

XX

# Maddie's Gift



Vivian  
Hart

Judgement

**MADDIE'S GIFT**

**BY**

**VIVIAN HART**

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

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

Maddie's Gift

Copyright © 2004 Vivian Hart

ISBN:

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya Publications, 2004

Look for us online at:

[www.zumayapublications.com](http://www.zumayapublications.com)

[www.Extasybooks.com](http://www.Extasybooks.com)

*For Mitch, With Love*

*Thank you's: I need to thank my writer's group in Maine for helping me to improve my writing; and thank you, Mitch, Sarah, Rose, Allyn, Jody, Patty, my mom, and everyone who has given me their generous and unfailing support, both emotional and financial. I couldn't have done it without you.*

## THE TAROT: THE JUDGMENT CARD

The essence of the Judgment Card in the Tarot deck is one of new beginnings, learning to discriminate between truth and untruth in one's life, finding inner strength and direction and acting on it, cleansing oneself of suppressed pain, and finding forgiveness and joy.

In *Maddie's Gift*, the lovely Madeline Welby and the ruggedly handsome Scotsman Padraic MacKinnon are going through the emotional and spiritual passages described in the Judgment card. For far too long, they have held back their mutual love and passion because of fear and inner conflict. But one fateful night during a rainstorm, life pushes Maddie and Padraic into a crucial moment of reckoning and they must now either follow their hearts or be faced with continuing loneliness and unrequited love. Will they make the correct Judgment?



## CHAPTER ONE

### New Abbey, Scotland, 1914

One. Two. Three. Four. Four steps would bring Madeline Welby to her brother's bedroom door. Maddie's heart pounded painfully in her chest and her body trembled, teeth chattering as she stared ahead of her in the dark hallway. With each step, she could feel the brush of the carpet under her bare feet. A late winter rainstorm was approaching outside, and the rumble of the thunder matched the rumble inside her being.

Maddie took the first step. *I'm barmy!* she thought. *Completely barmy!* Michael would never let her into his bed this night, not with his fiancée, Melody, and Melody's parents sleeping under the same roof. But even if they'd been alone, Maddie would have had to beg Michael to unlock his door and let her in. That's what she'd had to do ever since the gossip started and Michael became ashamed. She'd had to stand at the door, crying and scratching, begging him until he relented. And he almost always did relent, because

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

deep down, he still loved her. At least that's what he'd told her so many, many times.

The second step. A bolt of lightning sliced the dark sky. Bluish light poured into the window at the end of the hall, illuminating Maddie like a ghost in her flowing white nightgown. She berated herself for her lack of pride and dignity, for not accepting Michael's decision. He had chosen his path and moved on, announcing his engagement to Melody at the supper table this very evening, in front of everyone, including John and Fanny, the servants. Maddie had been relegated back to her role as Michael's sister again. But she could not accept the change. Maddie was her mother's daughter to her bones, and Caroline Welby had always bled openly and willingly in her desperation for love. Like her mother had been, Maddie was a living, breathing wound and could not rally herself to conceal her heartache, no matter how much Michael demanded it of her.

He, on the other hand, had ended up like their father, Jonathan Welby, the Oxford professor, a reserved man who worshiped intellect and defined himself by the opinions of others. Michael denied his sister's accusations that he had become his father, countering that he was now laird of Welby Manor, a role his father had refused in favor of academia. As for defining himself through the eyes of others, Michael had nothing to say, for he had thrown Maddie out of his bed six months ago when Rosalie Brown had espied the brother and sister embracing at the edge of the meadow. By that evening the gossip



had begun to make its rounds of New Abbey, traveling all the way to Dumfries. *The laird prefers to graze in his own pasture*, folks were saying, among other choice things. That had been the end.

Maddie took the third step as a hard, icy rain began to pelt the window, the torrent from the sky pounding in her ears. She wanted Michael to hold her, just for a little while; just to tell her he loved her. He probably wouldn't, but she would beg him to all the same.

As she went to take the final step to Michael's door, an unbidden thought came to her mind. It was of Padraic, so close by in the caretaker's cottage. Padraic's father had been the caretaker of Welby Manor before Padraic. Michael and Madeline had long ago adopted Padraic as one of the family, seeing as the man had practically raised them. Padraic had been there at the supper table when Michael announced his engagement to Melody. Seated next to Maddie, Padraic had reached for her hand under the table, squeezing the delicate fingers gently between his own, as if he could siphon out the grief he knew she felt into him and take it from her. He'd invited her to come back to the cottage with him after supper so she wouldn't have to be alone with Michael and his future bride and in-laws. And though Maddie had wanted to go, she was stubborn and had refused, desperate to wait for the bedtime hour so she could go to Michael's room and wring assurances from him. At her refusal, Padraic had shaken his head sadly and put his large, gentle hands on Maddie's shoulders.

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

His dark eyes bored into hers, his handsome, bearded face a mask of frustration. "How long will you go on this way, Maddie?" he'd said. "I can't bear to see you suffer anymore." Maddie's shoulders sagged under his hands, though his touch was pleasurable and made her want to fall into his arms. "I can't help it, Padraic," she'd answered. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Padraic had reached up and touched her cheek. "I'm here for you, Maddie," he said before he left.

Maddie had watched him disappear down the path. He had been there for her all the twenty-one years of her life, the father she'd craved, the friend who stood by her and Michael through everything, including their parents' deaths in the fire down at Oxford, the gossip, and Michael's betrayal. He'd never judged her and Michael or tried to change them, and it was Padraic who'd taught Michael how to run the estate when Michael had decided to take his place as laird instead of following his father to Oxford. Padraic had introduced Michael to all the crofters on the estate, teaching him how to negotiate with them and keep them contented.

When Maddie was twelve, Padraic had been the first man to capture her budding woman's heart. He had been her mother's age then, thirty-seven, and so handsome; the broadchested, bearded clansman who'd come down from the Highlands to steal her heart. Of course, Padraic had lived his whole life on the Lowland estate, but Maddie was lonely and given to her romantic fancies. She'd needed them, for

Padraic was not to be hers. Maddie was not yet a woman then, and Padraic was her mother's lover, giving Caroline Welby the love and passion she craved and could not milk from her stone of a husband.

*You should go to Padraic*, Maddie told herself as she began to reach for the doorknob. *You never stopped loving him*. But Maddie set her jaw in determination. She refused to be like her mother, who had loved two men, one of them Padraic, and had torn her family apart because of it. The woman's conscience had wracked her, yet she'd been unable to give Padraic up, running back and forth like a madwoman from the estate to Oxford. Her children, however, who loved and needed her, had gone ignored. Maddie had hated her mother for her weakness, and believed that she wouldn't have turned to her own brother in the first place if it hadn't been for Caroline's adultery.

Maddie sighed in her sadness, realizing the folly of pushing at Michael and trying to wring love from him the way her mother had with Jonathan Welby. Maddie had no need to be torn by conscience when there was no family now to tear apart by loving Padraic. The path was clear, really. And if she were honest with herself, Padraic *was* her only family now.

She almost turned away, but her stubbornness captured her yet again. She was fairly certain that Padraic didn't love her *that* way. Chances were he still saw her as the wee lass he'd raised and felt only fatherly toward. But Maddie wanted to feel desired. She wanted to know that a man's blood raced for her,

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

and that she was beautiful and loveable, now that she felt so ugly and unlovable. She could not have borne Padraic's rejection as well as Michael's. Padraic was the one man in the world she trusted. She felt as if his rejection of her as a woman would destroy her.

Maddie took the final step and put her hand on the knob. Quietly, gently, she turned it and pushed the door open. Too late, she realized her mistake. The door had been unlocked! Not once in six months had Maddie come here and found it unlocked as she had now. She froze when she realized Michael hadn't unlocked it for her.

Michael's room was dark, illumined only by the flashes of lightning outside the window. Maddie wanted to flee, but felt rooted to the spot where she stood, wickedly, insanely curious. In spite of the hard rain outside, Maddie's ears picked up sounds from the depths of the room. She heard a woman giggle softly in the direction of Michael's bed, followed by the rhythmic creaking of the bedsprings and masculine sighs of pleasure.

Maddie's blood turned to ice in her veins and she clamped her hands over her mouth, stifling her cry of pain. She had to get out of there, yet couldn't move. Then, suddenly, she felt strange, as if a fluffy cloud were enveloping her entire body, lifting her into the air in a soundless, mindless void. An eerie strength from a mysterious source seeped into her body, enabling her to turn and leave the room noiselessly before her presence was known, a gift of grace, a suspension in time that had allowed her to escape.

Back in the hallway, Maddie paused, her eyes closed, her breath coming heavily. The grace she had just experienced was still with her, directing her mind, making her path clear. Suddenly, she didn't care anymore *how* Padraic loved her. Love was love. And she desperately needed love and comfort. She would honor that truth, and this hell with Michael be damned!

Without another thought, Maddie turned and ran to the end of the hall, down the large grand staircase, through the dining room to the dark kitchen where she let herself out the back door. Fanny and John were asleep in the servants' quarters and did not hear her. No one did as she ran out into the freezing night, the rain biting like icy fingers at her skin, soaking her hair and nightgown as she fled across the back lawn and onto a dirt path. The path had turned to mud in the rain and splattered Maddie's bare legs and nightgown as she ran toward the road—the road that led to the caretaker's cottage.

## CHAPTER TWO

Padraic thought only of Maddie as he stared into the hearth fire. The storm howled and thundered outside the cottage, pelting the windows with sheets of icy rain. But inside, the fire was warm and cozy. It would have been cozier if he were curled up on the sofa, holding Maddie in his arms. The poor lass! Padraic's heart ached for her, especially this evening when Michael had announced his engagement.

In truth, he felt for Michael as well. The lad was only twenty-three, and Padraic knew how young he'd been himself at that age. He also knew what it was to take on the responsibility of running this estate. He'd done it then too, though for different reasons. Padraic had wanted to impress Katherine Adams, to show her he could be a responsible man instead of drinking and fighting in the pubs in Dumfries. He'd had to put aside his anger at life in order to get her to marry him. For Michael, however, becoming the laird of Welby Manor had been a rebellion against his father. Understandable. Padraic had grown up with Jonathan Welby. He would not have wanted to be that man's

son. Not for anything.

But at least Michael had the estate. He had wealth and property. Maddie had none of that. And now, she didn't even have Michael. Maddie was beautiful and sweet, everything Caroline had been and more. Padraic had fallen in love with Maddie in the last year, his feelings only intensifying after Michael had thrown her over as he'd done. Many times he'd wanted to tell her how he felt, but had restrained himself, knowing how much like her mother Maddie was. The lass would have gone round the bend if faced with the possibility of going to another man while she was in love with one. Telling her his feelings wouldn't have helped. At least that's what Padraic thought.

Padraic rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. Ach! He blamed himself for the way things were now. If he hadn't bedded their mother all those years ago, perhaps Michael and Maddie wouldn't have turned to each other for comfort. Maybe they would have felt they could turn to him in their unhappiness. Perhaps if he could have promised Maddie the future when she was twelve, when he saw how she looked at him. *When you're a woman, Maddie, in a few short years*, was all he'd have needed to say. But he couldn't. Not then. He'd been too gone on her mother. And then he'd lost Caroline to the fire...

Padraic tried to shake himself from his reverie of self-blame. Even Maddie and Michael didn't blame him. They loved him and trusted him. He'd proven

himself to them countless times and had gained their forgiveness. He even knew the moment when he'd won their undying loyalty. It was when he'd found out about their secret relationship and hadn't judged them along with the rest of the world. *Leave them be*, he'd thought to himself at the time. *They've been through hell*. He didn't judge anyone for taking comfort where it was to be found. Besides, he'd had a long-term adulterous affair with their mother. He'd made love to Caroline right here in front of this fire while his own wife, Katherine, lay upstairs dying of the consumption, and Eric was a wee lad, asleep in his bed. Who was he to judge anyone?

The knocking at the front door pulled Padraic from his musings. The sounds were little taps at first, barely audible above the rain, then loud, hard raps on the wood. Padraic rose from his chair, hurrying as fast as he could to the front door. In this weather, the leg wound he'd received in the Egyptian wars hurt like the dickens, and he limped worse than usual. When he drew closer, he heard the cries. A woman's voice was calling him. She sounded hysterical, as if Lord Death himself were chasing her. Then he realized who it was. God's teeth! It was Maddie! What the hell was she doing out on a night like this?

Padraic yanked open the door. Maddie was standing there in her nightgown, muddy, soaked, teeth chattering, crying hysterically. "Holy shite, woman!" he growled at the sight of her. He grabbed her and pulled her inside, slamming the door behind them against the wind and rain. He pulled Maddie to



him and she fell into his arms. He picked her up and carried her immediately over to the fire, setting her down on the warm hearthstones. Grasping her shoulders, Padraic peered into her face, which was streaming with a mixture of rain and tears. "Good God, Maddie!" he said. "What are you doing? You could catch your death!"

But Maddie didn't answer and only continued sobbing, reaching out for Padraic to hold her.

As much as he wanted to hold Maddie, Padraic feared more for her life and wanted only to get her warm and dry. He held her shoulders and pressed her firmly in place. "Not yet," he said gently. "Not until I know you're safe. I won't lose another woman I love." He rushed off for an armload of towels. Then he limped quickly upstairs to his bedroom and pulled one of Katherine's old nightgowns from the chest of drawers. The gown would be too big for Maddie, he knew, for Katherine had been a tall, busty Celt of a woman. But at least the thing was clean and dry. With the gown and towels in his arms he went back.

Maddie was standing where he'd left her, sobbing and dripping, a puddle of rainwater collecting on the hearthstones at her feet. "Maddie," he said touching the sleeve of her nightgown, "Get this thing off." Padraic set the towels down on the chair in which he'd been sitting. "Here are towels to dry yourself and a gown to change into. I'm going to make you some tea." When Maddie did not respond, Padraic put his hands on her shoulders. "Do you hear me, lass?"

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

Maddie continued to sob, but Padraic saw her sodden head bob up and down in a nod. He left her and went to put on the kettle, the sounds of the crying young woman following him all the way to the kitchen. Padraic lit the stove and put the kettle on to boil. He fixed a pot of tea, returning with it, and a flask of whiskey to the living room.

When he saw Maddie, he swore under his breath, for she hadn't removed her wet gown. The pile of towels sat on the chair, untouched, and Maddie had dropped to her knees, her face buried in her hands, her body rocking back and forth.

Quickly, Padraic set down the tray and lightly grasped Maddie's arm. "For God's sake, woman!" he scolded softly, lifting her gently but firmly to her feet. He'd waited for her to change while he was in the kitchen out of respect for her privacy. But now, he felt she'd endangered her life and had forfeited this right. In one swift movement, he lifted the sopping, mud-stained nightgown up over her head and threw it to the floor. He grabbed a towel, unfolded it, and began to rub Maddie's skin dry.

Had he not been so afraid for her health, Padraic would have wanted to savor Maddie's beauty as she stood naked before him. Her skin was pale and smooth, like fresh cream. The dusky pink buds of her nipples were erect from the cold, and the shape of her body, the slopes and curves, the supple flesh of her woman's stomach, the pale blond down on her arms and thighs made Padraic hunger to caress her, to explore every inch of her with his fingertips and

mouth.

Padraic worked quickly to dry Maddie, who stood like a rag doll under his hands, allowing him to rub the towel all over her, even down below, over her mound of dark blond curls. He knelt down before her, drying the springy curls with the towel before moving onto her thighs and mud-spattered calves. He felt the tightening in his groin as he passed the towel over her mound. Maddie was so quiet and submissive, he sensed he could have laid her back on the sofa and taken her right then. He wouldn't have done it that way, not without her consent. But she was so lovely in her nakedness, and it seemed so unreal that she was here like this, a gift that had fallen on his doorstep this stormy night that the thought came to his mind, with its accompanying threat of an erection.

Maddie's teeth had stopped chattering and her body relaxed somewhat as he dried her skin and the fire warmed her. Padraic sensed the danger to her health had largely passed as he wiped the last of the mud from her feet. In a moment, he would have to put Katherine's nightgown on her. His whole being rebelled against it. How he didn't want to conceal her beauty from his gaze! He dared to let his eyes rest just a moment longer on that secret part of her which was just level with his sight. Had he the freedom, he would have pressed his lips to the soft hair, breathing in her woman's musk, and let his tongue steal between the folds of skin to taste the nectar within. He would have held her buttocks, letting the creamy

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

flesh fill his hands while he caressed the sensitive pearl between her thighs with the tip of his tongue. His beard would tickle the supple skin of her inner thighs, and she would moan softly from the pleasure he'd give her. He'd make her forget everything else...

Padraic snatched up Katherine's nightgown and helped Maddie on with it. He caught himself on the verge of groaning with disappointment as the white cloth slipped down over her body, swallowing it up, away from his sight. He berated himself inwardly for his weakness, for the way he let his desire for her cloud his compassion.

Maddie was silent now, the flow of her tears stopped for the time being. She let Padraic lead her to the sofa and gently sit her down. He picked up an afghan that Katherine had crocheted years ago when she was pregnant with Eric, and wrapped it around her. He then took another towel and wrapped Maddie's wet hair in it. When he had finished, he sat down in front of her and looked into her tearstained face. He reached out and touched her cheek. "What happened, love, to put you in such a state?" As if he didn't know!

At his question, Maddie sputtered to life again, fresh tears gathering and spilling from her eyes. As she had before, Maddie reached out her arms like a small child needing to be held. This time, Padraic reached for her and gathered her to him, letting her cry in his arms.

"Michael...and...Melody!" Maddie sobbed, choking out the words between gasps for breath. "In

his...room!" Her body began to heave violently as grief wracked her. "They were...I could hear!" Then she fell to her guttural tears, unable to speak anymore.

Padraic held Maddie close, rocking her gently as she cried. "Oh, Maddie," he said softly. "I'm so sorry." With one hand he caressed her back. "Go on, let it all out."

As if he had given her permission, Maddie began to wail, deep guttural sobs that reminded Padraic of a wounded animal. He held her until she had exhausted her cries of grief. When she finally looked up at him, Padraic thought he'd die from the sweetness in her troubled eyes. It was then, in that moment, he understood the deep connection between desire and compassion, for they always flooded him in the same moment. Most of his life he'd been that way, unable to resist a woman in distress.

"What did I do wrong, Padraic?" she asked, her voice thick from tears.

Padraic reached up and brushed his thumb across her cheek. The pleasure of her lithe body in his arms almost overwhelmed him, and he wondered fleetingly if Maddie were really as unaware of her effect on him as she seemed to be. "You've done nothing wrong, lamb," he said gently. "I promise you."

Maddie sniffled and Padraic pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her tears.

"Then why doesn't he love me anymore?"

Padraic sighed. He wasn't certain she would

understand the truth about what she asked, the real, deep reasons for Michael's behavior. The lad had acted from the same fears and hurts that drove all human beings. He'd learned that in his own life, about himself, and now, Maddie would have to learn it in hers. "It's not that he doesn't love you, Maddie..." he started to say. But before he could finish, Maddie's lovely face crumpled again and she fell into fresh tears. She buried her face into Padraic's shirt and sobbed again as she had before.

Padraic held her and rocked her, listening to her sobs. He'd cried this way many times himself and understood that the source of her grief went much deeper than her pain around Michael. What had happened with her brother had allowed Maddie to revisit the pain she had carried most of her life, the deep ache in her heart around her parents and all the years of feeling lonely, frightened and abandoned. Padraic knew that crying this way would make Maddie feel cleansed and strong, able to see life in new ways she hadn't been able to before. He hoped, too, that she would be more open to his love.

Gradually, Maddie's sobs spent themselves and she wiped her eyes and face with the handkerchief Padraic had given her. She looked up into his eyes and laced her fingertips delicately into the dark, soft hair of his beard. This simple act surprised Padraic, yet her touch sent a thrill through him, and he wanted very much to kiss her tenderly on the lips.

"There's so much pain inside me, Padraic," she whispered.

"I know, love," Padraic answered gently.

Maddie said nothing more, and lay quietly in Padraic's arms. She had closed her eyes, seemingly content to rest there with him. Padraic watched her, listening to her breathing, every other breath that came out of her a sigh. How he wished he could hold her like this forever! If time could just freeze right in this moment, he felt he could be content, wanting for nothing more. Except, well, to make love to her.

Padraic reached up and felt the towel around Maddie's hair. The cloth was soaked, and he pulled it away. He wanted to get her hair dry so she wouldn't catch a chill. She could rest more afterward. "Come, lass," he said, gently bidding her to sit up. "I want to comb out your hair. It'll dry faster that way." Maddie nodded and sat up obediently.

Padraic reached into his pocket for his comb, and as he did so, his eye fell on the teapot. He touched it, finding the porcelain was still warm. He poured Maddie a cup and dropped a nip of whiskey into it from the flask on the tray. "Here's a toddy," he told her as he put the cup into her hands. He watched her, waiting for her to wrinkle her face and try to refuse it as she always did when she was ill and he went to give her a toddy. But tonight, Maddie took the cup without a word or a face and sipped from it. Padraic continued to watch her, knowing she was fighting back an expression of disgust. He smiled and positioned himself behind her to comb her hair.

Gently, Padraic worked the comb through Maddie's waist-length golden hair. He loved the silky

feel of it against his callused palms, delighting in the way the firelight glinted off of it, making it shimmer. To him, Maddie was like an angel, an angel whose faults and weaknesses he already knew. He loved her completely.

"Maddie, listen to me," he said as he ran the comb through her hair, down the length of her back. He was vividly aware that just a thin layer of nightgown rested between his fingertips and the soft skin of her back, and the thought sent a frisson of heat down his body and into his groin. "This pain you're feeling, it's not a bad thing. I promise you. You must let yourself feel it. If you don't, your whole life will go crooked, and you won't even know when you're truly happy or sad. Or when you have love or hate."

Maddie turned and looked up at him. Though her eyes were red and puffy from crying, she was still beautiful to him. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Padraic," she said. "No one in my life has ever treated me so well."

Padraic felt his heart surge, and he put the comb down a moment to collect himself. "Thank you, lass," he said quietly. "I'm honored you feel that way. I've always believed I've been part of the problem in your life, rather than the solution."

But Maddie shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "You mustn't think that again, ever." She looked again at Padraic, who had begun once more to lift the comb to her hair. "It was never your fault," she said softly. "Mum would have gone to someone no matter what. She was so unhappy." Maddie paused and



reached out, putting her delicate hand on Padraic's arm. "Thank God it was you."

Padraic felt tears sting his eyes and he put his hand over hers. The effort he had to make to hold himself back from gathering Maddie into his arms and kissing her with a passion from his depths was monumental. What she'd said was, for him, tantamount to a declaration of love and faith. With his other hand, he reached out and cupped her cheek against his hand, thrilling when she put her hand over his.

"I love you, Padraic," she said softly.

Padraic caught his breath. By God, she'd said it! Not that she necessarily meant love in the way Caroline had all those years. But it was a start! He wanted her here with him now, and couldn't hold back telling her any longer. After what had happened tonight with Michael, Padraic was terrified that if he didn't at least take a chance, Maddie would go off in her fragile state and give herself to some other man, another emotional weakling like her brother or father who'd throw her over at the first sign of difficulty. He'd seen such a fate befall other lasses, their lives destroyed by loving the wrong man. He'd be damned before he'd let that happen to Maddie.

"Don't go back there, Maddie," he said, almost in a whisper. "To that house."

Maddie's blue eyes widened. "Tonight?"

Padraic could feel her hands begin to tremble under his. He prayed he was doing the right thing. "Ever. Stay here. With me."

## CHAPTER THREE

Maddie stared at Padraic. The empty teacup and saucer in her hands rattled with the trembling that shivered through her body, and she let Padraic take the china from her and set it back on the tray. Had he just said what she thought he said? *Stay here. With me.* The words echoed through her mind. He was waiting for her answer.

She couldn't imagine he'd meant it *that* way. How could he when he'd just had her completely naked, rubbing every inch of her body with a towel and had gone about it in such a brisk, businesslike way, as if she were one of the crofters' sheep getting a bath before shearing? Maddie had always felt inferior to her mother, especially with Padraic, and his non-reaction to her nudity had confirmed her feeling. And yet, there had been something about the *way* he'd said those words. She felt it deep inside, in spite of her doubts.

"Padraic," she began, her voice coming out in a whisper, "D'you mean..." She couldn't finish the question for the sudden hard pounding of her heart.

She could only point to him, then back at herself.

Padraic nodded. "Aye, Maddie," he said softly.

Maddie smiled shyly, suddenly painfully self-conscious. The fire-lit room began to tilt, perhaps from the whiskey in the toddy. No, it wasn't that. It was Padraic, the way he was looking at her. She had seen him look that way at her mum, with a tenderness that made her weak inside. But she was not her mum. She was Maddie, and he was looking at *her*! *Oh my God!* Her memory came to her clearly now, unblocked by her grief around Michael. Padraic *had* looked at her that way before! Many times, actually, when they were together in recent months. Wandering through the ruins of Sweetheart Abbey on a Sunday afternoon. When she followed him around the stables or went with him to a crofter's home and they'd walk back together. He'd gaze at her and Maddie would feel all strange inside, and shy, not understanding this sensation of feeling torn between wanting to be in Padraic's arms and needing to run and hide from him. She'd been too blinded by her preoccupation with Michael to realize that her reaction was from Padraic's loving gaze. What a fool she'd been!

"D'you...feel...that way about me?" she asked, still incredulous. How strange it felt to have believed all this time that her heart's desire, born in her heart all those years ago, was right here, in front of her, hers for the taking! She began to tremble as doubt plagued her, tamping down the joy that wished to burst out. She had to know for sure, beyond any doubt.

Padraic lifted Maddie's hand to his lips and

pressed them into the soft flesh of her palm, sending the most pleasurable shivers through her body. Padraic's soft beard tickled her skin and she longed for him to kiss her.

"Padraic..." Maddie whispered. He'd kissed her hand one other time like that, and she'd felt the same as she did now. It was shortly after her parents had been killed in the fire. Maddie had gone to the cottage to see Padraic and had found him right here, in this spot, sobbing. He was holding a scarf that had belonged to Caroline, and when Maddie drew closer to him, she could smell her mother's perfume still clinging to it. Maddie had reached out and gingerly pressed her small hand on Padraic's shoulder. Unexpectedly, Padraic grasped her hand as she touched him. He looked up at Maddie, his dark eyes red and raw from crying, then brought her hand to his lips, holding it there for what seemed a long time. Maddie was just nineteen then, and knew as Padraic's lips brushed her skin that the budding love she'd felt for him seven years before was still in her heart...and had only deepened. At the time, Maddie was with Michael, and had cursed her heart for being as complex and troublesome as her mother's had been. Maddie had fought back her feelings for her own sake, and Michael's. But she soon learned that fighting her love had only strengthened it instead of making it go away.

Now, she didn't have to fight anymore.

Padraic released Maddie's hand and touched her cheek. Her fingertips still rested on his beard, and she

let them wander along the soft, dark hair with its striking threads of silver. Her eyelids began to flutter closed as her body filled with tingling heat. Padraic's beard was as soft as the richest mink, and the feel of it thrilled her as she rested her whole hand against his cheek.

Padraic moved closer to Maddie on the sofa and leaned in to her. Now their faces were so close together that Maddie could feel his warm breath on her cheek and smell the aromas of soap and pipe smoke he carried on his lips and beard. Gingerly, she slid her hand off his cheek to the back of his neck, which felt warm and strong to her touch. Padraic's lips were now almost against hers, a mere breath away, and she ached for them. She closed her eyes just as he kissed her, brushing his lips over hers, forth and then back again, tenderly, sweetly, and then more boldly, parting her lips with his tongue to slide it between them.

Slowly, Padraic pressed his tongue against hers, tasting it and caressing it as he put his arms around Maddie, pulling her closer to him until her breasts pressed tightly against his chest and she felt the heat from his body radiating into hers. The warmth gathered inside her and a pulsing, like a separate heart beating sprang to life between her legs. With each moment that passed, she felt her clitoris swelling and aching, her musky nectar beginning to gather. Maddie had not known that a man's kiss and touch could be so intense and so tender all at once, and make her feel so desired, like she was the most

beautiful woman in the world.

Maddie embraced Padraic. The brawny strength that filled her arms made her melt yet further, and her breathing grew more ragged as she let her hands roam over his back, exploring the slopes and ridges of muscle under his shirt.

The tentativeness of their first kisses dissipated in the growing heat, and Padraic laid Maddie against the back of the sofa, his body over hers, feathering soft kisses across her cheek and down her throat, suckling gently on the tender skin. Maddie moaned softly. The sound she made seemed to rouse him, for he stirred against her and closed his left hand gently but hungrily over her breast through her nightgown. Maddie heard Padraic's breath catch in his throat as the soft roundness filled his palm. Very tenderly he squeezed, the gentle pull giving Maddie a surge of pleasure. She moaned softly again when Padraic brushed his fingertips back and forth over the nipple and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, teasing the soft pink tip to aroused stiffness.

She tilted her head back, her breasts heaving with her breaths of arousal. She hadn't known it could be like this, tender and passionate all at once. Padraic was savoring her thoroughly, appreciating her and enjoying holding her in his arms, taking just a little taste at a time, with the promise of more delicious pleasure yet to come...

Maddie reached up and put her hand over Padraic's, following the movement of the gentle, sensuous pull on her flesh. He was breathing heavily

and lifted his face from their kisses to gaze down on her. His dark eyes smoldered with a mixture of arousal and tenderness. "I love you, Maddie," he whispered, moving his hand from her breast to touch her hair. He lifted a strand and ran his fingertips down the length of it. "Your hair's almost dry. But the upstairs is chilly, and I don't want you to get sick. We'll wait here by the fire."

Maddie put her arms around Padraic, her body burning for his bare skin against hers. "Let's not wait," she whispered close to his ear. "You'll keep me warm. I can't catch a chill then."

Maddie's seductive words elicited a soft groan from Padraic and he pulled her more tightly against him. But at the same time, she felt his restraint. He gazed deeply, meaningfully into her eyes. "You heard what I said before, Maddie, about not wanting to lose another woman I love?" he asked softly.

Maddie's breath caught in her throat. Yes, she'd heard him say that, but she'd been too overwrought at the time for the words to register in her consciousness. Now, they did, and Maddie returned Padraic's embrace as the full force of his words sank in. For Padraic, Maddie was as important to him as Katherine, whom he'd married and who'd borne him his son; and as important as Caroline, whom he'd loved for many years through the worst, heartrending difficulties. If the way he felt wasn't a man's love for a woman, nothing was. She reached up and stroked Padraic's hair. "Aye, Padraic," she whispered. "I understand. We'll wait."

Padraic stirred against Maddie, and she could feel his rising erection press into her thigh through her nightgown. He kissed the side of her neck, his lips slightly parted, feathering the tip of his tongue along the smooth skin, and upward, over her jaw and cheek, back to her lips, which he claimed in a deep sensuous kiss. Slowly, tortuously, Padraic plunged his tongue between Maddie's lips, tasting her, only to recede and do the same teasing movements over and over until Maddie throbbed so badly between her legs, she wished Padraic would just push up her nightgown and take her. She knew she was ready, wet and open, aching for the hot thrust of his erection. But he seemed determined to make the arousal last, at least until they were upstairs, in his bed. She grasped at Padraic's back muscles through his shirt, losing herself in his strength and in the delicious masculine aromas rising from his skin and hair. She was in a completely different world, one of deep intimacy and passion, a world into which she had catapulted and wished never to leave.

The ache between Maddie's legs grew to painful urgency, and she wanted him inside her so desperately she was prepared to beg Padraic to take her. She was about to whisper a plea into his ear when finally he lifted his face from hers and tested the dryness of her hair again. He picked up a golden strand and pressed it to his lips. Maddie waited, watching his face eagerly, her chest rising and falling with ragged breaths. Padraic looked at her, his dark eyes dusky and his lips moist from their kissing.



"Let's go to bed," he whispered.

They rose from the sofa and Maddie stood close to Padraic, waiting for him to bank the fire. When he'd finished, he picked Maddie up and carried her up the stairs to his bedroom. Gently he set her down by the four-poster bed and pulled back the covers. "Go on, get in," he told her, his voice fallen to a husky whisper.

Maddie climbed onto the bed, sinking down into the feather bed on the mattress. She sat, watching Padraic take off his boots, undress, and drape his clothes over a nearby chair. The storm outside had abated, but in the distance, lightning still flashed, illuminating Padraic's muscular physique in the darkness. Maddie moved over on the bed to make room for him as he climbed in beside her, pausing only to take hold of her nightgown and lift it up over her head. The air was chilly against her skin, but Padraic tossed the nightgown aside and gathered Maddie into his arms, laying her down underneath him, warming her with the length of his strong body against hers. Maddie pulled the goosedown comforter over them and then embraced Padraic, melting against the delicious heat of his skin as his strength filled her arms.

Maddie let her hands roam freely over Padraic's back while he kissed her. His kisses were now more fervent, and Maddie could feel him letting go of his restraint in the way he nibbled at her lips and suckled her tongue. She felt him taking possession of her and opened her legs so he could settle his hips between

them. His hard cock pushed against her slit, sliding up and down along the swelling pink.

The sensation was intensely pleasurable and Maddie responded by raising her hips, rubbing against his hardness. Yet still he waited, lowering his face to Maddie's breasts, capturing each dusky pink nipple in his mouth and suckling it with tender passion. The warm, moist suction of his mouth on her breasts caused Maddie to moan and arch her back upward as she gently clasped Padraic's head in her arms and stroked his hair.

Padraic's hand had been resting on Maddie's hip while he kissed her breasts, but now she felt it steal downward, his fingertips lightly stroking the moist lips of her opening. Maddie moaned and pushed against his hand, her sex soft and wet and yielding, urging him to explore her with more abandon. Gradually, Padraic slid his fingers into her, slowly at first, then more deeply, in and out, withdrawing then plunging in again, disappearing into her swollen, wet sheath. Padraic moved his fingers around, stretching the flesh, eliciting more moans from her, then withdrew them, spreading the nectar he had gathered with his fingertips over the sensitive nubbin of flesh above the opening.

Maddie moaned and panted, arching her breasts upward against Padraic's mouth. She began to claw at his back, squeezing the muscles in a vain attempt to pull him upward into her. Had her nails been long she would have scored his flesh, but she had bitten them down over the years in her distress and could

only grab ineffectively at his skin.

Instinctively, she slid her hand down below, between Padraic's legs, and rubbed his cock. The hardness of his shaft glided along her palm, the skin covering the muscle and veins smooth and velvety to the touch. Maddie rubbed lightly up and down with her open hand, reaching lower with each stroke to gently fondle the sac until Padraic groaned.

Maddie's rubbing on Padraic's erection worked, for he lifted his mouth from her breast and moved his body upward on hers until the tip of his shaft pressed into her slick opening. He slid in, first the tip, then the length of his cock, causing Maddie to gasp with pleasure as he penetrated her, stretching the swollen pink flesh with the delicious friction. Maddie's nectar still covered Padraic's fingers, and as he began to move inside her, he gently smoothed the cream he had gathered from her sex over her lips with his fingertips. Then he lowered his face to hers and licked the musk from her lips.

Maddie closed her eyes as she sank into bliss. Her arms were around Padraic, and the scent of her musk mingled with the masculine aromas of Padraic's beard and skin filled her nostrils as his tongue filled her mouth and his cock filled her sheath. Every part of her tingled with warm, melting pleasure. "Padraic! Padraic!" she cried softly as he thrust in long, slow strokes, positioning himself so that he ground against her sweet spot, increasing her pleasure. At the same time, he feathered soft kisses on the side of her neck, making Maddie feel so loved and adored that her

heart filled and surged in her chest. The happiness she felt overwhelmed her and she began to cry from the rush of emotions.

Her tears startled Padraic and he stopped moving. He looked down into her face, tenderly smoothing back her hair. "Should I stop, Maddie?" he asked quietly.

The tone in his voice made Maddie realize Padraic was alarmed. Her eyes flew open and she grasped his shoulders. "No, Padraic! I don't want you to stop! That's not why I'm crying."

"What is it then, love? I didn't think I was hurting you."

Maddie embraced Padraic and nuzzled his beard. She loved the feel of its silkiness against her skin. "I'm crying because you make me feel so loved," she answered. "I'm very grateful."

Padraic kissed her tenderly. "I'm the one who should be grateful," he said. He started moving inside Maddie again, thrusting slowly and sensuously, and neither of them spoke again. But Padraic kissed away her tears, and Maddie drifted once again into bliss.

For what seemed a long time, Padraic thrust into her in slow, hot strokes, all the while suckling her lips, then neck, then breasts, and back to her lips until Maddie felt the surge of cream inside that always flowed shortly before the blissful explosion. Instinctively, she thrust her pelvis up and down against Padraic's shaft in rhythm with his movements, rubbing against her sweet spot and against the flesh that hugged his cock, bringing her

closer and closer to the blissful release.

Each time Padraic took one of her nipples in his mouth, the suckling of the tender skin made Maddie tingle even more intensely between her legs until the tension mounted to its highest possible point. The delicious spasms erupted, radiating through the soft pink flesh between her thighs, causing her to moan with each surge, her head thrown back, her body falling open and pleasantly weak like a windblown flower.

Padraic continued thrusting, driven on by the abandon of Maddie's climax. He moaned when Maddie stroked his hips and buttocks as he moved inside her. She spread her legs as wide as she could, resting the soles of her feet on Padraic's backside. Padraic moaned again and raised himself on his hands, grinding his pelvis against her in ever-quickenening circles. Maddie reached up and felt his chest, her small, delicate fingers raking through the thick, soft dark and silver hair that covered the muscles. She could tell he was getting closer to release. She tightened her vaginal muscles around his shaft and raised herself on her elbows so she could kiss him, her head back, her mouth soft and open, inviting a deep, searing kiss. Only moments passed when Padraic moaned with the beginning of his orgasm. In one movement, he pulled out of Maddie, stroking himself as his warm, milky seed pulsed out and spilled onto her stomach.

Maddie reached up and caressed Padraic's hair, kissing him deeply as the last of his seed flowed out.

Padraic stayed above Maddie, leaning on his hands, breathing heavily. When his pulse had calmed, he rose from the bed and retrieved a clean handkerchief from a chest of drawers against one wall. Outside the night was quiet and dead black, devoid of moonlight from the clouds that still packed the sky.

Padraic returned to the bed and gently wiped off Maddie's stomach. When he'd finished he put the handkerchief on the nightstand and climbed back into the bed, gathering Maddie in his arms. She rested her head against his chest, pressing kisses into the silky hair and hard muscle. Her body felt languid and saturated with love. She closed her eyes as Padraic caressed her hair. "Thank you, Padraic," she whispered.

Padraic kissed the top of her head. "What are you thanking me for, love?"

Maddie raised her head and looked into his eyes. "For loving me," she whispered.

Padraic sighed and touched her cheek. "You never have to thank me for that, lass. Were it up to me, you'd never spend a moment of your life feeling unloved."

Tears rushed to Maddie's eyes and she rained soft kisses over Padraic's beard and lips. Padraic responded by kissing her tenderly and holding her close. Maddie closed her eyes and rested in Padraic's arms. For the first time since she could remember, she felt contented and peaceful as she drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Padraic woke just before dawn. Maddie was still snuggled against him, and the feel of her warm body molded to his filled his heart. Not since the earliest days of his marriage to Katherine had he awakened to this sweetness. Though he needed to relieve himself as he did every morning first thing, he was loath to leave Maddie, even for a few moments. He lay as long as possible, listening to her quiet breathing, punctuated every so often with a deep sigh. Then, as gently as he could, Padraic disengaged his limbs from Maddie's and emerged from under the warm covers into the chilly room.

Just before rising from the bed, Padraic looked down at the sleeping woman whose arms still reached out as if he were in them. The sight sent a warm rush through his body, and he began to harden with the desire to have her bare skin against his again. He loved the way the softness of her breaths stirred his innately male desires to protect and possess. Reluctantly, he stood up and padded softly across the wooden floorboards and out to the hall.

At the toilet Padraic stood, waiting for his erection to soften again so the stream could come. He wanted very much to be done with it and get back to the warmth of the bed and of Maddie's body. Suddenly, he had the feeling he was being watched and looked up. Maddie was standing in the doorway, gazing at him with wide blue eyes still glazed with sleep. She had put on Katherine's nightgown against the chill and did not seem to feel anything wrong or shameful about watching Padraic relieve himself.

"I'm sorry," she said sleepily when she saw his surprised expression. "I didn't know where you were. Should I go?"

Padraic smiled, shaking off his startle. "No, love," he answered. "You can come in." He watched Maddie come toward him and stand quietly at the sink, her eyes trained on his penis in his hand. He felt her gaze on him all the while, musing at how she seemed to enjoy watching him piss, even to the last moment when he tapped the final droplets off the tip. Caroline had had that same earthiness about her, combined with an irrepressible curiosity about the world of men, their ways and thoughts and bodies, a curiosity he'd been happy to satisfy. Katherine had not been like that. Though physically beautiful, she had been all business and order. Her steadiness had drawn him to her in his craving to escape the chaos his life had been at the time. But everything had a price and the price of Katherine's stability had been a lack of playful spontaneity and of appreciation of his nature. She'd criticized him for it, in fact, and nothing could



change her way of seeing him. He'd often wished he could more like her, or that Katherine could just cultivate a bit of the passion or earthiness that the Welby women possessed, but she hadn't.

Before long life together had become a dead thing, especially when he returned from Egypt and found she had been letting their son Eric sleep each night in the bed with her. Of course, she had reluctantly put Eric back in his own bed to make room for her husband, but Eric was only a bairn and hadn't understood. There had been such a wailing and gnashing of teeth from the wee lad that he never forgave his father for coming home. And Padraic had never forgiven Katherine for permanently damaging his relationship with his son and for treating her husband as if Padraic were the enemy invading the peaceful domicile of his wife and bairn. The domestic hostility had made Caroline Welby's sweet adoration of him utterly irresistible. And now, Caroline's daughter had the same effect on him.

Padraic washed his hands at the sink and rinsed the morning sourness from his mouth. When he'd finished and dried his hands, he turned to Maddie and gathered her into his arms. "Good morning, love," he said softly, kissing the top of her head. "Did you sleep well?"

Maddie looked up at him, smiling through her sleepiness. "Aye," she said as she returned his embrace. "I'm so glad to be here with you."

Padraic bent his head down and kissed her. Maddie's mouth was dry from sleep as he slid his

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

tongue inside it, but he didn't care. To him she was succulent, sweeter than the ripest pomegranate he'd ever tasted in his days in Egypt. He began to harden again and felt Maddie's body come alive under his hands. "Come back to bed," he whispered, slipping his hand over her breast.

Maddie let out a small gasp of pleasure as Padraic's hand closed over the soft orb of flesh. "All right," she whispered as her breathing grew heavier. "I just have to go first."

Padraic kissed her again, only reluctantly letting go. "Please hurry." He left her and went back to the bedroom and climbed under the covers, aching to have Maddie in his arms again.

After several moments he heard the toilet flush and the sink run. In a few moments, Maddie came into the room, pulling off the nightgown again before getting into bed. Padraic pulled her against him, holding her back to his front like a pair of nesting spoons. He pulled her hair aside and began feathering kisses along the back of her neck to her shoulder while he cupped one of her breasts in his hand, gently squeezing and rubbing the nipple to erectness. Maddie moaned and rubbed her backside against Padraic's groin, moving up and down him along her slit, his erection slipping between her buttocks. Padraic reached down and separated the lips of her sex. The flesh down there had only begun to swell and was still dry, but Padraic took her, guiding the tip of his penis in with his hand. As gently as he could, he worked his way into her, encouraged by her

moans as his cock pushed and stretched the moistening pinkness. With a few more small thrusts, Maddie's nectar began to flow and Padraic slid in his entire length, gasping as he buried himself in Maddie's womb all the way to the base.

Maddie's lithe body filled his arms as he filled her womb and he turned her over slightly so that her leg was draped over his hips, allowing him to rub her clit with one hand as he thrust into her. Maddie moaned and little mewling noises escaped her throat from the pleasure he gave her. Her musk flowed freely now, seeping out from where their bodies were joined, and Padraic gathered some onto his fingertips, gently spreading it over the sensitive pearl. The scent of her sexual fluid rose to his nostrils, released from the heat of their bodies and he breathed it in, losing himself in the way she filled all his senses.

Padraic kept up his loving massage of Maddie's cleft while she moved her hips in rhythm with his thrusting, wanting to make her cry out with her orgasm when it came. He could feel it building inside her by the way she moved and the sounds she made. When the release came, Maddie stiffened, her breasts arching upward with the intensity, cries of delight pouring from deep within her. Padraic did not stop rubbing until every last spasm had passed through underneath his fingertips, milking from her body every ounce of pleasure it could give her. Finally, Maddie went limp against him. He pulled out and moved her so she was on her back beneath him. He gave her one deep, hot kiss, then lowered his face

between her thighs. Gently, he spread the lips apart and suckled on the delicate rose of flesh until Maddie's body released another orgasm.

In light strokes, he licked the pinkness until Maddie was completely limp and weak beneath him, her breath heaving from pleasure. Then he raised himself over her. She was gazing up at him, wide-eyed and reached up to embrace him as he lay on top of her, her legs wide apart, inviting him to have his pleasure. Droplets of her musk clung to his beard and moustache and he brought his lips to hers, bidding her to taste herself on him, delighting in how willingly she suckled her own moisture from the soft hair. He slid into her amidst their deep kisses, thrusting hard and deep, his body craving release. It took no longer than a few moments and the spasms came. He pulled out of Maddie and finished himself with his hand, rubbing his sex until all the seed had spilled out. Then he reached for the handkerchief and wiped her stomach, lying alongside her when he'd finished, holding her in his arms.

Padraic kissed the top of Maddie's head gently as she wound her delicate fingers into his thick beard. That was another part of him that seemed to fascinate her. She stroked it, nuzzled it, and pressed her face to it, breathing in the scent of the soft hair, then lay still, seeming content to press her face into his chest.

Padraic turned his head and looked out the window where the light of day was gathering. The sky was still gray and packed with clouds. Breakfast was probably almost ready up at the house, and

Padraic knew that Michael wanted him to accompany him and Melody's father on a hunt for the last day of her parents' visit.

"Padraic, do we have to go up there for breakfast?" Maddie asked suddenly, as if she'd read his thoughts. She snuggled closer against him, stirring the warmth trapped between their bodies. "I want to stay here, just like this. There's no point to anything else."

Padraic sighed. "I feel the same way, love," he answered softly. He, too, rebelled at the thought of rising from their cozy nest to go out hunting in the cold. What a choice: shoot animals or make love to this beautiful young woman. It seemed ludicrous. Yet so many would choose the former, if the state of the world were any indication. Maddie was right. What was the point to anything except sweetness and love? He'd always felt the same way deep down. He and Maddie were kindred spirits. In all the world, in the most unlikely, roundabout way, they'd found each other. No conventional manner of thinking would have paired him and Maddie together, but life had. Their hearts had. He caressed her hair while he shored up his resolve to rise from the bed, get dressed, and do his duty like the workhorse he was...

\* \* \*

The knocking at the front door woke Padraic. At first, he thought he was still dreaming. He hadn't meant to fall asleep again, but he had.

The knocking persisted, cutting through the

drowse that had overcome him in the wake of his and Maddie's lovemaking. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as Maddie stirred beside him, also roused from sleep by the sound at the door to the cottage.

"Shite," Padraic mumbled. He knew exactly who it was. He threw back the covers and jumped from the bed, looking at Maddie as he stepped quickly into his trousers. She was sitting up, rubbing her eyes.

"It's Michael, isn't it?" she said. Her tone was clearly bitter and angry. "What does *he* want?"

Padraic did up the button of his trousers. "I'll go talk to him," he told her. "I'm supposed to take Melody's father hunting."

"Let him take him himself!"

"Hush now," Padraic told her as he limped quickly from the room and down the stairs to the front door. As he had known, Michael was standing there, dressed in his hunting coat, cap, gaiters and Wellingtons.

Michael Welby was a good head taller than Padraic, with an athlete's build and the same golden hair and blue eyes as Maddie. The lad was equal to his sister in physical beauty, and sibling or not, Padraic knew that Maddie would have fallen in love with him. Most of the lasses in New Abbey were smitten with the dashing young laird, and Padraic had always suspected that Michael had, in fact, ventured into other pastures than his own. This morning, Michael's handsome face was a mask of distress. "Padraic, have you seen Maddie?" he asked. "When she wasn't at breakfast, Fanny went to her

room..."

Padraic ushered Michael in, quickly closing the door against the cold, gray morning. "She's here, Michael," Padraic assured him. He reached out and put a hand on the younger man's arm. "Listen, lad," he said, "She found you last night with Melody..."

"That's why the door was open!" Michael interjected. His hand went to his cap and he swiped it off in obvious frustration.

"Aye," Padraic answered, trying to lower his voice. "She came running here in the middle of the storm last night, barefoot, with practically nothing on, she was so upset. She could have taken ill and died. Listen, Michael, I told you to be careful, to give her time!"

Michael paced a few steps in front of Padraic, then stopped, putting his hands out in a pleading gesture. "She has had time!" he argued. "Six months!"

"What do you want, Michael?" Maddie's voice came from the direction of the stairs before Padraic could reply. She had just descended the steps and stood at the foot of them, watching Padraic and Michael. But now she came forward, barefoot, in her nightgown, her pretty face clouded with grief, and stood next to Padraic, her arm pressing against his.

Padraic knew that Maddie had done that to show Michael up, but he also knew it was because she was frightened. Padraic was the only person who'd ever protected her. She loved him and he knew it. He felt it when he'd made love to her.

Michael took the point, his face registering first

surprise, then understanding as his gaze flitted back and forth several times between Padraic and his sister. "I came here because I was worried about you," he said. "But I see you've done fine for yourself."

Padraic felt Maddie bristle at the accusation in Michael's voice. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asked tightly.

The muscles in Michael's jaw tightened visibly. "You know what I mean." His voice held quiet menace.

Maddie gasped and tears came to her eyes. "You cruel man!" she cried. "You hypocrite! You don't care about me! I could have gone to the dogs for all you cared! Thank God for Padraic!"

Michael glared at her. "Aye," he said. "Good old Padraic! Always there for the Welby women, isn't he!"

At that, Maddie stepped forward and Padraic watched, astonished, as her hand came out and delivered a resounding slap across her brother's face. "Michael Welby," she hissed, "How dare you speak about Padraic that way! You *owe* him your life! Take it back or I'll never speak to you again!"

Padraic felt a surge of love for Maddie. He'd never seen her show such spirit before, and in his defense! No woman in his life had ever stood up for him like that, not even his own mother.

Michael, too, was obviously stunned at Maddie's unexpected show of spirit. But to his credit, he bowed his head, a contrite expression coming to his features.



"I'll take it back if you'll let me," he said softly.

Maddie didn't answer. Her hands had flown to her cheeks and she seemed to be in shock from what she'd done.

"She'll let you," Padraic said as he came and put a supportive arm around her.

Michael was looking at Maddie with a sheepish, wounded expression, and Padraic felt pain in his heart for him. He hadn't wanted to hurt the lad by being with Maddie. Michael was a troubled lad in some ways, but he was a good-hearted human being. At the same time, however, Padraic didn't want this beautiful wee woman to die of a broken heart.

"I'm not a hypocrite, Maddie," Michael said, almost in a pleading tone. "Melody and I are to be married."

Padraic saw Michael's thoughtless words slice into Maddie like daggers. The sight of her pain was unbearable. He had to act! "So are we," he heard himself say.

Michael's head snapped up and he stared at Padraic as if the older man had just dropped from the sky.

"I have every intention of marrying Maddie."

Padraic's heart surged in his chest, and the room tilted slightly, though he hadn't had a nip of whiskey. Not yet. The step he was about to take was one he swore he'd never do again. His marriage had been mostly a painful trial, and his affair with Caroline, though sweet in some ways, had been fraught with difficulty; arguing, jealousy and guilt on both sides.

But where Maddie was concerned, he felt nothing but protectiveness and tenderness, so strongly it made his heart fill to bursting. Though marriage to her would also have its trials, he realized he didn't want to live the rest of his life without her.

He put his hand out to her. "Will you have me?" he asked softly.

Maddie looked up at him, her eyes full of tears. In spite of her state, she didn't hesitate to take his hand. "Aye, Padraic," she answered. "I will."

At her touch, Padraic felt a jolt of heat through his entire body. What a woman she was! Her show of emerging inner strength and faith in him erased any lingering reservations. If he were to take this step again with anyone, Maddie was the lass.

He squeezed her little hand gently, then turned to Michael. "Done," he said. "Maddie's my wife. She has a year and a day to decide if she wants to stay with an old man like me."

Michael's eyes widened and he stared at Padraic. "That's handfasting!" he breathed.

"Aye," Padraic answered. "We Scots invented it. What's to stop us?"

Michael's jaw clenched and he struggled visibly for self-control. "Very well," he said tightly.

But Maddie gasped. "Is that all you have to say?" she cried at her brother. "Do you really care so little about me?" She fell against Padraic, sobbing into his bare chest, drenching the hair with her tears.

"What do you want me to say?" Michael answered.

"Have a care, lad," Padraic said to him as he held

Maddie, stroking her hair. "Put yourself in her place, just once. You never have, you know, not for a moment."

Michael looked at his sister, misery marring his beautiful features. To Padraic, he looked like a sad, bewildered boy rather than the laird of an estate.

"Go back now," Padraic told him. "I'll be along in a bit. And please have Fanny bring Maddie some of her things. She has nothing here. And some breakfast for her. Would you do that much?"

Michael nodded wordlessly, gazing on his crying sister as if she'd just slipped away from him over the side of a cliff. To Padraic, the lad hadn't looked that frightened since the night he'd learned his parents had died in the fire down South in Oxford. He watched Michael turn and go back out into the cold, his cap still crushed in his fist.

Padraic walked Maddie over to the chair by the hearth and sat her down. He crouched in front of the cold hearth and began to build a fire. When he had a good, cheery blaze going, he turned to Maddie and kneeled down before her, his hands on her arms. He looked into her eyes. "Are you sorry you married me?" he asked.

To his relief, Maddie shook her head vehemently. "Of course not, Padraic," she said. "I'm honored."

Padraic smiled and pushed back a lock of Maddie's hair that hung in her face. "Then pull yourself together, lass," he told her gently. "You showed some spirit back there. I've never felt so loved by a woman in all my life."

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

Maddie smiled through her tears. "Really, Padraic?" she said. "Is that true?"

Padraic took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Have I ever lied to you?"

Maddie reached out and touched Padraic's beard. "No," she whispered. "You haven't."

"Then honor your love for me and the rest will go straight. Even with Michael." Padraic touched her cheek. "Do you understand, lass?"

Maddie sniffled as she nodded. "Aye, Padraic. I understand."

Padraic reached up and brushed away her tears with his fingertips. "I'm sorry I can't give you everything a wealthy man could, Maddie," he said. "But I love you."

"I've had all those things, Padraic," Maddie answered. "And I've been miserable anyway. You know that. None of that means anything to me without love."

Padraic reached out and gathered Maddie into his arms, pressing a soft kiss into her hair. "Ah, Maddie," he said softly close to her ear. "Then I am wealthy, aren't I?"

## EPILOGUE

### One Year and One Day Later

Maddie put her arms around Padraic as he picked her up and carried her over the threshold of their bedroom. John had lit the fire in the hearth, making the place a cozy refuge from the winter winds howling outside the large windows. It was a night almost identical to that one a year ago, the night that had changed the course of her life, Maddie thought as Padraic set her down on the rug by the cheerful blaze. Only now, ironically, she and Padraic were in the very house from which Maddie had fled. They had moved in recently to keep Melody company while Michael was down fighting in the trenches in France. Melody was proving to be a kind sister-in-law. She had arranged a special dinner this evening in celebration of Maddie and Padraic's affirmation of their vows now the trial period had ended.

Padraic took off his shoes and lay down beside Maddie. He let his dinner jacket fall open and held his stomach with both hands. "Oh," he groaned, "I ate

too much."

Maddie smiled at him, watching the glint of the firelight off Padraic's skin and beard. She leaned in to him and placed a tender kiss on his lips. "It'll give us more sustenance," she said in a silky voice as she reached over and laced her fingertips into his beard.

Padraic chuckled deep in his throat as he looked at her, grasping the hand that stroked his beard. "You don't need more sustenance, lass," he told her. "One of these days you're going to wear my poor pecker down to a nub! You'll take down my trousers and there'll be nothing left for you to suckle on!"

Maddie laughed as Padraic turned her hand and pressed his lips into her palm. Then he released it and let her play in the hair of the beard she took so much delight in, like a child with a favorite toy.

"I love you," she whispered when her laughter had passed. She looked down into his eyes, feeling her soul caressed and captured by the tenderness for her she saw in them. No one she knew had such a vivid world of emotion pass through their eyes as Padraic, and every time she gazed into them was like the first.

"And I you," he answered softly, reaching up and cradling the back of her head in his large hand, drawing her toward him.

Maddie settled into Padraic's arms, parting her lips for warm, deep kisses. Slowly, sensuously, they tasted each other's lips and tongues, still sweet from the wine at supper. Maddie felt her body quickly soften and yield to him, and for a long time they lay caressing each other, drowning in the simple pleasure

of kisses.

The evening would have been perfect if not for Michael and Eric's being down in France. Great Britain had gone to war with Germany a mere few months after Michael and Melody's wedding. Michael and Eric had enlisted in the 52<sup>nd</sup> Lowland Division of the Scottish Regiments. Maddie had been crushed at the thought of Michael's going off to war. She still loved him in spite of all that had happened, and dreaded the possibility of losing him and of knowing how horribly he would suffer in that environment, being the sensitive, poetic person he actually was.

But she had gone ahead and done as Padraic told her, taking to her new role as Padraic's wife with joy and enthusiasm. Padraic kept her so busy tending the cottage, cooking, visiting the crofters and making love with him that Maddie soon blossomed into a strong, mature woman.

And Padraic had been right about Michael. He had not left without reconciling with his sister. One night, shortly before he was due to leave, Michael went down to the cottage and apologized to her for all that had happened. He told her how much she and Padraic meant to him and that he loved them both and couldn't bear the thought of losing them. He swore he'd come back alive and make everything up to her. Then Michael had proceeded to give Maddie a wagonload full of wedding gifts. There were new bed and table linens, dresses and nightgowns, jewelry and china. Maddie had thrown her arms around Michael, sobbing in her happiness to have made up with the

## *Maddie's Gift*

---

brother she loved so much and in her grief that he was leaving to go to war.

The night before Michael left, he threw a banquet in honor of Padraic and Maddie's marriage, complete with music and dancing. Most of the crofters on the estate and their families had attended, and Padraic's two sisters, Rosie and Sarah, came from Edinburgh to celebrate.

Now, Maddie prayed every day for Michael and Eric's safe return, and she was all the more grateful for the gift of Padraic's love, which had transformed her life, filling it with promise and laughter and sweetness...

Padraic reached up and pushed aside Maddie's shawl, slipping his hand under the shoulder of her evening dress. Maddie moaned as his fingertips sensuously grazed her chest, inching toward the softer, more sensitive breasts. Her nipples tingled in anticipation of Padraic's touch on them, and Maddie felt the throbbing begin down below between her thighs. She ached to have Padraic inside her, to feel the hot thrust of his erection. With anxious fingers, she began to undo the buttons of his vest.

Padraic stopped his petting long enough to oblige Maddie, pulling off his jacket and helping her with his vest and shirt. As soon as his flesh was exposed, Maddie put her hands on his chest, caressing the muscles and thick soft hair. A smile of delight played on her lips as she gazed up at Padraic through heavy-lidded eyes, her being saturated with the potent mixture of love and desire she had for him.



Her cheeks were flushed and her lips glistened from their kisses. Her body beneath his was open, soft and yielding, hungry for his possession. She could feel her creamy musk begin to seep out from between her thighs into her drawers, and when Padraic lowered himself back down and claimed her mouth again, Maddie grasped at the buttons of his trousers and worked them open.

Maddie felt the warmth from the fire kiss her skin as Padraic raised the skirt of her dress. His tongue plundered her mouth in deep, sensuous strokes while he slipped his hand into her filmy linen drawers, burying his fingertips deeply within her swollen pink cleft. Maddie moaned and arched her hips under his hand, her legs spread wide open, begging for Padraic to take her.

When she'd gotten his trousers open, she slipped her hand inside, closing it around his cock. She loved the feel of the hard muscle filling her hand and felt her hunger to taste him. In their time together, Maddie had grown to love going down and pleasuring Padraic with her mouth, so much so, that the mere thought of it at any given time during the day would start the pulsing between her thighs.

Maddie pulled away from their kisses and lowered her face eagerly down to Padraic's erection, pulling his trousers down to his knees just before settling herself alongside him, her breasts pressed against his thighs. Leaning down, Maddie captured Padraic's hard shaft in her mouth. With her hands on his hips, she suckled gently on his hardness, taking as much of

the length into her mouth as she could. Up and down she massaged Padraic's sex with her lips, teasing the opening with the tip of her tongue. Padraic moaned, his hand on her hair. One by one, he pulled out her hairpins, letting her hair fall loose and silky onto his thighs, so he could entwine his fingers in the tresses.

With gentle hands, Maddie caressed Padraic's hips, stomach and chest as she pleased him, until he stayed her with his hand and bid her rise and undress. He unbuttoned the back of her dress, helping her lift it over her head, then did the same with her silky chemise and drawers. When Maddie was naked except for her garters and stockings, Padraic laid her down on the rug underneath him and mounted her. In one swift thrust he took her, driven on by her cries of pleasure as he stretched the swollen pink flesh of her womb, made smooth and sleek by the flow of her sexual musk.

Maddie spread her legs wide, grasping Padraic's behind, pulling him deep inside her. Maddie squeezed her muscles around Padraic's cock, writhing her hips against his. Together they rose into a passionate frenzy, kissing deeply, their open lips joined, tongues pressed together in a sweet, moist dance.

After a few minutes, Padraic slowed down the rhythm of his thrusting so that he could take the time to lower his head to Maddie's breasts, teasing and suckling her dusky pink nipples, causing her to moan with the intense pleasure. For a while, he moved just enough to stay hard inside her, delighting in teasing

Maddie, bringing her closer to the edge of climax then back again, knowing that the slow building of tension would make her eventual release that much more heavenly.

In the middle of their languorous heat, Maddie gazed up into Padraic's dark eyes, her fingertips teasing and caressing his soft beard. "Padraic?" she whispered.

Padraic smoothed back her hair. "What is it, love?" he asked softly.

"Stay inside me the whole time," she said. "Until the very end. Would you?"

Padraic kept up the slow stroking movements, all the while caressing Maddie's hair. He studied her flushed cheeks and soulful blue eyes gazing up at him.

"Is it all right?" she asked when Padraic didn't answer right away. "I mean, now that I know you want to stay with me, I want so much to have a bairn with you."

Padraic kissed her tenderly. "Are you sure that's what you want, Maddie?" he asked. "You know how things went sour with me and Eric. I'd not want to do that to another."

Maddie reached up and touched Padraic's cheek. She knew about what had happened with Katherine and Eric, for Padraic kept no secrets from her about his life. "It wasn't so simple as that," she replied. "And you've tried to make up with him." Gently, she brushed her thumb across his lips. "Padraic," she said, "I can't imagine anyone who'd be a better

father."

Padraic sighed as tears came to his eyes. Each time she expressed her faith in him, he was unprepared for it. But he thanked God for it. For the gift of this beautiful lass who loved him as he was. "I would love to give you a bairn, Maddie," he said softly.

Maddie smiled and held Padraic close. In their embrace, she began to move her hips again, faster and faster, using her body to stroke Padraic's shaft. Her movements roused his passion again and he moved with her, lowering his face back to Maddie's breasts, suckling and pleasuring them while he ground his hardness against her sweet spot. All the slow, sensual teasing he had done before had brought Maddie so close to release, that in only a few moments, she climaxed, crying out with the intensity of it, her eyelids fluttering shut, her head thrown back, moaning until the spasms passed and her body relaxed, limp and satisfied, under his.

Maddie opened her eyes and gazed up at Padraic, grasping his hips, bidding him to come to his own release. She squeezed him and moved with him, stroking his sex with hers, offering her soft mouth for deep kisses, moaning with the pleasure of his hot, deep thrusts. The tension built again, this time in Padraic, and he came, emptying his warm seed into Maddie's womb.

Their passion spent, Padraic collapsed onto Maddie, breathing heavily, his body entwined with hers, the perspiration on their bare skin glowing in the firelight. Maddie stroked Padraic's hair as they

rested and she closed her eyes, smiling as she drifted into sleep.

Finally, when the fire had begun to die, the chilly air on their naked bodies woke them and they rose and went into their bed, their clothing still in small piles by the hearth. Together, their bodies nestled like spoons, they fell back asleep. Maddie curled up in front of Padraic with the very beginnings of his bairn inside her, the son who would one day inherit Welby Manor from his uncle Michael.

But that is another story...



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**V**ivian Hart is a freelance writer who lives in Maine and in Florida. She enjoys writing erotica and takes her inspiration from what she has learned about love from the man in her life. When she is not writing erotica, she writes for newspapers and magazines, although erotica is her favorite genre. She hopes that her erotic stories will provide a thoroughly enjoyable experience and wishes for all people a healthy, loving life.