

Cerrídwen Press

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Black Wind
Sean & Bronwyn



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Blackwind: Sean and Bronwyn

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BLACKWIND: SEAN AND BRONWYN

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Dedication

To the wonderful and understanding Emergency Room staff of the Grinnell (Iowa) Regional Medical Center. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your professionalism, your kindness and most of all your tender mercies when my migraine comes to visit. I truly appreciate each and every one of you.

—Charlee

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Chapter One

Albany, Georgia

September 1977

He followed the little girl's every movement with hungry eyes.

He had been watching her for three years now.

At his sides, his hands were clenched so tightly the fingernails dug bloody arcs into his palms. His body posture was tense as he watched the child from his hiding place at the corner of the building. Every trill of laughter from her creamy white throat, every shriek of delight as she soared higher and higher on the swing, drove a spike of hurt through his brain. Staring at her pretty smile made him clench his teeth, grind them together so strongly his jaw began to ache.

"Higher, Davy!" she demanded. "Push me higher!"

His fevered gaze shifted momentarily to the little red-haired boy who stood behind her, his freckled face beaming as he pushed the swing seat. Every ounce of hatred in his body became directed at the boy. Every vile epithet he had ever heard was hurled silently at the head of the child. A grimace of a smile began to relax his tight face as he watched the boy suddenly turn pale.

"Davy!" the little girl protested, turning to look back at her friend.

The recess bell blared. The watcher jumped since he was standing almost directly under the mechanism, but he did not remove his angry stare from the boy. If anything, his look intensified.

The red-haired boy faltered, stumbled back, his hand to his forehead. He went to one knee on the playground sand.

"Davy?" the girl questioned. The concern in her voice brought the eyes of her watcher back to her and away from the target of his rage. She twisted around in the swing seat, her worried eyes locked on her friend.

"Bronnie," the boy called as he lowered his other knee to the ground. "I don't feel so good."

"What's the matter?" she asked and tipped forward to drag her sneakers in the dirt, slowing the swing. Her face was turned toward him, her eyes troubled. "Davy, what's wrong?"

He knew what she was going to do a second before she acted. "No," the watcher hissed, venturing out from his hiding place. With a gasp, he stared in horror as the girl let go of the swing's chains and leapt out of the seat to land on both knees in the gravel. He groaned as he saw the flash of pain cross her pretty features as she stood and limped

toward the boy. His gaze dropped to her knees—he winced when he saw the flesh scraped and peppered with welling blood.

“Aye, you caused it,” the voice inside his head whispered. *“See what you did?”*

He stood trembling as she squatted beside her friend and put her hand on the boy’s shoulder. The blood rushed so thickly and loudly through his ears, he could not hear what she said. But it didn’t matter—he didn’t want to know. When he started to turn away, her words stopped him dead still in his tracks.

“Hey, Sean!”

He turned to gawk at her.

“Could you help us?” she asked, her pretty green eyes fused with his demon-dark orbs.

He shook his head in denial.

“Please?” she beseeched. She cocked her head and repeated the word.

He looked around, realizing they were alone on the playground. There was no one to see what was happening, no one to help.

“Please?” she repeated, and he realized she was close to tears.

Without fully realizing he was doing it, he began moving toward her. He didn’t speak as he stopped about two feet away. His heart was beating so quickly, he thought it might burst from his rib cage.

“I can’t pick him up,” she said. Her right arm was behind the boy’s back, her left hand entwined with his. *“Will you?”*

Seeing the two holding hands sent a ripple of fury through him. He was experiencing such murderous rage he wondered that the girl did not sense it.

“Sean?”

His name on her tongue brought him out of the dark place into which he wanted to descend. He mentally shook himself. *“What?”*

“Can you help me get him up?”

He shrugged and stepped forward. With a grimace of distaste, he took hold of the boy’s arm.

“What’s going on here?” an imperious voice demanded.

The watcher turned to see an overweight man bustling toward them. He let go of the boy’s arm and dug his hands into the pockets of his britches, backed away, lowering his head against the heat of the older man’s glower.

“Sean Cullen. I should have known I’d find you causing trouble. What have you done now?”

The girl snapped up her head. *“Sean hasn’t done anything, Father Goodmayer. Davy...”*

“Be quiet, Bronwyn,” the priest ordered. *“I was not speaking to you, young lady.”*

Father Henry Goodmayer's beefy face above the priestly collar was framed in a bushy salt-and-pepper beard. His dark eyes squinted against the glare of the hot sun as he turned his angry glare to Sean Cullen. "Go to Sister's office and wait for me."

"He was only trying to—" the girl began.

"I said to be quiet, Bronwyn!" Father Goodmayer snapped. "Or would you like some of what he will be getting?"

The girl's chin came up. "You whip that boy for something he didn't do and I'll have my father on you like white on rice!"

The priest's mouth flew open. His beady eyes narrowed. "How *dare* you!"

"I dare because my father is the Grand Knight and the president of the parish council and—"

Bronnie McGregor yelped as the priest brutally grabbed her arm and started dragging her toward the school. A second after that Goodmayer was on the ground with Sean Cullen, a crazed eleven-year-old boy, straddling his back.

"Don't you hurt her!" Sean bellowed, as he slammed his fists into the back of the priest's head.

It took two nuns and the gym coach to pull Sean Cullen off Goodmayer. Sean was so filled with rage, Sisters Mary Pat and Agnes Louise were obviously grateful for the strength in Coach Rubin Herndon's brawny arms.

"Be still, Cullen!" the coach hissed, his thick forearms locked around Sean.

Goodmayer struggled to his feet, his florid face even more infused with anger. He pointed a stubby finger at Sean. "Take that little hellion to my office and keep him there!" He swung his gaze to Sister Mary Pat. "And you take that rude little chit to *your* office and give her the paddling she deserves for her disrespect!"

"No!" Sean shouted, violently twisting to get free.

Sister Mary Pat sighed heavily. "Come along, Bronwyn," she insisted, taking the girl's arm. "I've no choice but to do as Father demands."

As if sensing another outburst from his ward, Coach Herndon tightened his grip on Sean and leaned down to snarl in his ear. "She won't lay a hand on Bronnie. Now, be still!"

Sean stared into the coach's periwinkle blue eyes and knew the man was being truthful. He stopped struggling, allowing his shoulders to droop.

"But you, young man," the coach grumbled, "won't be able to sit down for a week when Father is through with you!"

Sean didn't care about himself. His concern was entirely on Bronwyn as she walked dejectedly beside Sister Mary Pat. When she turned and gave him a hopeless, apologetic smile for getting him into such a fix, he shrugged nonchalantly.

A shrug Father Goodmayer did not miss.

* * * * *

"Pete and Mike Thomas said they heard the pops from that paddle all the way to the sacristy!" Bronwyn complained to her father. She swiped angrily at the tears streaking down her cheeks. "They know all about that paddle, Daddy. They've seen it. They say when Father came here he had holes drilled in it so it would hurt worse when he used it on one of the boys! Daddy, you've got to *do* something!"

Dermot McGregor stroked his daughter's trembling back. "Bronnie, it isn't up to me to speak to Father Goodmayer about this. It's up to the boy's father."

"Father Goodmayer should not have manhandled our daughter, Derm," Bronwyn's mother Deirdre put in. "I think you should find out all you can about what happened then take this latest outrageous behavior before the Council."

"Oh, I fully intend to have a talk with Goodmayer," Bronwyn's father snapped.

Bronwyn buried her face in her father's neck. "I'm worried about Sean, Daddy. Will you call and see how he is? Pete said Sean was limping when he left the rectory and got in his daddy's truck."

Her father looked at his wife. "What do you think?"

"I think the young man should be commended for trying to protect our daughter," his wife replied. "Don't you?"

Dermot sighed. "I guess you're right. What's his name, Bronnie?"

"Sean Cullen," she said with a hiccup. When her father stiffened, she lifted her head and looked up at him, surprised to see his face tight with disapproval. "What's the matter, Daddy?"

"Cullen. Are we talking about Tymothy Cullen's son?"

She ran the sleeve of her blouse under her nose. "I don't know. I guess so. Do you know his father?"

A muscle worked in Dermot's lean cheek. "I know *of* him."

"Is that the man who runs the butcher shop over on East Broad?" Deirdre asked her husband.

"I believe so."

"I've heard he beats his —"

"I'll handle this, DeeDee," her husband interrupted with a stern look. He dipped his chin toward his daughter then away in a silent message to his wife.

Deirdre nodded. "Bronnie, will you help me with supper?"

"But I want to know how Sean is, Mama!"

"Your father will tell us after he's spoken to the boy's father." Deirdre stood and held out her hand. "How about you making some of your great-tasting deviled eggs tonight? I've got four boiled eggs just waiting for you to work your magic on them!"

Bronwyn tucked her lower lip between her teeth. She was torn between staying to hear the conversation between her father and Sean's and her showing off the only thing she knew how to make. She shrugged. "Okay."

"And put some minced celery in for me," her father said.

Bronwyn smiled. "And dillweed?"

"Well, of course!" He chuckled. "What good are deviled eggs without dillweed?"

When his daughter was out of earshot, Dermot McGregor ran a weary hand over his face and sighed deeply. The last thing he wanted to do was have a conversation with Tym Cullen, a man the entire town despised. With effort, he pushed out of his easy chair and went to the phone. His frown deepened as he looked up the number for the Cullen residence. By the time he ended the telephone call, his frown had become a grimace.

Deirdre looked up as her husband came into the kitchen. The look on his face concerned her.

"Is he all right, Daddy?" Bronwyn asked. She was too young to understand the tight white line around her father's lips and the steely glint in his gray eyes.

"His father assures me he is, Bronnie." He came to stand beside his daughter who was mixing pickle relish, finely minced onion and celery into the cooked egg yolks. He folded his arms as she ladled a dollop of mayonnaise into the mix. "Not too much."

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "I *know*, Daddy!" she said with exasperation, reaching for the shaker of dillweed.

Deirdre dried her hands on a kitchen towel as she studied her husband of fifteen years. His forbidding looks made her feel the heartbeat in her throat.

"You finish up here, Bronnie," Dermot said. "I need to speak with your mother."

Bronwyn looked up. "About what you're going to say to Father tomorrow?" she inquired with a grin.

He nodded then gently cupped her cheek. "Do you know how much I love you, Bronwyn Fiona McGregor?"

She blushed. "Uh-huh," she whispered. Her soft green eyes tracked between her mother and father then lowered to the task she was performing.

Dermot smiled and turned away. Deirdre followed him from the room.

"What happened?" she asked when they were in the living room.

"I got Cullen on the phone and introduced myself," Dermot said in a tight voice. He stood before the large picture window that looked out onto the front lawn.

"Did he know who you were?"

"He said something smart like, 'Oh, yeah. You're the bigwig out at the nuthouse.' Then he asked what I wanted."

Deirdre sat on the arm of the sofa that flanked the big window. "And?"

"I asked if he knew about what happened at Saint Teresa's this afternoon and he said he did. I asked him how his son was and he said, 'The little bastard got what he deserved for stepping in where it weren't none of his business to be stepping.'"

Deirdre blinked. "You're joking!"

Plowing a hand through his crop of thick black curls, Dermot let out a snort. "Do I look like I am? Not only did Cullen not care that his son had tried to defend our daughter, he said he—and I am quoting him verbatim—'Beat the crap outta the little punk for causing me to close up shop and go get his scrawny little ass.'"

"Oh, Derm," Deirdre groaned. "Surely he didn't."

He turned to look at her. "You've heard the rumors about Tym Cullen, DeeDee. Half the town has heard them, and the other half has seen some of his doings! No one goes into that shop who doesn't come out talking about what a son of a bitch he is. How many times have people told us they've been to his store and seen Mrs. Cullen with a black eye and bruises all over her face? People know he cheats his customers and beats his wife and now *I* know he beats his boy, too!"

"What are you going to do?"

"There isn't anything I can do where Cullen is concerned, but by the good Lord I intend to do something about Hank Goodmayer! Saint Teresa's doesn't need a man like him at the helm of our ship!"

Deirdre smiled. Her husband's father was retired Navy and, after years of traveling the globe with his father, Dermot's liberal use of nautical terms was a habit he could not break.

"We could report Mr. Cullen to the department of welfare," she suggested.

"That would be about the best we could do."

"And hope it will help."

From her place beside the crack of the kitchen doorway as she eavesdropped on the conversation, Bronwyn allowed the door to close all the way. She stood with her head on the doorjamb and her eyes squeezed shut.

"I'm sorry, Sean," she whispered. She opened her eyes and stared at the woodwork. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

Hearing her parents moving toward the kitchen, she hurried back to the counter and finished arranging the deviled eggs on a platter.

When supper was finished and she had helped her mother clear away the dishes, she asked to be excused so she could do her homework. In her room, she stretched out across the bed and pulled her favorite gray and white teddy bear into her arms.

"Sean," she sighed, pressing her face into the soft, fake fur.

She knew he watched her.

Just as she watched him when he wasn't aware she was around.

Like on the day she had first seen him.

Bronwyn had been waiting for Sister Mary Pat to sign her absentee slip when Sean and his mother entered the office.

"May I help you?" Mrs. Cureton, the school secretary, inquired.

"I'm here to enroll me boy," the thin woman with the paisley print dress and small white hat replied. She had a thick Irish brogue. "Me name is Dorrie Cullen. His name be Sean Daniel Cullen."

"Hello, Sean. Welcome to Saint Teresa's." When the boy did not reply, the secretary looked at his mother. "What grade will he be in?"

"Third."

Bronwyn was very aware of the slim boy with the curly blond hair standing beside his mother. For an instant, his gaze swept to her then he looked quickly away, but in that fleeting moment, Sean Cullen's pale blue eyes had mesmerized Bronnie.

"Are you folks new to Albany?"

The woman nodded. "My husband bought the meat shop across the river."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Sutton's place. If I remember correctly, the shop was bought by folks from over in Savannah."

"Aye, Savannah," Sean's mother replied.

"Let me get the paperwork started. You are Catholic, of course."

"There is no other true religion," Mrs. Cullen pronounced softly.

"I agree completely," Mrs. Cureton said. "Naturally you'll need to register with the parish to get parishioner tuition rates."

"Aye. We can do that."

"Are his shots up to date?"

Sean's mother reached into her purse. "Aye. Here is the documentation."

Each time his mother spoke, Sean Cullen winced. To Bronnie, whose grandmother still bore the lilt of the West Country, she understood his embarrassment. She was about to speak to him when Sister Mary Pat called her into her office. With a smile of encouragement the boy seemed to ignore, Bronnie left him standing awkwardly at his mother's side. Though she did not see him again until a few days later, she thought of him constantly, for his good looks had fired her girlish imagination. By the time she laid eyes on him again, she had developed a strong crush on the boy with the blue eyes.

It was a crush that had only grown stronger over the years.

Because Sean was two years older, Bronnie only saw him when he passed her in the hall or as he sat in church during daily Mass. Though he never spoke to her and she was too shy to talk to him, the only contact they had was when their eyes met. It was during those brief times Bronnie thought she saw deep sadness in Sean Cullen's cobalt gaze.

Now, she thought she understood why.

"I love you, Seannie," she said and sighed, pulling the bear tighter against her.

Sean turned over in bed and winced. He felt the pull of his shorts against the broken flesh on his backside and knew the crusted blood had glued the fabric to his flesh. Though he had taken a shower and his mother had salved the lacerations caused by the priest's diligently wielded paddle, the abrasions must have opened again. Gently, he reached behind him to tug away the material. The sting made him draw in a breath and mentally curse Goodmayer to the Abyss and beyond.

"You are evil, Sean Cullen!" Father Goodmayer had snarled with each slap of the paddle. "You are evil!"

Bent over the priest's desk, with Goodmayer's hand pressed firmly between his shoulder blades, Sean had been able to see the man's legs and the thick bulge between them that gave evidence to how much the priest was enjoying the punishment. The harder the hits, the firmer the bulge, until with one last brutal pass of the wood, the cloth covering Goodmayer's crotch darkened in a spreading stain.

"Evil!" Goodmayer pronounced one final time then stalked to the window, his back to Sean. "Return to class, and as you walk, think on the sins you have committed. I will be talking with your father about your misconduct."

His rump on fire with the pain, Sean straightened. He hurt so badly he could barely hobble to the door. Not bothering to look back at the sadist who had inflicted such savage punishment, Sean went into the foyer and leaned against the wall, his head down and his legs trembling.

"Don't let him come out here and find you, Sean," Mrs. Harold, the priest's housekeeper, warned. She had come down the hallway, drying her hands on a towel. "Get going now. You don't need another paddling, son."

Later, when Tym Cullen arrived to escort his son home, Sister Mary Justice had come to Sean's classroom to get him. She looked at him with pity as he walked down the corridor beside her.

"He doesn't look pleased, Sean," Sister whispered.

"He never does," Sean said quietly.

One look at his father's face and Sean knew he would pay dearly. He had to grit his teeth to climb into the cab of his father's pickup because he did not want the man to witness his pain.

"This is a hell of a note!" his father snarled as he slammed the truck into reverse. "Being called down here to get your ass in the middle of the day!"

Sean knew he should not speak. His father's hands were wrapped around the steering wheel so tightly the knuckles were white. From the way those huge hands squeezed the plastic, Sean knew his father was itching to lash out at him.

"When we get home, I'll teach you to embarrass me like this!"

Sean kept his eyes straight ahead. His bottom throbbed with the cuts left by Goodmayer's beating. It was all he could do not to shift on the seat or to cry out as the vehicle bumped over the roadway.

"Well, you won't be coddled in that Papist resort after today."

Slowly closing his eyes, Sean knew what that meant – public school.

It wasn't that he cared one way or another where he got his education, but Saint Teresa's was where Bronwyn McGregor was.

"I'll teach you," his father growled, turning to give him a steady look. "You're nothing but trouble and have been from the day you were conceived. Well, I'll make a man of you if it kills me!"

The beating he'd been given at the unholy hands of the priest was nothing compared to the strapping he received from his father at home. Despite his mother's pleading from the other side of the locked door not to inflict further punishment on their child, Sean's father had made good his promise to teach him a brutal lesson. His blood flowing from lacerations caused from the barber's strop his father wielded savagely, Sean finally slipped into unconsciousness as the vicious pain continued. He awoke to find his mother kneeling beside him, his hand held protectively in hers, and one of her eyes swollen and already turning black from Tym Cullen's fist.

Now, lying in bed, staring at the wall, Sean knew that one day Tymothy Cullen would meet his rightful end and, when it came, it would be a violent end to a violent, brutal life.

"One day, I'll kill you, Tym Cullen," he vowed. "Before God, I swear I will kill you."

In the adjacent bedroom, he heard his mother cry out as she did nearly every night.

"I don't sleep so good, Seannie," she had told him once. "Your Da thrashes about and he accidentally hits me sometimes."

"One day there will be no more beatings, Ma," he said softly. "No more black eyes or broken arms."

As he had grown older, Sean tried to stop his father from abusing his mother and the results had been disastrous. The one time Sean tried to physically restrain his father, Tym Cullen had beaten him so savagely, Sean stayed in bed for three days.

But the brunt of that fury had fallen on Sean's mother and she had wound up in the hospital with a fractured jaw, a broken arm and a ruptured spleen.

"Fell down the stairs, she did," his father told the doctors at the hospital in Savannah.

Unable to prove otherwise and incapable of getting Dorrie Cullen to press charges, the authorities were forced to drop the matter, though one burly black officer had warned Tym Cullen that they would be watching him.

"Go ahead, Sean," his father said later. "Stand up for your Ma and see what I do to her next time!"

So, through the years, Sean had been forced to watch his mother's abuse and endure his own. He was biding his time, waiting for the right moment to strike.

"You are a dead man walking, Tymothy Cullen," he declared as he drew his pillow closer to his chest. He buried his face in the clean scent of ozone that permeated the fabric.

As he drifted into sleep, the soft material beneath his cheek became the creamy flesh of Bronwyn McGregor's shoulder and he nuzzled against that phantom sweetness.

He sent his mind out into the night and his thoughts moved gently into the cheerful lavender bedroom where she slept. In his incorporeal state, he stood there and watched her sleeping for a moment then laid his spectral hand against her cheek.

"Seannie," she sighed, and turned to rub her cheek against his ghostly palm.

Her words erased the pain in his body. He relaxed, giving in to the closing arms of sleep, and withdrew to his own dismal room and lonely space.

His lips moved against the fabric of his pillow. "Goodnight, milady," he whispered. "I love you, too."

Chapter Two

Albany, Georgia

September 1983

The halls smelled stale and old as Bronwyn stopped beside the library. The bustling corridors of Albany High School seemed intimidating. There were too many students jostling past her, eyeing her as though she was an alien creature dredged up from the muck, and none seemed inclined to ask if she needed help. She shifted her French II, geometry and biology books to her left hip and let out a snort. Just as she started forward again, a rowdy boy ran past and hit her arm. Her books went flying, skidding across the floor before her.

"Thanks, you little creep!" she yelled, and was astonished to find herself on the receiving end of the boy's middle-finger salute.

Exasperated by the rudeness, angry at being thrust into this new and unsettling experience, Bronwyn clenched her jaw and stooped to grab her notebook.

"Need some help, princess?"

The smirk in the voice did nothing to improve Bronwyn's state of mind so she ignored the speaker. Grumbling to herself, she picked up her textbooks and slammed them on top of the notebook on the floor at her feet.

"Suit yourself," the speaker said.

After lifting the heavy stack of books into her arms, Bronwyn stood. As she did, she took in the faded jeans and rundown sneakers of the young man who had spoken. Her gaze moved up his chest, past a plaid shirt that had seen much better days, to his expressionless, thin face.

Despite the lack of the light blue shirt and dark blue twill pants that had been the uniform at Saint Teresa's, Bronwyn would have recognized him anywhere, although he had grown taller. "Sean?"

He shrugged, but didn't reply.

"How are you?" she asked, smiling.

He shrugged again. "Okay."

The day after Father Goodmayer had punished Sean, the boy's father had enrolled him in public school. Bronwyn hadn't seen him since that day on the playground at Saint Teresa's but she had never forgotten him.

Her dreams were often of him.

She wanted to talk to him, to tell him what she never got a chance to tell him that day years before. She wanted him to know how sorry she was about what had happened.

"Sean, I—" she began.

"What class are you looking for?" he asked.

"Mrs. Browne's English."

"It's upstairs."

"Oh. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," he said, and turned to go.

"What do you have for sixth period?" she asked, falling into step beside him.

"Why?"

"Just asking."

He stopped and looked down at her. His stare was intense. "Do you ever dream about me, Bronnie?" he asked in a silky voice.

She blinked, her face flaming. "W-what?" The heat of his body, the pleasant smell of him, was overpowering and made her legs tremble. She stared into his lean face, into the lightness of his blue eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

He leaned toward her. "I think you do," he whispered.

She took a step back. When she did, he grinned.

He chuckled. "Go to class, princess."

She watched him walk away, his hands deep into the pockets of his old jeans. Fleeting, she wondered why he carried no books.

The next time she saw him, he was sitting outside Coach Barton's office, his long legs crossed at the ankles. Reclining on the bench as though he owned it, he sat with his arms crossed over his chest, his head tipped back against the wall, his eyes closed. It had been four days since their encounter in front of the library. Each day, she had diligently searched the halls for him during class changes and became increasingly frustrated when she could not catch sight of him. She had not been able to get him out of her thoughts, though she hadn't really tried.

"Hey," she said.

He opened one eye. "Hey, yourself. How're things in the kingdom, princess?"

She arched her chin toward the Dean of Boys' office. "Are you in trouble?" she asked in a teasing voice.

"I'm always in trouble." He grinned. "I'm a bad boy, or haven't you heard?"

"What did you do?"

"I punched Dave Cox in gym class," he replied, staring into her eyes as though he dared her to rebuke him for what he'd done.

"Dave Cox," she said in a flat voice. "My Dave Cox?"

Something evil moved in his eyes—his mouth tightened. "I wasn't aware he belonged to you," he snapped, and drew in his legs to push erect on the bench.

"He's my friend, and I know you know that."

"Aye, I have the scars on my ass to remind me."

She flinched. "I'm sorry about that. I never—"

"Don't apologize, Bronwyn. Don't ever apologize to me for anything."

"But—"

The door to Coach Barton's office opened and the Dean of Boys stuck his head into the hallway. "Let's go, Cullen," he said, his round face hard as flint.

Sean sprang up from the bench and, without a backward glance at Bronwyn, walked past Coach Barton and into the Dean's office. The door closed behind him with a snap.

Bronwyn stood there a moment longer, her lower lip tucked between her teeth. She wanted to wait, to be there when Sean was released from the Dean's office, but she knew she couldn't. She'd been on her way to the restroom and if she dallied much longer, Mrs. Gentry would send someone to look for her.

She was about to turn away when she heard the popping sound coming from the office.

She stilled, her hand going to her mouth. The unmistakable sound of the paddle being applied was one every student recognized. Not immediately realizing she was doing it, she counted the hits—eight, nine, ten.

The door opened and Sean walked out, his jaw clenched as tightly as the fists at his side. He seemed to look right through her as he walked past, but when he got about five feet away, he stopped.

"Meet me at Burdette's after school," he said without turning to look at her. When she didn't answer, he jerked around. "Did you hear me?"

She nodded. Her heart thundered. "I'll be there."

Her palms were suddenly sweaty, her legs weak. She watched him until he entered one of the classrooms at the end of the hall. It was the detention class and she had a feeling he was going to be there for a few days—if not weeks—to come.

The rest of the school day passed in a blur. As the hands of the big clock on the wall of her biology class crept slowly toward three-fifteen, she grew more and more restless. She had licked her lips so many times they were fast becoming chapped. Her skirt was wrinkled from the repeated drag of her sweaty palms against the fabric. When the bell rang, she nearly jumped out of her seat.

Without taking time to think, she hurried out of the classroom to the school's west entrance where she knew her mother would be parked, waiting for her.

"I gotta go to town," she said when she got into the car.

"Not today," her mother replied, starting the engine. "I promised your Aunt Doris I would —"

"Mama, please! I *have* to go to town!"

"To do what?"

"I gotta go to Burdette's."

"Again, to do what?"

She locked eyes with her mother. "To see a boy."

Deirdre McGregor's eyebrows shot up into the thick chestnut of her bouffant hairdo. "Oh, really?" she drawled. "And just who is this young man?"

"He's my soul mate," Bronwyn said fiercely. "The man I am going to marry one day!"

Her mother sat back in the seat. "I see. Is this someone of whom you believe your father and I would approve?"

Bronwyn's face puckered in a frown. "Probably not, but it doesn't matter."

"Oh, I'm quite certain it *will* matter to your father."

"Mama, please! I have to meet him. I swore to him I would. I have to keep my word!"

Deirdre shook her head. "I'm not ready for this," she said with a long sigh and put the car in gear. She cast her daughter an exasperated look. "You'd better tell me who he is."

Bronwyn crossed her fingers in the folds of her skirt. "Sean Cullen."

Deirdre pulled out into the traffic. "The butcher's son."

"I love him, Mama."

Her mother made no comment, but Bronwyn couldn't overlook the tightening of Deirdre McGregor's hands on the steering wheel or the look of shock in her hazel eyes.

"Mama, please?" Bronwyn beseeched.

Deirdre chewed on her lip for a long moment, remembering something her older sister had once said about her own daughter. *"When I forbid Siobhan to do something, she always finds a way to do it anyway. Saying no is like waving a red flag at her, like you're daring her to do whatever the heck she wanted to in the first place. Teenage girls are like that, DeeDee, especially where boys are concerned. Forbid them to see a boy she thinks she can't live without and she'll end up pregnant just to spite you! I've learned to let her date whomever she wants and just hope he does something to show her his true colors before it's too late."*

"Mama?" Bronwyn pressed.

"This is against my better judgment," Deirdre said.

As she pulled in front of the ten-cent store, Deirdre clenched her jaw. She was not good at parallel parking and breathed a heavy sigh of relief when she managed to angle her car into the slot.

Bronnie leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you!"
She was out of the car before Deirdre could reply.

He was sitting at the lunch counter when Bronnie entered. He did not look at her as she took the seat beside him. "We'll have trouble with your mother and father," he said, poking his straw up and down in his Cherry Coke.

Bronnie nodded. "You may be right."

"I know I am and you know it, too."

She swiveled her stool to face him. "How does that make you feel, Sean?"

He turned his gaze fully upon her. "It doesn't matter. I'm used to people telling me what I can and can't do. What I can and can't have."

"What is it you want?"

He smiled. "To be with you."

Bronwyn blushed and ducked her head. "I want to be with you, too."

"We'll be together one day, Bronnie. I swear."

She looked at his unsmiling face. "Do you believe in destiny?"

He leaned his arms against the counter. "I believe what is meant to be will be."

"So you think you and I were meant to meet?"

"As surely as the wind blows, *a ghrá mo chroí*."

Bronnie grinned. "That's Gaelic."

"Aye. Do you know what it means?"

"*Chroí* means heart," she replied, proud of her knowledge.

"*Ghrá* means love," he said softly. "The phrase is 'love of my heart'."

Her eyes widened. "'Love of my heart.'"

"As you will always be," he said, holding her gaze.

She folded her hands in her lap. "I love you, too."

He looked down the counter and his eyes narrowed. "Hey!" he called out. "You have a customer down here. You think you can tear yourself away from lover boy long enough to take her order?"

The waitress turned away from the uniformed Air Force serviceman with whom she was flirting. "Hold your water, sonny. I'm coming!"

"Did you hear me?" Bronnie asked, a little embarrassed by his rudeness to the waitress, but exhilarated by his show of authority. She was not prepared for his answer.

"I have loved you from the moment I saw you. You are mine, Bronwyn McGregor."

A chill went through Bronnie, she shivered. "You think so, do you?"

"You understood that long ago." He glanced at her. "Didn't you tell your mother so?"

"Soul mates," she agreed, liking the sound of the words. "Destined to be together." She didn't question how he knew what she had told her mother, even though another chill traveled down her spine.

He reached out to cup her right cheek. "Never fear me, Bronnie. For as long as we draw breath, I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"What can I getcha?" the woman behind the counter asked as she sidled up. Popping her gum, she pulled the order pad from the pocket of her apron.

"A Cherry Coke to go," Sean answered for Bronnie. He wasn't looking at the waitress, but through the front window of the variety store.

"Is my mama staring at us?" Bronnie asked.

"If looks could kill, I'd be a pile of ashes," he said, and turned so he faced the back of the counter.

"Daddy will no doubt have a talk with me tonight," she sighed.

"About the unacceptable company you won't be allowed to keep."

"I don't care what they say, Sean," she said fiercely. "If we have to hide our love, then—"

The waitress came back with Bronnie's drink. "You got a real anxious boyfriend here, sweetie," she said. "He 'bout wore a hole through the glass lookin' for you." She leaned forward, propping her elbows on the counter and affording Sean a good look down the front of her white uniform. "'Course if I had a boy as cute as this one a'waitin' on me, I'd make sure I hurried up to get to 'im." She flicked her tongue across lips.

"Get out of my face," Sean sneered.

"Care to try a woman instead of a little girl, handsome?" the waitress cooed.

Sean glared at the woman, but she just winked at him, laughed and headed back to her serviceman.

"That's what my mama calls a brazen woman, I guess," Bronnie said, her face flaming. She took a long sip of her Cherry Coke.

"That is what your mama would call a whore," Sean countered, digging into the pocket of his jeans for money to pay for Bronnie's drink. He slapped the coins on the counter.

Bronnie didn't reply. She sat there sipping her Coke, her eyes glued to the ice in the cup.

"If I gave you a token of my love for you, would you wear it?" he asked.

Bronnie was stunned, completely unprepared for the question. She stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"Aye, I'm serious, woman."

She turned to look at the nearby jewelry counter where several rows of friendship rings twinkled in the glass case.

"Not one of those," he said irritably. "This."

She looked down at his outstretched palm. Nestled there was an octagonal silver disk, its edges braided with intricately intertwined Celtic knotwork. At the top of the pendant was a trinity triangle—three triangles interlaced into one. Below that were symbols that looked familiar to her.

"It's called a Claddagh," he told her. "This is a very special Celtic wedding amulet."

She cocked her head. "I think my granny has a ring with these symbols on it."

"She most likely does. But this one is one of a kind. It belonged to my grandmother. Her husband was a silversmith and he made it for her for their Joining day."

"What do the symbols mean?" She reached out to trace the engraved hands, heart and crown on the charm.

"Will you accept it?"

She looked into his eyes, her finger still on the charm lying in his palm. "Yes."

"And all that it means?"

"Which is?"

"Put your trust in me, Bronwyn. And know I will never do anything to harm you."

She took a deep, quivering breath. "All right. Yes, I will accept it and all that it means."

"The amulet is silver, for that is the metal of purity to designate love in its purest form. The intertwined knotwork around the edges represents eternity, the linking of our lives through the ages. It was placed there to remind the one who wears it that the love of he who gave it would never end. The unbroken lines of the Trinity Knot triangle symbolize spiritual growth, eternal life and never-ending love. It also symbolizes the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Celts believe all life is reincarnated, that we are continually reborn after we leave this world. If you love a woman in this life, you will love her in the next."

He took her wrist, turned it, and placed the amulet in her palm. He closed her fingers around it.

"I have bared my heart to you, Bronwyn Fiona McGregor. From my hand into yours do I place it, crowned with my eternal love and devotion." He squeezed her fingers. "Wear my heart close to yours and we will never be apart, for where my heart goes, so will I." Bringing her hand to his lips, he kissed it. "Let love and friendship reign," he whispered.

Tears filled Bronnie's eyes. She could feel the warmth of the amulet tingling in her palm. When he released her hand and turned away, she wanted to throw her arms around him and press her mouth to his.

"And have your mother come in here and drag you out by your hair? I think not," he muttered.

"How do you *do* that?" she asked, her eyes wide.

He turned his head toward her. "I want you to remember something, Bronwyn," he said, his face grave, his eyes boring into hers. "They might be able to take you out of my

arms, but they will never take you out of my heart. No matter what. No matter where you go, I will find you. I will remove anything that gets in the way between us. Don't ever forget that."

She lifted her chin, thinking of one of the songs her mother had sung to her as a child. "'You choose the road, love, and I'll make a vow that I'll be your true love forever,'" she quoted.

He stared into her eyes for a long time then smiled. "My Celtic warriorress."

"I like that!"

He laughed and it was the first time she had heard him do so. It transformed his stern face, and she thought he was the most handsome boy to ever walk upon the face of the earth. A stray curly lock of flaxen hair dipped low over his forehead and she ached to reach out and push it back. She wanted to run her fingers over the mole on his right cheek and trace the faint white scar under his chin. She wanted to slip into his arms and have him hold her against his chest, a chest that had filled out nicely over the years.

His look softened. "You'd better go." His eyes left hers as he stared through the window. "She's getting antsy."

Bronnie scooted off the stool. "I'm going to the show with my friends Marti and Jean this weekend. Meet us there?"

He shrugged. "If I can. Which one?"

"The Albany." She blushed. "We can sit in the balcony and have some privacy."

He nodded. "We'll see."

She tucked her lip between her teeth, wanting to say more, but not knowing what.

"Go," he said, shooing her away with his left hand. "She's waiting to read you the riot act." He grinned. "Don't disappoint her."

Bronnie giggled and started out of the store.

"Hey, little witchling?" he called to her.

She looked back at him. "What's that?"

Sean was holding up his right hand, the thumb, index and little fingers extended, the middle and fourth tucked under. "It's the American Sign Language symbol for 'I love you'."

Bronnie imitated the sign and held it out to him. With that, she turned and hurried out, her gay laughter following.

Chapter Three

Tift Park, Albany, Georgia

May 1984

He pushed her higher.

"You did it on purpose," she scolded.

"I never was good at math," he responded.

"You're good at everything you do."

"Not everything."

"You did it so you'd have to repeat the year."

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it, Cullen," she said, pulling hard on the swing's chain to propel her body higher. She dug her heels into the air. "I know you."

He stepped from behind her and leaned against the swing set's front leg. "Are you complaining?"

"You betcha," she snapped. "I don't like having an ignoramus for a boyfriend."

He chuckled, folded his arms over his chest and stared at her. "I've been called worse."

The smile slipped from her face. He had been called worse—mostly, she thought, by her parents. She lowered her legs to slow the swing.

"You know it doesn't matter to me what they think," he told her.

She had long since given up asking him how he seemed able to read her mind. Each time she asked, he either grinned, wagged his thick brows or simply ignored the question.

"It matters to me," she said, dragging her feet against the ground.

He reached out to grab the chain of her swing seat. He stepped in front of her, grunting as her knees struck his, but bringing her to a stop. With his hands wrapped around hers, he leaned forward.

"Stop obsessing about it, Bronwyn," he demanded. "Let them think whatever they want. You and I know we will be together, so what they think doesn't count."

"They'll know you failed so you could stay behind and be with me."

"But they can't prove that I'm not just a retard."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, that, I might agree with them about."

He smiled, crossed his eyes, comically twisted his lips and sent her into gales of laughter.

"You goofy nincompoop," she said.

He drew her from the swing and into his arms, arms now thick with muscles from his daily workout with the weights at the school gym. "But I'm your goofy nincompoop."

She circled his neck with her arms, laid her head against his chest and sighed. "That you are."

He looked about them. Bronnie knew that prying eyes were something about which he constantly worried. Not only prying eyes, but wagging tongues that would carry tales to both her father and his. Seeing that no one was watching them, he put his finger under her chin, lifted her face and bent down to claim her lips.

Sean's kisses—so few and so far between—were precious to Bronnie. They were intoxicating moments in which their two souls seemed to blend through the pressure of their lips. The taste of his tongue as it slipped gently, tenderly and possessively into her mouth was a mating of their souls and sent shivers of ecstasy through her body. Unconsciously, she pressed closer against him, needing the feel of his masculine length against hers.

He released her lips and stepped back, putting distance between them. As her eyes fused with his, he shook his head. "One day, little one," he promised.

"I'm a woman."

"Not quite yet. You're going to have to wait a while for that to happen."

"I don't want to wait."

"But we will," he said firmly. "When this..." He hooked a finger under the chain around her neck and pulled out the amulet she had not removed since the day she put it on. "When this can be replaced with a ring to signify our lawful Joining as bond mates."

She groaned with frustration. "You're a beast, Sean Cullen."

"I'm a good Catholic boy even if you're a wicked Catholic girl," he teased. "Stop trying to seduce me. You're giving me sinful thoughts. I'm gonna wind up confessing to Father Mike tomorrow."

"I take it back—you're not a beast, Sean Cullen, you're a priest in training!" She pouted.

"You will thank me when you're able to tell our grandchildren their granny went to her Joining bed as pure as the white gown she was entitled to wear."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

He chuckled, cupped her cheeks, slanted his mouth brutally across hers for a moment then set her aside. "Take *that* to your dreams this eve, milady!"

She lifted her hand to swat him, but he danced away, wiggling his fingers toward him. "Come on, witchling! Give it your best shot!"

She ran at him but he skipped away, darting around the merry-go-round and setting out for the cages where the zoo animals were kept. She chased him, dodging between the tall pines and occasional park visitor.

"Be careful!" one elderly man warned, drawing Bronnie's attention to him and away from Sean.

"Sorry," she said, blushing.

When she turned around, she didn't see Sean. She slowed to a walk, knowing full well where he would be.

She found him at the manatee tank. His shoulders were hunched, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his jeans. She went up to him and put her hand on his back.

"It isn't right," he said.

She looked down into the tank and felt her heart ache. "I agree. It isn't."

The huge creature was barely able to move about the tank as it swam in an aimless, awkward circle.

"Sometimes," he said, "I wish it would die. At least then it would be free."

She slipped her arm around his waist. "I know." They had had this conversation before.

"The gods didn't mean for wild creatures to be caged out of their element," he said in a hard voice.

"She's safe here," Bronnie said, laying her head against his shoulder.

"She is in agony here," he protested, shrugging her away. "She misses her own kind. That is worse to her than not having freedom. Being able to commune with your own kind..." With his face set and hard, he turned and stalked off.

Bronnie took one last look at the sea cow, wondering if, in his fey way, the man she loved so desperately could somehow communicate with the creature. If he could, it would not surprise her. He had always seemed capable of reading her thoughts at will. She hurried to catch up with him, falling silently into step beside his tall frame.

He did not acknowledge her presence. His jaw was clenched, his shoulders still hunched. They walked to the Teen Center at the western end of the park without speaking.

"It bothers me," he said finally.

"I know."

He stopped beside her car. "She is so lonely and doesn't understand why she is where she is. She doesn't understand torture but she understands grief. She grieves for those she left behind when she was captured."

Bronnie stood beside him, wishing she could take him into her arms and make the sadness leave his eyes.

"They all feel that way," he said softly, looking back toward the zoo. "They were taken from their homes and shipped thousands upon thousands of miles away to a

place so unlike what they are used to. They spend the rest of their lives locked in a cage, looking out at the humans who can come and go at will, dreading the little boys who come to taunt and torment them." He ran a trembling hand through his hair. "Sometimes I wish they could all go to sleep and never wake."

Bronnie understood how he felt. She hated zoos as much as he did. "They are safe," she said lamely.

"Safe but unhappy. As miserable as you or I would be if such a thing was done to us." He shuddered and turned his back on the zoo. "Let's change the subject."

She smiled gently. "Fine by me."

He leaned against her car. "I got a job."

She arched her eyebrows. "Other than with your dad?"

He nodded. "Over at Griffin Motors."

"Doing what?"

"Detailing cars, changing tires. That sort of thing," he said with a shrug. "Tym Cullen doesn't pay me for working at the butcher shop and I need the money."

"So what do you need money for, Cullen?"

"To take you to the prom."

Bronnie's mouth dropped open. "Get outta here!"

Sean narrowed his eyes. "You don't think I'd let some other guy take you, do you?"

She clamped her lips together. They'd had similar discussions. "Not if I don't want you to punch the poor boy in the face."

"So it's settled."

"No," she drawled, drawing out the word. "I don't remember you *asking* me if I wanted to go to the prom."

"Every girl wants to go to her proms, Bronwyn. It's a rite of passage."

Sean was big on rites of passage, she thought. Although she had always dreamed of going to her junior and senior proms, she had given up on the notion because she knew he'd never let her go with someone else and she thought such things would bore him to tears.

That and the fact she also knew he did not have the money to rent a tux.

"Well?" he queried, one thick brow arched.

"Well, what?"

"Is it settled or not?"

"Are you going to ask me or not?"

Sean sighed, dropped his head, shook it in what could only be exasperation then drew in a breath. He raised his head and released the breath with his words. "Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the prom, milady?"

Bronnie put her index finger on her cheek and pretended to think. "Well, I'll have to check my social register. That's almost a year away and —"

She got no farther, for he stepped in front of her and pinned her against the car, deliberately pressing his lower body against hers. He did not speak, but the heat in his blue gaze said more than words ever could have. He ground against her and, at her gasp of shocked breath, grinned brutally.

"Aye," she said on a breathless note. "T'would be my pleasure to have you escort me, milord."

He stepped back. "Then it's settled."

"Did I have a choice?" she muttered, looking around to see if anyone had been a witness to her capitulation.

"No," he answered and started walking backward. "See you next Tuesday?"

"Of course." She laughed.

He gave her the deaf language sign that had become their special goodbye, winked and headed toward the bicycle he had chained to an oak. She sighed as she watched him throw a long leg over the seat. The muscles against his light green T-shirt rippled and her eyes fell of their own accord to his tight derrière in the torn, faded jeans.

"Hey, aren't you going the wrong way?" she yelled.

He looked back. "Going to Aunt Lou-Lou's!" He stood on the pedals and pumped hard, the bike canting from side to side as it sped beneath his powerful legs.

She laughed again, shaking her head. "I should have known."

Sean had one addiction and that addiction was hot boiled peanuts. The best place in town to get them was at a roadside stand run by a cheerful black lady named Lou-Lou Rainey. Packed in little brown bags wet from the salty water, the green peanuts were Sean's favorite treat. To Bronwyn, his militant craving for the peanuts was an endearing trait.

To Sean, they were nectar from the gods.

* * * * *

Deirdre McGregor looked up from the kitchen sink when she heard the car door slam under the carport. She stared out the window, not seeing the lush lawn Dermot had spent thousands of dollars to landscape earlier that spring. She did not see the pretty white latticework gazebo or the glider and Adirondack chairs that formed a quaint seating arrangement on the old brick-paved patio. "Is that you, Bronwyn?" she called as the door to the mudroom opened.

"Yes, ma'am."

Girding herself for the talk she had been instructed to give her daughter, Deirdre pushed away from the sink and took a seat at the breakfast table. "I'd like a word with you, dear," she said as her daughter entered.

"Wanna drink?" Bronnie asked as she made a beeline to the fridge. When Deirdre didn't answer, she turned with a cola bottle in her hand, wobbling it from side to side. "Mama? You wanna drink?"

"No, thank you, sweetheart."

Bronnie shrugged, fumbled in the catchall drawer for the bottle opener, popped the cap then tossed the opener back in the drawer. "I don't see why Daddy won't let us buy drinks in the can."

"They don't taste the same," Deirdre quoted her husband.

"I can't tell the difference," Bronnie said. She looked at Deirdre who was sitting with her hands clasped tightly together. "Is something wrong?"

"Sit down. We need to talk."

"Okay. What's up?"

Deirdre closed her eyes for a moment then squared her shoulders. "Bronwyn, your father and I have come to a decision. We know it isn't going to sit well with you, but under the circumstances, you have given us no alternative."

"Alternative to what, Mama?" Bronnie asked.

"We know you have been seeing the Cullen boy. We —"

"You've never forbidden me to see Sean."

"Not in so many words, but you are perfectly aware of how we feel about him."

"You don't know him," Bronnie reminded her.

Deirdre threw out a negligent hand. "That is beside the point. We know about his parents and —"

"His parents have nothing to do with the kind of man Sean Cullen is, Mother!"

"Bronwyn," Deirdre said, annoyance rife in her tone, "he is not of your class."

Bronnie sat back in her chair, her face hard. "You mean he isn't a doctor's son or the grandson of a state senator, don't you, Mama?"

"The boy failed his senior year of high school! What does that tell you about his ambition? He comes from a very unacceptable class of people. I mean — look at what his father does for a living, for Christ's sake! And I know perfectly well you are privy to the gossip bandied about concerning what that odious man does to his wife."

"And his son," Bronnie stressed, her teeth clenched. "Or did you forget what Sean's father did to him when he defended me to Father Goodmayer all those years ago?"

Deirdre shook her head. "I haven't forgotten, but it doesn't matter."

"It matters to me!" Bronnie said, coming to her feet. "I love Sean Cullen, Mama. I've loved him for a long, long time!"

"You are too young to know what love is."

"He said you'd do this one day. He knew you would!"

"Then he isn't as stupid as he acts."

"There is nothing stupid about him!"

"Don't you dare raise your voice to me, Bronwyn Fiona!"

"I won't have you talking about Sean like that."

"You watch your tone, young lady. We've never had to ground you before, but there is always a first time."

"Then do it! It won't stop me from loving Sean Cullen and it won't stop me from seeing him every chance I get!"

"He'll be eighteen next month," Deirdre said. "I checked with his homeroom teacher Mrs. Daniels to make sure when his birthday is."

"What has that got to—?"

"And you are still underage. In the eyes of the law, he will be an adult and you are a child. He could be arrested and charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"He hasn't done anything wrong," Bronnie said, tears welling in her eyes.

"You are not to see him again. Is that understood?" When Bronnie did not reply, Deirdre stood up. "If you do, he will be the one to pay for it. We will have him arrested and he *will* go to jail. That, I can promise you."

Tears streaked down Bronnie's pale cheeks. "Why are you doing this?"

"He is nothing more than a passing fancy. A teenage rebellion your father and I should have put a stop to long before now."

"I love him!" Bronnie sobbed.

"You *think* you love him. I'll concede he is a handsome young man, but the world is full of handsome young men. When you go on to college—"

"I'm not going to college!"

"Yes, dear, you *are* going to college," DeeDee emphasized. "And you'll meet a young man whom you will be very proud to bring home to introduce to your father and me. When that happens, you will know what true love really is."

"You might take me out of Sean's arms, but you'll never take him out of my heart! I will love him with my dying breath! If I can't be with him, I won't *ever* be with another man!"

"Then you'd better prepare yourself for the Carmelites, sweetie, because I'd rather see you spend your life in a convent than shackled to a nobody like Sean Cullen!"

Bronnie fled the room before she could say something she might later regret. As much as she loved her mother, she neither respected nor liked her at the moment. Flinging herself down on her bed, she pulled her old teddy bear to her and buried her face in the slick fur.

Her sobs shook the bed.

Deirdre went to the phone and dialed the hospital. It was rare that she had an argument with her daughter. Those times when she had, the arguments had been over the Cullen boy and Bronwyn's obsession with him. Such arguments brought on migraines and now Deirdre felt one pulsing over her right eye.

"Sylvia, let me speak to Dr. McGregor, please," she told the switchboard operator.

"I'll see if he's available, Miss DeeDee," the operator replied, recognizing Deirdre's voice.

Lighting a cigarette while she waited for her husband to come on the line, Deirdre fanned the smoke out of her face and massaged the pain over her eye with the heel of her hand.

"What's up?" her husband asked when he picked up.

"You have got to do something about that boy."

Dermot didn't need to ask whom Deirdre meant. "Did you talk to her?"

"I did and I got the reaction we expected."

"So?"

"I received a call from Frannie Wilson this afternoon. She was driving by the Teen Center and saw our daughter being...she was...that *boy* was..."

"What were they doing?"

"He was *rubbing* against her, Dermot! Luckily it was Frannie who saw such a disgusting thing! We can count on her to be discreet."

"I wish I had a dollar for every time I rubbed against you before we were married." Dermot chuckled. When Deirdre hissed, he reminded her that nothing had gone beyond that touching and he was positive it hadn't with their daughter. "I don't like it, but she's going to experiment, DeeDee. That's the way things are today."

"She won't experiment with that Cullen bastard!" Deirdre shouted.

"Just let me handle it. I'll go have a talk with him."

"And if he won't listen?"

Dermot's voice turned hard. "He'll listen, Deirdre. Believe me, he will."

"But what if he doesn't?"

There was a moment of silence then Deirdre heard her husband take a long breath.

"I have people who owe me a favor or two," he said. "If I need to, I'll call in those favors. The Cullen boy won't be allowed to be a problem for us."

Chapter Four

Tymothy Cullen was just closing the doors to his butcher shop when Dermot pulled into the parking lot. Seeing the fancy car and the man with the expensive suit who exited the pricy foreign job, Cullen unlocked the door and opened it. "Need a few lamb chops for the grill tonight, sir?"

Dermot stepped into the shop, his nostrils quivering from the sharp aroma of meat and animal blood. He looked at the white porcelain meat counter with its array of sliced and diced flesh. "Thank you, no. I'm looking for Sean. Is he here?"

Cullen narrowed his eyes. "You're looking for my boy?" His mouth tightened. "Why?"

"I am Dr. McGregor," Dermot informed man, knowing that should be explanation enough and it was.

Cullen folded his brawny arms over a thick, barrel-like chest. "I wondered when you'd get around to coming after the little idjut. I told him he ought not to be messing with no doctor's kin."

"Is he here?" Dermot inquired. He was ill at ease in the presence of a man he considered one step up from Neanderthal.

"No, he ain't. He's over at Griffin's, I'm guessing."

Dermot took out his handkerchief and covered his nose. "You should do something about the odor in here. It is very offensive."

Cullen grinned. "You one of them vegetarian people, Doc?"

"No," Dermot snapped, "but the stench is overpowering."

"Sean, now, he's one of that kind. Wouldn't eat meat if you pinned him down and pried open his mouth. Reckon he'd as likely choke on it as swallow it." He shrugged. "Been that way all his life. Ain't that a helluva note for a butcher's son to be a candy-assed vegetarian fool?"

"Perhaps he finds this odor as putrid as do I. I can certainly see why a person would abstain from eating meat if he or she got a whiff of this every day!"

"A man what don't eat meat ain't much of a man to my way of thinking," Cullen sneered. "Got that silliness from his ma, he did. She don't eat meat, neither." He shook his head. "It ain't right and I've told them so many the time. I've tried to show them the error of their ways, but neither one seems inclined to listen."

Dermot glanced at the red-haired man and shuddered. He could well imagine how a man as coarse and uneducated as this one would go about trying to indoctrinate his family into eating meat.

"You say he's at Griffin's?" he asked, wanting desperately to get out of the shop.

"Griffin Motors," Cullen snorted. "He's working over there in the afternoons."

"I see. Well, thank you, Mr. Cullen," Dermot said through clenched teeth. He turned to go.

"Don't want him near your baby girl, do you, Doc?" Cullen laughed.

There was something nasty in the way Cullen asked the question that rubbed Dermot the wrong way. He stared into the man's lined, beefy face. "I'm sure you understand how a father would like to protect his child."

"Sean can protect himself, but I reckon you need to protect your baby girl from him, now, don't you?"

Dermot's back stiffened. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Cullen's lips twitched. "Reckon you heard he is of a mind to Join with your girl."

"Join?" The word sent a chill down Dermot's back.

"Aye, as in the Joining of bond mates and all that." Cullen's grin turned to a hateful leer when he realized Dermot did not understand. "You know, Doc—as in wedding your soul mate."

"Most certainly not!" Dermot declared, his eyes going wide. "There could never be a marriage between my daughter and your son!"

"Then you'd best tell him that 'cause he's been telling me and his ma how Bronwyn McGregor will be his bride at the Summer Solstice of her eighteenth year. He's been a'planning on that Joining from the first day he laid eyes on your baby girl."

"No!" Dermot snarled, shaking his head fiercely. "That is totally out of the question. I will not allow it!"

"Can't always stop what's destined to be, Doc. Sometimes when you do, destiny sorta rears up and bites you on your bony ass, you know?"

His temper flaring, Dermot did not reply. He snatched open the door and strode out, his face as hard and set as granite. As he pulled his car door open, Cullen stepped out of the shop.

"You'll have to do more than just tell Sean Cullen no, Doc. It ain't never worked for me and it won't work for you."

Dermot ground the gears of his Italian sports car as he peeled out of the parking lot. In his rearview mirror, he caught a glimpse of Cullen laughing uproariously as he went back inside his shop.

* * * * *

Andy Griffin winced as the squeal of tires took his attention from the carburetor he was tuning. He looked out the garage bay opening and saw the low-slung black sports car braking to a stop in front of the showroom. Picking up a rag, he began wiping his greasy hands as he went to see what this late customer might need. He was already

forming his response in his mind because his shop wasn't equipped to work on foreign cars. He never got a chance to ask what was needed, for the enraged man who climbed out of the sports car came at him like an avalanche.

"Where's Sean Cullen?"

Griffin took in the rigid posture, set face and glaring eyes of his visitor and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Out back," he replied, and barely had time to step aside as the man pushed past him.

The black man who was changing the oil under a station wagon stopped what he was doing and stepped to the back door of the garage. "Sean!" he yelled. "You gots company!"

Griffin nodded. He appreciated Zeke giving the boy some warning that he was about to go toe to toe with who might well be Sean's girlfriend's father.

"Ten to one he done got that girl in the family way," Zeke said in a low voice.

"Lord help him if he did," Griffin quipped as he joined his employee. "That man looked mad enough to spit nails."

"Yassir. Mad enough to crucify dat boy," Zeke agreed, pulling off his baseball cap to arm the sweat from his brow.

They stood in the doorway and watched the angry man march over to where Sean was washing a new trade-in. Sean twisted the nozzle of the hose to turn off the water, then turned to face the man storming toward him.

"I want you to stay the hell away from my daughter!"

Sean looked past Bronnie's father to Andy and Zeke. He knew whatever was said here would be all over Albany by morning. Zeke would tell the patrons of the Satin Kat bar down in Harlem and every black woman there who had a job as a maid would tell her white employer. Andy would tell his wife Harriet who would tell everyone in her beauty shop. By midday tomorrow, there wouldn't be many people of consequence in town who wouldn't know Dr. Dermot McGregor had called out his daughter's suitor.

"Dr. McGregor, I—" he began, but Dermot's infuriated shout stopped him.

"If you think you will *ever* be a part of my family, Cullen, I suggest you think again! I have no intention of allowing Bronwyn to take up with the likes of you!"

"What exactly is the *likes* of me, Dr. McGregor?" he asked, his voice tight.

McGregor leaned into Sean's face. "Uneducated, conniving, poor white trash."

Sean lifted his chin. "I have an IQ of one-sixty, Dr. McGregor. I—"

"I doubt that. You failed your senior year of high school. Even a blind man could see you're a worthless deadbeat looking for an easy meal ticket."

"A meal ticket?"

"Do you think everybody is as stupid as you are?" McGregor punched Sean in the chest with his index finger. "Don't you think I know what you're after?"

Sean stared into McGregor's eyes. "What is it you think I want, Doctor?"

"You want to continue seeing my daughter and that's not going to happen. I certainly would never allow someone like you to court her! Just the thought of you wanting to marry her makes my flesh crawl!"

Though he knew the hurt likely flickered across his face, Sean held his ground. "Does it matter that I love her and that—?"

"And that you want her daddy's money?"

"I don't want your money," Sean replied through clenched teeth. "I will provide for us."

"Oh, really?" McGregor drawled nastily. He jabbed his finger into Sean's chest again. "And just how the hell do you think you could ever provide for my daughter washing cars?"

Sean flinched, but didn't move back from the painful jab. "I won't always be washing cars, Dr. McGregor. I will be able to support us."

"Doing what?" Dermot scoffed, his upper lip curled.

"I haven't decided yet, but—"

"You are nothing more than a shanty Irish con man, Cullen, and the chances are good you'll end up in a prison somewhere."

Sean winced at the prediction. "I'm not that kind of man, Dr. McGregor, I—"

"Stay away from my daughter," McGregor warned, his eyes narrowed into thin slits. "Because if you don't, I'll have you arrested."

A muscle jumped in Sean's jaw. "On what charge?"

"Contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I have friends in law enforcement, and believe me when I tell you, I'll see they throw the book at you and keep you locked up for as long as possible!"

Sean stared into the enraged man's eyes. He could read the fury boiling in McGregor's mind and had no doubt that Bronnie's father would make good on his threat. The thought of being put into a cell, locked in, confined, brought sweat to his brow and nausea to the back of his throat. He ran a trembling hand across his mouth.

McGregor smiled brutally. "I think we understand one another, don't you?"

"I love her," Sean said, ashamed that his voice broke on the words.

"How much?" McGregor asked as he pulled out his checkbook.

"I don't *want* your money."

McGregor ignored him. He filled in the check, stripped it from the book, and extended it toward Sean. "Beggars can't be choosers, you know. Take it. I think you'll find I've compensated you quite well for defending my daughter that time at Saint Teresa's."

Sean glanced at the check, but did not reach for it. He turned his back to Bronwyn's father and picked up the water hose.

"I'll mail it to you," McGregor said, stepping back from the spray of water Sean directed at the automobile.

Sean did not reply. He plucked a sponge from a galvanized bucket near the car's fender and bent to the job of washing the hood.

"Remember what I told you, Cullen! Come near her again and I will go to the authorities!" McGregor waited a moment to see if his words would get a rise out of Sean. When they didn't, he shrugged, pocketed the check and barely glanced at Andy and Zeke who moved out of his way as he entered the shop.

* * * * *

Deirdre met her husband in the garage. She opened the car door for him. "Well?"

"I went to see him."

"And?"

Dermot put his arm around her. "It's taken care of, DeeDee. We won't be having any more trouble from the Cullen boy."

"Are you sure?"

A fierce gleam entered Dermot McGregor's eyes. "I'm damned sure!"

* * * * *

Bronwyn slipped out of the house and went to their neighbors, asking to use their phone. When Sean's mother answered, she debated whether to hang up and try again later.

"Who's there, please?" Mrs. Cullen inquired in her thick brogue.

"I...is Sean there?"

"He hasn't come home from work, yet. Is this Bronnie?"

Bronwyn swallowed. "Yes, ma'am."

"Would you like me to have him call you, dear?"

"No!" Bronwyn gasped. "I mean, I'm not at our house right now."

There was a moment of silence. "I see. Is there something you would like me to tell him?"

"You know, don't you?" Bronwyn asked, tears forming in her eyes. "About my father going to see him?"

"Tym told me your Da stopped by the shop and was headed up to Griffin's. I take it he told Seannie he could not see you again."

Bronwyn swiped at the tears falling down her cheeks. "I love him, Mrs. Cullen. I'm not going to ever stop loving him, so nothing my parents say makes any difference!"

"Ah, but it does, dear," Dorrie sighed. "Until you're of age, you have to do what they say."

"They can't stop me from loving him!"

"I'd imagine not, but they can cause my boy a heap of trouble. Do you want that?"

Bronwyn's whimper of guilt was all the answer she could give as her tears escalated into deep sobs.

"Bide your time, Bronnie," Sean's mother advised. "Let 'em think they've won. If you and Sean are meant to be together, you will be."

Bronwyn listened to Dorrie Cullen's words of encouragement as she warned her son's girlfriend not to endanger Sean's freedom.

"I won't let them hurt Sean, Mrs. Cullen," Bronwyn vowed.

"I know you won't, dear. Now run home before your parents come looking for you. I'll tell Seannie we had a good, long talk."

"Tell him...tell him..." Bronwyn could barely get the words out, for her heart was breaking. "Tell him I love him."

"I will do that."

Bronwyn hung up and turned to see Mrs. Betty Turner, her neighbor, standing in the doorway.

"Good luck, Bronwyn," Mrs. Turner said. "I know exactly how you feel and I wish you better luck than I had."

"Did your parents dislike Mr. Turner, too?" Bronwyn asked, accepting the tissue the older woman held out to her. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

Mrs. Turner walked with her to the front door. "My daddy hated my boyfriend with a purple passion, Bronnie. He went to the base commander and had George reassigned to a base overseas."

Bronwyn paused at the screen door. "You were in love with someone else?"

Mrs. Turner's lined face grew wistful. "His name was George Franklin and the sun rose and set in that boy for me." She sighed. "I've often wondered what happened to him."

"I'm sorry, Miss Betty."

"So am I, dear," Mrs. Turner said, her voice breaking.

"I won't let them keep us apart. Somehow, some way, Sean and I *will* be together!"

"From your mouth to God's ear. I would not want you to be as miserable as I've been all these years."

As Bronwyn slipped into her parents' home and tiptoed silently down the hallway, she began to think of ways to thwart her parents' plan to tear her from Sean's life.

* * * * *

Andy Griffin stuffed his bandana into the pocket of his overalls and sat across from Sean at the picnic table by the storage shed. The young man's head was propped in his hands and he was staring at the scarred tabletop.

"Life can be a bitch sometimes, Seannie."

"Why can't they just leave us alone?" From the sound of Sean's voice, the young man had been crying.

Andy sighed. "Well, it ain't in some people's polography to mind their own bee's wax, son."

Sean looked up at the mangling of the word he knew should have been "prerogative". Andy had a habit of mispronouncing certain words—he said, "indentify" for "identify" and "confisticated" for "confiscated". It was a habit that endeared him to Sean and he often found himself drawn to his boss, needing the father figure Andy seemed happy to provide.

"He told me to keep away from her," Sean said.

"Reckon you might better do as he says," Andy ventured. When Sean started to argue, Andy raised his hand. "For a while anyway. You don't want that gal to get in trouble with her daddy, now, do you?"

"We love each other, Mr. Andy."

"Yep, but sometimes you have to bite the bullet, Sean, and be a man about these things. You ain't the only one who's ever been told to stay away from a woman, son." He grinned. "When I was about your age, I had me a gal named Ludie." He sighed wistfully. "Prettiest little critter this side of Hotlanta, lemme tell you." He sighed again. "But she come from the wrong side of the tracks, you know what I mean?"

"Across the river," Sean supplied.

Andy nodded. "Her pa ran shine for the Colter boys outta Miller County." He shook his head. "That was one mean bunch, them Colter boys. Men who worked for them had to be just as mean to survive, and Willis Tyler was as mean as they come in southwest Georgia. He had fathered nine boys by the time Ludie came along. All his boys have spent time in prisons." He chuckled. "The joke in that family is the Tylers has seen the inside of more penitentiaries than any other clan in the South."

"Bad men."

"Very bad men, son. But old man Tyler had one redeeming quality—he loved his daughter more'n he loved a good jar of moonshine and that was saying something, lemme tell ya!"

"He didn't approve of you?"

"Sure didn't. Said I come from a line of yellow-bellied grease monkeys and he wanted better for his baby girl. Said if I didn't leave her alone, he'd make me wish I'd never been born."

"Did you do as he told you?"

Andy looked across Broad Avenue. "Yeah, I did. Sometimes I wish I hadn't, but I did." He smiled crookedly. "I was jimmy crack-corn afraid of that old man and still am to this very day, though he's been in his grave nigh on twenty years."

Sean lifted his foot to the picnic bench and tugged at the laces of his untied sneaker. "What happened to Miss Ludie?"

Andy drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly. He lowered his head. "She went up to Augusta to live with one of her aunts. She married some engineer up there."

"Do you ever think of her?"

"Every day of my life, son. Every single day of my life." Andy gripped Sean's arm. "Don't let the same thing happen to you, Seannie. Don't you be sitting here a lifetime from now telling some wet-behind-the-ears kid how much you loved Bronwyn McGregor but weren't man enough to fight to keep her. Don't be a yellow-bellied grease money like me and lose the one woman who might have made you happy!"

"I'm not going to lose her. I won't let them keep me and Bronwyn apart, Mr. Andy," Sean said forcefully as he finished tying his sneaker. "I won't allow anything to break us up."

Andy locked gazes with his companion. "Won't be easy to keep that vow, son. Her pa seemed downright set on making sure you stay away from her."

Chapter Five

"I ought to have my head examined," Dave Cox complained. He opened his geometry book, pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Bronwyn.

"What's this?" Bronnie asked, unfolding the note. She glanced at the signature at the bottom. "Sean gave you this?"

"With instructions that, if I didn't, he'd beat my ass."

She leaned against her locker and scanned the note. As she did, her eyes filled with tears. "Did you read this?"

Dave gasped. "And have that crazed gorilla come after me?" He shook his head. "Hell, no, I didn't read it!"

The sheet of composition paper rattled in Bronnie's hand as she clasped it to her chest. "He says we can't see one another for a while."

Dave exhaled loudly. "That's the best news I've heard so far this school year."

"Because my father threatened him," Bronnie said with a sob.

"Well, that was to be expected, wasn't it? You know damned well they didn't want Cullen hanging around you."

"That's not their decision to make!" she hissed, running her hand under her chin, for tears were falling down her cheeks.

"Yeah, well, crap happens, you know?" Dave quipped. "Mine don't want me going in the Marine Corps, either, but when I'm old enough, I plan on enlisting." He put a hand on Bronnie's shoulder. "That's the key to the whole thing, McGregor. When you're old enough, they can't stop you from doing what you want."

Bronnie leaned her head against the locker. "But I've got two more years before I turn eighteen."

"If it's true love, it'll wait." He squeezed her shoulder. "If it ain't, it won't."

"Sean says we can't be seen together and he doesn't think we should call one another but we can pass notes through you."

"Ah, hell's bells!" Dave fumed. "Don't put me in the middle of this!"

She grabbed his arm. "You are my friend. I trust you. *He* trusts you. You're all we've got! You have to do this for me. You have to!"

"Yeah? And what happens if your mama finds one of those notes? Then what?"

"I'll keep them here," she said, opening the padlock and putting the note inside the locker.

"Jesus Christ on a stick," Dave groaned. "I don't like this. I don't like it one damned bit!"

"It'll be okay," Bronnie said, sniffing.

"You two are gonna get my ass in a sling, you know that?"

"I'll give you my note to him after third period," she said, not listening. She looked at her watch then snapped the padlock shut. "I'll see you then."

Before he could respond, she was gone, walking quickly toward her first class of the day.

* * * * *

Sean scowled at Dave's look of annoyance and tucked Bronnie's note into the pocket of his torn jean jacket. "Did she say anything?"

"You're going to get her in deep crap with her parents, dude," Dave pronounced.

Ignoring the remark, Sean locked eyes with the shorter man. "Did she *say* anything?"

"No!" Dave shifted his books to the opposite hip. "I hope you two know what you're doing."

"We do," Sean said, looking toward the parking lot.

"Her old man'll crap a brick if he finds out this thing between you two ain't over," Dave remarked gloomily. "He'll be expecting her to date and I got a feelin' she ain't gonna."

"Did she say she wouldn't?"

"Ah, hell, Cullen. You know she won't!"

"Watch out for her, will ya, Cox? If guys start hassling her, just let me know."

"I've always protected her." Dave lifted his chin. "Ever since preschool and long before you ever showed up on the scene. Some dude bothers her, I'll take care of it even if it ain't me she'd rather have come to her rescue."

Recognizing the love mirrored in the other boy's eyes, Sean nodded. "It's different between me and her."

"I wouldn't know," Dave lamented, "and I don't guess I ever will. Not now, anyway."

Sean's lips twitched in what he knew passed for a smile for everyone but Bronnie. "You can't lose what was never yours, Cox."

"Screw you, Cullen." Dave turned away.

"I don't fly that way, Cox." Sean chuckled when Dave flipped him the bird. Still laughing, he walked to his bicycle and unlocked it from the stand. He pushed the bike a few feet, stepped on the right pedal, swung his leg over the seat and raced out of the parking lot before Dave ever reached his rusted-out jalopy.

Dave opened this car door, wincing at the loud shriek. He threw his books inside the moldy-smelling interior. The interior of the twenty-year-old coupe was like an inferno, but he paid no heed as he settled behind the large steering wheel. For a long time he stared unseeingly at the fuzzy dice dangling from the rearview mirror. When the blare of a nearby horn brought him out of his self-imposed catatonia, he swiped at the moisture running down his face then wrapped his hands around the steering wheel. When he looked at himself in the mirror, he knew anyone passing by would do a double take—his normally pleasant features were distorted with anger.

* * * * *

The park was quiet, the shade of the stately oaks cool as Sean entered. He pedaled to one of the picnic tables, dismounted and rested his bike against a nearby pine. Going to the table, he sat, pulled Bronnie's note from his pocket and bent over to read.

I am sorry Daddy threatened you, Sean. Mama threatened me, too. I wasn't surprised he came to see you and not surprised at all that he tried to bribe you. I heard him and Mama talking last night. He called your father a beggar because he heard that radio spot Mr. Cullen did last week. My Dad thinks anyone who advertises on the radio and TV has to beg to make a living. He said people like that would do anything for money. I am so proud of you for not taking that check even if you did want to tear it up in front of him. I don't know what makes them so mean, but it doesn't matter.

Although my heart is breaking, I will do as you suggest. It will be the hardest thing in the world to pass you in the halls and not speak. It will be torture not to be able to pick up the phone and call you. I will be miserable not being able to talk with you at the park or meet you at Burdette's for a Cherry Coke.

Sean paused, staring at the clean, elegant sweep of Bronwyn's handwriting. He lovingly touched one of the little circles she used to dot her "I"s, then turned the sheet over to read the last page.

I will keep the letter you wrote me in a safe place, but the poem you wrote I folded and placed in the locket you gave me for Christmas. I will wear it with the Claddagh for as long as I live, my love.

Next year, as soon as graduation is over, I will be ready to leave with you. No one will know I've left until it is too late to do anything about it. We'll go up to South Carolina and get married. Until then, know I love you.

Bronnie

He read the note twice more then slowly folded the sheets and put them back in his pocket. With his hands clasped on the tabletop, he stared across the park at the caged animals.

McGregor's threats made him feel as though he was one of those helpless creatures, no longer in control of his life. He had not planned on leaving Albany until he could take Bronnie with him, but now he had no choice. As soon as school was out in June, he

would enlist in the service and hope, if they sent him overseas, he'd live to come back for the woman he loved.

When Sean arrived home that evening, his father was sitting on the front porch steps, a bottle of beer clutched in his meaty hand. The older man was clad in a pair of worn shorts and a sleeveless undershirt stained heavily under the arms. "You're late," he accused.

"I had two details to do."

Cullen grunted then reached into the back pocket of his shorts. "This came for you today." He threw an envelope at Sean's feet.

Sean laid his bike on the ground and bent to pick up the envelope. He frowned when he saw it had been opened.

"I asked myself why do you reckon that fancy doc with his expensive foreign car would be writing a letter to my addle-brained son," Cullen commented. "Couldn't be nothing good, I answered."

Sean spread the flap of the envelope and glanced at the check inside, which he had expected to find.

"Then I asked myself why under God's blue sky this fancy doc would be giving my son five thousand dollars." Cullen took a long swig of beer. Wiping the back of his hand across his lips, he pointed the bottle at Sean. "Know what I answered myself that time, Seannie, me boy? I says to myself—that fancy doc don't want no Cullen wiggles a'growin' in his little gal's belly and I can't say that I blame him. Seems to me, though, it's worth more'n five grand to see that don't happen, don't you?"

"I have no intention of cashing this."

"You don't want it, I'll take it."

"I'll be sending it right back to Dr. McGregor."

Cullen's mouth turned hard. "You ain't gonna do no such thing." With a speed that surprised Sean, the older man leapt to his feet and snatched the envelope from him.

Sean's hands doubled into fists at his side, but he knew it would be useless to argue with his father. When Tymothy Cullen drank, he got junkyard-dog mean and usually either his wife or son paid the price for that anger. Sean also knew that would not always be the way things would work.

"This will help pay for next month's bills," Cullen asserted as he stuffed the envelope into his pocket.

"Do whatever you want with it," Sean said, knowing full well his father would forge his signature on the back of the check and cash it. He hoped Dr. McGregor would find out and have the fool arrested.

"Good boy," Cullen sneered. He sat on the step and stared up at his son with one eye squeezed shut. "How come you're so agreeable?"

"I didn't ask for the money and I don't want it."

"Stupid little bastard," Cullen said. "Throwing away perfectly good money."

Sean shrugged, picked up his bike and wheeled it under the carport where he locked it to one of the wrought iron roof supports. He walked to the carport door and went into the house. Inside, the aroma of meatloaf filled the kitchen. He grimaced and went to the stove to see what his mother had prepared for herself and him. Lifting a pot, he was relieved to find succotash, a stewed tomato, okra, onion and corn mixture that was one of his mother's specialties.

"There is baked macaroni and cornbread in the oven," his mother told him as she came into the small room. "Fix me some tea, will ya, laddie?"

Sean's lips moved into the smile he reserved for his mother and Bronnie. "This stuff is gonna give you diabetes one of these days," he said as he poured her a metal tumbler of the thickly sweet brew.

"At least I'll die a happy woman," his mother countered, taking the tumbler from him. She looked deeply into his eyes. "You all right, laddie?"

"Aye, Ma," he lied.

Dorrie Cullen sighed. "As all right as you're gonna be, I'm reckonin'." She turned to the stove. "Call your Da in and let's hope he don't find no fault with my meatloaf tonight."

"How long's he been drinking?"

"Since he closed up shop early and came home."

Sean tensed. The last time his father had closed the shop early a savage punch had sent his mother to the hospital with a broken jaw. That had been when Sean was eleven. "What brought this on?" he asked, glancing worriedly at the back door.

His mother lifted her thin shoulders. "He's been gamblin' again with them darkies what run the barbeque place two doors down. Shootin' the craps, I suppose. Lost a hundred dollars or more."

Sean's jaw tightened. "Did you give him the letter from Dr. McGregor?" He knew that wasn't the case, but wanted to know how his father came in possession of the missive.

"You know I didn't, laddie," his mother answered in a hurt voice. "He went through your room lookin' for loose money and that's when he found it." She twisted her hands together. "It came this morning and I put it in your room knowin' you didn't want him to see it. I asked him not to open it, but you know how your Da is."

"That I do."

"When he opened it, he let out an almighty whoop."

"I'll bet."

"What was in that letter, Seannie?"

"The solution to his problem, Ma. At least for the time being."

She pulled open the oven door, took up a pair of potholders and reached for the meatloaf, the sight of which made Sean queasy. "Call him on in, now."

Sean went to the screen door. "Supper's ready!"

"Put this ungodly concoction on the table for him and I'll get us the macaroni," his mother ordered, placing the sizzling meatloaf on a hot pad on the counter.

Sean retrieved another set of potholders from the drawer and, with his lips pursed tightly, he carried the meatloaf to the table and placed it in front of his father's plate. He avoided looking at the gray-brown meat.

"The succotash smells great, Ma," he said as he watched her ladle their main course into a soup tureen.

"Smells like crap to me," Cullen grunted. He let the screen door slam behind him as he plopped down at the table. "Get me another brew, boy."

Sean exchanged a glance with his mother, but he did as he was told. After fetching the ice-cold bottle for his father, he brought the cornbread to the table for his mother, pulled her chair out for her then took his seat, ignoring the snort of disgust from his father at the courtesies.

"Always puttin' on the Ritz, ain't you, Seannie? Where does such highfalutin' crap getcha?" Cullen popped the cap from the bottle with a church key.

"He's just showin' his ma some respect," Dorrie said quietly.

Sean tensed. It was such innocuous remarks that, for whatever reason, set his father off. But the old man seemed not to have heard, for he was swilling down a long drag of beer. He grimaced as the man gave a loud belch then another for good measure.

"Will you say Grace, Tymothy?" Dorrie asked.

Cullen shook his head. "Let His Holiness do it."

Dorrie reached for her son's hand. Her tired, sad eyes locked with Sean's and she lowered her head.

"Bless us, Oh Lord," Sean prayed, "and these thy gifts that we are about to receive from thy bounty."

"Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy grits that we are about to receive from the county." Cullen giggled as he ladled a big slice of meatloaf onto his plate.

Dorrie's mouth tightened at the sacrilege but she made no comment. She passed the macaroni to Sean. "Would you slice me a piece of cornbread, laddie?"

"Just a minute," Sean said, realizing he would have to leave the table to get a knife. Before he could, a powerful backhanded blow from his father's left hand slammed into his face and knocked him out of his chair. He hit the floor hard on his left hip, his nose gushing blood.

"When your ma tells you to do something, you'd best hop to it, *boy!*" Cullen shouted.

Dorrie gasped and started to get up, but her husband's furious bellow kept her in her seat.

"Leave him be, Dorrie!"

Sean lay where he landed, attempting to staunch the flow of blood with the heel of his palm. He knew his nose was broken and his upper lip had been split from contact with his father's heavy signet ring.

"Get your lazy ass off the floor and clean up that mess," Cullen demanded, "before I have to drag you up."

His nose throbbing, the smell of the blood and the taste of it in his mouth making him sick, Sean pushed up from the floor. He knew if he made one sound, said one word, his father would be on him like a tiger on a wounded gazelle. He dared not even look the older man's way for fear the vicious temper would erupt and someone would suffer the consequences.

"Lily-livered little pantywaist," Cullen mocked. "Not man enough to stand up for himself and too damned stupid to even try." He stabbed a chunk of meatloaf and crammed it into his mouth.

Stumbling to the sink, Sean pulled a handful of paper towels from the rack and, with his nose still bleeding, went back to clean up the splatters on the floor.

Sean sensed his mother wanted to help him, but she knew better than to try. Things would be worse for him and more so for herself, if she dared. She sat still, her head bowed, her lips trembling.

"Eat your damned food, woman!" Cullen demanded.

Dorrie reached for her fork and gently slipped the utensil beneath a pile of macaroni. She moved the pasta from one side of her plate to the other.

"Good meatloaf for a change," Cullen pronounced around a glob of the mixture.

"Thank you, Tym," Dorrie said automatically. She flinched and her eyes went wide when he grabbed her hand. His strong grip tightened brutally around her wrist.

"I said eat your damned food, not push it around!"

"Aye, Tym," she agreed, her head bobbing. She lifted a forkful of macaroni to her mouth.

"When you get that floor spotless, go to your room," Cullen told Sean. "No food for you tonight, boy."

* * * * *

Sean lay staring at the ceiling, his hands behind his head. He could hear his father's angry mumbles as he moved about in the bedroom next door. With the scrape of a chair across the wooden floor came a piercing yelp. Sean knew the man was falling-down drunk again. He turned his head and looked at the clock.

Ten o'clock—unnaturally early for Tym Cullen to take to his bed. The man liked to sit in front of the television and curse the eleven o'clock news team. That he had forgone his nightly ritual meant the old man had consumed more than normal and hopefully would pass out before too many more minutes ticked off the clock.

When a light scratching came at his door, Sean sat up. "I'm awake," he said softly.

His mother opened the door and stood there, her work-reddened hands gripping the door's edge. "He won't be conscious too much longer," she whispered. "I left you a plate in the oven."

Sean nodded. "Go to bed, Ma. I'll be all right."

She looked at Sean's bruised face, the dark circles that had formed under his eyes. "Is it broken?" she asked, her eyes tearing as she took in his swollen nose.

He shrugged. "Probably. Don't worry about it. There ain't much that can be done."

Tears slid slowly down her face. "I am sorry, lad."

"Dorrie! Where are you, woman?"

The bellow startled her. She jumped, stepping back to shut Sean's door before her husband realized what she was doing. As the latch engaged against the strike plate, Sean stretched out on his bed. He knew before Tymothy Cullen passed out, he would subject his wife to another round of degrading sexual demands.

Turning to his side, Sean pulled the pillow over his head to blot out the sounds of rutting that would soon echo through the small house.

Chapter Six

The next morning at school, Bronnie was not close enough to speak to Sean when they passed in the hallway, but she was close enough to see the livid bruises across his nose and under his eyes. Her mouth fell open, her eyes filled with tears and her hands clenched into fists. She would have gone to him, but the slight shake of his head warned her away. She lost sight of him when he went into his chemistry class.

"Looks like old man Cullen did a number on lover boy," David remarked from her side.

She trembled. "That bastard!"

"I'll be damned if I'd let my father beat the hell outta me like that," Bobby Thompson, Dave's friend and Bronnie's cousin, scoffed.

"And just what would you do to stop him, Bobby?" Bronnie demanded. "Uncle Mike's twice your size and three times your age! How would you stop *him*?"

"I'd handle it." Bobby jerked his chin toward the chemistry lab. "Cullen could, also, if he was of a mind to!"

Bronnie stepped close to cousin and glared at him. "Is that so? And after he beats the crap outta his father, where does he go after that? Who will take him in to live with them?"

He shrugged disdainfully. "I dunno."

"You sure don't! And what do you think would happen to his mother if he went after his father? Who would protect her after he left? Where would *she* go?"

"He's afraid of what could happen to his mother?" Dave asked.

"No, he knows what *would* happen to her," Bronnie insisted. "That's why he takes the beatings and doesn't fight back. But one day, that will all end!"

The bell rang, cutting off Dave's rebuttal. He looked worriedly at Bronnie. "Cool it, McGregor," he whispered, but she was already striding away.

"Uncle Dermot is mad enough as it is about this whole situation," Bobby commented as the two young men walked to their first class. "He wouldn't like Bronnie defending Cullen like that."

Dave sighed. "I don't like it, either."

"Then what are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know that there's anything we *can* do."

Bobby looked into the chemistry lab as they passed. His eyes were hard and his mouth tight. "Oh, I don't know about that..."

* * * * *

Sean frowned when he saw Bronnie walking purposefully toward him. He lifted his bike out of the rack and angled it away from her. Determined to leave before she could reach him, he threw his leg over the seat and pedaled only a few feet before her angry shout brought him to a stop.

"I'll follow your ass to work, Cullen! We *are* gonna talk!"

Cursing beneath his breath, he slid his feet from the pedals and stood bracing the bicycle between his legs, waiting for her to join him. He turned an annoyed face to her. "Why don't you tell the whole school, Bronwyn?" he snapped, his nasal tone making his voice sound mean.

She ignored his waspish remark and reached out to touch his injured face. When he jerked his head away, she lowered her hand. "Why are you mad at me?" she asked, embarrassment clouding her face.

He sighed heavily. "I'm not mad at you, but you know we can't be seen talking together! You know what your father said."

"I don't give a rat's ass what Daddy said!"

"Well, you won't be the one going to jail, will ya?" he returned with more heat than he intended. At the look of hurt on her face, he cupped her chin in his hand. "This isn't good, sweeting."

She smiled at the endearment. "I had to talk to you. I had to see how you were." She scanned his battered face. "You look awful."

"Hey, don't mince words, now," he teased, letting go of her. "Tell me exactly how you feel."

She rolled her eyes. "Will you be serious?" She extended her hand to his face once more. When he didn't pull away, she lightly touched his swollen nose. "That looks like it hurts."

Sean looked past her and saw Bobby Thompson watching them from the corner of the gym. He met Thompson's narrowed gaze for a moment then looked at Bronnie. "It looks worse than it is. I gotta go. I'll be late for work."

"You're sure you're all right?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Yeah." He glanced at Thompson again then lowered his voice. "Don't do this again, okay? We're being watched."

Bronnie turned and snorted. "I can handle Bobby."

Sean didn't reply. He could feel Thompson's open hostility like a slimy wet coat plastered to his back. He absently shrugged, the feeling wearing on his nerves. "Gotta go."

"I like that shirt," she said, as if stalling for time, trying to keep him there. "Is it new?"

He looked down at the pale yellow shirt. "Yeah, I bought it myself."

"It looks good on you."

"Coach Hie said only queers wear pastel shirts."

"Most of your shirts are pastels, aren't they?"

"I like light colors," he defended, glancing around.

"Doesn't make you queer, though. So why do you wear blue and yellow shirts?"

He stared at her. "Because dark colors depress me. Where is this going, Bronwyn?"

"Grownups say a lot of things that make no sense. Just 'cause they're grownups doesn't mean they're always right."

"Oh, I see," he said with a grimace. "We're back to not paying any attention to what your father said."

"Remember what I said, Sean. Try to come up with a way we can see one another without prying eyes being there to spy."

He nodded. "That's all I ever do."

"Don't forget you promised to take me to the prom."

"Ah, Bronnie, no. That wouldn't be —"

"You promised!" she said, her eyes flashing. "And I'm holding you to that promise!"

"We'll see." He glanced one last time at Bobby Thompson. "I gotta go, Bronnie."

Before she could say anything else, Bronnie watched the man she loved pedal away. He didn't turn to wave or acknowledge her presence in any way. With her heart aching, she headed for the gym.

Bobby was leaning against the brick wall, his arms crossed over his wide chest. At his cousin's approach, he cocked his head to one side. "Living dangerously, eh, Bronwyn?"

"You tell Daddy you saw me talking to Sean and I'll tell Uncle Mike about the girl over in Colquitt."

His face paled. "You won't if you know what's good for you."

She smiled nastily. "Stay out of my business and I'll stay out of yours." She waited for him to say something else, and when he didn't, she headed for her car.

Bobby pushed away from the building. His head throbbed with anger, but it wasn't directed at the little cousin for whom he had a vast amount of affection. His rage was aimed at Sean Cullen. To Bobby's way of thinking, few men would ever be worthy of Bronnie's hand and Cullen was on the lowest rung of the ladder.

With a brutal look of vengeance, Bobby hunched his shoulders and headed across the parking lot to football practice. But before taking his anger out on the tackling dummies, he had a few words to discuss with a couple of his teammates.

* * * * *

It was dusk before Sean finished vacuuming the last car on Griffin's lot. He was sweaty and tired and his nose ached miserably. Zeke had left for the day and Andy was making sure the cars were locked. When Andy came out back to lock the storage shed, he found Sean inside, putting away the Shop-Vac.

"You need a ride home, son?" Andy inquired. "You can stick your bike in my trunk."

"No, thank you, sir," Sean replied as he left the shed.

Andy followed Sean outside and turned to padlock the shed. "I live only a couple of blocks from your house. It ain't no bother."

"I appreciate the offer, but I kinda like the solitude."

Andy looked at him. "Seems to me you have more solitude than you need, son." He smiled sadly. "Or that's good for you."

Sean ducked his head. He dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans and shrugged.

"Well, anytime you wanna talk or such, you just let me know," Andy said gruffly. "Okay?"

Sean nodded. "Yes, sir."

Andy patted him on the back. "See you tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

As Andy backed out of the car lot, the sweep of his headlights played over the tree where Sean had padlocked his bike then left it in darkness. Sean wished there were security lights illuminating that section of the lot. As it was, he had to strain to see the barrel lock. Just as the last pin disengaged, he heard a rattling in the bushes that bordered Griffin's property and the empty lot behind it.

Straightening up from his crouched position, Sean looked into the shadows. He stood still, listening, but there was no further sound. Still, the hair on the back of his neck stirred, and there was a tight sensation in the pit of his stomach, the taste of copper filling his mouth.

All his life Sean had felt and heard things he could not explain. Able to "read" other people's minds had at first frightened then confused, and then later irritated him. Most of the time, he pushed aside the thoughts and ignored them. With Bronwyn, he often gave in to listening to her inner thoughts, but always hated himself for doing it. On rare occasions, the ability had served Sean well when his father had made up his mind to take his frustrations out on him. At times like that, Sean was quick to put distance between himself and Tymothy Cullen. Rarer still, were the times when Sean sensed danger heading his way from an unknown source.

Just as he sensed it now.

Never taking his eyes off the bushes at the edge of Griffin's property, Sean backed his bike away from the tree. He never saw the person behind him, but he heard the

swoosh of air a second before something hard connected painfully with his spine. He fell sideways, over his bike, gasping with agony as the right pedal jabbed into his groin.

Bobby Thompson watched from the protection of a huge live oak as his buddies went to work on Sean Cullen. He grinned as they jerked Sean up from the ground and hustled him behind the storage shed so no passersby would see what was happening.

"Don't hit him in the face!" Bobby hissed.

Two burly linebackers held Cullen's arms while two other members of Bobby's team took turns using the helpless prisoner as a punching bag. The sound of fists landing brutal blows, then sneaker-clad feet slamming into unprotected flesh as Cullen dropped heavily to the ground, could not be heard over the homeward-bound traffic that passed out front on Broad Street. Cullen's grunts were drowned out by the soft, vehement curses of his assailants as he lay curled on the ground in a vain attempt to protect himself from the savage beating.

With one last vicious kick, his attackers ran, leaving him in the dirt behind the storage shed. Bobby joined his teammates as they ran past, laughing with them at the carnage they had left behind.

Sean moaned as he tried to push up from the ground. Though they had landed no blows to his face, he hurt in a dozen places and was sure a rib or two was cracked, if not broken. He wretched, his body shuddering with the effort, as pain flowed through him. His groin was on fire, his kidneys throbbed with terrible agony, his back hurt so badly he could barely move. He tried once more to get up, but the pain proved too much to bear.

He pitched over into the darkness that reached up to embrace him.

* * * * *

Bronwyn pushed open the door to the church then walked to one of the middle pews, genuflected and took a seat. She sat for a moment, staring at the huge crucifix behind the altar then lowered the kneeler. Slipping to her knees, she made the sign of the cross and clasped her hands together. With elbows braced on the bench in front of her, she lowered her head to her hands.

"Hail Mary, full of Grace..."

From his place beside the statue of Joseph, Father Felix Connelly watched the young woman. Her family had been among the first to welcome him as the new priest of Saint Teresa's a few months earlier. The kindly priest had sensed the girl's turmoil and had been trying for a week to have a private talk with her. A meeting of the C.Y.O. board of officers that evening had given Father Felix the opportunity, but Bronwyn had

left the meeting as soon as it was over. He had not expected to find her in the church when he came from the rectory to lock up for the night.

Bronwyn looked up as she felt a presence beside her. She smiled. "Hi, Father."

"May I sit with you, dear?"

"Yes, sir." Bronwyn slid over on the pew.

Father Felix took a seat beside her. "Is everything all right at home?"

"More or less."

"Typical home with a teenager in it, eh?"

She grinned. "Yes, sir."

He sat in silence for a moment. "How do you like your junior year in high school?"

Bronwyn shrugged. "It's okay," she said, looking down at her hands clutched in her lap.

"Grades good?"

"Straight As."

"I heard you're president of the junior class. I'm sure you have a lot of friends who voted for you."

"I do."

"Your teachers like you, I'll bet."

"I hope so."

"Not having a problem with one of them, are you?"

Bronwyn shifted in the seat so she could look at his gentle face. "I'm having boy trouble, Father."

Father Felix sighed. "Nothing serious, I hope." His pale blue eyes searched hers.

Her face turned hot when she understood his silent question. She looked away from that probing stare. "We're waiting until we're married, Father Felix," she said, instinctively knowing his thoughts would be running along those lines. "He isn't pressuring me or anything like that. He believes in waiting."

"That is always encouraging to hear in this day and age, Bronwyn," he said gently.

"It's my parents."

"So they don't approve of your young man? Do I know him?"

"It's Sean Cullen, Father."

"A courteous young man and a devout Catholic. He comes to early Mass with his mother on Sunday." He cocked his chin toward the front pews. "Sits up there and sings every song as loud as can be." He laughed. "Well, Dorrie sings. Seannie tries, but he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it."

Bronwyn smiled. "He is awful, isn't he?"

"Yes, but a terrific kid." The priest frowned. "What do your parents have against him?"

"Who his father is and what he does for a living."

"Ah, I see. It's the old story of the lace curtain Irish looking down their noses at their poorer countrymen, eh?"

"Exactly. Daddy calls them 'shanty Irish'. They don't know Sean and they don't want to get to know him."

"They've forbidden you to date him?"

"Yes, sir, and they've threatened to have him arrested if I do."

The priest shook his head as though lamenting the news. "Well, I imagine they believe they are protecting you, dear."

"I don't need protection from Sean!"

Father Felix took Bronwyn's hand. "My instinct tells me you're right. Do you love him?"

She met the kind priest's gaze. "With all my heart."

"And does he love you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I am of anything in this life, Father."

"Then God will provide a way for you two to be together, Bronwyn. You must trust His judgment and rely on His ability to set things to rights. It might take a while, but if your love is pure and destined to be, He will see that it endures."

"Even if my parents are so against Seannie?" she sobbed, swiping at the tears falling down her cheeks.

"We have to trust that our Lord knows what's best for us, dear."

"I don't want anything to happen to Sean. My parents aren't going to change their minds."

"Your parents are good people. They want what they feel is best for you."

"Sean is best for me."

"Then perhaps one day they'll see your way of thinking. You just have to hope and pray they do."

"Will you say a prayer for us, Father?" Bronwyn asked. "For Sean and me?"

"Tell you what—let's pray together," he replied, sliding to the padded kneeler.

Bronwyn knelt beside him and added her heartfelt prayers to his.

* * * * *

It was well after midnight when Dorrie Cullen heard the back door open. She lay as tense as a coiled spring beside her snoring husband, holding her breath until she was sure it was Sean coming home at this late hour and not a prowler. Long after Sean's bedroom door closed, she lay staring at the ceiling. Finally, she carefully eased back the covers, swung her feet to the floor then crouched beside the bed, her hands clasped in prayer.

"Hail Mary, Full of Grace," she began, tears sliding down her wrinkled cheeks.

In his room, Sean gingerly stretched out on the bed, not bothering to remove his clothing. He hurt so badly he had to bite his tongue to keep from groaning. Slowly, he pulled his knees up to his chest and lay in a fetal position, his torso a mass of throbbing pain and his spine on fire with an agony all its own.

He had recognized the boys who had beaten him. He had also gotten a glimpse of Bobby Thompson standing off to one side, watching. His last thought before he allowed welcoming sleep to claim him was one of unadulterated vengeance. If it was the last thing he ever did, Sean would make all five of his attackers wish they'd never been born.

Chapter Seven

Dorrie looked around as Sean entered the kitchen the next morning. She frowned. "Where were you last night?"

"I fell asleep at the car lot," Sean answered. He glanced at the oatmeal she had prepared for him and looked away. "I ain't hungry."

Wiping her hands on her apron, Dorrie stepped away from the sink. "You're working too hard."

Sean shrugged and wished he hadn't. He knew his pain flashed across his face. He grabbed the back of a kitchen chair to keep his knees from buckling.

"Sean?" she questioned, reaching out.

"I'm okay," he managed to say through clenched teeth. "Just stiff."

Her eyes full of concern, Dorrie lowered her hand. "You sure, boy?"

"I'm sure." He barely glanced at her before he turned to go. "I'll be really late coming home, Ma. It'll be after supper so just leave me something in the oven."

With his jaw set, he pushed open the screen door. He stood on the step for a moment, looking for his bike then realized it was still at the car lot. He had walked home.

Sighing deeply, he didn't relish the thought of having to walk to school. If he hurried, he might be able to catch the bus at the middle school two blocks away. His body aching, his temples pulsing with a vicious headache, he stepped onto the carport slab and headed down the driveway.

Dorrie watched her son from the kitchen door. "May the road rise up to meet you, Seanie," she whispered. "May the Wind be always at your back."

"What are you babbling about?" Tym snarled from behind her.

She jumped, turning to face her husband's glower. "Just saying a prayer for our son," she admitted, lowering her eyes.

Cullen snorted. "Our son," he sneered as he took his place at the table. "Your son, you mean. He ain't mine!"

Dorrie flinched, but made no comment. Instead, she hurried to the stove to ladle up his breakfast of grits, scrambled eggs and patty sausage.

"Where's my toast and apple jelly?" he demanded.

"I ain't had time to make the —"

Tym leapt to his feet. With a backhanded blow, he sent her reeling across the kitchen. Dorrie banged into the counter, cried out with pain then landed on the floor in a crumpled heap.

"You got time to stand there spouting mumbo jumbo to that bastard son of yours, but you ain't got time to take care of my needs?" Cullen kicked her in the hip. "Get your lazy ass up and make the damned toast, bitch!"

Dorrie screamed with pain as the pointed toe of her husband's boot again connected with her hipbone.

"Get up!" he demanded. When she didn't move fast enough, he grabbed a handful of her hair and jerked her to her feet. Ignoring her whimpers, he forced her toward the toaster and shouted in her ear. "Fix my toast!" He let go of her hair with a cruel push that cracked her head against the upper cabinet door.

"Aye, Tymothy," Dorrie moaned, shuddering violently. Her hands were trembling as she untwisted the tie on the loaf of bread. She dropped two slices of bread into the toaster then hurried to the refrigerator for the butter and jelly.

"Useless slut," he pronounced as he sat at the table. "Just as useless as her good-for-nothing son. Maybe I ought to tell him what kind of bitch he has for a ma."

Tears sliding heedlessly down her cheeks, Dorrie stood at the counter and stared at the block of knives. Her gaze fell on the thick handle of the butcher knife then to her husband. She stared at him until the twang of the toaster shook her from her revelry. Methodically, she opened the container of butter and began spreading it on the toast. All the while, her gaze kept straying to the knife block.

"What's taking you so long, woman?"

"I'm ready," she whispered. She carried the buttered toast and jar of apple jelly to the table. "You want anything else?"

He opened the jar, slathered a huge dollop of jelly on one of the toast slices and bit into it.

Dorrie walked back to the counter and placed two more slices of bread into the toaster. Once more, her gaze slithered to the knife block. "You said you would never tell him."

He grunted. "Time he knew the truth. He'll find out sooner or later, anyways."

The toast popped up. Dorrie laid her toast on another plate and began buttering it. "You *promised* never to tell him."

"Shut the hell up. I may, or I may not. Depends on my mood."

She reached for the butcher knife. After drawing the wicked blade from the block, she lowered it to her side, hiding it in the folds of her skirt. She turned, watching her husband cramming food into his mouth. "He thinks you are his father."

Not bothering to look at her, he continued to eat. His chin was greasy with butter, specks of grits clung to his red mustache. He answered around a mouthful of sausage.

"Ask me if I care what the little bastard thinks. I'm tired of folks thinking that piece of crap is any kin to me!"

The knife handle was hot in Dorrie's hand, the thickness of it reassuring. She started toward the table. She felt the wicked point jabbing into her leg, but she welcomed the slight nick of pain.

"He's a good boy," she whispered as she came to stand beside her husband.

"He's a coward." Cullen glanced up at her. "I don't need nothin' else. Get the hell away from me." He looked down at his plate, dismissing her. "I think I'll have a talk with him when he comes home this evening."

Dorrie raised the knife and struck. Years of battering gave her unerring aim and enough power behind the force of her movement to nearly decapitate her husband of eighteen years.

The bright red arterial blood that gushed from the brutal wound in Timothy's neck washed over the pale blue tablecloth, mixed with the white grits and gray sausage and creamy yellow scrambled eggs on the green dinner plate, and sprayed into the cup of black coffee. The colors ran and blended, and changed hues as Cullen slumped in his chair, clutching his wound between fingers that were soon scarlet.

Dorrie leaned against the wall, the coppery smell of blood making her nauseous. She could not take her eyes from her husband until he gurgled his last bubbling breath and his powerful hands fell palm up in his blood-soaked lap, the fingers twitching occasionally until all movement ceased. The last spurt of blood squirted onto the table, landing in the jar of apple jelly.

"You promised you'd never tell him." Dorrie dropped the butcher knife, yet did not flinch when it hit the linoleum with a clatter. "And you'll keep that promise, Timothy Cullen."

The only sounds were the soft patter of blood dripping down the tablecloth to splatter on the floor, the tick of the clock and the hum of the refrigerator as it kicked on.

For several moments, she stared at her husband, hating him with every fiber of her being. She turned, shut and locked the kitchen door, lowered the blind over its window then padded carefully through a widening pool of blood to pull down the blind above the sink.

She unbuttoned her blouse and dropped the spattered white linen into the trash can. Her skirt followed. After removing her blood-saturated slippers, she added them to the trash. Clad only in her slip, bra and panties, she went to her bedroom, threw on a freshly ironed housedress, stepped into a pair of canvas sneakers then walked through the living room, out the front door and around the house to the shed in back.

When she returned, she was carrying a long black case that held her husband's chain saw.

* * * * *

He found them in the lunchroom that day.

Unconcerned that he knew who they were and not afraid he'd tell, Bobby Thompson and his four teammates sat together at the table where all the jocks convened, laughing at their night's work. Now and again they would turn and stare openly at him, grinning hatefully then bursting into uncontrolled laughter.

Sean, sitting two tables over from them, his pimento cheese sandwich, barbeque chips and chocolate milk untouched, watched the football players with an intensity that undoubtedly unnerved those who noticed it. His unwavering stare locked primarily on Thompson, but shifted now and again to the two who had beaten him so viciously – Brad Forrester and Garret Dawes.

When the athletes finished their lunch and clamored up from the table, Sean tensed, hoping they would not take it into their heads to start something here. He wanted the confrontation beyond the eyes and hands of those who might interfere. His breathing quick and shallow, he watched the five young men leave the lunchroom without so much as glancing at him, obviously seeing no threat in his presence and wanting him to know it.

Sean smiled brutally. Though he was sore to the point of barely being able to move, he stood, lifted his lunch tray and walked to the garbage can where he dumped his uneaten food.

"That was a waste of good money, Cullen," Bronnie said as she joined him.

He barely looked at her. "How afraid of your father are you, Bronwyn?"

"I'm not afraid of him at all."

He locked gazes with her. "Do you love me?"

She nodded slowly. "You know I do."

He grabbed her arm. "Do you want to be with me?"

Bronwyn's heart thudded hard against her rib cage. She had trouble swallowing. "Ah, yeah. You know I do."

"In *that* way?" he asked, staring hard into her eyes.

Sweat broke out on her face. "Yes –"

"I'll be leaving here this weekend. If you mean what you say, meet me in the usual place at the park. I'll be there by six."

"Leaving?" she questioned, but he had already moved away and she dared not call out to him.

Bronwyn spent the rest of the day nervously chewing on her lip, her pencil and her cuticles. She kept watching the clock, alternately wishing the minute hands would speed up or slow down. When the last bell rang, she shot out of her seat like a cannon.

She shoved past the departing students and hurried out to the bike racks, but did not see Sean or his battered bicycle. A quick circuit of the parking lot showed he hadn't

parked the rusted wheels elsewhere. Finally giving up her search, she ran to her car. She began making the circuit of streets between the school and downtown where she figured he would have gone.

"Damn!" she finally pronounced, realizing she'd missed him altogether.

She hadn't thought to check the football field, and would not have dreamed of venturing into the boy's locker room to search for him.

If she had, she would have found three of Sean Cullen's attackers – Brent Spivy and Harold Gleeson in the locker room with bloody noses and black eyes, and Bobby Thompson sprawled near the ten-yard line with a fractured jaw.

* * * * *

When the phone rang at five that afternoon, Bronwyn nearly jumped out of her skin. Grabbing the receiver, hoping against hope it wasn't Sean canceling their meeting, she was stunned when Dave gave her the news about the three ballplayers.

"But that's not all!" Dave told her. "Brad Forrester is at Albany General with two broken arms, and they found Garret Dawes unconscious in the Burger Joint's restroom. Somebody beat the crap outta him!"

"Who did it?" Bronwyn asked breathlessly.

"Don't know. They say the ones who jumped 'em were wearing stocking masks."

She laughed. "You're kidding! I bet they know who did it, or else got a good look at them. Who do you think it could have been?"

"We're playing Stanfield this weekend. Maybe some of their students. Who knows?"

"Are they going to be all right?" she asked, not really caring. She had never liked any of the five jocks and especially not her cousin Bobby who had teased her unmercifully since they were children. She suspected he had feelings for her that weren't particularly kosher and that was – well – yucky.

"Oh, yeah, they'll be okay, but none of them are gonna be playing ball for a while!"

Bronwyn giggled. "That's a fate worse than death for those five."

Dave's answering chuckle let her know he agreed, even though he and Bobby Thompson were friends. "Anyway, it'll be the talk of the town for a long, long time. Hey, you wanna get a shake at the Dairy Treat? I bet everyone's down there gabbing about it."

She looked at her watch, gasped when she realized it was ten minutes to six. "Can't. I-I got something to do."

"Like what, McGregor? Wash your hair?"

"Like homework."

"Yeah, right."

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, and hung up before he could answer.

"Who were you talking to, dear?" her mother asked.

Bronwyn looked up, angry that her mother had been eavesdropping. "Davy. Did you hear about what happened to the football players?"

"Yes, and I think it's awful!" Deirdre shook her head. "What is the world coming to when our young men have to do things like that over a silly school rivalry?"

"I'm going to meet Davy at the Dairy Treat and go to the hospital to see some of the guys. He's gonna buy me a burger, so don't hold supper for me."

Her mother frowned. "Well, don't be gone too long. Your father will worry."

"I'll be back by eight."

* * * * *

Sean was sitting on one of the picnic tables when Bronnie drove up. As soon as he saw her, he walked quickly to her car. "Let's go," he said as he got in, his face tight.

"Which way?"

"Head north up Slappey," he replied, slumping down in the seat.

Her heart beating furiously, Bronwyn drove out of the park. She cast him a look and frowned. "What happened?"

"I've tried to behave like I know I'm supposed to," he said as though talking to himself. "It's been hard, but I've managed to do what was expected." He turned on the radio, flipping through the stations until he found one with what Bronwyn had termed "old man's stuff".

"Ugh," she said, hating the strains of supermarket music.

"Anyone following us?"

She bit her lip and looked in the rearview mirror as she pulled onto Palmyra Road. They weren't that far from the hospital and she was nervous, half expecting to see her father's car in hot pursuit. She knew if they saw her with Sean, her parents would be furious. She hated to think what her father might do. "I don't see any one, but if Daddy —"

"I said I'd protect you, and I will," Sean said in a harsh tone.

She looked at him. "I wish you'd stop reading my mind, Cullen!"

He grinned nastily. "That talent might come in handy one day, *mo Chroí*." He shrugged. "Too bad it doesn't always work when it should with other people, or I'd have known what I was in for last night."

"Something happened and I want to know what."

He twisted in the seat until he faced her. "There's an old saying that fits this situation. It goes, '*Ná bac le mac an bhacaigh is ní bacfaidh mac an bhacaigh leat.*'"

"Which means what?"

"Don't bother with the beggar's son and he won't bother with you," he replied, then turned to stare out the windshield. "Well, the trouble is, they messed one time too damned many with this beggar's son!"

Bronwyn stopped at the intersection of Palmyra and Slappey, looked south then headed north on the busy highway. She threw him a look of surprise. "You beat the crap outta Bobby and his friends, didn't you?" When he didn't answer, she looked at him. "You did, didn't you?"

"I heard it was five masked men from Stanfield." He chuckled.

"Yes, well, none of them are about to admit it was a lone man who did so much damage!"

"Five on one sounds better, huh?" he snarled. "There's real honor in that, right?"

The anger in his tone made her wince. "They jumped you? All five of them?"

She didn't expect him to answer. His steady look as their eyes met needed no words. "Sons of bitches. I'm glad you beat the crap outta them!"

"Filleán meal ar an meallaire."

"I know that one—'Evil returns to the evil doer'. That's one of my grandma's sayings."

"I can't prove it, but I'm willing to bet your father had something to do with it."

Bronnie snapped her head around. "Oh, Sean, no!"

"He warned me, and I sure as hell wouldn't put it past him. Would you?"

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I don't want to believe he would stoop to something so mean."

"Why would anyone else come after me, Bronwyn? Who else would care?"

"I don't know," she whispered, feeling the threat of tears burning her eyes. She loved her father, but she knew he had a bad temper. It was not inconceivable that he would ask Bobby to help take care of the situation. Her shoulders slumped. "Where are we going?"

"To Mosby's."

She felt the blood begin to pound thickly in her ears. A strange heaviness formed between her thighs. "T-the motel."

"Aye." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Do you have an objection to that destination, *mo Chroí*?"

"No."

After a long moment of silence, he tightened his grip on her. "Are you sure?"

Slowly, she nodded. "Yes."

"You know what will happen if we go in there."

She nodded again, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. Sweat made her palms slick on the steering wheel, so she wiped her right hand on her pants leg.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

She glanced at him. "You're so good at reading my mind," she said, turning back to the road. "You tell *me* what I'm thinking."

"I want you to say it aloud."

For a few ticks of the dashboard clock she said nothing then shrugged. "I'm wondering why you want to do this now."

"You think I want to make love to you to get back at your father?"

They were only a mile from Mosby's Dew Drop Inn, so she took her foot off the accelerator, slowing the car. "Is it?"

"No."

"Then why?"

He pointed to the side of the road. "Pull off here."

She didn't question him, but nosed the car onto the shoulder of the road. Putting the gear into neutral, she made sure it wasn't going to roll forward then twisted in the seat to face him. "Okay, let's hear it."

"I told you I was leaving. I'm going to enlist in the Air Force."

"I think that's stupid, but go on."

"They'll draft me anyway," he snapped. "The war is going to escalate whether we like it or not."

"You're probably right, but I don't like you putting yourself in harm's way."

"Better I enlist than be drafted into a killing unit, don't you think? The thought of taking a life, human or otherwise, makes me sick to my soul, Bronnie."

The thought of him killing another human being made her ill too, but the thought of someone killing him sent a shaft of pure terror through her heart. She reached out to him, taking his hand. "I would die if anything happened to you!"

He smiled. "No, you wouldn't."

She snatched back her hand. "How can you say that?" she demanded, tears flooding her eyes. "I love you!"

"I love you, too," he said softly. "And because I love you, I want us to be together. I want to remember how it feels to have you in my arms, *mo Chroí*. I want to make you completely mine, to seal the bargain between us. I want you to remember you are my bond mate and I want to know you will be waiting for me when I come home. I have to know you belong to me and no other."

Tears spilled down her cheeks, but Bronwyn ignored them. She turned, put the car in gear and pulled onto the highway. Her heart pounding furiously, she said nothing until the garish motel sign came into view. As she clicked on the blinker, she threw him a look.

"I hope you brought protection," she said in a firm voice.

He patted the right pocket of his jeans. "I did."

She pulled into the oyster-shell driveway of the seedy “no-tell motel”.

Chapter Eight

Dorrie was panting by the time she finished. The bathroom was thick with the copper smell of Tymothy Cullen's blood and the pink and black ceramic tile speckled crimson from the spray thrown up by the chain saw's track. She sat on the toilet seat to rest and wiped the back of her slick arm across her blood-splattered forehead.

Tym's dismembered body lay cooling in the bathtub, the shower washing away what remained of his congealing blood. On the floor sat a box of plastic lawn bags into which Dorrie intended to pack his remains for disposal. In the living room, the stereo was playing. She had turned it on louder than normal to drown out the harsh sound of the chain saw.

It had been difficult moving Tym from the kitchen to the bathroom, but once she had pushed him from his chair onto an old quilt, she managed to drag him the ten feet down the hall. Having taken down the shower curtains from both bathrooms, she had sandwiched the vinyl under the quilt so no blood would seep onto the hall carpeting. Once inside the bathroom, she strained to get him into the tub. Careful not to allow the chain saw track to dig into the porcelain, she began sawing his limbs into foot-long pieces, humming an old Patsy Cline tune as she worked. His torso she attacked with a vengeance, the blood splatters from his ruptured organs making her grimace with disgust. Now, her butchering finished, she was bone-tired but knew her work was just beginning.

Tym's remains had to be double-sealed in the bags and carried carefully to the car trunk. The bath and kitchen would have to be scoured, all signs of the murder scrupulously removed.

With Tym's hateful body wrapped securely, she took a quick shower, carefully scrubbing away all traces of his blood. She dressed in a pair of jeans and an old top she could later throw away along with the remains of her dead husband when she was finished with all her chores.

She kept a close eye on the clock, knowing Sean wouldn't be home until well after supper. It was a just past two-thirty when she began carrying what was left of her husband to the car. By four, the kitchen was as pristine as it had been before she cut Tym's throat. By five, the bathroom had been returned to order, although the tub was minus its shower curtain and there was a small nick in the porcelain. Dorrie shrugged. No one would know what had caused the nick.

After taking one last look at the bathroom, she went into the bedroom, got her pocketbook and headed for the car. As the grandfather clock in the living room chimed six, she backed out of the driveway. Soon thereafter, Dorrie Cullen tossed the first of Tym Cullen's remains into a dumpster outside the Lee County high school.

"You always wanted to finish high school," she said as she got back in the car. "Well, leastways you'll finish up in one or two."

Her next stop would be the dumpster at the high school up in Americus, thirty miles away. "Or three."

She giggled.

* * * * *

Bronwyn kept her eyes averted from the motel's office while Sean was inside registering them. She was too afraid—and too ashamed—to do more than stare resolutely across the rundown parking lot. When Sean skirted the front of the car and got in, she could not look at him.

"Number eight," he said quietly.

She nodded and cranked the car. Her face hot, she drove to the shabby brown door and winced when she parked. The metal sign had lost one of its screws, for the number hung sideways, looking like the infinity sign from a popular medical drama of a few years earlier.

Sean touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I love you."

She took a deep breath and turned off the ignition. "I love you, too."

"I know it's not the place you dreamed about, but it's all I could afford," he said. Bronwyn could hear the hurt in his voice. "And..."

She turned to look at him.

"It's safer than the motels in town."

She wondered if by "safer" he meant "physically" or "health-wise". When he smiled sadly, she cocked her shoulders in helplessness. "I can't help thinking it," she said, growing used to him picking her thoughts from the ether.

"Despite its reputation, they do have to keep the place clean. If it doesn't look clean, I'll get another room."

She nodded, trying to smile but her lips felt frozen. She looked away and could not stop the shudder that ran through her. The thought of going inside the motel room terrified her.

"Bronnie."

She hung her head. "I'm sorry."

He slid across the seat and took her into his arms, cradling her head in the hollow of his shoulder. When she began to sob, he tightened his grip. "Shush."

"I can't go in there, Sean." She was trembling, her hands clutching at his shirt. "I just can't!"

He kissed the top of her head. "Then we won't."

She pushed back from him and looked into his face. Her eyes were thick with teardrops. "I—"

"No," he said, putting a finger across her lips. "You don't have to explain. I understand."

"But you paid your money and—" she said, her lips quivering.

He placed a soft kiss on her lips to silence her. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does!" she said, and shoved him away. Before he could stop her, she was out of the car and standing in front of the marred door.

He got out to join her. "We don't have to do this," he said, but she was shaking her head. "I don't want you to do anything that's going to bother you so much."

"Open the door, Cullen."

He started to protest but she hit him on the arm.

"Open the damned door before I lose my nerve!" Her entire body trembled. She wrapped her arms around herself and stamped her foot. "Please open the door!" she sobbed.

He slammed the room key into the lock and shoved open the door. A blast of stale, cigarette smoke-laden air washed over them.

The stench made him gag. "No," he said, his face set and hard. "Get back in the car."

"Sean—"

"Get in the car, Bronwyn. I'll drive!"

Relieved that she didn't have to step foot inside the foul room, Bronnie hurried back to the car.

Climbing behind the wheel, Sean started the car and whipped it into a U-turn through the pothole-ridden parking lot. He turned south onto the highway.

* * * * *

Felix Mosby let the curtain fall over the window of the motel's office. He made a clicking sound with his ill-fitting dentures then walked to the counter and picked up a pencil and pad. He jotted down the tag number of the car that had just left his establishment so he wouldn't forget it. He added the make and model of the car.

"Damned kids," he complained as he turned the desk phone toward him. He lifted the receiver and dialed the Dougherty County police. When the dispatcher answered, he gave her the tag number and the particulars on the car. "Not a day over sixteen, if you ask me," he said, describing the girl in the car. "My guess is the boy is from the Air Force base."

Mosby listened, nodding.

"That's right. Yes, ma'am. I don't want that sort of thing goin' on out here."

He listened some more, thanked the dispatcher then hung up. He walked to the door, opened it and breathed in the late afternoon air.

"Jailbait," he said, then hacked up a wad of phlegm and spat. "Nothing but jailbait."

Glancing at the lowering sky, he shook his head and went back into the office, satisfied he had helped to end the indecent behavior of at least two rebellious youths.

* * * * *

Sean sat hunched over the steering wheel as he drove toward town.

"I'm not ready to go back," Bronnie told him.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"Kinchafonee Creek. Where everybody else goes. I'll show you."

He shot her a glance. "And just how the hell would you know?" he asked, his voice tight.

"Everybody knows where to go parking, Cullen. Doesn't mean I've ever gone. Just means I know where *to* go."

His hands gripped the wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. "Have you ever come out here with someone else?"

She turned to him. "You tell me."

He took his eyes from the road, stared at her for a moment then snapped his head back around, furious with himself that he had drifted into the northbound lane. The highway was notorious for fatal accidents and the thought of something happening to Bronwyn made him sick.

"Turn up there," she said, pointing.

She guided him deep into the pine thicket that ran along the waterway. Above, scrub oaks formed scraggly arches over the car. Spanish moss snagged on the antenna as they drove under the oaks, festooning the hood with silvery lace. The dirt path she indicated was edged with a rusted barbwire fence that kept honeysuckle and banana vines from wandering too far to the road.

"Park anywhere here."

He nosed the car beneath a tall, live oak and turned off the engine. The sound of water and the chirp of crickets filled in the silence. Dusk wasn't far away, and fireflies appeared along the banks.

Sean grunted. "This place looks like a photograph Ma has of the woods near Killarney where she used to visit a maiden aunt during the summer."

"Well, that sure ain't the Boyne," Bronwyn grumbled. "Creeks around here don't get much muddier than the Kinchafonee."

He shrugged. "Aye, but it has a certain charm, don't you think?"

"About as much charm as any, I guess." She looked at him. "What now, Cullen?"

Sean smiled softly. "Are we on a schedule?"

She took a quick breath. "I've got a blanket in the trunk," she said and reached for the keys.

He snaked out a hand, gripping her wrist harder than he intended. "And why would you have a damned blanket in your trunk?"

She grinned. "On the off chance you decided one night to bring me out here to neck. Have I ever used it before?" She shook her head.

He swept his gaze over her face then snorted at her hoot of laughter. She snatched the keys from the ignition and got out of the car.

"You're going to be the death of me," he complained as he joined her at the back of the car.

She pulled out a red and blue plaid blanket from the trunk. "Aye, I might kill you with love, Cullen." She headed for a fairly flat piece of ground.

"Watch out for snakes."

Bronwyn stilled, her eyes going wide. "S-snakes?"

He grinned and made a hissing sound.

"Don't do that!"

Sean laughed, grabbed her up and swung her around. He stopped with her held above him, her hips imprisoned in his strong grasp. "Would I let some slimy, slithering reptile near my lady?"

"I don't like snakes," she said, twisting in his grip to look around them.

"I don't, either," he said, sobering. "I loathe the sneaky things." He set her down. "They're about the only thing I'm afraid of."

Bronwyn looked out over the water. "There might be cottonmouths out there."

The creek was swollen from recent rains and the waters were running faster than normal. Driftwood bobbed on the muddy surface.

"There aren't any in the car," he reminded her.

She tossed the blanket at him. "Then let's see if the backseat is as comfortable as it looks!"

He made a grab for her, but she dodged him and ran laughing to the car. He dove into the car after her, sliding his body over hers, pushing her down into the softness of the seat. Almost instantly, the laughter left both their faces.

Sean was stretched out over her, his feet outside the door. He was braced above her, his arms to either side of her shoulders as he stared at her. She was so soft beneath him, her shapely hips and silken limbs hidden by the folds of her full skirt. He wanted to drag up her skirt and touch the satin smoothness of her leg and to run his fingers over the arch of her hipbone.

He looked at her parted lips, the gleam of her teeth very white against the dark pink lipstick. He saw a vein throb wildly at the base of her throat and felt her erratic breath as she struggled to breathe with his weight pushing down on her. He shifted his body so he wasn't lying completely atop her, but at her groan and the instant restriction of her arms as she enwrapped him, pulling him down to her once again, he lost all thought to her comfort and lowered his mouth to hers.

To Bronwyn, the weight of him was sheer bliss, she reveled in the solid feel of him. She felt the insistent hardness between his legs stabbing against her thigh. It throbbed in rhythm to the vein pulsing in his throat and she had to tear her eyes from that suggestive sight. She swallowed hard, her eyes locked with his.

Sean's kiss was unlike any other he'd ever given her. His lips were hard as they slanted brutally across her own, his tongue determined as it slipped past her teeth and delved deeply into the warm recess of her mouth. He tasted of butterscotch candy and his breath was sweet in her nostrils. When he flicked his tongue over her upper teeth, she shuddered and tightened her hold on him. He groaned deep in his throat and thrust his tongue deeper still.

Aching with a need she could not explain, Bronwyn arched herself lower from the seat cushion, straining to feel the heat of him, the rigid steel of him jabbing into her thigh. She shifted so that intruding member could strike at the very core of her. When it did, she gasped, her harsh breath drawing his tongue as deep as it would go into her mouth.

Sean tore his mouth from hers, moved so he was wedged against the back of the seat. Bringing his knee up between hers, it was all he could do not to ravage her when her swift intake of breath told him she was excited by the invasion of his knee against the juncture of her thighs. He eased his hand to her breast and gently cupped it.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" she whimpered, and grabbed his hand to mold it harder to her.

"Slowly!" he cautioned, feeling the tension in his loins straining to be set free.

She pressed the palm of his hand against her, closed her eyes to the heat of it, the weight of it plying her. She kept a tight grip on his wrist as he tenderly squeezed her, kneading her flesh. When his thumb moved over her nipple, she lunged upward with a squeak of desire that made him chuckle.

"Brazen little hussy," he teased. "You like that?" He moved his thumb over the hard little nub again.

"Sean!" was all she could say. She strained against him.

He tried to take his hand from her, but she held on. "Bronwyn, I want to touch you."

"You are touching me, nitwit!" she managed to choke out.

"I want to touch your bare breast, *mo Chroí*," he whispered, and lowered his head to kiss the hollow of her throat.

She released his wrist.

He undid the first three buttons of her blouse. Gently sliding his hand inside, he angled it under her bra and cupped her breast.

"Ahhh," she sighed. His hand was warm, dry against her flesh. He kneaded the firm mound then ran his fingertips over her turgid nipple.

Bronwyn gasped and shuddered violently. She grabbed his wrist once more. When she did, he withdrew his hand, ignoring her moan of protest. He took her hand and lowered it to the straining bulge between his legs. He molded her around him and rubbed her palm over the hardness pushing against his jeans.

"Feel how much he wants you," he whispered against her cheek.

"Yes."

"Unbuckle my belt," he said, and released his hold on her wrist.

She looked into his face. Her pulse raced at the red glints in his passion-glazed blue amber eyes. She shivered when he ran the tip of his tongue over his upper lip.

"I want you to touch me," he said.

Bronwyn's right arm was wedged between her lover and the back of the seat. She started to tell him it would be nearly impossible to work his belt free of the buckle, but he pushed up from her, one knee on the seat, the other on the raised hump on the floorboard, giving her room to maneuver.

She unbuckled his belt, tugged down the zipper. He wore no underwear. She firmly gripped his manhood and pulled it free of his jeans.

"Go slow, Bronnie!" he pleaded, biting the inside of his mouth to keep from shaming himself. His arms quivered, the muscles straining as he arched over her. He stared into her face, watching the need building, and the sight was nearly his undoing.

"Tell me what to do," she said, holding him so tightly it was becoming painful.

"Ease up," he managed to croak. "Don't...don't... Just ease up."

Sweat drenched his face. His jaw was clenched—his entire body was as rigid as steel. She released her death-grip on his turgid member, but kept her fingers around him.

"You are so big," she whispered.

"Don't say that!" he begged, hearing the tension in his voice.

"Why not?" she asked, obviously unsure what she should do.

He had to touch her. His fingers burned to stroke her flesh. Firmly nudging her hand away from him, he insinuated his own between their bodies. He tugged up her skirt, ran his hand over her thigh and dipped his fingers under the elastic of her panties.

"Sean!" she screamed as his questing fingertips touched her nether lips.

He pushed his thumb inside her moist heat and cupped her pubic bone with the rest of his fingers. She came off the seat as though she was attached to a puppeteer's

strings. Her shrill cry of pleasure was again almost his undoing. She clamped her muscles around his hand.

"Bronnie..."

"Now, Sean! Now!"

He knew he was forgetting something, something vitally important, but couldn't remember what. All he wanted was to bury himself deeply within his lover's straining body. He wanted to make them one. He wanted to put his brand on her, to claim her, to mark her forever as belonging to him. She was his mate and he wanted nothing more than to possess her for all time.

When he pushed into her, Bronwyn made note of the discomfort, the slight pain, then filed them away, savoring them as payment for becoming a woman. She gave herself to him—body and soul—and reveled in the possessive heat of his manhood pulsing deep within her. She clung to him, her hands buried in his thick hair. She wrapped her legs around his hips, laughed as his fingertips dug into her rump as he held her. She tightened her thighs around him and laughed again when he grunted with the effort of ramming his flesh into her.

"Mine," she heard him say, and felt the first itching vibrations in the core of her.

"Yours," she whispered in return, and twisted beneath him, searching for a release from the building sensation in her loins.

"Mine!" he bellowed, throwing back his head.

She stared at the pulse beating thickly, rapidly, in the column of his strong neck. She felt his quivering arms as he braced himself atop her. When he lowered his head to look at her, moonlight shone on his golden hair. Her heart swelled, thinking him the handsomest man she had ever seen.

"I love you," she said, reveling in the feel of him inside her.

"I pledge before God and man that I will love you for all time."

She squirmed against him, his words thrilling her. Her eyes widened when the itch in her nether regions became a blast of liquid fire that washed over her and threatened to drown her in its power. "Sean?"

Sean felt the muscles of her vagina tighten around him. He tensed, striving with every ounce of his strength to hold back his release until he was assured of her pleasure. As the pulsing tattoo of her attainment vibrated around his shaft, he let go of the hold he had on his own flesh and poured his love into her.

Bronwyn's squeal of passion silenced the crickets chirping outside the car. It stilled the rasp of the cicadas and the thrump of the bullfrogs on the far shore.

Sean's bellow of release frightened away the hoot owl in the tall cypress twenty feet away, and sent a family of raccoons and a lone possum scurrying for cover.

Chapter Nine

Deirdre didn't look up from mending a pair of her daughter's gym shorts when her husband came back to the den. "Who was that, dear?"

"Put that down," Dermot said.

"I'm almost fin —"

"I said to put it down!"

His shout frightened Deirdre so badly she jammed the needle under her thumbnail. She gasped, dropped her sewing and pulled the needle free of her flesh. "What the hell's the matter with you?" she hissed, bringing her thumb to her mouth. As she did, she looked at her husband and her blood ran cold.

Dermot McGregor's face was rock-hard, his eyes blazing hell-fires of fury. His fists opened and clenched so powerfully, the muscles in his forearms bunched.

"Dermot?" she whispered. "What's the matter?"

His glare latched on to her like an arrow driven through a target. "I want you," he said, his jaw tight, his words clipped, "to get up and come with me."

"W-where?" she asked, terrified of the unholy gleam in his enraged eyes.

She thought he wasn't going to answer but when he did, Deirdre knew a moment of absolute shock.

"To the police station," he spat, the words sounding vile as they shot from his lips.

"Why?" Then Deirdre McGregor felt her face drain of color. "Bronwyn? Has something happened to our daughter?"

Dermot stared at his wife for a long moment, striving to get his rage under control. He barely heard the panic in Deirdre's tone, hardly noticed her flesh turn as white as chalk. All he saw before him was a semicircle of zigzagging light in his right eye that always signaled the onset of a migraine. The aura darkened and sizzled in his line of vision, flowing over that portion of his sight as though he was sitting underwater. He could feel the nausea lurking at the back of his throat and knew this was going to be one hell of a headache—a condition shared by his wife and daughter.

Deirdre leapt to her feet and grabbed his arm. "Tell me!" she demanded, dragging on him. "Has something happened to Bronnie?"

"I'm going to kill that little bastard." Dermot squeezed his right eye shut but the aura was still there, disrupting his equilibrium.

"Oh, God! What has he done to our child?"

"Lying, degenerate, shanty Irish bastard!" Dermot bellowed, jerking his arm from his wife's grip.

"Dermot, what did he do?"

"He took her to Mosby's."

Deirdre's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, my God!"

"To *Mosby's*!" Dermot repeated, the word a curse.

"Did he...did they...?" Deirdre could not voice the question.

"Mosby called in her tag number," Dermot said, running a rigid hand through his hair. "Said that boy rented the room."

"Sean Cullen?"

"Who the hell else would it have been?"

"Where are they now? Was he arrested?"

Dermot grabbed his wife's arm and shook her so hard her head bobbed. "Why do you think we're going to the police station, stupid?"

"Is she all right?"

"The policewoman said she was bawling her eyes out, begging them not to arrest him. They've got her in a room waiting for us to pick her up!"

* * * * *

Detective Gail VanLandingham recognized Dr. Dermot McGregor the moment he came through the door. The man bearing down on her desk had murder in his eyes, and the woman walking a few feet behind looked as though she'd been trying to keep the man's murderous intent in check.

"Dr. McGregor?"

"Where is our daughter?" he demanded.

"We need to talk first." Gail held out her hand. "I'm Detective VanLandingham—"

"I demand to see my daughter!" he snarled, ignoring the gesture. "We can talk later!"

Gail shook her head. "We'll talk now and you'll get that temper firmly under control." She met his furious look with a calm one and pointed to a room. "We can talk in there."

Dermot stalked to the door and flung it open. He strode inside as though he owned the room. His wife threw Gail an apologetic look.

"I'm used to dealing with irate fathers," she told the wife.

"Is my daughter all right?"

"She's just fine." Gail motioned the women into the room.

"I want the book thrown at that son of a bitch," Dermot snapped as VanLandingham closed the door.

"Dr. McGregor, you need to calm down so we can discuss this."

"What's there to talk about? It's statutory rape, isn't it? And don't think Felix Mosby is going to get away scot-free just because he reported it! I'll have his goddamned license!"

A sob broke from Deirdre. She had not allowed herself to think of what might have gone on inside one of the vile rooms at Mosby's Dew Drop Inn.

"Your daughter never entered the room Mr. Cullen obtained, Dr. McGregor," VanLandingham said. She folded her hands on the table. "Would you please sit down?"

Deirdre tugged on her husband's arm. He batted her hand away, but stormed to the table and grabbed one of the chairs. Sitting down heavily, he folded his arms over his chest and glared at the detective. "Did he rape her or not?"

"They both deny there was any sex."

"Thank God," Deirdre sobbed, burying her face in her hand.

The detective pushed a lock of ginger-colored hair behind her left ear. "We are concerned about your daughter."

Deirdre wiped at her tears and looked at the thin woman across from her. "Why? You said she was all right."

"She is, but your husband is very angry right now and —"

"Damned right I am angry! I'm furious! If I could get my hands on that little peckerwood I'd —"

"Be quiet, Dermot!" Deirdre yelled at him, though she kept searching the detective's eyes. "She's afraid *you* might hurt our daughter."

"What?" Dermot shot to his feet. "I've never laid a hand on my daughter!"

"There's always a first time," VanLandingham suggested, her blue eyes steady on him.

"No, there isn't!"

"She's never disappointed you in this way, though, has she? Made you this angry before?"

Dermot opened his mouth then obviously thought better of what he had been about to say. He clamped his lips shut, sat down and seemed to be making a conscious effort to control his emotions. When he rubbed at his right temple, Deirdre assumed he was fighting a horrible headache.

"We've never spanked our daughter," Deirdre said, "if that's what concerns you. We don't believe in corporal punishment. We won't start now."

"This sort of thing is hard on a parent," VanLandingham said. "Especially when the child involved is an only child."

"We love our daughter," Deirdre said.

"I'm sure you do, but in a situation like this, it is difficult for a parent not to overreact."

Dermot sat forward, squinting. "I'm not angry at my daughter," he said forcefully. "I'm mad at the man who damned well could have defiled her."

"That is understandable, Doctor. It's my job to make sure that anger doesn't spill over to Bronwyn."

"As I said, it won't," he said, locking gazes with her.

The detective studied him for a long moment then nodded, apparently convinced of his sincerity. She sat back in her chair. "We have another problem you need to be aware of."

"You think they're lying?" Dermot demanded.

"We've no reason to believe so. When we found them, they were sitting in the front seat of her car, kissing. Both were fully clothed."

Deirdre let out a long, shuddery breath. "I'd like to think Bronwyn's upbringing prevented her from doing something she'd regret."

"So what's the problem?" Dermot snapped.

"I haven't told the young man this yet, but the Sumter County police have his mother in custody up in Americus."

Dermot frowned. "His mother? What does that have to —"

"She was observed throwing a trash bag into the dumpster behind the high school."

"So?"

"The track coach who saw her became suspicious. Considering she seemed to be having a tough time lifting the bag into the dumpster, combined with a license tag from two counties away, the situation sent up a red flag for him. He copied down her tag number then went to see what she had thrown into the dumpster."

"What was it?" Deirdre asked.

"A body. Or, at least, a portion of one."

Dermot snorted. "Of an animal from their butcher shop, no doubt."

"Of her husband."

Deirdre gasped and covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide.

Dermot slumped in his chair, obviously stunned. "She murdered her —?"

"Right after breakfast this morning. She admits she sliced him into several pieces with a chain saw in the bathtub."

"Holy Mary, mother of God!" Dermot whispered. "Did they...were they able to..."

"When she was pulled over by the state trooper, he found seven more bags of body parts in her trunk. We've found everything except the head. She won't tell us where she put it."

Deirdre squeezed her eyes tightly closed, as though by doing so, she could shut out the ugly picture her mind had formed.

Dermot drew in a long breath then slowly released it. His shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "Well, the man used to beat her. Everybody knew it."

"His son, too," Deirdre added.

"I'm sure her attorney will plead temporary insanity," Dermot suggested.

"Most likely," VanLandingham agreed.

Deirdre opened her purse and took out a handkerchief. She blotted her forehead and neck then used the cloth to fan her heated face. "Surely they won't send her to the electric chair. After all, he did abuse her. The poor woman probably couldn't take any more and just snapped."

"We typically don't execute prisoners, Mrs. McGregor," the detective said. "Not anymore."

"I imagine I'll be seeing her at my clinic," Dermot said.

VanLandingham nodded. "I'm sure you will."

"Where is the poor thing now?" Deirdre asked, tears misting her eyes.

"In Americus. We'll be sending up a deputy to get her." The detective clasped her hands on the tabletop. "My concern is how to tell her son."

"At this point, I could care less about—"

"You are a physician, Dermot!" Deirdre snapped. "You swore an oath or did you forget?"

"What is it you think I should do, DeeDee? Give aid and comfort to a hooligan who might well have molested our daughter?"

VanLandingham laughed softly. When Dermot's glower slid to her, she shook her head. "Sean seems like a nice, respectful young man. I would imagine the two of them let their emotions carry them away for a moment or two, but since neither of them went inside the motel room, one or both of them thought better of doing what they went there to do."

"That doesn't excuse the fact that he took my daughter to that roach-infested, disease-ridden—"

"How do *you* know what those rooms are like, Dermot?" Deirdre interrupted. When his head snapped toward her, she narrowed her eyes.

"Everyone in a five-county radius knows about that no-tell motel, DeeDee."

"I'd appreciate you going in with me when I speak to Sean, Dr. McGregor," VanLandingham said. "In your capacity as a psychiatrist and not an irate father. If you can't do that, then would you suggest someone else better suited?"

Deirdre held her husband's angry stare. She lifted her chin. "Neal Hesar is one of the finest—"

Dermot pushed up from the chair. "Where's the Cullen boy?"

VanLandingham smiled and stood. "Thank you for your help, Doctor."

"Don't thank me," Dermot grumbled, looking away from Deirdre's smug grin. He started around the table but Deirdre took his arm in a light restraint.

"Remember—our daughter cares deeply for this boy. It doesn't matter how you feel about him. Treat him as you would any other patient."

Dermot pursed his lips but made no comment.

As Dermot and the detective walked down the hall, he spied his daughter in one of the rooms. He stopped at the doorway, meeting Bronwyn's worried look. He smiled faintly. "You okay?"

"Yes, sir." She was seated in a chair, twisting a tissue in her hands. Her eyes were red and her lips were quivering.

Dermot looked at the detective and lifted a brow in question. When VanLandingham shook her head, he understood his daughter did not know about the senior Cullen's ghastly demise.

"I'll be back in a minute, Bronnie," Dermot said. "Everything will be all right."

"We didn't do anything, Daddy!" she insisted, coming to her feet. "I swear we didn't."

He nodded. "I believe you. I'm just going to talk to your friend."

"I love him, Daddy," she said, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Don't—"

Dermot held up a hand. "Just calm down. We'll talk later. Right now, Detective VanLandingham needs to talk to Sean."

"He didn't do anything!"

VanLandingham looked to an officer standing nearby. "Would you get Mrs. McGregor? I'm sure she'd like to see her daughter."

"Your mother will explain things to you," Dermot said.

"Explain what?" Bronwyn demanded. When he turned away, she ran to the door. "I know what you had Bobby do!"

Dermot looked around. "What are you talking about?"

"I know you told Bobby Thompson to have some of his friends jump on Sean," Bronwyn spat. "Did you think just 'cause they beat him up he'd stop loving me?"

VanLandingham's brows shot up. "Is that true?" she asked Dermot.

"Certainly not!" He looked at his daughter. "I didn't tell your cousin to do anything of the sort. If he and his friends went after Cullen, it was something between them. Is he the one who put them in the hospital?"

"Five on one, Daddy. Two of them held him while the others beat him. Do you blame him for getting back at them?"

VanLandingham whistled. "Tough kid."

"Like father, like son," Dermot snapped. When Bronwyn started to say something, he waved her away. "We'll talk later."

Bronwyn met the policewoman's gaze with pleading eyes.

"Don't worry," VanLandingham said. She patted Bronwyn's shoulder then motioned Dermot to follow her.

"Don't you threaten him again, Daddy!" Bronwyn called after them. "I mean it. If you do, I'll never forgive you!"

Dermot clenched his jaw as he walked alongside VanLandingham. His hands were fisted, his shoulders rigid.

"Have you threatened the boy in the past?" the detective queried.

"I told him to keep away from my daughter or I'd have him arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

VanLandingham chuckled. "You don't know much about the law, do you, Doc?" She stopped in front of a closed door. "Or young love."

Before he could respond, she opened the door, indicating he was to precede her.

* * * * *

Sean was staring out the window, his fingers hooked in the wire mesh that covered the panes. When the door opened, he looked around then stiffened.

"I think you know Dr. McGregor," VanLandingham said.

Sean nodded cautiously. His eyes were locked with the physician's, and neither man made a move to greet the other.

"I want you to sit down, Sean," the detective said quietly.

With his gaze glued to Dermot McGregor's, Sean asked how Bronwyn was.

"She's fine," VanLandingham replied. "She's just down the hall."

"Did he hurt her?"

The doctor lifted his chin, a muscle in his jaw working but he did not speak.

"No, Sean," VanLandingham answered.

"Did he make her cry?"

"Sean," she said, trying to gain his attention. "We have some matters that need to be discussed."

Sean ignored her. He moved away from the window, his eyes hard on Bronwyn's father's face. "I don't care what you do to me. You can lock me up and throw away the key, but if you lay one hand on Bronwyn—"

"I am *not* Timothy Cullen!" the doctor spat, taking a step toward Sean. "I don't hit women!"

"Sit down, Doctor," VanLandingham said. When he made no move to follow her command, she told him again, her voice raised a notch in volume.

"If you ever hurt her," Sean declared "I swear before God and man, I will come after you, McGregor, and I will make you sorry."

"You gonna break my jaw too, like you did Bobby's?"

"That's enough!" VanLandingham shouted. She took Dermot's arm and propelled him into one of the chairs then stepped up to Sean. "Sit your ass down. Now!"

Sean stared into the angry woman's face then shrugged. He pulled out a chair and sat, his attention latched on Bronwyn's father who glared back.

"Sean," VanLandingham said. "Sean, look at me."

Reluctantly, he tore his stare from the doctor.

"Something has happened to your father."

For a moment, Sean did not respond. Then he slowly closed his eyes. "He's dead?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Sean."

"Don't be. I'm not."

"Even so, he was your father," Dermot McGregor stated.

"Why is he here?" Sean demanded.

"Dr. McGregor is a psychiatrist and —"

"I know what he is. I want to know why you brought him in here?" For a moment, Sean stared into VanLandingham's face then the blood drained from his face. He stood so suddenly his chair fell, crashing to the floor. "No," he said, shaking his head. "No!"

* * * * *

Dermot walked beside the detective, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets. He was subdued, quiet. "I almost feel sorry for him."

VanLandingham sighed. "You should. I'm sure he hasn't had an easy life."

"Doesn't excuse what he tried to do to my daughter."

She put out a hand and stopped him. "What is it you think he meant to do, Doc? Something different than what other teenage boys have been doing since Adam and Eve left the Garden? Wake up and smell the coffee. My gut tells me your daughter loves that boy and I know damned well he loves her. Keeping them apart isn't going to get you anything but a rebellious daughter and a more determined future son-in-law!"

"Like hell!" Dermot roared. "Over my dead body will I allow that hoodlum to marry my little girl!"

VanLandingham rolled her eyes. "She'll probably dance at your funeral, then. If you force her to choose between you and Sean, I can tell you who the winner is gonna be."

He opened his mouth then snapped it shut with a click. He walked purposefully to the room where Bronwyn and his wife were. "Let's go," he told them.

"How is Sean?" Bronwyn asked.

"I said let's go! We'll discuss this on the way home."

Bronwyn looked to VanLandingham. "Is he okay?"

"He will be. He's a strong young man."

"He's a good man," Bronwyn said, her eyes on Dermot.

"Is there anything you want me to tell him?" the detective inquired.

"No!" Dermot took Bronwyn's arm and pushed past VanLandingham. "Come along, Bronnie."

Bronwyn tried to break free of his grip but he held on tight. She turned as he pulled her toward the exit. "Tell Sean I love him!"

Chapter Ten

Even though it was close to eleven in the evening, people continued milling about on the sidewalks on both sides of the street. They pointed at Sean as he got out of VanLandingham's car. "Vultures," he said.

"You got that right," VanLandingham said. "Just ignore them."

They had come to the house to pick up a few things for Sean and his mother. He would not be allowed to stay in the house until the forensics team was through and that might not be for several days. After slipping under the crime scene tape and nodding to the policeman on duty at the front door, VanLandingham ushered Sean inside.

"Where are the suitcases?" she inquired.

Sean led her out of the living room and to the coat closet in the hall. He took a large suitcase from the shelf. "There are two other bags inside this one." He put the suitcase on the floor, hunkered down and opened it. He pulled out the first of the two inner bags and handed it to VanLandingham.

"Which room is your mom's?"

He pointed to the adjacent room.

"Let's get her stuff first."

When VanLandingham had gathered some underwear and a few clean dresses, she asked Sean to show her to his room.

The smell of blood still hung in the air and sickened Sean. He studiously avoided looking at the bathroom door as he passed. Besides making him ill, the stench caused an odd sensation in his chest. He found it difficult to breathe normally. His hands trembling violently, he threw some of his clothes into the suitcase as VanLandingham looked about his room.

"You okay?" she asked.

He nodded, but left the room as soon as he shut the suitcase. Not bothering to wait for his escort, he rushed outside and onto the front lawn. He dropped the suitcase, bent over, clasped his knees and drew in long, shuddery breaths. He barely felt the gentle hand patting his back and rubbing slowly up and down his spine.

"It's rough, I know," she said, "but things could be worse."

"How?" he asked, his voice strained.

"He could have killed her instead of the other way around."

* * * * *

They had reserved a room for him at the Albany Motor Inn. VanLandingham stopped the car before the building and asked if he needed any money for food.

"I've got some of my paycheck left," he said, taking the key she held out to him.

"If you need anything, here's my card." She handed that to him as well.

"Thanks."

"Those boys won't admit it was you who beat the shit outta them," VanLandingham said with a grin.

He stared at her.

Her smile faded. "I don't want any trouble brewing between you and her father, though. You understand?"

"Not unless he starts it."

"Sex between a man your age and a girl her age is a misdemeanor, but it can still get your ass into a whole pile of doggie do, son."

He opened the car door. "Thank you for the ride, Detective," he said as he climbed out.

"He's going to protect her, Sean. If you get in his way, bad things could happen."

He bent down to look at her. "Yes, ma'am, I understand that."

She sighed. "Be careful, okay?"

He smiled for the first time since she'd met him. "I'll do my best." He straightened and shut the car door.

She waved and left him standing outside his room. In the rearview mirror, she saw him staring across the courtyard at the dumpster. An old saying came unbidden to her mind – good riddance to bad rubbish.

She smiled grimly. What a fitting end to a bastard like Tymothy Cullen.

* * * * *

Although Sean was worried about his mother, he knew she would be all right. Her attorney would argue diminished capacity or – most likely – temporary insanity. Since abused women received no special privileges in the state of Georgia, she would be found guilty of manslaughter. Of that, Sean had no doubt. She would be sentenced to Milledgeville, the state mental hospital. How long she would remain there would be up to the judge but Sean doubted it would be for life.

At least he hoped it wouldn't.

Gripping the suitcase, he turned to the door and stopped. He thought of the other motel room door he'd stood at earlier that day.

Then he thought of the lies he and Bronwyn had told.

And hoped there would be nothing to come of those lies.

* * * * *

Bronwyn had been quiet all the way home from the police station. Her parents had been equally silent. When they turned into the driveway, she knew the reprieve was about to end. But when her mother spoke, her words surprised Bronwyn.

"It's late," Deirdre said. "Why don't you take a shower and go to bed, Bronnie. We'll talk in the morning."

Bronwyn looked to her father, sitting rigidly behind the wheel. At his curt nod, Bronwyn opened the door and got out.

* * * * *

"Are you sure about this?" Deirdre queried her husband as she watched her daughter enter the house.

"As sure as I have ever been about anything." He was staring straight ahead, his hands kneading the leather steering wheel cover.

Earlier, while en route to the police station, they had discussed what must be done. Deirdre had initially argued against her husband's plan, but in the end, she had agreed—Bronwyn must not be allowed to throw her future away on a boy like Sean Cullen.

"Go on," he said. "I'll be in, in a minute."

"About Neal Hesar—" When Dermot turned to look at her, she shrugged helplessly. "I didn't mean to insult you."

"I know what you were doing, DeeDee," he said, his voice tight. "You also know how I feel about the man."

"Don't you think it would be better to assign him to Mrs. Cullen's case anyway?"

"I certainly can't treat her, given the circumstances, can I? It will have to be Hesar, charlatan that he is!"

There had always been bad blood between the two men. Both had grown up in Albany, both had attended Harvard Medical and both had courted Deirdre Siobhan Brell while she was a sophomore at Radcliff. Even though Dermot had won Deirdre's heart and hand, Neal Hesar was still a sore point in their relationship. It was unfortunate that both men had found work at the same hospital for their ongoing antagonism often landed them on the carpet before the institute's board of directors. Since neither was willing to leave the job and settle elsewhere, the battle seemed destined to continue.

"If the bastard would only take that job with Wynth Industries!" Dermot fumed.

"Why don't you? It would mean a huge salary increase and —"

Dermot pounded the steering wheel. "I'm not going anywhere. Let Hesar take the damned job!"

Deirdre clamped her mouth shut. They'd had this same discussion numerous times since the offer from W. I. had been extended to Dermot from Dr. Brighton Wynth, the Executive Director of Operations. She felt Dermot was being irrationally stubborn but dared not tell him.

"Who the hell wants to live in Iowa, anyway?" he snapped.

"I wouldn't mind. I like the snow."

He glared at her. "Well, I don't!"

Knowing further talk would make Dermot only more determined not to accept W. I.'s offer, she opened the car door. "You're sure you want to go through with this?" she asked, wanting confirmation one last time before setting his plan into motion.

"Yes."

Without another word, she got out of the car and went into the house. When she walked past the laundry room and into the kitchen, she heard the shower going upstairs. Showering before bed was a nightly ritual Bronwyn had established at an early age. The habit annoyed Deirdre, herself being a morning shower person. But the nightly routine was something that seemed to relax Bronnie and help her sleep better.

It also took a long time.

Her jaw set, Deirdre climbed the stairs and went into her bedroom. In her bathroom, she opened the medicine cabinet. She pushed aside several pale orange medicine bottles until she found the one she was looking for. She shook two tablets into her hand and returned the bottle to the cabinet.

Dermot was closing the laundry room door when she returned to the kitchen. He barely glanced at her as she took the mortar and pestle from the shelf where she stored spices.

"Grind them as finely as you can," he instructed.

Deirdre dropped the tablets into the mortar. With more force than necessary, she began to crush the 100-mg tablets of secobarbital with the pestle.

He poured her a glass of soda pop and brought it to her. As Deirdre reached into the silverware drawer for a spoon, Dermot poured some of the soda pop into the mortar.

When no residual flakes of barbiturate could be seen floating, Deirdre took the glass upstairs and exchanged it for the glass Bronwyn always took to bed with her each night. Though it was another one of Bronnie's rituals that annoyed Deirdre, tonight, she was thankful.

* * * * *

Dermot lifted her to a sitting position as Deirdre knelt on the opposite side of the bed and placed a robe around her shoulders. He helped to thread her arms through the sleeves then laid her down, rolled her toward him so Deirdre could pull the robe over

her flanks. After rolling her onto her back, he tied the robe's sash around her waist and put the fuzzy bunny slippers on her feet.

As Deirdre finished packing, Dermot gently lifted Bronwyn into his arms and carried her downstairs. The door into the garage stood open, as well as the back door of the car. Carefully, he placed his unconscious child into the backseat, put a pillow under her head and shut the door. He opened the trunk and waited.

Deirdre brought two bags into the garage. There would be time later for Dermot to pack additional items, to send them onto their destination, but for now, they had enough to sustain them for a few days. She also knew they could always buy more.

"You have the passports?"

"Yes."

"Her birth certificate?"

"Yes, I have everything we will need."

After putting the bags in the trunk and shutting it, he looked at his watch. "The plane should be ready to roll when we get there."

Deirdre did not reply. There was nothing to say. She went to the passenger side and got in.

"We are doing what is best for our little girl," Dermot said.

She remained silent as he cranked the car, pushed the button on the garage door opener and put the car into gear.

"Everything will be all right," he told her.

And still, she said nothing. Her mind was not on what they were doing, the right or wrong of it. Her mind was not even on her lovely daughter lying so still and peaceful in the backseat. Her mind was on the young heart she knew would break, and—for a reason she could not explain, though she sought hard to do so—she wondered why Sean Cullen's feelings should matter to her at all.

Chapter Eleven

The hearing went exactly as Sean sensed it would. Though he had argued with her against it, his mother waved a trial by jury and agreed to a bench hearing. After hearing the evidence, studying incriminating pictures of a dismembered Tymothy Cullen and listening to several experts convey opinions on the temporary insanity of the defendant, the judge looked at Dorrie Cullen with pity but found no reason not to find her guilty of manslaughter. Though Sean was certain the judge's empathy was genuine, it had not been allowed to sway Bible-belt belief in the sin of murder.

"Yes, Dorrie Cullen had been abused throughout her entire married life. Yes, her husband was a vile, violent man whose cruel tendencies spread to his son. Yes, he deserved to be punished for the terrible things he did to his family but he did *not* deserve to pay for his crimes with his life."

The judge's words rang in Sean's ears. He sat behind his mother, separated from her by the thick wooden rail. He kept his attention on the back of her head, his gaze passing over her graying hair and the meek way she held her neck. Occasionally, he'd look away, watching the observers. He had denied himself the privilege of listening to the thoughts of his mother's peers—he really did not want to know what they thought of her...or him. Their gazes shifted to him now and again and, when they did, he felt like a microorganism plastered between two slides of glass under a microscope. He saw pity directed at him, which hurt more than the openly hostile stares of some of the spectators who had come to witness his shame.

His scrutiny shifted to Bobby Thompson's younger brother Jerry sitting opposite him across the aisle. Thompson smiled nastily, cocking a chin toward him in acknowledgement of his attention.

Sean delved into the thoughts of the burly junior varsity football player but there was no hint of Bronwyn's whereabouts in that murky, masturbatory mind. Entering Thompson's head was like slipping into the semen-stained pages of some vile pornographic magazine. It made Sean queasy and he withdrew, feeling soiled by the contact.

He turned in his seat, searching for some other face behind which the knowledge of Bronwyn's disappearance might be imparted. But there was no one he recognized. A light sweep of the room picked up only stray thoughts of how tragic was the trial and how frail the defendant appeared. He frowned and was about to turn around when a single word brought him bolt upright in his seat, "*Seannie.*"

He surveyed the room, seeking the mind that had whispered the word. He searched each face—some looked away as though he had caught them doing something obscene,

some looked back at him as though they feared he might be about to cause a commotion, most simply stared.

No face revealed the culprit.

Deciding the worry about Bronwyn and his lack of sleep—her disappearance two months earlier had caused his mind to play tricks on him—he slumped in his seat, although his body stayed as tense as a coiled spring. He felt sweat between his shoulder blades and a cold, clammy sensation in the small of his back. He shifted, the feeling not quite painful but not comfortable, either. He rubbed at a sudden throbbing over his right eye.

The judge's words brought Sean's head up.

"Where she will be remanded for a period of not more than fifty, not less than ten years."

Sean frowned. *Remanded where?* He had not heard.

"*Milledgeville,*" came the words, in a thick Irish brogue.

Violently twisting around in his seat, Sean saw a tall, blond-haired man exiting the courtroom. Though he did not view the man's face, he knew it had been this man's thoughts that had come so unbidden and unwelcome.

Unable to follow his tormentor, he stood, turning to look at his mother, being supported by her attorney. He reached for her across the rail. She came briefly into his arms before the bailiff pulled them apart, dragged her arms behind her and handcuffed her wrists.

"I'll come see you," he said, even as she began shaking her head. "Why not?"

"Go on with your life, Seannie," she said, her thick brogue raspy and breaking. "Join the service. Make somethin' of your life, son. Forget about me."

"Never!" He tried to get past the guard at the rail but the man held him back. He watched his mother being led away and could do nothing to stop it.

"Find your lady, Seannie," she said. "Don't ever stop lookin' for her, lad!"

"Ma!" he called, his frustration hurt festering.

"Find her, Seannie. She's your lifemate. Don't forget that!"

Those were the last words his mother said as the door closed, shutting out her tired, worn face. He stood, staring at the portal as though by sheer will he could fling it open.

Jerry Thompson chuckled when he bumped—most likely, deliberately—into Sean. "You have about as much chance of finding Bronwyn as your old lady has ever getting out of the loony bin!"

Sean's fist caught Thompson on the point of his chin.

Jerry lurched backward, though one of his friends kept him from falling. Guards seized Sean before he could leap on his enemy. They dragged him away, bucking and plunging in the strong hands of his captors.

Held as he was, Sean could not escape Thompson. With a roar, Jerry drove a vicious fist into Sean's belly. As he doubled over with pain, another blow came—this time to the side of his head—before guards subdued Thompson and yanked him away.

"Arrest that man!" the judge demanded, returning to the courtroom, his robe half-off one shoulder. He pointed at Sean.

"You'll never see her again, you shanty Irish bastard!" Thompson shouted, spitting blood. "The family will see to it!"

"Him, too!" the judge ordered.

"She's beyond your filthy reach!" Thompson laughed. "Uncle Dermot won't ever let you near her again!"

Sean roared, trying desperately to break free of the restraints on his arms but the guards had none of it. They hustled him behind the rail and through the door his mother had exited.

* * * * *

VanLandingham tapped her college class ring on the bar. "Hey, there."

Sean was sitting on his bunk, his elbows on his knees. "Hey."

The detective chuckled. "That's one helluva mean right cross you got, Cullen. You knocked out three of Jerry Thompson's front teeth."

"Too bad. I meant to break his damned jaw."

"Yeah, well, all that display of temper got you was thirty days in here, son." When Sean looked up, his eyes wide, VanLandingham nodded. "You're damned lucky I was able to convince Judge Woolery you aren't a menace to society. He wanted to give you six months hard labor on some shitty road gang."

Sean's shoulders slumped. His head fell to his chest as he buried his hands in his hair. "I screwed up royally, didn't I?"

"The good news is Gerard Thompson is gonna be with you. Fighting in Vince Woolery's courtroom is a definite no-no." She thrust her arms through the bars and leaned her elbows on the crosspiece. "Now, I have to make sure the two of you stay the hell away from each another so you don't spend another thirty days in here."

Sean sighed heavily then swung his legs up on the bunk. He stretched out with an arm over his face. "What difference does it make? I've got nowhere to go, nothing to do. Might as well get a free meal while I can."

VanLandingham grunted.

There was a long silence before Sean slid his arm to his forehead and glanced at her. "What?"

"I spoke with your mother's attorney." The detective clasped her hands through the bars. "She doesn't want you to see her in there, so has put herself on the list for 'no visitation'."

Sean stared at her for a moment then covered his eyes again. "I thought she'd do that."

"Can't say as I blame her. Milledgeville is not a place conducive to pleasant visits." She cleared her throat. "And I thought you might like to know—I found out where Bronwyn is."

Sean was off the bunk as though a rocket had gone off beneath him. His movement startled VanLandingham. She jumped, stumbling back from the cell.

Coming forward, Sean wrapped his hands around the bars. "Tell me!"

VanLandingham breathed heavily, her face turning red. "God, you move fast, boy!"

"Tell me!"

"Hold your water!"

Sean pulled on the bars. "Lady, come on. Where is she?"

"In Ireland."

"Ireland?" he repeated, his voice filled with disbelief.

"Her mother and father enrolled her in a private Catholic boarding school in northern Ireland. I think it's named Galrath Academy, but it's really a nunnery on the outskirts of the town Rostrevor, in County Down."

"When I went to the clinic to find her father, they said he'd taken a leave of absence. They didn't say anything about him leaving the country."

"Maybe they didn't know. I've learned he's taken a position with a research center in Iowa and has terminated his position here."

"Iowa?" Sean asked in a tone that suggested he'd never heard the word.

"I've had the rent-a-cops at Wickergate keeping a watch on the McGregor's place. One called this morning to tell me there was a moving van at the house. I went and questioned the driver. I asked where they were taking the furniture. They said a place called Grinnell, Iowa. I found it on the map. It's about fifty miles from Des Moines. A little more investigating came up with the place McGregor is now working for Wynth Industries—a place called Baybridge."

"What is it?" Sean inquired.

"A private, maximum-security prison for the criminally insane. You know—serial killers, psychopaths, that kind of thing. That just damned sure gives me the creeps, you know?" The detective shuddered. "Mrs. McGregor is working there, too."

"They left Bronwyn in Ireland—alone?"

"It would seem so. The van driver said Mrs. McGregor was with them for the walk-through yesterday but only the real estate agent was there this morning. I spoke with her. It seems Wynth Industries bought the house from the McGregors as part of the deal—the real estate people will sell it for the corporation."

"Galrath," Sean said, laying his forehead against the bars.

"I did some checking on it."

"And it would take a company of Navy SEALs to break into it, right?" Sean queried in a hard voice.

She sighed. "Might take a platoon of Green Berets, Army Rangers *and* SEALs. It's more or less a cloistered community of nuns—what was described as a 'maximum-security, lockdown boarding school for recalcitrant rich girls whose parents couldn't control them'."

Sean squeezed his eyes shut. "Mother of God..."

"They can't keep her forever," VanLandingham said, touching one of his hands gripping the bars.

He looked at her, tears glistening in his eyes. "You know they'll do everything they can to make her forget me."

She rubbed his hand. "The girl I talked to that evening was very much in love with you. Love like the kind I saw in Bronwyn McGregor's eyes and heard in her voice, doesn't fade. It never dies. She won't forget you."

He turned toward his bunk, sat and hung his head. "She is my heart. She is everything to me. What else have I got?"

"You've got me, son. If you need a friend, someone to talk to, someone you can count on, give me a call. I'll be there for you."

Sean tried to smile, but only a grimace touched his mouth. He stretched out on the cot. "I appreciate that," he said, turning his back to her and pulling up his knees.

As if unable to think of anything helpful to say, the detective left, her heels making hollow sounds on the concrete. Sean heard the door slam at the far end of the corridor. Never had he felt so alone.

He buried his face in his pillow and wept.

Chapter Twelve

"Cullen!" the guard yelled. "You got a visitor!"

Sean crowned Joey Petersen's queen then ran the checkerboard, taking all his opponent's men. He grinned at the black man.

"Damned lucky Mick," Joey grumbled. He took up the checkerboard, folded it and stuck it under his left arm. "I ain't playing with you no mo'!" He got up from the bench.

"Same time tomorrow?"

Joey threw up a hand as though dismissing the notion but nodded as he ambled away, his right arm swinging and his head moving in rhythm to a beat only he heard.

"Cullen! Did you hear me, boy?"

Sean sighed and pushed up from the bench. He had less than a week to go on his sentence. He knew he wouldn't miss the harsh tones and insulting attitude of the guards.

"Hurry up yo' lazy ass," the guard Bob Powell snapped. "That man don't look like he's got much patience."

Sean halted in mid-step. "What man?"

"Some uppity doctor."

A jolt ran through Sean. He looked toward the door leading from the exercise yard. The only doctors he knew were Bronwyn's father and the court-appointed psychiatrist Dr. Neal Hesar who had examined his mother.

"Will you get on in there?" Powell snarled, shoving Sean. "I ain't got all day to wait on you!"

Stumbling forward, Sean's mind raced. He couldn't believe it would be McGregor, but that was a possibility. If Bronwyn's father had learned Sean would be released soon, he might have come to toss around some more threats.

"Or try to bribe me..."

"What?" Powell demanded.

Sean shook his head. "Just talking to myself."

"You getting to be as crazy as that mama of yours."

Sean dug his fingernails into his palms to keep from lashing out at the overweight guard. He clenched his teeth and kept walking with slower-than-normal steps toward the visitor's room.

He was worried. If it was Dr. Hesar, he might have bad news about Sean's mother. Could something have happened to her? Had one of the other inmates done something to her?

Sean stopped before going into the room. His heart pounded.

"Ah, for cryin' out loud!" Powell reached around Sean to open the door. "Get the hell in there! You act like you going to an execution!"

He put his hand in the middle of Sean's back and shoved him through the doorway. Stumbling into the room, Sean had to put out his hands to keep from falling onto the long table in the room's center.

The tall man standing in the shadows was neither Dr. McGregor nor Dr. Hesar. He was too brawny to be one, and too tall to be the other. Though he couldn't see the man's face, Sean had the impression he knew him.

"Leave us," the man commanded.

Without a word, Powell stepped back, shut the door and locked it.

Sean straightened and squared his shoulders. "Do I know you?"

"Sit down."

A spark of anger shot through Sean but he did as he was told. He'd learned the hard way that ignoring orders in jail could be a painful enterprise.

"Painful as well as foolish," the man commented. He spoke with a thick brogue.

Sean flinched. His heart began to thump as the man stepped from the shadows.

"And you are not foolish, Sean. You're a smart man. Very intuitive."

"You were in the courtroom."

"That I was."

The man took a seat across from Sean. He leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head to one side. "Can you guess who I might be?"

The answer came too quickly. "No."

"Ah, now," the man said with a click of his tongue. "Don't play stupid with me, Seannie. You know damned well who I am." He unfolded his arms and sat forward. He rested his elbows on the table, steepled his fingers together and stared Sean in the eye. "Tell me who I am."

"My father," Sean whispered as though the words were being torn from his throat with hot pincers.

The man nodded, his slow smile like a seal of approval. "Aye, I am indeed."

Sean gazed at the thick blond hair combed back from the man's high forehead. He took note of the emerald green eyes, the strong jaw and full lips, the thick eyelashes and curving slash of brow. He stared at the mole on the man's lean cheek and reached up to finger a similar one on his own face. It was like Sean looked into a mirror, imagining his own appearance thirty years down the line. In one way it was comforting, but in another, it was unsettling.

The man chuckled. "You got your mom's pretty blue eyes, son. At least you know you won't wind up looking like Tymothy Cullen—fat, with a gut hanging over your belt and a neck the size of a bull's."

"Why didn't she tell me about you?"

"Ah, but she couldn't, you see."

"No, I don't see. Did he know about you?"

"Tym? Unfortunately, he did. I am sure his decision to tell you about me cost him his life. She would not allow it." He took a deep breath. "She *could* not."

"Why?"

"It would be best if I start at the beginning and tell you the whole of it. It's time you knew anyway." He leaned back in his chair. "My name is Brian O'Shea. Dr. Brian O'Shea. I am a genetic engineer. But what I do and why I do it is not important. What is important is how I came to know your mother."

Sean watched the older man's face. A sheen of perspiration formed on O'Shea's forehead while a darkness in his gaze held Sean in thrall and made the hairs on his arms stir.

"She lived down the road from the institute where I worked in Roundstone. From the window of my laboratory, I used to watch her going through the pasture to feed her father's animals." He smiled wistfully. "Aye, but she was a beauty with her long blonde hair swinging against her hips. Shapely, she was, and what you would call buxom. I knew I had to meet her. So I did. It was like a thunderbolt struck us both that day."

O'Shea didn't speak again for a long time. When he did, his voice became a near whisper.

"I wasn't supposed to have anything to do with the local girls. The people I worked for brought prostitutes in on occasion for us. They were never the same ones twice. You see, once they came to Fuilghaath, they were never heard from again." He looked at his hands. "The rumor was they never left the grounds."

Sean frowned. "What kind of place was this?"

"Is," Brian corrected. "Fuilghaath is a large research center."

"I don't remember my mother mentioning any institute near where she grew up in Clifden," Sean said, suspicious.

"She wouldn't have talked of it, lad. No more than any of the locals will talk of it today. To do so is to risk terrible vengeance from the Stalcaires."

Sean shook his head. "I don't—"

"It means 'stalker' in Gaelic. That's what the security men at the institute are called. You might call them a modern-day Irish Gestapo. With their black uniforms and paramilitary training, they are so quiet no one ever knows they're about. Not until somebody winds up in the river, facedown with his throat cut. The locals pretend Fuilghaath isn't there. It's safer for them that way."

"So you lusted after my mother, putting her in danger, knowing what might happen to her."

"What would *you* do to be with your Bronwyn?" O'Shea asked, his gaze locked on Sean.

When Sean only shrugged, O'Shea nodded in agreement.

"She was all I could think about, Sean. I wasn't doing my job because I was watching her, plotting ways to meet her near the creek. I was so intoxicated with her all I could do was dream of us being together. Of lying in that pasture, holding her, making love to her."

Sean shifted in his seat. It was uncomfortable hearing his mother described in such a way by a stranger. He looked away from the intense verdant stare aimed at him. "I don't need to know that."

"Each of us goes through a period when we can not think of our parents being anything but our parents. We don't want to admit they have sexuality. There was nothing dirty about what she and I had together. We were very much in love. Just as you and Bronwyn are."

"Then why didn't you marry her?"

"I wanted to, Sean. More than anything in this world, but they wouldn't let me."

Deep pain shook Brian O'Shea's voice, his hands trembled. Looking into the face so like his own, Sean recognized true anguish. Instinct made him reach out.

O'Shea took his son's hand, gripping it fiercely. "I loved her, Sean. I love her still, but I had to stand by and watch them give her to one of the Stalcires. Even knowing what the brute might do to her, I had no choice. I couldn't let them kill her!"

"Cullen was a Stalcaire?"

Brian nodded, a muscle working in his jaw. "And the worst of his kind, I was later told. He took her to Dublin and found a priest to marry them. A day later, they boarded a ship for America. I never saw her again, until the day of her trial. Had I known what would happen if they found out about her and me, I would have never laid a hand on Dorrie Burke. I would have kept the walls of Fuilghaoth between her and I!"

"She was pregnant with me when she left. And they found out?"

"Aye, and threatened to kill her. I was valuable to them. More valuable than even I knew, so they dared do nothing to me. But they knew they had leverage they could use against me, to keep me in line for the rest of my life. When I was brought before the Breithmh, the Tribunal, I was given a choice. I could either watch them murder Dorrie and her unborn child, or I could do as they wanted and she would live. All they had to do was hint they'd hurt her and I'd move heaven and earth to do what they wanted."

Sean tried not to wince when the man's fingernails dug into his hand. He placed his free hand over O'Shea's. "You're hurting me."

O'Shea groaned. He let go of Sean and sat back. Closing his eyes, he ran a hand over his face. "Forgive me, lad. That is something I never meant to do." He opened his eyes. "You've been hurt enough."

Sean shrugged, embarrassed. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't. And what I have to say will hurt you even more, but there's no way around it. You have to be told."

Sean cradled his hand against his chest, rubbing away the pain. He sensed great sadness in O'Shea. Knowing it would be best to say nothing, he leaned back in his chair and waited.

"As I said, an intuitive man," O'Shea said gently.

"Did I inherit that ability from you?" Sean asked, knowing O'Shea would understand what he meant.

The man shrugged. "In a matter of speaking. You get me, you get the gift." He smiled crookedly. "Or the curse of it, depending on how you view it, I suppose."

The door opened and a guard appeared. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Time's up."

Brian O'Shea never raised his voice. He simply locked eyes with the guard. "Do not disturb us again." His tone was firm, gentle but there was steel beneath the softness.

The guard smiled. "Yes, sir."

"And see that no one else bothers us, either."

"Yes, sir." The guard stepped back through the door and closed it.

Neither Sean nor O'Shea spoke for a few ticks of the clock hanging on the wall. The silence was deafening and it wore on them like a wet wool coat. Both squirmed in their seats at the same time then laughed together.

O'Shea took a deep breath. "Have you tried things like that?"

Sean shrugged. "A few times. It usually doesn't work."

"You have to practice. I'll teach you a thing or two about controlling others' minds."

"That would have come in handy on test days."

O'Shea grinned. "Aye, but try not to use it for cheatin', lad. Evil begets evil, you know?"

"I'll try to remember that. So go on with your story."

"Here is the way of it, lad," O'Shea said in a voice that had suddenly turned hoarse. "In 1956, an Irish-American surgeon and amateur botanist named Daniel Dunne went to Ireland to study the plant life in the bogs of the Iveragh and Beara peninsulas. He rented a rather isolated farmhouse out in the Connemara countryside and set up a small laboratory. Accompanying him were two assistants—Louis Lutz and Helen Bryan. Dunne also hired a local man named Seamus MacCarthy, somewhat of an odd bird even by Irish standards, to be their guide and erstwhile protector. Why Dunne felt he needed a bodyguard has never been explained, but they say MacCarthy was a man few messed with. Today, he is in charge of the Stalcaire Unit."

"He sounds like the kind of man who might take his job very seriously."

"The man is a flaming lunatic," O'Shea grumbled. "He enjoys hurting people and watching 'em being hurt."

Sensing there was a lot of history between Brian O'Shea and Seamus MacCarthy better left untold, Sean asked his visitor to continue.

"It was on the evening of March twenty-ninth when Dunne and his team, plus MacCarthy and three other men were finishing up taking samples at Roundstone Bog. The sun was going down and the fog was drifting in. Dunne spotted a promising-looking area he wanted to explore and headed there. In the fading light, he somehow managed to lose his balance and fall into the bog. Since falling into one of the bogs was always a distinct possibility when they were working, they carried with them a long length of rope. MacCarthy ran to where Dunne was floundering but before they could reach him, Dunne sank beneath the surface."

Sean shuddered. "I hate the water. I never learned to swim."

"I used to be a right good swimmer, but I don't do it any more."

"I take it Dunne didn't drown?"

"Unfortunately not. Fearing the loss of probably the first decent-sized paycheck he'd ever had, MacCarthy tied the rope to his waist and dove in after his boss. The others held on to the rope. Many minutes passed before they felt a tugging on the line. The men pulled MacCarthy and Dunne out of the bog, but Dunne was shouting that they'd found something down there and wanted it brought up."

"Found something?"

"A body, it was."

"Some poor fool who'd also stumbled into the bog?"

"Well, they've been finding bodies in the bogs of Ireland, England and Denmark for a long time, lad. Many of them the scientists think were Druid sacrifices but, no doubt, many were murder victims. What better way to rid yourself of an unwanted corpse than dropping it into a bog? The bodies they've discovered have been pretty well preserved, thanks to the composition of the peat, and some of them date back to 8000 B.C."

"That's incredible!"

"Aye, but when MacCarthy dove back in and they brought up that body, I'm sure none of them was expecting what they saw."

Sean grinned. "One of the bog creatures, eh?"

"It was surely that. A creature unlike any they'd ever seen. It was covered in thick black fur, with sharp fangs and talons, but it had the build of a man. Well over six feet tall, it was barrel-chested with long, powerful legs and arms. The thing's face looked more like that of a wolf, but the body was fashioned more after a gorilla. It had eyes the color of blood, and fangs hooked like that of the old pictures of sabertooth tigers."

"What was it?"

"On the creature's chest, right about here—" O'Shea put his palm over his left pectoral muscle "—burned into the flesh, was a tattoo that looked like the grim reaper,

complete with the bloody sickle. Dunne labeled it a Reaper, not knowing that is exactly what the creature was called."

"How did he find that out?"

O'Shea sighed. "I'll get to that. Right now, let's just concern ourselves with the discovery of the Reaper."

"Okay. Do they know how long it was in the bog?"

"When they did the carbon dating, they decided the creature had been in the bog at least five thousand years."

Sean whistled. "Considering what a find that was, why hasn't the world been told about the creature?"

"When I'm finished with the tale, you'll know," O'Shea admonished. "Stunned but excited at having found something so alien, Dunne loaded the creature's body into the boot of their car and took it back to the farmhouse. Once there, Dunne swore them all to secrecy. No one was to learn of the creature's existence until after it had been studied at length. I would imagine Dunne had visions of making a name for himself with the discovery of this apelike man. He was a learned scientist and no doubt had read tales of the Yeti in the high Himalayas and similar creatures such as the North American Sasquatch. I am sure he thought he had found just such an animal in West Ireland."

"They began taking pictures of the body from every conceivable angle. When they turned the creature onto its belly to take pictures of its backside, another astonishing fact greeted them."

"What?" Sean whispered.

"Something was moving around under the skin."

Sean's mouth fell open. "No way."

O'Shea smiled. "Aye, something was very much alive inside it."

"A rat or something like that?"

"It wasn't anything that had crawled inside the corpse. It was something else. Something that had been inside the body when it went into the bog."

Sean sat up straighter. "Something else? You mean like an offspring?"

"No, it was very much a male. The genitalia on that thing would make any porn star envious!"

"How could something live that long inside the body?"

"Will you let me tell the tale, lad?"

Sean clamped his lips shut.

"Dunne and his team discussed it for a long time, all the while watching whatever was under the leathery skin squirming around. I've read Lutz's notes, and he said the sound it made as it moved was like a field mouse scurrying under a dry cornhusk. Finally, Dunne made the decision to do an autopsy."

"Wouldn't that have been against the antiquity laws?" Sean injected.

"What did Dunne care if it was? He had a discovery unlike any other. Knowing him as I do, I'm sure all he saw was the glory, the law be damned!"

"So they cut it open," Sean said, disgusted.

"Aye, and discovered something even more bizarre. The creature's blood was as black as tar. And, although the body was perfectly preserved on the outside, the inside was something else again. All the internal organs were shriveled and dried up."

"How could they know the blood was black, then?"

"Lad," O'Shea said with exasperation, "stop interrupting and let me finish! Just take my word for it that the blood was black as a moonless night and let it go at that, will ya?"

Sean bit his tongue. Though he had hundreds of questions, he realized he had to bide his time. He nodded his agreement and forced himself to sit back and relax.

"Good lad," O'Shea mumbled. "So they did the Y incision, but when they folded back the skin on the creature's chest, Dunne and Bryan nearly went through the roof. What they found was an eellike abomination with green flesh covered in hard scales. It was about a foot in length, and the tip of its tail was forked and covered with sharp spines. The thing had red eyes, elliptical in shape like a viper's and fangs that dripped a noxious, highly acidic fluid, which burned a hole through the wooden examination table. They could not believe anything like that could exist inside another living creature without destroying it." O'Shea watched his son's face. "All right—ask."

"How did it get inside the creature?"

"Well, now, that's the question they've been trying to answer since that day. No one knows how it got there. They know it's a form of parasite that feeds off the blood in the kidneys of the host body. They also know it can go into an extended state of hibernation." O'Shea shuddered and looked at his hands. "And that it wasn't alone in the creature's body."

Sean drew in a harsh breath. "There were more?"

"The thing they pulled out of the creature was the 'queen' of a whole nest or what Dunne called 'a hive', for there were dozens of the wormlike things in a honeycombed sac attached to one of the creature's kidneys. Most of them were no larger than your little fingernail."

"W-were they dead?"

O'Shea looked him in the eye. "Five of those malevolent little beasties were still squirming. Dunne harvested them and put them in a jar with a piece of the creature's kidney. The trouble was, it wasn't the meat the parasites needed."

"The organs were dried up," Sean said with a frown. "That means they were feeding on what—the queen?"

"As I said—a very intuitive young man," O'Shea stated, obviously pleased. "Two of the worms died before Dunne realized what you just did. Once he did, he sliced his finger, dropped some of his blood into the containers and the parasites perked right up

like a Fleet Street hooker with a new tattoo on her tit." He chuckled. "You understand my meaning."

Sean grinned at the analogy. "I do."

O'Shea's face turned somber. He shifted in his chair to get more comfortable. "Dunne and his assistants began experimenting with the parasites. They put a laboratory mouse into a beaker with one of the things, but the mouse wouldn't go near it and it wouldn't go near the mouse. Next, they sacrificed one of the parasites, shoving it down a mouse's throat. Nothing happened, so they realized the mouse's stomach acid did the thing in. Next, they killed one of the mice, gutted it, and put it in a beaker. This time, the thing swarmed over the mouse and began to feed on the rodent's blood."

"Where was the mother creature – the queen?"

"Placed in a beaker of its own. Dunne drew blood from each of his team members and began feeding it. When new workers are hired on at Fuilghaath, it is the next thing they want to see after the creature itself. If seeing the Reaper ain't enough to put the fear of God in you, seeing that creature coiled up in the vat, glaring back at you, sure as hell is!"

"It's still alive?" Sean gasped.

"As alive as you and me, lad."

Sean ran a hand through his thick hair. "Did he name those things inside the Reaper?" he asked, his voice raspy.

"Aye. He learned the thing inside is called a 'revenant worm' and that it had a physic bond to its host."

"A symbiotic relationship?"

"Precisely. You are a bright boy, you are."

"So they needed to know what effect these things had on the creature. They began to experiment."

"That they did, but it wasn't until Bryan had the idea to surgically implant the parasite into one of the mice that they learned what the relationship between host and parasite was."

"What happened to the mouse?"

"It changed," O'Shea said, holding Sean's avid gaze.

"Into what?"

"Into a creature twice the size of the one it had been before the surgical intrusion. Twice the size, with four times the speed and a hundred times the strength. It was able to knock over its container and scamper away before they could catch it. And not only was it faster, stronger and bigger, it was also smarter. Sometime during the night, it managed to release the other lab mice. The next morning, they were nowhere to be seen."

"Oh, my God..."

"Dunne knew he'd happened on something more important than just the discovery of that beast. And he wondered what putting one of those parasites inside a human would do. At that moment, hell opened on Earth—Fuilghaoth was born."

"He experimented on humans?"

O'Shea shrugged. "Not at first, mind you. For a year or two, he and a team of like-minded scientists he'd gathered from all over the world experimented with animals. By then, Dunne had bought land and built the compound near Derry Byrne. You won't find that town on any map of Ireland, I'll tell you right now, but it's there and right smack in the middle is the Fuilghaoth compound." He cocked his head to one side. "Do you know what that means in Gaelic, lad? Fuilghaoth?"

Sean shook his head.

"It is Gaelic for 'blood wind'." He looked at his watch and frowned. "That's enough for one sitting. I've given you more than enough to think about." He stood. "I'll come back tomorrow and we'll talk more. There's a whole lot you need to know."

Sean stood also. Although he wanted to plead with the man to stay, to go on with the tale, he instinctively knew it would do no good. Brian O'Shea would tell his tale in his own time and in his own manner. "Thank you for coming to see me," he said, putting out his hand. "What you've told me is incredible."

"Lad—" O'Shea sighed, taking Sean's hand "—you've only been shown the tip of an iceberg deadlier than the one that sunk the *Titanic*. When you hear the whole of it, you may curse the day you met me."

Chapter Thirteen

She had seen him now for three nights in a row.

Like a will-o'-the-wisp, he had suddenly appeared just after moonrise on Sunday, on the brow of the hill where the cromlechs stood sentinel to the Goddess Aine. His arms akimbo, his legs apart, he stared at her. With his face blurred by distance and the milky mist floating in from the bogs, she wished—not for the first time—that she had a telescope. In her heart, she gave him a name, though her brain told her he could not be the one she so longed to see.

This man's build was not the same as her lover's. This sentinel, as she thought of him, was taller, heavier in stature, with long dark hair that cascaded over his shoulders and fell to the middle of his back. He seemed powerful, even dangerous and he moved with a stride that seemed to shake the earth.

She lifted her hand to the window, pressing her palm to the glass and—as he had done on the two nights previously—he lifted his hand, too. She could almost feel the warmth of his hand against hers.

"Who are you?" She smiled sadly when he cocked his head to one side as though he was trying to understand her words.

A sound in the hallway made her turn to look at the door. When she glanced back around, he was no longer on the hill, seeming to have vanished in the fog.

Bronwyn sighed deeply and rested her forehead on the cool glass. Her fingers arched against the glass in a hopeless gesture. Her breath caught on a wretched sob. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she sank to the floor, her cheek scraping along the rough stone wall.

"Sean," she whimpered, wrapping her arms around her. "Oh, Sean, I miss you so!"

From the distance, the howl came, reverberating through the fieldstone walls. It was a lonely sound, a pitiful cry and it brought her head up. She looked out the window, not surprised to see him on the hill once more. He seemed to be reaching out to her and she drew in a shocked breath.

"Sean?" she asked, coming to her feet. She slapped at the locked window. "Sean!"

He threw back his head and bellowed. A shiver of surprise and expectation ran through her. She grabbed the handle, knowing she could not open the portal but trying anyway. She pulled on the offending metal, straining to break it, to pull it free of its housing.

"Sean!" she cried and watched as the sentinel started down the hill.

Her heart raced faster with every foot of ground he covered in his mad dash to her. She pounded at the tempered glass with her fist. He was only a hundred feet away,

loping pell-mell toward her with his arms pumping like pistons, his feet digging into the earth. She saw his eyes—silver-hued in the moonlight.

“Sean?” she questioned, knowing now it was not her beloved she had conjured.

One moment he was a few yards away, the next he sprung from the ground in an aerial leap no human could have made. He cleared the fourteen-foot high walls of Galrath Convent and sprinted toward the tower in which the good sisters had imprisoned her.

Terrified, Bronwyn ran, shrieking as she lurched for the door. Behind her, something hit the wall. The entire room shook. She spun around and saw him clinging to the outside wall, three stories high, his face pressed against the glass. She screamed—a bloodcurdling sound that outwardly startled the sentinel.

Afraid to turn her back lest he break through the glass and come after her, she stared at him. He cocked his head to one side, while his silver eyes became wet with cinereous tears. The heartbreaking sound of his low groan was so pitiful, so grievously wounding, she put her hands over her ears.

“Go away! Leave me alone!”

The sentinel whimpered. He clawed gently at the window, long talons dragging down the glass.

Then she heard her name on his thick black lips—“Bronnie.”

With a gasp, she sat bolt upright in bed, heart pounding, eyes wide as she snapped her head toward the window.

A dream. Nothing more than a dream!

Throwing back the cover, she rushed to the window. She flung back the curtains and stared out from her tower room into the murky mist that crept in from the sea and spiraled over the crest of the hill. There was no cromlech to Aine. No sentinel standing watch. Only the low banners of fog dancing over the ground and the moonlight pulsing through the cloud cover.

For a long while she stood staring, trying to conjure the shape of a man on the brow of Sleivemartin, a foothill of the Mourne Mountains. She waited—hoping, longing, needing but receiving nothing save the ache that destroyed another small part of her lonely heart.

She went back to bed and curled into a fetal position, her hands thrust between her thighs. She shivered with the cold seeping in through the old fieldstone walls but made no move to lift the coverlet over her.

It was, she thought, the wild tales other girls told after supper that had caused the dream. The girl from London had brought up the legend of the Bugul Noz.

“He is so hideously ugly, so repulsive, that even animals fear his appearance,” Sheila had said in a wide-eyed stage whisper. “He lives in the Brittany woodlands, deep underground, and only comes out when the fog is so thick no one can see his loathsome face. He hates the way he looks and is said to be the last of his race. But—” she lowered

her voice “—because he is so lonely, so desperately in need of human companionship, he will offer you anything, do whatever you ask of him, in exchange for your company and compassion.”

Bronwyn groaned. Though the tale was nothing more than an old talespinner’s yarn, a legend from a time when faeries and banshees and the Green Man held sway over the Celtic people, the thought of any creature—mythical or otherwise—suffering so touched Bronwyn’s heart.

She cried for the Bugul Noz’s loneliness. She cried for her own heartbreaking aloneness and she cried for Sean and the solitude he too had been forced to endure because of her parents’ narrow-minded, bigoted beliefs.

She pressed her face into the starched stiffness of her pillow and screamed as loudly as she dared. Not because she was afraid of the bogeyman who had visited her in the dream. Not because of the hopelessness that was hers from sunup to sundown.

It was for the years of such wretchedness she knew would be hers to bear.

* * * * *

The ages-old Nightwind stirred, snatched from his centuries-long slumber by the Call of one more powerful than he. He listened, frowning at the intrusion. His name on the tongue of He Who Calls was a long, low wail of command as it wove its way to him once more.

Sighing with impatience and bone-deep weariness, he lifted himself from the warm nest he had made from driftwood and petrified-forest branches and floated in the darkness of his lair. The smell of sulfur drifted under his nostrils and he inhaled the aroma as a connoisseur of fine wine will smell a cork. He opened his eyes and surveyed the barren cave he called home.

The rough, thick walls dripped with noxious fumes he found comforting to the senses. No light made its way this deep into the cavern system, but no light was needed. His nocturnal vision was as sharp as ever.

Once again, He Who Calls made bid for his attention. The awakened sleeper growled with annoyance. As he did, the air within his lair—as chill as the deepest reaches of the megaverse—became laced with a heavy blanket of fog. The mist surrounding him took on a pinkish cast from the crimson glow of his angry eyes.

With one last snort of disgust, he levitated up to the ceiling and passed through. His corporeal body transformed to pure energy as he sped into the ebon limitedness of space. Like a shooting star, he sped through time and millennia, weaving his way to He Who Calls. Though his black heart was not in the summons, his blood began to stir.

Chapter Fourteen

Sean hurried behind the guard the next afternoon, eager to talk to Brian O'Shea. He had not slept and was bleary-eyed and tired, a brutal headache making him wince at loud sounds. He thought the headache might well be because he hadn't eaten much since his incarceration. His jailers had laughed at his request to have vegetarian meals, and it seemed the vegetable servings were smaller than they should be and the meat portions larger. As a result, he had lost ten pounds.

But the headache might have come from the odious stench that had nearly suffocated him. Yet when he had asked his fellow inmates if they smelled the ghastly odor, no one seemed to know what he was talking about. They looked at him as though he had lost his mind.

Realizing he had been alone in his perception of the being, Sean decided to say no more about the nocturnal stench.

Opening the door for him, the guard stepped aside. Sean entered the visitor's room.

Brian was seated at the table, a Styrofoam container in front of him. "Hello, son," he said with a smile.

Sean took Brian's proffered hand. He could not seem to think of the man as his father and wondered why.

"It's all new to you," Brian said with a laugh. "You'll get used to it in time."

Sean sniffed. "You brought food?" He spied a paper bag on the table.

"I went by Mama Vivian's. I heard the food there was decent."

Sean straddled his chair and sat, reaching eagerly for the container. When he opened it, his eyes widened. Fried okra, Crowder peas with boiled okra, rutabaga, fried eggplant and fried summer squash—all the vegetables he loved. He looked up. "Thank you," he said, his voice breaking.

"Eat." Brian said reaching into his pocket for a plastic fork and extended it to Sean. "Enjoy it, although for the life of me I don't see how anyone could! Give me a rare steak and a hunk of bread any day and I'm content."

Sean dove into the food with relish, eating as though he was starving. When he looked up and saw Brian's ugly frown, he stopped eating, the fork halfway to his mouth. "What's the matter?"

"Gobshites have been starving you, haven't they?"

Sean shrugged, forking the rutabaga into his mouth. "They just won't cater to someone who doesn't eat meat."

Brian's jaw clenched. "You've only another day or two here and you can eat what you damned well please!"

Sean sighed as he chewed. "I miss Ma's cooking."

"I drove up to see her this morning."

Sean blinked. "They *let* you see her?"

Brian arched a thick brow. "You think they could have stopped me, lad?"

Grinning, Sean shook his head. "I guess not, if you had your mind set on it." He ladled some peas into his mouth. "How is she?"

"As well as can be expected. I told her I would be seeing to you from here on out."

Astonished, Sean lowered his fork. "Seeing to me in what way?"

Brian put his elbows on the table and threaded his fingers together. "I told her I'd be taking you back with me to Fuilghaath."

A shiver ran down Sean's spine. "Ireland?"

"Aye, lad. To Ireland."

Sean swallowed. "My lady is there, Brian."

"And I know you won't be able to get to her no matter how hard you try."

"Don't underestimate me."

"Don't go looking for trouble until its time to meet it head on, then," Brian countered.

"What does that mean?"

Brian drew in a long breath. "You'd best let me finish my tale before you decide if you'll be going after that little gal."

Sean put his fork in the container and closed the lid.

"Why aren't you finishing your food, lad?"

"Let's get something clear between us," Sean said, pushing aside the container.

Brian folded his arms over his chest. "What is it you feel we should be clear about?"

Sean locked gazes with him. "Bronwyn," he said, his tone hard and unyielding, "is my bond mate. I—"

"I am aware of that. I'd have it otherwise, but that wasn't my choice to make."

"No, it sure as hell wasn't!"

"Lad," Brian said in a warning tone, "don't read meanings into my words that aren't there. There is a good reason I said what I said."

"I intend to marry Bronwyn McGregor."

"That may or may not happen. Only time will tell. But for now, she's as far out of your reach as are the stars."

"That may be true for *now*, but they can't keep us apart forever. She is my lifemate."

"Again, I am aware that she is, and I am also aware that she will be the only one for you for as long as you live."

"Don't patronize me!" Sean snapped.

"I wasn't! I know you took her that night up at the creek. I'd venture to say her parents will learn of it soon enough. That will make them all the more determined to keep you away from her."

Sean threw out an angry hand. "She won't tell them. We will be together. No one will stop that from happening."

Brian sighed. "Would you be so anxious to be with her if you knew you would be putting her in grave danger?"

"From what?" Sean scoffed.

"From you."

"I would *never* hurt her!"

"Not intentionally, no. But you don't know all there is to know about you yet, do you? About your heritage and genetic makeup."

"I—" Sean stopped. His eyes widened. "Are you trying to tell me Dunne put one of those things inside *you*?"

A slow nod was Brian's reply.

Pure terror drew its sharp nails down Sean's spine. He stared at the man, his heart suddenly pounding. "Before or after you got my ma pregnant?"

Brian stood and walked to the mesh-covered window. He turned his back and looked into the parking lot. "Before, though I didn't know the deed had been done until after they sent your mother away." He glanced around. "And what is in me is also in you. The spores of the parasite are passed through the sperm."

Horried, appalled, Sean couldn't speak. His chest felt as though a ton of weight pressed against it and he felt cold, colder than he had ever been.

"Your ability to read minds, your quickness, your strength, all of it comes from the parasite." Brian turned back to the window. "I haven't tried to read your thoughts about your night with the McGregor girl, but I hope and pray you used protection."

Sean's breath caught in his throat. "What if we didn't?" he asked, his question barely above a whisper.

"Then you had best hope your seed didn't take within her. If it did, pray the seed was a girl child, because the spore would kill that before an embryo could form." He chuckled mirthlessly and faced Sean. "The revenant worm wants only male offspring."

Sean stared at his father, watching the man's eyes narrow and a crease form on his forehead.

"Ah, Seannie," Brian sighed. "This is not good."

Sean buried his face in his hands. "What have I done?"

"That was a grave mistake."

"I didn't know."

"This is why you might want to think twice about the girl you've chosen as your mate," Brian said gently.

Sean shook his head. "Bronnie couldn't have gotten pregnant."

"Let's hope she didn't, lad. Had I known what Dunne did to me, I would never have laid a hand on Dorrie."

"How did they implant you without you knowing?"

"As best I can figure, someone slipped something into my food or drink one night at supper. All I remember was waking up one morning feeling like I'd been run over by a lorry. My back hurt so bad I could barely climb out of bed. I stumbled into the bathroom, gagging and heaving like a man coming off a three-day drunk, but all I had was dry heaves and a terrible thirst water couldn't satisfy. There is a reason why that was, but I'll go into that later.

"When I glanced into the mirror, I looked somehow different. Oh, no physical changes, but I just didn't look like the man I'd been shaving for all them years. My back was paining me so badly I turned around, tried to see it in the mirror, but it didn't look any different. No cuts, no bruising, no welts or the like. I just thought maybe I'd slept crooked and pulled a muscle or two.

"I took my shower then decided I'd do a few laps in the pool, hoping to work the kinks outta my back. I swam every morning, never missed a day, and I was looking forward to relaxing for thirty minutes or so before I had to report in to work."

Brian shuddered then flexed his shoulders, as if to throw off a feeling that had overtaken him.

"When I got down to the gym and got a whiff of the chlorine in the pool, I started getting this strange feeling. It was a dread unlike anything I'd ever felt before, like something bad was about to happen. The closer I got to the water, the worse the feeling got."

His words trailed off as he stared at the table. Sean said nothing, giving his father time to gather his thoughts. After a moment, Brian shook himself and looked up. Misery filled his eyes.

"I could not make myself get close to the water. The more I tried, the more intense the feeling of dread grew. I stood shivering, wondering if I had suddenly developed an aversion to water. I knew that was possible but having grown up on the seacoast, living my life like a porpoise in the waters of Galway Bay, I couldn't fathom not being able to jump into the pool." He sighed. "I finally left, not understanding my fear at all."

"Did you talk about it with anyone?"

"I was too ashamed of my weakness to make anyone privy to it. I just kept going back, trying to enter the water, but every time, the same terror overcame me. By then, I had seen your mother and my obsession with her replaced any thoughts of the pool."

"How did you find out what they'd done to you?"

A mirthless laugh hissed from Brian's tightly clamped lips. "On the day I transitioned for the first time."

"T-transitioned?" Sean muttered, his voice trembling.

"Changed. Into a semblance — although not as drastic — of the creature they found in the bog."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it. It happened and *will* happen again."

"How is it possible? It's against the laws of nature!"

"Nature as you know it, aye, but not the place that creature came from. I won't candy-coat it, son. The first time scared me something fierce. I didn't know what was happening. No one told me I was going to become like the bog man and if they had, I'm not sure I would have believed them. You see, I didn't know Dunne had decided to implant humans with the parasite and sure as hell didn't know I'd be the one receiving it."

"Oh, my God. What did you do when you...when you..." He could not say the words.

"When your ma was taken from me, I went a bit crazy and tried to leave Fuilghaoth. I wanted to stop her marriage to Cullen, to get her back. They locked me up in one of the containment cells, and it was while I was so furious that the full Transition began. I'm sure Dunne knew it might happen and that was why I was caged. As soon as the god-awful pain began in my back, I knew what they had done to me. I nearly went mad with the thought of that evil inside me. The terrible thirst water couldn't quench was satisfied by the beakers of blood passed through a small door into the cell. I guzzled the stuff like it was nectar!"

Sean covered his mouth with his hand.

"When I reverted back to being human, Dunne sent for me. He was curious to know what I had felt during the Transition." Brian ground his teeth. "I'd never wanted to kill anyone as much as I wanted to kill him that day. I demanded to know why he'd done this terrible thing to me."

"What did he say?"

Brian flung out a dismissive hand. "He said names were drawn and mine was the first. On the luck of a draw, I was the lucky recipient of the revenant worm. How, he asked me, was he to know I'd impregnated a village girl with my tainted sperm? As soon as he said that, I knew I'd fallen right into his plan. He knew, Sean. He *knew* what Dorrie and I had been doing and he knew I'd more than likely get her with child. He could have put a stop to it, but didn't. It was the impregnation that fascinated him. He wanted to see what would happen to the babe when it was born. He knew I'd created another like myself."

"I-I'll turn into an animal? A beast?" Sean's eyes widened. "A beast that could hurt people?"

Brian shook his head. "No, no! You will be put in a containment cell to keep you from hurting yourself or others. It's not so bad, really. Transition lasts for only a few days then you change back."

Sean felt hopeless. "This *can't* be happening!"

"I'm sorry, lad, but it is all too real. And about to change your life forever."

"What will happen to me?" Sean sobbed, barely aware of the tears cascading down his cheeks. "*When* will it happen?"

"In the chimps they experimented on, Transition generally occurs at puberty in males that have had the parasite implanted. Of course, with older males, Transition starts within four to six weeks. In my case, it was delayed for more than two years because I was a strict vegetarian. I think the pain over losing your mother, the fear of worrying about her, the anger over having her taken away from me, brought the Transition on earlier than it might have come had those things not been factors. Three days after she was sent to America, I went into full Transition. Once they saw the correlation between vegetarian and meat diets, they knew what had to be done with you. They sure as hell didn't want you going into Transition outside their control."

Sean looked up through the screen of his fingers. "Did my mother know any of this?" he asked in a shuddery voice. "Does she know what is inside me?"

Brian shook his head. "They saw no reason for her to know. What they did, though, was bring her into Fuilghaath before she was sent to America and program her with certain instructions she was to follow to the letter, as was Tymothy Cullen."

"Instructions?" Sean asked, standing up. "What kind of instructions?"

Brian held up his hand and ticked off his reply. "First, you were not to be told who your real father was.

"Second, under no circumstances were you ever to be taken to a doctor and examined. The doctor might take a blood sample and that was to be avoided at all costs since the blood would contain antibodies beyond that doctor's experience. Any records needed for you to enter school would be provided – falsified, of course – by Fuilghaath.

"Third, you were not to be coddled, cosseted in any way. They wanted you to grow up tough and determined. With Tym Cullen as an example, I'd venture to say that was a given.

"And fourth, you were never to be given meat of any kind – you were to be fed only vegetables. There is no blood in vegetables, lad. The parasite thrives on blood, remember? Animal or human, doesn't make any difference to it. Dunne knew from his experiments that, if you received no meat, your Transition would be delayed."

Sean glared at the man, delving with ease into his mind. What he found made him recoil and he stumbled back against the wall, shuddering. "I'll never eat meat, so there isn't any chance I will – Transition," he declared, spitting out the word as though it was filth.

Brian shrugged. "You won't have any choice in the matter."

"Yes, I will!" Sean shouted.

"By Dunne's time clock, you have another month, at most, before your first Transition. Prior to that, your blood will begin to change. You will feel it as the parasite starts to awaken. Once that happens, once it begins to feed upon you, the byproducts it throws off will turn your red blood to a black, tar-like consistency."

"That is disgusting!"

"That parasite is what has kept you from getting all them childhood diseases the other brats got. Did you never wonder why you were so damned healthy?"

"I just thought I was lucky."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. The parasite attacks an illness and devours it. Once you Transition the first time, it will heal you—" he snapped his fingers "—like that! You'll never have to worry about cuts and scrapes again. The flesh heals in the blink of an eye. That is why Dunne sent me to fetch you. Imagine Transitioning over here and having someone see it! That would be bad enough. But imagine getting a cut on your arm that seals itself up quicker than you can strip the backing off a bandage and you can see why it was imperative I come get you. I wasn't counting on your ma having filleted Cullen, although it couldn't have happened to a more deserving man."

"There has to be a way to keep me from—"

Brian interrupted in a stern voice. "As soon as your time is up in this wretched place, we'll be leaving for Fuilghaath. You need to be in the facility when you Transition for the first time. You must be where those who know what to expect can care for you."

Sean shook his head savagely. "I'd rather die than live my life like that!"

"There are only two ways a Reaper can die, lad. By being burned or being drowned." He cocked a brow at his son. "Which would you prefer?"

Sean, reading the truth of Brian's words, slumped against the wall. "I'm terrified of either."

"That's because the parasite is terrified of being destroyed in those ways. What's your feelings on snakes, lad?"

Sean flinched. "I hate the damned things!"

"Aye, well, there is a viper called a ghoret that Reapers fear almost as much as fire and water. I'll tell you about them evil little reptiles one day."

Sean slid down the wall and hunkered there with his head buried in his arms.

Squatting beside Sean, Brian put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I will be beside you every step of the way, lad. I swear I will do all I can to make it up to you for this."

"You didn't know what would happen."

"But I regret every day of my life that I didn't let the Stalcaines murder your ma."

Slowly, Sean raised his head. "Why?"

"To keep her from Cullen's brutality all those years, for one thing," Brian said between clenched teeth, "and to keep you from having to go through the agony of Transitioning every four months."

"But you loved her."

"I *love* her," Brian corrected. "That hasn't changed. But it would have been better for us all if I had had the courage to let her go back then."

Sean stared into his father's eyes and saw his own guilt. "If I had known what was coming, I would never have laid a hand to Bronwyn, either."

"I know, and I regret not having come earlier. Blame me, if you want."

Sean looked at the floor. "I've no one to blame but myself."

"Now you see why it might be best to keep away from her."

With shoulders sinking in defeat, his heart breaking, Sean lowered his head to his arms once more. "Aye, I understand."

Chapter Fifteen

Bronwyn refused to look at the nun who had entered her room without knocking. She detested the wiry woman whose body odor was acrid and sharp within the folds of her long black habit.

"The physician is here to examine you," Sister Mauveen snapped. "Be up with you, girl."

Bronnie's fingers tightened around the pencil in her hand but she gave no other sign that she had heard the nun's words.

"If you wish to be dragged down to the infirmary, that can surely be arranged." When Sister Mauveen clapped her hands, two larger nuns appeared at the door.

Her lips pursed tightly, Bronwyn got up from her desk. She barely looked at Sister Mauveen as she passed.

"The wages of sin are pain and death," Sister Mauveen pronounced, folding her hands into the sleeves of her habit. She lifted her pointed chin. "The Lord will provide both for those who disobey His commandments."

The nuns at the door parted as Bronwyn walked toward them. She stepped into the hall, expecting them to fall in behind her and was not disappointed. Bringing up the rear was Sister Mauveen, the rosary beads at her waist clacking together as she followed.

Dr. Liam Darby was waiting for them at the door to the infirmary. He smiled encouragingly and ushered Bronwyn inside with a gentle pat on the back. He stepped in front of Sister Mauveen as she tried to join them. "I have a nurse to assist me," he said in a firm voice. "You won't be needed."

Sister Mauveen's nose twitched and she twisted to see inside the infirmary. Her beady eyes swept the room, her upper lip quivering. Upon spying the nurse talking to Bronwyn, she sniffed and straightened up to look the doctor in the eye. "Mother Superior will expect a full report from you on the girl's condition."

"Naturally," Dr. Darby replied. "I give a full report when I do physicals, Sister."

Sniffing again, Sister Mauveen tossed her head. Spinning on her heel, she clapped her hands and her entourage fell into step behind her.

"Bloody vicious old penguin." Dr. Darby shut and locked the door behind him. "Well, Bronnie, how are you feeling today?"

Bronwyn liked the tall, rawboned physician. He had a kind face and understanding eyes. "I've got a cold. I've been coughing like crazy."

"It's this rainy Connacht weather. Well, I'll leave you with Miss Moher. She'll help you get into the gown." He patted Bronwyn's cheek. "Let's see if we can't do something about that cough."

Bronwyn smiled and started undoing the buttons of her uniform blouse. She stopped to cough. The sound was wet, filled with congestion and lasted a long time. She was grateful when Miss Moher handed her a tissue.

"That doesn't sound good, now does it?" Miss Moher said with a cluck of her tongue.

"I had bronchitis a few years ago," Bronwyn said, "and I think I've got it again. That's why they sent for the doctor."

Miss Moher took Bronnie's blouse and folded it carefully before placing it on a bench. "Me Da got that once. Didn't it put him in the hospital for a fortnight?"

"Where is the hospital here, in case I have to go?"

"Isn't it down in Belfast?" Miss Moher asked. "But wouldn't you be kept here if you had to be hospitalized?"

Bronnie sighed. "I should have guessed that," she said in a disgusted voice.

"Wouldn't we take as good care of you as the hospital in Belfast, now, lass?"

"I'm sure you would," Bronwyn mumbled. One of the things she found annoying about the Irish was the way they constantly asked questions instead of stating fact.

"Don't you be worrying none 'bout having to go to the hospital. Won't we be curing you of that nasty cold right here?" She turned away as Bronwyn stepped out of her slip, panties and bra. Holding up the gown so it blocked Bronwyn's nudity, the nurse waited until Bronwyn had stuck her hands through the armholes before looking around. "Aren't you ready now for Dr. Darby?"

"I am." Bronwyn turned around dutifully for the nurse to tie the gown in back for her.

"Won't you be sitting on the examination table now, lass?" Miss Moher went to the door behind which Dr. Darby had disappeared. She rapped lightly. "Aren't we ready now, Doctor?"

Bronwyn frowned as she sat on the paper-covered vinyl seat. Despite being the daughter of one, she hated doctors. Having grown up being inflicted with chronic bouts of tonsillitis, her blood had never coagulated fast enough to undergo surgery to remove the offending appendages. Despite copious amounts of vitamins and tonics to build up her iron level, as well as injections of penicillin and bottle after bottle of streptomycin, all the medicines had done was instill in her a morbid fear of hospitals and men in white.

"Well, now, let's take a listen to your chest," Dr. Darby said as he came into the room. He took a position slightly behind and to Bronwyn's right and warmed the bell of his stethoscope between his palm. "You're from the States, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Georgia, is it?" he asked as he untied the top string on her gown.

"Yes, sir. Albany." She flinched as the stethoscope touched her back.

"Breathe."

Bronwyn fought the urge to cough as she took a deep breath.

"Let it out." He moved the stethoscope further down her back.

Her breath wavered as she released it, and the tickle at the back of her throat grew worse.

"Again." The instrument slid across her back to the other side.

This time as she took a breath, the cough got the better of her. She spent several ticks of the clock hacking into the tissue.

"How long have you had the cough?" Dr. Darby asked.

"Three, four days," Bronnie managed to say. She wiped her lips on the tissue. "I've had bronchitis before."

He looked in her eyes, her ears and her throat. He listened to her heart, checked the glands in her neck, under her arms. "I think you've got the flu. It's been going around school."

"I take classes by myself," she said, lowering her eyes. "I don't see much of the other girls."

"Umm. Scoot up on the table and lie down, lass."

She did as she was told.

Dr. Darby looked at Miss Moher. "Would you get me the gynecological tray?"

Miss Moher blinked, cast Bronwyn a quick glance and looked back at the doctor. At his curt nod, she hurried to get the tray.

Bronwyn nervously twisted the sides of her gown. She met the doctor's kindly gaze. She was trembling, her lips shaking.

Dr. Darby put his hand over hers. "Everything will be all right, lass."

"You know, don't you?" she asked in a scared voice.

"The Mother Superior asked that you be examined, Bronwyn. Sister Mauveen voiced her suspicions and I was asked to confirm or deny them." He pulled a rolling stool to the side of the table, sat and took Bronwyn's hand. "How far along do you think you are?"

Tears welled in Bronnie's eyes. "I've missed two periods."

"About three months? That's how long you've been here."

She whimpered.

"Well, let's be sure about it, all right? It could be something other than what you think."

* * * * *

Mother Mary Joseph, the Mother Superior of the Galrath Convent of the Poor, was having a cup of tea when Sister Mauveen knocked on her office door. She frowned, sighing deeply at the interruption and bid her visitor enter. Upon seeing who had come to call, her frown deepened. "And?" she asked, setting aside her cup.

"She is in the family way," Sister Mauveen reported with more supercilious glee than the situation warranted.

Another deep West of Ireland sigh wheezed from the Mother Superior's lips. "Have Sister Rosalyn place a call to America. Dr. and Mrs. McGregor will need to be informed."

Sister Mauveen inclined her head. "What of the child?" she asked, rubbing her hands together, her eyes bright. "What will become of it?"

Looking up at the birdlike woman hovering before her desk, the Mother Superior had an unkind thought about Mauveen Hotchkin. The image of a buzzard, its long neck stretched forward to sniff a fresh roadkill, flitted unbidden through the Mother Superior's mind. That Mauveen bore a striking resemblance to a vulture still did not make the uncharitable thought any less sinful in the Mother Superior's eyes.

She reached for her rosary and spoke sharper than was her usual wont. "Pray do not concern yourself on that account. Let me worry about what will become of Bronwyn's illegitimate child."

"We can't allow her to keep it here!"

The Mother Superior narrowed her eyes. "Did I ask you to see to the matter of the transatlantic phone call, Sister?"

Sister Mauveen took a step back, obviously realizing she had angered the woman behind the desk. She bowed. "Aye, Reverend Mother, you did."

"Then see to it!"

The stick-thin nun backed out of the room, bowing and scraping as though to a potentate. Her quick, nervous smile was no doubt meant as an apology but the Mother Superior saw it in an entirely different light.

"Meddling old hag," the abbess of Galrath snorted with uncharacteristic spite. She turned her chair around and stared out the window at the light snow falling on the grounds of the convent. Sighing, she laid her head on the back of the rich leather upholstered chair and closed her eyes.

She knew things would be difficult in the coming months.

Difficult and painful for Bronwyn McGregor and the bastard child growing in her belly.

* * * * *

The Nightwind sat by the campfire and stirred the blazing logs. Beyond the roaring fire, the night was black as onyx with nothing save the leaping flames to cast off the

gathered gloom. Rain clouds hid the moon and in the distance, spirals of lightning hurled themselves against the mountains. Banks of thick fog crept closer, the dampness settling on his flesh like unseen insects.

"Come, sit a while," he said quietly, not bothering to look up at the one who lurked just beyond the feeble circle of light.

The visitor came closer but stayed hidden in the shadows.

"I am lonely, too," the Nightwind admitted.

Shuffling nearer to the outer rim of campfire light, the visitor looked about, searching perhaps for a trap.

"It's just you and me, friend," he said and looked over his shoulders. His eyes locked with the visitor's and he smiled gently.

The visitor ambled to a log that lay beyond the flare of light and hunched down.

"Going to rain," the Nightwind commented.

"Aye," came the gruff reply.

"It's the rain I miss most when I am Beyond."

"Beyond?"

"My lair is not unlike yours. It, too, is underground. But it is not on this world. It is —"

"Beyond," the visitor growled.

"Aye. Beyond."

For a long time, the two sat in comfortable silence, listening to the distant thunder reverberating from the mountains to the west. At last, the builder of the campfire cleared his throat and spoke.

"I have a favor to ask." He stood and walked to where his visitor sat on the log.

"Do not come so close!" was the shocked command.

"I am not afraid of you, friend."

"You have not seen me!"

"Nor you, me." He stopped a few feet from his visitor and shook himself like a dog fresh from a pond. When the shaking stopped, he knew he bore a strong resemblance to the astounded being sitting on the log outside the reach of the fire.

"What are you?" the visitor asked in a hushed tone.

"I, my gentle Bugul Noz, am a Nightwind, a shape-shifter." He sat on the log beside the creature.

The Bugul Noz frowned, which made his already hideously ugly face look worse. "I have not heard of your kind."

"But I have heard of you and what is more, *she* has heard of you."

The large head of the Bugul Noz dipped, the sparse gray hair revealing a cranium pebbled with oozing warts and rippling lumps. His oversized hands rubbed together, creating a dry husk sound, for his flesh was mottled with calluses.

"I did not mean to frighten her," the Bugul Noz explained.

"I know you did not. Her heart was breaking and you sought to help."

"I should never have shown myself to her." The Bugul Noz sobbed, his black lips trembling. "I know better. Humans fear me."

"She believes it was a dream, friend. But it would not be wise to show yourself to her again." He laid a comforting hand on the repulsive arm of his companion.

Silver eyes lifted to fuse with crimson orbs, and an understanding formed. The oversized head cocked to one side, the long ears swinging.

"She is with child," the Nightwind sighed.

"Ah, his child—the one she calls for in her thoughts," the Bugul Noz added, his warty chin dipping as he bobbed his head. He reached up a hand tipped with long talons and flicked away the tears staining his wrinkled cheeks.

"Aye, him," he said, and his tone was filled with disgust.

"What is your favor, Nightwind?" the Bugul Noz queried.

"I have sent for another of my kind, but he has yet to arrive. He likes the Abyss more than he fears my Call."

"There is more of your race?" the Bugul Noz questioned.

"Hundreds dwell in the Abyss."

For a moment the Bugul Noz was quiet then he hung his head once more. "I am the last of my kind. I am alone."

"But you have a friend in me and in any of mine."

At that, the Bugul Noz proudly lifted his head and smiled for the first time in likely a thousand years. Though the smile was ghastly and would have stopped the heart of a passing human, his companion returned the gesture and reached out a hand.

"Let us seal our friendship." The Nightwind took the hot, calloused paw offered to him.

"I am your champion for as long as time is," the Bugul Noz declared. "Ask of me what you will and I will offer you whatever you want. I will do whatever you ask."

"All I ask is your help in keeping our lady safe. In exchange, I will teach you the art of shape-shifting. You can look as you wish, my friend."

Chiaroscuro tears slipped down the Bugul Noz's pitted cheeks, but they seemed no longer tears of loneliness—they were tears of gratitude. "Tell me what I need do."

"My desire is to keep her from Sean Cullen. I have claimed her as my own and am doing all that I can to see they stay apart."

"How can I help?"

“Run interference when I need it. One day I will call upon you. All I ask is that you be there on that day.”

The Bugul Noz placed his giant misshapen hands against his thick chest. “I swear it!”

The Nightwind nodded and settled comfortably beside the hideous creature. It was well within the realm of possibility to teach his companion to shape-shift. He wondered that none of his kind had thought of doing so before now. Despite the mood in which he was steeped, his pity went out to the creature at his side and he was happy he could help. He himself had often known the greatest of loneliness during his millennia of life.

And there was a side benefit, he thought, as he half-listened to the Bugul Noz talking about his lost tribe. If he could but do one great boon for a lost brethren—as he was doing for this poor being—perhaps the One Who Listens might take pity on him and help him rid himself of the curse that had turned him into a Nightwind so long ago.

He knew that was the only way he could ever be with Bronwyn McGregor, and being with her was his deepest desire.

Chapter Sixteen

Sean had been quiet during the flight to Ireland from New York City. He seemed not to notice the bright lights of the big city or the luxury of the private jet that had whisked him from the soil of his native land and into the wide expanse of night-darkening sky. He had declined the steward's offer of food and drink and curled up in his seat once the jet reached its cruising speed. He slept all the way to Shannon International Airport. When he was awakened, he remained silent, allowing himself to be led to the helicopter standing by to take him to Fuilghaoth.

Banking away from the sprawling airport at Shannon, Sean stared out the window, watching the myriad shades of green speeding beneath the helicopter's runners. Under normal circumstances, the bright blue of the Atlantic and the wild beauty of his ancestral land probably would have taken his notice. That morning though, all he noticed was the darkness of the craggy rocks over which they flew, the jutting rows of stone fences dotting the foreign soil and the forbidding wind that pushed at the craft, making it rise and fall.

Feeling detached from his surroundings, he closed his eyes and leaned his head against the cool glass of the window. He was sleeping too much, he thought. More than he ever had, but, to his way of thinking, what difference did it make? He had nowhere to go save the institute. He had no one to go to. Being with Bronwyn, now that he knew what lurked inside him, was out of the question. He had nothing to look forward to except years of turning from man to beast and back again.

And for what purpose?

Although he longed to question Brian, he had not. The last night in jail, he had spent a restless time staring at the floor, unable to accept the things he'd learned, but understanding the truth of them. Morning's light had brought with it a realization that his life was now in the hands of a stranger and he had no more say over it than a lab rat.

"I called to ask her if she'd like to say goodbye to you," Brian had told him when Sean left the jail. The man was waiting at the curb, a black limousine at the ready. "She said to tell you to mind your manners and make her proud."

It had been on the tip of Sean's tongue to ask how he would do that. He had wanted to know if his mother had been told what would happen to him in Ireland, but staring into Brian's eyes, he'd had his answers. He had simply climbed into the luxurious interior of the limousine and stared out the window.

"Nothing is ever as bad as we think," Brian had told him as the limo pulled into the MacAfee Airport on the outskirts of Albany. "There are always good things in everything." He'd put a hand on Sean's knee. "Do you want me to tell you about the second time I Transitioned, lad?"

Sean had looked at the man, saying nothing, then turned back to stare at the hangar they were approaching.

"Well, if you ever do, just let me know."

Now, the helicopter lurched, dropping altitude suddenly. Sean opened his eyes. He wasn't unnerved or frightened. If anything, he began to entertain the thought that, if they crashed, the chopper might burst into flames, trapping them inside and his worries would be over.

He chuckled at the morbid thought and felt Brian's gaze on him.

"Don't think things like that, lad," Brian admonished. "That's tempting fate. Burning to death is a horrible way to die."

To Sean, dead was dead and, at the moment, it didn't seem to matter how it was accomplished. He knew he'd never be able to take his own life, even had he been able to or the thing inside him allow it. Brian had told him – *"I know of a man who tried to kill himself once the revenant was implanted, but the parasite kept him from doing it. Dying by your own hand is no longer an option. That is the reason I can no longer swim. I can no longer even put a toe in the water. The parasite keeps a tight rein on me..."*

"Stop dwelling on such things, Sean," Brian ordered. "We'll both live to a very ripe old age."

Sean knew he had to find a way to shield his thoughts from Brian. He hated that every random idea, concept, observation and notion he had was plucked with ease from the ether and turned back on him. He now realized how annoying it had been for Bronnie when he had read her thoughts.

"Sean."

He turned toward Brian.

"This is your life from now on, lad. Make the best of it."

Sean looked away. To his way of thinking, he no longer had a life.

* * * * *

A ten-foot-high electric fence plastered with *Warning: High Voltage* signs in several languages and a guard post were the first things Sean saw as the limousine rolled to a stop outside the town of Derry Byrne. He craned his neck to look through the windshield as two guards left their kiosk and blocked the entry to the large gate. In their arms, they cradled machine guns.

The limousine driver Ciarán hit the button on the electric window and the darkened glass rolled down. "Dr. O'Shea returning," he told a guard. He lowered the window on Brian's side of the limo.

The guard saluted. "Welcome home, Doctor."

Brian waved a negligent hand. "Has Dr. Saur returned?"

"He came in this morning, sir." As the guard spoke, he turned to his companion and motioned for the gate to be opened. He stepped back, saluted again then with his gun clutched to his chest, walked back to the kiosk.

"The guards are not Irish, as I'm sure you noticed," Brian told Sean. "They are ex-Israeli commandoes. The one on the right has a kinsman who will be competing in the Olympics next year. Wrestling, isn't it, Ciarán?"

Ciarán glanced into the rearview mirror. "I believe so."

"When his competition days are over, we hope to recruit him, as well."

The gate closed behind them. Bogs lined both sides of the long road ahead. The rugged Twelve Bens mountain range to the north rose in the distance like sentinels.

"You will find we have a rather eclectic ensemble. Our cooks are Cordon Bleu chefs from France, although, for variety we have a few from Italy. The gardeners – Dr. Dunne still enjoys puttering with his flowers – are from Japan. The housekeepers are German. We have some Spanish and a few Greek laborers, but most are from the Netherlands. They seem to possess a superior work ethic. There are no blacks and no Chinese, and with the exception of Andrei Barinsokhov, no Russians."

"And there's only a handful of us Irishmen," Ciarán put in.

"Lazy sods that we are," Brian quipped, and the two men exchanged a laugh.

"In all, there are about three hundred inhabitants at Fuilghaath."

"What about the Stalcaires?" Sean asked, clearing his throat to get rid of the rust of disuse.

"He speaks!" Brian exclaimed, slapping a hand to his chest. He grinned at his son, but when Sean did not return the gesture, he rolled his eyes. "Lighten up, lad."

"What about the Stalcaires?" Sean repeated, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

"They are Reapers," Brian answered in a sober tone. "Therefore, they are of Gaelic extraction. Some Irish, some Scots and one or two Welshmen."

Sean frowned. "Tym Cullen was –"

Brian waved away the suggestion. "If he'd stayed here, he would have become one, given time. No, he was not a Reaper, otherwise, Dorrie would not have been entrusted into his not-so-gentle care."

"Celtic killers," Sean mumbled.

"No worse than IRA hit men or Provisional bully boys," the driver snorted.

"Fuilghaath," Brian said, pointing to Sean's right.

The building was larger than Sean expected. Made of a dark-colored stone, it appeared to squat on the land like a feudal fortress, the Ballynahinch River flowing past as though it was a redirected moat. There were no windows on the front of the building, and the thick iron doors that opened to admit the limousine were the only break in the forbidding façade. Looking back as the wide doors closed behind them, Sean

shuddered. The land disappeared with the shutting of those iron portals. Above, around and beneath him was the mud-colored stone.

Facing forward again, he saw a long tunnel lit with what looked like flickering torches. He frowned.

"Dr. Dunne likes high drama," Brian observed dryly. "He had the lights crafted to look like burning rushes. It lends a certain atmosphere to the place and rather sets a mood, don't you think?"

"It's creepy as hell," Sean grumbled.

"I imagine the imagery is just what the architect Dillon Butler envisioned when he helped Dr. Dunne design it." At Sean's look, Brian shrugged. "Remember what is written at the entrance to Hades in Dante's poem?"

Ciarán laughed. "Fits too, don't it, Doc?"

Sean couldn't remember the tenth-grade mythology he had learned in Mrs. Browne's English class.

"'Abandon all hope ye who enter here,'" Brian reminded him. "You might say Ciarán, here, is our very own Charon, the boatman who ferries the souls of the dead across the River Styx."

"We even got what Dr. Dunne calls the Cerberus," the driver joked.

"Indeed we do. Just as the underworld had its three-headed dog to keep those who Charon rowed across the River Styx from leaving, we have three of the most lethal guards in the Stalcaires posted at the main entrance to Fuilghaoth. No one can get past them. Anyone attempting to leave the facility without permission is automatically exterminated."

"Tell him how, Doc," Ciarán insisted.

"Fuilghaoth can't take chances of letting those who have been implanted—either by choice or by chance—out amongst the general population. If someone tries to get out without permission, it is assumed they have been implanted. The Cerberus have flamethrowers and simply incinerate anyone trying to leave. No questions asked."

"Charming," Sean commented. He began to wonder how long the passageway was and grew unsettled when he realized it was canting downward as the limo crept over the fieldstone cobbles. He looked at Brian. "Are we going underground?"

"Aye. There are five levels above us and two below. General offices are on the first floor. The living quarters, recreation areas and dining halls are on the second floor. Third floor is the health center—sickbay, the gymnasium, sports complex, etcetera. The fourth floor is where the labs are located and the fifth floor belongs entirely to Dr. Dunne. The containment facilities are subterranean. Along with the parking garage and station workshops."

Sean shifted in his seat, the walls of the tunnel seeming to pulse toward him. "I don't like closed-in places."

"That is your parasite. I never had a problem with claustrophobia until I was implanted."

There was a bridge ahead of them with a gate blocking the way. A tall man, holding what could only be a state-of-the-art flamethrower, stood directly in front of the gate, the weapon held across his chest.

"The first of our Cerberus," Brian said. "There is another on the bridge and one at the other end."

"Reapers can't cross water, so that's the purpose of the bridge," Ciarán said. "And the chances of them getting past even one of the Cerberus is slim to none, eh, Doc?"

Brian chuckled. "Indeed."

Bringing the limo to a stop, Ciarán lowered his window. "Afternoon to you, Risteárd. Bringing Dr. O'Shea and his son into the facility."

The burly guard nodded. He stepped back, waved a hand to the guard at the other end of the bridge and the gate began to lift.

"Three-hundred amps of electricity are running through that gate," Brian remarked. "Not enough to kill a Reaper, but enough to stun him long enough for one of the Cerberus to do his fire dance."

Sean gaped. "Not enough to kill him?"

"Only complete incineration will kill a Reaper. I told you that already. You can decapitate one and kill the human body, but the revenant will survive and crawl out and look for another host. Might be animal, might be man but the parasite will do all it can to stay alive."

Sean shuddered. "The more I hear, the worse it sounds."

Brian patted his knee. "It's not as bad as you're imagining, lad."

The bridge was made of corrugated metal, and the tires sang as the limo moved over the surface. Halfway across, Ciarán slowed down. "Afternoon, Angus," he said as they passed the ugliest man Sean had ever seen. His face was a mass of scar tissue and puckered flesh.

"Looks like someone put his face through a meat grinder, eh?" Brian laughed.

"What happened to him?" Sean asked, turning to look at the man they'd passed.

"Chemical burns. Happened when he was a mere child. He was making a bomb and it went off in his face."

"Too bad it didn't happen after he was implanted," Ciarán declared.

The driver braked before the second gate as the obstruction began to lift. A younger man stood guard at this final entry point.

"That one's name is Myles O'Rourke," Brian said in a low voice. "He has killed nineteen men who have tried to leave without permission."

"About as mean as one of your timber rattlers," Ciarán quipped. He eased forward off the bridge, nodding instead of speaking to the guard as they passed. "Don't like to have nobody messing with him."

"You'd do best to steer clear of O'Rourke," Brian suggested. "He's about as evil as they make 'em."

Although the limousine windows were darkly tinted, Sean had the feeling Myles O'Rourke was staring right into his eyes. Despite his dark good looks, O'Rourke gave off an aura of violence and fury that made Sean recoil against the seat.

"Aye, he could see you, lad," Brian told him. "He just memorized what you look like."

"Just in case he ever has to come lookin' for you," Ciarán said solemnly.

Brian leaned over and whispered to Sean. "Reapers track their quarries through the generic makeup of the quarry's blood, through the DNA, but Ciarán doesn't need to know that."

The limo was passing under a low archway upon which was carved the words—*Imeacht Gan Teach Ort*.

"What does it mean?" Sean asked.

"May you leave without returning," Brian answered. "It is an old Celtic curse."

Ciarán chuckled. "In other words—Abandon all hope ye who enter here."

Sean had an impulse to open the limo door and flee, taking his chances with the guards.

"You wouldn't get past O'Shay," Brian said softly. "No one ever has."

Sighing deeply, Sean slumped in his seat, his body cold and numb as the limo cleared the archway and entered a brightly lit parking garage. He paid little attention to the fleet of limos nestled along the low granite walls, or the dozen or so black SUVs angled into slots close to a bank of elevators. Four military all-terrain vehicles, though, caught his eye.

"Perimeter patrol," Brian explained. "At any given moment, there are four such conveyances roaming the fence line."

Sean stared at the machine guns mounted on their passenger sides. He looked away, the hair standing up on the back of his neck.

Stopping before the elevators, Ciarán put the car in park and got out, coming around to open Brian's door first. As soon as the older man stepped out, Ciarán ran around to open Sean's door. He smiled crookedly.

"Thanks," Sean said.

"*Go raibh an Ghaoth go brá ag do chúl,*" Ciarán said with a salute.

Sean nodded. He dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans, wondering what the Gaelic words meant.

"One of the things you'll master is the language," Brian said as he joined Sean.

"What did he say?" Sean asked after Ciarán climbed into the limo and pulled away.

"May the Wind be always at your back."

Brian pushed the button on the far right elevator. The door pinged and the stainless steel portals slid open with a soft rush of pneumatic air. The cage's interior was also stainless steel, polished to a high sheen. On the floor was thick black carpet. Overhead, a wide wire mesh covered the light.

Brian pushed the first floor button. "We'll get you signed in then I'll take you to meet Dr. Dunne."

"Can't it wait?" Sean complained, putting the tips of his fingers to his temples.

"No, it can't. What's the matter?"

"My head hurts."

"A headache?" Brian repeated, frowning. "When did that start?"

"When we entered the elevator."

Brian's frown deepened. He stared at Sean and made no move to exit the elevator when the doors opened on the first floor. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough that all I want to do is lie down." Sean squeezed his eyes shut, for the harsh overhead light was causing him acute pain.

"You have to be signed in," Brian insisted, taking Sean's arm. "I'll get you an aspirin while you're registering."

Leading Sean to a semicircular desk just to the left of the elevators, Brian reached into his breast pocket with his free hand and took out their passports. "Sean Daniel Cullen," he told the man behind the desk.

The man, dressed in a dark brown uniform, opened Sean's passport, looked at it then walked into an office. In a moment, he returned with another man, clad in a green uniform.

"Welcome home, Doctor," the second man greeted Brian. "So this is your son?"

"Aye," Brian replied. "He's tired, so let's hurry this up."

"Understandable." The man held out his hand. "This way, please, Mr. Cullen."

Sean followed him into the office.

"Please have a seat."

Sean sat in a chair beside the desk.

"We have several sets of papers for you to fill out." At Sean's groan, he smiled apologetically. "Most you can worry about tomorrow, but I do require some information before you can be allowed upstairs."

Sean sighed as three pages were laid in front of him. He could barely see the writing his head hurt so much, but he took the pen extended toward him and began filling in the information. He looked up as Brian came in with a glass of water.

"Here, take these," Brian said, opening his palm.

"What are you giving him?" the man behind the desk inquired.

"Aspirin. Long flight and bright lights. Wicked combination."

The man nodded and wrote it down in a chart.

It was all Sean could do to answer the questions on the three sheets, rubbing at the agony over his right brow as he wrote. When he finished, he slid the papers across the desk.

The man scanned them briefly then looked at Brian. "I've told him we can hold off on the in-depth questionnaires until he's rested."

"I appreciate that." Brian laid a hand on Sean's shoulder. "Let's go, lad. Dr. Dunne is waiting upstairs."

Sean wearily pushed himself from the chair. He wobbled for a moment, grateful to Brian who snaked out a hand to steady him.

"I detest jet lag," the man behind the desk commented.

"It's a bitch," Brian agreed.

"His first plane ride, wasn't it?"

"Aye."

"He'll get used to it."

"That he will."

"You might want to delay taking him in to see the Reaper until after you meet with Dr. Dunne," the man suggested.

"Aye, I think I will." Brian laughed. "Don't want him puking on me, you know?"

The elevator ride to the fifth floor was an excruciating experience. The higher the cage rose, the worse Sean's pain became. When the cage settled, he groaned and clutched his head as though it was about to explode. He sank to his knees on the dark carpet, bending over with the agony, just as the elevator doors opened.

"When did this start?" a man demanded and stepped into the cage.

"When he entered the elevator in the parking garage," Brian replied.

The stranger hunkered down beside Sean. "Son, I'm Dr. Lutz. Where does it hurt?"

"Over my right eye," Sean gasped, pressing his fingertips against the spot.

"Have you had headaches like this before?"

"N-no," Sean whispered, swallowing the nausea that had suddenly bubbled up his throat.

"Call down and get a hundred milligrams of tenerse sent up," Lutz told Brian. "STAT!"

Brian reached for the elevator's phone and punched in the sickbay's number.

"Let's get you to a couch," Lutz said, putting his arm around Sean and helping him to his feet. He staggered with Sean's heavier weight, but managed to walk him out of the elevator.

"Lights, dim!" Lutz commanded, and the overhead lights lowered dramatically. Leading his charge to a long, gray suede couch, he helped Sean to lie down. He glanced around as Brian joined them. "Did you take him to see the Reaper?"

Brian shook his head. "As soon as he said he had a headache, I knew that wouldn't be a good idea."

"You're right," Lutz agreed.

"I want a full neurological workup done on him as soon as possible," a new voice said.

"Yes, sir," Brian replied. He laid a hand on Sean's shoulder. "Sean, this is Dr. Daniel Dunne."

Sean tried to get up, but Lutz held him down. "Just rest, son."

"Call down and ask Helen how things are there," Dunne told Lutz. He leaned over the sofa, one hand on the back and one on the arm. "Nice to meet you, Sean."

"Hello," Sean mumbled, forcing himself to meet the doctor's gaze.

Dunne straightened. "His pupils are dilated."

"I noticed," Lutz responded as he took out his cell phone and punched in a number.

When the elevator door opened, Brian walked over to take the syringe from the nurse. "Tell them to get one of the containment cells ready just in case."

The nurse flinched, looked past him then spun on her heel, hurrying into the elevator as though the hounds of hell were nipping at her shoes.

"Helen?" Lutz said into the phone then glanced quickly at Dunne. "How bad?"

"Get some Reapers up here," Dunne said.

"Yes, sir," Brian acknowledged then went to the phone on a nearby table.

Lutz rang off and turned to Dunne. "She says there was minor agitation noted about thirty minutes ago. Five minutes later, there was a fluctuation in the readings, increasing steadily. It has changed dramatically within the last ten minutes. At the moment, there is a vast disturbance."

Dunne drew in a long breath. "Give him the tenerse and let's see what happens."

Sean hurt so badly he hardly noticed the alcohol being swabbed on his neck. Nor did the sting of the needle entering his carotid artery make much of an impression. But as the thick liquid began to spread through his artery, he gasped with the burn of it and slapped a hand over the area. "Mother of God!"

"I know it hurts," Brian said, squatting beside Sean, "but it will help, Seannie. Just hold on."

Sean stiffened as though someone had driven a steel rod through his spine then sighed deeply as the drug took control of his system. He relaxed, his limbs losing their rigidity. His lids fluttered, his eyes rolled and he slipped into unconsciousness.

"I remember the first time I was given that stuff," Brian stated. "It was like I was drifting on a cloud."

"It's a hundred times more potent than heroin," Lutz said as he punched a number into his phone.

"And just that much more addictive, too," Brian said soberly.

"Watch what you say," Dunne cautioned in a low voice, though Brian knew Sean could not have heard his comment.

"Helen? How are things now?" Lutz inquired. He listened a moment, nodding. "Okay. Keep us informed." He ended the call.

"Calm?" Dunne asked.

"As though nothing had happened."

When two Reapers stepped out of the elevator, Dunne turned to look at them. "Take him down to C-Mod. I don't think he's near Transition, but I don't want to take a chance."

One Reaper came to the couch and scooped Sean into his arms as though the young man weighed little more than a feather. He turned and carried Sean into the elevator.

"Are we to lock him in, Doctor?" the other Reaper asked.

"That would be a wise precaution," Dunne replied. "Make him comfortable before you leave him."

"Aye, sir." The Reaper punched the button to the lower level and the elevator doors slid shut.

Brian looked to Dunne for orders.

"First thing tomorrow morning, I want you to give him twenty-five milligrams of tenerse then take him to the Room. Let's see what happens then. I don't want him to see the Reaper just yet."

Brian bowed and walked over to wait for the elevator's return.

Dunne and Lutz went into Dunne's home office and closed the door. The sound of their voices, though not the actual words, came to Brian. He closed his eyes, put a trembling hand to his head and, for the first time in years, began to pray.

Chapter Seventeen

Bronwyn sat at the window and stared across the night-laced hillside of Sleivemartin. She was waiting for him and she knew he would come eventually.

Just as he had every night for the last few days.

She shifted on the uncomfortable chair and pulled the wool shawl closer around her shoulders. A slight draft came in from the window's frame and with it the smell from the waters of the Carlingford Lough. She inhaled deeply, longing for the freedom to stand on the shore and watch the waves roll in.

"Freedom," she said, and the word had a bitter taste.

With the bitterness came frustration, which eventually turned to acute hopelessness at her situation.

Then she saw him silhouetted against the sky, his long hair blowing behind him like a cape.

She moved to the edge of her chair and put her hand on the windowpane in greeting.

He held out his hand in reply. Bronwyn felt the warmth of his touch, the texture of his flesh against her cheek. She cocked her head into the phantom embrace and fancied his thumb smoothing over her lips. Closing her eyes to the sensation, she gave herself up to his offered comfort.

"Bronwyn..."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. Though distance and mesh-laden glass separated them, she heard his soft voice as clearly as though he was in the room.

"Take heart, beloved," he whispered.

His voice was infinitely sad. As sad as her own, of late. But it was his strength, his support, he sent to her, upon which she had come to lean.

"I am so lonely," she told him.

"I know."

She lowered her head, tears filling her eyes.

"Don't cry," he beseeched. "Your tears hurt me."

She put her hands over her face and gave way to wretched sobs that made her shoulders shake.

"Beloved," he moaned. "Please don't cry."

She got up from the chair and crawled into bed. Curling into a fetal position, she grabbed her pillow and buried her face in the starched fabric.

Pressure moved along her back, a gentle stroking sensation that was meant to console, to give succor. The pressure moved to her hair with a deft stroke that sought to soothe.

The sound of a key turning in the door lock banished the gentle touch.

Bronwyn whimpered, feeling more alone than ever.

"You may join the other girls for social hour if you wish, Miss McGregor," Sister Mary Elizabeth said as she opened the door. When Bronwyn gave no answer, the diminutive nun padded to the bed. "Are you all right, dear?"

Bronwyn liked "Sister Mary Liz", as she was affectionately called. She looked over her shoulder. "Yes, Sister."

Sister sighed. "You've been crying again," she said in a voice that said she understood.

"It's just so lonely here."

"That's why you should join the other girls. Danielle has agreed to play some Broadway tunes for us and Catherine Leigh will sing the songs from *South Pacific*."

"I don't feel much like listening to music tonight."

"Well, then, come play Scrabble with Sheila, Destiny and Aryn. I know they'd love to have you join them."

Bronwyn sat up, wiping tears from her eyes. "You aren't going to let me sit here and cry myself to sleep, are you, Sister?"

"Not by the hair of your future chinny-chin-chin!" Sister Mary Liz chuckled, pulling at the stray coarse hairs that seemed to pop up overnight on her own chin.

Despite her misery, Bronwyn laughed and swung her legs over the side of the narrow bed. "You ought to pluck those, Sister."

Sister gasped. "What? And have them grow back worse than ever?" She shook her head. "No, thank you."

Bronwyn went to the armoire and retrieved her shoes. Slipping her feet inside, she caught sight of her profile in the mirror and stopped, reaching up to smooth the shapeless jumper over her blossoming belly.

"Bronwyn," Sister warned, clucking her tongue. "Don't dwell on your condition."

The slight mound of her belly was not shameful to Bronwyn. The babe growing inside was a product of her love for Sean. To her, it was not something dirty or sinful. It was a source of pride, but she dared not say so to the Sisters. And especially not to Sister Mauveen who took great delight in condemning her for her unchaste condition.

"It will be a boy," Bronwyn said. "I will name him Sean Patrick McGregor."

"Come along. You mustn't be thinking these things."

Bronwyn stiffened. By order of the Mother Superior, she was not to talk about her condition to the other girls—as though they were both ignorant of her condition and blind to her changing body. Neither was she to discuss her pregnancy with the Sisters.

The only time she was permitted to make any reference to the upcoming birth was with the physician who examined her each week.

"If I don't talk about it, will that make it go away?" she had asked bitterly.

"One must be humble," she had been advised. "Humble and repentant. One does not brag about having committed a grievous sin against Our Lord Jesus Christ."

"I am not ashamed of my child! I love my child as I love his father!"

Bronwyn's outburst had assured her several hours of kneeling before the Blessed Mother to beg for forgiveness. It was a forgiveness Bronnie neither asked for nor needed. The sorrowful look on the statue of Mary only added to her growing sense of despair.

* * * * *

Sheila McPherson and Destiny Ward were already at a small table by the window when Bronwyn entered the social hall. Aryn Mooty was talking with another girl, a cousin of hers from Connemara. Aryn waved, obviously pleased Bronwyn would be joining them.

"Grab a chair, McGregor," Sheila said gruffly. "Take a load off."

Destiny groaned, glancing at Bronwyn. "Don't pay her no nevermind."

"She knows I meant nothing disrespectful," Sheila complained as she rummaged through the Scrabble game tiles. "Not like that uppity Sinclair bitch who stuffed a pillow under her jumper and strutted about in the hall last week."

"Aye, well, she got her comeuppance." Destiny grinned. "I'll wager she didn't enjoy scrubbing the floor of the loo with a toothbrush!"

"Serves her right for being such a snob." Sheila sniffed and pushed one of the wooden racks toward Bronwyn. "Try not to beat the bloody bloomers off'n me this time, will ya, Yank?"

Bronwyn smiled. "I'll try not to." She reached into the box to draw out some tiles.

Aryn joined them, taking a seat next to Bronwyn. "How you feeling?" she whispered.

"Okay."

"Have you felt him kick yet?"

Bronwyn shook her head, casting a look around to make sure none of the nuns were close enough to hear. "I thought I did last night, but I'm not sure."

"Well, my sisters tell me you'll know when he starts to move. They say it's like the wee one is playing soccer in your tum!" Aryn giggled.

"Lovely."

"Morning sickness passed, has it?" Sheila asked.

"No," Bronwyn said on a long breath. "If anything, it's worse."

"Next to the labor, that's the most awful part of it," Destiny put in and shrugged. "Or so I've heard."

"Guess I'll be finding out."

"Well, my sisters always complained of heartburn and their feet swelling," Aryn injected. "And hankering for things they wouldn't normally eat and haven't eaten since the wee one was born." She cast Bronwyn a look. "Been fancy somethin' odd, have you, lass?"

Bronwyn shook her head. "Nothing out of the ordinary," she replied, then thought about it for a moment. "Although I have been craving kumquats."

Aryn grabbed Sheila's arm. "Don't you say it, McPherson!"

"Say what?" Sheila asked, her eyes wide with what the other girls knew to be mock innocence.

"Go on with you," Destiny accused. "You know you was thinkin' something dirty."

Sheila rolled her eyes. "I don't always think dirty thoughts."

"If you didn't, you wouldn't be here," Aryn snorted.

"She done more than thinkin'," Destiny chimed in.

Bronwyn rearranged her word tiles. "I saw him again," she said softly, and became aware of the other girls' instant quiet.

"On the hill?" Destiny questioned.

"What happened?" Aryn asked.

"He held out his hand to me."

"You think it's himself?" Aryn asked in a wistful tone.

Bronwyn shook her head. "No, I don't know who he is, but..." She looked up, glancing at each girl. "I felt him."

Sheila sat back in her chair. "Whatcha mean, you felt him?" she demanded, her eyes narrowed.

Bronwyn looked down at her tiles. "It was almost as though he was in the room with me. I felt him stroke my back." She reached up to touch her hair. "My hair and..." She bit her lip, not knowing how to tell them what else had happened.

"Go on," Sheila insisted. Her eyes were locked on Bronwyn's face.

Bronwyn's voice was a mere whisper. "I heard him call my name."

"From way up there?" Destiny said with a shriek that had others looking their way.

"Tell the whole bloody nunnery about it, will ya?" Aryn hissed. She cast a look about the room, as if daring the other girls to continue staring. Her look made the watchers hastily look away. When she was apparently satisfied no one was observing them, she leaned over the table. "Go on, dearie."

"That's all. I just heard him."

"You heard him," Sheila stated.

"Yes."

"What did he say?" Aryn queried. There was a dreamy expression on her square-jawed face as she tugged at a lock of her long red hair.

"Dimwit," Destiny snorted. "She just told you he called her name."

"He did more than that," Sheila stated. "Didn't he, Bronnie?"

Bronwyn looked past Aryn's shoulder to the darkness beyond the window. "He called me his beloved and told me not to cry."

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph and Bridget!" Sheila gasped. She reached for the Celtic cross dangling from her neck. "Do you even know what it is you've gone and summoned, Yank?"

"Summoned?" Aryn questioned, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Mouth tight, eyebrows slashing together, Bronwyn snapped, "I didn't summon anything." She had little patience for Sheila's ridiculous belief in the supernatural.

"You might not have meant to call him, but somehow he heard you," Sheila said.

"What?" Destiny asked. "What did she summon?"

"He can't come onto hallowed ground," Sheila said, ignoring Destiny's query. "You'd best be thanking the whole legion of the saints for that, McGregor."

Bronwyn ran her fingers through her thick hair. "I don't believe in your mumbo jumbo, McPherson. Let's just drop it."

"He couldn't have come without you calling him," Sheila insisted. "In some way, you conjured him from his lair."

"Stop it!" Bronwyn hissed. She remembered her earlier dream of the monster plastered to her window. Goose bumps prickled her flesh. "You're full of crap."

"Ah, that I may be, but you're lucky you're in here and the Nightwind is out there, McGregor, is all I'm gonna say."

"What's a Nightwind?" Destiny asked, but Sheila ignored her. The older girl was staring at Bronwyn who refused to look at her. She turned to Aryn to ask the same question, but stopped when she saw how pale the girl from Connemara had become. "What's your problem, Mooty?"

"I heard tell of them creatures," Aryn said with a visible shudder. "Witches and the like bind them to 'em and such."

"Do more than bind 'em," Sheila mumbled.

"What is it you're trying to say, McPherson?" Bronwyn demanded, glaring at the girl from London. "Tell me and get it the hell over with!"

Sheila remained silent for a moment then sat forward. "He came because you were lonely. He could feel it. Maybe you were crying and he heard you. Maybe you wished himself would come for you, anybody would come for you and he left his lair to look for you."

"Can't just up and do that without the witch what owns him giving permission," Aryn said with a shake of her head.

"Some can," Sheila disagreed. "Some what's been granted their freedom after thousands of years of service or such can go and come at will."

"You're talking about a creature that's over a thousand years old climbing up Sleivemartin and waving at me," Bronwyn scoffed. "And you want me to believe that?"

"I don't give a rat's hairy ass whether you believe it or not," Sheila snarled. "But if you heard him calling you from over the distance to that hill and you felt him touching you, then you've got a Nightwind after you, Bronwyn McGregor!"

"Which isn't necessarily a bad thing," Aryn remarked. At Sheila's snort, she turned to the London girl. "Well, he does champion women who haven't had an easy time of it."

"Aye, and at what price?" Sheila asked.

"Where the hell are these things supposed to live?" Bronwyn inquired.

"Some say they live in lairs deep beneath the bogs," Aryn answered. "Some say they aren't of this earth. Some say they are from beyond this universe, even."

"Oh, for the love of Pete," Bronwyn groaned. "Now you're talking about spacemen!"

"Aye, like the one they have up at Fuilghaoth," Aryn threw at her.

Sheila stared at Aryn. "Where's that?"

"Ain't no one supposed to know of it," Aryn muttered. "Best not to be speaking of it."

"Then why'd you mention it?" Destiny asked.

"Dunno," Aryn replied with a dismissive shrug.

"They got a spaceman there like the one at Area Fifty-One in the States?" Sheila questioned.

"I done said too much." Aryn folded her arms over her scrawny chest. "Ain't gonna say no more."

"Could they have captured a Nightwind?" Sheila asked, interest shining in her dark brown eyes.

"Leave off, McPherson," Aryn insisted. "Folks have been known to come up disappeared for asking questions of Fuilghaoth."

"You girls are full of it," Bronwyn said. She picked up her rack and dumped the tiles back into the box. "I'm not going to listen to this crap." She pushed back her chair and was about to stand when Sheila and grabbed her arm.

"He's an incubus," the London girl said. "Handsome as they come on the outside but as evil as sin on the inside. It's best you not encourage him."

Bronwyn jerked her arm from the girl's hard grasp. "Will you let it rest?"

"He has laid claim to you and it won't be easy, if even possible, to be rid of him," Sheila stated. "You might well be his for the rest of your life."

"Shut up!" Bronwyn shouted, drawing the eyes of everyone in the room.

"Has he whispered his name to you?" Sheila asked. "If you knew his name..."

"Go to hell!" Bronwyn snarled, striding away even as Sister Mauveen bore down on her.

Behind the bottle-glass spectacles she wore halfway down her thin nose, the nun had a fiery look in her eyes. "Miss McGregor! You will return to this room immediately!"

Bronwyn paid no heed to the harsh bark. She rushed from the room, several nuns close behind. She heard their hard-soled shoes slapping against the marble floor and the clank of their rosary beads knocking against one another.

"Miss McGregor!" Sister Mauveen brayed. "Stop this instant!"

Bronwyn picked up speed, fleeing down the labyrinthian corridors of the old convent. Never without an escort, she soon lost her way amid the twisting and turning passageways. Coming to a dead end with a moisture-rimed wall blocking her way, she stamped her foot and pounded on the cold wall with both fists.

"Sean!" she cried. "Damn you Sean Cullen for not coming for me!"

"I am here," a voice whispered.

"You are not Sean!"

"I would never leave you, beloved."

"Who are you?"

"Get up!" Sister Mauveen snarled as she advanced down the corridor toward Bronwyn. Not giving Bronwyn a chance to do as she was ordered, the nun grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet.

"Be careful of her, Sister," one of the nuns warned.

"You will rue the day you cursed in my social hall!" Sister Mauveen hissed, shaking Bronwyn.

"Sister," came the admonishment. "Remember her condition."

"Whoring little tramp," Sister Mauveen ground out, her spittle flying into Bronwyn's face. "You are a disgrace to your family!"

Bronwyn was dragged along in the nun's hateful wake like a recalcitrant child. She stumbled, her arm cruelly held in the nun's viselike grip.

"Where are you now, my protector?" Bronwyn asked under her breath, and was not surprised that her unseen visitor did not answer.

"Stop mumbling," Sister Mauveen ordered. Her grip tightened and she smiled brutally when Bronwyn whimpered. "I will give you something to cry about!"

When they reached Bronwyn's room and Sister Geraldine Marie went to enter, Sister Mauveen would not allow it. "Wait outside!"

"I don't think—" Sister Geraldine Marie began, only to have the door slammed in her face.

Bronwyn clenched her teeth as the ruler slammed into her opened palms. The stinging grew worse the longer Sister Mauveen gleefully applied her chosen instrument of torture. Avoiding looking at the glazed look of combined fury and pleasure stamped on the nun's wrinkled face, it was all Bronwyn could do not to cry out with the agony being inflicted on her.

"Whore!" Sister Mauveen chanted as the heavy, metal-edged ruler descended. "Harlot!" The force of the strikes grew harder, the epithets louder. "Strumpet! Slut! Jezebel!"

Bronwyn's lower lip trembled, her cheeks streaked with tears but she made no sound as the ruler left vivid red impressions in her palms and on the tops of her upturned wrists.

"Hussy! Floozy!" Sister Mauveen shrieked. She lifted the ruler as high over her shoulder as she could and brought it down with enough force to splinter the wood.

Bronwyn screamed as the ruler's metal edge sliced open the flesh of her left hand. Stumbling away from the demented nun who shouted at her to stay still, Bronwyn crouched against the wall, her back to an enraged Sister Mauveen.

"Turn around! Give me your hands!" the nun demanded, pulling at Bronwyn's arm.

When Bronwyn refused to budge, Sister Mauveen grabbed a handful of Bronwyn's hair and would likely have pulled her around in that manner had not Sister Geraldine Marie stopped her.

"That's enough!" the nun shouted and stepped between Sister Mauveen and the object of her fury. She caught the other nun's wrist and dug her short nails into the mottled flesh.

Yelping, Sister Mauveen snatched back her hand and turned to glare at the smaller nun. "How dare you interfere with this whore's punishment!"

Bronwyn slid down the wall, cradling her bleeding hand against her chest. She whimpered—her shoulders shook.

"What's going on?" someone demanded from the doorway.

Sister Mauveen spun around to find Mother Superior just inside the room. She pointed a crooked finger at Sister Geraldine Marie. "This woman had no right to stop me from punishing this girl. I am—"

"Go to your room," the Mother Superior ordered, and when Sister Mauveen started to argue, she stepped closer. "Do you dare to disobey me?"

Sister Mauveen looked as though she smelled something rancid. Her upper lips arched toward her aquiline nose and her chin puckered. "No, Reverend Mother."

"Then do as you are told!" Mother Mary Joseph snapped.

With a curt bow that was less than respectful, Sister Mauveen spun on her heel and stomped from the room.

"See to the girl," the Mother Superior told Sister Geraldine Marie.

Hunkering down, Sister put an arm around Bronwyn's shoulder. "Let me see, Bronnie."

Eyes swollen, Bronwyn looked up and held out her injured hands. At the nun's sharp intake of breath, she began to cry again.

Sister Geraldine Marie looked at Mother Mary Joseph. "She is going to need stitches."

The Mother Superior's jaw tightened and her eyes became flint-hard. "See to it, please."

Helping Bronwyn to her feet, Sister Geraldine Marie ushered her from the room. As she passed the Reverend Mother, their eyes locked.

"I'll see to it," Mother Mary Joseph promised.

* * * * *

In the infirmary later that evening, Bronwyn lay on a cot, her face turned to the dank wall. She had cried all the tears she had in her and now all that was left was terrible grief and lingering pain in her palms.

"Bronwyn."

"Leave me alone," she said, her voice as detached as an automaton's.

"The nun will be punished. This I swear."

Bronwyn buried her face in the pillow and tried to drown out the insidious words coming to her from the night beyond the walls of Galrath.

"I love you, Bronwyn," he whispered. "I will always love you and one day we will be together."

"I don't want you," she said fiercely. "I want Sean!"

There was silence, then, "You will never have him."

Despite the pain in her hands, she covered her ears. "Go away!" she yelled.

There was a soft pressure, a longing stroke along her left hip. She jerked, staring up into the darkened room, yet seeing nothing.

"You are mine."

The pressure increased then vanished.

"Who are you?" Bronwyn sobbed, her lip trembling.

"You will know soon enough..."

Chapter Eighteen

Sean opened his eyes, feeling as though he was wrapped loosely in a thick blanket of cotton. He swallowed and tried to turn his head, but when he did, his world canted off to the side. He had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep the nausea from rushing up his throat.

"The feeling will pass," Brian said. "Don't try to move for a few more minutes."

"W-what did they give me?" Sean asked, his voice husky, grating.

"A drug called tenerse. Once you Transition, you won't be able to live without it."

Forcing his eyes open, Sean grabbed two fistfuls of the sheet beneath him and moved his vision to his father. "You get addicted to it?"

Brian nodded. "In a manner of speaking. It's not a narcotic, though. Don't consider it in that light. Think of it as preventative medicine. Something like a drug to keep your blood pressure under control or like insulin for a diabetic."

With effort, Sean lifted his hand and rubbed his forehead. "I hurt."

"I would imagine so. That was one hell of a seizure you had, lad."

At the word "seizure", Sean's brow furrowed. "What caused it?"

Brian glanced at Daniel Dunne who stood by the door. Dunne shrugged. "Tell him what he needs to know."

"Why don't *you* tell me?" Sean asked.

Dunne smiled crookedly. "All right," he said, advancing on the bed. "Where do you want me to start?"

"What happened to me?"

"We believe it was your close proximity to the revenant queen," Dunne replied. "She grew extremely agitated the moment you started up here. The parasite within you felt her and began to wake. You can liken it to a lost child hearing its mother's voice and trying to get to her." He locked eyes with Brian. "It's never happened before, so we were unprepared for the severity of Sean's reaction or the intensity of the queen's."

"The drug you gave me knocked me out," Sean accused.

Dunne sighed. "If it hadn't, you might well have experienced an aneurysm or gone into convulsions. We thought it best."

"Is that what Transition is like?" Sean asked.

"Since I've never experienced anything like you did," Brian answered, "I can't say, but from the sheer force of the reaction you had, I'd say Transition will be a piece of cake for you."

"That's not to say Transition will be easy," Dunne put in. "It's a painful process."

"Something to look forward to," Sean muttered.

"The tenses controls the severity of the change," Brian told him. "And it also keeps us from Transitioning out of cycle. Without it, we'd have no way of controlling when we Transition or for how long."

Sean stared at the ceiling. "How does it feel to be a puppet master, Dr. Dunne?" he asked sarcastically. "To turn men into monsters on a whim?"

Brian gasped. "Sean! Don't talk to —"

Dunne held up his hand to silence Brian. "Let him have his say. He is entitled."

A snort came from Sean. His gaze slid to Dunne. "What good would it do to tell you how disgusting this whole thing is to me? How angry I am that, through no part of my own, I can look forward to a future of torment?" He turned away his head. "How much I ache because that future can't be shared with the only person I've ever cared about, other than my mother?"

"Ah," Dunne said, sitting astride a chair beside Sean's bed. He braced his forearms on the chair's back. "That's the crux of the matter, isn't it? The girl?"

Sean's jaw tightened.

"You love this girl," Dunne stated. "We are aware of your feelings and we know those feelings will never change."

"Fat lot of good it does me that you know how I feel!"

"You've a lot to learn about being a Reaper," Dunne continued as though he had not been interrupted, "but the main thing you need to understand is that Reapers bear a close kinship to what legend calls 'werewolves'. When you Transition, that is basically the kind of shape you will have."

Sean flinched, his grip on the sheet tightened.

"If you know anything about wolves," Dunne went on, "you know they mate for life. The male wolf will never mount another female after he has chosen his mate. Neither will you."

"Not only a freakish monster, but a celibate freakish monster," Sean hissed.

Dunne sighed. "Please don't consider yourself a monster. You are —"

Sean turned a hard glower to the doctor. "What am I if *not* a monster?"

"I'll tell you, if you'd let me," Dunne snapped.

"By all means," Sean grated. "Tell me just how bad it really is!"

Dunne let out an exasperated breath and clenched his teeth for a moment. "For centuries there have been legends in Ireland of the dearg duls. Do you know what they are?"

"No."

"Celtic vampires. Every culture has its own version of the creature. The most written about are the ones from the Balkans region, from Transylvania, but Greece,

China, Spain, even the Native Americans, have beasts that resemble the traditional vampire. Dearg duls are ours. Reapers are dearg duls, they –”

“Not only a werewolf but a vampire,” Sean guffawed. “There’s no end to my talent, is there? Next thing you’ll tell me is that I’m part brain-eating zombie, too.”

“That’s enough!” Brian shouted. “There is no reason to be disrespectful!”

“Did he respect *you* when he implanted that evil thing in you?” Sean countered, his voice equally strong.

Dunne put a calming hand on Brian’s arm. “Let me handle this. Take a walk. Calm down. I’ll send for you when we’re through here.”

“But –” Brian began, but Dunne tightened his grip on his arm.

“Go,” Dunne insisted, then released his hold.

Brian cast Sean an angry look then threw up his hands and left.

Dunne sighed heavily. “Brian accepted what I did long ago.”

“How? By having one of your goons program him into accepting it?” Sean scoffed.

“I’ve never had any Reaper programmed and I won’t start with you, if that’s what concerns you.”

“What concerns me is the beast I’m going to turn into when the damned moon turns full!”

“Would it make you feel any better if I told you I am sorry I ever implanted the first revenant in a human?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because I wouldn’t believe it! I think you enjoyed the hell out of it. You knew precisely what you were doing. You might not have known what would happen to the men, but you knew it would be to your advantage!”

“How could it possibly be an advantage to me?” Dunne barked.

“I’ve yet to figure that out, but I will!”

“Well, whether you believe it or not, I do regret it. I’ve created beings that are hard to control and some that have gone rogue on me. I have three rogues locked up in the deep containment cells who would gladly tear me apart piece by bloody piece if they could. They are marked for execution at the end of this week.”

Sean stared at him. “Just like that?” he asked, snapping his finger. “You just say the word and a man’s life is terminated in the blink of an eye because he opposes what you did to him?”

“Do you have any notion of what evil those three would do if they were let loose on civilization?” Dunne ground out. “They’d make your horror movie serial killers look like choir boys. We’re talking mass slaughter here, and the violent impregnation of three innocent women whom those Reapers would keep filling with their contaminated sperm. There would be wholesale bloodshed until they could be stopped. Is that what

you would unleash on society? Is that the kind of plague you would like to see replicating itself?"

Sean seethed. "You know it isn't."

"Destroying the rogues is the only way to make sure that scenario doesn't happen."

"Stop making Reapers and you won't have to worry about it."

"We haven't 'made' a Reaper in eighteen years. You and nine others are the only second-generation Reapers we have." Dunne looked down at his hands. "When the three rogues are terminated, that will leave seven of you."

"And how many first-generation monsters?" Sean queried.

"Six, your father included. There were ten, but two died trying to escape Fuilghaath and two were terminated when they turned rogue. I suspect a third will be eventually going to the deep containment cells. He is the bloodfather of one of the rogues and is showing signs of turning."

"So no more Reapers, then?" Sean challenged.

Dunne shook his head. "No more Reapers."

Sean narrowed his eyes. "You're a lying piece of shit, Dunne."

The doctor blinked. For a few ticks of the clock, he said nothing then got up from the chair. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at Sean. "You are going to be trouble, Cullen," he said, his gaze flint-hard, "but you can be controlled."

"The rogues are like me, aren't they? They rebelled against what you did to them!"

"You want the truth? Okay, I'll take the gloves off. No more lies. No more Mr. Nice Guy. I'll give you the truth, boy." He leaned over Sean's bed, bracing his hand on the headboard. His voice was hard as he spoke.

"His name was Viraidan Cree and he came from a place far beyond our own galaxy, from a planet we have learned is called Rysalia. What we've learned of him has come from the revenant queen when she is psychically linked to the men we've implanted with her progeny.

"The Reaper's craft crashed somewhere near Clifden. You can imagine what the ancient Celts and Druids must have thought of this man falling from the sky in his chariot.

"Though hurt badly, burned hideously, he survived, his parasite working to heal him. He was dead then alive, perfectly healed as though nothing had ever scarred him. That must have stunned the natives. They fell to their knees and began to worship him as a god. They brought him women to ease his needs, and from one of them, he chose a mate, a woman named Chandra.

"The natives feared him, were terrified of his ability to shape-shift. Though he sexually took no other women save Chandra, there were females whose blood he drank, draining them almost to the point of death. These women would walk dazed through the village, eyes glazed, pale as ghosts and it was said they became undead creatures

who feasted on the blood of small animals and babies to satisfy the alien urges Cree had instilled within them.

"We know now there is a venom in the bite of a Reaper, a venom that causes the victim to become psychically attached to the Reaper. Inject enough venom into the victim and it will become immune to illness, to injury, even to death. No doubt this is the basis of the legend of the dearg duls—creatures who feast on the blood of others and turn them into undead beings like themselves."

Dunne leaned lower over Sean. "In time, Chandra bore Viraidan a son on whom he doted. He loved the boy dearly and began to teach him how to be a Reaper. When the boy Transitioned for the first time at puberty, the natives were horrified. They realized a whole race of savage beasts like Viraidan and his son could wipe them out. Their Druid priests began plotting a way to rid themselves of Cree and his bloodson. Chandra overheard what was planned and warned her menfolk to flee. The revenant queen does not know what happened to Chandra, but I suspect she was slain. The Druids could not risk her bearing another Reaper offspring."

"Which one did you find in the bog?" Sean asked.

"Viraidan. His son had been set upon by a dozen warriors and hacked to pieces with stone axes. As they struck his back, splitting it open, his parasite was revealed. It tried to slither away, but they picked it up with a stick and threw it into the fire. What was left of the boy was also thrown into the fire. Another group of warriors, however, chased Viraidan into the bog where he drowned."

"He drowned, but the parasite lived," Sean mumbled.

"It went into extended hibernation." Dunne straightened up. "Until I drew its host from the bog and allowed it to live again."

Sean shuddered. "And began putting portions of it into humans."

"To make them stronger, quicker, more powerful." Dunne grinned sardonically. "And deadlier."

A cold finger of fear scraped its talon down Sean's spine. His face crinkled with loathing. "But why would you do that? What purpose could you possibly see for turning men into monsters?"

Dunne cocked his head to one side. "Reapers are supreme warriors, Sean Cullen. Unlike anything this world had ever known. Their ability to shape-shift, to read minds, to hypnotize with a look, to kill without thought, makes them the perfect tool. They are worth their weight in gold bullion."

"Tool?" Sean repeated. "Tool for what? For whom?"

"For governments in need of invincible soldiers. Governments desiring the ultimate warrior without conscience, without pity, without remorse. A relentless, nearly indestructible operative who will do his assigned job, do it well then never ponder on what was done." He grinned. "In other words, the perfect killing machine for governments and businesses with deep pockets and the willingness to pay for what they want."

Sean stared at the man hovering over him. "You're talking about assassins. Terrorists."

Dunne nodded. "The most unassailable and invulnerable being in this galaxy and several others. An elite warrior without peer. Show him once how to do something and he will do it the second time a hundred times better than your more proficient expert. He can assimilate knowledge faster, more thoroughly than any genius ever could."

Sean thought back to a lifetime of never opening a book yet getting higher marks than any child in his classes. Of how easily learning came to him—almost without effort. He'd had to work at failing his last year of school so he could be with Bronwyn.

"I can see the gears turning in your head." Dunne chuckled. "You knew you were different from other kids. You just didn't know how different."

Sean winced and turned on to his side. "Go away."

"Once you go through Transition the first time, you will be amazed at how much you will assimilate. I could put a book of Egyptian hieroglyphics in front of you and in a matter of seconds, you would be able to decipher and read them. I could —"

"I'm not going to do anything for you."

"Do you believe you actually have a choice, Sean?"

"I won't become one of your puppet monsters!"

"Oh, but you will," Dunne said silkily.

"No!" The one word was a harsh explosion of sound.

"Look at me," Dunne commanded. When Sean did not obey, the doctor grabbed his shoulder and pushed him onto his back. Sean glared at the man. The doctor's jaw was tight, his gaze hot. "I have three Stalcaires, three elite warriors who are perfectly loyal to me. They will do anything I tell them to do without question. If I send one of them to Galrath, how long do you think it will take him to drain every last drop of blood from Bronwyn McGregor's luscious little body?"

Sean drew in a hard breath. Blood pounded through his veins, sweat popped up on his brow.

"How long?" Dunne repeated.

"Don't," Sean whispered.

"Ten minutes? Five?"

"Please, don't."

"Less than five?" Dunne pressed. "What if I told the Stalcaire to make her suffer before he drank her blood? To rip her apart while she's still living."

"No!" Sean tried to cover his ears with his hands, to shut out the loathsome words but Dunne grabbed his wrists.

"Look into my eyes and tell me you don't believe I'll do what I say."

He studied the doctor's brutal glower and knew a defeat so complete, so merciless, it was like a living death. No doubt the man would carry out his threat without the first twinge of regret.

"Well?" Dunne queried. "What's it to be? Do you go forth with your destiny or do you want the death of that precious little girl on your hands?"

Trapped, Sean thought. With no recourse. As entangled as a dragonfly caught in the web of a spider. He could see no exit from the snare into which he'd been plunged, no escape from Dunne's savage clutches.

"Do as I say and the girl lives, none the wiser about the young man she fancied who fell off the face of the earth," Dunne vowed. "Fight me, oppose my will even once and I will send a Reaper to Galrath. I assure you, your lady will feel the brunt of my anger. Balk at an order, fail to carry out a mission and I'll have Bronwyn McGregor hurt in a way she will never recover. Challenge my authority by trying to escape and I will have her torn apart." He narrowed his eyes. "Do I make myself clear?"

Sean closed his eyes. "Yes," he said on a breath.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes...sir."

Dunne released his hold on Sean and straightened. "Good boy. I think we understand each other perfectly, don't you?"

Chapter Nineteen

Bronwyn sat in the pew and stared at the statue of the Blessed Mother. She was not listening to Father O'Malley, had turned out his thick brogue and singsong homily. Now and again, her gaze would stray to the coffin sitting in the aisle and facing the altar. No feelings of guilt plagued her at the death of Sister Mauveen.

She had expected something to happen to the vicious old biddy, and had not been surprised that it happened so soon after the Nightwind promised to see to the matter.

"The nun will be punished," he had vowed.

And she had – falling down the stairs, breaking every bone in her fragile body.

"Let us pray." Father O'Malley's voice rose and fell with the sending off of Sister Mauveen's malevolent spirit.

Bronwyn looked down at her hand and stared at the stitches that ran parallel to her lifeline. The cut left by the broken ruler hurt, for it was right where she flexed her palm.

Those around her came to their feet. Bronwyn followed suit as though someone else plied the strings that worked her.

"The Lord be with you."

"And also with you," Bronwyn mumbled.

She felt nothing as the recessional began, the coffin being rolled down the aisle toward the narthex. She caught Father O'Malley's eye as he passed. He frowned at her.

She didn't care – she detested the old man.

It was difficult for her to genuflect as she left the pew, but she did out of respect for her beliefs. God had nothing to do with her being imprisoned in this vile place. Unlike the phantom voice that visited her nightly, He was a source of comfort. It wasn't right to take her anger out on Him.

Rain was falling as the procession made its way to the gravesite beyond the chapel. Tombstones glistened in the grayish light. Lightning speared the clouds from west to east then blazed again in a staggered arc across the sky.

"Well, that shoots my Da's theory all to hell," Sheila whispered.

Bronwyn glanced at the girl walking beside her. She raised her eyebrows in question.

"Da says it always rains when a good person dies. Says it's the angels crying for the dearly departed." She snorted. "Mauveen was meaner than one of your junkyard dogs. If the angels are crying, it's with happiness the mean bitch has turned up her ugly old toes!"

"Not nice to talk ill of the dead," Destiny whispered behind them. "God's listening, you know."

"No news to him," Sheila shot back, "that Mauveen was a bitch, I'm sure!"

Bronwyn tuned out the girls. She was rarely allowed outside, so despite the rain and the jagged lightning, she breathed in the smells of the freshly turned mound of dirt toward which they walked. To the south, just beyond the high wall separating Galrath from the rest of the world, a huge oak stood sentinel. None of its branches were close to the wall, but it was like a beacon to Bronwyn, drawing her attention.

It was there she saw the cat.

It was sitting on one of the highest branches, its blue-black fur seemingly untouched by the rain. Its piercing green eyes were locked on her, following her every step.

As the Rite of Committal continued, Bronwyn watched the sleek creature. It never moved from its lofty position. Never seemed to blink, to look away from her steady regard. When Father O'Malley pronounced the last words over Sister's Mauveen's body and the casket began inching downward, Bronwyn mimicked the actions of the nuns and her fellow students, gathering a handful of sod to throw into the open grave. As she passed the coffin, absentmindedly tossing in the clod of dirt, she looked up and thought the cat was grinning.

When the procession headed back to the school, Bronwyn turned and again looked to the high branches. She lifted her injured hand in farewell.

The cat daintily raised its leg and pawed at the air in answer.

* * * * *

Mother Mary Joseph walked into Bronwyn's room, a gentle smile on her face. "How are you feeling?"

"I've had terrible heartburn since breakfast," Bronwyn reported, standing.

"To be expected," the Mother Superior commented. "Or so I've heard."

"Did Father O'Malley send you?" Bronwyn asked quietly.

The Reverend Mother sighed. "He believes you need to come to confession."

"What am I to confess that I haven't already?"

"He didn't like your inattention during the funeral Mass this morning. He believes you were being disrespectful to Sister Mauveen."

"I probably was. Not intentionally, but I couldn't have cared less what happened to her after what she did to me."

Mother Mary Joseph frowned. "We should all care about one another, Bronnie. We must pray for our enemies as we pray for our loved ones."

"As Sister Mauveen no doubt prayed for me?"

The Mother Superior sighed again, heavier than before. "She was a troubled woman. We must ask the Lord to open His arms and accept her."

"If she's in heaven, Reverend Mother, I've no desire to be there."

The nun winced. "Well, I'm sure she'll be making a detour through a few years of purgatory before she reaches the Pearly Gates," she muttered.

Bronwyn smiled, but made no reply.

"Father is expecting you. Don't keep him waiting." She patted Bronwyn's shoulder then left, her hands tucked into the sleeves of her habit.

Bronwyn glanced out the window, looking to the place where she always saw the figure after sunset. She expected to see him standing on the crest of the hill but he was not there.

With a groan of frustration, she reached for her missal and rosary and headed for Father O'Malley's office.

* * * * *

The rain had continued through the day and into the evening hours. A harsh storm raged across Northern Ireland, and wind skirled around the eaves of Galrath. In the night sky, lightning stitched storm clouds together with white-hot silk thread, patching up the ragged holes. Bright pulses of intense light lit the sodden countryside and spears of deadly energy pocked the land. Thunder reverberated the windows of Bronwyn's room as rain pecked at the glass.

A light tapping at the door made Bronwyn scowl. She was in no mood for further chastisement from the nuns. After returning from Father O'Malley's office, two of Sister Mauveen's cohorts had come to complain of Bronwyn's lack of sufficient grief at the nun's sudden passing. Meekly answering their sneering reprimands, Bronwyn was fast approaching a saturation point and was afraid the next religious who lectured her would get a piece of her mind!

Flinging open the door as the tapping came again, Bronwyn was relieved to see Destiny, which was highly unusual. She was allowed no visitors to her room from among the girls.

"What are you doing here?" Bronwyn whispered.

"Let me in and I'll tell ya!" Destiny snapped, pushing Bronwyn aside.

Bronwyn stuck her head into the corridor to see if any nuns were lurking about then shut the door. She had barely turned around before Destiny took her arm, led her to the bed and made her sit with her.

"I can't stay but a minute, but I thought you might like to know what I overheard when I was dusting the Reverend Mother's sitting room."

Bronwyn's pulse rose. "What?"

"Your Da called from the States. When I realized who it was calling, I 'accidentally' picked up the extension and listened in. At one point, the Reverend Mother must have thought I was eavesdropping 'cause she told your Da to hold on. I hung up quick like and just in time, too, 'cause she came to the door between her office and the sitting room and told me to leave." Destiny frowned. "But I'd heard enough."

It was all Bronwyn could do not to shake the girl. She dug her nails into her palms. "What did they talk about?"

"Himself?"

"My Seannie?"

"Aye."

Fear bubbled up in Bronwyn's throat. "What of him? Is he all right?"

Destiny grinned. "Himself is over here."

Bronwyn grabbed the girl's arm. "In Ireland?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Came just this week, he did. Your Da don't know where he is, but he's got men searching. Told Mother Mary Joseph to be extra careful with you and if himself showed up, to call the coppers and have him arrested!"

Tears formed in Bronwyn's eyes. "Sean is here."

"Thought you ought to know," Destiny said, getting up. She padded to the door, opened it and stuck out her head. "See ya." With that, she was through the door, closing it gently behind her.

As the storm raged outside, Bronwyn's thoughts grew just as turbulent. Knowing Sean was in Ireland, hopefully on his way to rescue her from this prison, made her heart soar with love for him. But fear of what might happen if he was caught dampened that joy.

"I knew you would come, Sean," she cried, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I knew you wouldn't leave me here."

The pitcher and ewer, sitting in the dry sink by the door, sailed across the room and crashed against the far wall, splintering into fragments on the wooden floor. Her hairbrush followed, its handle putting a dimple in the plaster wall. Bronwyn's eyes grew wide as her comb, a jar of ointment for her cut hand and a tumbler of water on her bedside flew across the room and hit the wall.

"Stop it!" she shouted, scurrying from the bed and pressing against the wall by the window.

The chair at her desk skidded to the center of the room, spun round and round, then flung itself against the footboard of her bed.

"Stop!" she yelled, knowing full well who—or what—was responsible for the destruction.

Bronwyn's door opened and Sister Mary Pat came in just as Bronwyn's desk flipped to its top and began bumping up and down on the floor.

"Sweet Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Sister Mary Pat gasped, crossing herself. She barely had time to jump back before two of Bronwyn's textbooks came flying at her head. She jerked the door closed behind her as the heavy volumes slammed into the portal.

"Stop!" Bronwyn screamed, covering her ears to shut out the sound of the desk thumping against the floor. She stared wild-eyed as all the small things in her room began to churn in a vortex in the center of the floor.

Once more Bronwyn's door opened. Sister Mary Pat, accompanied by another nun, came in, crucifix held high. "Be gone!" Sister Mary Pat shouted over the spinning whirlwind.

As the din rose, Bronwyn heard harsh male laughter. She was barely aware of other nuns crowding into the room, staying well away from the dangerous tornado whirling before them. Even when one of the older nuns grabbed her arm and pulled her from the wall, tugging her out of the room, she was so shocked reality did not register.

"Call Father O'Malley," Sister Mary Pat demanded. "Tell him it's happening again!"

The nuns hustled Bronwyn to the chapel and crowded around her in the pew, the older nun's arm firmly around her shoulder.

"Don't think of him," the nun cautioned. "Concentrate on the Holy Trinity, Bronwyn. Concentrate on the Holy Trinity!"

Rain lashed brutally against the chapel windows, shaking them in their frames. The moan of the wind was so loud it drowned out all other sounds. Flares from the lightning striking ground all around Galrath made the old building tremble.

The chapel filled with the inhabitants of Galrath. The girls in their nightclothes, pressed into the pews as close together as space would allow. Their faces were pale, their eyes round, their lips quivering.

"Pray the Rosary," the Reverend Mother ordered. Hands trembled as her command was carried out.

For three hours the storm threw its strength against the walls of Galrath. By the time the wind's howl had lessened and the rain had ceased its relentless downpour, nerves were frayed and the soft sound of sobbing could be heard over the creak of the overhead beams and the plink of twigs and leaves hitting the window. Voices were strained from the many decades of the Rosary that had been prayed aloud over and over again, from the prayers that had beseeched God, His son and the Blessed Mother to intercede in the evil that visited Galrath that night.

When the last shriek of the storm faded and peace and calm were restored to the elements, Father O'Malley took to the lectern with a stony look of battle on his craggy features.

"Satan, himself, paid a call on us tonight, ladies," he intoned. "But he was turned away at the gate. He found he had no welcome here!"

Bronwyn felt the priest's eyes boring into her and she looked up.

"He came for the weakest link amongst us, but that link stood strong, inviolate and once again the Prince of Darkness was defeated."

The older nun whose arm was still locked around Bronwyn's shoulder, leaned toward her. "You did good, Bronwyn Fiona."

Bronwyn turned to the old woman. "You know who he is?"

Nodding, the nun squeezed Bronwyn's shoulder. "When I was a lass your age, he came for me, but I denied his seductive call. Just as many before you have denied him."

"He can not enter these walls," another nun whispered. "But he can send his loathsome energy to wreak havoc. The destruction he has caused here over the years has been fearsome."

Bronwyn looked about to find every eye in the chapel on her. She shuddered, suddenly terrified of the nightly phantom that had helped to console her unhappiness for the last several weeks. That she had conversed with the demon, encouraged it, made the hair stand up on her arm.

"Deny him and he will leave you," the older nun said. "Cast him back into the Abyss from which he sprang."

Something heavy hit the chapel door. Shrieks filled the room. The girls jumped to their feet, terrified.

"Deny him," came the chant of the nuns. "Deny him."

The wind began to howl once more, the rain slashed savagely against the windows.

"Deny him. Deny him."

The girls picked up the cadence of the chant as they left their pews and crowded around the pew where Bronwyn sat, the old nun's arm still around her shoulder.

"Deny him. Deny him. Deny him."

Father O'Malley came down from the lectern, taking the crucifix from the stand by the altar and marching with it as though it were a battle standard.

"Deny him!"

For the first time, Bronwyn felt the babe inside her womb move. She gasped, her hands going to her belly.

"Protect your child from the evil that longs to corrupt it!" Father O'Malley charged her. "Keep that innocent safe!"

The babe twisted within her. Bronwyn cried out and leaned over from the pain in her belly. She felt hands on her, pulling her back against the pew. The room spun, the lights overhead circling her like a kaleidoscope, the rays fractured and spinning off in myriad directions.

"Deny him!"

Outside the chapel, glass broke, wood splintered and material ripped, but inside the sacred room, there was calm despite the labored breath of the frightened girls and chanting nuns.

"Deny him!"

Bronwyn grew hot. So hot, sweat coursed down her face and from between her breasts. She swept a lock of hair from her cheek. The sounds around her became muted, and though she could see the nuns' mouths opening and closing, she heard no words. The room swirled around her, the lights fragmented, the air grew thick and cloying.

Then her eyes rolled up in her head and she passed out.

* * * * *

The Reverend Mother was sitting at her bedside when she awoke, holding her hand. Around her, other nuns were stationed, their faces drawn and pinched.

"You are safe, now," Mother Mary Joseph said. "He's gone."

Bronwyn looked about her. The room in which she lay was unfamiliar, its walls darker than her own. Save for the huge crucifix on the cot above her, there was nothing else in the room.

"W-where am I?" she whispered.

"This is a special room where you are to remain until we are sure no further assault on you will be made," the Mother Superior replied.

The room bore a strong resemblance to a cell and when she turned her head, Bronwyn was not surprised to see bars across the opening in the narrow door. There were no windows.

"Don't fret, dearling. You won't be here all that long. Just until we are sure he has gone back to his lair."

The word "lair" sent a shudder through Bronwyn. "Then it's true? There really is a Nightwind?"

"Hush, child!" one of the older nuns cautioned. "Do not say the word!"

"He is an incubus, Bronwyn. Every twenty years or so one of his kind comes to test us," Mother Mary Joseph told her. "He comes for the lonely girls, those he feels he can tempt to his side. So far, we've only lost one to him."

"What happened to her?" Bronwyn asked, her voice quivering.

The Reverend Mother made the Sign of the Cross. "She hung herself from the balcony rail."

"He...sp-spoke to me," Bronwyn confessed.

"We figured as much," Mother Mary Joseph replied. "The poltergeist activity witnessed in your room this evening and the chaos he caused in the main hall was a sure sign you had more than a passing acquaintance with him."

"Oh, God," Bronwyn cried, burying her face in her hands.

"It will be all right, now. Father O'Malley will see to it." She smoothed the hair from Bronwyn's forehead. "Just place your trust in us and all will be well."

Bronwyn made her home in the cramped cell for a little more than two weeks, and at the end of the time went with some trepidation back to her room. It took all her courage to go to the window that first night back, pull aside the curtain and look up to the crest of the hill. Though she willed him to appear, the Nightwind did not show. Neither did his phantom voice and ghostly hand reach out to soothe her.

When she took to her bed that night, she wondered where Sean was and when he would come for her.

Chapter Twenty

This was to be his first assignment. He had been placed under the watchful eye of Alistair Gallagher, one of the older Reapers. Sitting in the sedan car, waiting for their target to come out of the Dublin pub, Sean felt nauseous, more nervous than he had ever felt in his life.

"Killing ain't hard," Alistair commented as he ratcheted a hollow-point bullet into the chamber of his .45 automatic. "After the first one, it's all a piece of cake." He eyed Sean, sitting in the passenger seat. "Ye will more than likely puke, though, and if ye feel like ye be gonna, don't ye dare do it on me shoes or I'll plug ye 'tween them pretty blue eyes. Ye get me drift, laddie?"

Sean nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak for fear his voice would break like a pubescent boy's. His palms were slick with sweat, his mouth dry. The Russian-made machine pistol sitting across his lap trembled from the quivering of his jittery legs.

"What did ye think of her when ye first saw her?"

Sean looked at the man who had been assigned as his partner. "What?"

"The queen, laddie," Alistair snarled. "What did ye think of her?"

Realizing the Reaper was talking about the creature in the Room, he shook his head. "I nearly shat my britches."

Alistair hooted with laughter. He slapped a hand on his bulging thigh. "I reckon that be what most of us felt!"

Sean looked at his watch, wondering how long the Englishman was going to stay in the pub. He wanted to get this over with. His nerves were stretched so fine, he thought he well might start screaming and never stop.

"What did she do?" Alistair asked, his eyes narrowed. "When ye waltzed in there?"

Sean knew the details of what happened when Brian had taken him to see the queen revenant had been bandied about at Fuilghaoth within moments of their occurrence. There wasn't a soul at the complex who didn't know what had transpired in that sickening room.

"I don't want to talk about it, okay?" Sean grated.

Alistair twisted in his seat until he was facing Sean. "Why not?"

Mustering a courage he truly didn't feel, Sean looked at the other man. "Just let it drop."

Shaggy red brows rose into the sparse bangs plastered limply to Alistair's wide forehead. The pockmarked face with its deep craters and thick blackheads hardened.

"Don't forget who ye be talkin' to, laddie," he threatened. "Ye don't want to go makin' an enemy of me just yet."

Sean looked away, his jaw clenched, a muscle working in his cheek. He stared out the window, trying to calm his frazzled nerves, but the more he tried not to think about what had happened inside the Room, the firmer the image became etched.

Brian had come for him right after Dr. Dunne left, the doctor's threats still heavy in the air. Sean was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, his stomach a twisted knot of misery. He was trying desperately not to cry, to give in to the hopelessness he was feeling. When the door opened, he didn't even look up.

"Come with me," Brian ordered, his voice a bit gruffer than usual.

Sean lifted his head, letting his hands fall between his knees. He stared up at the man who had fathered him, a man he didn't think he would ever understand then stood. He didn't ask where they were going.

He didn't really care.

Walking beside Brian down the corridor, he felt warm, too warm. He ran the back of his hand under his chin.

"We have to stop in the lab first," Brian told him, and they detoured down a long, windowless corridor.

They were waiting for him in the lab. The technician stepped forward, hypodermic in hand and told him to remove his shirt. Sean did as he was told.

"Sit here," the technician said, indicating a gurney.

The alcohol on the cotton swab was cool against his flesh, but the sting of the needle penetrating his neck was excruciating, and it was all he could do not to cry out. He jammed his hands into fists at his side and willed the burning pain spreading through his veins to ease.

"You'll never get used to the sting of the tenerse," Brian said.

Sean made no comment. He resisted the urge to reach up and rub the burning agony in his neck.

The closer they came to the room at the end of the corridor, the warmer Sean got. His mint green shirt was soon plastered to his back and chest. His head began to hurt but not with the same debilitating pain he had experienced the day before.

"As I told you, the tenerse will help lessen the severity of your Transitions," Brian commented. "Believe me when I say you wouldn't want to try changing without it on hand." He shuddered. "I know from experience that can be brutal."

Sean kept his attention locked on the black door at the end of the white corridor. He sensed a faint vibration beneath the soles of his shoes and could hear an electronic hum that rasped along his nerve endings.

"This is the first thing new recruits see when they come to Fuilghaath," Brian was explaining. "Most men..."

Sean tuned out the words. He was feeling nauseous again. His face was so hot, he felt as if he was inside an oven. An irritating itch had developed along his shoulder blades and along the nape of his neck. One he scratched – the other annoyed him, but he would not ask his father to relieve the sensation.

“One thing, though,” Brian said. “Don’t stare at it too long. It does weird things to you.”

They were at the black door. There was no handle. On the wall was a palm print sensor, its opaque surface in sharp contrast to the stark white walls.

Brian pressed his palm against the PPS and the door slid open on silent pneumatic rails. He held out his hand. “After you.”

Sean felt the hair stir along the base of his neck and wanted nothing more than to turn and run as fast and as far from this place as he could get. But the steady look emanating from his father’s stern face made him all too aware of his predicament. He wouldn’t get ten yards before being captured.

“You know better than to even try,” Brian whispered.

Walking into the twelve by fourteen room was like walking underwater. The pressure was severe, pushing down on Sean’s shoulders like an invisible weight. He found it hard to lift his feet. Light played along the shiny walls in undulating waves, reflecting from the muted milky glow coming from a large glass case sitting in the room’s center. There was a strong smell of sulfur and the room was so hot it was hard to breathe.

“How’s your head?” Brian asked.

“It hurts.”

“How bad?”

Sean shrugged. “Just a dull ache.”

“Good. That means the tenerse is working.” Brian put out a hand. “No closer.”

Sean was looking at the eerie glow inside the glass case. The liquid inside it was perfectly still. As opaque as it was, he could see nothing at all.

“She knows you’re here,” Brian commented, shifting his shoulders as though something was perched atop them. He reached behind and massaged the area over his right kidney.

Sean became aware of a nagging ache in the small of his back. It wasn’t painful, simply irritating. But the longer he stood there, the more intense the ache became until he realized he was acutely uncomfortable.

“Your parasite is waking,” Brian told him. “The tenerse put it to sleep, but the call of its mother is too strong to resist. When it awakens fully, you’ll wish it had stayed asleep.” He rubbed his back. “I wish I’d had a shot of the drug myself!”

The pain grew until it became an agony that threatened to buckle Sean’s knees. He moaned. When he did, the thing inside him squirmed under his flesh. He screamed and dropped to his knees as though he’d been poleaxed.

"Steady as she goes, lad," Brian said. Sean heard the pain in his father's voice. The older man was suffering, too.

From his servile position on the floor, Sean thought he saw movement behind the glass. When the liquid appeared to ripple, his parasite bunched under his rib cage then slithered over his spine and pushed against his left kidney.

"God!" Sean yelled, falling sideways and curling into a fetal position.

"Not good," Brian hissed.

The next thing Sean heard was the door opening and closing, and he knew he was alone in the room.

And the Transition began.

Now, looking back on it as he sat in the car with Alistair, he could think about it objectively. At the time, he had been too stunned, horrified beyond words. The pain had been unbelievable, the agony worse than anything he could have ever imagined. The sight of his fingernails arching into thick, black talons had shocked him to the depths of his being. The howl that had issued from his throat as human speech fled and the animal inside him took over had been enough to freeze the blood in his veins. But it was the hair on his arms multiplying, thickening, spreading into a coarse brown fur that sprang from his flesh like wiry tentacles, the shriek of his nose elongating into a wet, black muzzle, the nostrils opening and dripping copious snot, his teeth sharpening, dropping into wicked fangs that cut his pebbly tongue, his eyes turning into rabid slits that cast a crimson glow on the milky fluid beyond the glass, the sound of his body bulging in places it shouldn't have, ripping his clothing to shreds as his spine arched, elongated, then fanned into wide haunches attached to powerful legs and long furred paws, that turned his world inside out.

Inside him, the parasite had tried to break free of his flesh. At one point as he lay writhing on the floor, his body a mass of agony, he wished the vile thing would pop free. He could do nothing but lie there at the mercy of the creature and allow it to change him into a nightmare no sane mind would ever entertain.

The horror was almost more than he could take. When the pain grew so intense he thought he would be ripped apart, he passed out, his blood so hot it bubbled in his veins and his panting so loud it echoed off the stainless steel walls.

When he awoke, the milky liquid inside the glass had turned a sulfurous yellow. The stench was so vile, so overpowering, he thought he would pass out again from lack of air. Weakly, he pushed himself up, ashamed of his nakedness, looking about for the remnants of his clothing and realizing there was no scrap large enough to cover him.

The room had turned ice-cold. He was shivering, his breath pluming in the air. He sat up, wrapped his arms around himself, thankful he had returned to human form. He shivered uncontrollably.

And She had come to the glass.

At first, he wasn't sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. From everything he had been told about the revenant worm found inside Viraidan Cree's

bog-preserved body, it was a hideous, satanic viper with sharp fangs, slit tongue and scaly skin. What he saw undulating behind the glass, though, was a long, willowy creature with stubby wings, a face like a cat and a tail curled up like a sea horse.

"My son," She purred, and her voice was soft, seductive, sultry and low-pitched.

He pushed up from the floor, aware he was no longer cold but embarrassed at his nudity. He put his hands to the juncture of his thighs to cover himself.

Her laughter was like the rippling in a pond. It washed over him, soothing him, making him smile.

"Come, my lovely," She bid.

He walked closer, his gaze fused with her soft green eyes, chatoyant as they peered from the yellow liquid.

"Mine," She said.

At her silent command, he dropped his hands to his sides. He felt her heated scrutiny sliding over his manhood, yet was not in the least ashamed of the hard erection that came unbidden.

"I have waited so long for you to come home, my child," She whispered. "Now all my children are home with me."

He closed his eyes as an unseen hand stroked down his back and over his bare flanks. He swayed as that ghostly appendage spread over and cupped his member, assessing. His eyes snapped open at that intimate touch.

"I am well pleased," She said, and the erotic touch slid from his body.

Sean moaned, but did not move. His eyes were locked with her lovely green ones and he became lost inside their velvety depths.

"You are Reaper," She said. "And perhaps something even more. Come to me, my child..."

When he left the room an hour later, both Brian and Dr. Dunne were waiting for him in the corridor. They stepped back, looking him over for any sign he might not have fared well from his first Transition.

"You did well," Dunne said then turned to Brian. "He now bears Her mark."

Now, Sean touched the tattoo on his left shoulder. He had no recollection of the symbol being burned into his flesh that day more than two weeks ago, but with all the pain he had experienced then, a brand such as he now possessed would have been a minor thing.

"Does it hurt?" Alistair asked, his hawklike eyes fastened on Sean's shoulder.

"Aye," Sean said absently. "Now and again."

"Mine never has. I wonder why —"

"Is that him?" Sean asked, blocking out his fellow Reaper's words. He nodded toward the chubby man who had stepped from the pub.

Alistair nodded. "That's our bloke." He straightened and dragged his red ski mask into place. "Let's do it."

Not giving himself time to think, Sean pulled down his own ski mask and opened his door. He stepped out on the curb and rushed with Alistair toward the Englishman who turned at the last minute to see them coming.

There was no fight in the portly man. He didn't make a sound as they grabbed his arms and ushered him into the sedan. Sean pushed him into the backseat and slid in beside him. Alistair got behind the wheel and drove them away, yanking off the mask as he turned a corner and increased speed.

"Don't kill me," the man pleaded, his rheumy eyes filling with tears. "I've got a wife and —"

"Shut up." Alistair looked at the Englishman through the rearview mirror. "Do as ye are told and no harm will befall ye."

The man looked at Sean as he removed his mask. "Oh, Lord," Sir Toliver Appleton whimpered, viewing his own death — and likely the unspoken apology — in Sean's eyes.

"We'll make it quick," Sean said, caressing the machine pistol.

"Not in the face," Appleton asked, trembling so badly his teeth clacked together.

Sean nodded as the fat man collapsed and began to pray in the corner of the backseat. He met Alistair's smirk in the reflection of the mirror and looked away.

Chapter Twenty-One

She strained, pushing with all her strength then fell back against Sister Mary Pat's shoulder. She was panting, sweat oozing. Sister Henry Louise blotted her face with a cool towel.

"Again," Dr. Darby positioned himself between Bronwyn's thighs. "Push, Bronnie. Push!"

She felt she was being torn apart. For the last twenty-odd hours she had lain in bed, the contractions coming harder and harder until she could no longer keep the screams at bay.

"Damn it, girl, push!" the physician shouted.

Sister Mary Pat braced Bronwyn, lifting her as she bore down, trying to push out the baby. "Just a little more," Sister said.

"I can see the head," Dr. Darby announced. "A couple of more good pushes and you'll be done. Now, push!"

Bearing down with all her waning strength, Bronwyn felt something let loose inside her. Her scream reverberated through the room. She could not stop from pushing again, and when she did, she felt the baby slide out.

"Glory be to God!" Mother Superior said.

"It's a boy," Dr. Darby pronounced. He held up the babe by its heels and whacked its bottom. The instant wail brought a sigh to every lip, including Darby's.

Sister Henry Louise chuckled. "Got a set of lungs on him, don't he?"

"Aye, he does," Dr. Darby grunted as he laid the newborn on his mother's belly.

Weakly, Bronwyn pushed herself up as far as she could, grateful for Sister Mary Pat's help. The sight of her squalling son, the smear of the birth liquids covering his howling face and trembling lower lip, brought it home to her that this was real, that she had actually delivered this child—Sean's son—and was now a mother.

"Let me hold him," she said, reaching down to touch his slimy cheek.

"Not now," Dr. Darby said. He had finished cutting the cord and lifted the babe for Sister Henry Louise to wrap him in a blanket.

"Why?" Bronwyn asked.

"We must see to him, Bronnie," the Reverend Mother said.

"He has to be weighed and footprinted," Sister Mary Pat said, locking gazes with the Mother Superior.

"Aye, and bathed, as well!" Sister Henry Louise put in.

Bronwyn had only a fleeting glimpse of her child as he was taken away. She had rejoiced that his hair was blond like his father's, and though his face had been screwed into a mask of protest, his eyes squeezed shut, she was positive those orbs would be cornflower blue like Sean's.

"You need to rest now," Dr. Darby said, drawing her attention. In his hand, he held a hypodermic syringe.

Alarm sped through Bronwyn.

And the first faint stirrings of understanding.

She tried to get up, reaching for Sister Henry Louise who was taking the baby from the room. She shouted and begged and pleaded and threatened and cursed, clawed and scratched and spit.

But it was all in vain.

When Bronwyn awoke many hours later from the drug-enforced sleep, she discovered her baby had been given up for adoption.

"That was your parents' decision," Mother Mary Joseph informed her. "We had no choice but to comply."

Turning her face to the wall, Bronwyn swore she would find her child if it was the last thing she ever did. Cursing her mother and father, she pulled the pillow over her head and wept bitter tears, wondering why Sean had not come to take her from this hell on earth.

* * * * *

"What did you learn?" Sheila asked.

Destiny swept her little bundle of trash into the dustpan. "They took him to Belfast, but I ain't been able to find out who the people are what adopted him." She emptied the contents of the dustpan into the bag Sheila held open. "I'll keep at it."

Sheila shook her head. "She's lost nigh on fifteen pounds. Much more of this and we'll be laying her to rest up by old Mauveen."

"Don't say that!" Destiny gasped.

"Well, it's true. The poor thing just mopes about, barely eating. Sleeping more and more every day. She's making herself sick."

"I heard Mother Mary Joseph say they've called her parents to come over to see her," Destiny confided in a low voice. "Don't tell Bronnie, though. She might have another one of her conniption fits."

"It ain't right what they done to her," Sheila grated. "Damned interfering penguins!"

"Wish we could find himself," Destiny sighed. "He'd take her from here in a heartbeat."

Sheila clucked her tongue. "I don't see how he could, but you're right. I wish we knew where he was."

Destiny leaned on her broom. "My brother Liam is one of the lads. You reckon if I write him he might be able to find himself where Bronnie's Da's men ain't been able to?"

"Worth a try," Sheila said, spying one of the nuns heading their way. She rolled her eyes. "Never a minute's peace." She plastered a fake smile on her face. "Good morning, Sister."

Sister Eugene nodded primly as she passed. She cast Destiny an annoyed look but said nothing.

"Old biddy knows what we think of them," Destiny quipped. "Knows every girl in here don't trust them no more than we can throw 'em."

"Write your brother," Sheila said. "Can't do no harm and it might even help poor Bronnie."

* * * * *

Since the birth of her son, Bronwyn had not spoken. She ignored the admonishments, the threats and the cajolery of the nuns as well as the pleadings of her fellow students. She refused to do schoolwork, chores and instead stayed locked in her room, sitting at the window, staring out. She ate one meal a day – at noon – and did not touch the other trays brought to her. She did not leave her room to go to the social hall, nor could she be forced to go to chapel. Since she was not allowed visitors, she rarely saw the other girls except in passing as she walked to the shower. Even then, she passed them without a look or any sign that she knew they were there.

Many trips were made to Dr. Darby's office as well as Mother Mary Joseph's and Father O'Malley's. Nothing the adults said swayed Bronwyn McGregor and her silence had begun to concern them.

* * * * *

A call to America was placed six weeks after the call announcing the birth of the child and the placement of him for adoption in Belfast.

On the fourteenth day of March 1985, Dermot and Deirdre McGregor arrived at Galrath's front gate. Haggard from the long flight across the Atlantic and concerned for their child, they were taken to Mother Mary Joseph's office straightaway.

"How is she?" was the first thing Dermot asked.

"She's lost more than twenty pounds and is down to ninety-four pounds," the Reverend Mother reported.

"Oh, my God!" Deirdre gasped, her hand to her mouth.

"Is she refusing to eat?" Dermot demanded.

"She eats the noon meal and nothing more."

"And she's still refusing to speak?"

Mother Mary Joseph nodded. "Or socialize. The few times we tried to force her to Mass, she kicked and screamed and carried on like a person possessed. Dr. Darby had to sedate her."

"Oh, Dermot," Deirdre groaned, tears gathering in her eyes. "What have we done to our baby?"

"What we felt was right for her!" Dermot stood. "I want to see her now!"

The Mother Superior held out her hand for the McGregors to precede her into the hall. She then led the way to Bronwyn's room.

"How is the baby?" Deirdre asked, eyeing a thin, gangly girl walking quietly behind them but obviously paying little attention to her.

"Healthy and quite happy with his new family, the McDougals," Mother Mary Joseph reported. "He's..." She noticed Destiny behind them and stopped. "Young lady, where are you supposed to be?"

Destiny ducked her head. "I was on my way to the library."

"Then pray be about it!" the Reverend Mother snapped.

Destiny bobbed a curtsy and padded quickly away.

"These young hellions will be the death of me yet," Mother Mary Joseph sighed. "You must be on your toes at all times. That one is a blabbermouth and she's a friend of your daughter's."

"You think she overheard us?" Dermot asked, looking at the retreating girl.

"I'm sure not," Mother Mary Joseph replied, indicating an archway. "Through here."

The first thing Deirdre noticed about her daughter was the gaunt look on her face, the dark circles beneath her eyes and the burning hatred shooting from her gaze. When she tried to embrace Bronwyn, the girl stepped back, putting distance between them. Her angry glower went to her father and held.

"We did what was best for you," Dermot defended.

"Go to hell!" Bronwyn said, her voice rusty and grating.

"Bronwyn, do not speak to your father—" Mother Mary Joseph began, but the girl's fevered stare leapt to her.

"And you can join him, you conniving, vicious old liar!"

Deirdre gasped, turning for help to her husband.

Dermot, accustomed to working with unruly and angry patients at Wynth, knew how to deal with such behavior. "I know you're angry and you have every right to be, but you are a child and —"

"I am the *mother* of a child," Bronwyn hissed. "A child you stole. Don't think for one moment I will ever forgive you. When I can, I will go after him and get him back. God help you if you get in my way!"

There was such fire in his daughter's eyes, such strong intent, that it obviously shocked Dermot. He was used to the malleable, gentle-spirited girl he had left at Galrath, not this wild-eyed termagant with the blazing temper. He tried to reason with her but her shout of fury outwardly took him aback.

"I want my baby! I want mine and Sean's baby!"

"Now, listen here, young lady," Dermot said. "You are underage and haven't even graduated. You will attend college and —"

"The hell, I will!" Bronwyn insisted. She took a step closer to her father. "You thought I was obstinate before you did this horrible thing to me? You haven't seen stubborn yet, Doctor McGregor. You can keep me here until I'm of age, but after that, this place and you will have seen the last of me!"

"You don't know what you're saying," Deirdre said, wringing her hands. "We are your family."

"No," Bronwyn flung at her. "Sean and Patrick are my family. You are nothing to me!"

"Who is Patrick?" Dermot questioned.

"My son! His name is Sean Patrick!" Bronwyn shouted. "The son you stole!"

Deirdre clutched her husband's arm. "We have to get the boy back for her, Dermot."

He shrugged away her hold. "Absolutely not."

"He's our grandchild," Deirdre reminded him. "Flesh of our flesh."

"And blood of that pervert who raped our daughter!" Dermot bellowed.

"Sean Cullen didn't rape me," Bronwyn said, her attention fastened on her father's furious face. "I went willingly to him and I *will* go willingly to him again when I find him."

Dermot's lip curled. "Into the arms of an IRA assassin? Some husband he'd make!"

Deirdre looked at her husband. "That's what Rory Brell found out and you wouldn't tell me?"

Dermot waved a dismissive hand at her question. "Answer me, Bronwyn! Is that the kind of man you want to spend your life with? A murderer for hire?"

"If that's what he is, then, aye!" Bronwyn answered, as if not believing her father for one moment.

"I'll see him hanged first!"

Bronwyn met her father eye to eye. "Hurt one hair on Sean Cullen's head, Daddy, and I swear before God and man I will make you regret it for as long as you draw breath!"

"The man is a killer!"

"If he is, he is what you and Tym Cullen have made him!"

Dermot opened his mouth then snapped it shut. His face was livid with rage, a muscle jumping in his cheek. He stared at Bronwyn for a long time then threw up his hands. "Fine! You want Cullen? You can have him! I won't stand in your way, but you'll stay here until you're of age to ruin your life!"

With that, he stormed from the room.

Deirdre was torn. She knew she should follow him, but she wanted desperately to have things back to normal with Bronwyn. She reached out to her, but once more, her child stepped back.

"It was not my idea to put the boy up for adoption," Deirdre said. "I wanted to bring him to Iowa and raise him until you graduated."

"The boy," Bronwyn said, "has a name—Sean Patrick!"

"I believe his adoptive parents named him Cormac," Mother Mary Joseph said.

"They can un-name him!" Bronwyn sneered. "His name is Sean Patrick Cullen."

"Tell me what you want, Bronnie," Deirdre said, swiping at the tears on her cheeks. "I can't stand this estrangement."

"I want my child and I want out of this hellhole! I want to find Sean and I want us to be married as we planned!"

"If he is with the IRA—"

"He isn't!" Bronwyn stated. "Sean isn't like that. Daddy's lying. I know it! Sean is one of the most devout people I know. He'd never join an organization like the IRA. He doesn't believe in what they stand for and he'd never kill anything!"

Deirdre's shoulders slumped. "All right. We'll find Sean. I suspect your father's known where he was all along. We'll bring him to Derry Byrne and talk. We're staying at the Flying Wench Inn. Tomorrow we can—"

"You *will* take me out of here tonight!" Bronwyn demanded.

Deirdre exchanged a look with the Reverend Mother. "Let me have a chance to talk to your father, Bronnie. This hasn't been easy for him and—"

"And you think it's been easy for me? How would *you* have felt if someone had snatched me out of your arms when I was born?"

Deirdre's face turned hot and her shoulders slumped. "Let me talk to your father. I'll make him see reason."

* * * * *

Dermot stubbornly shook his head. "No! I will not contact that bastard and I will *not* remove Bronwyn from Galrath! The child stays with the McDougals. That is my final decision and nothing you can say will change my mind!"

"Do you want our daughter to hate us for the rest of our lives?" Deirdre asked. "The baby is your—my—grandchild! You know how I felt when you made the arrangements for his adoption. It wasn't right—it wasn't moral!"

"Was it moral for our daughter to get herself pregnant out of wedlock?" he thundered.

"Was it moral when you got *me* pregnant out of wedlock?" she flung at him.

Dermot went perfectly still. His face crinkled as though he was in pain. "We vowed never to mention that, DeeDee."

"Had he lived, our son would have been illegitimate. The stigma you've attached to our grandchild would've been attached to him. Would you have loved him any the less?" She narrowed her eyes. "Do you think Bronnie loves her child any the less?"

Turning away, Dermot raked his hands through his hair. "You don't play fair." His shoulders slumped. "You never have."

"I want you to call the McDougals and tell them we'll pick up our grandchild tomorrow!"

Dermot looked around. "Then what? I told you, Bronwyn stays where she is. What—"

"We *will* take Tiernan back to America. We *will* raise him until our daughter has finished her schooling. After that, we *will* bring her home and hopefully she'll see the need to go on to college. I'll watch our grandchild for her while she does."

"What about the Cullen boy?" Dermot snapped. "Don't you think he won't try to intrude?"

Deirdre raised her chin. "I don't care what happens to him. I told our daughter we would contact him—"

"Hell, no, we won't!"

"Will you let me finish?"

"Go on, then."

"Contact Cullen and have him come to Derry Byrne. Once he's here, let Rory and his men take care of the situation. Get him out of our lives forever."

Dermot's mouth dropped open as he stared at Deirdre. "Killed?"

"Of course, not! I was talking about turning him over to the authorities."

Dermot sat on the settee, pondering the matter as Deirdre had expected. Her husband would likely see the merit of what she had suggested. The Brits would be overjoyed at getting an IRA hitman handed over to them and there would likely be a speedy trial with Cullen, no doubt, hanged for his crimes.

"As far as Rory can tell, there's no evidence against Cullen but an informant swore to Rory the boy has killed six men."

"You don't think evidence will be found?" she asked.

He looked up. "The Brits have been known to manufacture what they need to convict a man."

"Call Rory. Have him set the wheels of justice into motion," Deirdre said, turning her back on him. She went to the window of their suite and looked out over the streets of Derry Byrne. "Let those wheels roll over Sean Cullen – and crush him."

* * * * *

Bronwyn opened her door, surprised to see Sheila standing there. "Don't let them catch you here. I'm more persona non grata than ever."

"Don't worry none about me," Sheila said. "Destiny knows who adopted the boy."

Bronwyn pulled Sheila into the room, shut the door and blocked it with her body, since there was no inside lock. "Who?"

"Cormac McDougal. We have his address." Sheila pulled a folded piece of paper from the inside of her uniform blouse. "Here."

Bronwyn took the paper, unfolded it and read the Belfast address. "How did you get this?"

"Destiny overhead Mother Mary Joseph use the name 'McDougal'. She snuck into the office and called her brother Patrick. He called Gerry and Gerry called Liam. Liam called his contacts from the lads in Belfast and within twenty minutes had the names of any family named McDougal what had an infant living with them. Only one that fit your Sean Patrick's age was Cormac McDougal."

"They named Sean Patrick after Cormac," Bronwyn sneered. "Son of a bitch!"

"I also got a way for you to get out of here."

Bronwyn, sure her mother would not extract her from Galrath, had every intention of getting out if she had to run through the corridors, meat cleaver in hand. "Tell me."

"Well, here's the way of it..."

* * * * *

When Bronwyn came up missing later that evening, the entire building was thoroughly searched. Wolfhounds were brought in from a neighboring farm, and when they picked up Bronwyn's scent from a piece of her clothing, they followed it to the wall beside the cemetery and to a long rope that had been tied to an upper branch of the oak standing sentinel beyond the wall. The rope dangled down the stone wall.

"She's out there," Sister Henry Louise said, looking at the rope. "Scaled like a spider, she did."

"She's not the only one out there," one of the older nuns said. "He's out there, too."

The nuns hastily crossed themselves.

"Who?" Martha Walsh, one of the new students, inquired.

"The Nightwind," a longtime student replied. "The Nightwind's out there."

* * * * *

She knew someone was trailing her, but she dared not slow down. She increased her walking to a slow trot then went a bit faster until she panted with the effort. At one point, she stopped by a stream to rest, hid behind a spreading oak and listened. Around her, the hillside lay quiet but she knew she was not alone. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and a cold chill enveloped her.

"Leave me alone," she said, her hand trembling on the bark of the oak tree.

"I am only protecting you, beloved."

Her eyes wide, her mouth a perfect "O" of fear, Bronwyn pushed away from the tree and ran as fast as she could. Yet she fancied she felt his hot breath on her neck. Too afraid to look back, terrified of what she would see, she ran until the pain in her side was so great she fell, crashing to her knees in the dew-laden heather. Struggling to get up, she felt a hand on her upper arm—

And screamed.

When she came to, Bronwyn found herself surrounded by hay and lying in the back of a wooden cart. The steady clop-clop of horse's hooves let her know the conveyance was moving, and she sat up so quickly, her head swam.

"Easy does it, lass," an amused voice spoke from the high seat of the cart.

She scrambled to her knees to see who had spoken. The bright full moon shone as clearly as a spotlight, allowing her to get a good look at her benefactor.

He was at least eighty, with kindly eyes looking back at her from a weather-beaten face. The corncob pipe tucked into the corner of his mouth was unlit but he chewed on it around a crooked grin. His gnarled hands gripping the reins shook while his thin shoulders bowed with a slight hump.

"I'm Cedric," he told her with a Scottish burr. "I live over to Muckamore. Lost me lady of sixty-five years about two years back. I sorely miss her."

"I'm sorry," Bronwyn mumbled.

"As am I," Cedric sighed, and gently flicked the reins. "Old Bert here can go faster when he's of a mind to. I suppose he's tired this evening."

"You were following me?"

"Not me, lass," Cedric said, shaking his head. "I went down to the Six Mile Water to give Old Bert a drink and found you lying on the ground. I picked you up and put you in my cart. I'm on my way into Ballyclare."

"Ballyclare?" Bronwyn gasped. "That's heading back toward Derry Byrne! I can't go there! They'll be looking for me there!"

Cedric hauled on the reins. He twisted in the seat, an expression of pain of his wrinkled face. "Are ye running away from that damned Galrath, lass?"

Bronwyn tucked her lower lip between her teeth and nodded, sensing the old man wasn't a promoter of the school.

"Papist prison!" he said with a scowl. "I used to be an Anglican and never *did* take to that Papist mumbo jumbo."

"Please, I have a son in Belfast. They took him away from me and —"

"Enough said." Cedric turned around, sharply snapped the reins. "Get your ass to moving, Bert!"

Bronwyn breathed a sigh of relief as Cedric turned about the cart and headed back the way they'd came. "Thank you..."

"Don't mention it. Anything I can do to derail the Papists at Galrath is a privilege!"

Bronwyn relaxed against the side of the cart and closed her eyes. Soon, she nodded off, the steady sway of the conveyance and the gentle humming of its driver helping to ease her mind.

Cedric craned his neck to see about his passenger. When he found her asleep, he smiled, his red glowing eyes lighting a path on the roadway.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"His name is Rory Brell," Alistair reported to Dr. Dunne. "Works for Wynth Industries. He be in charge of their security."

"I'm familiar with the man," Dr. Dunne said. He looked at Sean. "You've been careless, my boy, in letting a spy follow you. Didn't you feel you were being watched?"

Sean shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

"The difference is *you* can be identified and *you* were instructed to see that did *not* happen!" Dunne snarled. "You more than likely led him right to Fuilghaath!"

"So?" Sean drawled. "He can't get in and, even if he did, he wouldn't survive the getting out."

Dunne ground his teeth. "I will not sanction insubordination. Do you remember what I told you would happen if you do not behave?"

Knowing he was treading on thin ice, Sean remained silent. He did not lower his eyes to Dunne, but his body posture made it obviously clear to the older man that he was sufficiently reprimanded.

"Wynth Industries is a thorn in my side," Dunne snapped.

"I don't know anything about Wynth Industries," Sean lied.

"We will correct that oversight immediately," Dunne growled, casting Alistair a hard look.

Alistair ran a finger under his collar. "Ye want me to—"

"Find out where Rory Brell is right this minute and report back to me. I want to know whom he is working under, why he is watching Cullen in particular and—"

"I think I can answer the who and why, Doctor," Brian said from his place at the far end of the room. "Bronwyn McGregor's father works for Wynth at Baybridge. He's in charge of the behavior modification unit in Iowa. He's also in Ireland, staying at Derry Byrne, near the Galrath School." He cast his son a warning look that Sean seemed to ignore.

Dunne's lips peeled back from his teeth. "I knew that slut would come back to haunt us!"

Sean stood, his hands curled into fists. "Call me whatever you like, do whatever you want to me but leave Bronwyn out of it." He took a step closer to Dunne's desk. "Don't you *ever* call her that again."

Brian winced. He sped across the room. "Sean, think before you speak."

"Let him speak. Every word he says is duly noted and remembered. The consequences of his temper and his tongue will be on his head."

"Sit down," Brian hissed, pushing Sean into his chair. "And pray, watch what you say!"

Dunne shot Alistair an infuriated look. "Why are you still here? Find Brell!"

Alistair spun on his heel and exited the room.

Sean shifted on the seat, his hot glare locked on Dunne.

"If you didn't show promise, I'd terminate you," Dunne said.

"I'll have a talk with him," Brian promised, shooting Sean a warning glance.

"Explain to our hotheaded young fool who and what Wynth Industries is. Perhaps he'll be less apt to allow himself to be trailed by one of their operatives if he understands just how dangerous they are!"

Brian up drew a chair beside Sean's. "Wynth Industries is run by Brighton Wynth. Headquarters is in Des Moines, Iowa. Don't you remember that lady cop in Albany telling you that was where Dermot McGregor went after he left Georgia? Part of their operation is a prison for the criminally insane."

Sean nodded. "I vaguely recall her saying something."

"Another part of their operation," Dunne put in, "is a private research facility funded primarily by the American government. W. I. has developed several protocols that have benefited the psychiatric community, but they are a danger to our operation here."

"Why?" Sean asked.

"W. I. has developed a program in which they can alter the psychotic tendencies of their research subject and turn him or her into a docile human being," Brian explained. "'Docile' if somewhat catatonic." He shrugged. "A worthy endeavor, but should one of our Stalcaires fall into their hands, there would be one *hell* of an explosion. We can't risk having them know Reapers exist. Sure as hell, Wynth would send some of its operatives after us to shut us down."

"We can't allow that to happen!" Dunne stated.

"They believe we are an arm of the IRA," Brian put in, "and that we're a training ground for hitmen."

"And should Brell capture you – as is, no doubt, his intention," Dunne grated, "and they take you back to W. I., you could compromise our entire operation. And that, we will *not* allow to happen."

"Capture me for what purpose?" Sean asked. "As far as McGregor is concerned, if he's behind Brell watching me, he'd want to make sure I stay as far away from Bronwyn. Brell would turn me over to the Brits."

"We can't allow Brell or anyone else to take you," Brian said. "The Brits would create evidence to convict you, sentence you to death and, when they tried to carry out that sentence, you'd give them the surprise of their lives!"

Dunne chuckled. "That would almost be worth handing him over just to see the looks on their faces when they realize he can't die."

Sean leaned back in his chair. "So what do we do?"

"Get rid of Brell," Brian stated.

"And the source of the problem," Dunne added. When Sean turned a heated stare on him, Dunne rolled his eyes. "Not the girl, but the father! As long as he's allowed to plot against you, he unknowingly is plotting against Fuilghaath. We need to make sure he can *not* pose a threat to our existence."

Sean tensed. "Are you ordering me to kill Bronwyn's father?"

"What do you think?" Dunne asked.

"I won't do it!"

"Father or daughter," Dunne said with a yawn. "Take your pick." When Sean said nothing, simply stared at him, the doctor cocked one shoulder. "Either the father dies or the daughter. I'll leave the decision up to you."

Icy hatred washed through Sean. He knew all too well that what Dunne promised, happened. If he did not agree to kill Dermot McGregor, another Reaper would go after Bronwyn and her death would not be easy.

"What's it to be?" Dunne pressed.

"Think before you speak," Brian cautioned. He put a hand on Sean's knee.

Sean knew he had no choice. "When?"

"As soon as we locate Brell. Chances are he's nearby."

"You want me to take him out, too?"

"We'll have Alistair do it, unless he is with McGregor. If that's the case, you can kill two birds with one bomb."

"A bomb," Sean repeated.

"The preferred choice of the lads," Dunne chuckled again. "If they think you are IRA, they'll not question the manner of assassination."

"I'll get what you need," Brian remarked. "Plastique is the best medium for this kind of thing."

Sean looked at Dunne. "Is that all?"

"For now." The doctor leaned back in his tall leather swivel chair. "You may go."

Coming to his feet, Sean turned his attention to his father. "The gods damn you for ever laying eyes on my mother." That said, he stomped from the room.

"Such an impressionable young man," Dunne sighed. "And growing more difficult to control by the day." He steepled his fingers. "I hope we won't have to terminate him."

Brian felt the gash of a warning scraping down his back. "I'll handle him, sir. He'll come around. I'll see to it."

"He's due for his next Transition – when?"

"The end of next month."

"No tenses after the third week," Dunne ordered. "Put him in a containment cell and see what happens when he goes against his masters."

Remembering all too well a similar lesson applied to him, Brian tried to dissuade Dunne from acting on his vengeance.

"He will be brought to heel or terminated!" Dunne vowed. "Either way, I'll have no more trouble from that whelp!"

* * * * *

"Don't dawdle, laddie," Alistair said, "and be careful ye don't blow yourself up."

Sean ignored his partner. He got out of the car, cast a quick look around the dark street in front of the Flying Wench then dropped beside the car Dermot McGregor had rented. He scooted under the vehicle, attaching the box with the heavy-duty magnet glued to its top to the inside of the wheel arch. After making sure the wires sticking from the end of the box were exposed, he slid from under the car. Standing, he dusted the grit and dirt from his faded blue jeans and sauntered back to the sedan where Alistair waited. He got in.

"Good boy." Alistair chuckled, looking down at his wristwatch. "We've got a while to wait, I reckon. Might as well take a snoozer."

His attention riveted on the death vehicle he had created, Sean crossed his arms over his chest to still his trembling. Though he had gotten used to dispatching the occasional Parliament member or loyalist, he knew he would never be able to justify the evil he was doing. Each successive killing made him ill. He had yet to finish an assignment without puking.

"Ye ain't Transitioned enough to want to go for the blood," Alistair had told him. "But it'll happen. Can't stop it."

Despite the two Transitions that had turned him into a slathering, howling beast, Sean had yet to crave the taste of blood that Brian insisted he would. He had yet to desire anything other than the vegetarian meal prepared especially for him. He thought perhaps his secretive nightly excursions to the chapel at Fuilghaoth and the hours he'd spent on his knees begging God not to allow him to change into a full-fledged blood beast had slowed the process.

But he knew the day was fast approaching when no amount of prayer, no humble entreaties to his God would stop the inevitable.

He feared that day when he would change into a creature, like the one he'd observed in a deep containment cell. The memory of that loathsome monster still gave him nightmares.

"Thinking of Johnny, are ye?" Alistair inquired.

Though he practiced trying to conceal his thoughts, Sean had not mastered the technique and the occasional pondering filtered out for Brian or Alistair to read.

"Johnny had a right-good case of the bloodlusts, he did," Alistair snorted. "That's the worst of a Transition when you reach that point."

Sean looked at his partner. "Have you ever reached that point?"

Alistair grinned. "Many's the time, laddie, and passed it." His grin widened. "As will ye. Drove Johnny mad, though. Some can take it and live with it, and some can't—Johnny couldn't."

The thought of turning into the ravening animal he had seen in the deep containment cell set Sean's teeth on edge and brought a cold sweat to his forehead. "I pray every night that will never happen."

The older Reaper chuckled. "Praying is a waste of time, lad. Ain't a matter of *if*, Seannie. It's a matter of *when*. Ye can eat all them filthy vegetables ye want and it won't keep the bloodlust from comin' of its own accord. Ye be skating on thinner and thinner ice, laddie. Sooner or later, ye will break through and, when ye do, there will be no turnin' back."

Sean scrunched down in his seat. He turned so he could keep watch on the entrance to the Flying Wench. "The tenerse is bad enough. I can't begin to imagine what the blood will taste like."

"Right salty, it is. Can't do without it on a daily basis once the bloodlust Transition occurs. Ye'll know soon enough." Alistair reached under his seat and pulled out a pint flask. "Wanna sip?"

Sean knew what he was being offered, so didn't look. "No," he snapped, but as soon as his partner uncorked the flask, he inhaled the metallic stench of fresh blood and his mouth watered. He unconsciously licked his lips, even though the thought of consuming the vile liquid made him gag.

"Ah, now that's a real pick-me-up, it is!" Alistair said, smacking his lips. "Sure ye don't want a taste, laddie?"

"No!"

Alistair's giggle made Sean dig his fingernails into his palms to keep from lashing out.

"Might as well relax. It'll be a while 'fore the show begins."

Sean laid his head against the window glass. He had felt jittery, wired as tight as the bomb under Dermot McGregor's car. A part of him was upset Bronwyn's father would die come morning, but another part of him rejoiced. It was that side of his new personality that he found the most disturbing. It bothered him to realize he was becoming immune to watching people die, blasé about ending a fellow human being's life. He worried about his lack of sympathy for the men he'd helped kill and the offhand attitude toward death that was becoming a part of his psychological makeup. He brooded over his inability to dredge up a sufficient amount of guilt over the killings. He knew he was becoming as callous and unfeeling as the other Reapers.

"Ye think too much," Alistair mumbled. "That is the biggest problem with ye, laddie."

"I wasn't born to kill."

"Sorry to be the one to tell ye this, Seannie, but, aye, ye were. That is exactly why ye was born. No amount of going to that there church you kneel down in every week will help you, lad. You are marked same as us all. If there really be a heaven and hell, you know where you'll be going!"

Sean knew that was partly true. But he had yet to come to terms with the inevitability of the way things would be for him from here on out.

"She'll hate me for this," he said softly.

"I told ye, I'd be the one to detonate the bloody bomb," Alistair growled. "Ye be worryin' the situation like a dog after a bone. Forget it!"

"Not that I'll ever see her again." Sean's voice was even softer.

"Count that a blessing, laddie. Ye'd not want to and have to worry ye might jump her and make another of us."

Sean flinched. "That I do not want."

"Then, like I say – count it as a blessing that ye won't be seeing her."

Bronwyn's lovely face drifted through Sean's troubled mind. He ached with a need to hold her, press her sweet body to his. He longed to kiss her, stroke her sleek flesh and plunge himself into the heat of her.

"That's it," Alistair grated. "Make yourself sick with wanting her and me horny as hell with the images ye be wafting around in the ether!" He punched Sean's arm. "Cut it out, now!"

Tamping down on the thoughts running through his mind, Sean concentrated on the inn's sign – a witch astride a broom. He stared at the ugly, bulbous nose of the hag, the black pointed hat and stringy dark hair flying from under the grin.

"That's more like it. Looks just like me ma." Alistair laughed. "Mean old hag that she was!"

Despite his turbulent thoughts and tight belly, Sean smiled.

It would be his last smile.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bronwyn woke to find the cart in which she'd been riding unmoving. She sat up, looked around and frowned when she did not see Cedric. She called him several times and when he did not answer, scooted out the back of the cart. The horse was munching on a mound of hay that had been dropped in front of him—he was tethered to a hitching post before of a small, whitewashed stone cottage.

Thunder boomed, drawing her eyes to the heavens. Lightning flared, stitching across the horizon. The sky was a bruised color that boded ill for travelers in open carts. The wind picked up, bringing with it a cold wash of dampness.

She looked at the cottage's closed door, tucked her lower lip between her teeth and decided it would be prudent to see where she was and where Cedric had gone. Hitching up her courage, she walked up the short gravel path, stepped onto the shallow porch and knocked lightly on the door. When no answer came, she knocked again.

"If you're looking for the McMahons," a voice called to her, "they've gone to Londonderry to see their daughter. They won't be back for another week."

Bronwyn turned to see a handsome young man standing by the cart. She came off the porch. "Have you seen the man who owns this cart?" she asked.

"I own the cart," he replied.

Bronwyn shook her head. "I mean the man who was driving it. The man who brought me here."

"You mean Cedric?"

"Yes! Do you know where he is?"

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Caught a ride home with the Daly boys."

"He said he'd take me to Belfast. He said —"

"Cedric has never been to Belfast in his life." The young man chuckled.

"I have to get to Belfast," she said, tears gathering in her eyes. "I have to find my son."

He cocked his head. "You're an American."

"How far are we from Belfast?"

"Not all that far," he answered, "but with a storm coming, I'd sure advise against trying to get there today."

"Then what am I going to do?" she cried, swiping angrily at the tears.

"Well, you can wait it out with me."

When she gave him a disbelieving look, he held up his hands.

"I am not a serial killer and I've not ravaged a pretty girl in—" He lowered his arm to look at his watch. "Oh, about twelve hours, give or take a minute of lust or two."

Despite her nervousness and disappointment, she smiled.

"You're welcome to come in and wait out the storm. They usually pass in an hour or so. I can make you some lunch."

Another vicious boom of thunder shook the ground. Bronwyn looked at the black sky. Lowering her gaze, she found herself staring into a pair of amber eyes that were kind and gentle.

"How often do you do your ravaging?" she asked.

He grinned as he walked toward her. "Every twelve hours or so."

"Comforting thought."

"Sometimes sooner," he said, coming to stand before her. "It depends on how lovely I find the lady."

"Naturally," she said, oddly at ease.

He stuck out his hand. "Danny Hart."

"Bronwyn McGregor," she replied, taking his hand. She was amazed at the strength in his grip and the heat of his flesh.

"What's a Yank doing riding in the back of my cart?" he inquired as he opened the door for her.

"Cedric picked me up near Galrath," she replied, casting him a warning look.

"Ah, running away from that hell-spawned school for wayward girls, are you?" He laughed, sweeping out his hand to indicate she was to precede him into the cottage.

"I didn't know the cart wasn't Cedric's."

"A fact he fails to mention ninety-nine percent of the time. He borrows it on occasion and takes it up to Muckamore. Brings it back when it suits him. He had it about a month this time."

"I take it you have other transportation."

"A motorcycle and a German runabout."

"You don't mind him borrowing it, then."

"He's kin," Danny sighed. "Getting a bit long in the tooth to be out and about ravishing the countryside's lovely ladies, but he can hold his own now and again." He winked. "Like me."

The inside of the little cottage was spotless, with a warm peat fire blazing in the hearth and candles glowing softly on the mantel and kitchen table. The smell of bread baking mixed with the aroma of a stew bubbling on the stove made Bronwyn realize she was starving.

"You can wash up through there," Danny said, indicating a door. "Soup and sandwich sound okay?"

"Heavenly."

Danny grinned. "Wouldn't call it that, but I think you'll not leave my table unsatisfied."

The little washroom was as immaculate as the parlor with soft, with fleecy white towels draped over the shiny gold towel bars and the scent of gardenia potpourri in a lovely copper urn on the vanity. The wallpaper was a pretty ivy print border in mauve and the single window was draped with white eyelet curtains. In one corner stood a white clawfoot bathtub that looked as though it had never been used. Just for the heck of it, Bronwyn ran her hand along the rolled edge and was not surprised when no dust clung to her fingers.

"Either you are an exceptionable man, Mr. Hart, or you have a maid," she mumbled. Looking into the oval mirror above the sink, she arched her brows. "Or you're married to a terrific housekeeper."

Danny, ladling stew into a brown crockery bowl, looked up as she joined him. "Feel better?"

Bronwyn nodded as the storm chose that moment to wash over the cottage. She had to raise her voice. "Do you live here alone, Mr. Hart?"

"It's Danny, and, alas, that I do." He brought the bowl to the table and placed it at the solitary setting.

"You aren't eating?"

"I've already eaten," he said, holding her chair. "Please, sit down."

Rain slashed at the windows and onto the roof. Lightning sent harsh white flashes through the windows.

Feeling awkward that she would be dining alone, Bronwyn cleared her throat as he pushed her chair up to the table. "I'm sorry to have put you to this trouble. If I'd known you weren't going to —"

"I don't get much company way out here," he said, taking a seat across from her. "I am thrilled to have you visit."

"Don't you bring your women friends here to seduce?"

"I usually go to them," he said, putting his hands on the table and threading his fingers together. "I sneak into their bedrooms in the dead of night, do my dastardly work then vanish before first light."

"Ah," she said, unfolding her napkin. "I can see the wisdom in that."

He grinned. "How so?"

"You go to them in the dead of night when the moon is hidden behind thick clouds. They can't see your face to identify you to the authorities." She looked at the table. "Then you leave before they can see your face when the sun comes up."

"Just as all respectable incubi do," he said with a nod.

A horrendous crack of lightning rent the heavens and the smell of ozone seemed to permeate the room. Bronwyn had been about to take up her spoon but at his words, she froze, a chill going down her spine. She raised her head and stared at him.

He was devastatingly handsome, with thick black hair combed straight back from his high forehead. His tawny eyes were bright with a slight almond shape that gave them a mysterious cast. He had a ruddy complexion and firm physique that suggested he was accustomed to manual labor. Though his hands looked powerful, the nails were clean and well-kept.

She looked away from his penetrating gaze. "Joking about such things is not amusing."

"Who said I was joking?" he whispered.

The hair shifted on her arms. She heard the blood rushing through her ears.

"Bronwyn," he said softly, "look at me."

She shook her head.

"I won't hurt you."

"No," she said, ashamed of the squeak that came from her closing throat.

"You had to know I would come after you, beloved."

Light from the flickering candle on the table danced in his golden orbs. It threw his face into a study of shadows, darkness accentuating his cheeks and throat.

"W-what do you want?" she managed to ask.

"You."

He reached across the table to take her hand. She jerked her hand away. He leaned over the table, arm outstretched, fingers bidding her to slip her hand into his. When she didn't move, he laid his palm flat on the tabletop then slid it back toward him.

"I mean you no harm, beloved."

"Don't call me that!" she hissed.

"It is what you are to me. I am blood-signed with—"

"I belong to Sean Cullen!"

His face turned hard. "And I told you that you would never see him again."

"He is the father of my child and—"

"Who says he is?"

"Go to hell!" she grated, standing. The chair fell over behind her.

"Been there." He chuckled.

She ran to the door. Outside, the storm grew in intensity. Lightning speared the earth and the wind howled in cadence. As she yanked on the handle, she felt a slight shock from the metal and released it.

"Come back and sit down." He was still sitting at the table, looking at the food he had served her.

Again, she tried to open the door and felt the unpleasant shock travel from her hand up her arm. This time she yelped, for the shock had been stronger, more intense.

"Let me out of here!" she cried.

"Not until we've talked."

She backed away from the door, looking around for another avenue of escape. Through an archway, she saw a bed and dresser. Save the door to the washroom, there were no other doors in the room. With a groan of frustration, she used her skirt to wrap around the handle. This time, with the insulation of material between her and the metal, there was no shock but neither did the door open. It was locked, with no bolt or button to release.

"Open this door!" she shouted, pulling the handle.

"When we have talked, I will take you where you need to go," he said gently. "Until then, you stay here."

She spun around to face him, furious that he wasn't looking at her, that he expected her to do exactly as he ordered. She stormed over to him and pounded a fist on the table. "You don't own me!"

He looked up at her. "But that hardly matters, does it?"

"What do you want from me?"

"You."

"Stop saying that!" she said, covering her ears.

"You called and I heard you."

"I didn't call you."

"But you did, beloved. Your heart was breaking and I came to ease your pain."

She slapped her palms on the table in front of him so hard he blinked. "My heart was breaking for Sean. I was calling to him, not you!"

"Calling to a Reaper is of little use to any woman, save one wishing for her own death," he said, gazing up at her with a calm she wanted to swat from his face.

Instead, she pounded the table again. "What the hell are you talking about? You're insane!"

"Do you know where your precious Sean is at this minute?"

The dishes in the cupboard rattled when a brutal boom of thunder shook the cottage. "Looking for me!"

"He is sitting in front of your parents' inn, waiting for a bomb he set to go off." He locked stares with her. "A bomb that will take the lives of two of your kinsmen."

She went after him then, trying to drag her fingernails down his face, to rake and scar, to inflict as much pain as she could. But he stopped her arched hands with a speed and ease that astonished her. He stood, dragging her to him, bringing her to his body in a snap that knocked the breath from her.

"He is about to cause you untold sorrow, Bronwyn. He will inflict a pain you will find hard to overcome."

She struggled against him, bucking in his grasp. His strength was overwhelming. His hands, though tight on her wrists, were not hurting her, but the frustration made her howl as though she was in agony.

"Listen to me, beloved!" he shouted over her banshee-like trill. "What will be will be. Not even I can stop it, but I can help you! Let me help you, Bronwyn! Let me be your haven from the coming darkness."

She arched her body, striving to break free. She tried to knee him in the groin, to kick him, but he easily swung her away, molding her to his hip as she fought.

"Bronwyn, accept me as yours and I will be at your side through the coming ordeal!"

"Let go of me!"

The sound from the storm grew intense. The rafters shrieked from the pressure while the window glass bulged in the frame. The slate roof seemed to lift from its sheathing while the plink of tiles hitting the ground as they were raked away sounded like rifle fire.

"Sean!" Bronwyn howled, her hair flying wildly about her head, her eyes wide.

"He is lost to you," her captor decreed. "For all time, Sean Cullen is lost to you!"

She sagged in his arms, her crying so loud it rivaled the skirl of the wind. She slid to the floor, holding onto his leg, her face pressed against his calf. He sank down beside her, gathered her into his arms and rocked her.

"Shush, now," he said, cradling her. "I will take care of you."

She clung to him, despair so rife in her heart she could do nothing else.

* * * * *

Sean woke from a light doze when Alistair prodded him. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Looking at his watch, he saw it was ten minutes to eight. Nothing had changed outside the Flying Wench, although a dark red car was coming down the street toward them. He glanced at his partner.

"Rory Brell, himself," Alistair said, nodding toward the car pulling in front of the McGregor sedan. "The gods are good to us today, lad. We'll get two for the price of one boom!"

Sean spared a look at the detonator Alistair held in his lap then turned to watch the tall man climb out of the red car. He frowned as Brell opened the rear door, leaned inside and seemed to take longer than necessary to retrieve whatever he was after.

"Going after that damned Russian-made piece he always carries like a football," Alistair quipped. "Machine rifle, it is."

Brell backed away from the car and came to his full height. In his left arm was a white bundle he indeed carried like a football.

"What'd I tell ye?" Alistair grunted. "And lookee who be coming out the front door right on time!"

Sean turned his attention from Brell to the familiar figure walking down the steps of the Flying Wench. Dermot McGregor, his arrogant face and haughty stance sending prickles of hate through Sean, lifted a hand to greet Brell.

"Got a surprise for you," Brell called, shutting the back door of his car.

"Get ready, lad," Alistair warned. "I'll flip the switch as soon as the two of them are by the car."

Sean sat forward, reaching behind to touch the .38 he had tucked in the waistband of his faded jeans. Satisfied his weapon was at hand should he need it, he then withdrew a set of earplugs from the pocket of his flannel shirt.

Alistair plugged his own ears and gripped the switch of the detonator.

As Sean was about to screw the second earplug into his ear, he heard McGregor ask, "Is that the baby?"

Sean paused, the earplug still between his fingers.

"Aye, it is."

A haze of red flowed over Sean's vision. He was sitting a hundred yards away, but hearing Brell's words as clearly as the man was in the car with him. He looked at Alistair. "Brell has his child with him!"

Alistair squinted. "What?" he asked, pulling one of the earplugs halfway out of his ear.

"That's a child Brell's carrying!"

Alistair looked across the street and shrugged. "So what?" He twisted the earplug back in place. "Don't make no difference whatsoever to me."

"I'll not be responsible for killing a child!" Sean flung open the car door.

"Get your ass back here!" Alistair hissed, reaching for Sean as he scrambled out of the car.

Sean ran across the street. Brell and McGregor stood on the sidewalk beside the car under which Sean had attached the bomb. Both stared at the bundle cradled in Brell's left arm. The inn's front door opened and Bronwyn's mother appeared. She lifted her arm, pointing at Sean. The two men turned in unison. Brell thrust the bundle into McGregor's arms while his right hand dove under his coat, bringing out a weapon.

"Get away from the car!" Sean shouted, waving his hands, motioning the trio back. "There's a bomb. Get a way from the car!"

Brell's first bullet hit Sean in the shoulder, slammed the left side of his body but he kept coming, barely feeling the pain, more intent on saving the child. The second bullet went through his chest, exiting through his back. Sean stumbled against the impact but managed to stay on his feet. He was almost to the car when Brell fired again.

The bullet punched a hole in the center of Sean's forehead.

From the inn's doorway, Deirdre McGregor saw Sean Cullen crash into the side of their car. Her hand flew to her mouth as the young man's eyes met hers before he slid down the side of the vehicle. Even as her shocked gaze slid to her husband, she knew what was about to happen.

When the explosion came, knocking her backward through the doorway, the long scream of denial from her constricted throat hung on the air like a siren's wail.

"Damn you, lad!" Alistair threw the detonator into the back seat, started his engine and sped away from the carnage, from the bomb crater in front of the Flying Wench, and from the burning body of Sean Cullen, lying sixty feet away.

* * * * *

Deirdre looked up as Bronwyn entered the hospital room. When her mother opened her arms, Bronwyn flew to her, wailing her sorrow.

"Oh, Mama," she sobbed, trembling.

"It was quick. I'm sure they felt nothing."

Bronwyn moved back, searching her mother's eyes. "He said it was Sean, Mama. He said —"

"Don't say that bastard's name in my hearing!" Deirdre snapped, jerking her hand from Bronwyn's hold. "He killed your father and your son!"

Bronwyn staggered back from the fury in her mother's face. "My — my son?"

"Rory Brell was bringing the baby to us. We'd heard you'd managed to get out of Galrath. We knew you'd go to Belfast, so wanted to have the boy to use as leverage to get you to go back." Tears formed in Deirdre's eyes. "How were we to know Cullen would come after us? That he'd kill his own child?"

Bronwyn stood in the center of the hospital room, her teeth chattering, her limbs trembling. She felt the blood drain from her face and as she sank to her knees, the terrible scream tearing from her throat brought doctors and nurses running.

Deirdre watched as the medical personal hovered over her daughter. She sat on the gurney, unfazed as the doctors administered injections to Bronwyn to stop the hideous shrieks of grief. As her child was wheeled away, limp and unconscious, Deirdre could not rouse herself to follow. Instead, she lay down, curled into a fetal position and stared at the wall.

Following unseen in the wake of orderlies wheeling Bronwyn to her room, Danyon stopped dead in his tracks, frowning. He cocked his head to one side, listened then

sighed heavily. The woman to whom he had sworn his allegiance was calling to him and her tearful entreaty overrode everything else around him.

"Not now, Aoife!" he hissed, digging his nails into his palms.

"Danny, I need you!" came the clarion call in tones of misery.

Torn between going to the woman with whom he had signed a Blood Pact and caring for the one who had captured his affection, Danyon growled with frustration. His shoulders drooped in defeat. Unable to do anything else, he closed his eyes, calling out to the world beyond the hospital's windows. In the space of four heartbeats, he opened his eyes.

"Go to her," he commanded. "Take her to confront the Reaper. Be my eyes and ears, Cedric." He stared at the demon he had called from its lair months before. "Do not dare to sign a pact with her, old friend. That is a deadly mistake you dare not make."

Miles away, Cedric smiled. "I have been in this world too long, Danyon. I would welcome an end to my existence."

"Even Nightwinds as ancient as you can feel agony, Cedric," Danyon warned. "Be careful how you tread with Bronwyn McGregor. The Bugul Noz will be my ears and eyes."

Cedric nodded.

In a flash of pulsing light, he sped across time and distance. When his essence settled, he was standing in the corridor of St. Simon's hospital in Derry Byrne.

Unseen, he walked to Bronwyn's room then stood to one side as nurses and doctors finished their tasks and left the young woman lying still and as pale as death beneath the crisp sheets. Cedric went to the bed and put his hand on her cheek.

"Wake, Bronwyn," he whispered.

Bronwyn opened her eyes and gazed up at the old man hovering over her. "Cedric?" she questioned. "What are you doing here?"

"Danyon the Nightwind summoned me. He bid me look to you."

"You're like him – like Danyon."

"I am."

"Go away," she hissed.

"He is here, lass. Just down the hall."

"I know where he is," Bronwyn seethed. "He brought me here."

"I meant the other one."

"What other one?" she asked. "You're not making any sense."

"The man who killed your child."

"Sean is here?" she asked, her voice tearful.

"Just down the hall." Cedric held out his hand to her. "Do you wish to see him?"

She hesitated, staring at his face. There was deep sadness in his watery gaze and a tremble to the hand he had extended toward her.

"I am old, Bronwyn. Older than anything on your world. I have seen much sorrow and caused more of it than I care to admit."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because Danyon summoned me to take you to Sean Cullen." He moved his hand closer to her. "Will you go in to see him before it is too late?"

Bronwyn placed her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet. Her bottom lip quivered. "They said he died."

"They lied. He is alive and his parasite is striving to heal him." He shook his head. "It will not be successful. It was burned too badly to rejuvenate his flesh. Sean Cullen will die before the evening is out." He squeezed her hand. "Do you wish to see him?"

"I don't understand..."

"You don't need to. We must hurry if you are to see him before he leaves this world."

Her heart breaking, she walked beside the Nightwind, wondering why no one seemed to look their way as they passed. Even the burly guards who flanked room 105 never batted an eye as Cedric opened the door and ushered her inside.

A horrible stench permeated the room, and Bronwyn realized it was the smell of burned flesh. It sickened her and when she gagged, Cedric touched her forehead and the sensation passed. He led her to the bedside where a nurse was adjusting the flow of an IV tube.

"He can hear you and see you, but she will not," Cedric said.

The nurse took a seat across the room, picked up a magazine and began reading.

Fearfully, Bronwyn looked at Cedric.

"I am right here, beloved," the ages-old Nightwind said. "I will not leave you."

A groan from the bed drew Bronwyn's gaze. She shivered, her bare feet icy against the marble floor.

"He doesn't have long to live," Cedric insisted. "If you wish to speak to him, do it now."

The light over the headboard was low, casting shadows in the room but bright enough for Bronwyn to see the gruesome spectacle. Had she not known who lay atop the stark white sheets, she would have sworn she had stumbled onto the set of a horror movie. The ravaged flesh—blistered, peeling away from bone, oozing fluids—seemed surreal. So hideous was the apparition, so horrible the smell, it was all she could do to believe it reality. Only stray wisps of blond hair clinging to the bloated skull identified this awful sight as human. When the monstrosity tried to lift a withered, blackened hand to touch her, she jumped back, her gorge rising, despite Cedric's hypnotic suggestion.

"Talk to him, beloved," Cedric pressed. He draped his arm around her shoulder.

"Why, Sean?" she asked, her voice breaking. "Why did you do it?"

"He cannot answer you, beloved. His vocal cords are useless."

Bronwyn looked helplessly at the old man.

"Tell him how you feel," Cedric encouraged. "Let him know."

Turning back to Sean, Bronwyn dug her nails into her palms. She willed herself not to hear the pathetic attempts at speech coming from the bed. She steeled herself not to react to the trembling hand struggling to reach her, the sickening sight of the blistered flesh.

"I will never forgive you, Sean Cullen."

There came a loud exhalation of air as Sean lowered his hand, palm up, to the bed.

"Goodbye, Sean," she said, swatting at the tears that threatened to choke her. She ripped the chain from her neck and dropped the Claddagh necklace he had given her so long ago into his palm then flinched when his destroyed fingers closed over it.

"Turn your back on him," Cedric instructed.

She did, burying her face in Cedric's chest.

Sean gasped. The loud sound of the machine beside the bed brought the nurse to her feet, the magazine flying.

Cedric pulled her back as doctors and nurses entered. He held her against him as the medical team applied paddles to the seared chest and the monitor flat-lined. The monitor's high-pitched squeal continued long past the several more attempts the doctors made to bring the man back to life.

"Time of death..." were the last words Bronwyn heard before she collapsed in Cedric's arms.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Brian stood with his sweaty hands pressed against the glass of the observatory. Beside him, four other physicians stood attentively, watching the proceedings in Operation Room 4.

"I can't believe you were able to get the body so quickly," Dr. Felix Cramden remarked.

"Be quiet," Brian snapped. He was in no mood for idle conversation. Since he outranked them, he doubted they would balk at his command. If they did, he would personally toss them out on their rear ends.

"Whose decision was this, Brian?" Dr. Gerard Mabry asked.

"Dunne's," Brian said through clenched teeth.

When hushed mutterings came from behind, Brian turned to glare. The muttering stopped.

The sight on the operating table was the most horrible thing he could have imagined. Upon seeing the condition of Sean's body when it was brought to Fuilgaoth, Brian thought he would pass out. There was nothing human left in the charred remains that could have been identified as his son.

Dr. Dunne glanced up at the balcony. "Are you sure you don't want to be down here, Brian?" he asked, his eyes glittering behind his surgical mask.

"No," Brian grated.

Dunne shrugged then nodded at his assistants who turned the burned body onto its stomach. The charred backbone shone whitely through the split flesh.

"As you know," Dunne said, speaking to his team, "Cullen's parasite barely survived the blast. Had its host maintained a desire to live, there is no doubt in my mind the parasite might well have managed to keep the body alive a bit longer." He spread his hands. "At least until we were able to get the body back here."

Brian clenched his fists against the glass.

"But Cullen lost the will to live and expired at ten-thirty-five this morning. It is now..." He looked up at the clock. "Two-thirty-five in the evening. The body is cold to the touch and the parasite has died."

"Get on with it!" Brian hissed beneath his breath.

"We will now attempt to implant a fledgling parasite in order to reanimate the body."

"It won't work," Brian growled.

The door to the observation balcony opened and closed. A hand touched Brian's shoulder, but he shrugged it away. It returned with a firm grip. He turned to see Dr. Helen Bryan standing at his side.

"I have something to show you," she said urgently.

"Do you see what he's doing?" Brian snapped, cocking his head toward the operating table. "The man thinks he's God! He's trying to reanimate my son's dead body!"

"Come with me," Helen insisted, pulling at him.

Brian shrugged away her grip. "Leave me the hell alone!"

Helen grabbed his arm. "Dunne can't do a damned thing for your son, but there may be something we can do!" She looked around her. "Does anyone here remember what happened the day he was brought to Fuilgaoth?"

Dr. Mabry stepped to her side. "I do."

"Well, She became twice as agitated when they brought him back this afternoon. The tank is rocking on its base."

"Could it be?" Cramden asked.

"She's chosen him for Her Prime," Mabry breathed.

"She has," Helen agreed.

Brian looked at Dunne who was stepping back after having implanted a young parasite into Sean's body. He shook his head. "You know what will happen when he finds out," Brian said. "He won't allow what you're suggesting."

"Does it matter what he won't allow?" Helen asked. "He's become a liability, Brian. The things he has done, the abominations he has created, are a sin each of us will have to help atone for. Can we allow him to continue perverting what could have been something used for the good of mankind?"

"You're talking about doing the same damned thing!" Brian snapped.

Mabry turned to the other two men who had remained quiet. "Colter, Devereaux. What do you think?"

Dr. Henry Colter shook his head. "Do what you think best but leave me out of it. I can't afford to have Dunne come after me."

"Dunne won't come after any of us if we have Her on our side!" Samuel Devereaux remarked. He walked over to the others. "Count me in."

"What do we need to do?" Cramden asked.

"As soon as Dunne is finished and has gone back to his office, we'll wheel Sean up to the Room," Helen responded. "The queen will let us know what to do next."

"This is dangerous," Colter insisted. "If you fail, you will all be terminated."

"Breathe one word of it to someone who might stop us and I swear we'll implicate you," Mabry snapped.

Colter held up his hand. "I want no part of this but do what you have to. I won't interfere in any way."

"They're finished," Devereaux said.

Brian turned to what was happening in the operation room. He watched Dunne walk out of the room with his chief assistant Louis Lutz.

"Give them ten minutes then we'll get Sean," Helen said.

Brian took her arm. "Do you think She can bring him back?"

"All I know is She put the thought into my mind. We can only do Her bidding..."

* * * * *

An eerie ruby red light filled the Room as Sean Cullen's scarred body was rolled inside. The air was as frigid as the North Pole and there was a strange humming that jarred Brian's nerves. Inside the tank, the queen was plastered to the glass like a giant leech, Her beady eyes as scarlet as blood. The fluid inside the tank violently agitated.

Brian cast a fearful look to the queen. The parasites inside his body squirmed, his own queen rolling within his kidney, making him grunt with the pain of her movements.

"God, that hurts," Cambry said, obviously experiencing the same.

"What do we do now?" Devereaux asked. He was as far back from the tank as space would allow. Not being one of those implanted with the parasites, he was terrified of the creature.

The humming grew in volume until those in the room had to cover their ears to blot out the painful sound. Brian could feel it in the fillings in his teeth, in the marrow of his bones. They all backed away from the source as the tank began to shake and wobble on its base.

Brian's eyes grew wide as Helen pressed herself against him. He knew she would have preferred him to wrap his arms around her, could feel her need but the sound penetrating the pressure of his hands against his ears was driving him insane.

The glass tank burst. The liquid inside spread its fetid waves over those gathered. The queen flung Her body atop Sean, and before Brian's stunned eyes, sank into the ravaged flesh and disappeared from view. A sharp, sulfurous aroma saturated the air and sent Brian and the others into the corridor, gasping for breath, eyes stinging. Gagging, retching, Brian, Helen, Cramden, Devereaux and Mabry slid down the wall, pulling at their clinging garments, trying desperately to pry the searing material from their bodies. Already Brian's flesh was turning red from the caustic intrusion of the liquid into his clothing.

"What the hell is going on?" Dunne shouted as he and Louis Lutz came out of the elevator. They ran toward the group on the floor. "Lou! Check the Room!"

Unable to speak, his lungs singed by the noxious fumes, Brian, along with the other physicians, kicked at the floor and tried desperately to drag oxygen into his rapidly depleting body.

"The tank has ruptured—the queen is gone!" Lutz reported. He was standing beside Dunne, a handkerchief over his mouth, tears running down his cheeks.

Dunne tried to enter the room but backed out, coughing violently and fumbling for a handkerchief. Covering his mouth, he attempted to enter the room again but was driven back.

"Get the biohazard team in here. Now!" he ordered.

"Cullen's body is in there," Lutz said.

Dunne's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"It's on the floor," Lutz reported before turning to make the call to the biohazard team.

Dunne dragged Brian to his feet and shook him, ignoring his gasping. "What have you done?"

Brian's lungs felt baked, his flesh on fire. His vision was gone, the fumes having burned a hole through his retinas. He felt himself being shaken but could do no more than groan.

"What have you done?" Dunne screamed, shaking Brian so savagely, the man's neck snapped beneath the onslaught.

Louis Lutz stepped back as Dunne let go of Brian's limp body and turned his attention to the others. The only one left alive was Helen Bryan. Dunne went to her, jerked her to a sitting position and demanded she tell him what had transpired.

Through gasps and groans, Helen whispered that she had been far enough away from the tank when it exploded that she received a lesser amount of fluid on her. She was also the first to stagger from the room so her lungs were not as damaged. Dunne surmised she might survive the experience but at the moment, all she could do was choke in between moans.

A warning klaxon brought Dunne to his feet. "No!" he shouted, running for the elevator. But even as he reached the stainless steel cage, the doors slid shut, narrowly missing chopping off his fingers. He pounded on the door, demanding it be opened.

"We're quarantined," Lutz said uselessly. "Not even the bio team can reach us now."

Dunne threw back his head and howled in frustration. His lips skinned back from his teeth as he kicked Brian O'Shea's body. "Son of a bitch!"

Lutz knelt beside Helen and used his handkerchief to wipe her face. Dunne hunkered down beside them. She gazed up at them through blurred vision. Her mouth worked but she could no longer speak.

"You brought him here for Her, didn't you?" Lutz asked.

Helen managed a nod, feebly reaching up to grip his arm. Her eyes, though seemingly unable to focus, pleaded with him.

"The gods help us, Helen," Lutz said. "This may be the end of us all."

"Did she tell you why they did this?" Dunne snarled.

Lutz looked up, locked gazes with Dunne and realized for the first time the man he'd worked with most of his adult life was staring at him with a lethality that bordered on the insane.

"The queen instructed them to bring him to Her," Lutz said, holding Dunne's heated glower. "She chose him as Her Prime."

Dunne blinked, his lips parting. "Aye," he said, realization obviously setting in. "She chose him. We knew that, didn't we?"

Lutz nodded in reply but remained silent.

"She chose him," Dunne said, getting to his feet and going to the door of the Room. "She entered him, didn't She? That's where She's gone."

"Aye," Lutz said, shuddering as he looked away from Dunne's avid stare. "She devoured the fledgling you inserted in him and has taken residence in his body."

"We will have a Prime Reaper at last!" Dunne chortled, clapping his hands and hooting with unrestrained glee. "We will have an Assassin's assassin, at last!"

Helen's grip on Lutz's arm tightened. She was trembling from her pain, but also, Lutz realized, most likely trembling with the realization that she may have helped bring something more monstrous than anything the world had ever seen into their lives.

* * * * *

Several days passed before the first signs of healing began in Sean Cullen. On the fifth after his death, five days after the queen invaded his body, the young man's heart began to beat. At eight-fifty-three that morning he took his first labored breath.

"He is going to survive!" Dunne said, his grin wide. He looked at Brian O'Shea. "And you should thank whatever evil star under which you were born that that is the case."

Brian's parasite had healed his injuries. He was now as healthy as he had been before the incident. He was also, however, a virtual prisoner of Dunne and treated as an enemy.

"He's thriving?" Brian asked.

Lutz chewed on his lower lip. "Yes, he is."

Dunne stared at the ravaged flesh. "How long do you think it will take for him to completely heal?"

Lutz shrugged. "No idea."

"You could be a bit more enthusiastic, Lou," Dunne complained.

Lutz ran a hand over his face. "I'm hungry and I've got a bitching headache. And I'm tired of being cooped up in here."

"The quarantine won't last much longer," Dunne snapped. "Be thankful there was any food at all in the break room on this floor."

Lutz exchanged a look with Helen Bryan. The physician pursed her lips and picked at the skin on her hands where the tank's liquid had burned her flesh.

Dunne put his hands on his hips and drew in a long breath, held it then exhaled. He flexed his arms. "I'm going for a walk," he said, heading for the corridor.

"Have fun," Helen snorted and ignored his irritated look.

"Watch what you say to him," Lutz cautioned. "He's a dangerous man."

"He's crazy." Helen threw back the covers from her legs and sat on the sofa. "With any luck, She will remember him keeping Her imprisoned in the tank and make mincemeat out of him when Sean awakes."

Lutz frowned. "If Sean wakes..."

Brian looked at him. "What does that mean?"

"Come here. You too, Helen. Look at him and tell me what you see happening."

Helen arched a thick blonde brow. "What do you mean?"

"Look at him."

Brian and Helen turned their attention to the body on the floor.

"What is it I'm supposed to be looking at?" Helen asked.

"His hair," Lutz answered.

"It's growing back," she reported.

"Growing back very thick – and very black."

Brian blinked. "But Sean has blond hair..."

"Let me show you something interesting." He pointed to Sean's blistered face.

Brian swallowed, the sight unnerving. "He was such a-a handsome young man –"

"With the palest blue eyes, huh?" Lutz hunkered down and slid up Sean's right eyelid.

Brian gasped. The eye peering blankly back at him was a deep brown with amber striations.

"Good lord!" Helen gasped, scrambling to her feet. "What's happening to him?"

Lutz smiled sardonically. "The Queen is healing him."

"But he's changing!" she protested.

Lutz shook his head. "He's healing exactly as She knew him when he was alive."

Brian's eyes grew wide. "Oh, my God, no!"

Helen looked from one man to another. "I don't understand."

Brian staggered to a chair and slumped down. He leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. Tears formed in his eyes. "He's—he's gone."

"Tell me what's happening!" Helen demanded.

Louis Lutz sighed. "The queen never knew the taste of Sean Cullen's blood, so therefore She did not have his DNA. There were no genetic blueprints from which She could work to refashion his destroyed body. Everything had to be regenerated from memory. Exactly as it was on that—that last day."

Helen's mouth sagged open. "You mean..." Her eyes bulged with terror.

Brian shuddered and looked at the body on the floor. "She is doing the only thing She could do—bringing back the man who landed in Ireland many centuries before. She is bringing back Viraidan Cree."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"I know all about Danyon Hart," Deirdre McGregor told her daughter. "I wish to God I didn't, but I do."

Bronwyn was lying on her side, her head in her mother's lap as the woman who had given birth to her gently smoothed Bronnie's hair back from her forehead. "I thought I was dreaming him at first."

Deirdre nodded. "So did I but I learned like you that he isn't a dream but a nightmare yet..."

"Yet what?" Bronwyn asked.

Bronwyn sat up on the settee, running the back of her hand under her chin where tears still clung. She didn't know what had made her tell her mother about Danny Hart. It was such an implausible story, yet the nuns at the convent had known of him, had knowledge of his supernatural powers. She had kept the knowledge of Cedric to herself—not willing to reveal his existence—but she had found herself telling her mother all about Danyon. She was shocked to learn her mother had experience of the Nightwind.

"I got rid of him, Bronnie, and so can you."

"You sent him away?"

"I called him to me," her mother said, staring at something only she could see, "just as you did. I had no idea what I was doing and when he arrived, I became enchanted with my own power."

"I don't understand."

Her mother stood up and walked to the window of the inn and looked out, striving to keep her gaze from going to the bomb-blasted hole in the street, the dark smudges of destruction that spread out from the place where her husband and grandchild had died. "Do you remember Nanna Broderick?" she asked.

"Your grandmother?" At her mother's nod, Bronwyn replied that she vaguely remembered the small, frail woman who had lurked about the house like a shadow.

"She was the one who first summoned him," Deirdre said. "She was always a bit odd and interested in things dealing with the paranormal. My mother swore to me she never knew where Nanna got the Book."

"What book, Mama?" Despite the agony in Bronwyn's heart, her mother's words were managing to distract her from her terrible grief.

"The Book of Shadows. It contains the incantation that can summon a Nightwind."

Chills rippled down Bronwyn's flesh. "And she knowingly summoned him?"

Deirdre nodded slowly, still looking out the window. "From what my mother said, Nanna feared nothing and no one except Daddy Broderick." She glanced around at her daughter. "He used to beat her, Bronnie. As a child, I can remember seeing terrible bruises on Nanna. I heard whispers that he'd beat her 'til she dropped and she'd wound up in the hospital many a time. All that stopped the day Nanna took possession of the Book."

It was raining again and lightning flashed outside the window, lightning Deirdre's face in an eerie blue-white glow. "Nanna took the Book out to the old homestead near Colquitt where she was born and assembled all the things needed to summon the Nightwind and she set about invoking the demon from his lair."

"Did she know what she was getting into?" Bronnie asked, her eyes wide.

"I'm sure she'd read all she could about him from the Book," her mother replied. "It states that he aids lonely women and will champion them, granting them all they desire."

"You read the Book," Bronwyn whispered.

"From cover to cover and over the years I tried out more than a dozen spells from its pages." She shrugged. "I did until I realized that what I was doing was the devil's work and I threw the evil thing into the fire and burned it to ashes." She hung her head. "But by then it was too late. I'd already brought Danyon Hart back into this world and had set him free thinking he'd leave me and mine alone."

"Did Grandma...?"

"Lord, no!" her mother interrupted. "She knew about the thing because Nanna showed it to her, but you remember your Grandmother Grace. She was as God-fearing a woman as has ever walked this earth. If she had ever come across the Book she'd have destroyed it."

"What about Aunt Meg? Does she know about it?" Bronwyn asked.

"She'd heard the old tales about Nanna being a witchy woman but she didn't pay any heed to them. Mama never meant any of us girls to find out about the Book so she never told us it existed, but I was the one who found it and opened the Pandora's box of it, much to my regret."

"And Grandma found out you'd discovered the Book."

A sad smile stretched across Deirdre McGregor's tired face. "It was after I'd brought Danyon to me. There's a part of the ritual where you have to sign your name in the Book alongside his." Her hand tightened on the window curtain. "In blood, of course. Stupid me, I'd used Nanna's old athamé, her ritual knife, and the blade was rusted. The cut I made got infected and I nearly died of blood poisoning. Mama found out what I'd done when I was so sick from the wound." She cocked one shoulder. "Apparently I was bragging about it in my delirium or calling on Danyon. One or the other. Either way, she knew what I'd done even if she didn't know the particulars of it and confronted me when I was in a clearer frame of mind."

"What did she do?" Bronwyn was following her mother's every word.

"Well, she knew of the Book, as I said, and she'd looked for it after Nanna died to destroy it. She asked me where I'd gotten it and I told her down at the old homeplace in Colquitt." Deirdre laughed. "That was the day before the place burned to the ground, and although I don't know it for a fact, I'm fairly sure Mama went down there and set fire to the house, herself."

"You said you had Nanna's ritual knife. Were there other things you took from the old place?"

Deirdre sighed. "I took it all. They were all in a burlap sack inside a wooden chest buried under the back steps."

Bronwyn's forehead creased. "How did you know where to look?"

Her mother turned to look at her. "How do you imagine I knew?"

The hair on Bronnie's arms stirred. "Danny sent you there somehow."

Nodding at her daughter's correct assumption, Deirdre returned her attention to the jagged hole in the pavement below her window. "Nanna had sent him back to his lair in the Abyss before she died, telling him to listen for the cries of her kin should they come. If he heard one of Kathleen's kinswomen crying in need, he had her permission to introduce himself. He took her at her word."

"What happened that you inadvertently called him, Mama?"

Deirdre said nothing for a long time as she stood there gathering her thoughts then she drew in a long breath, exhaling softly. "You know the old saying about being careful what you wish for because you just might get it?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, ma'am," Bronnie acknowledged.

Her mother moved away from the window and sat down in a chair beside the settee. "I was sixteen when I first set eyes on Dermot McGregor and Lord, how I loved that man! I thought he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen. He reminded me of James Dean, the actor, and I just about melted every time I came close to Dermot."

There was pain in her mother's voice, a deep sadness in her eyes that Bronnie knew was in her own. Not just for the father she'd lost but for the man she'd loved, as well.

"He was going with a girl named Johnnie Ree Bullock," Deirdre continued, "and I absolutely loathed that girl! She had Dermot wrapped around her little finger and when she said jump, he asked how high. He didn't even know I existed but I couldn't keep my eyes off him and I wanted him something fierce." She smiled sadly. "I was determined he and I were going to marry."

Deirdre went on to explain how Danyon had appeared to her one night as she lay in her bed crying over how much she wanted Dermot McGregor. She told her daughter how Danyon had promised her he'd grant her every wish and how a sixteen-year-old girl had succumbed to the demon's wily promises and put her feet on a path she wished she'd never trod.

"When he showed up in my bedroom that night—drifting in through the window like a stream of dust motes—I couldn't do anything but lay there as frozen as a TV

dinner." She glanced over at her daughter. "If you're wondering how he could have come in without me inviting him, it was Nanna's old room I'd moved into when your grandfather remodeled the house. Nanna had invited Danyon into that room many a time when she was living with us and I'm sure it wasn't just to talk."

Bronnie's face grew red as a strawberry and she had to look down at her hands.

"Well, he is a handsome man, Bronwyn," her mother reminded her. "I remember him all too well. He wouldn't have come to her as a monster."

"Did you...?" Bronwyn couldn't ask.

"No," her mother said. "All there was between us was him helping me to get your father to notice me and then to rid me of a slight problem later on."

"What kind of problem?"

Deirdre's face hardened. "One I won't discuss with you or anyone else. Only Danyon and I know of it."

"Yet you sent him away."

"I had what I wanted," Deirdre said. "I had gotten Dermot McGregor just as I pledged I would, but like the old saying goes—be careful what you wish for."

"I thought you loved Daddy," she said.

"Oh, I did, but it wasn't the love I thought I wanted. Danyon had spoiled me for other men, even your father. Even though he never laid one hand on me, he showed me what it would be like to be cherished by a man who wanted only me. It was a heady feeling and one every woman should know at least once in her lifetime. If you do succumb to Danyon's wiles..."

"That isn't going to happen!" Bronnie swore. "I'll never let him touch me!"

Deirdre breathed a sigh of relief. "Then you can send him back to the Abyss and that would be the wisest things to do but..." Her mother stood up and began pacing restlessly. "He can be of great use to you, Bronwyn."

Her heart was shattered in her breast and Bronwyn didn't feel she wanted any man at that moment—especially not a demon. The wounds her mother and father had caused her were still fresh, gaping open in places and oozing bitter vetch. Although she could not forget the complicity of her mother in what she had done in helping to take Bronwyn's son from her—and she knew she never would—she could forgive her. After all, her mother was the only immediate family she had left. That forgiveness would take a long time in coming and Bronwyn accepted that. She thought, perhaps, her mother had accepted it, as well.

"You aren't suggesting I sign a blood pact or whatever else you call it with him, are you, Mama?"

"Lord, no!" Deirdre said. "But just having him around wouldn't be such a bad thing." She turned to lock gazes with her daughter. "As long as you know not to sign the pact."

"I'd never do that," Bronnie pledged.

"He's sworn to be your protector, Bronwyn, for you are Nanna Broderick's kin and such is the way the pact between him and her was written. He'll watch over you and that can be helpful."

"He's a demon, Mama. He..."

"He is only as evil as you will allow him to be. If you keep a tight rein on him, he'll look after your interests and nothing more."

Bronwyn thought about it for a moment. "He could keep men from pestering me?" she asked.

"If that's what you want him to do."

"Make sure no harm comes to me?" She looked around the room, half expecting to see the handsome Nightwind.

"Since I gave him his freedom, he'll not show himself around me ever again for that was part of the bargain he and I made that day, but with him near you, I won't worry about you while you're at college or if you should choose the wrong man as a mate."

"I won't be choosing any mate," Bronwyn snapped. "One man breaking my heart is all I can stand."

Deirdre came back to the settee and squatted down in front of her daughter, taking Bronwyn's hands in hers. She held her daughter's wounded gaze with her own heartsick one.

"We were going to take Tiernan back to the States with us. I was going to look after him until you finished your schooling. That was something your father did not want but—as God is my witness, Bronwyn—I would have done it." Fresh tears spilled down her mother's pale cheeks. "I just wanted you to know."

Though her life had been shattered, the man she loved having been torn from her, his betrayal a fiery dart to her soul, and her heart aching for the child she would never hold this side of heaven, Bronwyn made up her mind then and there that she would turn all the grief around. She was determined that the deaths that had come from this horrendous turn of events would not have been lost in vain.

"I want to make a difference to someone else who is suffering, Mama," she said, curling her fingers under to capture the grip her mother already had on her. "I want to help you at the clinic."

"I would like that, baby," Deirdre said, "and your daddy would have been so proud."

Her father's unique betrayal would forever be a deep trough dug through Bronwyn's soul. It would take the duration of her entire life to forgive him for what he'd set into motion and she wasn't sure even that would be enough time. She loved him—would always love him for he was her father—but the forgiveness for his actions was beyond her at that moment.

Deirdre got up from the floor. She needed time to herself before they had to meet with the state department. There were myriad things to do before she could go back to

the States. Bronwyn would be leaving with her, finishing her schooling in America, and her withdrawal from her present school had to be seen to. Arrangements to have whatever was left of their lives salvaged needed to be taken care of.

"We'll be all right, Mama," Bronwyn said as her mother walked to the door. "Danny will see to it."

As though she'd felt a slight touch on her cheek, Deirdre put her hand to her face and shivered. "Yes, Bronwyn," she said, searching her daughter's eyes. "I know he will."

Long after her mother had left her, Bronwyn sat curled up on the sofa. She could feel the Nightwind close by but he was not intruding on her grief. She knew all she had to do was speak his name and he would appear, and she wasn't quite ready for that yet. Accepting him as a permanent part of her life—until she was ready to send him back to his lair—would take some getting used to.

Lying down, she drew her knees up and lay there staring at the wall. She ached for her father and her child, but most of all she ached for Sean. His face—as she had loved it—was fresh in her mind, pushing away the horrific visage she had glimpsed there at the end of his life.

Tears dripped slowly down her cheeks and the last thing she thought of as cleansing sleep claimed her was the Claddagh necklace she had given back to the only man she would ever love.

She had no way of knowing that man was still alive.

About the author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 39 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

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