



Wild Geese

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*And a whisper awoke on the wilderness, sighing,
Like the voice of the heroes who battled in vain,
"Not for Tearlach alone the red claymore was plying,
But to bring back the old life that comes not again."*

CULLODEN

Andrew Lang

Scotland: The Year of Our Lord 1749 The Players

Riona Chattan-Campbell

She knew her quarry. She'd seen him once, from across the market square, in Inverness, it was. Three years ago now, almost four. A giant of a man. Nearly two ells tall and nigh thirteen stone, she'd wager. Long, slightly curling black hair escaped to frame his face in a wild fray that sang of the Highlands. Shoulders broad and powerful enough to swing that Claymore as if 'twere no more than a wee dagger.

What she remembered most were his eyes. Bright, shining green eyes that brooked no quarter even when he'd been surrounded and pushed back towards the water's edge. He'd fought them still, fought until every last man lay dead and he alone stood to wipe the blood from his blade.

Aye, he was a killer, that one.

He'd gotten away, but at what cost? Six men down, good men, and none to pay for their loss. Wives and sisters and daughters left with their crosses to bear. And all so Bonny Prince *Tearlach* could sit in his borrowed castle half a continent away, sipping red wine, or strolling the gardens playing croquet.

The Highlanders were fools, the lot of them, her husband included. And it fell on her now to avenge him as he'd splayed himself on a dead man's blade.

Aye. Well there was nothing else to it. She'd best get on with it, then.

She'd fought him once, in her dreams, defended her honor and that of her clan. She'd taken up her husband's sword, still slick with his own blood, and charged into the fray. She'd woken up damp and winded, her muscles still twitching as she raised her arms to bring the sword crashing down on his head.

She hated. Oh, how she hated. That frightened her more than the man. For what was a man, but so much clay? But hate, that would live on until it consumed all in its path. What would she be when naught else survived but her hatred?

It mattered not. Regret was for those with a future. She had none. She had naught but a debt that must be repaid, and a man with a price on his head whose blood would settle the debt.

For tonight, she had kinsmen to go to who would give her what she needed most. A way to locate the elusive Gray Ghost. Afterward, perhaps, she would have time to mourn. But not now. Definitely not now. She fingered the small bloodstained patch of tartan with which she'd wiped the last drops of blood from her husband's dying lips. No. Not now. She would wait. A woman had to be good at waiting. A woman was always waiting on something, wasn't she?

No matter. Regret was a dish best served cold, and today's meal was a far sweeter one—revenge soaked in the fresh, hot blood that would spill from the man's heart when she sank her dirk in to the hilt.

* * * * *

Captain Ewan MacKenzie

She was a fast ship, the *Anice*, a square-rigged Schooner built to ride the winds. Soon the Western Isles would be but a memory, a picture he'd hold forever in his heart. They'd one more landfall to make before Eire—MacDonald's of Glengarry. Then he would rest.

The early hours before dawn found him ashore, leaning heavily against the low stone wall, closing his eyes for just a moment while he waited. He wouldn't go to sleep. He couldn't. Didn't have time. Couldn't afford the luxury. But he could afford to close his eyes for a moment. Just a moment.

A sliver of sound reached his ears. He jerked awake with a start, his heart beating wildly. *What?* There it was again, the faintest of tinkling laughter, like the tiniest ring of a Faerie bell.

Changeling! He could almost hear his grandmother's warning hiss against the quiet of the night. He searched the darkness, but he could not find the source of the magical Faerie laughter. Ewan shook his head, trying to rid himself of the ridiculous superstition. *Changeling* indeed. He needed no spirits for haunts. Cumberland's whole damnable army was most likely after him. His capture would not be enough. Not any more. Cumberland wanted him dead.

He'd lived with a price on his head for almost four years now. The wanted posters and broadsides called him the Gray Ghost. Untraceable. Unstoppable. Made him out to be some sort of a monster. Or a hero, depending on who was telling the story. He knew better, either way. Heroes were soon enough martyrs.

He was just a Highlander, an exile in his own home, surviving the best he could. If he helped some along the way, 'twas a debt he owed, and he was one to repay his debts. He was a careful man, a cautious man, one who knew the firths and the bays of his native land as well as he might have known his own daughter's face, had she lived. He could smell the tides when they changed and read the danger in a man's face before he reached for his dirk. He provided a service to those in need, and he took his reward where he might.

Still, the *Changeling's* laughter gave him pause, made him remember the softer things in life he'd once taken for granted. He couldn't recall the last time he'd bathed in the cool, clean water of a highland spring, or slept 'neath the clear, crisp skies, the smell of the heather a sweet drug to his senses, the sound of the wind his lullaby.

Hell. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. Sleep brought no sweet release for him. Not any more.

No matter. There was work to be done, and the night was the time for doing it.

But not for long. His work was almost done. He could feel it. Could smell it on the air like the changing tides. His time was almost up. His very existence was beginning to pose a threat to those he called friends.

Still the sound of Faerie laughter, as sweet and soft as the song of a bubbling brook, haunted him, bidding him pause, telling him to bide where he was a wee bit longer, just to wait while the sound grew closer, just to rest for another moment or two...just to close his eyes...

Chapter One

"Captain MacKenzie?"

Ewan jerked awake with a start. He straightened himself, stepping out of the shadows to meet his man. "Here."

"Everything's at the ready. Five women, three bairns, four stout lads, three lasses, and six barrels of whiskey for your troubles."

"I canna' take your whiskey, MacDonald."

"Ye can, and ye will. 'Tis all I've got to pay ye with, MacKenzie, and I'll not be havin' your charity."

There was aught these clans had left but their pride. Ewan swallowed his own and took the offered hand. "Aye, then."

Working as quietly as they could, the men stowed the families and their few worldly possessions into the longboats. It was always worst for the children. Roused out of their beds in the wee hours of the night, asked to follow a stranger where he would lead them, they were frightened and tired and trying so hard to be brave. Ewan pitched his voice low, trying to quiet the little ones. "Come along, then. Move quiet now. Give your sister a hand there, that's a good lad."

"How long will it take?"

"You'll be in France in six days, lad, the good Lord willin'."

"Six? Da' told us 'twas but two!"

"Aye, and it would be, were we goin' straight across. We canna'. The North Sea's runnin' too high, lad, and we've more cargo to load, as well."

"We've to go south, then, along the coast of Eire?"

Ewan smiled despite himself. "You'd be Jamie, then, wouldn't ye?"

"Aye. How'd ye know that?"

"You've a good head on your shoulders, lad, and a good memory for your lessons. Your Da' talked about ye. Said ye were a bright lad, and always one for questions."

"Ye knew my Da'?"

"Aye. That I did. We fought together. He spoke o' ye often. You're a brave lad, and the makings of a fine man, he told me, and I can see he had the right of it. He'd be proud of ye, takin' care of your mother and sisters the way ye have."

The young man grew pensive. "Were ye with Da' at Culloden, then?"

"Aye."

"Was he a hero?"

Memories swamped Ewan. "'We were all heroes that day, lad. But your Da' was one of the best."

"Are we goin' to France to join up wi' the Bonny Prince?"

'Twas all Ewan could do to keep his voice from betraying his disgust with the *Bonny Prince*. "I've no notion where *Tearlach* might be o' the moment, lad. I'm takin' ye to stay wi' your kin in France. Those o' Clan MacDonald who escaped are with our allies, the Dillons. You'll be safe there, and things will be better."

"Why can Clan MacDonald no' come home?"

Ewan swallowed hard. "None of us could go home after Culloden, lad. There's a price on our heads. 'Twas your uncle, Angus MacDonald, who sent for ye. He's been working to build a new life for ye in France. You'll no' be alone. 'Tis many an old friend you'll find there, and others to follow."

Many others, Ewan thought. Soon the Highlands would be empty, and Dillon's Regiment would be full of "Wild Geese" — Scotsmen and Irishmen alike searching for a place to call home.

* * * * *

Ewan was tempted to take a last look at the shoreline they'd left behind, but Grandmother's voice whispered again. *Don't look back, boy. Never look back.* He stared forward, instead, peering out through the night at the Sea of the Hebrides. The night's "Geese" were all stowed safely in steerage. Now there was just him and the sea – and a dozen seasoned men who shared the night's solitude with him, moving silently about their tasks.

The softest of sounds distracted him. *The Changeling again.* Evan turned at the sound of her laughter. "There's a good lad. Get ye below now. Your mother will be worried about ye."

No, not a *Changeling*, but merely a woman. Someone's wife, someone's mother, her worldly possessions in a satchel slung across her back. The tight set of her shoulders, the way her elbows hugged her sides, the way she touched the child before she sent him on his way, told him more than words could. She put on a brave face for the little ones, but it was only a façade.

He'd noticed her earlier. She was the kind of woman a man would notice, any where, any time. She was tall, for a woman, with a long, thick braid the color of the last light of a Highland sunset that reached down her back and well past her waist. As she stooped to help the boy back down between decks, the braid slid over her shoulder. Small curls escaped to wisp around her face like ivy on a gatepost.

Her head would fit neatly under his chin. He'd caught the scent of her, heather and clear mountain mornings and all the scents of the Highlands rolled into one, and nearly forgotten where he was and what he was about.

Hell. It could have been any woman. After so many months, so many years, even the roughest old crone would have looked welcoming. Women meant home, and hearth, and arms to comfort. Women meant fresh clothes and warm meals and a warm, willing body with a welcoming heart.

The *Changeling's* laughter sounded again. Though he heard the strain in it this time, warmth stirred in his groin at the sound of her voice. Emotions flooded him. The need

to possess, to protect. Ewan shook himself from his daydreams. 'Twas no use to wish for what could not be. 'Twas only the scent of her, fresh, clean woman-scent, that had distracted him. Though truth be told she was no old crone. 'Twas handsome she was, a fine, bonny lass. Had he been younger, less tired, more inclined to think of his own needs and less those of others...

This wasn't the time to concentrate on the needs of the body. Had it been, his greatest need was to sleep. Sleep, that elusive balm he could not quite reach.

Changeling indeed. Who was she? Where had she come from? Which family was she with? Too many faces, too many nights collecting souls in the dark. He'd seen her with children before, but not the children she was with now. He didn't know what household she was with, couldn't be sure when she'd joined them, or where. He didn't like that. Didn't like not knowing.

He'd ask among the men. See who had brought her, what family she was from, who was to be responsible for her at the other side of the crossing. Something about her looked almost familiar, as if he should know her, know of her. The lost memory nagged at him, teasing him from just beyond his reach.

Changeling... Once again he shook off Grandmother's warning. He was getting too old for this game. Too soft. 'Twould not do to let himself be blindsided by a woman just because his body desired the comfort he might find in the softness of her curves. He would watch her for a bit, to be sure where she fit in. He had not gotten this far on blind faith and trust. He was a careful man. A cautious man.

That was the reason he'd decided to watch the woman. Aye, that was it.

That was why, once the night's consignees were safely stowed below decks and his ship but a memory in that once familiar harbor they would never see again, he found himself standing on the foredeck, instead of tucked into his cabin, stretched out in his bed, where he might at least garner a few hours rest before the nightmares jolted him awake.

He needed to keep an eye on his *Changeling* lass.

She stopped to stand beside him, now, her gaze followed the line of the waves out across the ocean's shifting face, almost where he had stood staring an hour earlier. "Why do ye do it, Captain?" Her voice was no more than a whisper in the dark, the soft sweetness a balm to his heart.

"'Tis not safe for them here. 'Tis no life for a Highlander, scrapin' a living out only to give all he works for to an English laird. A slave on his own lands, forbidden even his kilt. I'd have the children to know something better than we were born to. I'd have them know freedom."

"And what about ye? Will ye find freedom in France?"

"This is my last run. I'm bound for Virginia. They say there's land there not unlike the Highlands. Land that can be had for no more than the labor of a strong back and willing hands."

"Aye," she whispered to the night, her hair a fine mist obscuring her face. "I had ye wrong. 'Tis no the money, is it? Nor even the glory of the chase. 'Tis an idealist y'are."

"An idealist? Aye, if ye will. No Scotsman's a stranger to hard work. I've a mind to leave somethin' to my children the King in England canna' be takin' away. What about ye? Is one o' the wee bairns your own?"

Pain flickered across her face. "Me? No. I've no one at all any more."

He knew her now, and still he could not escape the magic of her voice. It lulled him to a safe, quiet place where he might spend eternity wrapped in her arms. "You'd best get on with it, then," he warned the back of her head as he stood drinking in the scent of her.

She turned to face him at that, almost moving into his arms, a half smile easing the lines of strain and worry along her jaw line. "Get on with it, Captain?"

"Aye. I know ye, *Changeling*. My grandmother brought me up in the old ways, so that I might ken the likes of ye. Are ye not here to seduce me, then, so that I might follow ye like a lamb to the slaughter?"

She laughed at that—a throaty laugh that started deep in her diaphragm. "So it's a *Changeling* I am, is it? Nothing more than a wee bit o' Faerie Fluff? And was this my plan, I suppose you'd no deny me the seduction?"

She moved closer. Too close. All the warning bells in his mind went off as he reached out to cup her jaw in his palm, looking down into eyes both wary and yet vulnerable. "I am but a man. I would deny ye nothing, Lass."

Changeling laughter tinkled like tiny Christmas bells, quickly swept away by the ocean breeze. "You're a strange man, Captain, a strange man indeed. What makes ye think I'm here to do ye harm? If harm ye would call it."

He stared at her lips as she bantered with him, watching the curves undulate until he forgot what he knew of her. "Mayhap I was just prayin' for the seduction after all."

The dancing lips formed into a steady smile as she leaned forward. Hands he had not consciously seen moving buried themselves in his hair, pulling his head down toward hers. Warm breath tickled his beard along his lower lip. As if time had slowed to let him catch every nuance of an exquisite torture, he felt his heartbeat pumping blood that surged through his veins now like liquid fire. Her lips met his, soft and yet demanding, tasting first in a light butterfly of a kiss, then attacking, hot and wild, as she sucked his bottom lip between hers.

His hands took on a life of their own, skimming down her back until they reached the curve of her hips, admiring the firm, round cheeks of her buttocks even as he pulled her against the length of his body. Desire swamped his senses, swelling until it became a hot, tangible scent in the air, nearly overwhelming him. He could feel the heat coiling in his groin, his body demanding things his mind knew he had no right to ask of her. He could feel the outline of her curves beneath the fine wool she'd wrapped herself in. She wore the soft gray-blue wrap in the traditional style of a plaid, belted around her waist with the excess draped over her shoulders like a cape to protect her from the chill of the evening air.

Her body wasn't chilled now. She felt hot and alive under his touch. The hard intake of her breath pushed her breasts against his chest in bold relief with each pause for air. His body betrayed him, the heat of his own reaction to her threatening to consume him.

No. He closed his eyes, drawing in slow, steady breaths, his logical mind warring for dominance with his physical desires. He had to keep reminding himself that she was a chance he could not afford to take. She was dangerous. He was... She was...

"Do ye have a name, or shall I just call ye Captain?"

A name? He searched his mind, even such simple knowledge nearly out of his reach. "Ewan. Ewan MacKenzie."

"Ewan. I like that. I must tell ye, Ewan, for a proper seduction, 'tis necessary that the man in question should remain awake. And unless I miss my guess, you're out on your feet. How long has it been since ye slept, Ewan MacKenzie?"

"Slept?" He blinked slowly, trying to make sense of her words. What was she doing? Her arms pulled at him with a strength he'd not thought her capable of, steering him away from the ship's rail and the moonlight that reflected off the water.

"Aye, sleep, ye fool of a man. Can ye no' even remember? Ye stagger like a drunk, near passed out on your feet, and ye fancy yourself carryin' on conversations with Faeries. Ye walk these decks as if the world depends on ye for each moment of its turning. Do ye not crew your ship wi' men ye can trust? Must ye do everything yourself to see that it's done?"

Had he thought her soft and vulnerable? There was nothing soft about her as she towed him to his cabin, bullying him with a sharp hiss when he realized what she was about. Somehow they'd reached the half-deck, but he froze at his cabin door, afraid to go in. "'Tis a good crew, loyal men all, and I do rest," he argued, though even to him his voice sounded like that of a petulant two-year old.

She took no notice of his protest. "Rest is no' sleep."

He was so tired. Still, if he slept, the nightmares would come. "I canna'."

Hands that were busy with his clothing paused on their mission. "Canna'? Nay, I think no'. Willna' is more like it. To bed with ye, Ewan MacKenzie."

The sound of her voice kept him off balance. His name sounded like music on her lips. She was right, and he knew it. He was swaying on his feet like a drunkard. But still, the promise of the bed was a tainted one. He knew how it would end. "Will ye stay with me, *Changeling*? Perhaps your magic can do what I canna'." He knew he sounded desperate, but he didn't care any more.

She opened her mouth, as if to speak, then snapped it shut again. She turned away, and he thought she would leave, but instead she bolted the door behind them, as if to keep him from escaping.

'Twas but a moment's work for her to strip down to her ankle length shift. She slid into the narrow bed, holding the bedcovers open in welcome to him.

A quick tug on the tie at his waist and he stepped out of his trews as they puddled about his feet, a smile twisted his lips as he slid in beside her, his body a sodden mass that defied his will. "Your virtue is safe with me this night, *Changeling*."

Her musical laughter reached his ears from far away as she tucked the covers around them. "You're welcome to do anything ye have the strength for, Ewan MacKenzie."

"Do what ye must, *Changeling*," he whispered, his voice but a sleepy mumble, even to his own ears. "I'll no' hold it against ye."

"I ken no' what ye mean, Ewan."

She was too far away for him to answer. Instead he smiled as the *Changeling* performed her greatest seduction of all. As sleep dimmed his eyes, he prayed her magic would last.

* * * * *

The clank and rattle of chains awakened him. Yet even as he opened his eyes he knew he was not awake, but dreaming once again. He feared the thing that haunted him, feared her and needed her both. He twisted, trying to find her in the darkness.

Ewan.

"Màili?" He began to shake as the ghostly voice called out to him.

"Ewan?" Another voice. Closer, but groggy with sleep.

Ewan! Release me, Ewan!

"I know not how to help ye, Màili! I canna' find ye. Tell me what to do!"

Release me, Ewan! Please!

"Ewan. Ewan, listen to me." Two voices. One closer, one farther away. One pair of hands, caressing his face, pulling him back to her world. "'Twas but a dream, Ewan. A nightmare."

"Aye." 'Twas all the answer he could manage.

Ewan...

Strong hands pulled him close, pillowing his head on a pair of unbound breasts. His hand traced their fullness, a warm tingle flooding his groin. "Ye shouldna' be here. 'Tis verra late. 'Twas wrong of me to ask ye to stay. The good women in the between decks will think ye a wanton."

"Let the gossips think what they will. Go back to sleep, Ewan."

"Aye," he agreed, already seduced by the gentle sway of the ship, rocking him like a young bairn in her arms.

Chapter Two

Ewan! Release me, Ewan!

He could hear Màili's voice, calling him, but the dark mists swirled around him, obscuring his vision. "I canna find ye, my love!" he cried into the mists.

Release me, my love. Please! It is time.

"Ewan. Come back to me, Ewan. I'm real. I'm here. Touch me, Ewan. I'm real."

Was she real? Any more real than his dreams? It mattered not. He would have what she offered. Warm skin shivered briefly as he laid his hands on her shoulders. He bent his head to touch his lips to the pulse at her neck. Strong. Steady. He kissed his way slowly up to her jaw, mesmerized by the tiny shivers that met his touch.

He framed her face with shaking hands, kissing her lips at last. A gentle, hesitant return. Soft, sweet lips trembled beneath his, parting slightly when he stroked them with his tongue. A small gasp of surprise when he sucked her bottom lip between his teeth, and then her tongue slid along the length of his, rubbing, caressing, arousing, until he fought back, devouring her with the need of too many months of passion unspent, too many nights of fear and loneliness. Beneath his tunic his shaft swelled hot and hard, so ready to burst at her touch that the feeling was more pain than pleasure.

Her hands, stronger than he'd thought they could be, pushed him back enough to put a small space between them. "Look at me, Ewan."

He forced himself to slow his breathing. He'd never yet forced a woman, and he wouldn't start now. He ran a shaking hand over his face. "Forgive me, Lass. I didn't mean to —"

One finger across his lips stopped his words. "But tell me that ye ken who you're with, Ewan. I wouldn't be a stand-in for a dream, nor a memory you'll regret in the morning."

“’Tis ye who’ll regret this, *Changeling*. I shouldna’ have asked ye to stay.”

“What makes ye think ye had any say in the matter, Ewan MacKenzie?”

’Twas no *Changeling* laughter now, but the sensual, demanding laugh of a woman who knew well what she wanted. Her hands stroked down his sides toward the hem of his tunic, capturing the thin bit of fabric to raise it up out of the way. Her breathing hitched as she stared at him, her laughter fading.

Even her stare couldn’t dim his raging erection. He wanted her to touch him, anywhere would do, but *somewhere*. Anything but just staring at him like that. Just when he feared he could stand no more, her hand moved. One finger reached out to trace the hard, thickened length of him, carefully brushing over the head of his weeping cock, then raised to her lips to meet the tip of an innocent tongue. He shook so violently that he thought he might come just watching her.

He struggled to find his voice before the magic faded and his *Changeling* vanished forever. “Have ye a name, *Changeling*? One fit for a mere mortal to speak?”

She laughed her silvery laugh at that. “I am called Riona. Riona Chattan.”

“Riona...” The name even sounded like magic.

“Do ye mind my looking? ’Tis fine a sight ye are to look at, Ewan MacKenzie.”

“You’re daft, woman, but look all ye want. Do what ye will with me, Riona. I am yours.”

“What she would” apparently included torturing him, for she pushed his shoulders back flat against the narrow bed, moving to kneel between his legs. As she bent over him her braid fell forward over her shoulder. A brief frown of annoyance puckered her forehead. When she would have batted it back behind her, he stilled her hand, reaching to slip the tether from the end of her braid.

“Now just look what you’ve done.” Laughter sparkled in her eyes, and a wicked smile curved over her lips. She plucked at the braid and shook her head, freeing the dark fire-red mass until it nearly engulfed her. “Fool man. Know ye not to leave Medusa well enough in check?”

He bit his lip, trying not to groan in pleasure and frustration as she bent her head slightly to let the tips of her hair sway back and forth over his skin. His hands, no longer content to be still and compliant, swept up her hips and along her sides, skimming her shift with them. She obligingly lifted her arms, letting him pull it over her head. When he did so the whole mass of her hair tumbled through the neck opening, engulfing him in its cloud. She looked up, an apology on her lips as he brushed the soft strands away from his face.

"Do na' move." She hovered there, naked except for a silver cross on a chain that dangled between her breasts, her sweet Faerie face framed by a cloud of red curls. "Do ye know how beautiful ye are, Riona? There is a special kind of magic about ye. No *Changeling* ever could match the picture ye make."

"There's so much poetry in ye, Ewan. I never expected poetry from ye. Especially no' in your bed. Mayhap *you* are the *Changeling*, come to steal my soul with your fine words and your gentle hands."

"Poetry is the sound of your laughter on a night breeze. The way ye touch the children. The way I'm wantin' ye to touch me now. But be gentle with me, Lass. It's been a long time."

"Aye. Longer than I care to think about." The smile left her lips for a moment, but then it was back as she ducked her head, making her fiery curls pool against his skin. She caught up a lock of her hair so that the ends stuck out of her hand like a paintbrush. He closed his eyes. A groan escaped his lips, but he had no desire to stop her.

He didn't expect to feel the brush of those soft bristle tips against his throat, or tracing over his chest. Or teasing his nipples. He opened his eyes again to find her grinning down at him as he jerked spasmodically away from her touch, only to push himself back at her as quickly as he could.

Her magical laughter met him as she obliged, lowering her head to press her lips over his nipple through her hair, her woman's heat so close to his cock she nearly

scalded him. He moved his hips, thrusting blindly, pushing his cock against the soft curls that framed her passage.

"Mmm." She rolled her hips to rub against the length of him, her eyes dropping closed as she took up a slow, steady rhythm. "Do ye know how good ye feel to me, Ewan MacKenzie?"

"Good is it? You're killing me, woman. But don't stop. I'll die if ye stop now."

But she did stop, rolling back far enough to leave his cock standing there, alone and exposed, jumping madly for the want of her. When he raised his head enough to see what she was about, he said a quick prayer. "Dear God in Heaven forgive me for what e'er I ha' done to offend thee..."

His words choked off with a sharp hiss as the brush of her hair along the underside of his cock had his hips jerking hard off the bed. He could feel his pulse pounding through his cock so hard he could barely focus on anything else. "Dear God, woman. Be merciful."

But she was not. She moved her paintbrush down the bottom side of his cock once more, tweaking nerves he'd thought long dead from disuse, to tease his balls with the soft tickle of her hair along the sensitive surface of his scrotum. He moved his hand to squeeze himself, hard, near the base of his cock, afraid if he did not he would spurt into her hair like some untried lad.

Well, two could play at this game. As soon as some level of control returned, he scooped up handfuls of her hair, using it to explore her delicious curves, touching everything he could reach except her breasts. Those were special. His eyes feasted on them. Large, full breasts that had seen the nursing of a child. He would ask her about that later. For now he framed them with his hands, lifting and shaping, then releasing. The nipples fascinated him. Large, dark coral nipples that would fill his mouth with the sweet taste of her skin.

There was patience. And then there was torture. Smiling, he circled the line of her areola with the tips of her hair, watching in fascination as the large dark circle puckered

into a smaller, tightening frame that lifted the nipple itself towards him, as if begging for his touch. He wanted to be greedy, to take, but there was no need to hurry. He teased the very tip with the brush of her hair until she threw back her head. "Ewan!"

"Talk to me, Riona. Tell me what ye want, my beautiful *Changeling*. I love the sound of your voice."

"Want?" Her hands stilled on his skin. "Make me see myself the way you do, Ewan. Make me believe I am beautiful. I've never felt beautiful before. Touch me. Kiss me. Anywhere. Everywhere."

He kissed her lips, first, suckling her lips between his. "Make ye believe? Ye are beautiful, Lass. How could ye not know?"

"I'm no' a vain woman, Ewan. I ken what I am. Plain and ordinary and well past my youth. There's nothing special about me 'til you look at me, but every woman needs to feel beautiful, at least once in her life."

He pulled her down to draw her nipple into his mouth, the bright coral tip peaking for him like a rose about to bloom. He kissed first, then sucked, pulling the nipple into his mouth like some delectable treat, swiping his tongue across the center once, twice, then nipping gently as he sucked.

Pulling her to him brought his cock to direct pressure against the curls of her nether lips again. His cock fought him, reaching for her even as she attempted to capture it, but he would not rush this. No. It had been too long. The future was too uncertain. Or perhaps too certain. He might never have the chance to pleasure a woman again. He would take the time to do this right. His *Changeling* would be worth the restraint.

She twisted above him, first arching her back, then pulling him closer. As he sucked at first one breast, then the other, she ground against him, groaning in pleasure that quickly became a demand for more. He slid a hand between them, taking his cock in his fist to use like an instrument of her torture. She gasped, moaning as he outlined her clitoris, her body trembling beneath his touch.

"Ewan!"

"Aye? Is there somethin' ye want, Lass?"

"Oh, aye." She squirmed against him, reaching between them to replace his hand with her own. "I want you. I want to feel the heat of ye inside me, filling me, Ewan."

"No' just yet, Lass." A woman who did not know she was beautiful deserved so much more. Holding her tightly, he reversed their positions, drawing a gasp—either of surprise or of fear—from her. "No' just yet. Patience."

"I don't want patient. I want ye now!"

Ewan chuckled as she squirmed up against him, catching her hands as she pulled at him. If only he had something...her hair. It might not hold very well or for very long, but then, he didn't need sailors' knots for what he had in mind. He twisted a thick lock into a loosely wound rope, and wrapped it around her wrists with two double half hitches.

"What are ye doing?" she shrieked, fighting to escape him in earnest.

"Teaching ye patience." He tucked the ends in between her hands. "If ye go moving those hands about much I imagine you'll remember where the other end o' that rope is anchored. Don't be pullin' your hair out, my beauty." He kissed her before she could protest again, holding her still with the weight of his body, silencing her words with his tongue, until she quieted beneath him, her struggles directed only toward pressing her body more closely against his.

"Remember where ye are, Lass. 'Tis the captain's quarters. Ye came here of your own free will. I make the rules here." She shivered beneath him, despite the heat of their bodies. Good. He wanted her a little afraid. 'Twould heighten her senses, make her response to him that much more powerful.

He kissed his way down her body, his hands following, both caressing and anchoring her firmly. Still, she seemed to have no notion what he was about when his kisses reached her lower belly. He sat up over her enough to take a good, long look at her, spread out before him like a delectable banquet.

She shivered in anticipation, no longer looking quite so frightened, as he gently spread her legs, slipping his hands beneath her hips. The soft, pale skin of her inner thigh pebbled with goose bumps as he kissed his way from her knee back up to her damp red curls, taking his time, letting the anticipation build within them both.

"Ewan? What are ye — ya canna' mean to — Ewan!"

She screamed as she felt the first tickle of his breath over her mons, arching hard off the bed toward his waiting tongue. He obliged her with a long lick over her slit, stopping to circle the small nub of her clit. He chuckled as that tiny little button grew longer, as if seeking his touch.

"Ewan!" she shrieked.

A quick look told him what he wanted to know. She was so focused on him, her body drawn so taut, that she'd forgotten what little actually held her bound. All she really had to do was relax her grip on her hair and it would work itself loose quickly enough. But her hands were fisted so tightly there was no chance she'd escape.

Good.

He'd thought she would take him in his sleep. She'd waited too long. But then, she couldn't have known about the nightmares. No one knew.

He wanted her so focused on him that the world beyond them ceased to exist. He wanted to touch her in places no man had touched her before. He wanted her to forget why she'd come here. He wanted her to give herself over to him totally.

You're a fool, MacKenzie. A doddering fool. You've no time for a woman who'd just as soon see ye dead. Give her a boat and an oar and set her adrift.

Better the enemy you ken than friend ye ken not.

He rubbed her soft skin with the bristles of his short-cropped beard before he explored her again with his tongue. She writhed beneath him, her body straining to reach any part of him. All she could do without her hands to support herself or to pull at him was to push with her shoulders or hips and to alternately clamp her thighs closer or spread herself wider for him.

“Ewan, no!” she screamed as the tip of his tongue rimmed her opening. “No! No’ like this! Ewan! I want...”

Her protests turned to an incoherent cry as he pushed his tongue deep within her, his grip on her buttocks allowing her no quarter. Her whole body went stiff as she clenched around him, her juices flooding him with the sharp, rich taste of her release.

Short, whimpering sobs shook her as she pressed against his mouth. He slid his tongue out to tease at her swollen clit, pleased with himself as she arched up again, her thighs spread wide for him, her whole body drawn as taut as a bow string.

Keep your friends close. Keep your enemies closer.

Is this close enough, Grandfather?

Chapter Three

She could have been so much more to him. The soft beauty of her touched him, awakened feelings he'd thought buried along with his Màili so long ago. But this was no place for such feelings. He rolled her to her stomach, covering her with his weight, rubbing his cock hard against her sweet ass in long, slow circles. "Ye should have slipped away while ye had the chance, *Changeling*," he whispered against her ear. "Why are ye still here?"

He did not think she would answer, but she pushed herself up on her elbows, her words muffled by the bedclothes as she tried to find a position where she could breathe without ripping the hair from her head. "Can a woman no' wish to share the pleasures of a man's bed without a reason?"

"Many a woman can and does, Lass, but you've no' the look of a whore about ye."

"Must ye question whatever fortune throws your way, then, Ewan? 'Tis an old and honest profession, I've heard."

"I question everything. 'Tis why I'm alive." He lifted her hips, kneeling between her splayed thighs, rubbing his cock slowly down the cleft of her ass.

"The children." She thrust her ass back against him, hard. "Many a woman tires of being alone. But 'twas the children that won my heart to ye. A man who cares so much for the wee ones canna' be all bad."

"No man is all bad. Nor all good." He slipped his cock between her folds, its weeping head so close to where he wanted it. "No woman is all bad, Riona. Ye feel so good to me now. What do ye want from me, *Changeling*? What do ye need from me?"

She thrust her ass higher, her voice a muffled sob.

He slipped his finger into her, probing her liquid heat. "I didna' quite understand ye, Lass."

“Fuck me!”

He wanted to laugh. Would have laughed, except that he needed her so badly he was shaking as he slid his swollen cock into her tight, wet sheath. Her muscles clenched around him, fighting him, as if trying to both hold him frozen in place and draw him farther in at the same time. He'd have moved slowly, made this last as long as possible, but she thrust her hips back at him hard, burying his length to the balls.

Had he thought her helpless like this? She was not. True, she couldn't reach him with her hands, but she rolled her hips, the inner muscles of her thighs helping her to squeeze him so hard he could not find the line between pleasure and pain. She set the pace, squeezing and releasing, pushing and pulling, driving him to pump deeper, harder, faster, until the bed beneath them groaned shrilly with each thrust. Had it not been anchored to the cabin floor he was sure it would have launched itself across the room.

His balls ached with the need for release, drawn up hard and tight so that each slap of her ass against him squeezed them against the curve of her thighs, her tight, hot cunt so wet that her fluids washed out with each inward thrust, to run down over his balls in an agonizing tease. She fought his bonds now, trying to tear her hands loose from their bindings. He knew what she wanted, but he would not grant that release. Not yet. Not yet.

“Captain's quarters,” he reminded her. “Captain's rules. Your hands stay bound.”

She cried out, sobbing in frustration, but her hands ceased to fight their bindings. As a reward he slipped one hand under her, teasingly close to her mons, then changed direction, capturing a swaying breast to pinch the nipple sharply between his thumb and forefinger.

A long, convulsive shudder wracked her body. “Ewan!” She drew out his name as if it were a curse. In and out, in and out, savoring each stroke. Slower. Deeper. Harder. Faster. He rolled his hips from side to side, varying the directions of his thrust until he hammered into her from every possible angle.

"Ewan!" she screamed again.

He abandoned her breast to bury his fingers in the steaming heat of her soft fleshy folds, his fingers working her clit in time to his thrusts, teasing, coaxing, demanding. When she broke again, his name on her lips, he followed her down as she collapsed, his seed washing over them both in a raging torrent.

Too much. Too much need, too much anger, too much pain, too much desire. Too much of everything, and nowhere near enough. He could possess her body, but never her soul. He cuddled her in his arms, wiping the hair away from her face, bending his head over her shoulder to kiss her tenderly. "Do what ye must, *Changeling*," he managed as he fought to keep his eyes open. "I'll die now a satisfied man."

"You're a fool, Ewan MacKenzie," she scolded as she let go of the small lock of hair that had kept her wrists bound. She rolled in his arms as her wrists worked free, reaching not for her knife, but instead tangling her fingers in his hair to pull his head down to hers. Her kiss was soft and gentle and fierce as her temper, soothing and scalding all at once. "Go to sleep, Ewan. You're safe with me this night."

His arms tightened around her, the need for what she could not give him as fierce as any gale that had ever raged on the seas. She would kill him. He knew it. Maybe not tonight. Perhaps not with her knife. But one way or the other, this wisp of a *Changeling* would be the death of him yet.

* * * * *

He was breathing hard, fighting to maintain some semblance of control, from the first flood of sensations as she slowly slid her hot, wet sheath down over his burning cock. 'Twas a tight fit, but gradually she took in more and more of him 'til she held his whole length within her. He wanted more, so much more, but if she moved just now, he feared he might embarrass himself. He grasped her hips, steadying her, holding her in place. That didn't help at all, for he could feel her around him, her muscles quivering, contracting, already demanding more.

He shook his head, trying to clear the fog from his brain. He recognized his surroundings. He was in his own quarters, aboard the *Anice*. The woman who had just claimed his cock was familiar. The *Changeling*. How much time had passed or who had woken whom up or he was no' quite sure, but he knew the feel of her cunt slowly squeezing his cock into a burning ball of need.

Her hands rose to frame her breasts, lifting them so that he had a clear view, rolling and tweaking the nipples harder than he ever would have, her head falling back, her hair draping over his knees now, as she rose up over him, sliding almost off of him before she came down hard over him again. She was shaking already, her tight sheath threatening to close around him at any moment, her juices running over him in a scalding wash. He held her hips firmly, not content to let her set the pace, thrusting up hard into her, burying himself to the hilt before he pulled back out.

"Ewan! No!"

Laughing, he thrust in again as hard as he could. Slow, measured strokes gave way to hard and fast as she cried out his name. Deeper, harder, her muscles tightening around him on each stroke, as if to hold him, her fingers pinching and stroking her nipples for him, as strong a visual aphrodisiac as ever he could withstand. He slid a hand up her back to pull her down over him, sucking one nipple into his mouth, his tongue stroking in rhythm to their bodies' movements.

She was close. So close. He could feel the building within her, her body as taut as a drawn bow's string. "Now," he demanded. "Come for me, Riona. Come for me now."

"No! Ewan, I canna'!"

Harder, faster, deeper, he thrust up into her with all the strength he could call to play, her body begging for release over him. He slid his hand between them, pushing into her wet, slippery folds.

"Ewan! No! I canna' —I—Ewan!" she screamed as he found her clit, stroking hard with a finger on either side in rhythm to his merciless thrusts. Fiery red hair

enshrouded his face, then disappeared as her head flung back and forth, wordless moans ripped from her throat.

Her tight sheath convulsed around him so hard he could barely move. The pressure of her muscles fisting around him was more than he could withstand. He could feel his balls drawing up hard against his cock, ready to spurt. "Riona!" he warned.

Her knees locked around his hips, and she thrust herself down, harder, tighter, her body milking him for all he could give her. She shuddered around him again as he stilled within her, a sound like a muffled sob escaping as she fell forward across his chest, her thick mane a blanket now over them both.

She held him when he would have moved to settle her more comfortably beside him, her body still clenching around his cock as he grew softer, smaller within her. He stroked her hair back from her face, trying to read her expression in the soft glow of the moonlight that filtered through his cabin window. "Do ye know how beautiful ye are to me, Riona?"

"Mayhap ye might have to try to convince me again," she chuckled. "Later."

He pulled the bedcovers up over them. "Aye. Much later." And as she snuggled there against him, her Faerie magic pulled him back to the land of dreams.

Chapter Four

"Are ye leavin', then, Lass?"

She turned to face him, his brush in her hand, a look of guilty surprise on her face. "I'll no leave ye, Ewan. No' without sayin' goodbye. I was just about freshinin' up a wee bit."

"Do ye ken what a picture ye make, standin' there brushin' your hair? I could just lie here and watch ye forever."

She turned away again, biting her lip. "I shouldna' have used your brush without askin' ye."

The look of her reminded him of a doe, listening to the sound of danger approaching, ready to bolt. "Come here, Lass. Bring the brush with ye."

Even her walk, as she reluctantly crossed the few steps between them, reminded him of a frightened doe. He didn't have to ask. She handed him the brush. She looked like she'd rather run, but she sat beside him when he patted the bed.

She wasn't cringing. Not precisely. But 'twas only through the sheer force of her will, of that he was sure. Anger washed over him, that she would think him capable of hurting her, but he forced it down. A woman who did not know she was beautiful might well not know she deserved to be treated like something priceless.

What did she know of him, anyway? A glance that had lasted too long, many years ago. A night and a day spent in his bed. So far he'd done nothing to make her think he would be gentle with her, now had he? If he wanted her to know gentle, he would have to teach her gentle. He sat up behind her, half curled around her, close enough that he could feel her whole body shiver at the first stroke of his brush through her hair.

He could see her in the mirror, watching him as he ran the boar bristle brush through her hair with slow, leisurely strokes, watching the fear go out of her, and

something else take its place. He talked to her, as he might have a wee lass, letting the tone of his voice sooth her. "I have no' used this brush in a long, long time. 'Twas my wife's. I like the way it feels, slidin' through your hair."

"She's gone, then? Your wife?"

"Aye."

She turned to him, stilling his hand as she pressed her lips against the skin over his knuckles. "'I'm sorry, Ewan. Ye must have loved her very much."

He raised troubled eyes to meet her assessing gaze. "Do ye think—do ye think I dishonor her with ye?"

"Do ye think I dishonor my husband?"

A quirk of a smile pulled at his lips. "I think ye mean to honor him."

She raised his hand to her cheek, turning her face against it to kiss his palm. "Ye keep her memory alive, Ewan. That's all ye can do. Had ye died, would ye want her to live forever in mourning? Or would ye want her to learn to live again?"

He brushed his lips over hers, his kiss soft and gentle, an invitation to tenderness. She responded in kind, the tip of her tongue sliding over the inside edge of his lip with a touch so delicate as to awaken every nerve ending in his body. She turned to face him fully, giggling slightly as she figured out how to get her leg on the opposite side of his hips. He helped her, cupping her foot in his hand, stopping for a moment to trace the curve of her arch. Funny. He'd never really appreciated the elegance of a woman's foot before.

"I wish I had beauty to offer ye, Riona. Halls full of art and poetry, and gardens where ye could sit in the sunshine, and I could sit with ye, admiring the one flower in the garden more precious than all the rest."

"Ye have given me a gift more precious than earthly treasures, Ewan. Ye have given me the beauty and poetry of your soul." Her arms slipped over his shoulders to cross

behind his head, pulling him close again. Her kiss was a long, sweet torture of nibbling bites, soul-searching depths, and sparring tongues, in no particular order.

He'd never taken the time to appreciate the nuances of a kiss before. Here they were equally matched, his height a bit of an encumbrance as he bent to her, her small, sharp teeth as effective a weapon as his, her tongue dueling with his on equal terms, sometimes overpowering, sometimes letting him win.

Their kisses spread, encompassing shoulders and necks, until her hand found the brush he'd laid aside. She pulled away slightly, stopping to look at him, a smile on her lips. "Have I told ye, Ewan, how beautiful ye are?"

He snorted at that.

"'Tis true. I love to look at ye. Ye have extraordinary eyes." She leaned in to kiss his eyelids. "They change color, one moment storm gray, the next as green as a Highland meadow."

A shiver ran through him at the touch. How strange. He'd never thought of eyelids as particularly erotic before. "And ye call me a poet."

She curled her legs around his hips, pulling herself closer to where he wanted her to be. Her curls brushing the tip of his swollen cock. "Aye. Ye are a poet. Everything about ye is poetry."

She reached for something—her hand came back with the brush he'd laid aside. What was she—oh, God. A shudder tore through him that sent little currents of energy coursing through his blood. A single stroke of a brush through his hair nearly unmanned him? "There was no poetry in me until ye found it there. Truly, ye have bewitched me, *Changeling*."

He slid a hand between them, feathering her curls, stroking in rhythm to her brush in his hair, sliding his fingers deeper, parting her nether lips, finding her damp with anticipation, curling towards him at his touch. She drew herself forward, asking in a language older than words for what she wanted. His cock was only too happy to oblige, slipping into the warm comfort she offered as if it belonged there.

Sitting facing each other as they were, her legs crossed over his thighs, offered little range of movement—he could manage only the slightest of thrusts, by rocking his hips—but he found the close cuddled contact of their bodies produced a slow burning torture. He would have lowered his head to kiss and suckle her breasts, but that would have made brushing his hair difficult for her, and each movement of her arm as she stroked through the tangles resonated through his cock.

The walls of her vagina clenched around him, tighter and tighter, as if seeking to capture every nuance of feeling as they rocked together. He stroked over her skin with long, slow sweeps of his hands, wanting to touch her everywhere at once, needing to tell her without words how beautiful she was to him. His lips found hers, and he kissed her again, their tongues touching, teasing, slow and easy and as gentle as the soft slippery slides in and out of his cock within her channel.

The brush fell from her fingers, forgotten, as his hands gripped her ass, lifting her, pulling her closer, sliding her back. Her head fell back, her hair spreading over his knees like a sunset-red waterfall. She gasped as his lips closed over one tightly budded nipple, sucking and licking with a feather light touch.

“I could love ye like this for hours,” he whispered against the damp skin where his lips had just been. “Ye feel so good around me. So good.”

“I never—I never made love slow like this before, Ewan.” A sob shook her. “I canna’—I’m not sure I can hold all these feelings!”

“Let it go, Riona, let it go.” In and out, slow and easy, no more than an inch or two at most, then pressing her back until he could feel their pubic bushes touch, each sensation lighting another small fire, like sparks from a fire being constantly stirred. He could feel the tension building within her, could nurture it and feed it, stroking higher, harder, shorter, softer, until she was clinging to him, her back arched, her breasts thrust toward him like a feast. He suckled first one, then the other, sucking the nipples in and out, shallow then deep, like the movement of his cock within her tightening sheath.

“Ewan!”

He stabbed up into her as hard as he could, nipping at her swollen nipple as she clenched around him, sucking and licking 'til she writhed beneath his mouth, no longer sure whether she wanted more or escape. "Ewan!" she shrieked again as he felt her release wash over him.

He stilled within her, waiting as the contractions passed around him in waves, afraid to move lest he spill into her before he was ready. When she was quiet, limp and pliant as a doll in his arms, he began the dance again, teasing her back to life with his tongue flicking around the soft little nub of her nipple, feeling it harden again as she tried to twist away.

"Too much," she whispered. "I can take no more."

"Hours," he whispered, kissing his way up to the under side of her jaw. He clenched his fingers into her buttocks, kneading the strong muscles there, watching her boneless body turn whole again as she surged toward him, already wanting more.

Her head snapped up, eyes like a predatory cat sparkling with challenge. "We'll see about that." Her lips closed over his earlobe, sucking it slowly between her teeth, producing a shudder that ran the length of his body, while her hands rose to stroke over his chest, touching him everywhere but his nipples. He could feel them budding into hard knots of desire, so sensitive that one touch would destroy him.

But she didn't touch. Instead her fingers skimmed down to caress his ass, pulling and clenching as if she could direct his thrusts with her hands. Perhaps she could, though she could not lift his weight to guide him physically as he could hers. But he found himself thrusting harder, deeper, in time to her movements.

He shivered in anticipation as her lips moved from his ear in a path down his neck, his nipples so hard they were painful. The first graze of her lips across them had him twisting in her arms, trying to escape what he wanted so much. Harder, faster he thrust up into her. Deeper, tighter she clung to him. Her hot fluids bubbled over him like a stinging wash, calling for more. More.

He could feel her laughter in hard puffs over his wet nipple as she clung, despite his attempts to escape her too-intense touch. She suckled him now like a wee bairn, first one side, then the other, then scraped her teeth over him lightly, delighting in his choked groan as he impaled her, twisting and rolling until she was under him, slow and gentle but a dim memory. Hot and hard and wild he bucked into her, his teeth fastened on her shoulder, every fevered thrust harder than the last, every breath a moaning plea for release, every heartbeat attuned to hers as she met him thrust for thrust, need for need, hunger for hunger.

She broke first, a thin keening wail that might have been his name spilling from her lips, her muscles clenching around him so tightly that he could feel her orgasm rip through him as well. Then he was coming, shooting his hot waves of semen into her with a release that was almost painful, his balls drawn up so high that they brushed against the hot, wet juncture of two bodies become one. The flood of their mingled juices washing over his balls produced another wave of sensations, almost more than he could contain.

He lay quiet over her for a long time, listening to their breathing return to normal. When he could, he rolled to his side, cuddling her close against him. She snuggled tighter as he drew the bedcovers up over them. "Aye. Ye have bewitched me, my sweet Faerie. And when ye leave me, there will be nothing left but a broken husk of a man. If ye canna' stay, then use your magic to take the dreams of ye from my mind, for they will surely haunt me to my grave."

* * * * *

Damn the man! Damn him to the nine gates of hell and back again!

Riona shifted carefully, inching an arm this way, then a leg that, slowly untangling their bodies. Freeing herself at last, she sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at the object of her quest, fingering the cross at her breast.

He looked so innocent in sleep. For the first time since she'd laid eyes on the man he looked truly at peace.

'Twould be an easy lie to tell herself she'd let him use her body so that she could get close to him. The truth was more complicated. Aye, she'd set the stage, well enough. She'd played the grieving widow to the women packed below. A woman too deep in mourning to think of her future past leaving Scotland behind. There was no' a woman or man aboard that would think ill of her before this night. As for what went on in the Captain's Quarters, well, she'd screamed loud enough surely someone would have heard her. Probably most of the ship. All she had to do now was slide the small silver-bladed dirk between his ribs while he slept. No one would condemn a woman for taking the life o' a man who'd stolen what was not his to take.

'Twas a scenario she'd plotted out carefully through the months as she planned her revenge. Cumberland's men had a notion of what MacKenzie was up to, but a notion was all they had. A privateer could make landfall and away a hundred times 'round the coastline of Scotland and Eire 'fore the rumors turned to aught the navy might set their sights on.

She'd run through her plans a dozen times a dozen ways, planning for every contingency. Every contingency but one. She'd expected the cold-blooded killer who took down six men that night in Inverness. She'd expected a man who would take what she offered, and more, no questions asked.

She'd expected a monster.

She'd found a man. A man battered and bruised by fortune, but with the heart of a poet. He might have used her, but she'd used him as well. She'd forgotten, for a while, the hate that consumed her. It had been easy to forget with his hands on her skin, his words a sweet balm to her soul.

She paced the room, gathering up their discarded clothing as she went. She hadn't meant to let him get to her like this. 'Twas the children, she knew. She had a weakness for children. Watching him comfort them, talk to them, seeing him risk his life to save

them, it was all more than she'd prepared herself for. He'd slipped under her guard so easily.

Riona fingered her last keepsake, the small scrap of bloodstained plaid she'd kept pinned in her cloak, kept as a marker in her Bible, trying to recall the horror of that day. Diarmait had sent word to her that his regiment was to be stationed in Inverness, to help keep the peace, and to round up the last of the renegade Highlanders. She'd been on the wharf, waiting, when the soldiers appeared out of the mists, six of Her Majesty's finest, one bloody, defiant Highlander in tow.

She saw it all again as if it was new. She'd stared at the prisoner a moment too long, captivated by the wild beauty of him. Diarmait turning to wave at her, his smile dimming as he saw the direction of her gaze. The prisoner seizing his moment to grapple for the nearest sword. One man, in chains, and but a moment's distraction.

Had she not been at the wharf that day—had she not stood staring at the wild, ragged Highlander—Diarmait would be alive. She clutched the small scrap of his plaid to her heart. She owed him this. This one last bit of loyalty. He'd done his duty to her as a husband. If he did not share her father's politics, 'twas no' his fault.

He had been loyal to his clan, and once a woman married, she belonged to her husband's clan, did she no'? She tried to dredge up some feeling, some memory of the man that went beyond loyalty. Tried to remember the hatred she felt for the one she'd come here to kill.

She was a Highlander, damn it. She lived by the Highland code. Her honor was all she had left. If she did not avenge Diarmait's death, who would?

A sob shook her, then another. Damn MacKenzie for making her doubt what had been her sole purpose these last three years. Damn the man for making her want the illusion they'd shared to be real.

A slight movement behind her was all the warning she had. He hit her with the most powerful weapon he held over her—his innate kindness. A large, warm hand rubbed soothing circles over her back and shoulders, caressing, healing, coaxing more

sobs from her until the tears flowed freely. He pulled gently, coaxing her to lay back against him, wrapping her in the bedclothes to seal out the early morning chill.

His body to warm her. His hands to comfort her. His goodness to care for her, even after he'd gotten all any man ever wanted from a woman. She sobbed all the harder for that. She had been measured, and found wanting. There was naught in her the equal of the man who had dedicated his precarious freedom to rescuing women and children from death and privation.

She'd never considered what her fate would be should she fail. She could not have failed with any other man. Now he curled around her, his long body providing her heat and comfort, and she had to tell him the truth, that everything about her was a lie. The words would not come. His hand stroked down her arm, cuddling her closer against the warmth of his chest. His fingers closed around her hand where it rested on the cross she'd worn now for so many years.

A slight twist brought the blade free of its ornate holder. He held it above them, turning it this way and that in the dim light of first dawn, as if admiring the fine workmanship. He kissed her neck, his tone light and teasing as he handed her back her knife. "Ach. Be careful with that thing. 'Tis sharp."

She sniffed as she wiped at her eyes. "Of course it's sharp. I meant to kill ye with it."

"Would that have mended your heart?"

"I didna' think anything could mend my heart, Ewan. But I never thought to meet a man like ye."

He laughed at that. "A man like me. And what would that be? A man with no home, no country, and a price on his head?"

"A good man, Ewan MacKenzie. A man with the heart of a poet."

He snorted softly. "Ye prostituted yourself too cheaply, Riona. I'd a given ye my heart, had ye but asked for it. I'd have bared my breast willingly to your wee knife.

Instead ye've reminded me what it is to feel again. I'll be a bit more cautious before I offer ye such a bargain again. Ye should o' killed me when ye had the chance."

He rolled out of bed with one easy move, crossing the room in a single stride. His back was to her as he pulled on his clothes. Even his back made her hands itch to hold him again. Long and lean and rife with muscles that twisted and bunched as he moved. "The sun's nearly up. We'll make landfall in Donegal Bay well after dusk. It's a busy enough port. Ye can take passage on any ship ye choose from there. Do what ye must from there. All I ask is that ye give me time to get the children to safety."

"Ewan!" she managed, his name a plea on her lips.

He stopped in the doorway, his back still to her.

She licked her lips, trying to find her voice. "Ye knew, then. From the first?"

"Knew?" He turned to her, his eyes blazing with a cold, deadly rage. "Knew? I've been expecting ye, Lass. Did ye think I would fear death? I've been to hell. The devil's got nothin' on me. But you. I could o' loved ye, Lass. I felt it that day on the docks. God help me. I thought ye an angel, come to my rescue, 'til I saw his face. He was your husband, was he no'?"

"Aye," she whispered. "And I've lived w' the shame of it every day since. I wanted to blame ye. But there's no' to blame but myself. I knew ye when first I saw ye, Ewan. Knew I'd been cheated, traded off to the wrong man for the price o' a wee bit o' land. Every woman makes a prostitute of herself. She trades her body for home and hearth and the comfort of a man's arms to hold her at night. She trades her soul for the honor of her clan and a code as old as the Highlands. I couldna' live up to the code, Ewan. I couldna' kill ye for what ye saw in my heart that day. Diarmait knew, damn him. It was the knowin' that killed him, no' your hand on his blade."

"Do ye think ye did me a favor, then, Lass, sparin' me death's sweet release? I ken what ye came for. I welcomed your wee knife. But what have ye left me with now?"

She took a step back, despite herself, frightened by his intensity, only to come up hard against the edge of his desk. He pushed closer, his eyes blazing with fury. "We played your games. Now we play mine."

His belt came off so fast she barely saw his hands move. For the first time since she'd first seen him, she was truly afraid of the man. She bit her lip to keep from screaming, though she could not stop the tears that welled up in her eyes. She deserved a beating. 'Twas no more than his right. But she'd not thought him the kind of man who would.

She was almost relieved when he looped the worn leather over her wrists, taking an extra wrap around her forearms before he tugged the end over one of the clothes hooks that lined the wall.

With no further preliminaries he stripped out of his trews and rammed his thick, hard cock into her cunt. She should have hated him for it. It was fast and relentless, slamming her hard against the wall on each thrust, his balls banging into her as he buried himself deep.

She should have hated him for a lot of things. But as her leg slipped up to pull him even closer, she knew she did not. And even as the first screaming release tore through her, she knew that no matter what he did, she never would.

When he collapsed against her moments later, there were tears in his eyes. She wanted to hold him, comfort him, tell him that somehow, some way, they could make things work between them. But she could not. It was a lie that even she would not believe.

"'Tis time ye learned the law of the wild, Mrs. Campbell. A wounded enemy is the most dangerous. He has naught left to lose."

She wanted to call him back as the door slammed behind him, but she knew better. She had nothing to offer him. The best she could do was to salvage some scrap of her pride and slip away before she hurt him any more than she already had.

She stretched, testing her bindings experimentally. With a bit of work she could get herself free. But she would never escape the condemnation she'd seen in his eyes.

I could o' loved ye, Lass...

* * * * *

She was gone. Not that he'd expected her to be where he left her by now. No. She wasn't stupid. The hooks were placed high on the wall, but she'd had plenty of time to figure out how to get herself loose.

His cabin was set back to rights, as if she'd never been there at all. There was no trace of her. He swallowed hard, shutting the door behind him. He was a fool. He should have come back sooner. Set her loose himself. Apologized...

No. One did not just apologize for such a thing. This was beyond any apology. A man simply did not...

She had come to his world. *His* world, damn it. She'd broken all the rules. This was never supposed to be personal. She'd pushed him too far...

You're a fool, Ewan. Ye know that, don't ye?

Màili?

Would it have been so wrong, Ewan, to tell the woman you love her?

How can I love anyone but ye?

'Tis a small heart that has room for but one. Release me, Ewan. 'Tis time to let me go.

Màili... Tears streamed down his face. He knew what she wanted, now. 'Twas *he* who held her here.

* * * * *

Moonlight touched the waves, painting the tips a silvery white, like fairy fire. Some small movement, like a current in the air, told him he was no longer alone. He braced

his hands against the ship's rail, willing the pain back into the hole where he'd hidden it. He did not want Riona to see him like this.

Soft hands smoothed over his back, stroking in long, slow sweeps, her touch gentle, hesitant, as if she feared he might push her away.

Well, she had reason to fear him, didn't she?

"Do ye want to talk about her, then?"

"No." He bit the word off, just to make sure.

"How long?"

She wanted to talk about his wife? His mind fogged at the question, unable to separate enough from the grief to answer her.

"During the war?"

"Culloden." He had to force the words out around the lump in his throat. "I escaped, but by the time I got home word o' the battle had spread. The women went, after, to find their men among the dead. Cumberland – Cumberland ordered them slaughtered as well. He used them as bait to catch the few of us that got away." His shoulders shook with the sobs he could not let go of. Why had he told her? *Why?* He'd spoken to no one of that day before.

"And I suppose 'tis blamin' yourself ye are, then?"

"If I'd made it home but half a day sooner..."

"You'd a been in your house when they burned it to the ground like so many others, and 'tis dead ye'd be, and her beside ye."

Ewan gripped the railing until his knuckles turned white. "'Tis where I belong. I should have died at her side. But I was too late for that, as well."

"Oh, aye, that's the way of it. That would o' solved everything, now wouldn't it? And if only ye were God, ye could a seen what was comin', and made the choice to die there at Culloden yourself."

"Aye," he agreed, the pain he thought he'd buried so long ago bubbling up afresh. "'Twould o' been for the best. I'd no' have killed your husband."

"And what of the others? What o' the mothers and wives and the wee bairns ye have led to freedom this night and a hundred others? Is your life worth more than all of theirs? Was his?"

"My life is worth nothing!"

"Then your death is worth less," she chided. "The blood that ye did not spend at Culloden was not yours to spend. 'Tis no wrong to mourn her, Ewan, but 'tis wrong to savor your grief, to lock it inside ye, blamin' yourself, when ye had no choice in the matter. Ye lived. She did no'. There's nothin' for it but to play the cards ye've been dealt. The bairns need ye, Ewan MacKenzie. I need ye. More than ye needed to die, we needed ye to live."

He'd already been fool enough to think she might want something more from him. He'd not make that mistake again. "What do ye need me for, Riona? Is it the reward? If you're to kill me, Lass, do it yourself. Do it now. I've no mind to rot in an English prison."

"'Twas wrong of me to blame ye for what ye could no' help, Ewan. We did no' ask for this war, none of us. We'd best to put it behind us."

What was she saying? He turned to face her at last, willing his hands not to shake. "I thought ye would slip away at Donegal."

"I tried," she admitted. "I wanted to hate ye, but I couldna'."

He wanted to touch her, to take her in his arms, but if he reached for her and she pulled away he would lose what was left of his sanity. "Riona, I—"

She touched his lips with the tip of her finger. "Let me say this, Ewan. I know you're angry with me, and you've a right to be, but that does no' change how I feel. I couldna' leave ye, Ewan."

Despite what he knew, his heart leapt, as if pushing against his ribs to escape. A foolish grin spread across his face. "Are ye no' done with me yet, *Changeling*? Are ye plannin' to seduce me again?"

"Oh, aye. But you'll have to forgive me. I've no' had the time to prepare myself for a proper seduction. I don't suppose Captain's privileges include a tub o' hot water?"

Joy danced like a song across his heart as he scooped her into his arms. "Ha! Did they now, you'd have to fight me for it."

Her nails scraped over his scalp in a lingering caress. "What? Is there no chivalry left in the world? Would ye deny a lady a proper bath?"

"Aye, I would. I'd kill for a bath just now. A warm kettle on a warm hearth and a fine lass such as yourself to scrub my back."

"I like that picture." She framed his face with her hands, her tone suddenly serious again. "I'm afraid, Ewan. I think I'm falling in love with ye."

He swallowed hard, a lump of hope lodging itself in his throat. "When will ye know for sure?"

"How can I ask ye to trust me? I've naught to offer ye in return. No land. No Clan. No dowry but broken dreams and forgotten promises, and a heart that's found healing under your touch."

He took her hand and placed it over his heart. "There was nothin' there 'til ye touched me, Riona. I did no' hurt. I did no' love. I did no' feel any more. Ye changed that for me. I want to believe what's between us is real."

Silvery *Changeling* laughter floated away on the breeze. "What's between us is as real as I am, Ewan MacKenzie."

A smile pulled at his lips, despite himself. "And how real is that, *Changeling*?"

"I'm as real as ye want me to be, Ewan. And I love ye."

He closed his eyes and buried his face in her hair. "Riona Chattan Campbell, I love ye. Will ye come to Virginia with me, as my wife?"

"As your wife?" She pulled back, fingering the cross at her neck. "I swore never to marry again, Ewan. I'll be no man's property, to be done with as he will."

Remorse stained his cheeks like a wave of heat rising across his face. "I deserve that. I'm sorry, Riona. I want ye to know, I would never — this morning — I pray ye can find it in your heart to forgive me."

One eyebrow cocked at him in surprise. "This morning? Did I ask ye to stop, Ewan?"

He opened his mouth, then shut it again. "Ye did no'. But that does no' —"

"Would ye have had I asked ye to?"

"I—I don't know. I was somethin' fierce angry with ye. No' that that makes what I did right. But I'd like think I'd o' stopped had ye made me believe ye wanted me to."

"Know this, Ewan. My body is my own. Make love to me any time ye want to, any way ye want to. I don't think I'll ever tire o' the feel of your cock within me. But I'll no' be beaten. Ever."

Shock coursed through him. "Beaten? I could never hurt ye. I swear that to ye, on my life."

"Aye. Your life it is." Her hand fisted around the cross again. "If ye lay a hand on me in anger, you'd best no' let your eyes drift shut, e'er again."

"It shames me that I've given ye cause to think ye need to tell me such a thing."

"It's no' ye, Ewan. It's the law. The law says as my husband ye have the right. But I'm tellin' ye I've a law of my own. This cross was my mother's. It's been in my family for generations, and it's known the taste of blood."

"I'll no' be beatin' ye, Riona. With or without your wee cross. Nor will I ever take by force what ye are no' willin' to give me."

She pulled his head down, her hands tangling in his hair as she kissed him. His cock sprang to life as her teeth closed over his lip.

"Does that mean you'll marry me, *Changeling*?"

"Oh, aye," she laughed. "You'll no' escape me again. But who will ye find to do the marrying?"

"Why I believe, as Captain of this ship, that's one of my privileges."

"I see. And what other privileges might the Captain have?"

"His own private quarters, where he might make love to his wife for hours on end uninterrupted, no matter how loud she screams."

She rubbed the length of her body against him, setting every inch of him on fire. "I like this plan."

"I thought ye might." Slivers of *Changeling* laughter, like the tinkling of a dozen Faerie bells, floated off over the silvery waves as she led him toward his cabin. He followed her willingly, this *Changeling* who had stolen his heart, his cock burning with the wanting of her. "As a matter of fact I was quite certain ye would."

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