the energy coursing through the room. This warmed her heart even more toward Faolan. His soul was pure.

Gaze dropping, she couldn't help but wet her lips as she admired the lines of his body. His image within the waters of Cerridwen's cauldron had not done the man justice. He towered above her. Muscles well-defined, his tensed arms corded with strength. This was no sedentary man. His black silk tunic stretched tight across broad shoulders. His kilt slung low about trim hips. Faolan moved with the smooth, predatory gait of the wolf; he was the image of his Gaelic namesake.

Too bad he's not a shape-shifter. Ciara heaved a breathless sigh with this silent observation. *What a time we would have, the dark wolf and I. I'd have him howling by the next full moon as we chased each other through the midnight woods.*

The nervous hacking of the high-strung priest interrupted her erotic musings. It was apparent by the uncomfortable expression on the man's face, he'd asked her a question and waited for a response.

"Oh, I am sorry. I am afraid I didn't hear you. Please find it in your heart to forgive me. I'm afraid I'm a bit nervous in front of such a large crowd. I'm not used to so many people."

Ciara forced herself to babble inanely at the priest. She allowed her voice to tremble just a bit as though unsure of just what she should say. She played upon the rumor of her simple-mindedness she heard running through the judgmental man's little mind. She might as well enjoy herself while she was here. Hypocritical holy men were so easy to manipulate. She widened her eyes until they stung for the want of tears and fixed the priest with as vacant a stare as she could muster. She'd run across his kind before.

The priest licked his dry, chapped lips as though he were a lizard tasting the air. He heaved a sigh and leaned toward Ciara as though he were about to lose his patience. With a forced smile as though he spoke to a dullard, he slowly repeated his words. "I asked ye if ye would repeat the betrothal words, *I...will...take...thee...Laird Faolan MacKay, to be my betrothed.*"

Ciara turned and locked her golden gaze with Faolan's troubled stare. She stared unblinking up into his face and repeated the priest's instructed words. "I will take thee, Laird Faolan MacKay, to be my betrothed." Then her smile widened as she added a few words of her own, much to the priest's dismay. "And by the power of my goddesses, I pledge to thee my life and open my womb to your seed."



FAOLAN DROWNED in the depths of her gaze. There was nothing simple or safe about this woman. His long dormant mystical nerves tingled and roared to life. His inner alarms sounded with a warning blare. Before he realized he violated his own edict, he spiritually opened to her aura with his senses.

He'd never seen an aura so intricate and colorful. Most people possessed only a single hue that changed according to their state of emotional being. Ciara's aura rainbowed a miasma of violets, pinks, blues, and reds. The colors swirled and danced around her form. The longer he watched, the more he relaxed and the farther he drifted away. He felt himself slipping, losing his careful control.

Faolan blinked and disciplined his mind back into its regimented state. He stiffened and ignored Ciara's whispered ad-lib as he coldly repeated the priest's words. "I will take thee, Dierdra Mairi Ciara Sinclair, to be my legally betrothed."

With a tensed jerk, Ciara's chin lifted, her smile faded, and she turned to face the priest.

As he turned the page of his book, the priest squinted at the pages and ran a trembling finger along the words. "Then let the betrothal be recorded. The wedding shall be held a year and a day from today, unless..." He cleared his throat and glanced about the room. "Unless an...uh...ev-event oc-occurs that brings about the marriage sooner."

"If he's anything at all like his brothers, she'll be his wife before tomorrow's dawn!" A rumbling voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling as Angus MacKay shouted from the back of the room.

The crowd cheered at this announcement. They clapped their hands and stomped their feet upon the wooden benches. "Aye, Faolan! Consummate your vows this eve! Dinna wait for the wedding feast!"

With a groan, Faolan ignored the rowdy crowd and bent to brush his lips across Ciara's in the required sealing kiss. With a start, he stiffened when she slid her soft hand up the back of his neck. He shuddered as she laced her fingers through his hair and pulled his head down to hers. The wind fled his lungs as she opened her mouth beneath his. She sent him the most intimate of messages with her warm, moist tongue. Her other hand rested on his chest as she slid her body closer. Instinct overrode his stubborn mind and Faolan deepened the kiss. He pulled her close and hardened into her curves as she pressed in subtle invitation against him. Her delicious scent, a warm mixture of ginger and vanilla, intoxicated his senses. His mind filled with visions of her sprawled across the pillows of his bed. He reeled with the taste of her, lost in her arms he almost forgot he stood before his clan.

“Oh, aye! There'll be no wedding feast in a year and a day for this union. We'll more than likely be celebrating the christening of a bairn! Here's to the birth of the first of many sons!” Head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd, Angus once more roared across the room. “Pipes! Play the pipes and strike the fiddles. Let us seal this day with music!” His broad face split with a wicked grin; Angus settled his pipe between his teeth and filled the hall with the eerie strains of clan MacKay's favorite sound.

“*Bi Tren! Bi Treun!*” The MacKay cry rose in time with the music as the other pipers joined Angus in his song. Be true, be steadfast: the clan motto, the persona of clan MacKay.

Faolan's chest tightened, as he forced the sealing kiss to the back of his mind. Teeth gritted; his stomach clenched. He hadn't felt this unnerved since he'd been a virgin. *Damn the woman. Damn his advisors.* Once more he offered Ciara his arm and led the way toward their seats at the head table.

With a sideways glare, Faolan watched her as she floated along beside him. Ciara smiled and nodded to all in the room as she settled into her chair. The woman had the audacity to praise the serving lads every time they filled her plate. She was so sure of herself. She was so damned kind. She lauded them for keeping the tables buried with platters of food and tankards of ale and wine in every hand. Faolan steamed. It seemed Lady Ciara had a kind word for all in the room. The woman appeared determined to win everyone over.

Fine. Faolan fumed to himself. Lady Ciara and Sorcha would have plenty in common. They could take care of Castle MacKay together and leave him

the hell alone. That would be just perfect. His fists knotted atop the table; Faolan tapped on his untouched ale. He'd finished the cask while dressing in his rooms. If he had much more to drink, his mood would grow even darker, if that was possible.

He glared out across the hall. The torchlight dimmed against the brightness of his kinsmen's faces. Repeated toasts to the health of the laird and his new wife echoed to the rafters. Even the dogs yipped and howled happily as plentiful scraps flew their way.

His snorting laughter echoing as he pounded the table, Gordon Sinclair staggered up from his seat. He sloshed his ale across the table as he waved his tankard in the air. A watery belch echoed as he flipped a half-gnawed rib bone in time with each of his words. "A toast! To the many sons that will spring from this union! May they all be braw, strapping lads. And for God's sake may they all be born sound of mind and not vacant-eyed fools like their mother when she was first set into my arms."

Ciara's head snapped up at Gordon Sinclair's words. The massive amount of alcohol he'd consumed had nudged the bastard's mind loose from her tight memory control.

The hall fell silent at the Sinclair's drunken toast. Several clansmen crossed themselves against the ill-mannered Sinclair's words. Serving lads shifted uncomfortably where they stood and looked to the head table at Faolan.

Ciara placed her hands flat upon the table, her eyes narrowing as she started to rise. A movement at her side caught her attention and she turned to see Faolan stand.

Faolan's hand rested on the hilt of his claymore, one finger tapping as he stared across the room. The familiar touch of the pommel settled him, reassured him the blade stood at the ready in case The Sinclair erred in thinking him a trusting fool. His fingers slid lower and curled around the grip. He envisioned The Sinclair's throat twisting between his hands. "Sinclair. I don't know how much ye know of the MacKays, other than enough that ye wish to become our allies. Apparently, ye realize if ye're no' our allies ye'll know the pain of our steel and the strength of our men when we beat ye back across your borders. Above all else, mark these words, Sinclair, and dinna ever forget them. We MacKays consider all children a precious gift, no matter their abilities."

A loathsome sneer settled upon his face as The Sinclair downed the rest

of his ale and threw his tankard and the bone to the floor. “Ye say that now, all filled with your pride and ye think nothing ill can e’er befall the MacKays. But just wait and see how ye feel when they lay an idiot in your arms and tell ye that it’s your child!”

Faolan tensed until his knuckles whitened on the hilt of his sword, fury pulsed through his veins. His rage at his future father-in-law’s insult swelled to fill the room. His fingers itched to rip his dagger from its sheath and bury it between The Sinclair’s drunken eyes. “Since the ale appears to have caused ye to lose what little sense ye ever had, I think ’tis time ye took your leave of my home. For your own safety, do not wait until the light of the morn to go; I want you and your men off my land now.”

With Faolan’s words, the MacKay men mobilized as though not a drop of spirits had touched their lips. Faolan’s men served him well, especially with members of a rival clan in their midst. Swords drawn, they had the Sinclair members ousted from their seats before they realized they were no longer welcome.

Gordon Sinclair couldn’t make such claims about his men. Each of them was well into his cups. They staggered from the benches, their heads bobbling in confusion. They looked around for why they were suddenly no longer welcome.

The Sinclair shook his greasy fist in the air, as he stumbled away from the table. He gasped as he fell back against the wall and shouted to all in the room. “Ye shall mark my words when she births ye an idiot just like her mother did!” He shook an accusing fist at Ciara as two of his men tried to silence him. He sputtered and spit bits of food down his chest as they yanked him from the room. The ale had broken all the memories free, washing Ciara’s carefully constructed dam of subterfuge away. “I don’t know who that woman is by your side but she’s nay the addle-pated idiot I’ve kept hidden for all this many a year!”

The crowd gasped at this latest revelation and all eyes swiveled to the raised dais to watch Faolan’s reaction to the Sinclair’s drunken words.

Steel sang as Faolan unsheathed his sword and raged toward the babbling drunk. He stalked across the room, blood surging with the hunger of a predator about to make the kill. His apprehension about his betrothal was gone, replaced with explosive fury.

“Silence!” he roared as he pressed the tip of his blade into the folds of the Sinclair’s multiple chins. “If ye wish to leave my home alive, ye will speak

no more while in my presence.” With complete control, he shoved the blade just a bit farther until a tiny rivulet of blood trickled down The Sinclair’s chin. Faolan wanted his intentions clear. He was not in a generous mood.

The Sinclair gasped. His piglike eyes widened as his pudgy hands flailed about in the air. The blade of the claymore held his tongue as he watched his blood run down its length. He backed away from the point of the sword and crept his way along the wall toward the exit of the hall. As soon as he reached the corner of the archway, he turned and staggered out of the keep.

Faolan growled and bared his teeth as he sheathed his sword with one swift motion. First, he nodded to Maxwell and then to Angus, then glanced after the retreating Sinclairs in an unspoken command.

When he returned to the dais, he risked a glance at Ciara still sitting with her head bowed at the table. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear the woman had a smile tugging at her lips. What game was this? He’d just ousted her family at the point of his blade and she sat smiling at his table? Faolan frowned, puzzling over her composure.

It must be due to the years of cruelty she’d endured at her father’s hands. Faolan’s unease grew as he pondered Ciara as she sat with poise and grace. There wasn’t a meek, subservient bone in that woman’s body. The woman was biding her time. She was up to something. He’d bet his best blade on it.

Unsure what to say, he rested his fingers on her shoulder and bent to speak so only she could hear. “I am verra sorry. I wish I could have somehow avoided such unpleasantness at what was supposed to have been a celebration.”

Ciara pressed her hand atop his and turned to smile up into his eyes. “Don’t apologize for that insignificant man. He and his ilk are of little consequence. I learned long ago to always look to the future and in so doing I am well pleased with my new home and most especially in my new husband.”

Faolan eased his hand off her shoulder and edged a few steps back. “I am glad ye find our union suitable and ye have my word ye will always be safe while under my protection. Please excuse me now, for I must go and ensure our *guests* are well on their way out of the keep.”

Faolan stormed his way out of the room, while Ciara watched him retreat with a quiet laugh. Seduction was going to be trickier than she thought with the way that man shuttered his feelings away.

Rising from her seat, she beckoned with a slight wave of her hand to the

woman she remembered being introduced as Sorcha. Sorcha ambled over to Ciara's side and set an empty platter upon the table. With a stern look, she sent a kitchen boy scurrying and wiped her hands on the apron around her generous waist.

"How can I be of service to ye, m'lady?" she asked with a dip of her head.

With a friendly smile, Ciara tried to put the old housekeeper at ease. Sorcha could prove to be a valuable ally. "I am a bit tired with all the excitement of the evening, Mistress Sorcha. Would you have someone not too busy with the feast who could take the time to show me to my rooms?"

"I would be honored to take ye to your chambers myself. I am sure ye are completely spent. Why ye just arrived and they took ye straight away to the priest! Ye didna even have a chance to visit the garderobe."

With a clap of her hands to summon the chambermaids, she gifted Ciara with a welcoming smile. "If ye will follow me, I will have ye settled in and your things put away as befits the lady of Clan MacKay."

CHAPTER
FOUR

Bright and cheerful rooms surprised Ciara when Sorcha led her through the door of her chambers. She'd expected the usual gloomy interior found in most keeps of the Highlands. However, Faolan's suite of rooms was a complete antithesis of the dark, brooding man himself. Unusual scenes of heather-covered hillsides woven into tapestries decorated the whitewashed stone of the walls. Ciara heartily approved. Deer and dogs or bloody hunting scenes usually decorated most keeps.

The vibrant hues of the threads matched the chill-stopping weaves hanging at the narrow windows. Hand-carved benches beckoned with pillows of rich burgundy and royal blue, with silky coverlets to match. Ciara found the craftsmanship of the substantial furniture impressive and heartwarming. She had spent so much time in the plastic and metallic world of the twenty-first century, she realized just how much she had missed the seduction of a satiny hand-finished wood.

At the sight of furs scattered across the stone floor, she couldn't help but frown. At one with the earth and all its creatures, Ciara felt more akin to the animals roaming the world than she did to the mortals inhabiting this realm. She noticed a door adjoining her rooms to the laird's private chambers. Anticipation stirred the heat between her thighs. Good. The doorway would make the seduction easier.

One sparse trunk had arrived from the stables when the Sinclair troop unloaded their horses. Gordon Sinclair hadn't deemed it necessary to provide his daughter with anything but the barest of trousseaus. No matter. Ciara could manifest anything she desired.

A muffled caw and a frantic pecking at a tapestry-covered window drew

her attention from perusing the room. As she pulled aside the cover, Alec hopped inside, his feathers puffed against the chill of the night. “Brrr...I should’ve changed into a wee mousie and stayed inside your dress.”

He fluttered to alight upon the back of the chair closest to the roaring fire. As he stretched his frost laced wings, Alec almost purred as he basked in the warmth of the flames. “How did it go? Did the laird like ye? Do ye think ye’ll have any trouble luring him to your bed?”

Ciara backed up to the fire with a shrug as she lifted her skirts to let the warmth caress her legs. “I think my fine laird is going to be a bit hard-headed when it comes to warming my bed. You should’ve seen his face when he accidentally used his magic and looked upon my aura.”

“He saw your aura?” Alec squawked as he hopped over to check out a plate filled with bits of cheese and bread. “If he saw your aura, he’ll know ye for sure to be an immortal. Only immortals can power so many prisms of light.”

Ciara turned to roast the front of her legs, stretching to study the heavy wooden mantel mounted above the hearth. Bundled sprays of lavender and heather were draped across the entire shelf. Thick stumps of candles on iron pillars sat snuggled in between the bundles of the aromatic herbs. As they warmed, the herbs released a calming scent to float around the room.

“I don’t think Faolan knows about such things. He’s turned his back on his mystical studies. He’s not tried his powers in years. From what I can find out, he blames two things for all the problems in his life. He thinks magic and love are the basis of every evil in the world.”

Alec picked up a crust of bread in his beak, tossed it in the air, and downed it with a stretching gulp. Hopping over to the pitcher sitting beside the platter, he cocked his head to one side and peeped inside the vessel.

“All the problems in his life?” Alec’s squawk echoed as he stuck his head down into the jar. He pulled it back out, raised his beak in the air and let the liquid gurgle loudly down his gullet.

Ciara nodded as she stretched out on the bench beside the fire and hid a yawn behind her hand. “The housekeeper, Sorcha, has proven to be a wealth of information. We had quite a nice chat while I settled in.”

As she unlaced the soft doeskin slippers on her feet, Ciara wiggled her toes as she continued, “Faolan blames love and magic for causing his parents’ deaths, one brother to be cursed, the other brother to disappear at sea, and his sister to be sent to parts unknown. From what Sorcha told me, his father died

while protecting his mother from some sort of witch-hunt. His mother didn't feel life worth living without his father, so with her husband dead, she jumped from the cliffs onto the rocks below. One of his brothers was cursed by a jealous sorceress. The glass crystal in which she entrapped his soul is guarded somewhere within this keep. The other brother and his wife and both their daughters have been lost at sea for nearly a year. Faolan blames a jealous sea goddess for leading them astray and possibly destroying them."

Finger tapping her chin, Ciara paused as she tried to remember everything Sorcha's memories had told her. It still amazed her that Sorcha's aging mind had been able to give her such a complete rundown in such a short amount of time. Even though Sorcha was getting on in years, her mind was quite the analytical file. Ciara had been able to sort through all her memories for almost immediate retrieval.

Her eyes widened and Ciara nodded as she continued, "Oh, and his sister, Aveline, was sent from this realm since it was discovered she was born an immortal. She was forced to be mated to the sea god Mannanan when she dabbled with the tapestry of time to find Faolan's brother Ronan a wife."

Alec paused with a chunk of cheese clenched in his beak, cocked his head to the side, and mumbled around the bit of food. "You found out all that in the short time it took the housekeeper to set ye up in your room?"

Ciara wiggled a mischievous brow and folded her hands behind her head. "You know how people always open up to me. All I have to do is *listen*."

Gobbling down the cheese, Alec hopped closer to the fire as he chortled with a knowing croak. "Ye mean ye read the woman's mind while she was hanging your dresses upon the pegs in the cabinet."

Ciara sat up to remove the tray from Alec's reach and smoothed the sleek feathers glistening upon his head. "You know me too well, my trusted raven. I might have cheated just a tiny bit and popped into her mind to sort through some of what she told me. I had to...she kept close guard over her words. I could barely sort through what she said."

As she rose from her seat, Ciara walked over to the bed, and ran her hand across the woven coverlet. "Mistress Sorcha is very open and friendly but she's also very protective of her laird. She seemed eager for me to understand him and his ways but was very selective of her words. I had to be certain everything she told me was the truth."

Beckoning to Alec with a wave of her hand, Ciara turned her back to him as he lit upon the bed. "I had the poor woman so flustered by the time she

left, she forgot to send a maid in to undo my gown. Be a dear, will you?"

Standing still, her head bent, she stared at the floor as Alec unlaced the intricately woven gown. "I suppose I could always think it away, but I've got to be careful just how much I manifest things in and out of thin air. I don't want to draw any more suspicion than I already have. It was obvious when I arrived, Faolan MacKay expected a childlike lass. Apparently, he planned on using his faux wife to silence his advisors' bidding that he must marry. Now that he's been publicly tied to a woman who's obviously not a simplistic child, it may be a bit more difficult to draw him into my snare."

Ciara felt the tug as Alec yanked at the ribbon clenched in his beak. "If ye ask me, I feel sorry for the lad. I got a peek at his aura as he headed out toward the skirting wall. I've never seen such a melancholy shade of blue."

Stepping out of her gown, Ciara bent and picked it up from the floor. She shivered and moved closer to the fire as she shook out the gown. "He's a gloomy one all right. He looks at everything from the darker side. But his heart is pure. Perhaps when he has a son to bond with, it will make him better. Maybe we can help him while we're here, Alec. I'll have to think about that."

Ciara hung the gown on a peg and closed the door to the lavender-scented cabinet. Turning back to the inviting overstuffed bed, she sighed as she pushed aside the velvety bed curtain. As she slid naked between the cool, crisp sheets, Ciara shivered in delight as she snuggled deep into the pillowed nest.

Alec hopped to the head of the bed and bent down to peer into her smiling face. "Ladies of this time dinna sleep naked in their beds unless they've just finished lying with their husbands or they are whores who have just been paid. Where is your night dress?"

Pushing the raven out of her face, Ciara snuggled even deeper under the covers. "I'll conjure one tomorrow morning before the maid comes in to wake me. Now go away and let me go to sleep. I love the feel of these sheets against my skin."

"Ye have always been such a hussy," Alec replied with a sniff as he perched upon the chair by the fire. "I shall stay the night here to make sure no one happens upon ye in your sleep and finds ye naked in your bed. Ye remember the last time ye said ye'd wake up before something happened? Ye were on the *Titanic* and ye nearly ended up in the sea."



FAOLAN PACED ACROSS THE BATTLEMENTS, the wind lashing his plaid about his body. The night air crackled with the bitter chill, but not cold enough to douse the fury coursing through his veins. He snarled out loud, breath fogging into a frosty cloud. What an unexpected twist his well-plotted betrothal had taken. His spies had assured him the woman seemed childlike. They'd sworn to him they'd caught a glimpse of her wandering lost atop the skirting wall of the Sinclair's highest deserted tower.

They'd even found the seamstress charged with making the mysterious daughter's clothes. They'd sworn to him she was the last speaking servant known to have escaped the Sinclair castle. All the others had over-stayed their luck and The Sinclair had silenced them with a knife across their throats. The seamstress had assured them Dierdra Sinclair was as meek and innocent as a newborn kitten.

From this height upon the battlements, Faolan watched the crashing waves, losing himself in the endless motion of the sea. Ciara Sinclair was to have been his way out of an undesirable situation. And he had been prepared to be her safe haven from a possible marriage to a cruel brute.

The moonlight skittered across the tips of the waves, but Faolan ignored its nocturnal sparkle. He dug his fingers into the weathered stones as though trying to catch hold of what little sanity he had left. Somewhere in the distance, the mournful howl of a wolf sounded; Faolan felt an immediate affinity with the bone-chilling cry. He had planned on being as alone as the outcast black wolf of the pack. He yearned for a solitary life, a life where no one could ever touch his heart again and then leave it ripped open and aching when they left. If he kept everyone away, never allowed the slightest sentiment in, he'd never repeat the pain he'd experienced in the past.

And then he had seen her. Those damned golden eyes set fire to his very blood. As soon as he'd gazed into their warm, welcoming depths, he'd been mesmerized by the richness of their shades. He wanted to see how hot they glowed when Ciara's passions stirred to a roaring blaze. And her body, the way she'd melted against him, he could've taken her right there on the table in front of everyone at the feast.

Faolan threw his head back and roared, his cry echoed to the rocks below. He tore his tunic off his body and welcomed the frigid air against his burning skin. He wanted the damn woman more than he could remember wanting

anything in his life. He wanted to claim her, make her his own until she cried out his name.

Stripped to the waist, Faolan took his sword and did something he'd not done for years. There upon the battlements, he began the ancient dance he'd learned while training with the Druid priest. He sliced the air with the rhythms learned as a young lad seeking the mysteries of meditation. He handled the sword as though it was a part of him, swung, sliced, paused to listen to the unseen energies as the blade sang out into the night. Eyes unblinking, his senses melded with the sword and the powers flowing through his soul.

When he'd turned from his ancient heritage of magic, he'd severed a part of his being. It would've been the same as if he'd cut off both legs and then expected to still be able to walk. Faolan needed to return to his teachings. He needed its strength and discipline to keep from breaking his other oath to himself. He'd sworn two things upon the death of his parents: never return to the practice of magic, and never open his heart to a woman. He could reconcile himself to return to magic if it gave him the strength to hold out against Ciara.

The blade whistled through the air. Meditation soothed his soul. Skin dampened with sweat, he was oblivious to the cold. He continued the dance into the night. Backward, forward, even atop the stone wall, he was tireless with the blade between his hands.

Faolan ignored the sound of Maxwell's footsteps when he joined him on the wall; he barely spared him a narrow-eyed glance when Maxwell shook his head in Faolan's direction. Only when Maxwell drew his own sword, did Faolan acknowledge his friend was there.

Their motions synchronized just as they had when they were lads. The chief Druid Emrys had taken Maxwell to train at Faolan's father's request. Although no mystical abilities flowed through Maxwell's veins, the meditation of the sword served him well in battle.

Faolan and Maxwell ended their motions. They sheathed their swords in unison. Maxwell stood, waiting for Faolan to speak until the silence between them took on a life of its own. "Faolan, ye've not danced with the sword since your mother took her life. Ye must realize your betrothal to Ciara Sinclair is not a terrible thing."

His chin raised, Faolan stared out across the rocky cliffs and drew a ragged breath. "I want her, Maxwell. I swear to ye, man. I can already taste

the honey of her body.”

Maxwell’s eyes widened at the strength of Faolan’s words and he took a slight step back. “Then go to her, man! What the hell are ye standin’ here for? Maybe if ye go ahead and lie with her, ’twill get her out of your blood. Consummate the union and she’ll be your wife, then ye’ll never have to bed her again. If ye feel ye canna stomach her as a wife, ye can return to this solitary existence ye seem so damned determined to keep.”

Faolan scrubbed his hands against the evening stubble of his chin. “This is insanity.” He groaned. His self-control ebbed away like the tides from the pull of the moon. This golden-eyed seductress that had landed in his midst had to be some sort of trap. He reeled to shake his fist in Maxwell’s face, just inches from his friend’s nose. “Bed her? Do ye really think by lying with the woman I’ll be able to get her out of my mind?”

Maxwell followed close behind Faolan as soon as he jerked back around to renew his pacing. “Think about it, Faolan. Ye’ve been attracted to fair maids before and once ye tasted them, ye easily set them aside. It’s the wolf in ye, man. Your thrill is in the hunt. Ye always want what ye have yet to catch.”

At Maxwell’s observation, Faolan pulled up short. He whirled back around where he found himself once more nose to nose with his adamant friend. “Ye actually think if I relent and lie with Ciara and assert my rights as her husband, ye actually think I’ll be able to put her aside and go on with my life as though I never met her?”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Maxwell tossed his hands in the air. “It’s either lie with the woman or don’t lie with the woman. Which is it going to be? So far, ye havena bedded the lass and ye already know ye’re miserable. In my mind, ’tis time to test the other option to see if it brings ye any better results.”

“I will kill ye if this doesna work,” Faolan growled, yanking open the door leading down from the battlements.

Maxwell bowed his head in response, snorting aloud as Faolan glared at him before slamming the door in his face.



AS HE EASED his way into the dimly lit room, something shifted out of the

corner of his eye. Faolan could've sworn he'd seen a dark form retreat from the circle of light surrounding the blazing hearth. He blinked and peered closer to find the source of the movement, but all remained still. He shook his head. It must be a trick of the shadows dancing across the furs.

Faolan couldn't resist a bitter chuckle. The pounding of his heart almost drowned out the pop of the logs in the fire. He snorted to himself, swallowing hard as he adjusted the rough material of his kilt. Ye'd think he was still a damn virgin.

He edged deeper into the room and into the pale, light flickering around the bed. His hands flexed as he loomed above her and stared down at her sleeping form. Every muscle in his body tensed as though ready to spring if she made the slightest move. He held his breath, leaned closer, and peered down into her sleeping face.

Her silky black hair was fanned across the pillows. One long bare arm was stretched on top of the sheets. Her skin glowed golden in the firelight, and her bare shoulders begged for his caress. With a dreamy moan, she snuggled deeper into the pillows. The sheet slid down to her waist.

Faolan swallowed a groan as his eyes locked onto her creamy breasts. He hungered for the taste of her dusky nipples shadowed in the half-light of the fire.

Her lashes fluttered as she rustled in her sleep, as though she dreamed or perhaps neared to waking. Then there they were. Those damned golden eyes, opened and aglow in the light of the fire. She stared at him, alert as a cat. Her gaze followed him as he drew closer to the bed.

"Dinna be afraid." He kept his voice to a husky whisper, amazed the lass hadn't screamed. Instead, she held out her hand and lifted the covers, silently inviting him into her bed.

Faolan ripped off his clothes; kilt and sword hit the floor. Then he stood there. He stared, torn with indecision. His need pulsed through his veins...*take her* pounded with every beat of his heart. By almighty Brid, he wanted this woman. Surely, Maxwell had to be right. Surely, this one claiming would cure him of ever wanting her again.

Faolan slid into the bed and curled her into his arms. He lost himself in the tawny depths of her gaze as he traced his fingers along the velvet of her jaw. He remembered the betrothal kiss. She had intoxicated him. Those lips, the honey flavor of her mouth. Lore, he needed more. Faolan lowered his head and had another taste. *God's beard*. She tasted even better than she had

earlier.

He shuddered a breath, edged back the covers, and feasted his eyes on the rest of her delightful body. Her smallish breasts beckoned, rounded and ripe, hungry nipples puckered in expectation of his touch. His eyes trailed lower to the inviting curls between her legs, hiding the pleasures waiting to be enjoyed.

He trailed his fingertips along her collarbone, his gaze following the path of his touch. Skin rippling, she shivered with gooseflesh as he cupped her breast in his palm.

She waited motionless beneath his caress, her breath fanning between slightly parted lips. Faolan forced himself to go ever so slowly. He didn't want to frighten her or cause her any undue pain. He'd only taken a virgin once before and hadn't handled it well.

She gifted him with a faint moan as he fondled her breast and lowered his mouth to suckle her awaiting nipple. He groaned as she responded with eagerness, arching her back as she tangled her fingers into his hair and pulled his head harder against her breast.

God. He hoped Maxwell was right about bedding her just this once. He hoped this one time would be enough. If not, he was going to kill the bastard for sending him straight to this delicious hell.



FAOLAN AWOKE BEFORE SHE DID. He forgot where he was until he felt the weight of her head on his shoulder. She'd stretched a long silken leg across his body and curled it around his waist. Her satin belly pressed against his side, the curls of her charms tickling against his flank. He hardened in an instant as he remembered the delicious wet warmth inside.

He raised his free hand and covered his eyes as he blew out a dismal sigh. Maxwell was a damn fool and Faolan an even greater idiot for taking his advice. One bedding would not cure him of this woman; in fact, a thousand beddings would never be enough.

Last night, when he'd pushed through her maidenhead, his primeval emotions had risen from within the depths of his soul and resounded with a deafening roar. *This is my mate. This woman is mine. No other man will ever have her but me.*

His erection demanded his attention, roaring to uncomfortable throbbing readiness immediately. He was ready to roll her over again and start his claiming anew. The only reason they'd stopped last night or rather this morning was because they'd both collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

She had cried out his name, her face filled with elation as he'd filled her body with his seed. She'd clutched him close as he'd shuddered within her, his groans echoing with her cries. Her legs had wrapped around his body, completing her embrace. Her satisfied spasms had pulled him deeper, drowning him in mindless ecstasy.

She had welcomed him inside her again and again. Not once had she shied from his touch. He could only imagine what lovers they could become, as his virginal bride grew bolder with delightful experience.

Faolan gritted his teeth and stared up at the ceiling. He had to stop this before it went any further. He'd consummated the union. She was safe as his wife. Now, he had to make sure he never touched her again.

He eased his body out from under her warm, trusting weight. Faolan forced himself not to look upon her face. He scooped his kilt and sword from where they'd dropped on the floor and crept his way out of the room.

He wound his kilt around his hips and made his way down the hall. Since he couldn't remain in his own chambers adjoining with Ciara's, he would take up residence in what used to be his brother's rooms.

Just as Faolan was about to make his escape, Maxwell greeted him in the hallway. He stuck his head out of his room and shot Faolan a knowing wink. "Well? How did it go? It's nearly dawn and ye're just now leaving her bed? Did it work? Is she out of your blood?"

Without a word, Faolan crashed his fist into Maxwell's jaw, stepped over his friend's unconscious body, and continued his way down the hall.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Ciara kicked the dried pine needles from her path and stomped her way deeper into the woods. She snatched at the branches blocking her way, growling out loud as she replayed the morning in her head.

“Where are ye going?” Alec squawked from high above the tree line.

“I’m going to the goddesses’ spring. Faolan is being an ass.”

“Well, he is a mortal,” Alec observed, soaring in and out of the pines.

“I have never met such a hard-headed mortal in all the centuries I have been dealing with the infernal creatures. The man is impossible. I have to speak with Brid and Cerridwen.” After fighting her way through the tangled brush, she arrived at her destination in the center of the wooded copse.

Immense shelves of limestone surrounded dark, peaceful waters. The depth of the water was impossible to discern by looking at the surface. It rippled from the constant trickle of the spring where the sparkling liquid emerged from the depths of the earth through a crack in the largest stone at one end of the pool. Long-forgotten Picts had painstakingly shaped the stone and carved into it the serene face of a beautiful woman. This well was dedicated to the Goddess Brid. She gifted the water with her blessings.

“He left!” Ciara shouted down into the waters. She stomped one foot on the ledge as she waited for her mothers’ faces to appear on the dark, shimmering surface. “I even faked the membrane of a maidenhead so the man would believe I was a virgin. I held back my passions so as not to frighten him with the pleasures I could give him. The man left after just one night in my bed. How am I supposed to get pregnant by the stubborn fool if he’s not even there for me to seduce?”

The vision of Cerridwen’s and Brid’s smiling faces appeared on the

shimmering surface of the pool. “Patience, Ciara. He will return soon. Ye know ’tis not unheard of for a laird to travel across his lands and see to the well-being of his people.”

Her doeskin clad foot tapped in the leaves as Ciara peered down at the surface of the water. “A laird does not leave his newly wedded wife in the late fall of the year to go traipsing over his lands. If any of his people have any problems, they come to the keep during this time of year. I even overheard the chambermaids wondering why he had gone to the north. Early summer is usually when Faolan does his traveling. Trust me, I know for a fact he wasn’t faking his enjoyment of our first joining. Even his aura shimmered with pleasure! He fairly lit up the room.”

Her eyes twinkling, Brid set the surface of the pool to rippling as though it were chuckling in response. “Ciara, did ye think ye would land right in the middle of the troubled man’s life, bear him a child, and then be merrily on your way? Sometimes ye have to struggle a bit to achieve what ye want, even when ye are an immortal.”

Ciara glanced up at Alec where he perched as a lookout in a nearby tree and shot him a look imploring him to speak up in her defense. She knew Alec was never short on words. Alec declined with a decided shake of his feathered head and turned his back to her. Ciara scowled back at the bird. *Fine*. Apparently, she was on her own with this one. She would deal with Alec later.

“Then what exactly would you suggest I do?” Ciara fumed to the still rippling reflections.

As their images faded from the dark waters of the goddesses' pool, their voices rang out from the depths. “Do what ye do best, our precious Ciara. Embrace your obsessions fully.”

Ciara scoffed at this vague bit of advice as she lobbed a pinecone at Alec’s back. With an indignant squawk, he rose from the branches to glide in a circle over her head. “Ye know I have eaten a great amount of berries today. ’Twould be a shame for such a stain to ruin your lovely gown.”

Glaring up at the bird, Ciara narrowed her eyes and folded her arms across her chest. “Do it and you’ll find yourself in the kitchens with Mistress Sorcha plucking you for a pie.”

Alec perched upon a nearby bush in a blue-black huff. His dark form ruffled as he gawked at Ciara, preening each of his feathers back into place as he balanced on the limb. “How do ye know ye’re not already carrying his

child? God's teeth, I thought the two of ye would never go to sleep last night. Ye would think ye were a pair of lust-crazed minks."

Ciara paced back and forth beside the well, snapping back at him with an irritated shrug, "I'd know it if I were pregnant! I'd feel the presence of the child's soul, even if it were just conceived." She paused in her pacing and whirled on Alec with a shaming look. "And you could've left the room, you wicked bird. You didn't have to stay and watch. I didn't think you were such a perverted creature."

Alec continued running his beak through the feathers beneath one wing, while ignoring Ciara's scolding. As he raised his head, he fluttered his wings and settled all the feathers back into place. "Then what do ye plan to do to entice him back into your bed? That is, once he returns to the keep."

With a determined huff, she took hold of her skirts and found the hidden pathway back out of the woods. "If he won't come to me, I'll go to him. He's not the only one who knows how to travel through the Highlands. I remember how to ride a horse."

With a disappointed chirrup, Alec spread his wings and rose to circle above Ciara's head. "Ye know how I hate traveling in the cold. Do ye think we'll be back to the keep before the dead of winter sets in?"

Winding her way out of the overgrown thicket, Ciara didn't attempt to look up at the great bird as she picked her way through the underbrush covering the ground. "That all depends upon our fine obstinate laird and when he decides to play by my rules."

Alec flew higher, just out of range of a well aimed pinecone. "Then we'll be seeing the winter solstice from the back of a horse. The man's stubbornness is an even match with your own."



THE MAKESHIFT MEETING place in the dining area of the local inn served his purposes well enough. Faolan knew his people realized such a late seasonal visit from their laird was an unexpected treat. *Hell's fire*. He didn't realize this village to the north held so many. The usual turnout to air grievances and seek favors swelled to an unusually large crowd. Clenching his teeth, Faolan wondered just how many gathered there due to curiosity alone. He'd heard the whispers; they all hoped for a glimpse of his wife.

One of the northernmost settlements within the borders of the MacKay lands, very few had made the trip to witness his betrothal. This time of year, winter preparations demanded the villagers remain close to home.

Faolan didn't miss how their faces fell when they discovered he traveled alone. The remote settlement thrived on any bit of new gossip whenever it wandered into their midst.

Shuffling through the papers on the makeshift desk, Faolan looked up at the sound of a familiar voice he'd not expected to hear in this part of the Highlands. Angus. What the hell was he doing here? He'd left Angus at the keep to ensure all remained safe while Faolan traveled the MacKay lands. He had charged Angus with keeping the clan seat guarded. This was the first time he'd entrusted the man with such a responsibility.

Faolan still burned too hot from Maxwell's faulty advice to consider leaving him in his stead. He seethed a few degrees hotter whenever he thought about it.

Damn the man and his fool ideas. Faolan had ordered Maxwell to travel as part of the laird's personal guard and sleep in the stables with the men. Maxwell was to ensure they didn't dally with any of the local maidens and leave behind any future mouths to feed. If Faolan suffered with never lying with his wife again, then Maxwell should damn well suffer the pain of celibacy too. As far as Faolan was concerned, an aching cock was apt punishment for the disastrous opinion Maxwell had given.

Faolan tapped his quill on top of the table as Angus's voice boomed across the room. Wherever Angus entered, his volume clearly announced his identity; his deep rumbling brogue shook the floor. The huge MacKay's ancestors must've lain with the giants. With Angus MacKay's wild black hair and dark wooly beard, Faolan easily imagined a cross between an ogre and a bear taking great lumbering steps toward him.

But Faolan also knew that contrary to Angus's fierce appearance, the great man's nature was generous, his heart as huge as his body. But heaven help the man who pushed Angus too far; he'd best have his soul ready for judgment because when Angus finished with him there would be nothing left to pray over.

This couldn't be good. With a sinking feeling in his chest, Faolan rose to his feet. There must be something dire indeed for Angus to have personally come to fetch him.

"Angus, why have ye left the keep? Tell me, man, why are ye here?"

Angus came to a halt directly in front of the table and then appeared suddenly struck mute. He dropped his head to stare at his shuffling feet, his huge hands clenched behind his back. He cleared his throat as though choking on a bone, risking a glance at Faolan's face every moment or two.

"Well?" Faolan prodded.

With one final sheepish glance up at Faolan, Angus motioned toward the doorway with a slight jerk of his head. "Lady Ciara decided she should join ye so all your people could know your new wife. She thought it best if she traveled at your side."

Ciara pushed her way through the throng of people milling about in the inn. Cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling, she wound her way into the room. Shedding her green woolen riding cloak and gloves, she beamed her brightest smile up into Faolan's startled gaze. "My lord, I thought you might enjoy introducing me to the northernmost members of our clan."

Faolan cleared his throat and shot a chilling glare at Angus while battling to curb his irritation. Grinding his teeth, he made his way around the table and buried his fingers into the huge man's arm. With a forced smile, he nodded to Ciara while he maintained a vise-like grip on Angus's meaty arm. "My dear wife, I thought to introduce ye to our people when we visited here together next summer. I thought ye might need more time to *settle* into your new role as lady of Clan MacKay. I feared such a journey so soon after our betrothal would cause ye undue...discomfort."

Fingers tightening into the flesh of Angus's arm, Faolan effectively transmitted his rage.

Head hung low, Angus stared at his feet, doing his best to avoid looking Faolan in the eye.

Faolan blazed his fiercest glare at Angus then turned to frown at Ciara, who stood patiently waiting with her arms gracefully crossed over her chest. Her golden eyes burned liquid holes through his body. The minx was plotting. He'd bet his best horse.

"What?" Faolan hissed. He could tell by the look on her face she was about to say something he wasn't going to like.

Ciara patted a calming hand on Faolan's arm and molded her exquisite body against his. "Please don't be angry with Angus, husband. He was only trying to do as ye asked."

Faolan tensed, grinding his teeth so hard he swore he heard them crack as he slid a step away from Ciara's disturbing touch. His body responded with

eagerness to her heat. Her scent alone made his mouth water. He could barely form a sensible thought because of the memories of their joining springing to mind.

He took a deep breath and shook himself, steeling himself against her sensual arsenal. God's beard, he could spread her right there on the floor. This desire for her was madness. "Angus was asked to guard the clan seat, to guard castle MacKay in my absence. How was his bringing ye to this remote village in the north doing what I asked of him?"

Ciara eased forward and snuggled tighter against him. Her eyes widened as she slid both hands up his chest. "Did ye not also tell him to watch over me and tend to my every request?"

Angus bobbed his head up and down as though it were on a stick. "Ye did say that to me, Faolan. Ye did ask me to watch over the lady. Ye did tell me to listen to her bidding."

Faolan scowled at Angus over the top of Ciara's head and struggled to keep from exploding. He'd lost complete power over this situation starting with this vixen tantalizing his senses to the uncontrollable cock stiffening between his legs.

He fixed Angus with a piercing gaze as his voice fell to an acerbic growl. "I see, Angus. Apparently, in the future, I shall need to be a bit more specific when I leave my instructions at the keep."

Ciara bit her lip and turned toward Angus with a remorseful bow of her head. "Forgive me, Angus, for causing you so much trouble. Perhaps I was wrong to travel to my husband's side."

She turned back to Faolan and drew a bit of silk from her sleeve, dabbing it to the corners of her eyes. Ciara sniffed, her voice trembling as she appeared to weep into her hand. "Forgive me, husband. I only seek to please you and I thought it was the proper thing to do. I shall return to the keep straight away since you seem so ashamed to have me at your side."

With a growl, Faolan scrubbed his face with one hand, then raked it through his hair. "I am not ashamed of ye! 'Tis just... 'tis just that..."

"'Tis just what?" Ciara hiccupped, her eyes wide as a single teardrop trickled down her cheek.

"Nothing. It is of no consequence. Ye are here now and here ye shall stay. There is but one more settlement to visit after this one. We shall return to the keep within the week. Ye are welcome to stay here at my side. However, ye must understand I have a great deal of business to be about. Ye will have to

entertain yourself.”

Hellfire, how had he lost control of this situation? His shoulders sagging in defeat, he turned back to Angus. “Would ye be so kind as to bring in her bags? Then ye can take the cart round to the stable.”

“What cart? Lady Ciara rides as though she were born on the back of a horse. She carried but one bag on the saddle in front of her. She doesna pack endless trunks of clothes like most women ye meet.” Angus waggled his bushy brows, much like a puppy wags his tail for his master’s approval.

Faolan’s mouth fell open as he turned to his wife. He started to speak, then thought better of it. Now was not the time. Hands raised in defeat, he bowed his head and made his way back to his seat. “If ye will forgive me then, I still have a day’s business to sort through. I am afraid my time will be quite filled until late into the evening.”

With an obedient nod of her head, Ciara clasped her hands dutifully in front of her. “Then I shall go about the village introducing myself and see if there’s anything I might do to help ease the lives of our people.”

Faolan couldn’t believe his ears. This woman would be the death of him. “Ye shall do no such thing,” Faolan thundered, crashing his fist on top of the desk. He’d held his temper as long as he could. The woman pushed him over the edge. If Ciara was going to leave the safety of the keep, then she’d best learn how he expected her to behave. “Ye have no business wandering about alone. Have ye never heard of kidnappings or even worse dangers for a woman wandering alone in the Highlands?”

At the return of Ciara’s trembling lower lip, Faolan roared again. “And do *not* start crying again! Angus, go with her. See that she is kept safe...and this time, do what ye *know* I mean.”

Scooping up her cloak, Angus pulled Ciara by the arm and scooted her toward the door. Bending to whisper loudly in her ear, he nodded toward Faolan as he spoke. “We had best be going. He’s headed toward one of his fierce tirades and it’s a mite early in your marriage for ye to witness one o’ his storms.”

Pointedly locking her gaze with his, Ciara raised her voice loud enough to be certain Faolan overheard her words. “I love a good storm. It sets fire to my blood and stirs my very soul.”

Faolan swallowed hard and adjusted his kilt as he watched her swinging skirts sashay out of the room. After hearing her words, he wondered if there was an icy spring nearby where he might souse his body before he retired.



THE HARRIED WOMAN pulled the boy by the shoulders until he stood trembling in front of Faolan. Faolan studied the lad up and down. He couldn't have been older than eight or nine years old. It was hard to tell since by the look of his knobby bones, most of his meals had been too far apart. His mother's bony fingers gripped him steady, while she wiped his running nose with the corner of her apron. The boy appeared as though he'd been unwell for a while, purple shadows darkened his sunken eyes.

The woman waited for permission to speak, standing with head downcast, shoulders slumped. Face weighted with weariness, eyes red-rimmed, she looked as though she hadn't slept in days.

Faolan raised his head from the scratch of his quill and motioned her forward with a nod of his head. "Good e'en to ye. I would hear your words and as a sign of your fealty to your clan, I would ask ye to speak only the truth in what ye seek from your laird," Faolan repeated the age-old greeting taught to him by his father. He waited, quill paused in midair for the woman to state her needs. He twirled the feather between his fingertips, waiting for her to speak. For the hundredth time, he silently thanked his mother for insisting he learn to read and write. With a sharp intake of breath, her face shimmered across his mind, her unnecessary death still a raw, gaping wound. Mother. A time-traveling witch from the far off future, she had suffered more than most.

With a shaky curtsy and a respectful bob of her head, the woman in front of him cleared her throat. "I come here this e'en to give ye my only son, in gratitude for returning his life to me."

Faolan sat up straighter and set the quill aside. Returned his life to her? It had been a long day. Surely, he misunderstood the woman. He leaned across the table to ensure he had correctly heard the mother's words. "What are ye saying, woman? Are ye asking that I take your son to the keep to be fostered?"

Edging forward, the frail woman pushed her wispy hair out of her eyes, her chapped raw hands rasping as she scraped them across her skin. The little boy just stared at his feet; his tiny hands clenched at his sides.

When she remained silent, Faolan settled back, shifting to prop his elbows on the curved wooden armrests of the chair. Stroking his chin, he studied the woman. Haggard face, drawn skin, she looked to suffer from

complete exhaustion and from the hang of her clothes hadn't eaten in quite a while. He understood how she might want him to take the boy to the keep, especially with winter coming on. But what did she mean about this gratitude for returning the boy's life to her? She didn't make any sense. "Why do ye say ye're giving me the boy in gratitude? Why don't ye just ask that I take him to the keep? Have ye no man? Are ye widowed? Why do ye say ye are grateful?"

With a shaking breath, her head trembled to one side as she rested her hands upon her son's shoulders. The woman stared at Faolan with a look of disbelief etched across her face. "Ye sent your wife out to my croft, mighty laird. She told us so herself.

She brought us more food than we've seen in many a day since my husband passed to the grave. She brought herbs that broke my son's death fever, and willed the very life back into his eyes. She said ye told her we were doing poorly. She said ye kept up with the welfare of every member of your clan. The woman must be descended from the mother goddesses themselves. Ye have mated wisely, honored laird."

Faolan shifted uneasily in his chair at the woman's words. There it was again...more unanswered questions about Ciara. He rose to his feet and circled the table. With a steady hand, he lifted the boy's chin, peering down into the lad's face.

"How old are ye, son?" The boy's skin appeared as delicate as parchment; his veins pulsed like pale blue rivulets tracing down the side of his face. Chapped lips trembled; his sunken eyes grew even rounder, as the shy lad whispered a hoarse reply. "Ten years, sir."

Disturbed to discover the scrawny boy was even older than he'd first thought, Faolan's scowl deepened as he returned to his seat behind the table. Perhaps a bit of distance between himself and the boy might calm the poor lad's shaking.

As he returned his gaze to the worried mother's face, Faolan folded his hands on the desk in front of him. "How long have ye been without your husband to provide for ye? Did your neighbors not offer to help?" The idea that the people of this village had allowed the helpless woman and her ailing son to nearly starve troubled Faolan's heart. The MacKay clan always took care of their own. It was one of their greatest strengths.

The proud woman lifted her chin as her fingers tightened about her son's shoulders. "My husband died last winter. He was a fisherman taken by a

storm upon the sea. Our bit of land is several miles from here; our croft sits right upon the shore. We usually sold our fish to a village lying farther west that owes fealty to the Kincaid clan. Since we live on the border, no clan truly claims us or looks after us as their own. But my mother was a MacKay by birth. I have always claimed this clan as my own.”

Faolan motioned one of his personal guards forward and indicated the man with a nod. “This is Dougal MacKay. He will travel with ye to your croft and help ye pack your belongings. Both you and your son shall come to the keep. Mistress Sorcha can always use an extra hand in the kitchens and I’m sure once the lad has regained his health, we shall find plenty for him to do in the stables.”

As Faolan spoke, the woman shattered into tears, her shaking hands clenched to her chest. “Blessings upon ye, Laird Faolan MacKay. Blessings to ye and your wife. May ye have many healthy sons. I swear to ye, my chieftain. Ye will ne’er find two more loyal servants. I canna thank ye enough.”

For the first time since the woman had pulled him into the room, the little boy’s face relaxed and regained a bit of color. He actually managed a trembling smile and glanced up through his scraggly hair.

Dougal ushered them from the room, stooping to pick up the boy before they reached the door as he weakly staggered against his mother. Faolan watched them leave, his chin resting in his hand, his heart warmed by the new light of hope he’d seen reflected in the woman’s eyes.

He drummed his fingers on the table, not bothering to turn as he spoke to the man standing in the corner. “Angus. I know ye stand in the shadows. I can hear the shuffle of your oversized feet. I think perhaps ’tis time you and I talked and ye told me everything ye know.”

Angus lumbered forward; his hands wringing together; his eyes darting around the room as though he sought a shield from Faolan’s piercing glare. “I suppose ye’ll be wanting to hear about your wife’s day? Ye’ll be proud to know the people warmed right up to her. They welcomed her with open arms.”

“That would be a good place to start, Angus, after ye tell me where she is right now.”

Faolan leaned back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He surveyed the man fidgeting in front of him as he crossed his ankles to prop his feet on the table. He stretched the stiffness from his weary body and

prepared himself for the worst. He could already tell by the sheepish look on Angus's face this wasn't going to be good. It had been a long time since he'd gone into a rage. He was way overdue.

"I believe she's gone to your rooms to tidy up a bit. Ye wouldna believe the muck that woman waded through to get to that woman and her boy." Angus bit his lip. With a jerking grimace, he glanced upward as thunder rumbled in the distance. He cleared his throat and searched Faolan's face, his face reddening as he inched his way closer to the door.

Remaining silent, Faolan steepled tensed fingers beneath his chin and fixed Angus with an unblinking stare. Faolan knew the man's greatest weakness. If he gave Angus enough rope, he would hang himself. Angus never knew when to stop talking. All Faolan had to do was watch and wait, Angus would blurt out everything he knew.

True to his weakness, Angus stood wringing his hands in time with each of his words. "What I mean to say is...the old woman and her son live out on the farthest edge of the shore. 'Tis a wonder Lady Ciara was able to find them at all and then all them there herbs she knew to pack along and the food they would be a needin'. 'Twas as though she had looked in a scrying glass and checked for everything she should take."

Faolan tapped his forefingers together then laced them and brought his hands to the table. He dropped his voice to a cold, dead calm as he lowered his feet to the floor. "And how do ye think Lady Ciara knew about this family, about the dire need of the boy and his mother and the means it would take to save them? Did you see her use a scrying glass or anything else a seer might use to divine such information?"

Angus opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water as he eased his way toward the outer door. "I didna see her use a bit of magic. Faolan, there's no darkness in that woman's heart. I swear to ye, Faolan, she just knew where to find them. She knew every need they had. Why, she truly reminded me a great deal of your mother. Ye know how your mother always knew what to do whenever there was someone in need."

Faolan slammed both fists on the table so hard, bits of it splintered off into the floor. "My mother was a witch who was almost hunted down and burned at the stake. My father had to take his fiercest warriors to protect her from the flames! When they brought his body back to her covered with his shield, she gave up on everything she'd ever known. She saw fit to throw her body down from the cliffs and join him in his death. Are ye telling me,

Angus, that I've married a witch? Ye know my edict regarding magic. And why did that old woman say Ciara must be descended from the mother goddesses themselves? Ye know what I've proclaimed about the old religions. Our clan must move away from the old beliefs. Have I not provided a priest for each of these communities and built fine kirks for them to attend?"

Had every single one of his clansmen gone insane? Had they all decided to ignore their laird? Faolan glared at Angus as the man inched his way closer to the door, a few more steps and the fool would bolt to his freedom. This mystery of his wife bordered madness. Faolan fought against the urge to throw the table across Angus's retreating path. If Ciara were a witch, it would explain a great deal. Perhaps that was the true secret of Gordon Sinclair. Hadn't Ciara's mother been a witch?

Holding up his hands as he backed away, Angus stammered himself a bit of redemption. "She didna mutter any spells or call down any sort of spirits. I'm tellin' ye, Faolan. She just...she just...just...knew where they were and what to do to help them."

As he reached the freedom of the doorjamb, Angus relaxed and slid one foot across the threshold. With a quick salute to his chieftain, he slipped outside, smiled, and tossed his words back over his shoulder. "I'll just go out into the stables and make sure the horses have been rubbed down after such a hard day. It looks like all the people have finished with ye so, I'll bid ye a good e'en as well."

Faolan snarled, lost his battle with his temper and threw the table across the room, shattering it against the wall. His fury mounting, he stomped about the room, looking for something else to destroy. His advisors and spies had failed him in every task he had assigned them. Ciara Sinclair appeared to be a lot more than she seemed. However, what that something was he had yet to find out. Or better yet who was she? And apparently, the only way he was going to find out the truth about his wife was by interrogating her himself.

CHAPTER

SIX

The sleek gray mouse perched on the side of the huge metal tub, his little pink paws clasped against his snowy chest. With the ever-increasing cold, Alec had abandoned the form of a raven for a smaller, more compact animal. As a mouse, he could snuggle somewhere unseen upon Ciara's nice warm body underneath her clothes.

Alec grasped his long pink tail in one tiny paw using it as a pointer to direct Ciara in her ministrations. "Ye missed a spot just there underneath your chin. Ye know, if ye had levitated over that marsh ye would nay ha' been covered with all that green slime that smells a great deal of rotted gourds."

As she scrubbed at the indicated spot with the soapy rag, Ciara splashed him as the soap slipped out of her hand. "Oops, sorry, Alec, and how would I have explained levitation to poor Angus? The man is incapable of keeping a secret."

Patting the bottom of the tub in search of the soap, Ciara found it and returned to re-sudsing the rag. As she leaned back and stretched out a long, glistening leg on the side of the tub, she relaxed deeper into the water with a sigh. "Don't misunderstand me, Alec. Angus is as good-hearted as they come, but his loyalty to Faolan is phenomenal. I think I'm going to have to be very careful of what I do around him. When he's nervous, his tongue grows loose at both ends and there's no telling what he'll run and tell."

"It's too late for that, my verra amazing wife."

Faolan loomed in the doorway, face darkened with a murderous scowl and hands clenched above his head against the doorsill. His gaze darted about the room, as he appeared to search through the shadows to find Ciara's bathing companion. "'Tis time we talked. About levitation, how ye know

about people in need, healing, and many other subjects I am sure ye are an expert on. Ye can start by telling me exactly who and where this person is ye seem to be talking with while ye are in your bath.”

Faolan stomped into the room, slamming the door so hard behind him, all the candles flickering on the mantel snuffed out into smoking pillars. He stalked across the floorboards so hard they groaned as he yanked aside the curtains surrounding the bed.

Ciara sank deeper into the tub until her chin rested upon the surface of the water. *Dammit*. She’d over-played her hand this time. She wondered how he would react to maybe just a few selective tidbits of the truth, just enough to season the lie. “If you will stop stomping about like a bull in search of his mate, I’ll be happy to introduce you to my friend.”

Faolan halted in his tracks. His scowl darkened as he whirled to glare at Ciara still submerged to her chin.

Motioning with a soapy hand toward the towel wadded up on the stool, Ciara made the formal introductions. “Laird Faolan MacKay allow me to introduce you to my friend Alec, currently in the form of a mouse.”

A fold of the towel wiggled as Alec emerged from its depths, his whiskers twitched as though testing the air. With a regal bow of his tiny gray head, he squeaked loud enough for Faolan to hear. “’Tis a pleasure to meet ye, Laird MacKay. Congratulations on your marriage to the lovely Ciara.”

Lightning flashed through the windows, illuminating the room as though it were the middle of the day. Booming thunder rattled the walls, shaking the structure of the inn from the roof down to the foundation. Faolan clenched his hands into shaking fists, threw back his head, and roared. “Now look what ye have made me do! Ye have thrown me into such a fit of fury, I have stirred the energies into a storm. I havena called up a storm in nearly fifteen years. I finally had my rage under control. *Dammit*, tell me what ye are. Tell me who the hell ye are and why ye have foisted yourself into my life!”

Alec blinked beady black eyes and smoothed back his flattened pink ears with tiny trembling paws. He sat upright on his square little behind and squeaked as loud as he could. “I am a mouse, for now. I actually prefer the form of a raven, but the wind grows bitter with the cold.”

“Not you!” Faolan thundered at the shaking rodent. “As strange as the sight of a talking mouse might be. I shall deal with the likes of you later.” His face darkened as he raged. Faolan whirled on Ciara where she sat wide-eyed in the tub. “You! Who or *what* the hell are you?”

With a deep sigh, Ciara emerged from the water and slid free of the tub. She smoothed her glistening skin in the dancing firelight, allowing enticing droplets of water to roll their way down her curves. She never took her gaze from Faolan's enraged face as she stretched to retrieve her towel. She patted the moisture from her flesh and basked in the heat of the blaze at the hearth. "I am not a witch if that's what's worrying you. Although, I really don't understand why that would be so bad. Let's just say I'm a bit special in the Ways. That's why my father kept me hidden in that tower all these years."

She read him easily. His eyes revealed his war within. Denial. Mistrust. Frustration. Ciara traced the tip of her tongue across her lips. There was a fair amount of lust in those eyes as well. Good. She was ready for a delicious romp herself.

She couldn't tell him the truth. She felt sure if she did, he would banish her from his midst. However, she had to come up with some sort of explanation since Faolan was no fool. He had paid well for information telling him of a simple-minded maid to wife and now here he stood married to Ciara.

Faolan tossed his head against her words, as he strode another step closer. "Do not lie to me, woman. I have seen your aura. I can see into the depths of your heart. I believe ye are a bit more than something *special*. Now tell me who and what ye are."

Ciara dropped the towel to the floor. With a delicious shiver, her skin tingled, not just from the heat of the fire but from desire for the man in front of her. His calling up of the storm had stirred her blood more than she cared to admit. It had been centuries since she'd seen such power rage within a mortal man. The time for words and explanations was over. She wanted Faolan deep inside her and she wanted him now.

Reaching up, she untied the ribbon holding back her curls. She let the abundant tresses tumble to her waist and drape across her curves. She held Faolan locked within her gaze and eased across the room. Tracing her hand up his chest, her body molded against his, she nuzzled against the sweet, salty warmth of his neck. "I am your wife. I am here to make your life complete. Now cease this incessant talking and take me."

With a roar, Faolan laced his fingers into her hair and forced her face up to his. As he possessed her mouth, he clutched her body tighter, his heart pounding in sync with hers. Then with another groan, he threw her on the bed. His breath became ragged as he held her captive with his stare. Stripping

off his clothes in one easy motion, he covered her body with his. She lay motionless beneath him, watching him with half-closed eyes. With a seductive smile and a slow run of her tongue across her top lip, Ciara silently dared him to continue.

He pinned her to the bed, claimed her with his mouth and plunged deep inside her. Ciara wrapped her body around him as he pounded into her core. She reveled in the fury and the frustration Faolan unleashed within her arms. She growled and clutched him tighter against her as he drove his body into her. Ciara purred with mounting ecstasy while Faolan battled against her possession of his soul.

As she raked her nails down his back, her hips matched him thrust for delicious thrust. She sank her teeth into the side of his neck, growling with abandon as she relished his wondrous attack.

Ciara groaned aloud. Now this was worth being bound to a mortal. This was a claiming, a wondrous power struggle. Tonight, she would treat him to all of her pleasures. He'd forget about the feigned virgin he'd taken on the night of their betrothal. Ciara laughed right before she moaned. "Oh, dear husband, wait until you see what I have in store for you."

Ciara shifted and rolled Faolan to the mattress. She stretched her body above his. She straddled his form, arched her back, and settled down on the length of his shaft. She wanted to ride him, grind him beneath her until he came inside her again and again. This mortal knew how to make her feel things she thought she'd forgotten, perhaps even things she had never found with other men. Faolan wasn't destined to be a solitary. Faolan was destined to be a lover. Ciara knew without a doubt he could satisfy whatever she required.

She leaned forward and pulled his head to her breast. She groaned as he caught her nipple between his teeth. She ground her hips against his body, moaning as he tantalized her even more. She shuddered in release, gasping his name as she found her pleasure.

As her body clenched him with delicious spasms, Faolan rolled Ciara back to the bed. "Now, wife, 'tis my turn." He growled as he nipped at her jaw. Turning her away from him, he rose up behind her, and bent her to suit his needs. Once more, he slid deep inside and slammed her back against his thighs. Again and again, deeper with each thrust until she cried out his name. His name echoed sweet when it rode upon her moans. It inflamed him even more.

Withdrawing his body from her warm wet depths, he turned her around to face him. He wanted to stare into the depths of those golden eyes when he filled her with his seed.

Wrapping his body with her long legs, she arched her back to bury him to her very center. She dug her fingernails into his buttocks and clenched him as deep as he could go. As she began to shudder and reached the pinnacle of the dance, he held her face between his hands. He threw his head back and roared to the winds as he filled her to overflowing.

Collapsing atop her, he buried his face against her neck and rasped into her hair. "I never asked for a woman such as you. I never wanted a wife."

Ciara laughed into the darkness, running her hands up his back and lacing them in his hair. With a nip to his earlobe, she nestled her face against his. "Sometimes a gift is given without being requested. When that happens, you should just be thankful."



THEY RODE ALONG IN SILENCE, their horses abreast while Angus and the rest of the guard followed along behind. Faolan risked a narrow-eyed glance at Ciara as she rode beside him. The mere sight of her stirred his blood. Dark hair, golden eyes, face framed by the rich colors of a MacKay plaid. The chill wind of the morning colored her cheeks an eye-catching rosy red. A dark, feathery curl escaped from under the scarf gathered around her head and shoulders.

Ciara's eyes sparkled in the sun as it dappled down through the pines of the steep hillside around them. Her breath fogged in the frosty air as her gaze danced over the rugged landscape ahead. It was clear the woman was thrilled with their trek through the Highlands. She reveled in being outside.

Faolan frowned as he noticed Alec's long pink tail peeping out from under the scarf. The mouse nestled against the curve of Ciara's throat to escape the nearly freezing temperatures. Faolan snorted to himself. He had forgotten about Alec last night with the onset of Ciara's seductive attack. But Faolan hadn't forgotten Ciara's introduction regarding Alec and his ability to assume the shape of different animals. This wasn't over. Faolan would find out the truth about both Alec and Ciara, no matter how tempting the distractions.

She'd never given him an answer last night regarding who or what she was. He was now certain she wasn't Dierdra Sinclair. But if she wasn't Dierdra Sinclair, then who or what was she? And why had Gordon Sinclair paid such a high bride price for the MacKays to take her off the Sinclair clan's hands?

Faolan inhaled a rib-cracking breath and swallowed hard. The damn woman festered under his skin. He'd never had this problem before and it wasn't just her body, it was everything about her. Faolan adjusted himself beneath his kilt, as unbidden memories of last night's pleasures demanded his complete attention. Never in his life had he been with such a woman, one who would wage such glorious battle with him in the bed. She'd been so different from the first time they'd been together when he'd presumed to have claimed her maidenhead.

With a derisive snort, Faolan felt certain Ciara had feigned that meek love-play as well. There was no possible way a woman new to the sport of love could become so aggressive and demanding after just one night. Ciara was a warrior when it came to claiming her pleasures. One who didn't consider the possibility of defeat.

As he shifted in the saddle, Faolan urged his horse to a faster trot. He took great gulps of the brisk morning air in a vain attempt to cool his blood. What the hell was he going to do with this woman? He'd be damned if he'd go back on his word again. He'd already slipped back into the ways of mysticism. The sword meditation and spiritual travels to other realities were the only relief he'd been able to find from her constant presence in his thoughts. He'd be damned if he broke his second oath and allowed himself to become enamored with this woman who'd somehow landed into his life.

As Faolan took the lead, Ciara coaxed her mount to a faster trot as well. Once more, she brought her horse to an obedient canter even with her husband's sullen side. He wasn't going to escape her as easy as that; they were in her territory now.

The rugged beauty of the Highland wilderness strengthened and renewed Ciara's spirit. Lush green trees, dusky blue mountains, all encircling playful crystal springs gurgling through the nearby open gorges. Ciara connected with the energy of Scotland. Its magic fed her very essence.

The dirt road upon which they traveled wound its way through the jagged hillside. The crunch of the horse's hooves in the frosty dirt echoed all around them. Ciara loved being out in the open. She inhaled the wintry air in greedy

swallows as though she feared it was in short supply. While wreaking vengeance in the world of the over-crowded future, she'd become tense and overly despairing. Her being had become poisoned by being cut off from the land. She had missed her beloved, mysterious Alba and the magic that flowed through its soil.

With a glance over at Faolan, her hands tightened on the reins. She pursed her lips and studied her husband's brooding scowl. The possibility of spending eight years with this mortal became more appealing by the day.

Damn, the man knew how to pleasure a woman. He was by far the most exhilarating mortal she had ever had. The others had been enjoyable. However, pleasure with them had been much like craving a certain food. Once you satisfied the craving, you no longer desired the much sought after treat. But Faolan had turned out to be quite different indeed. He whetted her appetite for more.

Ciara frowned a bit at this disturbing insight. She stole another glance at her husband's stormy face while he stared down the road ahead. She tried explaining away this uneasy realization by deciding it was the fact he remained a challenge. A sigh escaped her. This seduction had proven a lot more difficult than she had thought it was going to be.

Since he wasn't a man prone to an easy tumble, perhaps she should target his heart. If she could figure out a way to win his affection, conceiving his child could prove easier. If he would simply stop being such an ass and fall in love with her, things would go so much simpler. Perhaps then, she wouldn't have to keep stalking him to bring him to her bed.

And therein lay the root of the problem. Faolan was no fool. She knew he was onto her thinly veiled pretense of posing as Gordon Sinclair's daughter. He hadn't figured out who or what she was but she was certain he would never let down his defenses until he found a way to explain her existence. She was going to have to find a way to ease his mind or she'd have to keep trapping him into her bed.

As she eased her horse closer, Ciara took the lead and forced Faolan to look her way. "Since it appears we have a few hours of riding before we reach the next village, I think we should get to know one another better. Why don't you tell me your history, Faolan MacKay? Tell me a bit about your past."

His stony glare fixed on the road ahead, Faolan guided his horse in sullen silence as though he hadn't heard her. His plaid hung loose about his

shoulders. Against the dropping temperatures, he had also donned a thick, furred vest, making him resemble a large, sulking bear. The dark stubble of his beard made his face seem even fiercer as his black hair whipped loose in the wind. His eyes narrowed against the bite of the winter air, their color a mirror of the muted blue of the mountains in the distance.

A shiver tickled up Ciara's spine as Faolan's calculating gaze shifted to her with a narrowing of his eyes.

"I would prefer to learn more about my wife and her past. I think 'tis time ye answered my questions, Ciara."

He had called her Ciara. Well, that was a start. It was the first time he hadn't used his usual detached formal way of addressing her as *Lady Ciara* or *wife*. With a slight bow of her head, she encouraged him. She could play a little game of cat-and-mouse. After all, she had centuries of experience. "Fair enough, husband. Ask away. I shall play your game of twenty questions."

Ciara thought he would never speak; Faolan stared straight ahead as though he'd forgotten they conversed. Finally, he sidled a glance her way; thunder rumbled in the distance as he spoke. "Ye have a strange way of speaking, wife, such as what ye just said about some sort of game of twenty questions? Ye dinna have the lilt or brogue of a Scot. Your speech isn't accented by any region I have ever traveled. Where are ye from and better yet, how did ye come to be here and call yourself a Sinclair?"

Ciara worried the leather reins between her thumbs. Well, she hadn't really expected one regarding her lack of accent. The man was no fool. However, she had to admit it was a legitimate question. Now how was she going to answer it? She'd traveled through so many worlds and through so many times, she'd lost any particular accent long ago. "I guess you could say I was born in this area but I've traveled quite a bit throughout my life. I've never stayed in one place long enough for any particular dialect to take hold. My unusual sayings also come from my travels. I must've picked them up from the people I was around. And as for how did I come to call myself a Sinclair? I guess you could say the Sinclair clan more or less adopted me. Even though I'm not related to the Sinclairs, I am very close to The Sinclair's daughter."

An uneasiness roiled in the pit of her stomach at sharing so much information. She stole a glance over at Faolan; his stormy features told her he was reasoning through all she'd said. Her mouth became drier as she realized by admitting she wasn't Dierdra Sinclair, Faolan could have their marriage

annulled. The rhythm of her little elusive dance had just geared up from a waltz into a Highland fling.

Faolan avoided her gaze and stared over the top of his horse's head. "Ye say ye were adopted by the Sinclair clan, but ye're no' the chieftain's daughter. Then why would he be so willing to pay such a bride price in order to marry ye off?"

Okay. Very good question, Laird MacKay. How was she going to explain that one? Fidgeting in the saddle, Ciara loosened her scarf. All these questions made her warm. Where were Cerridwen and Brid when she needed them for a little ad-lib here and there? Highlanders and their pride. *That's it!* You could always tie everything back to a Highlander and his pride.

"Gordon Sinclair needed an alliance with the powerful MacKays. The Sinclair clan has grown steadily weaker over the years. He felt sure once you met Dierdra and saw her delicate condition, you would refuse to marry her and ally with his clan. But he was a proud man and couldn't bear to tell you the truth about his daughter's condition."

Ciara bit back a smile as Faolan relaxed in the saddle and turned to her with a slow nod of his head. "So, the rumors are true. Dierdra Sinclair is truly one of the touched?"

Ciara peered a bit closer at him; the sneaky beast was plotting something. She could see the color of his aura shimmer and change. She was no fool. She knew this meant his mood shifted in another direction. Faolan's mind was a whirl with some sort of plot regarding her fate. What he planned for her destiny she couldn't tell. Since he had already sensed some of her powers, she feared to join with his mind. She hoped whatever he thought would somehow align with her plans.

Tucking her chin, she filled her voice with compassion and pulled her scarf tighter about her chest. "Yes. Dierdra Sinclair is blessed as one of the touched. She doesn't see things as other people do."

Faolan pulled his horse to a stop in the middle of the road and turned in his saddle to face her. "Then ye are not my wife. My contract was to wed Dierdra Sinclair, not some woman named Ciara."

Ciara feared Faolan would come to that conclusion, but she had a very strong alternate attack ready. Since seduction didn't seem to hold his attention, maybe an insult to his pride would smack him right between the eyes. "Your statement is true. We both know you agreed to wed Dierdra Sinclair so your advisors would stop nagging you to take a wife. Apparently,

you also did this to bow to your own cowardice, since you are afraid to find yourself in a marriage with a real woman.”

Ciara shivered with delight beneath the darkened sky as thunderheads banked and rolled above the tree line. She couldn't resist a victorious smile as she stretched taller in the saddle. She'd scored a direct hit at her intended target and hit him square in his pride. Her brooding Highlander's greatest weakness was the fact that no one had better call him a coward. “Why are you so afraid to be wed to a real woman, Faolan? I can promise you from firsthand observation; you have no shortcomings in bed.”

Rage flashed in Faolan's eyes as he growled, “Ye have no idea who I am, woman, or what prompts the decisions I make.”

Lightning splintered down through the clouds, striking so close the metallic odor of singed air wafted through the trees. Angus and the rest of the MacKay guard struggled to calm their frightened mounts pawing and snorting in the center of the road. Forced to dismount, they pulled up and steadied the horses to soothe the animals' jagged nerves.

Only Faolan and Ciara remained in their saddles, their horses stamping and milling in ever tightening circles. They faced each other as though about to joust with swords rather than words. Their horses snorted and pawed at the ground as roiling black clouds filled the sky.

Ciara brought her horse closer and leaned toward Faolan, taunting him to make a move. “All I know is the man I see before me: one who is terrified of longing for a woman's touch.”

Faolan grabbed her by the shoulders and shouted into her face as he yanked her over onto the saddle in front of him. “It is not a woman's touch I fear! It is the pain that follows once it's gone!”

The pound of his heart hammered against her; panic flashed in his eyes. Ciara clearly saw that Faolan MacKay battled with an inner demon he feared he couldn't best. She had to find a way to allay his fears, to show him he hadn't seen the entire picture of what a soul's existence entailed. He had only seen the pain of what he thought was a loving relationship's end.

She rested a calming hand against his cheek. With a heavy sigh, she traced her thumb along the roughened stubble of his jaw. “Faolan, you have only seen this side of pain and loss. You've seen love as a brief respite from loneliness. You feel it is a teasing torture leading to a hopeless end. Let me show you the part you haven't seen. I can give you a glimpse of what lies beyond.”

His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper; he stiffened away from her hand. “Ye said ye were nay a witch.”

Ciara couldn't resist a knowing smile and leaned forward to cradle his face in both hands. “I am not really a witch. I am just a very *talented* woman who can show you the truth of things.”

He searched her eyes, studying her face as though attempting to stare into the depths of her soul. Ciara waited. Faolan had to come to this on his own terms. Here was one mortal impossible to rush. After what seemed like forever, he exhaled and jerked his head forward in a single nod, his fingers relaxed their grip on her arms. “How can ye do such a thing?” he finally asked, as his hands slipped down her side.

Ciara nodded toward the men farther up in the road still milling about with their horses, then she glanced up at the ever-darkening sky. As the wind lifted her hair, she raised her voice over the distant rumble of thunder. “Send your men up ahead to find a bit of shelter in case your mood succeeds in ripping open the clouds. Once they're gone, we'll sit over there beside the spring and I will show you what you need to know.”



SHOULDERS LOCKED, emotions churning, Faolan stirred the mounting storm as they waited for the men to disappear around the next bend in the road. He willed the men not to desert him, strained to hear the last crunch of the horses' hooves plodding against the frosted earth. Once they were gone, once they had left him, he would have no choice but to follow Ciara.

Then it was time. He couldn't avoid it any longer. He barely heard the thrum of hoofbeats in the distance, like the gentle roll of weakening thunder. The hair pricked on the back of his neck as they dismounted and led the now calmer beasts down the steep hillside of the rock-strewn gorge.

They picked their way through the clumps of grass and scattered stones until they arrived at a spring gurgling up from the ground. Ciara motioned toward a good-sized limestone shelf canopied by several towering pines. She dropped the reins to her horse and allowed the beast to scavenge its way around. “Over there. We'll be sheltered from the wind and still be able to see down into the water.”

With a skeptical glance first at the spring, then at Ciara, Faolan paused to

rest his hand upon his horse's warm neck as though the animal's touch gave him reassurance. He didn't know what the woman was about to do, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out. His pain and loneliness had molded him into who he was today. He wasn't certain he was ready to let that pain and loneliness become a part of his past.

Ciara spread a thick woolen blanket upon the stone ledge, then settled down, and fluffed her skirts around her. With a tender look, she patted the spot beside her.

Faolan crouched on the edge of the blanket. Those damn golden eyes of hers cut right through to his soul. They stirred him, forced his memories to where they shouldn't go. It wouldn't surprise him if the minx snapped him up like a wolf in a trap.

With a wary glance first in Ciara's direction, he leaned forward toward the edge of the rock and peered down into the depths of the eddy below. The spring had etched out a natural well, the water pooling just beneath the stone ledge. The shadows of the drooping branches of the pines and the cut of the stone shielded the water from most of the sunlight. Darkened by the depths, the surface of the pool resembled obsidian glass.

Resting her hand on the crook of Faolan's arm, Ciara gently squeezed while she waived her other hand over the water. "What do you see?" she whispered as his gaze focused on the shimmering surface below.

Shifting closer to the edge, Faolan stared at the water, his heart quickening as the faces of his parents flickered into view.

He ignored her question, leaning closer to the water while watching his parents at different intervals throughout their lives. He watched how they loved, laughed, fought, and shared their lives. He watched the connection, the way their eyes met. He noticed how their auras intertwined throughout every vision appearing on the pool.

"No," he murmured as his mother sobbed over his father's cold, lifeless body. "No!" he shouted, as she leaned forward on the edge of the cliff, arms extended into the air before she fell to the rocks below.

Faolan whirled on Ciara and shook her by the shoulders, his voice cracking with pain. "Why do ye show me these things? Do ye no' think I can remember them clearly enough without ye throwing them up in m'face?"

"Keep watching." Ciara pulled away and motioned to the pool below.

Faolan struggled for breath, gasping for air. It was as though he fought during battle. Hands clenched, jaw tightening, he turned back to face the

water. He feared what else the visions would show but he couldn't deny Ciara's command. This time the surface of the pool rolled with the smoke of a pale misty light. Faolan leaned forward and focused harder on the surface to study the images playing below.

His father's spirit hovered above his mother's broken body where she lay bleeding among the jagged rocks. His mother's spirit discarded her shattered form and rose to embrace her awaiting husband. Their faces shone with joy as they gazed into each other's eyes and floated into each other's arms. Then they turned in unison, their forms shimmering and slowly faded from view. But before they disappeared through the awaiting veil, they paused and looked Faolan full in the face. His father gifted him with a nod of acknowledgment, a hint of a smile reassured Faolan that all was as it should be. His mother blew him a kiss and then laid her hand on her heart, an obvious testimony of her love for her son.

Faolan struggled with the images he'd just seen. He raised his eyes to meet Ciara's watchful gaze as he knelt on the cold, unforgiving stone ledge. "So, they are together? Ye mean for me to believe they've crossed over into the next time and ye expect me to truly believe they're together and they are at peace."

Ciara remained silent, her eyes dark and unreadable; Faolan couldn't fathom her expression. She waved her hand over the water again, without breaking her gaze from his. Pointing toward the pool once again, she directed him to the surface of the waters.

Views of his siblings, contented and joined with their mates, shimmered across the surface. His lost brother, Ronan, appeared first upon the looking glass. His brother's once dark hair now glinted with streaks of gray, and his face was lined with the roadmap of advanced years. His body bent; Ronan limped along an unfamiliar beach arm in arm with his still beautiful wife of many years.

His cursed brother, Latharn, appeared in a strange place filled with strange structures of frightening shapes made of materials he'd never seen. Faolan watched him smile down into the eyes of a tiny woman holding two babies cradled in her arms.

Aveline, the baby, his only sister, danced among the clouds. Her laughter echoed across the sky as she spun, just out of reach of the laughing man trailing just behind her.

What sort of madness had Ciara brought forth with her powers? All the

lost members of his family flickered upon the surface of the water. All the people he had loved and mourned when they'd each left him behind, all the ones who had broken his heart and deserted him. Yet by these images, he could see they were all happy, wherever it was they had gone.

Faolan staggered away from the ledge and ran from the memories stirred upon the waters. He blindly searched the surrounding pines, oblivious to everything around him. His thoughts and emotions battered through his being like a storm lashing its way through the trees.

He frowned as he watched the branches whipping about in the wind. The shushing needles of the pines whispered his name. He almost swore he heard his family's voices; it was as if they traveled to him through the trees across the web of realities.

If the images were true, he was glad they all were happy and at peace. But that didn't alter the fact that he was still alone. It still didn't change his reasoning that if he ever opened his heart again, he risked being hurt.

Ciara sat and waited on the ledge. "Faolan."

Faolan ignored her call.

"Faolan, you saw they are all at peace."

Faolan remained silent; his face lifted to the rising wind. The woman couldn't understand the depths of his pain; his family had been his life.

Rising from the stone, Ciara picked her way across the rough ground to where her horse sipped out of the spring. She turned to Faolan, brushing her hair out of her eyes as she bent to scoop up the reins. "Faolan, you can spend what precious little time you have left on this earth bemoaning all you have lost. Waste your allotted time in complete misery. Fritter away your days until death finally comes to end your sorrow and pain.

Or you can honor your loved ones, bid them farewell, and celebrate the peace they have finally found. I advise you to embrace every form of happiness until your short time has passed and it's time to cross through the Veil. The choice is yours, Faolan: a lifetime dedicated to misery, or a celebration of every opportunity you are given."

With a flip of her plaid, she then led her horse back to the road where she mounted and rode away.

Faolan just stood upon the stone and stared out into the trees.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Salt spray stung her cheeks as the waves crashed against the rocks jutting along the shore. Her body eased, relaxing in the saddle with the sounds of the incoming tide. A shiver rippled across her flesh. The wind's bite sharpened here in the north. She had forgotten the harshness of the Highland shores, especially during this time of year.

Ciara pulled the hood of her heavy woolen cloak closer about her face and snugged her scarf tighter around her neck. With a heavy sigh, she adjusted her bodice as Alec's warm little mouse body nestled in a tighter ball between her breasts. Alec had always detested the cold. She had always thought a better form for him would've been a lizard somewhere in the tropics.

She waited on her mount as Faolan and his men stood at the door of a weathered croft. Glancing around the grounds, it reminded Ciara of the small dwelling where she had found the ailing boy and his mother from the last village. However, this well sodded home stood even closer to the shore and appeared a bit better kept.

Ciara's interest was piqued when she noticed Faolan appeared more concerned about whatever went on inside. Peering at the thatched roof, she just made out the faintest curl of smoke as it fought its way from among the woven bundles tightly lashed together.

Ciara wrinkled her nose; she dreaded the smoke-filled interior. Maybe she wouldn't have to go inside. She'd never relished the choking smoke of the damp peat fires. The roofs of these crofts allowed the smoke of the fires to rise and filter out through the highest point in the thatching. The ceiling of the croft would be sooted black from the smoky fires. Inside the dwelling would

be cozy and warm but unpleasant to breathe.

“Then don’t breathe,” Alec squeaked from his warm position between her breasts.

With a hissing whisper down the front of her cloak, Ciara jerked her scarf as she replied, “How many times have I told you to stay out of my mind? And I have to breathe or they’ll catch onto the fact that I am an immortal, you little fool.”

At that point, Faolan returned to her mount, his face white-lipped with desperation. “Do ye know anything about bringing a bairn into the world?”

Ciara caught her lower lip between her teeth, glancing toward the house then back to Faolan’s tensed face. That question coupled with Faolan’s dire expression couldn’t be good. “Isn’t there a midwife nearby we could fetch?”

“There’s nay time. Her husband says her pains have been going on since early yesterday and she canna seem to get any relief. She wouldna let him leave to fetch the midwife. She says she didna want to die alone.”

Ciara stifled a groan. Mortals suffered so when they thrust new life into this world. This did not sound promising at all. Holding out her hands for Faolan to help her down, she risked another glance at the house. “Help me down. I don’t know if there’s anything I can do, but it sounds as though I’ve at least got to try.”

As soon as she ducked her head inside the croft, Ciara’s heart fell. Her eyes locked with the Shadow of Death. The cloaked figure stood in the farthest corner with his arms folded across his chest.

The young mother was right. She hovered near death and more than likely her child would go with her. Ciara frowned hard at the quiet specter but he merely shook his head.

Untying her cloak, she shoved it into Faolan’s hands and knelt beside the woman on the floor. At Ciara’s disapproving scowl, Faolan explained her husband had fixed her a pallet on the floor when she had shrieked that she didn’t want to die in their marriage bed.

The woman’s pale face shone as white as the cream pooling on the sill. Tendrils of her thin blonde hair plastered to her skin drenched with sweat. Spread-eagled on the pallet, her swollen body looked ready to explode.

With a sense of surprise, Ciara realized Faolan stood just behind her. The rest of the MacKay men had hurried back outside. Even the woman’s husband had retreated from the room when Ciara had entered to see if she could help. Ciara’s heart went out to the man; his wife’s suffering had nearly

driven him over the edge.

Ciara scooped the woman's icy hand up into her own and tried soothing her with a smile. "Let go," she whispered. "It will make it so much easier for your soul to move on if you will just turn loose of your fear and all this pain."

"No!" Faolan shouted as he dropped to his knees beside her. "Dinna give up. Ye must fight the damn Angel of Death. Fight for the life of your child and for your own survival."

"My laird, forgive me. But I am so weary of the pain. And this life—it is so verra hard." The woman swallowed hard, her dried lips cracking open to bleed before she managed to whisper, "And I fear my bairn has already died. The babe has no' moved in quite a while."

"Save her," Faolan hissed into Ciara's face. "If ye ever expect me to turn back to the Ways, then show me they are of some use in this miserable life."

Ciara turned to glance once more into the corner where Death stood watch. She arched a brow in silent question. Death declined with a single shake of his head.

"It is her time, Faolan. She has arrived at the end of this path and now it is time for her to travel to the next." Ciara's heart wrenched at the pain reflected in Faolan's eyes. She knew he still dwelled on all he had lost, still relived all that he had suffered.

"But the bairn," he whispered, hoarse with desperation. "The child never had a chance. How can ye sit there and tell me that death is the destiny for this child?"

"Please." The woman choked out in a coughing whisper as tears streamed down the sides of her face. "Please end this for me. I do not know how to let go. I don't know what to do." With a trembling hand, she clawed at Faolan's plaid and pleaded, "Listen to your wife's words. I see Death awaitin' over in the corner. He has been here for a while. I'm no' afraid to follow him anymore. He seems quite kind, and he shall take me away from the bitter harshness of this life."

Letting her hand rest on his, Ciara tried her best to calm Faolan with her touch. "Open your senses, Faolan. Stop thinking about death as what has been taken away from you and look at it as a doorway to another existence. You saw your family. You know they're happy and safe even though they might not be with you. Open your heart. You know once you travel through the Veils, you will see them again. Once you cast this physical body aside, you are capable of so many things."

“Show me this Death,” Faolan growled, jumping to his feet and unsheathing his sword. “I have a great deal to say to him about all he has stolen from me in this life.”

With a wave of her hand, Ciara removed the glamour shielding Death from Faolan’s eyes. “He is right there. But be respectful, Faolan. He is slow to anger but the darkest times of mortal man’s history are when his patience has run thin.”

As Death’s cloaked form shimmered and became visible, Faolan rushed at the specter with his sword. Death opened his arms, his shadowed face expressionless as Faolan ran him through.

Faolan yelled the MacKay battle cry, turned and slashed, ripping his claymore across Death’s throat. Nothing happened. The blade passed right through as though Death wasn’t there. His sword clenched in both hands, Faolan gave a mighty grunt as he sliced down the middle of Death’s tall, cloaked form. This time Death merely shook his cloaked head, his form completely untouched. The specter stood silent, while the angry man stirred his essence with his sword.

When Faolan had exhausted himself and stood doubled over and panting, Death finally spoke, his voice rich and deep as a melodious chord echoing through all eternity. “Faolan, let me show ye what would happen if I didna exist. Let me share with ye what happened one time in history when I paused for a brief moment in my gathering of the souls. Open your mind and ye shall see that I am truly mortal man’s dearest friend.”

Faolan’s mind filled with the vision of a battlefield covered with bloody and broken bodies. The injured lay moaning, their cries only heard by the great birds circling overhead. He watched as the men suffered, writhing in pain as the birds landed to rip away at their flesh. He cringed, the bile burning in his throat as he saw them ripped open and eaten alive. Sinew and muscle torn from their bones, eyes plucked from sockets. Pain-filled shrieks mixed with excited caws of the birds as the men’s bodies were sliced and torn with razor sharp beaks and claws.

Although he couldn’t understand their language, somehow, he knew the men pleaded for Death to come. Their screams and moans rose from the battlefield until the clouds parted and Death appeared. The cries of the warriors reached a fevered pitch. However, this time their voices were filled with hope. They knew their relief had finally arrived. Soon, their pain and suffering would end.

With a wave of his pale hand, their bodies released their souls. They flocked to embrace Death; their thankfulness clear in their shining new forms. They followed Death as he led the way back through the clouds, away from the suffering and pain.

As he withdrew his vision from Faolan's mind, Death extended a pale hand toward the woman where she lay upon the floor. "This woman has suffered her entire life and the child within her is physically deformed. This is the wrong century for this child to be saddled with such a frailty. If this child stays upon this plane with such a condition, it will know nothing but sorrow and cruelty from the harshness of this time. I will lead their souls to another place. I will deliver them from this reality. Granted, those left behind will truly miss them. But aren't they being selfish to insist these two remain in this life to suffer more unspeakable pain?"

Faolan grew quite still as his gaze settled on Ciara's watchful face. With a stiff nod, he rasped out his reply, "It would indeed be selfish to keep them suffering. 'Twould be more loving to bid them farewell and safe journey."

Holding out her hand, Ciara drew him down beside her and cradled his head to her breast. "Now you understand. I promise it is going to be all right, Faolan. You have to let go of the pain."

Faolan raised his head, his jaw clenched, as he rose to his feet. With a nod to the moaning woman on the pallet, he asked, "What do ye need me to do to help her on her way?"

"Go outside, Faolan," Ciara whispered. "Leave her with us. We will help her begin her final journey."

Faolan nodded once and turned to go, pausing at the doorway. "I shall go prepare her husband and try to console him on the loss of his wife and child."



GADS, the sound ripped out his heart. He wanted to throw back his head and howl. The mournful cry of the pipes echoed across the hills as they gathered around the small burial cairn. Angus played the fairest song he knew in honor of the mother and her child. The weary woman had released her soul with the rising of the sun. Ciara told him she had smiled when she'd cradled her child in her arms and walked with Death through the Veil. But Faolan didn't know what the hell to believe.

“Ye shall come with us to the Village Morag. ’Tis our final stop on this journey.” Faolan cleared his throat against the knot of emotions burning in his chest.

The woman’s husband gave a slight nod of his head, exhaustion, and grief etched deep lines across his face. “There’s nay reason for me to stay in this place. I shall pack what little I have and be ready within the hour.”

Faolan stood with Ciara and watched the poor man stumble away, eyes downcast, shoulders slumped as he wandered away from the grave.

Ciara slipped her hand into his chilled palm and gave Faolan a reassuring squeeze. “Are you all right?” she asked, peering up into his face.

Faolan felt a numbness creep across his body that didn’t come from the cold. He felt no emotions right now and that was just the way he wanted it. He squinted his eyes and stared out across the land. Every muscle in his body tensed as he braced himself for his wife’s answer. “Why are ye here, Ciara? What the hell do ye want of me? What is it ye expect to do?”

Edging closer, Ciara leaned into his chest and peered up into his face. “I am here to be your wife and the mother of your child. Is that such a terrible thing?”

“Who are ye, Ciara? Are ye a witch? Or are ye some sort of punishment sent to me from the goddesses?”

Ciara backed away a bit at the harshness in his tone. She sensed a growing uneasiness. Faolan had hit uncomfortably close when he supposed her as sent from the goddesses. Perhaps she should allow him to believe her a witch. After all, his mother had been one of the most powerful *bana-buidhseachs* his clan had ever known. If she didn’t tell him something to satisfy his infuriating stubbornness, he would never lower his guard enough to allow her into his heart. It would be so much easier for her to get pregnant if she could snare the man’s emotions.

With a decisive nod, Ciara shrugged. All she could do was try. “I am sorry, Faolan. I lied to you before because I feared you would have me imprisoned or maybe even burned at the stake. I didn’t know you and I knew of what happened to Dierdra’s mother. I was afraid to tell you the truth.” Ciara took a deep breath and ignored the twinge of regret at having to tell a lie. “I am a witch. I’ve been a witch since birth. The magic flows through my blood just as surely as magic flows through yours.”

Faolan ground his teeth but remained silent as he brought his plaid closer around his shoulders.

Ciara watched him; she pushed back the nagging temptation to join her mind with his. His aura still swirled the darkest shade of blue she had ever seen but the edges sparkled a bit lighter. She hoped that was a sign his frame of mind was improving but until she knew his thoughts, she couldn't be sure.

Reading his thoughts was too much of an invasion. Especially when she knew he would sense her presence in his mind. No. She needed to give him his space. He'd seen a lot today. At least he hadn't denounced her outright. He hadn't yet ordered her taken away to await their annulment at the keep. She knew Faolan struggled with all he'd learned. Life lessons were sometimes difficult to swallow.

"Ye are truly a witch? Ye swear to me that ye are telling me the truth this time?" Faolan turned from glaring across the hillside to scowl down into her face.

Ciara paused. *Dammit.* She hated lying but she couldn't tell him the absolute truth. She shoved her conscience to the back of her mind and forced an innocent nod of her head.

His expression darkened while thunder rumbled in the distance. Faolan jerked his head toward his men standing at the bottom of the hill. "Go to your horse, woman. Leave me with m'thoughts. I canna bear much more this day."



AT THIS RATE, the only way she would ever get pregnant was if she mounted the man in his sleep. Ciara glared at him, training her eyes on the middle of Faolan's back as he rode at the head of the group.

When they had finished at the last village and started the long journey back to the keep, he had ordered her to ride in the middle of the cluster of clansmen. She'd never seen such a fearsome scowl when she tried leading her horse to the front of the pack to trot along at his side.

When she had opened her mouth to argue, he'd raised his hand in the air. His dark look had silenced any further discussion. Faolan had informed her it was for her own well-being. One never knew when there might be a highwayman about.

Ciara was no fool. She could sense any threat long before the men or Faolan knew what stirred unseen alongside the roadway. The only thing she sensed in the air right now was the distinct smell of Faolan's fear. Ciara knew

he was more terrified of her than any foe he had ever faced in battle.

She scowled down as she knotted the reins in her hands, not bothering to guide the horse. She'd connected her mind with the beast when they'd first set out. The horse knew what she wanted it to do. Therefore, she had reduced the leather straps to worrying beads while sorting through her current dilemma. She thought for sure she had convinced Faolan with the visions from the spring. If that hadn't convinced him, then she'd made it even clearer when she introduced him to Death.

Expelling a huffing sigh into the frosty morning air, she glared at the back of his head. He had to be the most worrisome beast she had ever met in all her centuries of existence.

Cutting her eyes over to the rider by her side, she caught Maxwell spying on her beneath his ruddy brows. Now, there was a possibility. She urged her horse closer over to his side, so she and Maxwell might share a private word. "Maxwell, tell me. How long have you known Faolan? The two of you seem quite close."

Maxwell returned his gaze to the view just above his horse's ears and inhaled a deep breath before he replied, "Faolan's father agreed to foster me when I was but six years old. Faolan had just turned six himself. I guess ye could say I am closer to Faolan than he is to his two brothers who shared his mother's womb with him."

Ciara mulled over Maxwell's words to the steady rhythm of the horse's clopping hooves. "So, you're the one most familiar with just how impossible he can be when it comes to accepting what's best for him?"

With a chuckle, Maxwell shot her a lopsided grin as he visibly relaxed in his saddle. "Aye. Faolan takes some convincing at times. He thinks it must be his way or no way at all."

"I can make him happy, Maxwell. Tell me what I need to do to gain his trust?" As she spoke, Ciara projected an enveloping aura of comforting energy and stroked Maxwell's subconscious with the power of her own wishes.

Maxwell blinked hard as though trying to stay awake and shook himself as he sat taller in the saddle. Ciara suppressed a smile. Mortals often felt as though they were about to nod off when she seeded their mind with her desires.

"Be true to him, m'lady. Just give him time. He doesna trust the idea of love or the mysteries that make life worth living. Somewhere along the way,

Faolan grew unable to withstand the bitterness that sometimes makes life difficult to bear.” Maxwell scrubbed his face, stifled a yawn, and nodded toward Faolan as he continued. “He loved his family more than life itself. He’s never known the type of closeness his parents shared with each other. He’s never known a true love of his own. So, when he lost his parents, he felt abandoned. Then he felt even more alone when his brothers and baby sister disappeared. Faolan has always been a bit of a loner. So, it was nay a stretch for him to forsake ever falling in love.”

“Help me, Maxwell. Work on him from the inside out while I try to gain his trust.” Ciara peered at Maxwell; positive her words took hold as his eyelids drooped with weariness. “Help him realize becoming a husband and father would be a blessing instead of a curse.”

Not even trying to stifle another jaw-cracking yawn, Maxwell shook himself as he nudged his horse to a faster trot. “I shall help ye all I can, Lady Ciara. But there is one condition I place upon my assistance.”

Ciara smiled with self-assured satisfaction, as she gifted Maxwell with a nod. “Name it.”

Maxwell returned Ciara’s smile with a smug grin and a jaunty wink of his own. “Stop tryin’ to seed my mind when ye’re asking me for your favors. Ye will find it ne’er takes full hold on me. Faolan used to try bespelling me so much when we were lads, I finally learned how to block his energies. ’Tis been a long while since I’ve had the wool of suggestion settle inside m’head but I can still recognize it when it’s done. But I promise ye, m’lady. I’ll help ye all I can. Even though ye havena been able to *suggest* your way into my head.”

Ciara struggled for some sort of reply. Well, that wily old fox. He’d been onto her all the while. The first case of giggles she’d enjoyed in centuries bubbled up until her laughter echoed across the mountains and ravines. “Well said, Master Maxwell! Congratulations indeed. I agree to your terms since you’re obviously honest to a fault and I must say I look forward to being your friend.”

Maxwell nodded and waved a hand at Faolan when he turned to glare at them both from the front of the group. Then Maxwell chuckled back at her in return. “Aye, m’lady. We’ll be fast friends and I look forward to helping ye in your quest.”



FAOLAN STOOD on the front steps of the keep, surveying the courtyard with a critical eye. Other than a few minor repairs to some of the storage sheds, the castle stood ready for winter. He'd been a bit concerned as to whether all would be ready since he'd been absent from the keep so late in the season. He should have known better than to fear anything would be amiss. His servants were experienced and diligent. They'd never disappoint their laird. They knew the importance of their duties. Preparing the castle for the long Highland winter was quite a serious task. The survival of the clan depended upon the successful planning and back-breaking work that took place in the early fall.

Fish to be smoked, beef and pork to be salted and cured, root vegetables had to be stored in the massive cellar. Medicinal and cooking herbs must be dried as well.

As Faolan inspected the keep, he grew more satisfied and relaxed with every bit of preparation he saw. Noticing Maxwell coming his way, he groaned and retreated up the stairs to the top of the skirting wall. He wasn't in the mood to listen to Maxwell's chatter. He'd seen him plotting with Ciara on the ride back to the keep. He still hadn't forgiven Maxwell for that first faulty bit of advice that had set him on his slippery slope straight to hell.

Now Faolan realized if he had never given into the temptations of Ciara's enticing charms, he might've escaped this commitment to a woman he couldn't resist. But it was too late to retreat. He was as addicted to her as though he was a drunkard and she a robust wine.

He leaned against the stones at the top of the battlements, inhaling a deep breath of the crisp, clean air. The isolated crags and mountains surrounding his home mirrored his jagged soul. The feathery clouds racing across the icy blue horizon reminded him of his troubled thoughts. The day shone unseasonably clear for the Highlands; an unnatural calm floated upon the winds. Faolan sensed trouble brewing in the air just as he felt the unrest in his soul.

"Have ye settled the lad and his mother with Mistress Sorcha?" he called out over his shoulder as Maxwell topped the last stair. If Faolan could find a task to send Maxwell running it might spare him listening to any more of Maxwell's misplaced advice.

Maxwell stood with his hands clasped behind his back, silent, apparently choosing not to answer. He just meandered across the battlement. The stiff, chill breeze blew in from the sea and tugged at the length of his plaid.

Faolan turned just in time to catch Maxwell studying him. With the heat of his temper warming his blood, he spat out his words. "I would appreciate an answer, Maxwell. I asked ye if ye settled the lad and his mother with Mistress Sorcha?"

"I heard ye the first time, Faolan. My body might be a bit scarred from its battles but there is nothing wrong with my hearing." Maxwell walked to the side of the castle that overlooked the white capping waves. "I didna follow ye up here to speak about the future of some waif and his widowed mother. I came up here to talk to ye about your wife."

"The way I see it, ye have no rights to that subject, so ye had best be taking yourself back down to the courtyard." Faolan rested his clenched fists atop the wall.

"Lady Ciara only wants to be a good wife to ye, Faolan. She told me so herself."

Faolan's frustration churned like a brewing storm as he remembered Ciara's words. "She lied to me, Maxwell. She lied to me and now she has admitted to being a witch."

"Your mother was a witch. A verra gifted witch who helped this clan in many ways. Ye've also got the gift of magic simmering in your blood, Faolan. What difference does it make if the lass has magic flowing through her veins as well?"

Faolan's shoulders tensed as he scrubbed at the dark stubble of his jaw. Why was Maxwell being so stubborn? Was the man blind? Had Ciara cast a spell on him while they rode together back to the keep? "Ciara is not who she said she was, man! She is not the Sinclair's daughter."

"Aye, and is that such a terrible thing? Would ye truly want your children to have a drop of Gordon Sinclair's blood in their ancestry?" Maxwell snorted and shook his head. "I would think that verra fact alone would endear ye to the lass even more."

"I don't want to be endeared," Faolan shouted, his voice echoing across the hills. "Damn ye, man! Can ye no' see the woman is driving me insane?"

Maxwell clapped his hand on Faolan's shoulder and leaned closer to look him in the eye. "What I see is a man who's terrified of leaving his loneliness behind."

Faolan shrugged Maxwell's hand away and stomped farther down along the wall. "Ye have no idea of what ye're saying. Now I suggest ye go and do as I asked and see to young Ian and his mother. Mistress Sorcha will help ye

get them settled into the empty croft along the southern wall.”

Maxwell relinquished with an exaggerated bow of his head as he turned to go. “As ye wish, Laird MacKay. I shall see to the lad and his mother. But I suggest ye start seeing to yourself. Our lives are short and often filled with pain. When ye have something good in your grasp, it seems a waste to toss it aside.” Maxwell turned and made his way down the stairs to follow his laird’s commands.



CIARA PEEPED around the garden of the castle to ensure she was quite alone. When she felt sure no one spied on her presence, she waved a healing hand over any plant that seemed a bit on the wilted side.

Her attention restored the late seasonal herbs and vegetables to vibrant health. The greening leaves exhaled a sigh of relief as they stretched toward the fading rays of the sun. With a satisfied nod, Ciara surveyed her results and wound her way out of the gardens across the grounds to the nearby stables.

She had overheard Faolan instruct Maxwell to take the boy they’d rescued upon their travels and show him a few chores he could handle in his still weakened state. Ian’s health had already improved in the short time since their arrival at the keep. His thin cheeks had lost a bit of their pallor, but he still had a way to go. A few more weeks of Sorcha’s belly-stretching meals and he’d soon fill out enough to look his age.

A few at the keep had mistaken his silence for lack of intelligence. Ciara’s heart stirred, filled with pride. She knew Faolan had seen the brightness of the lad’s eyes when his mother had pulled him into the room. Faolan had assigned Maxwell to foster the boy and afford him every chance to learn a useful trade.

An unusual yearning nagged in the center of her chest. Faolan’s acts of caring toward those in his clan, especially his kindness to the child, had melted several centuries’ worth of ice from around her heart.

As she entered the warm, inviting stable, Ciara just made out Maxwell’s deep voice murmuring in the farthest stall. Pausing, she heard him stress the importance of mucking out the stalls to maintain each horse’s health.

She propped her chin atop her hands where she’d latched onto the side of

the stall. When Ian glanced up through his scraggly hair, she dazzled him with her kindest smile. “Ian, you look healthier every time I see you. I’m so glad you’re doing better.”

Tucking his pointed chin to his chest, Ian stared at his feet. Whispering his reply, his tiny voice disappeared into the folds of his oversized tunic. “Thank ye, Lady MacKay. Thank ye for letting me and Ma come here to the keep. I promise to always work hard for my laird.”

Ian chewed his lips and ducked his head even lower, shuffling his feet as though trying to hide behind the pitchfork in his hands.

Maxwell settled his hand upon the boy’s bony shoulders and gave Ian an approving nod. “Ye’re a good lad, Ian. Laird MacKay and his wife have faith in ye and know ye’ll not disappoint them.”

As he edged his girth out of the stall, Maxwell motioned for the boy to continue his mucking of the soiled hay. With a nod at Ciara, Maxwell arched a brow and glanced toward the outer doors. “Lady MacKay, would ye mind if I walked with ye back to the hall?”

Ciara sensed the unspoken weight of Maxwell’s words and brushed off her hands as she moved away from the stall. “Of course.”

She paused just a moment to gift Ian with a reassuring smile and placed a gentle hand on his cheek. “I’m proud of you, Ian. Keep doing well and make your mother proud.”

With an obedient bob of his scruffy head, Ian hurried to resume his tasks.

Ciara stood outside the double doors to the stables, her shawl pulled close against the chill of the day. Waiting until Maxwell had closed the door behind him, she reached out and grabbed his arms as soon as he turned around to face her. “Well? Do you have any news for me?”

Maxwell jerked, backed up a step and glanced about the yard to see if anyone watched them. “Lady Ciara! Mind your actions. Ye will surely have all the hens wagging their tongues that ye’re chasing the laird’s finest warrior.”

Ciara took a step back and did her best not to laugh. The round old fox certainly thought a lot of himself. Her face ached with the desire to smile as she lifted her hands in the air and acted as though Maxwell were hot to the touch. “Oh, really? You certainly seem blessed with a generous supply of self-esteem. Are you conceited or just convinced?”

Maxwell puffed his broad chest beneath his plaid as though he were a peacock about to strut about the courtyard. A mischievous grin spread across

his face as he gave her a wicked wink. “There’s nothing wrong with knowing your strengths and embracing your talents fully.”

Ciara tightened her shawl closer and chuckled as she shook her head. “I wish you could teach my beloved husband that concept. Now I repeat, do you have any news?”

Maxwell fell into step beside her as he clasped his hands behind his back. “Let me just say the man appears more at peace, he seems more at ease in his own skin. I don’t believe he’s quite as angry at life.”

Scuffing his worn leather boots in the dirt, Maxwell lowered his voice as he continued, “I don’t know what ye said to him the day before we returned from the shores, but he seems less angry at the world, less frustrated with life in general. It has been many a year since I have seen him so relaxed. He only cursed me three times this morning.”

“Only three times?” Ciara repeated. Her lips trembled as she bit back her laughter. “I am impressed. That’s indeed an improvement for Faolan. But why hasn’t he returned to my bed, Maxwell? I miss my husband’s warmth at night.”

Maxwell raised his hands in the air and shook his head as he replied, “If I ask the man why he’s not bedding his wife, he’s liable to do more than just curse at me!”

Ciara pursed her lips as she searched the battlements where she could just make out Faolan’s silhouette against the evening sky. “I am getting tired of having to stalk the man and plot every seduction. It’s beginning to hurt my pride, Maxwell. Am I that displeasing to his eyes?”

For a brief moment, Maxwell’s gaze settled on Ciara’s inviting neckline, then flitted to the tight bodice of her woolen dress and roamed to the curve of her waist. He groaned as he pulled his stare away from the swell of her hips filling out her form-fitting gown. “Trust me, Lady Ciara. Whatever reason Faolan has for not warming your bed comes from his past. There’s nothing amiss with you.”

As she smoothed her hands along the deep green of the dress, Ciara’s attention remained on her husband’s shadow upon the walls of the keep. His stark profile darkened against the gray of the horizon, magnifying the loneliness of his soul. “I grow tired of this game, Maxwell. Tonight is going to be the last time I force him to see how enjoyable a wife can be.”



FAOLAN SLEPT. Or at least pretended to sleep as Ciara slipped into their room. She dearly loved stalking her prey in the flickering glow of the hearth. She leaned back against the door, enjoying the rise and fall of his chest as he sprawled naked on the bed.

She allowed her eyes to drink in the rippling muscles of his chest and trace along the cut lines of his flat, taut stomach. The target of her nocturnal hunt twitched semi-aroused, a silent invitation for her to complete the awakening. Muscled legs flared in a welcoming vee, as though he waited for her to crawl up between them.

He wasn't asleep. Without a sound, Faolan turned his head and returned Ciara's stare. He took his growing erection in his hand as his eyes raked across her attire.

Ciara had draped a gauze veil of the whitest silk around her naked body. She had tinted her nipples; they tightened now against the folds clinging to her breasts. As she floated across the floor, his hand stroked. His arousal lengthened as his gaze settled between her legs. The satin material parted at the top of her thighs treating him to an unhindered view.

Ciara paused by the bed. She let the gauze slide to the floor and cupped her breasts in her hands. She lifted them, stretched and peaked her nipples, showing Faolan what was about to become his.

She climbed on the bed, crawled up between his legs, and teased along his inner thighs with the barest touch of her nails. She cupped him with one hand then replaced his stroking hand with hers, gifting him with slow, enticing pulls. She bent toward him, her gaze locked with his, and flicked her tongue along the length of him for a salty, tantalizing taste. As he caught his breath, she swirled him into her mouth and swallowed him as far as he'd go.

She licked and nibbled, now and then raising her head, then rose to hold her body over his. With deliberate strokes, she slid the tip of him against her mound as she leaned forward to suckle his bottom lip into her mouth. Rubbing his engorged tip against her pulsing entrance, she stroked his shaft and pressed her breasts hard against his chest. She finally thrust her body down upon him and buried deep as she climaxed with a groan.

Then she rode. First, a slow, circular grind of her hips then moved faster, as she pulled his hands to cup her breasts. She climaxed again, arching her back as she shuddered upon his body.

He rolled her over and plowed deeper; Faolan laced one hand in her hair as he buried himself inside her clenching body. Holding her face steady, he

waited for her orgasm to subside and for her to open her golden eyes. “Now, Ciara. I will claim ye now and take ye as I should have on our very first night. When this evening is over, there will be no more shadows between us. This night we will become husband and wife.”

Before she could reply, he covered her mouth with his and ground himself deep inside her. Slow, delicious, torturous strokes had her writhing as she wrapped her legs around him. Then he withdrew. She cried out at the sudden void he left behind. A sharp intake of breath replaced her cry as he licked his way down her body. She moaned and knotted her fingers in his hair as he tantalized her with his tongue. He suckled and stroked until she cried out for mercy, begging him to get back inside her. As Ciara shuddered upon his hand, he raised his mouth from between her legs to capture her nipple and nuzzle at her breast.

Faolan caressed Ciara’s body as her moans subsided into satisfied purrs, then smiled as he parted her thighs. He raised her hips to settle himself into the heated depths of her core. He pulled her against him, again and again, as he knelt between her legs. Finally, he stretched himself over her body, and pounded with a possessive fury that had grown since the first moment he’d seen her. As his body spilled itself into her womb, his roars mingled with Ciara’s moans. They shuddered against, in, and around each other until they collapsed into a breathless heap.

He cradled Ciara against his chest. Her heart hammered against his. Faolan buried his face into her hair, his lips pressed against her ear. “I surrender, Ciara. I can hold out no longer. Teach me how to love.”

Ciara nuzzled the side of Faolan’s neck and nipped at the base of his ear. As she snuggled her body closer, she exhaled with a whispered sigh, “I believe you already know.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

“If you don’t hold still, I will never get it out!”

Ciara perched atop one of the trestle tables near the hearth of the main hall.

Faolan squirmed on the bench in front of her, his outstretched hand pinned between her knees. *Damn.* The woman had the grip of a warrior locked in life-or-death battle.

“Faolan! I thought you were supposed to be a battle-hardened Highlander? You’ve shown me the scars from dozens of wounds. This is just a bit of wood festering in your hand. Why can’t you hold still while I dig it out?” Ciara yanked his hand higher into her lap and held it tighter between her knees.

Snorting, Faolan pulled against her grip. He jerked away for a second time just as she reached for the bit of wood. He’d seen she almost had a good grip on the embedded splinter and wrenched his hand out of her grasp just as she had leaned close to slide the offensive bit of wood free of the tender swollen wound.

“Faolan. A child doesn’t squirm this much.” Yanking his hand closer to her chest, Ciara hissed out a frustrated breath through gritted teeth.

“A child doesn’t realize the pain ye’re about to cause. And I ne’er said the enemies tortured me. The wounds they inflicted were clean quick thrusts with their blades. The bastards didn’t dig around in my flesh to see what they could find.” Faolan pulled his throbbing hand away and stood with it clutched against his chest. He glanced at the reddened flesh of his palm and inched a step away. If the woman would just leave him alone, the festering puss would expel the sliver in due time. Without any additional pain. Just as nature

intended.

Ciara rolled her eyes and glanced around the hall. Stepping forward, she locked her gaze with his and widened her golden eyes.

Faolan stood paralyzed. He couldn't retreat, nor could he call for help. Frustration surged through his veins until his heartbeat hammered in his throat.

Ciara reached out, covered Faolan's hand with her own, and imprisoned him within her trance. With a gentle breath, she blew three times into his face then withdrew her hand with a satisfied nod. "Feel better?" she asked with a condescending smile as she turned to clear away her tools.

While keeping a watchful eye on Ciara to ensure she didn't lunge for his hand, Faolan risked a quick glance into his palm to assess his once painful wound. Pleasant surprise relaxed his tensed body when flawless skin met his gaze instead of the festering sore. His hand appeared as though the spike of wood had never marred the skin.

He glared at her as he rubbed the once tender spot and observed it with an irritated hiss. "Why did ye no' do that in the first place instead of tryin' to split m'hand in two?"

With an innocent batting of her lashes, Ciara shrugged. "You told me you had issued an edict against all magic. I was just trying to abide by your wishes."

"Abide by my wishes? That's verra amusing, especially coming from you. In the future, if it comes to a choice between invoking magic and causing me unnecessary pain, I give ye permission to choose magic." Faolan snorted over one shoulder as he turned to stomp from the hall.

Ciara caught him, spun herself into his arms, and snuggled up against his chest. Voice sultry, she pressed her curves against his body in the most ancient of unspoken messages. "I'm sorry, husband. When I finished, I intended to kiss it and make it better. I swear you would've forgotten every little pain."

"Humph," Faolan grudgingly grunted as his body responded with immediate interest. It had only been this morning since they'd enjoyed each other by the light of the breaking dawn. His wife's appetite for lovemaking proved to be almost more insatiable than his own. "I fear I'm going to wear ye out, my delightfully wanton bride."

After leading him to a secluded alcove near the stairs, Ciara slid her hands up his thighs to the throbbing part of him straining beneath his kilt.

“Just keep trying, my fine Highland lover. I promise to let you know when to stop.”



“WHAT DO ye mean ye canna find the priest? The man should be snug in his croft we built behind the kirk.” Faolan sat behind his desk; the scratching of his quill echoed in time with his words.

Maxwell stood in front of his laird; his hands clasped behind his back. A pained expression spread across his face as he shifted from foot to foot.

“Father Danaan’s croft is empty and no one has seen him at the kirk since Sunday past. Ye know ’tis not really necessary the man perform the wedding ceremony. The betrothal has become a legally binding marriage since all can see ye’ve been quite successful in getting your lovely wife with child.”

Faolan relaxed back in the depths of his chair and tossed his quill upon the table. Drumming his fingers beside the drying parchment, he studied Maxwell’s worried face, which spoke much louder than Maxwell’s words. “What are ye not telling me, Maxwell? What has happened to the priest?”

“Nothing has happened to the priest! He’s just left this part of the Highlands. That is all I have to say.”

“Just left this part of the Highlands,” Faolan repeated, rising from his chair. “And why exactly would a newly ordained priest leave such a promising parish as the MacKay lands? And in the middle of winter, no less.”

Maxwell clamped his mouth shut, his lips thinning into a determined line of silence.

“Maxwell! I asked ye a question, man. And it was not a difficult one at that.” Faolan circled Maxwell, drawing ever closer as his friend closed his eyes and tucked his chin to his chest. Dammit, he’d keep the man in this room until he told what he knew about the priest.

“I told that little hypocritical beast we would be just fine here without him, and if he needed to find the pathway to Hell, I would be more than happy to point him in the right direction,” Ciara said as she pushed open the door.

“Ciara! Ye did what?” Faolan couldn’t believe what she just said. Had she noticed they neared the dead of winter? Did she just say she had told a holy man to go to Hell? “How could ye do such a thing? He is a priest, Ciara.

He's supposed to guide us and tend to our souls."

"The drunken bastard," Ciara hissed. "He judged everyone, gossiped worse than the kitchen maids, and blackmailed the parishioners with what he reaped from the confessional." Ciara's eyes flashed as she whirled on Faolan, standing with her fists clenched at her sides.

Faolan shook his head and nodded toward the doorway to allow Maxwell his escape. Shooting Faolan a sympathetic glance, Maxwell edged out the door.

"Ciara, the man was the clan priest. 'Twas his duty to listen to their confessions and assign them penance to atone for their sins." Faolan steadied his voice to a calm soothing tone as though explaining the tenants of Catholicism to a child.

"The man used their confessions to force them into whatever perversions he dreamed up. And for some strange reason he found it convenient to forget his God wrecks the judgment. Penance my ass!" Ciara slammed her hand in the middle of Faolan's desk, sending his neatly piled parchments flying.

With an irritated growl, Faolan threw his hands in the air and retreated to glare out the window. "Fine, Ciara. Then ye've cheated yourself out of a wedding ceremony. 'Tis nearly the dead of winter and we'll no' be able to get a priest this far north until late into the spring. I thought 'twould be nice for ye to have a fine wedding feast but that is out of the question now."

"Do not give me that holier-than-thou Highlander attitude, Faolan. It sounds to me like you're the one who's champing at the bit for a wedding. As far as I'm concerned, the deed is done."

Her words needled him, chafed him raw. Faolan turned, clenching his teeth to keep from exploding. He had to remember she carried his child. Where did the damn woman get such a tongue? And Mother of God, those golden eyes lured him even more when they snapped with the fire of her anger.

She glared at him. "Do you have anything else to add or is this discussion over?"

Faolan sucked in a deep breath before he spoke. Now he understood what his father had endured. "I think we're quite finished here."

"Fine." Batting her eyelashes and clasping her hands to her chest, Ciara purred in a sarcastic tone, "Well, dear husband, then I guess the lack of a ceremony will be my punishment for being such a difficult woman."

Then she stomped out of the room and slammed the door behind her.



AND HERE SHE thought they'd been getting along so much better. She must've been delirious. The man was as hardheaded as they came. How dare he take that tone with her?

Ciara paced along the top of the skirting wall, her breath fogging in the cold night air. No wonder the goddesses had chosen the MacKay bloodline. The generations flowing down from the MacKay genetics would be indestructible by their sheer stubbornness alone.

Leaning against the frost-covered stones, Ciara stared out across the barren hills. According to the stars, the season had just passed the winter solstice, the time when her beloved Alba slept.

Ciara adored this time of year even though the air grew bitter with the cold. Pulling her plaid tighter about her shoulders, she snuggled into the heavy wool protecting her from the bite of the icy wind. She loosened her hair around her face to shield her cheeks from the cold.

During this time of year, the stars seemed particularly close and brighter in the sky. The sparkling blanket of the night covered the keep as Ciara fumed atop the castle wall.

Faolan would never understand why she had detested that perverted priest. If she explained it to him, she risked revealing all her secrets. She had run across so many of the priest's hypocritical kind in the future while she battled the mortal's selfishness and greed. She'd become obsessed with ridding the MacKay keep of the man as soon as she had seen him as a harmful soul.

"Come inside, Ciara. 'Tis too cold up here for a woman in your condition. Ye will chill yourself to the marrow of your bones. I fear ye will become ill and I know in my heart it canna be good for our child." His deep voice echoed from across the rooftop, pulling her from her thoughts.

Ciara hadn't heard Faolan's approach. Her emotions had deafened her to her surroundings.

"I'm fine," she snapped with a yank of her cloak tighter about her shoulders as the wind whipped against her.

Then he stood behind her, his arms encircling her body, cocooning her against the breadth of his chest. He blocked the fierce wind and tucked his own plaid around her as he sheltered her into his warm embrace. Spreading his hands across the swell of her stomach, he pressed his face against her

cheek. The warmth of his breath caressed her chilled skin as he whispered, “Come inside, Ciara. I am sorry I spoke to ye the way I did. I didna realize the priest was such a vicious little man.” Faolan nuzzled the curve of her neck, coaxing his way closer to her ear.

Unable to resist the power of his voice, Ciara snuggled deeper into his arms. “I guess I might’ve been a little touchy today. I just really need you to understand the man wasn’t good for our people. But I am truly sorry I spoke so harshly to you.”

“Then ye’ll come inside and let me warm the chill from your body. Our bed is cold when ye’re not in it. I canna sleep when ye’re not lying in my arms. Ye’ve ruined me for sleeping alone.” Faolan scooped her up into his arms, held her tight against his chest and carried her from the wall without another word.



SO MANY PEOPLE milled around the main hall, Ciara thought she would retch. The aroma of so many unwashed bodies had taken on a personality of its own. She shuddered as a particularly offensive breeze reminded her of that drawback of this century.

Most Scots of this era thought it dangerous and unhealthy to bathe during the dead of winter. She swallowed hard against the bitter taste of bile rising in her throat. She tried breathing through her mouth in short tasteless gasps. Whew! Perhaps her newly seeded womb also attributed to her enhanced sense of smell.

At the onset of the latest severe winter squall, all the inhabitants of the nearby crofts had gathered inside the castle’s walls. Weathering the storm within the keep ensured the safety of each and every MacKay kinsman.

A sense of pride swelled in her breast as Ciara beheld Faolan across the room. He had restored her waning faith in mortals. Faolan wasn’t about wealth, power, and lands. His father had taught him at an early age his greatest asset was the loyalty of his people.

Ciara smiled, watching him where he sat at the table in front of the widest hearth. The roaring flames lit his face as though he viewed the pits of Hell. A distraught woman of advanced years flailed her arms before him, capturing his full attention. As she ranted her hands fluttered through the air as though

she were about to take flight.

As Ciara noted the growing look of confusion on Faolan's face, she wound her way through the crowded room to see if she might bail him out.

"Ye must hear me, Laird MacKay! Someone's hidden him. I know they would try to spirit him away because he's so verra fine." Her snowy brows knotted over her crinkled eyes as her shaking hands dabbed at her tears.

"What's wrong?" Ciara asked as she made her way around the table to stand at Faolan's side. She took note of the cloudy appearance of the woman's aura and wondered if Faolan realized this woman's sense of reality might not quite agree with everyone else's perception of the world.

Turning to Ciara, the frail old woman caught her lower lip between the only two teeth she had. As she chewed, she shook her head and wrung her hands in front of her. "He's gone. Yet, I know he'd ne'er leave me of his own accord. He loves me more than life itself. Ye must believe me when I say someone ha' taken him away. I havena seen him since the snow began to fall. Please, my laird and lady, I beg ye to call upon the guards. I beg ye to have them find him."

"Find who?" Ciara faced Faolan and waited for an answer since the woman had been ranting in front of him for quite a while.

With a deep sigh, Faolan leaned forward with the barest shake of his head. "I am not quite certain, my love. So far, I havena been able to get her calmed enough to say. Whoever he is, she will only assure me that they love each other verra much."

Ciara nodded. Someone the old woman loved. She'd already gathered that part. She put an arm around the woman and encouraged her to sit beside the fire. Settling down beside her, she glanced first at Faolan, then with his silent nod of agreement, tried to find out more. "What is his name so that we might call out to him? This would help us in our search."

"Jasper. His name is Jasper. Please find him. I do love him so." As she clenched her hands beneath her trembling chin, the woman moaned and gave way to another onslaught of tears. Huge teardrops rolled down her withered cheeks then splashed to her faded dress.

"Jasper?" Faolan mouthed the words to Ciara and motioned with the slightest shake of his head.

"Aye. Jasper's my laddie. My only true love. He's never left my side before." As she wiped her tears with the back of a shaking hand, the old woman struggled to speak. "But the cold is so verra bitter. He will nay

survive. Please. Ye must find him before he freezes to death.”

“Dry your tears. We’ll do our best to find him. No clansman will die in this storm. I promise we’ll start the search this verra minute.” Rising from the table, Faolan motioned for Maxwell and Angus to come to his side.

Ciara also rose and gave the woman a consoling pat on the arm before she made her way around the table to her husband. With a meaningful look, she nodded toward the stairwell and slid her arm through his. “We need to talk before you speak with Maxwell and Angus.”

Faolan patted her hand as he nodded at the teary-eyed woman where she still sat fretting at the table. As he leaned toward Ciara, he fixed her with a placating smile and traced a finger along her cheek. “Dinna worry, Ciara. We shall be careful in the storm. We’ve searched for kinsmen in worse weather than this.”

Ciara caught herself right before she rolled her eyes. Protective Highlanders. She had to remind herself in what century she currently resided. With a shake of her head, she graced Faolan with an indulgent smile. “I just thought you might want to know that Jasper isn’t exactly one of your kinsmen. I agree it’s important for you to find him but I might be able to help you figure out where to look.”

“Not a kinsmen? Yet, he has to be. Old Drealda has lived here all her life. I might not be able to bring her husband’s face to mind right now but I’m sure I’ll remember him once I see him. Jasper must be a MacKay. I just havena been able to place him.” Faolan patted Ciara’s hand. Then he turned to go, snorting out an impatient huff when she reached out and detained him once again. “All right, woman. I give up. Tell me what it is ye feel I must know.”

Ciara stretched, placed her mouth close to Faolan’s ear and whispered, “Jasper is her wee little dog and I think he’s curled up asleep in the kitchens by the bread ovens.”

Faolan shot Ciara a quick glance, then his mouth clamped shut into a thin line as he closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. “Are ye certain?” he muttered under his breath with an exasperated sigh.

“Positive,” Ciara replied with a grin. “She holds his vision so firmly in her mind, I’m surprised you couldn’t see his image reflected in her eyes.”

Ciara glanced over her shoulder; Maxwell and Angus had already worked their way across the room, weaving in and out among the people. Expectant looks on their faces, they almost stood at attention once they reached

Faolan's side.

As the period of silence between the three men grew longer, Maxwell tilted his head to one side and lifted his hands in the air. "Well? What would ye ask of us, Faolan? Why did ye call us to your side?"

"Aye, Faolan. What's the trouble? From the look on your face, we thought it must surely be something dire," Angus piped up, his hands behind his back as he leaned forward to listen to Faolan's orders.

Faolan rubbed his chin, cleared his throat, and glanced about the room. His brows lifted as his gaze settled on the tapestries flapping at the windows of the hall. "What report do ye have on the fierceness of the storm? Have the winds abated any at all?"

"Ye called us over here for that?" Maxwell snorted as he glanced toward the windows. "Ye have eyes, man. Can ye no' see the wind is still yankin' at the plaids?"

Ciara bit her lip to keep from laughing as she stepped between the men. She widened her eyes in the most pitiful, helpless female look she could muster. "It was me, Maxwell. I am so worried about my sweet little mare. Are ye certain she's snug and safe?" She ignored the slight choking sound of disbelief from her husband standing just behind her.

Maxwell's face softened as he bowed his head and smiled. "Why, Lady Ciara, I assure ye the stables are quite snug and warm. Trust old Maxwell when I tell ye, all is well."

His great round face lit up with an indulgent grin, as Angus also added his reassurance. "Aye, m'lady. I saw your wee lassie tucked away in her stall enjoying a bit of hay. Fear not, as soon as the storm passes, she'll be ready to take ye for a ride."

Ciara batted her lashes and sighed at the accommodating men, patting them each on the arm. "I feel so much better now. Thank you for reassuring me that my little mare is quite safe. But there's just one more thing that is truly bothering me. But I hesitate to ask it."

Both men stepped forward, their faces perked with interest. Each of them fell for Ciara's helpless female bait...hook, line, and sinker. Ciara bit her lip to keep from smiling. This game was entirely too easily.

With a gallant bow of his head, Maxwell held out both hands. "What is it, m'lady? Ask what ye will. We are here to serve our lady as well as our laird."

With a meek bow of her head, Ciara heaved a great sigh as she glanced at Drealda still whimpering at the table. She pulled them in close, so the old

woman couldn't hear. "Poor Drealda's wee little dog is hiding from her in the kitchens. Do you think you might find him so she might be at peace? It breaks my heart to see her so upset. The dear woman loves him so." Rubbing the slight rounding of her belly, Ciara added another pitiful sigh as she batted her eyelashes one more time at both men for good measure.

"Don't ye worry, Lady Ciara. We'll fetch the lad and put him in her arms." Angus nudged Maxwell in the ribs as he headed toward the kitchen.

"Aye, m'lady. Tell Drealda to rest assured. We'll bring him to her shortly," Maxwell agreed as he turned with Angus and they headed out of the hall.

"Ye are truly amazing, my fine wicked wife." Faolan chuckled in her ear. He wrapped his arms about her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Ye completely motivated my two finest warriors into mobilizing a search for one wee dog."

Ciara heaved a sigh of satisfaction as she hugged his arms tighter around the small swell at her waist. "They're very dedicated, caring men. They would've done the same for you, if only you'd asked them."

"Only with a fair amount of ribbing and a considerable amount of complaining." Faolan laughed as he rocked her to and fro. "I shall have to remember to bring ye along should we ever go into serious battle."

Ciara shook her head and disagreed as she watched the men return with the little black dog in their arms. "No. You know as well as I do, if it ever comes to serious battle, they both will do whatever you ask. I have never seen two more loyal auras surrounding a pair of mortals in all my many days."

"A pair of mortals in all your many days? Ye speak as if ye are an ancient immortal." Faolan nuzzled his face deeper into the braids of her hair as he pulled her tighter into his arms. "When are ye going to tell me your secrets, Ciara? When will I gain your complete trust?"

Her heart grew troubled as Ciara turned in his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You know all about me you need to know, husband. You would be bored with all the details."

With a reluctant sigh, Faolan released her from his grasp. As he nodded toward the now ecstatic Drealda where she sat cradling her beloved Jasper, he shook his head as he replied, "Somehow, I doubt that I could ever grow bored with anything about ye, my love. I hope someday ye will be able to trust me enough to tell me who and what ye really are."

"I am your wife and soon I will be the mother of your child," Ciara

replied. “That’s all that matters. The past is gone. The future is all we need to look toward.”



FAOLAN WATCHED Ciara as she stood beside the hearth, scrubbing at Ian’s grubby face as though she were determined to discover if he were a different color.

Ciara had latched onto the lad as he’d walked past on his way to the kitchens. Poor Ian had been unable to escape. She’d scolded him about his personal hygiene, even going so far as to call for a basin of hot water and a rag to get him well on his way to removing a few layers of filth.

Ever since the snowstorm and the aromatic assault of so many unwashed bodies, Ciara had made it her personal campaign to teach the clan the benefits of regular bathing. She now had Ian headlocked against her chest, rubbing at the dirt until his damp skin glowed.

Faolan took a deep breath; a glow of contentment settled in his heart as he watched her wrestle with the squirming boy. Her once flat belly rounded beautifully, proud testament to his son’s growth within.

Ciara had sworn to him the bairn was a boy and Faolan knew better than to question her. He’d never thought he would find such a sense of peace as his heart overflowed with now. He felt more for Ciara than he could put into words; his emotions obliterated every barrier he’d ever set. If this was what his parents and siblings had found, then Ciara was right: this complete connection was worth any sacrifice.

He chuckled under his breath and finally took pity on the poor boy struggling against Ciara’s soapy rag. Ian wormed around with his eyes screwed tightly shut as he wriggled against Ciara’s ministrations. Faolan crossed the room to rescue the boy before she scrubbed his pink skin raw.

“Ciara, leave the boy a bit of his hide. Ye are going to scrub a full year’s growth from the lad.”

Ciara paused, about to rinse the rag as she held Ian’s chin trapped in her hand. “There’s a full year of filth on this child. I’m not even sure it’s Ian. By the time I’m through washing all the dirt away, I might find there’s a girl standing in these clothes.”

“I am not a girl,” Ian piped up with a horrified squeak as he tried backing

out of Ciara's unrelenting grasp.

Capturing Ciara by the shoulders, Faolan couldn't resist a rumbling chuckle. What a fine mother. She'd keep their son well in line. "I shall speak to Sorcha about getting Ian into one of the tubs tonight when the guards go to bathe." As he turned to Ian, Faolan shared a hidden wink with the boy and jerked his head toward the kitchen. "Run to the kitchen now and get your supper. Ye best hurry while I have the lady in my grasp."

Ian didn't waste any time in seizing the opportunity for escape and broke into a dead run toward the kitchens.

Ciara's eyes narrowed as her gaze settled on Faolan where he still stood with her shoulders in his hands. She tossed the rag into the basin on the table, her prey lost for now. "The boy needs to learn that if he bathes on a regular basis it will greatly improve his health."

Faolan pulled her close, nuzzled a possessive kiss into the warm silk of her neck, and rested his hand on the small bulge of her stomach. "I promise I will speak to Sorcha. Trust me, since ye explained to her that we all must start bathing to improve our health, there's no way the lad will escape a good washing when we entrust him to her."

As he spread his fingers on the promising swell, he nibbled his way up to her ear. "Has my son decided to move yet? Has the quickening finally begun?"

As soon as he spoke, he felt the faintest tap against the palm of his hand. Faolan jerked away and stared down at her waist. His throat caught; a sudden lump of emotion constricting it. He stood stock-still, holding his breath as he waited to see if his child would move again.

A smile of delight lit up her face, as Ciara's eyes sparkled. "I believe your son just answered your question. He must've heard his father's voice."

Faolan swallowed hard at the swell of feelings knotted in his throat. He bent and brushed a gentle kiss across her lips. "Thank ye, Ciara," he whispered against her cheek. "Thank ye for this...and so much more."

She pulled Faolan into her arms and buried her face against his chest. She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting against the sting of tears as strange emotions churned inside her.

As she opened her eyes, she stared up at the ceiling, peered over his shoulder, and tried to gain control. It must be the baby. She'd heard of this problem when women carried a bairn. When she'd traveled the realities, invisible to the mortals, she'd often seen expectant mothers sob for no

obvious reason. It must be the child that made her heart swell every time she looked into Faolan's eyes.

She inhaled a deep breath to gain control. She'd thought surely this weepiness would've passed by now. She thought it only struck during the first few months of carrying a child but perhaps she'd remembered wrong. This tender ache Faolan caused in her heart; this confusion needed to go away. It had to be the child. She refused to think it anything else.

She brushed the back of her hand across her eyes and gathered up the basin, soap, and rags. As she rested the bowl on one hip, she frowned as she turned back to Faolan. "I thought you were going to the Lowlands today? Weren't you and Maxwell supposed to ride out this morning?"

Faolan shook his head as he reached into the sporran strapped at his waist. He paused before pulling his hand back out of the elaborate furred pouch. "I didna feel comfortable leaving ye this morning. Ye werena well last night. I know ye said it was just the way of women when they carried a bairn, but I was afraid to leave your side."

As he took a step closer, Faolan's face grew serious as he pulled his closed fist from the depths of the bag. "So, Maxwell rode out to find what I sought. He knew exactly which smithy would have the token I had in mind. I wanted to give ye this gift, Ciara, because of all ye have given to me."

As he opened his hand, Faolan revealed an intricate band of crafted silver inset with a multifaceted amethyst. The Celtic knot work designed into the sides of the ring perfectly cradled the deep purple stone. "I never gave ye a betrothal present, nor a wedding gift. I wanted ye to have a wedding ring to wear for all to see. I want there to be no doubt that ye are truly wed to the laird of Clan MacKay." Faolan couldn't explain the fierceness of the emotions that filled his heart. Love didn't begin to explain what he felt for Ciara or the child growing within her womb. His hands trembled as he took her hand and slid the ring upon her finger. He exhaled in relief as it settled perfectly into place.

Ciara stood silent, blinking her dark lashes hard and fast as she stared down at her hand. She raised her other hand to her chest, her fingers trembling as she rested them against her throat. "It's beautiful," she choked out in a whisper. Then her golden eyes flooded with a wall of water and great round teardrops streaked down her face.

"Dinna cry!" Oh God, what had he done? The stone must be ugly. Mayhap he shouldha sent for the ruby. Faolan gathered her to his chest. "I'm

sorry. Is it not to your liking? Do ye no' want to wear a wedding ring? Ciara, please don't cry."

His concern only fueled the watery torrent now flowing down her face. Ciara sobbed louder; her body trembled as she buried her face in his chest. "It's so beautiful...I...want to wear it. It's just that—" Hiccups interrupted her words. Hysterical crying took over. Her sobs grew so loud, they echoed through the room. Servants passing through stopped and stared at the laird as he tried to console his wife.

Faolan held her close and stroked her hair. *What the hell did he do wrong?* Gently pulling her aside in his arms, he carefully dabbed at her tears. "It's just that...what? Tell me, Ciara. Tell me what is wrong. I swear to ye, I will make it right."

This statement only succeeded in raising her wails to a fevered pitch high enough to frighten the birds nestled in the narrow windows high upon the walls. Her sorrowful cries echoed to the kitchens, causing Sorcha to come running with a meat cleaver clutched high in one gnarled hand.

Wielding her blade, Sorcha's gaze darted about the room, her teeth bared as though she looked for a battle. The old housekeeper pulled up short, her eyes wide when she saw it was only Faolan holding his wife in his arms.

Faolan raised one hand in a silent motion instructing everyone to remain at a safe distance; he cradled Ciara's shaking head against his chest and softly repeated his words. "Ciara, please my love, ye must tell me what is troubling ye so. Ye are sure to fall ill if ye dinna tell me what is causing ye so much pain."

As she hiccupped her muffled reply into his chest, Ciara buried her face deeper into his embrace. With his snowy white tunic clenched in both her hands and her face ducked in the folds of his plaid, Ciara's body trembled as quieter sobs drenched the front of his shirt.

Faolan took a deep breath. He tucked a finger under her chin and raised her face to his. He tenderly pressed his lips to her forehead and reveled in the taste of her warm, sweet skin against his mouth. "Say it again, love. I couldna hear ye with your lovely face buried in my plaid."

Ciara sniffed, then swallowed hard as she clenched her fists even tighter. "I said...you are making me love *yoooou*." She ended her sentence with a piercing wail that sent the hounds scooting beneath the tables. Then she buried her face against his chest as a fresh torrent of tears started anew.

Faolan looked over the top of Ciara's head at Sorcha where she still stood

on the other side of the room. He rounded his eyes in questioning arcs as he silently mouthed his words. *“Is she not supposed to love me?”*

Sorcha nodded her head and made a circling motion over her stomach as she mouthed her reply. *“It’s the babe bringing on her tears. Dinna worry. It will pass.”*

Faolan’s entire body relaxed and he smiled as he cradled Ciara closer. He waved everyone out of the hall and rocked her trembling body as he shushed his words into her hair. *“’Twill be all right, my dearest love. I promise. Dinna worry ’twill be all right.”*



HER LOWER BACK THROBBED AS if she’d been beaten. Their son must be the size of an ox. Ciara rubbed her aching back and counted the months she’d waddled around the keep. As best she could figure, she still had at least another full moon of misery before she held her baby in her arms. How did these mortals tolerate this? And many of them did it more than once.

The baby chose that moment to roll a double somersault and Ciara warmed at the pulse of this most private of connections. Stroking her stomach, she now understood without the slightest doubt. *This* was how mortals survived this misery. When they felt the gift of life as it flared in their bodies, it showed them a glimpse of immortality. Their short lives were often such a struggle and filled with pain; this was the only magic most of them would ever know.

Then he stretched, he hooked a tiny foot under her ribcage and pushed until she gasped. Ciara held her breath, and pressed back against her side until her son repositioned and gave her a bit of relief.

“It would’ve been much more comfortable if ye could’ve talked the goddesses into allowing ye to take the form of a bird. Then the bairn would’ve been inside an egg instead of battering about your body.” Alec hopped down from the branch where he’d been perched to alight upon Ciara’s shoulder.

Ciara returned both hands to her lower back and kneaded her muscles as she swayed down the cobblestone path. She meandered deeper into the canopy of the gardens so no one would overhear her talking to the raven. *“Where have you been, dear old friend? You left without saying goodbye.”*

Alec's feathers ruffled a bit as he resettled his wings. "I thought ye might need some time alone to finish your wooing of your fine, sulking husband. From the looks of your waistline, ye appear to be doing well. Are ye sure there's just one of them in there?"

Ciara shoved the black bird from his seat on her shoulder and straightened her gown with an irritated huff. "Alec! If you've only returned to be rude, you can go back to wherever it is you came from."

Alec perched atop the ivy-covered stone wall that rose even with Ciara's head. He jerked his head, ruffled his feathers, and glared around the garden fully bloomed with the warmest days of summer. He hopped along the wall and crushed a beetle in his beak, then spat it upon the ground.

Ciara watched Alec take out his irritation on the bug, frowning as she puzzled over his behavior. Alec had returned in a foul mood. Where had he disappeared to for so long? "Where did you go, Alec? What happened that's soured your view of the world and turned you to such an ill humor?"

With his feathers puffed, Alec strutted along the leaf-covered top of the wall. His head jerked to the right and then to the left as he ignored Ciara's question.

Ciara lowered herself to a nearby bench sheltered by an arc of rowan trees. As though in a trance, she eased herself back against the seat and rubbed circles on the surface of her belly. With a weary sigh, she watched the irritated bird as he fluttered along the top of the wall. As she glanced around the gardens to ensure they were quite alone, Ciara lowered her head and fixed Alec with a purposeful stare.

The shape of the black, saucy raven disappeared. In the bird's place, a blond-haired youth with a look of shocked surprise straddled the garden wall. He stared down at his hands, his gaze traveled up his arms, then he gingerly patted at his chest. His mouth fell open; he spread his arms wide as his gaze traveled over his now quite human shaped body.

Alec jumped down from the wall, landing with a thud and stumbling forward as though unsure of how to use his legs. Average height, his build compact and wiry, his wasn't the massive bulk of Faolan's Viking ancestry. Alec stood just over five and a half feet once he straightened from his rough landing on the ground.

His round-eyed gaze locked with Ciara's as he brought his hands in front of his face to touch his fingertips and rub his hands together. "How, Ciara? How did you do this? I thought only the goddesses could return me to my

original form.”

As she planted her hands on either side of her hips, Ciara shifted positions to make more room for her very active unborn son. Mercy, she wished the child would settle for a second or two and give her poor ribs a rest. Ciara studied Alec with an appreciative eye. She hadn't seen his human shape in eons. “When the goddesses asked that I take this task, they passed the power to me.”

Alec patted at his face, shaking his head as he laced his fingers through his hair. “Why then? Why did ye release me now?”

What a flawless face. Ciara admired his smooth, tanned skin. The cut of his jaw, the line of his nose, and his features spoke pure, aristocratic precision. Alec shimmered as glorious as the angels the mortals worshiped; the portraits of the ones Ciara had seen when she'd traveled along the timeline of DaVinci's age. As she rested an arm across her swollen belly, Ciara shrugged as she replied with a weary smile. “You've served your penance, my dearest friend. It's time you were released to follow whatever path you choose.”

Alec's face darkened as he connected with Ciara's mind. He frowned as he moved to sit beside her and slowly shook his head. “Ye're sending me away. Ye're hoping the goddesses will allow ye to stay and be Faolan's wife. Ye at least wish to stay until his mortal life is finished and it's time for him to pass through the Veil.”

Alec scooped Ciara's hand in his and peered deep into her eyes. “Ye're mistaken, Ciara. They'll never allow it. They don't give a damn about your love for that mortal or the pain his loss will cause ye.”

Ciara jerked her hand out of his; he voiced the demons she already feared. “Alec! You are wrong. Cerridwen and Brid both care about me...and it's got nothing to do with my pain. Once they see how much better it would be for the future, I know they will allow me to stay. Faolan and I can have more gifted children. If one gifted child can better the world, think what several children could do.”

Alec snorted and jumped up from the bench, shaking his head as he raged with a fist toward the cloudless sky. “Stop lying to yourself, Ciara. Ye love the man and when he passes over, ye will barely survive the pain. I know ye, Ciara. I've traveled at your side for centuries. I may not have been in the form of a man, but I've loved ye with a man's heart and mind. Ye love Faolan and ye already love that child beyond all reason. Ye canna help

yourself, it's how ye're made. And Brid and Cerridwen dinna give a damn about ye."

Ciara covered her face with her hands, her throat strangling with unshed tears. By the pits of the eternal abyss, she couldn't bear the weakness of these damn mortal emotions! They ripped her very essence to shreds. "Then help me, Alec. Help me convince them I have to stay. Go to them. Help them see the truth. Make them see how wrong it would be to tear me away from these mortals I have grown to love."

Alec's eyes filled with sadness as he knelt before her and took her face between his hands. "I tried, Ciara. I swear by the eternal light of the moon. I already tried...and they refused."

Unable to stop them, her tears over-flowed as Ciara covered his hands with her own. She already felt protective toward this child she carried beneath her heart. She'd be damned if she'd give up without a fight. Swallowing hard, she wiped away the tears and her voice steadied as she swore, "Then I'll figure out a way. I've got seven years once the babe is born. Hear me well, dear Alec. I am going to find a way to stay."



HE PULLED her warm body close and spooned himself behind her. His legs notched comfortably into the crook of her knees; Faolan breathed in the sweet scent of her hair. With a contented sigh, he reached over and rested his hand on her enormous, swollen belly. He didn't want to wake her. She tired so easily these days but he longed to feel the movement of his son.

Faolan smiled into the darkness as he felt the smooth movement of either a knee or a sharp little elbow as the baby shifted positions. The child was strong. He stirred constantly as though searching for the exit from his warm, safe nest. Faolan ached to hold the child; surely, it wouldn't be much longer now.

Ciara had said the child would come late in the summer. The time she had spoken of was now. The moon would be full within the next two days. Perhaps the great glowing orb would coax the child to be born.

Firelight flickered and danced along the tapestry-covered walls, Ciara's even breathing the only sound stirring through the room. Faolan could lie like this forever, his wife and child safe within his embrace. Their heartbeats

thumped gently as they nestled in his arms. He basked in the warmth of his love for them.

He only wished he could find a way to oust whatever unseen demon troubled Ciara of late. In the evenings while they'd sit together at the hearth, she'd taken to reaching out and pulling his hand to her chest as though she feared being spirited away.

Ciara had admitted to him that she was a witch, but he had trouble believing her words. He knew of the powers his mother had held and they paled in comparison with what he had seen Ciara do.

He'd seen Ciara make things happen with nothing more than a glance. She'd never resorted to any type of spell work to make events come to pass. The closest she'd ever come to convincing him she was truly a witch was when she'd scryed the waters within the pool. Even then, she'd not needed the power of the moon or the stars to assist her with the visions. He knew the energies when he'd seen them in use. They responded to Ciara as though she were a part of them. What then could be so powerful to make Ciara afraid? What tormented his wife?

Ciara rustled in her sleep; she snuggled back against Faolan's chest. She stirred as if to reassure herself she still rested safe within his embrace. He held his breath until her breathing evened back into a slumbering rhythm and signaled she'd settled back into her dreams.

He smoothed down her curls and narrowed his eyes as he gazed out into the shadows dancing about the room. His gaze traveled over the many tapestries hung upon the walls. With Ciara's movement, he'd become aware of a new presence in the room. He searched with his senses as well as his sight; the uneasiness strengthened with each passing moment. Whatever he sensed, it neared the bed. The energy pulsed through the air and pricked through the hairs standing on his skin.

"Faolan." The voice of a female called out his name. One he'd not heard for years.

"Mother?" he whispered into the shadows. He watched Ciara's face as he spoke. He was determined not to wake his sleeping wife, no matter what entered the room.

"Yes, my son. Listen but do not speak. You will wake your poor exhausted wife." A pale, shimmering mist swirled in a pillar beside the bed, emitting a warm and loving light. "You must leave Ciara to her secrets, Faolan, just love her and allow her to be. All will become clear in the proper

time. For now, just revel in the peace and joy in your life. Trust that all will be well.”

His mother’s words struck a note of dread in his heart and Faolan eased himself higher on the pillows on the bed. He searched the mist as though trying to focus on her form and struggled to keep his voice to a whisper.

“What danger lies ahead? I hear it in your voice, Mother. Are they to be taken from me so soon?” Thoughts of the woman who died while giving birth ran rampant through his mind.

The shimmering light shifted in color, becoming a soothing shade of green as his mother’s voice lilted through the air. “There is no danger to Ciara or the child. Only challenges lie ahead. Thus the reason for my visit: I am here to impress upon you, you must trust in the destiny assigned by the goddesses. You must listen to your heart and not your mind. You must trust in the gifts you have been given.”

Faolan glanced down at Ciara’s peaceful face where her sooty lashes rested upon her ivory cheeks. He drew a deep breath, his mind still troubled at the vagueness of his mother’s words. With a weary sigh, he scrubbed at his jaw and looked up to see clearly into his mother’s eyes. “Protect them, Mother, as much as ye can. Protect them from whatever lies ahead.”

Before his mother’s face faded from view, she acknowledged with a bow of her head. “I shall protect all of you as best I can, my son. I am never far from your side.”

CHAPTER
NINE

Faolan slipped just inside the wide double-doors of the stable, taking care to close them without a sound. Ciara was worried about the boy again. She had sensed he'd been in another scrape with the older lads around the grounds. In her condition, Faolan would not have her upset. He'd see to the lad himself. He'd tracked Ian to the boy's favorite hiding place but it looked as though Maxwell had already found him.

Brown muck oozed, along with bits of straw and unidentified clumps of debris, down the sides of Ian's face. Only his tiny, red-rimmed eyes peered through the clotted mess. His torn tunic hung off one shoulder; his tattered kilt dangled from his waist. His eyes welled with unshed tears; his little fists clenched and trembled at his sides. His mouth clamped shut and he stared at his feet, widespread in leftover self-defense. His entire body trembled with short erratic jerks.

Faolan scrubbed his face with his hands. The poor lad, the other boys had razed him with horse manure. *God's beard*. Ciara couldn't hear of this. She would be absolutely livid.

Maxwell frowned down at the boy; his thick arms crossed over his barrel chest. Circling the boy, he rubbed a thumb across his pursed lips as he studied the lad. "Ye know if I take ye up to the keep in your current state, Lady Ciara will have those boys' heads on a platter."

Ian remained sullen. He stared down at his feet and didn't utter a word. He just shrugged one skinny shoulder, which succeeded in shaking free some of the foul-smelling muck that had clotted in his hair.

Maxwell made another circuit around the boy, wrinkling his nose as he used the handle of one of the rakes to push Ian's soiled tunic back up on his

body. “Why did they jump ye? I thought ye were getting along well with the other lads about the grounds. I thought ye had made some friends.”

Faolan edged closer. Ian’s answer would decide whether he lashed those boys’ arses himself.

Ian scuffed his worn shoe in the loose straw and clamped his mouth shut. With a sniff, he wiped his grubby nose on his sleeve, then sneezed as a bit of mud went up one nostril. “They said my ma was no better than a whore ’cept she tried to sell my body ’stead of hers.”

Faolan clenched his teeth, irritation seared through him at the cruelty of the youths. He’d teach those lads about selling bodies. They’d find themselves putting theirs to use scrubbing the stones lining the sluice leading out of the garderobes.

“What?” Maxwell grabbed Ian by the chin and forced the boy to look him in the eye.

Ian wrinkled his muddy forehead into a frown and knotted his dirt-encrusted brows. “They said she tried to sell me to the laird so how’s she’d be all set till she found herself a man to bide her through the winter.”

Maxwell rolled his eyes and planted his hands on his hips just below his wide leather belt. “Ian, ye know your mother only wanted to send ye to the keep to give ye a chance at living long enough to grow into a man. The woman was willing to stay the winter in her croft even though she knew she’d starve long before the winter solstice. Ye were there, Ian. Ye know there was no talk of money and ye also know what a help your ma has been to Mistress Sorcha in the kitchens. Surely, ye don’t listen to those boy’s cruel jibes when ye know they hold no truth.”

Ian shook his head so hard dirt showered from his clothes. “I know they lie. But I gotta defend Ma’s honor. I may be small but I ain’t no coward.”

Maxwell nodded, held his nose, and patted the boy on the back. “I know ye are no coward, Ian. Ye’re just a bit on the scrawny side and perhaps a wee bit ill prepared. Let’s douse a few layers of this filth off your body and then we’ll see if I can’t teach ye a few ways to fight the lying little buggers off.”

“Train him well, Maxwell.” Faolan had heard enough. He walked over to Ian, rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder and added, “Clan MacKay always needs warriors with a true sense of honor. We need men with courage against the gravest of odds. I see the bravery shining from Ian’s heart. I know he’ll serve this clan well. He just needs a bit of preparation...and right now, a bit of a bath.”

Ian stood taller beneath Faolan's praise. His eyes shone as he raised his head. He swallowed hard, gave a nod, and puffed out his skinny chest. "Aye, Laird MacKay. I shall serve ye well. I swear it upon my verra soul."

Faolan acknowledged Ian's pledge with a curt nod of his head and motioned toward two buckets on the floor. "Then off with ye to clean away a bit of this filth so ye can work with Maxwell and begin your training."

Ian looped the ropes of the buckets over his spindly arms and left the stables at an excited trot. He paused at the doorway and glanced back at the men with a thankful bob of his head.

Faolan waited until the boy had closed the door behind him, then turned to walk deeper into the warm depths of the stable. He settled himself on a built-in bench beside the stall and sank his weary head between his hands. "See to it ye train the boy how to defend himself, Maxwell. Ciara cares deeply for the lad. As her time grows near, she's easily upset. She is *not* to hear the details of this latest scrape and how cruelly the other boys treated him."

Maxwell agreed with a solemn nod and stood with his hands behind his back. "What is it, Faolan? Ye seem o'erly troubled. Surely, ye're no' this upset over something as minor as lads brawling about the stable yard."

Faolan worried his hands through his hair, raking his fingers repeatedly through the strands. He gazed across the stables; focusing his attention on some unseen object on the farthest wall.

How could he explain to Maxwell about his mother's visit when he didn't understand it himself? Gritting his teeth, he took a deep breath, then slowly closed his eyes as he spoke. "Mother appeared to me last night, Maxwell."

"In a dream?" Maxwell asked. He frowned as he glanced about the stables and made the sign of the cross over his chest.

Faolan shook his head, clasped his hands before him, and then finally opened his eyes. "No. Her spirit came to me. She spoke to me through a mist."

His gruff voice fell to a seldom used whisper as Maxwell lowered himself to the bench beside Faolan. "She came to ye from beyond the grave? Gads, man...what did she say to ye?" Leaning forward, he stared up into Faolan's face. He cringed as though in physical pain.

Faolan scrubbed his face until the skin of his cheeks burned; his muscles tensed as though he were about to be attacked. "She said I must trust Ciara, leave her to her secrets, and enjoy the peace and happiness I've found for a

little while.”

“Trust her?” Maxwell pursed his lips as he straightened to lean back against the stall.

“Ye don’t have to pretend, Maxwell. I know ye’ve noticed the inexplicable things that only seem to happen when Ciara’s about.” Faolan wearied of the subterfuge and Maxwell could be trusted. The strain of worrying about Ciara and the child had settled on him like an unbearable weight. Now that he’d accepted Ciara into his life, the thought of losing her terrified him. He could talk to Maxwell. The man would understand.

Leaning back against the stall, Faolan covered his face with shaking hands. All the damning evidence raced through his mind. Ciara displayed talents too gifted even for a highborn witch. “How many hall meetings did Ciara too easily settle arguments between members of the clan?” Faolan recounted her uncanny ability to bring the truth to the forefront of any discussion. She’d always detected the slightest untruth, seen through the cleverest lie, and somehow when brought in front of Ciara, even the smoothest of liars had stammered out the truth within minutes.

With a slight shrug, Maxwell agreed as he snapped a bit of straw between his fingers. “And remember how she predicted which clan members suffered with sickness and disease with the onset of winter? And when old Dougal had fallen in a ravine, trapped with a broken leg?

“Ye would never believe the visions she raised when we traveled through our lands back in the late fall.” Resting his elbows on his knees, Faolan fell silent as he remembered the images Ciara had drawn from the springs. How she’d shown him his loved ones had moved on to better planes. How did she have the power to control such mysteries? Even the magic of Faolan’s family paled in comparison with what Ciara had done.

The slightest movement caught Faolan’s attention; a flicker of gray shifted out of the shadows just a hint darker than the weathered wood of the barn.

Alec scurried down the supporting beam attached to the nearest stall. His tiny paws clenched at the veins of the gray, battered wood as he inched his way closer to the men. Flicking his pink ears, he peeped around the edge of the wood. He squeaked out loud as his beady gaze met Faolan’s thunderous glare.

By the goddesses, he would have his answers now. Rage pumped through his veins as he honed in on the little mouse. This little bastard would tell him

everything he needed to know. Faolan reached out with the power of his mind, paralyzed the tiny mouse, and lifted Alec into the air by his long pink tail. Faolan stared cold and hard, tempted to rip the little mouse in two; then he unceremoniously allowed Alec to drop into his upturned palm. He kept the mouse paralyzed, and brought him to eye level, glaring into Alec's beady little black eyes.

With a confused frown, Maxwell laid a hand to Faolan's shoulder, clearing his throat as he leaned in front of Faolan's face. "Faolan! Have ye taken leave of your senses, man? What do ye mean to do with a wee mousie?"

Faolan narrowed his eyes into calculating slits and held Alec up for Maxwell to see. "This is no ordinary mouse, dear Maxwell. This is Ciara's *special* friend. And if ye would excuse us, I'd like a word with wee...Alec. Yes, I believe Alec is his name. I need to speak with him alone. Would ye mind leaving us and seeing to Ian? Perhaps he's ready for ye to give him his first lesson."

Maxwell arched his bushy brows to his hairline but didn't say a word. With an obedient nod, he backed out of the stable, pausing just a moment before closing the door. "Aye, Faolan. Whatever ye say. I shall see to Ian. Ye just sit there and talk to your wee little friend. Perhaps he can ease your heart. I'll be outside if ye happen to need me. Ye just need to give a call."

Faolan ignored Maxwell's stammering and lowered the still motionless mouse to the bench in front of him. "Don't think ye'll be able to get away, little Alec. I'm just setting ye down upon the bench before ye decide to piss in my hand."

Alec crouched, motionless on the bench, his beady black eyes fixed in a glossy stare. His tail was stiffened out behind him straight as a poker where Faolan had held him suspended in the air.

"I want answers from ye, wee Alec, and I want them now. I'm tired of looking the other way. Ciara has danced around my questions ever since we met. But to keep her safe, as well as to protect my child, I have a right to know. What is she, Alec? Where is she from? I know she is not a Sinclair or even an adopted best friend, and I believe she's a bit more than a gifted witch."

Alec remained silent. He didn't make nary a squeak nor move the slightest flick of an ear.

"Sorry." Faolan focused his glare. "I'll grant ye *a bit* of movement. Now

talk.”

Alec twitched his whiskers, squinted his eyes, and wiggled his nose. “I shall strike ye a deal, my fine, suspicious laird. If ye free me from this damnable spell, I shall shapeshift into human form so we can discuss lovely Ciara man to man.”

Faolan snorted at Alec with a shake of his head. “Do ye think me a fool? If I free ye from the spell, ye could just as easily change to your raven form and fly away. Ye chose the form of a rodent to spy from the shadows. Ye shall keep the form of a rodent until ye tell me what ye know.”

Alec flattened his ears across his back and wrinkled his twitching pink nose into a tiny mouselike sneer. “Well, ye’re nay the fool. I give ye that much. But surely ye knew I at least had to try.”

As he leaned back against the heavy wood beam supporting the half wall of the stall, Faolan glared at the insolent mouse paralyzed on the bench. “Fine. Ye tried to play me for the fool. Now answer me before I change my mind and decide to feed ye to the cat.”

With one ear flicking in time with his twitching whiskers, Alec peered up into Faolan’s face. He wiggled his nose and sucked in a deep breath as he stammered out his tale. “Ciara is nay a normal witch. She is...ah...quite a bit different from your gifted mother.” Alec paused, gasped a bit, and darted a nervous look around the stable. His nose twitched as he sniffed at the air and cast a wary look at a strange light flickering just beyond the window. “Ye might say she is a chosen one, blessed by the Goddess Brid and the Goddess Cerridwen.”

Alec stopped again, his ear twitched and he stretched what part of his neck he could move as though he listened before continuing his story. As Alec spoke, his words tumbled faster as though he feared he couldn’t voice his thoughts quick enough. “Ciara has had a difficult life in serving the goddesses. Her path has been difficult to bear. Ciara has endured both loneliness and pain while attempting to fulfill her charge. She was sent here in hopes you could heal her heart and perhaps the pain and bitterness ye suffer from your own past experiences could be resolved as well.”

Faolan leaned closer to the nervous mouse and snorted with a doubting sneer. Alec lied; it glinted in the beast’s glassy little eyes and the way they darted about the stable. Rage filled Faolan, nearly blinding him. Ciara’s love for the little bastard was all that stayed his hand. “If what ye say is the truth, Alec, then why didn’t Ciara tell me this herself?”

Alec twitched a whisker and flicked an ear as he blinked at the glowing orb floating outside the window. “She thinks she was sent here to save only you. She doesn’t realize ’twas also done for her own redemption. The goddesses swore her to secrecy before ye met. They felt ye would cast her aside if ye knew the truth. The goddesses know ye had shunned the Auld Ways and forbidden magic from your midst.”

“And now she’s swollen with my son and I’ve grown so enslaved to even the sound of her voice that I’ll do anything to keep her near.” Faolan groaned through gritted teeth as he saw the reasoning in Alec’s explanation. He clenched his fists and glared down into Alec’s tiny face, rehashing everything Alec had said. He examined every word the mouse had told him. He sifted through the story for the truth. “Ye say Ciara is ‘chosen.’ Chosen to do what? And why would the goddesses give a damn if my heart was healed of its pain?”

Alec just blinked. He didn’t reply, even his whiskers remained motionless.

“Answer me, Alec! Why do ye hesitate? Are ye having trouble coming up with another lie?” Faolan picked the mouse up by his tail; his fist trembling as he fought against the urge to crush the creature in his grasp.

Then Alec disappeared.

Faolan’s fist closed in on thin air. As he opened his fingers, he stared at his empty palm and his hand quaked with the beginning tremors of rage. Then fury exploded through his veins like green sapwood on a fire.

Lightning flashed through the shuttered windows of the stable. Thunder chasing behind it rumbled so hard it shook the dust down from the rafters. Faolan threw his head back and roared his frustration, releasing his wrath to unleash the howling winds.



CIARA TURNED AWAY from the window where she’d witnessed the furious storm. Faolan. What had angered him so? Squinting her eyes against the intensity of the lightning, her heart worried at the strength of the storm. This maelstrom resulted from Faolan’s emotions. She read the energy crackling through the air as though it were words on a page. Her husband was in a rage. Something had challenged him and he’d lost the battle when he’d lost control

of his emotions. He hadn't handled the defeat well from the sound of the hissing lightning as it split through the trees.

As she absentmindedly rubbed at the taut, itchy skin of her swollen stomach, Ciara flinched against the bright flashes of light. She let the tapestry fall back over the window and waddled over to the pillowed bench beside the fire. Easing her unbalanced body back against the cushions, she grimaced as she scrubbed her ankles together and peeled her shoes off her swollen feet.

The babe would come soon, maybe even tonight. She sensed her son's impatient little soul. He grew restless inside his safe haven. Her heart stormed with mixed emotions. She longed to hold her baby in her arms but she would also miss the weight of him inside her. And once he was born, she would be one step closer to having to leave this life she had grown to love.

Love. She'd never thought it possible that she would ever love. What a cruel emotion, this mysterious energy of love. So capable of filling the heart to overflowing with ecstasy and then dashing it to pieces with unspeakable pain. She had to figure out a way to stay. She had to convince the goddesses it would be for the best.

But even if she did, her time with her loved ones would still be so short, for they would end up going where she could never follow. She was immortal. She had no soul. Ciara was an energy meant to drift upon the winds of time, traveling from one plane to the next. Although mortals' lives were short, their souls passed on to greater realities than she could ever imagine. Ciara didn't care. She would do whatever it took. She'd beg, borrow, or steal whatever time she could to stay with Faolan and her son.

A sharp pain stabbed deep within her body, tearing her from her thoughts. She caught her breath and forced her muscles to relax; then she smiled and closed her eyes. He would come tonight. Before the rising sun had chased the full moon into the horizon, she would hold her son in her arms.

Alec. Where was Alec? She wanted him present at the birth. She called out to him with the power of her mind as the pain in her belly eased. Alec had been with her for eons, through many a battle against the darkest of foes. He knew her better than anyone. Who better to keep her mind occupied as she struggled to bring forth her child?

The thought of Faolan staying with her during the birth didn't even cross her mind. Men of this time were useless when it came to childbirth. To Faolan, childbirth was a greater mystery and more frightening than the blackest of magic. A strained laugh escaped her as she paced about the room.

Ciara considered the midwives of this century an unfortunate necessity. For appearance's sake, she would allow them in the room. She sighed as she stroked her spasming belly. She didn't really want them to assist with the birth, but she really didn't have any choice. It would seem truly odd indeed, if the laird's wife brought her child into the world alone. She needed Alec to keep her company. Where was he? Why didn't he answer her call?

Another pain clenched, this time lower and longer, causing her to double over and catch her breath. *Damn Alec!* Apparently, he'd decided to ignore her summons. She should've known better than to release him from his spell.

As the worst of the contraction subsided and her muscles relaxed, Ciara hitched her way across the room. As she exhaled, she sent a thought of thanks to Faolan's time-traveling mother for having bellpulls installed in the laird's rooms.

Yanking on the rope hanging beside the bed, she waited a few moments then yanked again. After what seemed like forever and at least one belly ripping contraction later, one of the youngest chambermaids bubbled through the door. As soon as the girl saw the pained expression on Ciara's face and the way she held her middle, the maid shot back out into the hallway, bellowing at the top of her lungs.

As Ciara eased herself down into the bed, she rolled her eyes and lay back against the pillows. She groaned in disbelief as she listened to the tiny girl screech for someone to fetch the midwife and tell the laird his wife's time was at hand. With a heavy sigh, she tried to force herself to relax since it was apparent the mortals were going to panic.

CHAPTER
TEN

Faolan's eyes widened as Ciara's enraged cursing thundered from the other side of the bedroom door. The sound of shattering pottery followed another stream of profanity and the muffled thumping of scurrying feet.

He turned to Maxwell and Ian where they stood with him in his vigil in the seating area of the torchlit hall. "Is it normal for a woman to get so violent when she's trying to bring forth a child?"

Maxwell shrugged and raised his hands in the air. "I am relieved to say this is the first time I have ever been this close to a birth. As far as I know, I have no children. Which I must admit is quite a relief, since I have no wife."

"Ma says 'tis a fight to bring new life into the world. She told me women are even greater warriors than men." Ian edged his way farther away from the door as he spoke, eyeing it as though demons battled on the other side.

The two men and the young boy warily glanced at the door as another torrent of curse words resounded from the other side. They all three slid a little farther down the hall as though they feared the door was about to blow off the hinges.

"Where did she learn all those words?" Maxwell whispered as he watched the door.

Faolan ignored Maxwell's question and cleared his throat as he turned to Ian. "Did your ma say how long these things usually take? This has been going on for hours."

Ian squinted both eyes shut as he searched his memory, then finally shrugged both skinny shoulders. "Seems like every time Ma goes to help with getting a bairn to come out, it takes a really long time."

At that moment, the hallway filled with the enraged cries of a howling infant from the other side of the bedroom door.

Ian's mother, Maidrie, emerged from the room, her red face wreathed in smiles as she waved them closer. "My laird, ye have a fine healthy son and your wife is safe as well."

Faolan grabbed her by the shoulders, lifted her off her feet and laughed as he peered around her into the room. "Thank ye, Maidrie. I must see them. Are they ready for us to come in?"

With a bob of her head, Maidrie patted Faolan on the arm as she stepped aside to guide him through the door. "Oh, aye! Your lady is ready for ye. She sent me out here to fetch ye."

Face pink and flushed and her hair damp with sweat, Ciara beamed from where she lay against the pile of pillows propping her up in the bed. She held her son cradled to her breast, smiling down at his greedy rootling. "Apparently, your son worked up quite an appetite making his way into this world."

Faolan edged his way across the fur-covered floor. He couldn't breathe; the sight before him sucked the wind from his lungs. Easing himself down on the edge of the bed, he stared in wonder at the bundle nestled in Ciara's arms.

Silvery down, fine as threads of silk, covered the babe's head. His little face was still red as he suckled at his mother's breast, his tiny hands clenched into earnest fists.

With a shaking hand, Faolan reached out and stroked the child's velvety head; the small crown disappeared inside his massive hand. Amazed at the warmth and the softness of the baby's skin, Faolan smiled at the silky curve of his son's plump cheek.

"He's amazing," he whispered, then glanced up into Ciara's watchful gaze. "And so are you."

Gently disengaging her son from her breast, Ciara placed him into Faolan's arms. "Keagan MacKay, this is your father." As she covered Faolan's hand with her own, she blinked hard against unshed tears. "I know you will love him as much as I do. He is truly an amazing man."

Leaning forward, Faolan brushed her lips with his, then pressed his forehead to hers. "Thank ye for forcing me to open my heart. Thank ye for everything, Ciara."

With an exasperated growl, Keagan squirmed in Faolan's arms, his face flaming red as he sucked his fist. Apparently, he hadn't been finished at his

mother's breast and was about to make his displeasure known.

As he smiled down into the face of his son, Faolan laughed and stroked one tiny hand with his finger. "So ye're going to have a temper are ye, my lad? Are ye going to be one to speak your mind?"

"I canna imagine where he would get that trait," Maxwell snorted from the doorway.

Faolan laughed again as he placed Keagan back in Ciara's arms and watched the baby latch onto her breast. "I believe he inherited his appetite from Cousin Angus. The lad appears to be starving!"

Ciara smiled, stroking Keagan's cheek, and cuddling him close with a contented sigh. "He's braw and bonny. He's destined to be a courageous fighter and none will stand in his way." As she ran a light finger from the top of his forehead to the tiny tip of his nose, Ciara dropped her voice to a breathless whisper as a tiny teardrop escaped down her cheek. "And his soul will never go where his mother cannot follow. He will never leave her behind."



SWELTERING HEAT RADIATED through the room. Ciara couldn't remember when their bedchamber had ever been this warm. Faolan had stoked the hearth until the flames roared into a white-hot inferno. He'd weighted down the tapestries covering the windows against the prying fingers of the biting, cold night wind. Apparently, he'd decided a stifling room might help his overwrought son.

Exhaustion hammered at her weary body as she listened to Keagan's frantic wails. Poor little lad, she didn't know which tore at her heart worse, Keagan's never-ending cries or Faolan's panic-stricken face.

Keagan was a little over a month old and at the moment, he expressed his extreme displeasure as loud as his lungs could bellow. Ciara drew a shaking hand through her hair; she'd lost track of how many hours remained until sunrise. She'd never dreamed such a tiny creature could raise such a racket for so long. *Mercy*. She must've birthed the first male banshee.

Stripped to the waist, Faolan cradled his son, pacing back and forth across the fur hides scattered over the floor. The babe's fretful wails echoed off the rafters as Faolan rubbed his tiny back. The child's little legs alternately

tensed and kicked from beneath his swaddled rump. He squirmed and fretted; his rounded belly rumbled.

Ciara knew Keagan screamed with colic and by the increasing volume of his cries so did everyone in the Highlands.

She pulled herself out of the bed and held out her hands. "My turn. Let me walk with him for a while. You've jostled him for hours. I thought surely his little belly would've calmed down by now. I'm not sure what else to try."

With a shake of his head, Faolan hesitated handing over his fretting son. He cupped the wailing baby's head in his hand. The lad screamed as though a knife pierced through his little body. Faolan groaned and stared down into Keagan's face. "Are ye sure he's all right? He's in such pain. Is there no way we can get him any relief?"

Holding out her hands, Ciara nodded. "Your son is just very outspoken." Ciara remembered all the babies she'd seen down through the centuries while traveling among the mortals of the world. With a weary sigh, she kissed him on the head and cuddled him to her cheek. "He's got a bellyache. I promise. He'll be fine. If he wasn't, we both would know it."

Finally, a trick came to mind she'd once seen while watching an old wise woman tend to a young woman's brood. Ciara rubbed her cheek against the velvet of Keagan's head and hummed a monotonous tune as she paced across the floor. Settling on the pillowed bench beside the hearth, she carefully placed Keagan on his tummy across her knees. She gently jiggled her legs and rubbed his tiny back, smiling as he rewarded her with several popping farts.

Faolan chuckled as he cozied down beside her and hugged his arm about her. With a kiss to her neck, he held her close as she continued rubbing and patting Keagan's back.

"The poor lad. He's got a bellyful of gas and can't seem to pass it. Apparently, he's not as much like his cousin Angus as I first thought." Faolan reached out and patted his son's rump as he settled Ciara deeper into his arms.

His face darkened as he peered into Ciara's face while she continued rubbing Keagan on the back. "What did ye mean when ye said if something was gravely wrong with the lad, we both would surely know?"

As Ciara lifted her now quieter son up to her shoulder, she rocked to and fro to lull him to sleep. "Faolan, you know the magic that flows through our veins. Those very same energies flow through Keagan's as well. If Keagan

were threatened in any way, I promise you, we would be able to sense it.”

Faolan pulled her back against his bare chest and whispered into her hair. “I swear to ye, Ciara. I swear to ye upon my very soul, I shall always keep both of ye safe until I draw my last breath.”

As Ciara nestled back into his protective embrace, she was thankful Faolan couldn’t see her face. If he could, he would’ve noticed the immediate sorrow clouding her tear-filled eyes. These damn human emotions, so hard to control, especially this fierce love surging through her being. She blinked back the tears and swallowed hard against her choking emotions. She’d be damned if she’d waste an instant of what little time she had with her husband and her son with weeping over what the future might threaten.



WITH KEAGAN CONTENT and asleep in her arms, Ciara wandered up and down the narrow stone path crisscrossing through the gardens. She searched through the blackened branches of the leafless rowan trees and glanced under the bushes sagging low to the frost-covered ground.

Ciara searched everywhere she thought Alec might hide. Where was he? She hadn’t seen him in over two months, not since she’d returned him to his human form. She couldn’t believe he had left her without even the simplest goodbye. Alec had been the closest thing she’d ever had to a friend. How could he just disappear?

She had been more than irritated when he’d ignored her call when she’d given birth to Keagan. Perhaps she’d spent so much time amongst these mortals, she’d become susceptible to their sensitive emotions. He had really hurt her feelings when he had abandoned her without a word. Then she’d been so busy with her new duties as an attentive mother, she’d put her bruised feelings to the back of her mind. Now that she and Keagan had settled into a comfortable routine, she found herself missing her longtime friend.

She wanted him to meet Keagan. Ciara knew he’d love him almost as much as she did. Alec always held a special place in his heart for the innocents born of this world. Ciara wanted Keagan to know Alec as well. The feisty immortal could teach her son so much. Even though they’d been together for centuries, she doubted she even knew all of Alec’s tricks. She

missed the sound of his mocking voice. She even missed his snide observations.

Ciara grew tired of wandering up and down the wintry garden and settled upon a bench, the same bench where she'd begged Alec to help her find a way to stay in this satisfying life. He'd told her that day he'd already tried, had already spoken to the goddesses once. His news hadn't been what she'd wanted to hear. He'd told her they'd refused to allow her to stay.

Could he have gone back? Maybe tried again to convince them to let her stay with these people who held her heart. An uneasy feeling nagged at her. An unnatural rift in the energies disturbed her dreams at night. Ciara felt it. Something had gone terribly wrong with Alec.

She held her son closer in his plaid blankets, inhaling a deep breath; she loved his sweet baby scent. The comforting weight of his warm, little body helped her concentrate and channel her powers. She projected her emotions out into the cosmos and sent her maternal feelings across time and space. She wanted the goddesses to feel what she felt. She wanted them to know the potential depths of her pain, to feel the ache of what she stood to lose.

Once again, she called out to Alec. Many times, over the eons, she'd connected to him in this way. She'd often guided his wandering energy back to her when she'd jumped centuries in pursuit of a foe. But her call came back empty. The stars winked as silent as the waning moon where it floated on the horizon.

Ciara pulled her shawl closer around her sleeping child and rose from the bench with a disappointed sigh. The evening hour was already upon them. The air chilled as the sun settled from the sky. A pale star teased in the darkening night. Ciara looked once more into the fading light of the setting sun and sent out one last call to her friend. "Alec, wherever it is that you've gone, a piece of my heart goes with you. I hope it finds you well, my dearest friend. You truly are missed."



BAKING DAY. Ciara adored baking day. She'd often hovered unseen through the kitchens of well kept keeps just to breathe in the sweet smells from their ovens. Ciara always had a weakness for the inviting scent of fresh-baked bread. The intoxicating aromas from Sorcha's labors pulled her in even more

with the heady sweetness of the rich yeasty bread. A hearty stew bubbled toward the back of the hearth. The frugal use of leftover meat bones from last evening's meal proved Sorcha's successful management of the MacKay kitchens. Ciara's mouth watered as she inhaled again. Nothing went to waste.

Sorcha's sleeves were rolled past her elbows, as she punched and worked the dough. A fair dusting of flour covered the ever-present apron lashed about her waist. The color rode high on her weathered cheeks from the heat of the massive stone ovens. But not a drop of sweat peppered across her brow as her muscled hands kept the dough in constant motion.

Ciara noticed a new serving girl across from Sorcha at the other side of the counter. She stifled a smile as the child wrestled with an enormous ball of yeasty dough. Her skinny young arms trembled as she wallowed in the well-floured ball. Although the maid was clearly just entering the stages of young womanhood, the girl still appeared sorely disadvantaged. Sweat coursed down the sides of her narrow face and she appeared about ready to collapse.

Her nose lifted as though she were a hound on the scent, Ciara closed her eyes and her stomach growled in blissful anticipation. Fresh baked bread hot from the oven. Heavily crusted and lavished with a generous dollop of butter. She could make a meal out of a single slice...or maybe two. If it weren't for the fact that she was on a mission, Ciara would introduce Keagan to this wondrous treat. Now that he was teething, a thick crust of bread would be perfect for him to gum. But that would have to wait. She had to find Faolan to show him what his son had just discovered he could do.

"Where's Faolan?" Ciara strolled around the worktable with a chortling Keagan astraddle one hip. The lad contentedly bounced one leather-clad foot against her side as though she were his favorite steed. She tousled his silvery hair out of his eyes; her heart swelling as she hitched him closer.

Sorcha beamed at Keagan's toothless smile as she wiped her hands on her apron. She offered the teething toddler a juicy well-gristled bone and then chucked him under the chin. "Ye know we all love ye, don't ye, laddie?"

Ciara smiled at her chortling son as he puckered up and leaned forward to give Sorcha a smacking wet kiss. Keagan held everyone's hearts tight in his tiny little fists. He had them all wrapped around his chubby little finger. It never ceased to amaze Ciara, whatever Keagan wanted, Keagan always got.

Sorcha patted an escaped wisp of gray hair back into the bun twisted at the base of her neck as she turned to Ciara. With a nod toward the back entrance to the kitchens, she re-tied her apron about her waist. "I saw the laird

and Master Maxwell heading toward the stables. They've got to decide which of the new colts they're going to keep."

With a mysterious wink, Ciara motioned for Sorcha to follow as she headed toward the door. "Well, Keagan and I have something to show him. Come with us, Sorcha. You'll want to see this too."

As Sorcha followed, she laughed out loud at Keagan as he peeked at her over Ciara's shoulder. As he gnawed his treat, his plump, rosy cheeks shone with the grease he suckled from the teething bone.

Once out into the courtyard, Ciara glanced toward the stable in search of Faolan and Maxwell. They stood in front of the stone trough beside the building, caught up in some sort of serious discussion.

Faolan stood with his arms folded across his chest, eyes narrowed, his chin in one hand. He stared into Maxwell's animated face, nodding in agreement with whatever Maxwell attempted to explain.

Ciara stopped and took a deep breath. She shivered as a delicious tingle rippled through her belly. Her gaze caressed her husband's body and she licked her lips as a surge of warmth flooded through her. She'd never tire of admiring Faolan, no matter how many centuries she had to look at him. Keagan had just started sleeping the night through, allowing them to return their attentions to each other.

Rebelling against tradition, Ciara had refused to put Keagan across the keep in one of the cribs in the old nursery. She didn't care if he'd be under the caring eye of a dutiful woman of the clan. Ciara wanted her son close to her side. She didn't want to miss a minute of his life and if he cried out in the night, she wanted to be the one to respond.

Therefore, Faolan had ordered a doorway opened into a small room adjoining the laird's chambers. Keagan's small bedroom now adjoined their own. His parents responded to his every call.

But now that Keagan was older, he slept sounder and rarely roused anymore during the night. Ciara shivered as she remembered last night's pleasures and the ecstasy she'd enjoyed in her husband's arms.

Faolan sensed his wife's mental caress and turned to her with a smile. The same desire causing her body to tingle mirrored in his eyes. She knew if he had his way about it, he'd pull her into the stables and take her right there in the sweet smelling hay. But too many lingered about and from the bright-eyed alertness of his son's smiling face; Keagan was nowhere near ready for his afternoon nap.

“We have a surprise for you!” Ciara called out as Faolan and Maxwell headed her way. “Don’t come any closer. Stand right there and see what your son has discovered he can do!”

Faolan grinned and stopped in his tracks. He stood waiting, head tilted to one side. Maxwell crossed his arms over his barrel chest and watched to see what the tot could do.

Ciara extricated the well-gnawed bone from Keagan’s chubby fist and tossed it to an eagerly awaiting dog. All the clan dogs trailed Keagan. Whenever the chortling toddler was about, there’d be an abundance of dropped scraps.

Ciara steadied Keagan on his feet to draw his attention away from the bone. As she squatted beside him, she held his hands until the child realized what his mother wanted him to do.

Spying his father standing just a little way from him, Keagan squealed an excited greeting. His chubby little legs churned into motion; his uneven steps staggering in the dust. In his excitement, he released his mother’s hands, his arms held aloft to maintain his balance. He lurched forward a step then swayed to a dangerously low angle, tilting to one side before he moved again.

Proud laughter rumbling, Faolan dropped to one knee and held out his hands to his son. “Come to me, Keagan. Come to Da. I know ye can do it.”

Keagan clapped his hands and almost lost his balance, swaying until his rump almost dusted the ground. His chubby face furrowed with concentration, he grunted, then staggered forward again.

“Come on, lad. Come to Da,” Faolan prompted once more.

Keagan squealed a war cry, opened and closed his hands, then dove headlong into Faolan’s arms.

Faolan laughed as he swung the boy up into the air and held him overhead. “Well done, Keagan! Ye’re barely a year old and already ye’ve walked across the courtyard.”

Maxwell clapped Faolan on the back as he grinned up into the drooling tot’s face. “A fine lad! He’ll soon be ready to sit a horse and learn to handle a sword.”

As he set the toddler back on his feet, Faolan placed a crooked little finger in each of Keagan’s chubby hands. Together they inched in a circle about the courtyard, the huge man bent as he steadied the exploring baby.

As Ciara watched them, she stood with a hand to her throat and blinked hard against the happy tears stinging against her eyes. Brushing her hair away

from her cheek, she caught Maxwell staring at her, a strained look upon his face.

“What’s wrong, Maxwell?” Ciara studied him, her senses heightened as she peered into his mind. She searched his memories; she found the many times he’d witnessed Faolan suffer when life had been unkind.

Maxwell kept his voice low so Faolan wouldn’t overhear and moved closer to Ciara’s side. “I never thought I’d live to see Faolan this happy. Ye have no idea the change ye’ve brought into his life.”

“And he into mine,” Ciara whispered as she remembered the darkest times of her past.

Maxwell shook his head in amazement as he watched Faolan continue his stooped walk around the yard with his son. “We all know there’s something special about ye, Lady Ciara. We’ve seen the inexplicable things ye’ve done. What I ask of ye now, I ask because I care for Faolan as a brother. I mean ye no disrespect in what I am about to say.”

A chill nicked its fingers along her spine at the echo of his words. Her eyes narrowed, as Ciara forced her focused gaze straight ahead. “Speak your mind, Maxwell. Stop hemming and hawing. What is it that you would ask?”

“Don’t hurt him.” Maxwell huffed as though the words left a bad taste in his mouth. “All I ask is that ye do not hurt him. The man has suffered enough.”

Ciara raised her chin as though she’d been struck, flattening her mouth into an unhappy line. She inhaled a deep breath then released the air as if she turned loose of her very soul. “I swear to you, Maxwell. I will do everything in my power to keep any of us from suffering any more pain.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Heavy crimson bed curtains cocooned the frame, enclosing them in their own private nest. Just enough firelight filtered in around the bedposts to cast a seductive glow. The covers were wadded against the footboard and pillows lay scattered about the bed. Their naked bodies glistened in the hazy light; the pounding of their hearts settling to a regular rhythm as their breathing returned to normal.

Ciara nestled her head into the crook of his shoulder, one leg stretched over his love-dampened body. As she snuggled herself tighter against his heated flesh, she almost purred as her still throbbing body hummed in sync with his.

Faolan's hand lazily traced up and down her back, sending delicious shivers up her spine. She raised her head to draw her lips along his tempting throat, his salty skin sweet, as she tasted the tip of her tongue along the line of his stubbled jaw. "I'm surprised we didn't wake Keagan. I'm afraid I got a bit loud that time. It's a good thing you thought to pull the curtains. They must've muffled some of my cries."

Faolan chuckled as he fondled one of her breasts and kissed her forehead as he pulled her closer. "I like it when ye let me know I've pleased ye. I love the sound of your moans."

Propping herself up on one elbow, Ciara tapped the end of his nose. "You weren't so pleased the other night when Keagan suddenly appeared by our bedside and asked you why you made me yell."

His face a complete mask of seriousness, Faolan avoided Ciara's taunting gaze by staring up into the canopy of the over-sized bed. "I thought I handled

the lad's question quite well, even though it was a bit ill-timed."

Ciara pushed herself even higher up into the pillows and reached down to pull at the coverlets against the growing chill of the room. "You told him you were trying to convince me to give him a little brother and I was yelling because I wanted him to have a sister."

Faolan rumbled with laughter as he pulled Ciara back down into the depths of the pillowy mattress and rolled to pin her beneath him. "What would ye have me tell the lad? He's a bit young to learn the way of things so early. He's naught but four years old."

Biting her lower lip to keep from laughing in his face, Ciara planted her hands against his shoulders. "Your explanation was all well and good until he decided to repeat it to Sorcha and all the kitchen maids."

Faolan groaned as he settled himself back between her legs, then grinned as he raised his head. "So that's the reason for all the laughter in the kitchens whenever I call out your name."

Wrapping her legs around him to pull him in deeper, Ciara arched her back and agreeably sighed. "That's because he also told them that you call out to me in the darkness because you sometimes lose me under the covers."

As he settled his hips into a tantalizing rhythm, Faolan ground his body into hers. Then in the middle of nuzzling her neck, he paused and raised his head. "Where did he come up with that one?"

As she raked her hands down his back and matched her thrusts with his, Ciara struggled to maintain the conversation rather than spiral into mindless oblivion. The time for talking had passed; she just needed to feel. "I might've...told him..." she managed to gasp before her voice trailed off into a delirious moan.



THE FAINTEST HINT of approaching summer rode in the air. The freshest smell of new life teased the weary senses worn and tired from the staleness of winter. The morning sun shone as a brilliant medallion suspended in the crisp blue sky. The early rains had finally cleared. The world sparkled fresh and new as the day it sprang forth. Anticipation crackled in the air.

Ciara didn't realize so many of the clan could fit in the courtyard of the castle. Their faces beamed with expectant smiles. Word had traveled fast.

This morning was a rite of passage for Keagan, and apparently, no MacKay wished to miss it. Faolan's closest guards formed in a semi-circle around the front of the main stable. With their arms extended and locked at the wrists, they resembled a human fence.

Ciara paced the broad front steps of the keep, gnawing at her lower lip. She knotted her arisaid between her hands and stared within the arc of awaiting warriors. In her mind, she knew Keagan was growing up, but in her heart, he was still her baby.

Holding her breath, she couldn't believe she'd allowed Faolan to convince her that Keagan was old enough to try and ride the dark MacDubh.

The impatient stallion had a monstrous temperament. The largest horse in the MacKay stables, MacDubh was also the most feared. His coat dark and shaggy, it was the perfect package for his surly, unpredictable temper. He delighted in throwing every rider and for a vicious stomp and a bite once he had them down.

Ciara envisioned her baby on the huge beast's back and her heart nearly hammered out of her chest. She must be insane to have listened to Faolan. What did a father know about protecting his son? If that horse so much as hinted at hurting her Keagan, she'd sift him into Brid's personal stables so fast his shaggy head would spin. She didn't care if the entire clan realized she was an immortal Fury. No one would hurt her baby.

She knew the horse had only respected Faolan in the past; never once had he challenged Faolan's authority. MacDubh grew as meek as a newborn kitten whenever Faolan held his reins. Ciara prayed MacDubh would know Keagan as Faolan's son and thereby, respect and protect him as well. She also hoped Keagan would remember what she'd taught him about dealing with unpredictable beasts.

Keagan. Her baby was already five years old. The son of an immortal and a Highlander with magical blood, Keagan wasn't the average lad.

She strained to decipher the sounds coming from the stables, trying to pick words out of the encouraging laughter and shouts from behind the double doors. She couldn't make out what they said. Why didn't they come out where she could see them?

Ciara worried for Keagan. One of his gifts was communicating with animals. Therefore, she'd done her best to train him to listen to all animals and treat them with the respect they deserved. She taught him he must never use his abilities to exploit them or cause them any harm. However, she'd also

taught Keagan it was safest to keep his gifts secret, unless he absolutely had to use them.

The doors to the stable suddenly burst open as Keagan and MacDubh exploded out into the yard. Faolan, Maxwell, and several others followed close behind, shouting instructions to the lad.

Ciara rushed forward on the steps, reminding herself that Keagan had known horses since before he had walked. As a toddler, Faolan had often steadied the boy on the saddle in front of him for slow rides through the fields. When he'd reached the ripe old age of three, he'd received his very own mare. He'd soon graduated to riding alone under the stable keeper's watchful eye. However, as he'd grown a bit older, he'd become bored with the obedient, sweet-natured mares.

Ciara had held strong against his pleas to ride a larger horse but with the endless determination of the headstrong young, he'd worn his father down. Faolan consented to allow his son to ride old MacDubh.

His brilliant blue eyes snapping with excitement, Keagan beamed from atop his lofty perch. His silvery blond hair whipped in his face as the horse bucked its way through the doors. His ecstatic smile stretching from ear to ear, the young boy clung to the back of the beast as though he was a mere fly hitching a ride.

As Keagan's gaze met with the anxiety etched in his mother's face, he laid a small hand to the snorting behemoth's neck. In an instant, MacDubh settled down, and the bucking diminished to a slow purposeful trot. It was done. MacDubh and Keagan had bonded. MacDubh would do him no harm.

With a proud nod, Faolan folded his arms across his puffed chest and beamed around the yard. He turned a blinding smile on Ciara, his eyes sparkling with joy. "Could there be a better son than ours? Only five and he's already mastered our clan's fiercest stallion."

"No, my love. He is more precious than you could ever know." Ciara whispered the words under her breath, ignoring the silent, painful reminder of all she would soon lose. She swallowed hard and forced a return smile for Faolan.

Pulling in a trembling breath, she shifted her attention back to her son. The snorting horse slowed to a trot about the yard. The clop of his hooves rustled so calm and fluid, the dust barely stirred in the lot. Keagan grinned down from his lofty perch, as he brought the horse to a halt in front of his father. "See, Da? He's a kindly beast. He's nay the devil everyone says he is.

He just doesn't like it when people can't understand him. All he wants is their respect."

Faolan nodded and took hold of the horse's reins as he patted Keagan's leg. "Aye, Keagan. It seems ye have found a true friend in MacDubh. He is yours now. See that ye treat him well."

Keagan crowed to his mother who waited on the steps. "Mother! Did ye hear Da? He said MacDubh can be mine!"

Ciara smiled at the excitement she heard in her young son's voice. As she walked across the courtyard, she peered deep into the horse's eyes and sent her thoughts of thanks to the beast for his cooperation. "Remember, Keagan. You must earn MacDubh's friendship and loyalty. Treat him with respect. If you treat him like he's just a piece of property, you will find yourself without a friend."

Keagan nodded as he puffed up his tiny chest. "I know, Mother. I shall not treat him badly. I've already told him..." He clamped his mouth shut when his mother made the slightest shake of her head. "Sorry, Mother. I almost forgot," he muttered, ducking his head.

With an encouraging smile and a nod of her head, Ciara connected her mind with his. *It's all right, Keagan. Just try to remember. It's safest not to speak openly about the special things Da and I know you can do.*

Faolan glanced between his son and his wife and knew they communicated without speaking a word. A twinge of jealousy pulled at his heart at the bond they shared. Faolan almost wished he could control the energies enough to join them. He was powerful in many of the Ways. Magic flowed in his blood. He hadn't quite decided if this was a blessing or a curse.

"Can I ride MacDubh across the bridge and out into the heather?" Keagan sat atop the horse, nearly bouncing in the saddle as he waited for his father to decide.

Before Faolan could answer, Ciara stepped between them, to shake a warning finger at her son. "Only if your father and Maxwell come with you. You are too young to ride the fields alone upon a horse as large as MacDubh."

With a shrug at Maxwell's smug grin, Faolan inclined his head toward the stables. "Come, Maxwell. The lady has spoken. Shall we go for a ride with the lad?"

One brow quirked as he headed toward the stable, Maxwell's shoulders quivered with silent laughter as he shook his head. "Aye. Let's head for the

open field and the *freedom* to be found in the Highland air.”



“CONCENTRATE, Keagan. You must control the energies surrounding the object with your mind. That will keep the water tightly formed into a ball and hold it suspended where you want it.” Ciara stood behind her son, her hands resting upon his shoulders.

The peaceful sanctuary of the wooded copse surrounding the goddesses' pool provided the perfect classroom for Keagan's daily lesson. Ciara's heart swelled with pride as she noticed the level of improvement in Keagan's ability to tighten the whirling sphere of water. She had brought him here daily since Keagan had turned two years old to introduce him to the many wonders flowing throughout the realms.

Beneath the sheltering branches of the whispering pines, Ciara had opened her son's eyes to the mystical universe and the many planes of realities just waiting for him to explore. With a shuddering sigh, Ciara tried not to think about all he had yet to learn and conquer before he reached seven years of age.

She had to ensure Keagan was prepared in case the goddesses kept their word. Her heart ached as dark thoughts of losing those she loved once again shadowed her mind. Swallowing hard against the ache closing off her throat, she forced herself to put the thought aside and concentrate on her son.

Keagan stood with his hands extended, a roiling ball of water swirling in the air above his palms. Eyes wide open, the tip of his tongue poked out one side of his mouth as he struggled to keep the water formed into a rolling sphere. He practiced moving it with his mind, first to the left and then to the right. A tiny smile pulled at the corner of his mouth as he finally had the ball whirling up and down and around the clearing with a jaunty rhythm.

Just when Keagan had grown sure of himself, a rabbit scurried out from beneath a trio of low overhanging bushes sprouting beside an outcropping of rocks. Its tiny sides heaved as it hopped to snuggle tightly against the side of Keagan's foot. The reason for the rabbit's panic soon became clear when a wolf exploded from the underbrush a few moments later. Upon seeing Ciara and Keagan, the tongue wagging wolf almost somersaulted in midair as it scrambled to a screeching halt.

As the distraction of the animals broke his concentration, Keagan groaned as the water showered to the ground. "I'm sorry, Mother. I just couldn't keep thinking about the ball of water while the rabbit begged me to save him from being eaten by the wolf."

Patting her son on the shoulder, Ciara smiled and shooed the wolf back into the forest. "It's all right, Keagan. It's important you always listen to the animals but remember you have to be careful. We're going to have to find a way to keep your connections to the animals a bit more subtle. We don't want others to notice how they seem to seek you out to tell you what they need."

With a frown, Keagan bent and scratched the rabbit between the ears. Scooping the trusting creature up into his arms, he raised his head to his mother's loving gaze. "Why do I have to make sure no one knows about all the things I can do? You and Da can do things other people can't. I've heard the kitchen maids say so when they don't know I'm around."

Ciara studied her son's innocent face. Taking a deep breath, she struggled to select the right words. How could she tell her son about how dangerous and cruel the world could become if he wasn't watchful at all times? She didn't want him to live in fear or be ashamed of the powers he'd been given. But Keagan had to understand, with every mystical gift there was great responsibility and sometimes a great deal of risk.

"Ye're doing it again, Mother."

"I'm doing what?" Ciara snapped back to the present and found herself targeted in Keagan's reproofing glare.

"Ye're trying to think how to tell me about how mean the world can be and ye're forgetting how loud your thoughts can be when ye're truly upset." Keagan gently released the rabbit into a patch of clover beside the spring.

"Keagan, I have told you about entering another's mind without their permission. How many times do I have to tell you that it should never be done unless you are feeling threatened or you are absolutely certain it is for that person's own good?" Ciara tensed, finding herself winding up to repeat the speech she had preached to her son many times.

"I know, I know. A person's mind is their absolute last refuge and should never be treated with disrespect." Keagan finished Ciara's speech in a singsong voice, his little silver head bobbing in time with the recited words his mother taught him.

"Apparently, someone does not value their riding privileges. At least not until the next full moon." With an arched brow, Ciara glared down at her son,

one foot tapping in the leaves as she waited for his apology. The boy was a great deal like his father at times. He never knew when to close his mouth.

Keagan bit his lip. “Sorry, Mother. I didna mean to sound so disrespectful. I know ye only want to keep me safe from harm.”

“People fear what they don’t understand, Keagan. There may come a time when you find yourself among people who have never been around someone *special* like yourself. Not many clans are as broad-minded as the MacKay clan. Magic has always traveled their ancestral lines. But there are those of this world who think anyone with mystical abilities should be put to death because they are surely evil.” Ciara paced back and forth across the spongy moss covered ground. She didn’t want to frighten her son but for his own safety, she had to make him understand.

“Da told me about Grandmother Rachel and Grandsire Caelan. He told me how Grandsire died while fighting to keep Grandmother safe.” Keagan’s voice dropped; his tone reflected wisdom well beyond his years. “Dinna worry about me, Mother. I can sense what people hold within their hearts. Their essence speaks to me even louder than their actions. I dinna have to enter into their minds to know whether or not they are unkind.”

Ciara swallowed hard; her heart sank with his words. Keagan had just turned five years of age a few short months ago. Would that she could shield him from the evils of the world and have him only know the pleasures of a carefree child.

She pulled him to her chest and rested her cheek atop his silvery head. She inhaled deeply and cuddled him close. Ciara wished for the hundredth time since he’d been born that she could somehow make time stand still. “You’re growing up too soon, my fine young man. What am I going to do once you’re grown up and gone your own way?”

Keagan wrapped his arms tight around her waist and snuggled deeper into her arms. “I am always going to be here for ye, Mother. Dinna worry. I will never go where ye canna follow.”

Ciara blinked against the tears and swallowed hard as Keagan repeated the words back to her, she had whispered to him upon his birth. As she tousled his hair, she lightly coughed, and struggled to choke back her emotions. “I know you will always do me proud, Keagan. Now, run and gather more water from the spring so we can return to our lesson.”

Watching him run away from her across the clearing, she sent a silent message out into the cosmos. “Please don’t take me away from them,” she

whispered and hoped the goddesses would heed her words.



CIARA SHIVERED as the fierce Highland wind howled cold and bitter outside. She knew the blizzard swirled and drifted snow against the walls of the keep, isolating those within. It didn't matter; she heaved a satisfied sigh. Here inside, the hearths blazed, stoked with great logs that exploded with raging flames that kept the demon cold at bay.

She snuggled closer against Faolan as they sat together and listened as Keagan read aloud. What a fine son they had. He'd been as quick to learn to read and write, as he'd been to learn everything else. Like a sea sponge, he'd absorbed the written word as though his thirst for it could never be sated. Ciara's heart neared bursting with pride.

Keagan loved telling stories. The boy had a vivid imagination and once he'd learned to write, he'd taken to recording his tales on parchment and then later would read them aloud to his parents. It had become a comforting evening ritual for the family before Keagan went up to his bed.

This evening's tale was of a faery queen whose loyal servants would whisk unsuspecting mortals off to a mystical land. Once there, the mortals fell in love with the faery world and would beg the queen for permission to stay. She'd look into their hearts to see if they were pure and capable of unconditional love. Those traits alone determined if she granted them permission to stay in her blessed land. If found lacking they'd be returned from wherever they'd been taken. The only problem was that a mere moment in the Land of Fae was a hundred years or more in the life of the mortal. So if their hearts lacked truth, they found themselves returned to a world where everything they had ever known and loved had long ago turned to dust.

"So if their hearts had been pure, they would've been allowed to stay in the delightful Land of Fae?" Faolan nodded his approval of the moral of the story as Keagan turned the last page and looked up with an expectant smile.

"Aye, Da. I want everyone to know it's what lies deep within their hearts that truly matters and makes them who they are." As he gathered up his pages, he tucked them under his arm and rose from the fur spread in front of the fire to go up to his bed.

Faolan pulled his son to his chest and tousled Keagan's hair with an

affectionate rub. “Ye are a wise lad, Keagan. Now give your mother a hug and off with ye to your bed.”

Wrapping his arms around his mother’s neck, Keagan smiled as he kissed her cheek. “I love ye, Mother. I shall leave my stories on your bedside table so ye can add them to the book.”

“I’ll bind them along with all the others, Keagan. We’ll soon have quite a collection. Good night, son. Sleep well. Do you really think it necessary that all the dogs in the keep share your bed each night?” Ciara glanced at the five dogs patiently sitting beside the doorway waiting to follow Keagan upstairs.

Keagan smiled at his faithful friends as they waited wagging their tails. With a shrug, he edged his way out of the room with a grin. “I canna choose between them, Mother. I love them all the same.” Then with a mischievous quirk of a silvery brow, he added before he bounded up the stairs. “Besides, they keep me toasty warm when I snuggle down between them.”

Faolan laughed as he settled his arm around Ciara’s shoulders and pulled her close to his side. “Keagan’s heart is as big and open as the Highlands. Ye wouldna have him any other way.”

With a contented sigh, Ciara snuggled back into Faolan’s arms as her gaze settled on the mesmerizing flames. “He’s an amazing child. When he reads his stories, sometimes he seems so much older. You never know what he’s apt to say. I believe he’s taught me more than I could ever hope to teach him.”

Stroking Ciara’s hair away from her face, Faolan pulled her close. With a tender kiss against her neck, his voice fell to a husky whisper. “He’s almost as amazing as his mother who’s still a wondrous mystery to me this day.”

Ciara turned upon the bench. She shivered with anticipation as she unlaced her dress. There was no one left in the sitting room. There was only Faolan and the fire. She knew in her heart, no matter how much time she spent with Faolan, her desire for him would never wane. The inferno raging whenever they joined had only grown hotter with each passing year. She needed her husband. She needed him inside her. She sensed her time in this world with her loved ones grew short.

Ciara stood. She let her skirts fall to the floor in a woolen heap around her. She held out her hand and waited for Faolan to complete her embrace.

Faolan wasted no time in stripping off his kilt and tunic until nothing remained on his skin but the flickering light of the fire. He pulled Ciara into his arms and folded her into his embrace. He bent his head, covered her

mouth with his and lowered them both to the floor.

As the fierce north wind moaned outside the walls, Faolan and Ciara's moans echoed within. They made love in the firelight of the hearth of the great hall until deep into the night. As the hour grew late, Faolan scooped Ciara up into his arms and carried her up to their room. He held her tight against his chest as though they had just married. As they settled deep into the pillowed softness of the bed, they joined their bodies again.

They didn't sleep until the sun broke over the horizon; Faolan still buried deep within Ciara. She held him tight as she drifted off into a dreamless void, surely nothing could break this bond.



THEY WALKED IN SILENCE, side by side, down to the waves crashing upon the shore. The night breeze wafted warm, filled with the sounds of summer bugs chirruping to the winking stars. The air floated heavy with the scent of pines as the wind danced down from the hills. A late summer's eve in the Highlands was pure tonic for a weary soul. However, the comfort of the evening was lost to them. Faolan knew Ciara's heart sank as heavily as his. Once again, she had failed to conceive.

Faolan found a perfect rock on which to sit and held out his hand to Ciara. With a sad smile, she placed her hand in his and climbed up to settle herself between his legs. She leaned back against his chest, her head resting beneath his chin as he wrapped his arms around her. To look out to the horizon, it seemed the world must have ended with the coast of Scotland, so vast and endless was the sea.

They sat in silence and stared out across the ripples of the waves for what seemed like hours. After one of Ciara's deepest sighs, Faolan rested his cheek atop her head. Lore, he couldn't believe he'd been such a fool, been such an idiot to add to her pain. "Please forgive me, Ciara. I didna mean to shout. Ye know what a hardheaded fool I can be. I would never mean to cause ye pain. I didna understand what ye were trying to tell me."

As she pulled his arms tighter around her, Ciara squeezed his hands with hers. "It's all right, Faolan. I just wish I could give you the answer I know you want to hear."

Faolan held her so close he could feel her heartbeat against his chest. He

flinched at the sorrow he heard in her voice. The pain he knew he'd caused by what he'd thought was a simple request. "Ye've already given me one verra fine son. It doesna matter if we never have any more children. Please forgive my thoughtless words, Ciara. I didna realize the risks of your looking into the future. But now that I think over what ye said, I see the truth in your words. I suppose I was desperate when I asked ye to scry the waters of the goddesses' pool to see if we ever have another child."

With a shuddering sigh, Ciara kept her eyes locked on the tireless crash of the waves. The moonlight sparkled atop the frothing water as silver dust sprinkled from the stars. She shook her head back and forth upon his chest, as she blinked hard against the tears. "There's nothing to forgive. I hope you truly understand why I'm unable to scry into our own future. It's too risky, Faolan. I have seen how too much knowledge about what lies ahead can push you over the brink into madness."

She sniffed as she swallowed hard against her storming emotions and rushed on to try and explain. "I want more children just as much as you. Keagan is almost seven years old. He doesn't come running to his mother anymore. My baby's growing up."

She couldn't tell him, she'd also hoped in vain over the years if she could become pregnant again, the goddesses would somehow heed her wishes and grant her a reprieve. Surely, they would never remove her from this world if another gifted bairn was on the way. But her womb remained stubbornly empty. It was as though the Powers had sealed it shut. Ciara feared her time with her family was about to run out. She sensed a slow shifting in the energies. Keagan would be seven years old in a few short months, the end of her allotted timeline.

Faolan tightened his hold around her body and swayed as he rocked her in his arms. "All that matters is that I have ye in my life. You and Keagan are all I need."

She closed her eyes against his words, huge tears escaping to roll down her cheeks. How could she prepare him for the pain that lie ahead? How could she prepare herself?

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Boughs of dried flowers and branches of richly colored leaves decorated the mantels and the stone ledges surrounding the hall. Tables groaned beneath platters of roasted hams of wild boar and mouthwatering troughs filled with baked squash and hot buttered breads. The usual entourage of dogs huddled beneath the benches and tables. Their tails thumped as they eyed the tempting morsels headed their way.

Ciara's heart ached as she stiffly sat in her chair on the dais. Keagan's seventh birthday. The reason for the late summer feast. How would she ever survive it?

Keagan sat in the place of honor at the main table beside her next to his father. Her throat clenched around the knot of emotions as her son laughed and clapped at the antics of the fiddlers as their music stirred the crowd.

Angus treated them to his best sword dance atop the crossed blades of his own and Maxwell's swords. He danced with agility, arms raised in the air, touching the tips of his toes between the blades with a frenzy.

The crowd cheered as Angus finished the feat without once touching the blades with his toes. With a sad smile, Ciara bowed her head. If they'd been going to battle, this would've been their omen that they'd be successful in their quest. A sign from Cerridwen: Keagan would be successful as he journeyed through life.

Faolan stood with his hands raised and drew their attention, quietening the din of the room. With a proud nod, he waited as they all settled into their seats. Once they had finally grown quiet, he stepped behind his chair and pulled a tartan-wrapped bundle from the shadows. With a wide smile, he uncloaked a small shining sword fashioned after his own massive claymore.

As he balanced the hilt in one hand, the blade tip in the other, he turned to his son. “Keagan, ’tis time ye received your own blade to protect ye as ye grow to be a man. ’Tis a proud day that a father stands before his son and puts his first weapon into his boy’s hands.”

Keagan’s eyes widened with excitement. He bowed his head and took the hilt of the sword in his hand. As he held the blade straight up and down in front of his body, he caressed the precious gift with his gaze. With a deep breath, Keagan jumped into his chair, then roared as loud as he could while holding the sword high over his head. “*Bi Tren, Bi Treun!*”

Everyone in the room joined in the MacKay cry. The pipers coaxed the battle song from their pipes. The walls of the keep trembled as excitement swelled to fill the room. Maxwell and Angus raised Keagan to their shoulders and marched with him around the room. Keagan waved his sword in time with the pipes, his laughter lost among the cheers of the crowd.

Ciara rose unsteadily and stood beside Faolan. Her smile strained until her face ached as she clapped in time to the music. Today was her deadline. Her time was up. She already felt a change in the air. She couldn’t tell if her uneasiness was due to the dread of leaving her family or to the strength of the ethereal summons. Either way, she wouldn’t be able to resist the imbalance for much longer. Her essence couldn’t withstand such a strain of despair. She was about to shatter into the cosmos like a piece of finely blown glass.

Ciara blinked hard against the unshed tears. She wouldn’t let them fall. She’d be damned if she’d ruin this proud moment for her son and her husband. She refused to let them know her pain. She would see to it they had their special day. It would be her last gift to them both.

“Look, Mother! It’s truly fine. Have ye ever seen such a blade?”

Maxwell and Angus deposited Keagan back at the main table to stand at his mother’s side.

With a quick nod, Ciara laid a gentle hand to his cheek and smiled down into Keagan’s face. “It’s a truly fine blade for a truly fine son. Your father and I couldn’t be more proud.”

“What’s wrong, Mother? Why are ye so sad? Dinna fear, I’ll be careful with the sword.” Keagan hugged Ciara tight as he looked up into her face.

With a start, Ciara realized Keagan was too perceptive. She might fool the others but she would have to use her powers to shield her true feelings from Keagan’s senses. With a cluck of her tongue, she pecked him on the cheek and powered up her defenses. “I know you’ll be careful. I’m just a silly

woman who hates to see her baby growing up so fast.”

“I am not a *baby* anymore, Mother,” Keagan huffed with a roll of his eyes.

Picking up on his son’s exasperated tone, Faolan moved a bit closer and wrapped a consoling arm around his wife’s shoulders. As he fixed his son with a meaningful glance, he pulled Ciara close against his chest. “Ye will *always* be her baby, Keagan. Even when ye are as old as I am. They canna help it. ’Tis the way their hearts work. It’s what makes a mother so special.”

With a nod of his head, Keagan eased away from his parents, as he kept glancing toward his friends. “Can I go show Ian this fine sword? He said he’d practice with me when I had a blade of my own.”

As he waved his son away with a nod, Faolan laughed. “Aye, son. ’Tis your day. Do what ye will.”



SHE STOOD STARING down into the hearth, hypnotized by the firelight. This would be her last night with her husband. She’d pelted the universe with unanswered pleas to the goddesses. Ciara knew for certain her request to stay had been refused.

She almost sobbed aloud as Faolan came up behind her and wrapped his arms about her waist. Her eyes closed, she breathed in his wonderful scent as his lips teased across the back of her neck. She’d never forget his fragrance in a thousand years, a mixture of pine and the salt of the sea layered with undeniable strength. Her mind marked him like an animal mated for life. Ciara could find him even if she were struck blind.

The fire in her blood outgrew the flames in the hearth as he worked his way down her shoulder and unlaced the back of her dress. He cupped her breasts in his skillful hands as her gown slid to the floor. As she leaned back against him, she realized with a delicious shiver he’d already shed his own clothes.

His smooth hard muscles sang to her goose fleshed skin as her body melted back against his. She stretched, greedily seeking out his mouth as his thumbs tantalized her straining nipples. He finally released one of her breasts to slide his hand down her tingling stomach. He buried his fingers in her anxious depths as he guided them back toward the bed.

Settling them both on the edge of the bed, he pulled her down in his lap. Her back against his chest, she slid down his erection, groaning as he guided her slowly to the delightful base. He teased the nub of her entrance as he pulled her back against his chest. Her legs spread wide, Ciara couldn't resist a moan as she writhed upon Faolan's lap. The magic of his massaging fingers had her clenching him even deeper into her core.

He claimed her mouth, his exploring tongue matched the rhythm of his undulating fingers. When he finally pushed her over the edge, he swallowed her cries as she shuddered upon his shaft.

Collapsing back against his chest, Ciara pulled his hands to her breasts and reached down to cup her hands between her legs. Pulling him out of her body, she rubbed him against her as he obediently massaged her nipples.

Before Faolan realized what Ciara did, she dropped to her knees before him. With tantalizing strokes of her exploring tongue, she tortured him with slow and deliberate caresses as he fell back across the bed. She suckled him until she sensed he neared his point of release. Then she rose above his body and slid down his shaft to bring him to his pleasure.

As he shuddered and emptied inside her body, Ciara stroked his face between her hands. As she tasted his lips, she whispered against his mouth, "This evening's just getting started."



"WHERE IS SHE?" Faolan roared, storming into the great hall. He stalked his way into the middle of the room, breathless as panic ripped through his chest.

As he searched among the faces avoiding his scrutiny, he raged, shaking his fists in the air. "Angus! Weren't ye the one to ride with her to the woods? Her horse returned to the stable hours ago. Why did ye abandon my wife when ye knew damn good and well she'd be left with no protection?"

Angus shook his wooly head and raised his hands as he backed against the wall. "I thought Maxwell was the one to ride with the lady. She told me so herself. When I tried to go with her, she grew almost frantic, told me to go and see to young Keagan's safety. She said the lad was going to ride old MacDubh and she didn't want him riding alone. When I got to the stables, Keagan was up in the loft writing down one of his wee stories."

"Maxwell?" Faolan whirled to glare at his friend. "What say ye to

Angus's words?"

Maxwell stared at Faolan with a worried frown and raised his hands to hold his head. "I have never seen anything like it, Faolan." Maxwell stopped and swallowed hard as though it pained him to speak. "We were riding along together, when she turned to me and said we must hie to the keep. She said she'd sensed Keagan was in some sort of danger." Maxwell paused and rubbed his hands over his eyes; his face paled as he stared off into the distance and drew a shaking breath. "Faolan, ye shouldha seen her face. The woman was terrified for her son. We both rode hard across the fields. We pushed the horses as hard as they would go. I could hear the pounding of her horse's hooves right beside me. I could see her mount out of the corner of my eye. She was right there with me all the way. We crossed the fields together. But when we came to the bridge to cross over the ravine, I reined in my horse to let her cross over first and she was...Faolan...she was just...gone."

Faolan grabbed Maxwell by the front of his tunic, yanking him to within inches of his face. Baring his teeth as though he were a beast of the wood, he echoed Maxwell's words with a snarl. "What the hell do ye mean, 'she was just gone'?"

Clenching his teeth as Faolan's nose nearly touched his, Maxwell stolidly held his ground. "Aye, Faolan. She and the horse both just disappeared. At first, I feared they'd gone off into the ravine. But I searched the banks. I examined the brush. It's as though she vanished into the wind. And then her horse returned to the stable alone. I don't understand it, man. I tell ye, Faolan. It was as though she was just spirited away."

Faolan pushed Maxwell away with an irritated shove. He turned to pace the length of the hall. "I went to the stables and checked her horse for myself. There is no sign of violence to the beast or the saddle. It's as though she either fell from her seat or the beast just wandered away from her after she dismounted."

Faolan threw himself into his chair and dropped his head into his hands. Where could she be? What could have happened? Ciara was more at home in the wild than in any other place. There had been no sightings of any strangers wandering through the MacKay lands. Things had been peaceful for months on end. There was no way anyone could've spirited her away right out from under Maxwell's very nose.

Raising his head to stare into the flames, Faolan's heart grew leaden in his chest. *Spirited her away.* Years ago, Alec had told him that the goddesses

had sent Ciara. The mouse had confessed this news to Faolan just before he himself had disappeared into thin air. Disappeared into thin air just as Maxwell had said Ciara had done.

Was it possible the goddesses had called her back? Could some of Alec's words have held a hint of the truth? As he'd listened to the mouse's words, Faolan had been certain he'd sensed an aura of dishonesty surrounding Alec's tiny paralyzed body. He couldn't bear the thought of this possibility. If the goddesses had truly taken her away, chances were he would never see her again.

Faolan stared unblinking into the fire. He didn't look away from the crackling flames as he barked his orders to every clan member in the room. "I want every inch of MacKay land searched. I want my Ciara found."



CIARA SAT at the edge of the glowing sea. She coughed as another stream of endless tears cascaded down her face. She lifted her swollen eyes to the sliver of moon drooping in the starless sky. Locking her arms around her legs, she hugged her knees tight against her chest. Maybe if she sat this way for a few centuries, she'd keep herself from shattering into a million shards of nothing but pain.

She hated this place. The water upon this plane lay motionless and dull, the surface as solid and smooth as a newly silvered mirror. It was as though the ocean held its breath, remaining silent out of respect for her sorrow.

She missed the rhythmic sound of the crashing waves like the lively ocean just below MacKay keep. The stormy sea there had been a sweet lullaby. The endless crash and swoosh against the rocks had comforted her as she'd drifted off to sleep in Faolan's arms each night. The seas of Danu's world teemed lively and wondrous. The seas here were bereft of any life or emotion at all.

"Ye will be allowed to return to that reality someday. 'Tis not as though the mortal's world is lost to ye forever." Brid stood behind her among the gray obelisks, her form swirling with the rising fog.

Ciara transformed her garb into the skintight leather jeans and black shirt she knew Brid found extremely distasteful. She fluffed her fingers through her now erratically short-cropped hair and colored it the faintest hue of purple

on the very tips. She opened to every rebellious fiber that had ever pulsed through her body. She thumbed her nose at every civility her mothers had ever instilled within her. The goddesses had caused her the greatest pain. Ciara refused to be obedient and bow to their terms of her existence. They had given her love and then yanked it away. They had created the most painful, gaping sore in her heart she had ever known. She hated them and all they stood for.

With a defiant glance at Brid's disapproving frown, Ciara bent to brush a bit of sand from her spike-heeled boot. "Whenever you decide to allow me to return, all I ever cared about will be dead and gone. There is no reason for me to return to that world. As far as I am concerned, humankind can all be damned and sizzle until they're crispy in their self-made hell."

Brid didn't reply. She just stood regarding Ciara in her current enraged state. The goddess's eyes narrowed and her mouth flattened into a firm disapproving line.

As though she'd read Brid's mind, Ciara took a deep breath and returned to her rock on the shore. "Leave me, my mother. Before I anger you even more with the depths of my despair. Just leave me alone with my pain and sorrow before I lose what little restraint I have and dishonor whatever relationship we have left."

Brid acknowledged Ciara with a gentle nod as her form faded from view. "As ye wish, Ciara. I shall give ye time to heal before I meet with ye again."

Her throat tightened and a tear broke free to start another torrent of sorrow down her cheeks. Ciara looked up and whispered to the cold, unfeeling sky. "I will never heal from this pain."



HE BURST INTO THE ROOM, almost tearing the door from its hinges as he banged it open against the wall. "Ciara! Thank the Powers they found ye. I feared I'd ne'er see ye again."

The dark-haired woman didn't stir. It was as though Faolan hadn't spoken. She sat in the carved out windowsill and stared out into the night. She sat with her feet tucked beneath her, her hands folded in a passive knot in her lap. Even the slight rise and fall of her chest with each breath was almost impossible to detect.

“Ciara?” Faolan knelt at her side and slid her folded hands into his own. Her pale, delicate fingers were as cold as ice as if they’d suffered the fiercest of Highland winters. If not for the fact that she turned away from the window, Faolan would’ve thought he held the hand of a corpse.

This woman appeared identical to his beloved Ciara, until he looked into her eyes. Gone were the golden eyes flashing with a myriad of emotions and sparking with intelligence and wit.

Instead, he stared into the depths of a gray, vacant-eyed stare with a vague and out-of-focus expression. His blood ran cold as Faolan saw before him a woman who had somehow misplaced her soul.

He raised his hand to caress her cheek. As he spoke, Faolan’s voice caught in his throat. “Ciara? What has happened to ye? Who...or what has stolen your spirit?”

The silent Ciara turned back to her glassy-eyed stare out the window. She settled her body farther away from Faolan’s touch and deeper into the corner of the window seat. She refolded her hands in her lap as though Faolan hadn’t spoken a word.

Sorcha eased her way into the room and closed the door behind her. She coughed. A few moments later, she cleared her throat. At last Faolan turned, as the noises Sorcha made broke through the fog of his pain. The kitchen’s mistress stood in the middle of the room; her head bowed as she waited.

At his curt nod, she beckoned Faolan to follow her from the room. Sorcha glanced toward the silent woman staring out the window and gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

Faolan rose from where he’d knelt at Ciara’s side and followed Sorcha out into the hallway. He paused and glanced back at Ciara; with the vain hope she’d somehow sparked back to life. His shoulders slumped as he watched her lean her head against the edge of the window and reach out toward the rising moon. She still didn’t speak, just sat with one hand lifted toward the winking stars.

Sorcha eased the door shut behind them once they were out in the hall. She knotted her hands in her apron, with a sad shake of her head. “She has been that way ever since they found her.”

“Where did they find her?” Faolan whispered, his voice cracking with grief. His gut clenched as though he’d been beaten.

“At the base of the oldest oak tree of the wood. She was curled among the roots.” Sorcha almost wrung her apron into tatters with her kneading hands.

“She’s not spoken a word. They couldn’t even get her to rise from the base of the tree. Maxwell had to pick her up and ride back with her cradled in his arms.”

Faolan balled his fists against the wall and pressed his forehead against the chill of the stones. The muscles of his back knotted with tension as he pounded the wall with his hands. “What is wrong with her, Sorcha? Can ye tell if she was *harmed* in any way?”

Sorcha pressed a comforting hand on Faolan’s shoulder. “She has not been ravished. And as far as I can tell, she’s suffered no physical harm. When Maxwell brought her to me, I bathed the grime from her body and dressed her in her gown.” Sorcha’s voice caught as she struggled to continue. “She’s like a bairn’s ragdoll. She never moved. Just laid there staring at something only she could see.”

Faolan turned from his pounding of the wall and leaned against it instead. As he raked his hands through his unkempt hair, he squeezed his eyes shut as though trying to block Sorcha’s words.

Faolan opened his eyes and took a shaking breath as he dropped his hands to his sides. As he turned to walk away from the room containing the only woman he had ever loved, he didn’t look back as he choked out his orders. “Take care of her, Sorcha. See to her every need. I don’t care how long it takes. We’re going to take care of her till her spirit returns. She is still my own Ciara.”

“It will be done. I swear to ye, my laird. Our lady will want for nothing.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

“**N**ow hear me, Keagan,” Faolan said. “Dinna be upset if your mother seems a bit *different*. She’s just unwell right now. Ye must be patient and speak to her quietly. Give her a wee gentle hug about her neck and tell her how much ye love her.”

Faolan nudged the boy in the middle of his back and nodded in the direction of the gardens. Faolan, Maxwell, and even Sorcha had agreed that perhaps if Ciara saw her son, she might somehow snap out of her vacant-eyed trance and return to her vibrant self.

Keagan leaned to one side and peered around Maxwell’s broad body. He bent his tousled head with a curious stare and studied the woman awaiting him in the garden. He quirked his mouth into a dimpled frown and stared harder at the woman’s face. His pale brows knotted in disbelief, as he faced his father with an accusing glare. “That is not Mother! How could ye think that wee small woman over on yon bench could be my mother? Have ye both gone daft *and* blind?”

Faolan crouched and brought his face even with Keagan’s. He inhaled a slow breath as he took his son by the shoulders. He swallowed hard and steadied his voice, forcing his churning emotions to the back of his mind. “Of course, that’s Mother, Keagan. She’s just—” Faolan stopped short and glanced over at the woman on the bench. He was at a loss for words. How could he explain to his son that his mother had returned to them as nothing more than an empty shell?

Keagan turned and looked again at the sedate woman who sat on the bench in the gardens, then returned a disbelieving scowl on his father. “How can ye not see it, Da? I know Mother said ye didna have the sight but ye

dinna need it to see this woman doesna look like Mother at all. She's too little. She's a wispy thing. Can ye no' see it? Mother is tall. Mother is like a warrior princess. That woman looks like one of the fae of the woods. Look closer, Da. Can ye not see her in her true form? Look beyond the glamour, Da!"

Damn the boy! Now was not the time. Faolan couldn't bear to look in the direction of the woman staring up into the clouds. He just stood with one hand resting on his son's shoulder and gritted his teeth. "Keagan. Now is not the time for your stubbornness. Go now and greet your mother. It will help her feel better!" Lore, Ciara had gifted the boy with hardheadedness. Why did he have to be so much like his mother?

With his jaw clenched in the identical image of his father when Faolan was about to lose his temper, Keagan gave a curt shake of his head and jabbed a finger in the direction of the garden. "I am not playing any sort of game! That woman is not my mother. Ye need to look with your heart, Da. Use your heart instead of your eyes."

Turning to stomp his way across the path, the young boy paused before storming out the garden gate. "Ye must use your magic, Da, to see the truth of this world. I dinna mean to be disobedient, but Mother said there would come a time when I would need to be firm with ye about your beliefs and when ye should use your powers. I canna say if she meant this day or not. All I know is that pitiful woman sitting on that bench is definitely not my mother!" After he spoke his piece, he marched out the gate, but stopped just short of slamming it behind him.

"How can one so young sound so wise?" Maxwell wondered aloud as he watched Keagan storm out of their midst.

Life shattered, Faolan raised his face to the cooling breeze as it wafted down from the surrounding mountains. In the space of just a few short weeks, his entire world had fallen apart. The scent of the heather from the nearby hillside succeeded only in increasing the consistent ache in his chest.

It brought back the memories of the warm, secluded hillside with his loving wife in his arms. Exhaling with a groan, he scrubbed his face with his hands, his voice raw with his breaking heart. "Ciara insisted on preparing Keagan for what she called a turbulent future. She never revealed the details of his lessons, just insisted I trust her in preparing our son."

Faolan scuffed his boots against the moss covered stones of the path as he made his way over to the empty-eyed woman sitting on the bench. Reaching

out an unsteady hand, he brushed his fingertips to her hair. How could this woman not be Ciara? But then again, how could she be? Gone was the fire, the fury, the passion. Gone was even the melancholy and mysterious depression that had plagued her of late. Gone was everything that had made his wife the wondrous woman he loved more than life itself.

Physically, this woman appeared to be Ciara. Same hair, same face, and she seemed to have the same body. Faolan didn't know for sure since he found it almost physically painful to be in the same room with the eerily silent woman and hadn't harbored a thought of returning to their bed since he'd looked into those damnably vacant eyes.

However, if Keagan was right, then what was the truth? Who was this woman and where had she come from? More important, where was his wife? What had happened to his beloved Ciara?

Faolan turned to Maxwell and nodded toward the garden gate. Damn, he felt as defeated and weary, as if he'd aged a hundred years. Life wasn't worth the battle without his beloved Ciara. "Maxwell, see if ye can find Keagan. Bring him back here to the gardens. Since my son is so clear-sighted, perhaps he can show me how to see through this cruel illusion he swears exists."

Maxwell shrugged; one scraggly brow cocked as he responded with a curt nod of his head. For a brief moment, he rested a consoling hand upon Faolan's shoulder before he left to fetch Keagan back to the gardens.



A MIXTURE of pain and pride flooded Faolan's chest as his gaze settled on his son. One of the last conversations he'd shared with Ciara sprang to mind as Keagan walked back through the garden gate. Damn the boy favored his mother across the eyes, but Ciara had been right, the rest of the lad was all MacKay.

Keagan stood tall for a seven-year-old boy. The top of his head already reached Faolan mid-chest. Even though still a lad, the blueprint was clear: Keagan would someday follow in the footsteps of the majority of the MacKay males. Keagan would be a mountain of a man.

Keagan's eyes had settled into the darkest shade of blue the clan had ever seen. Faolan had heard talk they reminded everyone of the deepest waters of the sea or the part of the sky closest to the edge of a full moon in the deepest

part of winter. His blond hair shimmered the silvery-white blond of the very young and was just beginning to darken at his crown. Faolan smiled, remembering Sorcha had told him the kitchen maids gossiped that the boy was already strikingly handsome even though he was still just a lad.

Faolan was relieved Keagan's amazing way with animals had also extended to any person he met. He'd learned the boy could perceive their thoughts and feelings without them having to say a word. Unfortunately for Keagan he'd also inherited his father's temper. With a sigh, Faolan realized he'd have to help Keagan learn how to control his emotions. One of the last things Ciara had mentioned was that Keagan was just as adept as Faolan at stirring up a good thunderstorm when angered.

"I'm verra sorry I spoke to ye the way I did, Da. If ye wish, I'll try and help ye see past the glamour to find out who she truly is." Keagan stood with his gangly arms folded across his chest and his chin jutted into the air.

Faolan stifled a smile. His son didn't sound verra sorry. He sounded thoroughly pissed. "That sounds like a fine idea, Keagan. How shall we start?"

Keagan shifted to stand between his father and the catatonic woman who sat staring straight ahead at nothing. They were still in the garden sheltered just inside the castle's skirting wall where the quiet woman perched on the edge of the bench. A bit of sunlight remained in the day, just enough to barely warm the stones. This late in the season, the trees were bare. The only hint of green was the ivy covering the walls.

Keagan looked over at the woman then turned to his father with a scowl etched across his narrow face. He inhaled a deep breath and repeated his instructions as though his father was a bit slow. "Da, ye must look at her a bit out of focus. Look at her as though ye are more looking at the air around her instead of directly at her body. Mother said ye were able to see people's auras. Her aura is what ye seek. When ye open your mind completely to her aura, the glamour surrounding her true form will fall away."

Clenching his teeth, Faolan glanced first at Keagan then stared harder at the air around the vacant-eyed Ciara. Damn, if this wasn't sheer madness. Why couldn't he do this? He knew damn good and well why he couldn't do this. He could hear Emrys drone at him as though the nasally old curmudgeon stood right behind him. He was trying too hard. He couldn't force the energies. Years ago, Faolan had trained in the Auld Ways. He'd been the most gifted of all his siblings. He'd tossed magic aside when life had

disappointed him. Now he needed to reconnect.

He held his breath until it exploded free of his lungs. With a growl, he threw his hands in the air. “Dammit! I canna do it, son. Are ye absolutely certain of what ye see?”

Keagan rubbed his forehead as though trying to spark an idea, then turned to Faolan and held out his hand. “Give me your hand, Da. This is a powerful glamour. Perhaps I can give ye the strength to see through it.” Keagan waited, holding out his small hand for Faolan to find the strength to trust himself to his son’s advice.

With one more look at the pitiful Ciara, Faolan fixed his gaze on his son’s determined face. Taking a deep breath, he wrapped Keagan’s small hand in his own, startling at the strange surge of energy that immediately jolted within his palm.

As a small smile of victory tugged at his lips, Keagan waved his other hand in front of the faux Ciara’s blank face. When he did this, Faolan saw what appeared to be a waterfall of colors tumbling through the air as the glamour shattered away.

A tiny wisp of a woman appeared on the bench, her bones so fine and delicate, Faolan feared the late autumn breeze would spirit her away. Her hair floated as silver as gossamer spiderwebs shimmering in the moonlight. Her clear gray eyes still stared vacant and empty as though her thoughts flitted somewhere else. Obviously, she wasn’t interested in this world. Her spirit just happened to be entrapped in this reality until she found a way to escape her physical form.

“Who are ye?” Faolan whispered as he released Keagan’s hand. Once the glamour had shattered, he no longer required his son’s powers to enable him to see through the sham.

The elfin woman made eye contact with Faolan for the first time since returning to the keep. Her voice was musical, so soft and light he leaned forward, straining to hear her words.

“I am Dierdra. Do ye know how I can find my way back to the Land Beyond the Mists?”

“Dierdra Sinclair?” Faolan repeated, easing himself to the bench beside her. He took care to keep a bit of distance between them, fearing he’d frighten her away.

Dierdra glanced at him with uncertainty, her gaze darting about the gardens as though she searched for an escape. Dierdra seemed as skittish as a

tiny fawn separated from its mother.

Nodding once, her voice as light as the sougling of the wind through the trees, Dierdra folded her pale hands in her lap. "Aye, my name is Sinclair. Please tell me how to find my way back."

"Ye canna go back," Keagan interrupted, taking a step between Dierdra and his father. He scowled as he planted his small hands on his hips and hooked his thumbs in the top of his kilt.

Her gray eyes widened, lower lip quivering. Dierdra grew ashen as she cried out in dismay. "But why? Did I do something to anger the goddesses? I was only in their land for a verra short time."

"Keagan! Ye must not upset the poor woman. Why would ye say such a thing to the wee lass?" Faolan fixed his son with a withering glare, as he shifted on the bench.

The wind picked up. Dry leaves spun all over the ground as storm clouds gathered in the sky. The cold breeze yanked at Keagan's small warrior's braid, pulling his hair away from his face.

"I'll not lie to her, Da. Only immortals can stay forever in the Land Beyond the Mists. 'Tis their consolation for not having souls. Mother told me we mortals pass through the Veils to any number of incarnations. But the immortals are forbidden to follow us to all the places we can go. So, their reward is the Land Beyond the Mists."

"But I was there!" Dierdra cried out again, her eyes filling with tears. "They invited me to stay there for a while. I didna realize I'd have to leave so soon."

"This makes no sense," Faolan growled as he rose to pace along the stone path circling the bench. He raked his hair out of his face, as he whirled to face his son. "Tell me, Keagan! What else did your mother say about this Land Beyond the Mists?"

As he adjusted his plaid over one small shoulder, Keagan shook his head. "Just that it's a wondrous place, peaceful and welcoming to those who are allowed to dwell within."

Distant thunder rumbled beyond the castle walls and kept pace with Faolan's growing frustration. He took his plaid from about his body and wrapped it around Dierdra's delicate shoulders against the rising wind. "Mistress Dierdra, please tell me what they said when they invited ye to go there for a while. If ye can tell us everything they might have told ye, perhaps we can find a way to help ye."

Dierdra's eyes clouded with even more confusion than they usually held and her chin dropped to her chest. She wrung her tiny fingers together, as though trying to squeeze the memories to the forefront of her mind.

At last, her gray eyes widened and she looked up into Faolan's face. Her lower lip quivered and her eyes refilled with tears as she frowned and shook her head. "I remember now. My friend Ciara came here to bear ye a son and ensure no one would doubt I was your wife." Her body trembled and she turned to Keagan as she covered her face with her hands. "Ye are right, young lad. I can ne'er go back. I am trapped here until I die."

Then she broke down into sobs, her body rocking to and fro upon the bench as she buried her face in Faolan's plaid.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Faolan crouched before her and gripped her shoulders so tight he almost lifted her from the bench. "Where did Ciara say she would go when ye were returned to this world? What happened to her when it was time for ye to come back to this reality?"

"I don't know," Dierdra hiccupped between her sobs. "She didna say when she came to me in my dream."

"Came to ye in your dream?" Faolan repeated. The bile churned high in his throat and his gut clenched as he rolled back on his heels. As he released Dierdra's shoulders, he rose to his feet and raked his hands through his hair.

"Mother is an immortal," Keagan whispered as he watched Dierdra return to her pitiful rocking to and fro.

A surge of fury roared its way through his body as his hands trembled into fists. He had forsaken the Auld Ways once long ago but he'd listened to Ciara and found his way back to opening his heart. What a fool he had been to think the Powers had been finished causing him misery and pain.



THE GODDESSES' pool shone like a mirror. The tree limbs swayed with the gentle wind, their reflection stirring the water's surface. The clearing echoed with silence, as though the entire wood stood hushed out of respect for the young boy's pain.

Keagan sat with his legs hugged to his chest, his chin propped on his knees. He stared unblinking into the depths of the spring, huge, silent tears rolling down his face. Faolan's heart clenched. Misery choked him. He had

followed his son to the private sanctuary. This had been their place. Keagan's and Ciara's...Faolan felt like an intruder.

Ciara had left them. Moreover, she'd never revealed she was an immortal. How could she have kept it hidden? How could she have lied to them all these years?

Faolan watched his son, his little head bowed as he wept beside the pond. He raked his fist against the rough bark of the tree as though trying to claw his way through the despair. In addition, since Ciara was immortal, what could've stolen her away? What could have possibly overcome her? She should've been all-powerful. Faolan sickened at the thought. He collapsed against the tree, raising a shaking hand to cover his eyes. Only one answer came to mind: Ciara must've chosen to go.

Keagan heaved a rock into the blackened pool. He sniffed as the rings rippled into ever widening circles. Faolan drew his hand across his eyes. He had to be strong for the boy.

"Keagan." Faolan stepped around the tree, holding out his hand. He swallowed hard against the throbbing in his chest. He had to put his pain aside for his son. "Come away from here, son. The hour grows late and there is naught here but painful memories."

Keagan turned from the water and rubbed his sleeve across his face. "I wasna crying, Da. I was just looking for answers."

"I know, Keagan. Ye are a fine, brave lad. 'Tis just the brisk wind that can sometimes bring the sting of tears to the surface." Faolan couldn't resist a proud smile as he tousled the boy's hair. Damn, if the boy didna have the look of his mother right around his eyes.

Keagan interrupted Faolan's torturous appraisal. "We have to find a way to get her back, Da. We have to fight to bring her back home."

Faolan inhaled a great shaking breath as though he were about to roar. However, when he spoke, his voice rasped with weariness as though he'd aged a hundred years. "She's gone, Keagan. And we don't know where. She's left us and she's not coming back."

"She didna leave us!" Keagan shouted, rolling his shoulder out of his father's grasp. He moved a few steps out of Faolan's reach, fixing his father with a cutting glare. "Mother loved us! She would never leave of her own accord. She had to have been stolen away."

Faolan clenched his fists, staring up through the branches of the trees as though the bits of sky peeping through the needles held the answers he

needed. How could he explain it so Keagan would understand? Immortals differed when it came to love. The legends taught of the fickleness of their emotions. His son was too young to understand. Faolan laughed bitterly to himself. He didn't understand it either.

“Keagan, your mother loved ye more than life itself. But she was an immortal. It must've been time for her to move on. She chose to leave us, Keagan. We must accept it...and we must move on, as well.”

“No, Da. Ye are wrong. Mother said ye would never understand and that ye wouldna listen with your heart. Ye must listen with your heart, Da. She said when the time was right, I must ask ye to show me the mystical library. What is the library, Da? Please, ye must tell me.” Keagan circled his father, staying just out of Faolan's reach as though he were a dangerous beast.

Faolan raked his hands through his hair and silently cursed Ciara. She had seduced him, drowned him in desire, made him incapable of functioning without her. And now she'd left cryptic messages with their son to give the poor boy false hope that she might someday return. Faolan's gut burned with her betrayal. His stomach churned with rage.

“What is the library, Da? Please...if it will help us find a way to bring Mother back...please, won't ye tell me what it is?” Keagan took a step closer and laid his small hand on Faolan's arm.

Faolan looked down at the small trusting fingers resting on his forearm. The tiny hand. The fingers so small. Faolan heaved a shuddering sigh. It wasn't Keagan's fault Ciara had left them behind. What harm could come from telling him?

“The library is Grandmother Rachel's old workroom in the northernmost tower of the keep. We've kept it sealed off since Grandmother died. There is more magical knowledge and lore hidden in that room than ye could hope to read from now until ye become a man.”

The goddesses' pool behind them shimmered. Keagan glanced at the water then turned back to Faolan with a grin. “There must be something in there. Did ye see the goddesses' pool react? They dinna want us to go there, Da. Did ye feel it? Did ye feel the surge of energy that passed through the clearing when ye spoke of the magic in the room?”

“I felt nothing, Keagan.” Faolan sighed. The boy was imagining things. Faolan looked up at the swaying trees. The wind had merely rippled the pool.

“Mother said this is Brid and Cerridwen's special place. They are here, Da. I feel it. They are watching us. Concentrate, Da.” Keagan squeezed his

father's hands as though willing him to see the magic in the air.

"I feel the wind, Keagan." Faolan's heart sank as he looked at his reflection in the pool. Memories of Ciara ached in his chest, making it difficult for him to breath.

Keagan's face fell as he released Faolan's hands. "Will ye at least show me Grandmother Rachel's library?"

Faolan's reflection frowned up at him, his mouth flattened into a saddened line, his brow creased as he stared into the water. Why was the boy being so persistent? He was just going to be disappointed in the end. "Someday, Keagan. When you're older. Someday, I'll show ye the library."

"But we need it now, Da!" The goddesses' pool shimmered again. Keagan pointed and yanked on Faolan's sleeve. "Did ye see it this time? I told ye they do not want us looking at Grandmother Rachel's things."

Faolan scrubbed his face with his fists. *God's beard!* The lad was as worrisome as a mid-summer midge! How the hell could he shield the boy from more pain if he wouldn't leave off this nonsensical notion?

"Keagan," Faolan groaned through tightly gritted teeth. "The hour grows late and I am weary. We will discuss the library another time." He hugged the boy away from the quicksilver pool and nudged him in the direction of the path leading back to the keep.

"But, Da—"

"Home, Keagan, now!"



"NOT ANOTHER WORD, KEAGAN!" Faolan warned as he pushed his untouched plate of food onto the floor in the midst of the wiggling group of dogs. "Now go tend to your lessons with Maxwell. This discussion is over. I will hear no more of this senseless chatter!"

Faolan rose from the table and stomped over to the fire, turning his back on his irritated son. He threw his body into his chair. *God's teeth.* He felt a weariness echoing to the marrow of his bones. Ciara danced in the flames of the hearth. Faolan rubbed his hand across his eyes. Damn her for wedging her way into his heart. Damn her for branding his soul.

Over the pop of the wood, the hiss of the fire, he heard the scrape of Keagan's chair. He closed his eyes and heaved a sigh of relief as the fading

sound of Keagan's footsteps told him his son was finally doing what he'd been told. Handling Keagan had become so difficult. The boy's persistence was driving him over the edge. His own loss was as painful as a raw, open sore. He had to take care not to lash out at Keagan.

The slam of a heavy door echoed down the hallway. Faolan opened his eyes and sat up straighter in his chair. That echo had sounded from the wrong direction. *Dammit!* It was the passage to the north tower. The boy had gone there on his own. Faolan's hands curled into fists and his stomach filled with dread. Now, *he* had to go there...to his mother's rooms. He hadn't been there since her death. *Damn that boy!* He was as hardheaded as his infernal mother.

Faolan slipped through the passage taking care to be as silent as the darkness beyond the light of the torch. He came upon Keagan just as the boy sprinted up the winding staircase leading to the abandoned tower.

"I will tan his little arse," Faolan grumbled under his breath. He paused behind the curve of the stair until the proper time to make his presence known to Keagan. His son was going to have to learn to listen. He stayed just out of sight, using the light from Keagan's torch to make his way along the steps.

When Faolan's parents had died, Faolan had ordered the northern tower sealed. The rooms of the tower had been Faolan's mother's rooms where she'd studied and worked her spells. The tower had also contained the massive Library of Mystics where Rachel MacKay and the chief Druid of the clan had painstakingly gathered and stored all their mystical lore. However, when Rachel's husband had been murdered while defending the magic, she'd hidden all the mystical resources away.

Faolan couldn't resist a smile and a sense of pride as he watched his son work his way down the passage. Keagan found the rooms with no trouble. His gifted senses honed in on the hidden passage like a bat's radar on its prey in the night.

Keagan paused at the hidden door to the landing where he sensed the library to be. He listened and looked up and down the hall. The boy seemed to be checking to make sure he was alone. Faolan bit his lip to keep from laughing. He knew Keagan checked for the worrisome chambermaids that constantly followed the boy about. Since his mother had disappeared, and then seemed to have returned as a mindless woman, all the women of the keep had almost driven the boy insane by their constant mother-henning whenever he was about.

The shadowy halls were as silent as a tomb, just as they should be. The eerie quiet assured Keagan he was quite alone and it was safe to shift the walls. Faolan arched a brow and waited. How did the boy know the secret to shifting the walls?

Faolan inched a few steps closer, craning his neck to see.

Keagan placed his left hand as high as he could reach while at the same time positioning his right hand at the level of his chest. Then he pressed hard against the worn stone blocks until he heard the grind of the gears within. It seemed to take forever for the ten-foot section of the fitted blocks to inch inward to suffocating darkness. Keagan drummed his fingers and eyed the walls to ensure the shifting was complete before he slipped inside the passage.

Faolan squinted at the opening and shook his head. How had the boy known? Without the light of Keagan's torch, the passage had plunged into inky darkness. Faolan slid his hand along the wall to find the doorway and slipped his way into the anteroom. Faolan hurried along the passage to catch up with the disappearing glow of Keagan's torch. This was merely the first passage, the first doorway; Keagan had yet to pass through the final door.

Faolan stayed back far enough so Keagan couldn't sense him; he paused when Keagan paused. He smiled as Keagan brushed away the cobwebs as though they were mere tattered curtains. His son was fearless, even though just a lad. Perhaps he'd not tan his arse after all; maybe he'd just make Keagan muck all the horseshit out of the stable.

As Keagan made his way deeper into the stifling darkness, he came upon the blackened metal door sealing away the ancient rooms. Faolan swallowed hard and edged a silent step back. Now, he'd see what his son could do.

Keagan took a deep breath and stretched on tiptoe placing his right hand upon the mystical symbol in the center of the door. Keagan closed his eyes.

"Concentrate, Keagan," Faolan whispered too low for the lad to hear. He remembered the horrible pull of the door and the dark magic holding the seal.

The magical seal locking the door responded to the boy's tremendous will. It creaked and groaned as though angered at being disturbed. The door grated open and swung inward to allow Keagan into the room.

"Well done, my son," Faolan breathed in a ragged voice as he leaned against the wall. He glared at the door as though it were a vile, wicked beast about to swallow him whole. Now he had to go inside. Inside the room filled with all the ghosts. Inside the room where a lifetime ago, he'd stood at his

mother's side and learned of all the wonders magic could do.

Once inside the cavernous room, Keagan lit the additional torches staggered about the walls. The warmth of the yellow flames beat back the dry, musty darkness and illuminated the vast collection of books and mystical relics lining the dust-covered shelves. The cavernous library went on forever. Shelves spanned every wall of the chamber, running from the ceiling to the floor. Weathered wooden tables formed a crescent-shaped work area in the center of the room. Snuffed out candles stood in multi-branched iron candelabras in the middle of the tables, it appeared as though Rachel MacKay had left her workroom for a brief moment rather than entombing the magic almost twenty years ago.

Keagan settled his torch into one of the metal holders and made a slow circuit of the room. His eyes narrowed as he squinted at the items stuffed into the shelves and stacked in the corners along the walls. "Keagan."

Keagan yelped and whirled around so fast he fell back against the shelves behind him. "Dammit, Da! Ye scared the living shite out of me!"

Faolan arched a brow at his son's choice of words.

Keagan straightened his kilt and caught the books he'd knocked loose before they slid off onto the floor. "Sorry, Da. But ye did scare me. I didna mean to curse at ye. At least I didna take the Lord's name in vain."

Faolan rubbed his face to hide his smile. The boy did have a point. The tower had an eeriness about it. "What are ye doin' here when ye were told the library would be discussed with ye at a later time?"

Keagan clasped his hands behind his back, ducked his head and remained silent.

"Keagan?" Faolan cleared his throat. Damn, the boy was too much like his mother. Whenever he was quiet, trouble brewed.

"I've nearly found what it's going to take to convince ye that Mother was stolen from us. That she didn't just decide to go away." Keagan stubbed his foot at a non-existent spot on the floor with the worn toe of his boot.

Nearly found? Faolan didn't like the sound of that. He fixed the boy with a wary gaze as though he were a ticking bomb. "What do ye mean ye've 'nearly found'? Have ye been up here before?"

Keagan gave a quick bob of his head. "Oh aye, Da. I've been up here twice before. Grandmother Rachel showed me the way and helped me with spellin' the door."

"Mother!" Faolan growled through gritted teeth as he paced across the

room.

“There’s a scrying bowl, Da! I found a spell in one of Grandmother’s books telling us how to use it.” Keagan circled his way around the room, his fingers trailing along the shelves as he walked. “If we can find the bowl and use the spell, I know it will show us what truly happened to Mother.”

Faolan stared at his son, heart aching and his gut wrenched with rising frustration. How could he protect Keagan from the truth the scrying bowl might reveal? “Keagan, my son, are ye truly prepared for anything the vision of the bowl might show ye?”

Keagan smiled, wisdom beyond his seven years glinted in his deep blue eyes. “It will be all right, Da. Ye must trust in your heart. Just help me find the bowl.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

The moon spiked well past its zenith, the time before dawn where it shares the sky with the sun. It was the in-between time of darkness and light when energy is at its highest. Faolan and Keagan stood atop the skirting wall of the castle on the side nearest the sea. The steady beat of the waves on the rocks below vied with the roar of the winter wind as it whistled down from the mountains to the east.

They'd lugged an ornately carved pedestal up to the battlements. This was the first time in over one hundred years the obelisk had emerged from inside the keep. Faolan had hefted the intricately carved piece of marble, from an island far away, across his back. The stone of the pedestal rendered such a deep rich green it shone black in the fading moonlight. Striated with the faintest bands of yellow with lighter shades of green filtering up through the base, the marble reverberated with the life force of millennia. Atop the pedestal balanced a bowl of polished wood filled to the very rim with shimmering water. The water emitted an energy all its own, like quicksilver dancing upon glass.

Keagan stood with his hands on either side of the bowl. Faolan stood on the opposite side of the pedestal and covered his son's hands with his own. With an almost imperceptible nod of his head, Faolan bade Keagan begin the ritual.

Dread and anticipation battled in Faolan's heart. He yearned to know what had happened to Ciara and yet he feared to know the truth. Did she choose to leave them, or was she ripped away? Damnation, what would he do if she had chosen to leave of her own free will?

Keagan bowed his head and focused on the waters as they swirled

beneath the fading light of the moon. He gripped the bowl and leaned forward, his lips moving as he silently mouthed the words to the memorized spell.

Faolan jerked, tensing as visions of Ciara shimmered across the surface of the water. Both Keagan and Faolan edged closer to the humming bowl of liquid silver as glimpses of the final scenes from Ciara's life streaked into view.

Faolan tightened his hands over Keagan's as he watched the images of his beloved wife. He couldn't breathe for the pounding of his heart shutting off his throat. He ached for her. Gads, he felt as though half his existence had disappeared. He clenched his teeth as Ciara's final moments on earth swam into view.

She rode behind Maxwell, her face streaked with tears, her hands clutching at the reins. Ciara clearly knew what was about to happen. They could see she felt herself ripped away from the realm. Finally, she had relinquished to the unseen force. She had straightened in the saddle and grimaced as though in pain. She had shielded her face with her arms. As her body had started to fade from view, Ciara had shrieked with despair. As her form had shattered into tiny particles into the wind, her cries had spiraled into a heart-wrenching moan that had echoed across the land. Maxwell had mentioned he'd thought he'd heard the cry of the death banshee on the day Ciara had disappeared. What he'd heard was Ciara's breaking heart as her energy scattered to the wind.

"I told ye, Da! I told ye she'd never leave us. Not of her own accord. Mother loved us. They took her away. But we're going to get her back."

Keagan ripped his hands out of Faolan's grasp and yanked an ancient *sgian dubh* from its sheath. With more anger than Faolan thought possible for a seven-year-old child, Keagan stabbed the blade deep into the center of the bowl.

With a firm nod, Faolan rested his hand atop Keagan's where it still trembled on the ceremonial dagger at its hilt. "Aye, my son. We will get her back. No matter what it takes."



THE SPIKES of her heels clicked along the jagged passage, echoing throughout

the honeycombed caverns running below the immortal's plane. The hollow pings reverberated for what seemed like forever; they trickled like pebbles sorted through a sieve.

Ciara worked her way deeper into the caverns and examined the crystal columns with a selective eye. She wearied of this painful existence. If she embedded herself deep within the bowels of this world, she would become a crystallized shard of pain. Perhaps a few centuries shut down in this cave would dull this ache in her heart. There was no point anymore. These damned mortal emotions had ruined her. No matter how many eons passed, she would never forgive herself for opening her heart to Faolan or for bonding so eternally with her son.

The caverns splintered off into a myriad of directions, each section of crystals striated a different shade according to how much light filtered and reflected down through the uppermost crevices exposed to the sun. The smooth stalactites and stalagmites in this particular cave shimmered a soothing emerald green. Perhaps this was the one. She had always liked green. Perhaps sifting her energy into one of these crystal pillars would bring her the mindless oblivion she sought.

"It won't work, Ciara. No matter the form ye take, they will never leave your heart and neither will the pain." Alec's voice echoed through the chasm like a nagging conscience hammering at the back of her mind.

Ciara didn't bother to face him, just plodded deeper into the bowels of the cave. Her dispassionate voice resonated off the walls, as she nearly spat the words as though they burned her mouth. How dare the fool reappear now. He had deserted her when she needed him the most. "What made you finally decide to show up, Alec? The irresistible urge to do the I told-you-so dance?"

Alec grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her to face him, his eyes flashing with hurt and bitter recrimination. "Actually, I've been imprisoned within the goddesses' keep. They spun my essence into a blackened veil of pain, suspending me there for...oh, I don't know...about eight years now, while you raised your son and enjoyed the safety of your loving husband's arms. I was being punished for trying to help you."

Ciara jerked out of his grasp and shoved him out of her way. "I don't believe you. If you'd incurred Brid and Cerridwen's wrath, they never would have released you this soon."

Alec knotted his hands into fists as he trembled before her. "I should take the form of a phoenix just so I could burst into flames and singe that hideous

purple hair you've adopted! The only reason they released me was to send me here to check on you. Trust me. I'm sure I've not been forgiven so easily for trying to tell Faolan of their plan."

Ciara searched his face for the vaguest hint of dishonesty, then collapsed to sit atop a jagged crystal ledge. With a shuddering sigh, she dropped her head in her hands. Could Alec be telling the truth? She'd felt the rift in all the energies. She'd sensed the imbalance when he'd not answered her calls. A shudder coursed through her body as she only imagined the pain he must've endured.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I feared they might have done something to you when you disappeared right before Keagan's birth."

As he scooted down on the ledge beside her, Alec shook his head. "Why are you down here having a pity party? Why don't ye defy them? Ye're powerful in your own right, Ciara. Why don't ye return to the ones ye love?"

"I'm afraid I'm not as powerful as you give me credit," Ciara answered with a bitter laugh. "I battered against the barriers they placed around my precious Alba until I collapsed into a bloodied heap. I'm no match for them, Alec. I might be an immortal, but I'm nowhere near the level of a goddess."

As he traced his finger along a splintered crack running along the edge of the crystal shelf, Alec stared into the prismatic green depths of the stone upon which they both sat. "Then there is no way to defeat them? There's no way for ye to return and free your heart of this pain?"

With a sad shake of her head, Ciara rested her hand against a shimmering pillar as she whispered her reply, "I know of no way to beat them at this game. I have lost, Alec. I have lost it all."



"SHE REFUSES TO EAT. She grows paler each day. Soon she will be too weak to even sit in a chair." Sorcha stood before Faolan, wringing her hands as she nodded toward the untouched tray of food the chambermaid had just returned to the kitchen. Quail eggs, parrich, even Sorcha's finest scones, and tea: nothing tempted Dierdra to taste a morsel.

With a dismal sigh, Faolan pursed his lips and glared at the plates of uneaten food. He hadn't spoken to Dierdra since the day in the garden when he'd found out her true identity. From what little she'd told him; he knew

what she was doing. Dierdra was anxious to leave this world. As one of the touched, Dierdra would never think of violence to separate her soul from her body. She would just stop eating until her body ceased to function and began its journey back to the dust. Then her soul would be free to pass from this realm and all the pain she'd always known.

Faolan had made her as comfortable as possible in her own set of rooms in the farthest wing of the keep. He'd carefully chosen which maids would tend to her needs, and ensured only the kindest of servants surrounded her. He felt sorry for Dierdra, almost as bad as he felt for himself. Both of them were miserable. All he could do was ensure her physical comforts were met and keep her safe from harm. And now he couldn't even guarantee that was done. "Don't trouble her or try to force her to eat. Just give her the peace she requests." With a heavy sigh, he turned and left the kitchen, returning to the northern tower. He and Keagan were searching through every written record for the path to where Ciara had gone. If Dierdra had decided to end her life, the only way he might save her was to find Ciara and return her to the keep. Ciara would know how to ease Dierdra's troubled mind. Ciara always had the answers.

With a heavy heart, Faolan climbed the steps to the tower, raising his torch high against the darkness. Even though he and Keagan had practically lived in the library, Faolan had ordered the tower remained sealed off from the rest of the clan. The winding stone steps were forbidden to everyone except Keagan and himself. Faolan still blamed the mysteries for his shattered heart. Magic was his enemy. He only resorted to the powers now in an attempt to recover the woman he loved.

The fact that Ciara was an immortal also troubled his mind. But he'd deal with that later. He just wanted her back. No matter the cost.

He paused at the doorway. A sense of pride swelled in his chest as his gaze rested upon the bent head of his son. Keagan was relentless in the search. He was as determined as Faolan. Most boys of his age would've already given up, would've decided to move on with their lives. However, when Faolan looked into Keagan's eyes, he saw the wisdom of an ancient soul. Keagan's body might be that of a now eight-year-old boy, but his mind and soul held the wisdom of the ages.

Keagan didn't look up at the sound of his father in the doorway. He pored over the yellowed pages of the leather-bound parchment opened on the table before him. He moved his finger just above the page, his lips moving the

tiniest bit with each of the words he read.

“This is the way.” His voice an excited whisper, Keagan moved his finger back and ran it back across the passage. His hand moving faster over the words, he repeated the verse aloud. Finally tearing his gaze away from the tome, his face lit up with hope. “I’ve found the way, Da. But we must act soon, before the Feast of Beltane.”

Striding around the table to peer over his son’s shoulder, Faolan studied the pages beneath Keagan’s hand. As he scanned the page, his brow knotted into a worried frown as he read the troubling words. Should they do this? Even for Ciara? His gut clenched at the thought. This smacked of sacrificial magic. “Keagan, this is a blood ritual. Do ye understand what this rite entails?”

With a solemn nod, Keagan closed the book after marking the passage with a faded ribbon. “Dierdra wishes to leave this world, Da. It will end her pain as well as ours.”

Blowing out a breath, Faolan stalked around the room, then finally turned to face his son. “What ye’re suggesting is cold-blooded murder, son. Dierdra is an innocent. We canna do this rite.”

Keagan rose from his chair, tucked the book under one arm and jerked his head in disagreement. “It takes the pure blood of a true believer or an innocent to open the portal. ’Tis the only way to gain passage to where Mother must be. We can take Dierdra to the stone and place the ritual *sgian dubh* in her hands. Her mind will clear when she sits upon the altar. The light of the waxing moon will temporarily pull her from her confusion. Then the choice to open the portal will be hers and I know what path she will choose.”

Faolan stared at his son, amazed at the boy’s wisdom. “How do ye know these things, Keagan? I know that wasna written in any of these books.”

Keagan swallowed hard, his wide eyes troubled, as he hugged the worn leather journal to his chest. “Mother’s voice speaks to me in my head. I feel her presence inside my heart. I think she passed her wisdom on to me when she found out she was going to be taken away.”

“And once we open the portal? What then, my wise son? How do we succeed in stealing back your mother?” This worrisome unknown had gnawed at the back of Faolan’s mind for days. He’d felt sure Keagan would find a way to open the portal. Of that, he had no doubt. However, what were they supposed to do once the gateway opened? How were they supposed to find Ciara on the immortal plane?

Keagan stared down at the sputtering candle as it flickered on the table. He seemed not to have heard Faolan's words since he didn't immediately respond. He just stood unblinking, staring into the flame as though the energy of the fire spoke directly to him alone.

Faolan didn't interrupt him. He'd seen that type of look once before when his mother, Rachel, had sent herself into a trance. She'd instructed all of her children that it would endanger her if she were disturbed while in such a state.

So, Faolan waited. He watched over his son while the minutes passed into hours. As the candle burned out and the flame disappeared into a trail of smoke, Keagan blinked and raised his head. He looked at his father and responded to the question as though Faolan had just asked it.

"We will tell the goddesses to return her. And as long as a mortal with MacKay blood flows in their veins walks upon this reality, we shall ensure the legends are never forgotten."

"And if they refuse?" Faolan asked, knowing the answer before Keagan replied.

"If they refuse, we obliterate every icon, legend, and text we can find referring to the Auld Ways and the goddess religions. We have the power to erase them from all mortal memory. The goddesses fear being forgotten above all else. Without believers, they cease to exist and will evaporate with the mists."

With a decisive nod beyond his young years, Keagan turned and walked out the door.



THE ANCIENT STONE altar stood upon the highest crag of MacKay land overlooking the restless sea. It consisted of a huge limestone rock hewn into a rough-edged rectangle big enough to hold a slaughtered bull. It lay flat upon the hilltop like a massive table awaiting its ceremonial sacrifice. Two other stones had been erected on either side, nearly the same size as the over-large rectangle, but these stones had been balanced upright on their ends. The result was a great stone archway looking out across the water. As the moon rose out over the sea, the dark gray obelisks framed it in its climb to the highest point in the sky.

Not used since the time of the ancient Druids and their ritual sacrifices to honor the gods and the goddesses, the black weathered stones still stood strong against the harsh elements of time, silent testament to what used to be.

Dierdra had grown so weak from her refusal of food; Faolan had to carry her up the narrow path. When he'd come to her rooms, she hadn't spoken a word of protest or even questioned where they were bound. He wondered if she somehow sensed her time of release was near. Her drawn face had lit up with anticipation.

Keagan followed close behind, the ceremonial *sgian dubh* wrapped in fur beneath his arm. It too had waited among the shelves in the mystical library, the ancient blade stained with ritual blood from sacrifices long ago. Whenever the blade was in view, Faolan sensed the energy surging out from deep within its core.

Under Keagan's other arm, he toted a heavy woolen plaid shimmering with ceremonial threads of silver and gold. The plaid would cover the stone altar where Dierdra would lie and later would become her burial shroud.

The night was warm for so early in the year. The Feast of Beltane was but three weeks away. Spring was nearly full upon the Highlands. The energy of new life waited to burst free of the earth. The greening of the world floated heavy in the air. All paused for new beginnings.

Keagan spread the plaid upon the stone while Faolan stood by with Dierdra in his arms. As Keagan glanced up at the position of the moon between the upright stones, he nodded for his father to place her on the altar.

Dierdra curled to her side and stared out across the sea. A serene smile spread across her face as her eyes reflected the light of the moon. She held out a pale hand toward Keagan and nodded toward the knife he held between his hands. "I am ready, dear Keagan. Dinna be troubled, for I will feel no pain. Tell Ciara I am truly sorry I didn't get to see her again. She was so verra kind."

Faolan stood at the head of the stones; his body tensed as though he were the wolf about to spring upon his prey. *This is not right*, his conscience nettled him. He wrestled with uncertainty. How could this be what they should do? How could they take the life of an innocent? It was one thing to take life while defending hearth and home. But no matter how many different ways Faolan sorted through it; he couldn't rationalize what they were about to do. Just as Keagan placed the knife in Dierdra's hand, Faolan snatched it into his own. "If the goddesses want blood to open the portal, then let it be

my own.”

He slashed deep across the palm of his hand and shook his bloody fist at the moon. With a sneer of contempt, he showered the altar with his blood as he roared the MacKay battle cry across the valley. “*Bi Tren, Bi Treun!*”

As the echo of his shout resounded across the hills, the moon shimmered and swelled in the sky. The dark of the night bowed and receded in reverence to the strength of the eerie blue light. The air crackled with increasing energy as though lightning were about to split through the air. The earth’s pulsing heartbeat trembled from the depths of its core up through the marrow of their bones.

“Be True, Be Steadfast. Truly proud words that have always endeared me to this clan.” The goddess Brid appeared between the stones; her fiery hair suspended in the energy of light surrounding her body. “Tell me why ye have summoned me, Chieftain MacKay. It has been an eternity since I’ve been gifted such powerful mortal blood.”

Still clenching the bloody dagger in his left hand, Faolan spat the words as he flung more blood in the direction of the goddess. “Ye know damn well why I’ve called upon ye, Goddess! Give me back my wife!” Taking another step forward, he raised his bloody fist and shook it in her face. “I grow weary of being your pawn. Give her back to me, mighty Brid. Do so and I swear to ye the Auld Ways will ne’er be forgotten. Refuse and my son and I will spend the rest of our days erasing your existence from this plane.”

Her feathery brow arched in wry amusement as Brid floated around the altar. Her translucent gown shimmered in the moonlight and flowed with her every move. “Careful, mortal. I understand your soul is filled with heartache and pain, but dinna grow over brave with your words.” Brid paused to rest a gentle hand atop Dierdra’s head and gifted the frail girl with a motherly smile. “I will bring Ciara here, but she canna stay with ye until a choice has been made.” As soon as she said the words, both Ciara and Alec materialized on the other side of the stone.

Ciara looked around, stumbling in confusion at so abruptly being yanked out of the bowels of the caverns. Her eyes widened, when she realized Faolan and Keagan stood just a few feet away. With an ecstatic cry, she closed the distance between them and jumped into Faolan’s arms.

His arms wrapping tightly around her, Faolan crushed her to his chest. He would never let her go again. If she tried to dissolve into tiny particles of light, he would bury the *sgian dubh* deep in the center of his heart to send his

essence with her. He kissed her mouth, her eyes, her tear-stained cheeks as she repeatedly sobbed his name. “Shh, Ciara. Dinna fear. I shall never let them take ye again.”

Keagan rushed headlong to join his parents’ embrace; his whoops of joy joining his mother’s sobs. “Mother! I knew the rite would work. I knew it would bring ye back.”

Ciara pulled Keagan to her chest including him in her embrace. She covered his face with teary kisses and crushed him into her arms. “You did well, Keagan. I am so proud of you. I missed you so very much.”

Ear-splitting thunder ripped through the energy in the air silencing their happy reunion. They turned to see the goddess Brid where she hovered just above the stone altar. Her eyes flashed with righteous fire as her voice echoed across the clearing. “Ciara, ye canna dwell in this land. Ye know ’twould be against all the natural laws. Ye are an immortal. Ye are meant to float upon the streams of energies and never settle forever in one plane. Ye would only be postponing the pain of separation when their souls go where ye canna follow.”

Her eyes widening, Ciara wrapped her fists in Faolan’s plaid and clutched it to her chest. “How can you be so cruel as to bring me back here and then threaten to send me away? What is it you want from me, Brid? Name it and it is yours.”

Faolan pushed Keagan and Ciara behind him, baring his teeth as though he’d become the wolf for which he was so aptly named. “Remember my words, mighty goddess. If my allegiance to keeping the Auld Ways alive is nay enough then take my soul as payment for Ciara to stay. When I die, I shall gladly go to the Abyss. Ye have my blood to seal the oath. Ye have the blood of a MacKay.” Faolan took another step forward, shaking his bloody fist in the air, and showered the sacred ground with the crimson droplets. “My family is not yours to take. I’ll no’ let ye destroy us again.”

Brid shook her head as though speaking to a slow-witted child and dismissed Faolan with a wave of her hand. “The choice is not yours to make, my righteous laird. Although, I will admit your self-sacrifice is admirable. If Ciara searches within her heart, she knows what price I seek.”

Ciara stepped around Faolan; her chin raised, and fixed Brid with a defiant glare. “Take it,” she spat and spread her arms wide as though waiting for the goddess’s embrace.

“No!” Alec roared. He threw himself in front of Ciara and raised his

hands as though he were a shield. “She doesn’t mean it, Brid. Ye canna take her immortality. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

Brid’s face softened with an understanding smile and she ignored Alec as though he hadn’t said a word. She held out her hand to Ciara, the affection for her troubled daughter shining in her eyes. “Do ye know what ye’re truly giving up, Ciara? Do ye understand that when ye become mortal, ye will quickly grow to feel the pain of old age and disease and then ye will someday die?”

Ciara glanced first at the look of shock registering upon Faolan’s face and then at the trusting face of her son. She acknowledged the goddess’s question with a smile and a firm nod. “If I can’t be with the ones I love, I might as well be reduced to bitter ashes and scattered upon the winds. I gladly relinquish my immortality. Take it as my gift to Dierdra.”

Dierdra rose to sit upright upon the altar, her eyes bright with excitement. “If Ciara gifts me with her immortality, I can return to the Land Beyond the Mists.”

Brid nodded her approval and floated forward to rest her palm upon the center of Ciara’s chest. A shimmering light, like a golden mist soon gathered around her hand. Then she turned and cast the pulsating energy like a fireball at Dierdra’s body. As soon as the energy orb connected with the tiny maiden’s chest, her body took on a soft and luminous glow.

As Brid lifted the mantle of immortality from within her breast, Ciara fainted into Faolan’s arms. He caught her up against his chest and cradled her as though she were a babe.

Alec dropped to his knees, holding his head in his hands. He moaned and shook his head while rocking to and for. “How could ye do it? Now she’ll die. Now she’ll go where I canna follow. Now I’ll end up being all alone. Why must ye always punish me so?”

Brid rested a consoling hand upon his bowed head and spoke to Alec as though he were a very spoiled child. “Ye will not be alone, Alec. Dierdra will need your help now. She will need ye more than Ciara ever did. ’Twill be all right. Trust my words. This is the best for all concerned.” Brid touched a hand to Ciara’s cheek as she bent and pressed her lips to her daughter’s forehead. “Ye were nearing burnout, my fiery child. We are glad ye made the choice ye did. If ye had not chosen to stay with The MacKay, the madness would have surely taken ye. We have always loved ye best, my tempestuous child. We did not wish to see ye suffer. We hope ye will someday understand

why we did the things we did.”

Ciara blinked against the tears as she turned her face into the palm of her mother’s hand. “I love you, Mother Brid, and I thank you.”

Brid nodded once, then turned to pat Alec on the head. “Make your goodbyes now, Alec, so the MacKays can be on their way. We have much to teach Dierdra about the ways of immortals. Ye have quite a task ahead of you and only an eternity in which to accomplish it.”

Faolan knelt to set Ciara down upon the ground beside Alec and reached out to grasp him by the shoulder. “Thank ye, Alec, for always being there for Ciara. Thank ye for being her friend.”

Ciara raised her head and held out her arm to pull him into her embrace. “I’ll always love you, Alec. You truly are the best friend I ever had. I swear to you, we’ll keep your name on the tongues of all the future MacKay generations.”

Alec clutched her to his chest and sniffed in her hair as he struggled to hold back his tears. “Just make me taller whenever ye describe me. And don’t forget to tell them of my charm and unbelievably quick wit.”

Ciara nodded and brushed away her tears with the back of her hand. “I promise they’ll know you for the gifted immortal I have always loved. You will be the hero in every tale and you will win out over every evil.”

“Alec, ’tis time,” Brid called from between the obelisks where she stood with one arm resting around Dierdra’s waist. With a graceful nod to Faolan, she repeated the MacKay cry as the three immortals faded from their sight. “*Bi Tren, Bi Treun!* Be true, be steadfast, my fine MacKays. The fate of the world rests in your hands.”

EPILOGUE

Faolan held his squirming daughter against his bare chest and yawned as he made another circuit around the room. Keagan had been this colicky as a wee bairn, but that had been ten years ago.

Ciara followed Faolan in his path around the room, cradling her tiny daughter's twin brother and patting him on the rump as he rivaled his sister's wails. Erin wasn't about to be outdone when it came to demanding his parents' attention. Ciara hummed the unknown song under her breath as she jostled the babe to and fro in her arms.

Glancing across the room at her weary husband as he patiently crooned to the fussing little girl, Ciara smiled as she spotted the barest glint of a silver hair or two shining at his temple. Her heart swelled to near bursting. She had never dared hope to be a part of this much happiness.

Catching his attention, she nodded toward the huge four-poster bed waiting in the shadows as she settled little Erin in his cradle. The tiny warrior had finally lost his battle against the rhythm of his mother's mesmerizing tune and drifted off to sleep. Holding out her arms to the squirming baby still fussing in Faolan's arms, she softly smiled and gestured to the bed again. "Give Ella to me. Go get some rest. Hopefully, she'll drop off to sleep soon too."

With a shake of his head, Faolan cradled his daughter closer as he kissed the top of her auburn head. "Nay, 'tis times like these that make me feel the most alive. They'll all be grown before we know where the time has gone. Too soon, they'll all be gone from the safety of our arms and out making their own adventures in the world."

As he settled upon the edge of the bench, he rocked the fretting babe to

and fro. Ciara settled down beside him and sighed as she rested her head upon his shoulder.

Faolan whispered into the darkness, his voice so low she almost didn't hear him, "Do ye ever regret it, Ciara, my love? Relinquishing your immortality?"

"Never, my love," she responded without hesitation. "Because you replaced it with a contented soul."

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EXCERPT FROM:**

**Beyond a Highland Whisper
A MacKay Clan Legends Book**

CHAPTER I

MacKay Keep
Scotland
1410

“LATHARN, are ye sure ye never touched the lass?” His father’s scowl burned across the room mere seconds ahead of the words.

The reproach in Laird Caelan MacKay’s voice stung Latharn like a physical blow. Tension knotted his muscles and his body stiffened with the bitterness pounding through his veins. Only years of respect for his father held his tongue. How could his sire treat him this way? He wasn’t an irresponsible boy anymore. How dare he be treated like a lust-crazed lad!

The great hall of the MacKay Keep spanned the largest part of the castle and housed every important gathering of the clan. Flexing his shoulders, Latharn inhaled a deep breath. From where he stood, the room shrank by the moment. He couldn’t believe his father had chosen the monthly clan meeting as a means for resolving this matter. How dare he try to shame Latharn into a confession by confronting him in front of his kinsmen. This ploy had worked well enough when Latharn was a lad. His father had used it often whenever he or his brothers had gotten into mischief. Latharn involuntarily flexed his buttocks in remembrance of punishment received after a confession ousted in just such a manner. However, he wasn’t a mischievous boy anymore. This was private; they could handle it between themselves.

Every man, woman, and child strained to hear Latharn’s reply. His

father's closest warriors leaned forward upon the benches. The servants peeped around the corners of the arches, their serving platters clenched to their chests. Latharn rubbed the back of his neck; his skin tingled from their piercing stares.

His father's face flushed a decided shade of purple. Apparently, he'd delayed his answer long enough. Clipping his words just short of blatant disrespect, Latharn growled through a tight-lipped scowl. "How many times must I swear to ye, Father? I have never laid eyes on the MacKinnett lass. I canna bring her face to mind and I havena planted a child in her womb!"

The hall remained silent. Even the dogs sprawling beneath the tables ceased in their endless scuffling for scraps. The only sound breaking the tense silence was the pop of the wood just thrown upon the fires.

With his hands curled into shaking fists, The MacKay pounded the arm of his chair centered at the head of the great hall. Laird MacKay raised his voice to a throaty growl as he edged forward in his chair. "The MacKinnett clan has always been allied with ours. Their lands join our southernmost borders. Must I tell ye how serious these allegations are to our families? The treaty between our clans has been solid for years. God's beard, son! If ye've dishonored their family, there will be no more peace. This lass is the only daughter of their laird!"

His knuckles whitened on the arms of his chair as he continued his tirade. Laird MacKay tensed on the edge of his seat as though he was about to spring upon his prey. His hair heavily streaked with gray, Laird MacKay's once-golden mane gave him the appearance of a battle-weary lion. Though his body showed subtle signs of an aging Highlander, his eyes still blazed as his roar echoed throughout the great hall.

"Always, ye've been one to skirt danger, Latharn! I will admit... 'twas usually for the greater good. However, you yourself must also agree, there have been times when ye have yanked the tail of the sleeping dragon just to see if it would breathe fire. So far, your quick wit has kept ye safe from whatever troubles ye have stirred. But this time, I must know the absolute truth: did ye lie with The MacKinnett's daughter?"

How many times was he going to ask him? Did he think he was going to change his answer? Anger surged through Latharn's veins. Rage flashed through him like a cruel, biting wind. He crossed his arms as a barrier across his chest and curled his mouth into a challenging sneer. They didn't believe him. No matter what he said, they didn't believe his words. He read it in their

eyes. He spat his words as though their bitter taste soured on his tongue. “I swear to ye upon all I hold sacred, I don’t even know the lass’s name!”

A brooding man the size of a mountain stood at Laird MacKay’s side. Stepping forward, he thrust an accusing finger toward Latharn’s chest as though aiming a lance for the killing throw. “Since when did not knowing a lass’s name keep ye from tumbling her in your bed?” Latharn’s brother, Faolan, stalked forward upon the dais, shaking his head at his brother’s latest scandal. Faolan was the eldest of the MacKay sons, next in line to be laird. The look on his face plainly told Latharn he deemed his brother guilty on all charges as stated.

Latharn snarled. “Stay out of this, Faolan. Ye may have beat the rest of us out of Mother’s womb, but ye’re no’ the laird, yet.” Latharn met his brother’s glare, squaring his shoulders as he stalked forward to answer Faolan’s challenge.

How dare Faolan pass judgment against him? Latharn didn’t deny he’d enjoyed many a maid since he’d grown to be a man. However, that didn’t mean he’d ever treated them unkindly or shown them any disrespect. He’d sated them fully and when their time was done, he’d taken care to spare their feelings as best he could. Never once had Latharn been inclined to give of his heart...nor had he pretended to do so just to lure a pretty maiden to his bed.

“The lady’s name is Leanna and you will speak of her with respect.” The clear voice rang out through the archway of the hall, causing everyone’s heads to turn. Latharn’s mother, Rachel, emerged from an offset alcove, her eyes flashing in irritation toward her youngest son. “Her clan says she has named you as the father of her child. If she carries your child, Latharn, you will do right by her.”

Latharn winced as thunder rumbled in the distance. Whenever his mother’s emotions were in an upheaval, the weather’s stability always suffered. Rachel’s powers directly connected with the ebb and flow of the forces of nature. Her emotions meshed with the energies coursing through the physical realm. Thunder, while Mother was clearly upset, was never a promising sign.

Latharn’s heart sank as he heard the ring of doubt echo in his mother’s voice. She had always been his greatest champion. Whenever the rest of the family rushed to deem him guilty when trouble was in their midst, Rachel always kept an open mind until she’d heard his side of the story. If his mother already believed him guilty this time, how would he convince the rest of

them he didn't even know this lass existed?

Latharn had emerged as the youngest of the MacKay triplets. His name was Gaelic for "the fox" and it had served him well. Little did his parents know how aptly the title would fit when they had chosen it for the innocent babe. Whenever mischief occurred, the wily young Latharn had always been the first to be accused. But that same charm and cunning that was the source of all the mayhem also bailed him out of any trouble he'd caused. That is until now, until this latest uproar that had the entire family in such a stir.

Casting a furtive glance at his mother, Latharn wondered why he was to blame for the women always chasing him. It wasn't as if he went a-whoring all over the country for just anyone to warm his bed. Since he had reached manhood, there didn't seem to be a lass in the Highlands who could resist him. He didn't know why they always sought him out. He didn't do anything special. He was just nice to them...and they followed him to his bed. In fact, sometimes they didn't follow him. Sometimes, he'd find them waiting for him when he arrived in his chambers. Latharn shifted in place and adjusted his kilt. A lass probably lurked in his private hallways this very minute. It had become somewhat of a problem escaping them.

Latharn had grown restless. Now that he was older, he'd grown weary of their freely given charms. A quick tumble with a lass was once an incomparable elation. Now the euphoria had dimmed. The satisfaction had dulled to basic physical release. Even while lying spent in erotic exhaustion with a sated lass cooing by his side, Latharn knew there had to be more.

Of late, he'd found a night spent in a luscious maiden's arms left his heart troubled, as though a question nagged at the tip of his tongue, and the answer danced just beyond his reach. No matter her beauty, no matter her sweetness, they all left him empty and cold. Loneliness settled over him like a weight crushing on his chest.

There had to be more than the mere physical pleasure of losing himself in a woman's embrace. He knew there was more to be found. The security of his parents' love for each other had strengthened their family as far back as he could remember. He sought that glow of contentment he'd seen in his parents' eyes when their gazes met across a room. No matter how many years had passed between them, the look they shared never changed. He ached for the connection his parents had found. He longed to lose himself in another's eyes and speak volumes without saying a word. It was time he cradled his newborn child in his arms, with his loving wife nestled at his side.

Latharn stifled a shudder; the tension gnawed at his gut. The expressions on their faces told him so much more than words. They'd never believe the things he'd done to avoid the women vying for his embrace. His emptiness ached like a festering wound that refused to heal. He had decided to search for the elusive answer by honing his mystical powers. He'd hoped by refining and perfecting his magical gifts, he might solve the mystery of his untouchable heart.

Of late, he'd been so engrossed in sharpening his goddess-given powers, he'd not even walked with a woman in the gardens for several months. He'd been holed up in the northern tower of the keep. There was no way he fathered the MacKinnett woman's child. By Amergin's beard, it had to have been at least five full moons since he'd been outside the castle skirting walls!

The air of the keep closed in around him; the sweltering heat of too many bodies shoved in one room added to his discomfort. Latharn raked his hands through his hair and tore himself from his tortured musings. His mother glared at him, her foot tapping. Perhaps it was the fire that flashed in her eyes bringing the heat to his skin.

"I know of no Leanna MacKinnett!" he ground out through clenched teeth. Latharn braced himself for his family's damning replies. His gut was already wrenched with the unspoken accusations springing from their eyes.

Raking his own hands through his graying hair, Laird MacKay expelled a heavy sigh. Fixing his gaze on his son with a disappointed glower, he dropped his hands to the arms of his chair. "Their *bana-buidhseach* will arrive at any moment. Their clan will not be satisfied with your denials until their seer has had a chance to speak with ye and weigh the truth of your words."

Latharn turned to his mother. There was one more thing he had to say in his defense. He didn't care if the rest of the MacKay clan didn't believe him. His mother would believe his innocence.

"Mother! As many abandoned bairns as I've rescued while on my travels, as many waifs as I've brought home to this clan, do ye honestly think I would be able to deny a child of my own blood, a child I had sired? Do ye truly think I would turn my back on a bairn of my very own?"

Latharn towered over his mother, peering down into her eyes and opening his soul to her senses. She had to believe him. He trusted his mother's intuition to see the truth in his heart. His voice fell to a defeated whisper as he groaned and repeated his earlier words.

“I swear to ye, Mother. I am not the father of the woman’s child. I know of no Leanna MacKinnett!”

Rachel’s hand fluttered to her throat, and she slowly nodded. “I believe you, Latharn. Moreover, I will do what I can to shield you from their *bana-buidhseach*. I hear this woman’s powers are amazing, perhaps even stronger than mine. But I’ll do whatever I can to protect you from any evil that may be traveling upon the mists.”

With a heaviness in his chest and a catch in his voice, Latharn embraced his mother and whispered, “Your belief in me is all I’ve ever needed, Mother. Ye know I would never bring dishonor to our family or shame upon our clan.”

He brushed his lips across his mother’s cheek just as chaos erupted at the archway of the hall.

Her shrill cry echoed through the keep as the MacKinnett *bana-buidhseach* screeched like an enraged crow. “I demand retribution for Clan MacKinnett. That heartless cur has sullied Leanna MacKinnett’s good name!”

The bent old woman rocked to and fro at the entrance to the hall, brandishing her gnarled walking stick overhead like a weapon.

Her white hair hung in tangled shocks across her stooped shoulders. Her black eyes glittered in her shriveled face, like a rat’s beady eyes from a darkened corner. Her somber robes swept the rush-covered floor with every dragging step. Even the brawniest Highlander in the crowd faded back as she hitched her way to the front of the cavernous room.

Drawing a deep breath, Latharn’s muscles tensed as the old crone edged her way toward him. Tangible power emanated from her swirling aura as he studied her twisted form. This seer’s energies rivaled those of his time-traveling mother. The battering rush of the crone’s malicious emotional onslaught threatened to slam him against the farthest wall.

His mother’s powers had been refined through several generations to her in the twenty-first century. However, her aura had never emitted such waves of energy, not even after magnification through the portals of time.

Immense anger emanated from deep within this old woman, reaching out toward Latharn like a deadly claw. The crone’s soul overflowed with touchable hatred.

Latharn braced himself as a rising sense of dread curled its icy fingers around his spine. He shuddered, swallowing hard against bitter bile as he

noticed something else. The *bana-buidhseach*'s aura seethed with an underlying layer of evil his mother could never possess. The witch's pulsating energy roiled with a menacing thread of darkness he'd never seen the likes of before.

Cocking her head to one side, a malicious glint shone in her eyes. Her mouth curled into a grimace as she croaked, "What say ye, MacKay cur? Do ye deny robbing my laird's daughter of her precious maidenhead? Do ye deny ruining her for any other man?"

With a single stamp of her crooked staff upon the floor, enraged lightning responded outside, the flash splintering throughout the room. Everyone in the hall cowered against the walls, shielding their faces from the narrow windows high overhead. The acrid tang of sulfur hung heavy in the air from the burn of the splitting energy.

Theatrics to get her point across. This did not bode well. His hands tensing into clenched fists, Latharn took a deep breath before he spoke. "I fear there has been a grave misunderstanding. I have not been outside the walls of Castle MacKay in the passing of the last five moons."

"Exactly!" she spat, jabbing her bony finger from deep within her ragged sleeve. The *bana-buidhseach* hitched sideways closer to Latharn and shook a threatening fist in his face. "Ye appeared to the lass while she lay in her bed. Your vile essence washed over her silken body by the light of the swollen moon. As your spirit swirled upon the mist of the bittersweet night, ye violated her ripe nest and filled her with your seed."

Eyes flashing with a mother's protective rage, Rachel shoved her way between Latharn and the snarling hag. Resting her hand on Latharn's chest, Rachel stood nose to nose with the crone. "Surely, you don't believe in such an outlandish tale? The girl could not possibly find herself pregnant in the way you just described."

The crone hitched her way even closer to Rachel, her dark eyes narrowed into calculating slits. Hissing her reply, her foul breath nearly colored the air around her as she spat through rotted teeth with every word. "Do ye call me a liar, Lady MacKay? Do ye slur the name of Leanna MacKinnett and the honored MacKinnett clan?"

The hall crackled with the conflicting forces of emotional energy as lightning once again splintered the electrified air. Thunder roared, shaking the walls until debris rained down from the rafters.

Rachel circled the wizened old hag. "I've nothing to say about Leanna

MacKinnett or the good name of the MacKinnett clan. I defend my son's honor against your lies. I challenge your slander against an honorable MacKay son!"

With a wave of her hand and a narrowed eye, the hag halted Rachel where she stood. The spell she cast silenced Rachel's voice and paralyzed her body. Sliding around Rachel, she stabbed a gnarled finger into the middle of Latharn's chest. A demonic smile curled across her face as she sidled her body closer. With a flourish of one hand, she withdrew a ball of swirling glass from the folds of her tattered robe. Her cackling voice rose to a maniacal shriek as she lifted the ball for all to see. "Do ye deny lying with every maiden whose head ye happened to turn? Do ye deny withholding your heart from every woman in which ye've ever planted your cock?"

Latharn's voice fell to a low, guttural whisper as dread gripped him in his gut. "Who are ye, woman? What is it ye seek from me?" An icy premonition, fear of what was to come, stole the very breath from his lungs. Latharn knew in the very depths of his soul there had never been a Leanna MacKinnett. This wasn't judgment for ruining some woman or the name of her clan. The stench of something much more sinister hung in the air. It rankled with every breath he took.

With a crazed laugh, the shriveled old woman transformed before his eyes. Her dry, tangled hair lengthened into flowing black tresses. Her sallow, wrinkled skin smoothed into creamy silk. Her bent frame straightened, blossoming into a shapely woman, breasts full, hips round and firm.

Her eyes remained black as the darkest obsidian, and her full red lips curled into a seductive, malicious smile. Her voice became a throaty, honey-laced melody, deadly in its hypnotic tone. "Do ye remember me now, my beautiful Highlander? We were together once, you and I. We were lovers, but now I come here as your judge and jailer. And I have found ye guilty of withholding your heart from the only one who truly deserves your love."

"Deardha?" Latharn recoiled from the seductress bearing down upon him.

As she thrust the deep violet globe into his face, Deardha's voice echoed across the hall. "Aye, Latharn. Ye remember me now? Listen closely to my words. I condemn ye to this eternal prison. I banish ye to this crystal hell. Ye are far too powerful a charmer of magic to be toying with women's hearts. No longer will I allow ye to sow your seed with any poor fool who warms your bed. If ye willna pledge your heart to me, then ye shall wish ye were dead." As Deardha uttered the spell, blinding white energy swirled from the

tips of her long pale fingers. The shimmering tendrils flowed and curled, constricting around Latharn's body.

With an enraged scream, Rachel broke free of Deardha's binding spell. Forcing her way between Latharn and the witch, she clawed at Deardha's face.

"Mother, no!" Latharn roared, fighting against the tightening bands of the curse meshed about his body. "Ye must get away from her. Save yourself!" He couldn't breathe. His heartbeat slowed and the room darkened around him. This must be what it felt like to die. Latharn struggled to focus his eyes.

The conflicting forces threw Rachel across the room as Deardha's field of malevolence blasted against the walls. The winds howled and roared as the demonic chaos ripped through the castle. Then all fell silent just as swiftly as the storm had risen and a fog of sorrow settled over the room. Latharn shuddered awake to an icy smoothness pressed against his spine. Finding his arms freed, he flexed his hands, wincing as he rolled his bruised and battered shoulders. Where was he? He lifted his head, staring about in disbelief at the see-through globe enclosed around his body.

Everyone eased their way out from where they'd taken cover: they crawled out from under tables, from behind overturned benches. Eyes wide with fear, they glanced about the room to see if the attack was over.

Latharn spread his hands on the curved, cold glass. What were they doing? Why did they mill around him like he wasn't there? It was as though he sat among their feet on the floor. What the hell were they doing?

The serving lads rushed to re-light the torches lining the walls. The scattered clansmen and villagers rose from the floor, checking each other for injuries. Tables and benches lay about the room like scattered rushes strewn across the floor. Tapestries and tartans hung in tattered strips, nothing left on the standards but bits of colored shreds.

Laird MacKay shoved his way through the wreckage to his wife. Rachel lay in a crumpled heap beside the hearth, her weakened breath barely moving her chest.

"Mother!" Latharn shouted against the glass. If she was dead, it would be no one's fault but his own. Standing, Latharn stretched to see if Rachel would move.

Laird MacKay cradled her against his chest, pressing his lips to her forehead until she opened her eyes.

Rachel struggled to lift her head, her eyes widening with disbelief as she

looked across the room directly toward Latharn. Lifting her hand, her voice cracked with pain as she keened her sorrow to all who remained in the great hall. “My baby!” she sobbed. Waving her trembling hand toward her son, she buried her face in Caelan’s chest.

Latharn closed his eyes against the sight of his mother rocking herself against her pain. As her wails grew louder, he covered his ears and roared to drown out the sound.

CHAPTER 2

Washington University
St. Louis, MO
2010

“PROFESSOR BUCHANAN, do I get extra credit for fixing you up with him? You know, the fine piece of man we met? That guy we met at last month’s conference?”

Nessa Buchanan peered over the top of her laptop, scowling from behind the pair of reading glasses perched on the end of her nose. “If you were one of my students, Ms. Sullivan, you would’ve just failed the semester for hooking me up with that so-called fine piece of man.”

“Oh, come on, Nessa. He couldn’t have been that bad.” Trish sank her teeth into the apple she’d been juggling as she sauntered around Nessa’s office.

After she tossed her glasses onto the desk, Nessa steepled her fingers beneath her chin.

“Trish, do you remember his lecture on the existence of different realities and their definitions as determined by any one individual’s perceptions?”

“Vaguely.” Trish nodded as she munched another bite of the apple and thumbed through the exams on Nessa’s desk.

“Well, it appears that his perception of all night long is my reality of maybe—and I’m really stressing the maybe part—of about, oh, maybe ten minutes.”

Nessa stretched across the desk and slammed her hand down on top of the pile of exams. “And after the questionable ten minutes of all night long, he started snoring!” Snoring didn’t begin to describe it. He’d practically rattled the windows out of her apartment.

With a grimace, Trish shuddered and tossed her half-eaten apple into the trash. Wiping her hands on the tight seat of her jeans, Trish shrugged. “Come on, Nessa. Was he really all that bad? He seemed kind of nice at the conference.”

“He farts in his sleep.” Not looking up, Nessa shoved folders of exams into her backpack in a futile attempt at unearthing her disappearing desk. The guy had been a veritable methane gas factory.

“I see,” Trish observed with a sigh. “Well, that settles it since we both know you never fart.” Trish groaned out loud, as Nessa handed her another stack of exams that wouldn’t fit in her already over-stuffed backpack.

“And he sucks his teeth,” Nessa continued, holding out two more piles of papers toward Trish.

“Before or after he farts?” Trish asked as she juggled the packets of oversized files.

Nessa grunted. “After he eats.” Dragging her backpack over into her chair, she huffed as she kneed it shut and wrestled the straining zipper.

Trish backed away from the desk with a defeated shrug. “Okay! I get the message. No more fixups. I’ll just leave you to your fantasies about your nocturnal Highlander.”

Nessa stopped grappling with her overstuffed backpack long enough to point her finger at Trish. “I will have you know my dreams of my ancient Scotsman have made me what I am today.”

The youngest Ph.D. in Archeology at Washington University, Nessa prided herself on the position she’d attained in her field. She’d worked long and hard to get this far, untold hours of solitude, sweat, and tears. She also knew the reason she’d achieved such a lofty position. Nessa owed it all to the inexplicable dreams she’d had since the summer she turned eighteen.

She’d never forget that horrible summer or the catastrophe of her eighteenth birthday. She’d spent summer vacation mooning over the muscle-bound exchange student staying with her mother’s best friend.

Nessa realized now she had grown up an insecure child. And no wonder, the way her thoughtless parents had always maligned her with constant criticism.

“Develop what little mind you’ve got, Nessa. As plain as you are that’s all you’re ever going to have.” Those words had been their constant mantra for as long as she could remember.

However, her mother had noticed Nessa’s infatuation with Victor and had plotted a little birthday surprise. The night of Nessa’s party, Victor attended her every move. Everywhere she turned, Victor was there. Nessa was delirious. She was thrilled by his touch. She couldn’t believe he really liked her. But at the end of the party, the delightful fantasy shattered when Nessa saw her mother hand Victor a check. Her mother then bestowed a pitying smile upon her and told her, “Happy birthday”.

Nessa sobbed herself to sleep that night, the night she’d had the first dream. He had appeared as though in answer to her silent cry of despair, this man, this great, hulking warrior the size of a mountain. Soul-piercing eyes glimmered so green and haunting Nessa felt adrift in a sea of pines. High cheekbones, aquiline nose. She sighed. His features had struck her breathless. He had the reddish blond hair that bespoke of Viking ancestry, the strong Norse genetics forged when the marauding invaders overtook weaker villages and sowed their ancestral seeds. At eighteen years of age, Nessa didn’t know much about men. But she knew enough to realize this one was pure perfection.

He’d never spoken to her, not a single time. The first time he’d appeared, he’d stood a few steps away as though he didn’t wish to frighten her. His gaze had swept across her body, while the faintest of smiles had pulled at one corner of his mouth. The understanding in his eyes had pushed the loneliness from her heart. He’d reached out to her with the barest touch, brushing the back of his fingers across her arm. The trust had telegraphed like electricity across her skin. At last, she’d found someone who wouldn’t humiliate her.

As she’d grown older, his repeated visits had changed and evolved into something much more. The dreams had become a subtle courting, a gentle winning of her heart. He’d found clever ways to draw her close, pursue her with a sensitive glance. Always intuitive, he appeared when she needed him. He never pushed her but never failed to respond whenever her subconscious called out. Her Highlander soothed her with his silent caress. He strengthened her with his touch.

She didn’t realize her nocturnal visitor was a true Highlander by birth until one of her history classes touched upon the turbulence of Scotland. She’d always loved his unusual garb but had never placed it until one day

when she'd opened to a particular chapter in her history book. His kilted plaid fit snugly about his narrow hips as though it were part of his body. His ancient claymore hung at his side as a silent warning. His hand often rested on the hilt as though he found comfort in its touch.

When he'd taken her hand and guided it over the ancient crest pinned at his shoulder, Nessa had fallen hopelessly in love with the man and all things relating to the Scot.

After that, she had been a soul possessed to find out everything she could about Scotland's past. She'd spent months trying to find the elusive crest, in the hopes of identifying her Highlander's clan. She'd found some that were close, but to her dismay, she'd never located an identical match. That's when she'd decided he was just her fantasy. At least if he was only in her head, it meant he could never leave her. Her Highlander would always be hers.

Even though she'd accepted deep in her heart her Highlander couldn't be real, Scotland remained the first love of her life. She studied its history with relentless passion, from its bloody past to its determined people, and how it had changed the course of civilization through the ages. The only drawback of her single-minded obsession, and a rather annoying side effect of her dreams, was the fact that any male met during her waking hours didn't quite measure up against her perfect nocturnal Highlander.

Nessa blamed her continued solitude on the fact that apparently, her parents had been right all along. She must be too homely for any man to consider taking home to meet the folks. That is, any man worth having. Any man like the one in her dreams. There were plenty of them out there ready and willing to participate in messing up the sheets. If you weren't too picky and had approximately ten minutes you didn't mind donating to a total waste of time.

"Nessa! You're doing it again!" Trish dropped a stack of books on the floor.

Nessa jumped, jolted from her reverie.

"I mention dream dude and there you go, off into Nessa-land again."

Fixing Trish with a threatening glare, Nessa tucked her reading glasses into the neck of her shirt. "You drop my textbooks like that again, and I'm gonna recommend you for the Research Department! I haven't forgotten how much you just love disappearing into the archives for days—and nights—at a time."

An opened letter on the desk caught her attention and Nessa's irritation

with Trish vanished. “You have to see this! Look! Are you up for an extended trip to Scotland?” Scooping up the paper, she pushed it under Trish’s nose, then slung the groaning bag over her shoulder. That multi-folded piece of paper held her magic genie. Her wishes were finally granted.

Trish shook her head as she unfolded the paper. “Come on, Nessa. You know I can’t afford airfare to Scotland right now. I’m still up to my eyeballs in student loans from getting my master's degree.”

Scanning over the well-worn letter, Trish wrinkled her nose as she read. Pinching the page where her reading had stopped, Trish’s face grew thoughtful with what she’d just digested. “Where exactly is Durness?”

Excitement bubbled inside Nessa as though she was a can of carbonated cola. All of her studying and long hours of solitude had led her to the land of her dreams. “Northwestern tip of Scotland. The Highlands. It’s finally happened, Trish! I finally got the grant!”

Trish’s grin spread into an excited smile as she glanced up again from farther down the page. “This is it? You finally got the grant from the University of Glasgow? This is the one you’ve applied for three years in a row?”

Snatching the letter out of Trish’s hands, Nessa waved it in the air. “You got it, my friend. I finally got the grant. I’ve received the funding to go on an extended archeological study of the Durness sites and the surrounding areas of Balnakiel. All I have to do is register all of my findings with the University of Glasgow. Anything I find will be tagged by their history department for use in further studies. And since you’re my assistant, your expenses are just as fully paid as mine.”

“Well then, woo hoo!” Trish hooted at the top of her lungs with a jab of her fist in the air. “That’s fantastic! You’ve been trying to get this grant forever. And Scotland...what is it you call it after you’ve had about half a beer? The land of your heart’s desire? Hey! Maybe you’ll meet the great-great-grandson of the guy in your dreams and finally have a sex life worth talking about.”

Great. She could always count on Trish to put things in perspective. Nessa laughed as she folded the well-worn letter and forced it into the outside pocket of the backpack. “Tell me, Trish. Why is it you can remember things like that but you can never remember what we’ve named our database files? And is sex all you think about? I think you’re the one who needs to find a guy worth taking to bed.”

With a wicked wink, Trish patted her shapely rump before she scooped up an armload of folders off the desk. “I’m not the one who has a problem with snoring, farting, ten-minute teeth suckers taking up space between my sheets.”

GET your copy of *Beyond a Highland Whisper* to find out what happens next!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



maevegreyson.com

USA Today Bestselling Author. Two-time RONE Award Winner. Holt Medallion Finalist.

Maeve Greyson's mantra is this: No one has the power to shatter your dreams unless you give it to them.

She and her husband of over forty years traveled around the world while in the U.S. Air Force. Now they're settled in rural Kentucky where Maeve writes about her courageous Highlanders and the fearless women who tame them. When she's not plotting the perfect snare, she can be found herding cats, grandchildren, and her husband—not necessarily in that order.



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