

# **Under A Wild Wolf Moon**

By

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## Prologue

#### The Prophecy

In the Clann's darkest hour, when the moon no longer governs the shift, there will come an alpha pair unlike any other. He will master the shift, and she the ways of Magick. Together they will thwart the evil within, and revive the Clann to glory and unity.

#### Translated from ancient Gaelic

Before the time of Saint Patrick, Man and Myth coexisted in harmony with nature. Druids knew the way of forgotten Magick. Creatures, now long gone, roamed Eire's Emerald Isle. Wolves were plentiful, as were their guardians, the Shapeshifters.

Of all the guardians, the Clann MacTire, "Children of the Wolf," was the most faithful.

As in wolf packs, an alpha pair led the Clann. The alpha male, being the most powerful Lycan, chose, as his mate, the Clann female most adept in druid magick, thus maintaining order in the Clann, and the packs in their care.

Saint Patrick brought Christianity and the Catholic Church to Ireland. The arrival of the Church spelled the end of the druids, but the wolves and the Clann survived. More wolves existed in Ireland than in all the remaining countries of Northern Europe combined. Though Oliver Cromwell's attempted genocide of the Irish Catholics failed, his edict to eradicate the Irish wolf population did not.

In 1786, the last wolf in Ireland was hunted down and butchered.

The Clann emigrated to the New World.

Staying on the outskirts of civilization and, following their wolf packs, the Clann moved progressively westward. Eventually, they settled in America, near the town of Destiny, Montana.

Time moved quickly, capturing the Clann in its wake. Families broke away from the old ways, seeking new, modern ways of living. Those who left the pack invariably lost their culture, language, and even the age-old knowledge of Shifting. Of those who remained, only the most conscientious retained the ancient ways into the twentieth century.

Shrinking resources, previous generations thought inexhaustible, forced both wolves and men to compete for their control.

Many of the Clann forgot they were Guardians of the wolf, and chose to lust after power and riches rather than live with the land and protect their brethren.

The wolves were being decimated in North America, and the Clann was divided.

Thus, the Clann Mac Tire's darkest hour had arrived.

## **Chapter One**

She didn't have to accept the position; no one was forcing her to return to Montana. Not physically anyway.

She doubted it would actually come to that but perhaps she should give in before physical coercion became their only option. Destiny, like a spider's web, strengthens our bonds the harder we struggle and she was a fly trapped in a web of her own making. A spider approached...

*Okay, Drama Queen, you're being a bit overdramatic.* She flipped a long strand of titian hair over her shoulder and knocked on the office door in front of her. Besides, she might not even get the job.

"Come in," a distracted voice called from behind the door.

She stiffened her spine, as well as her resolve, and pushed the door open. As she stepped into the crowded University office, she noticed a large red leather chair, behind the desk, swallowed the petite, balding man.

*This was the "Wolf King?"* Aloud she asked, "Dr. Conroy?"

The man peered at over the rim of his reading glasses. "Hardly. I'm Professor Dumfries. I'm filling in for Dr. Conroy this semester. He's already left for Montana."

"Oh, but I was supposed to interview with him this afternoon about a position."

"'See-O-Ban' Doyle is it?"

"It's pronounced 'Shi-von', but yes, I'm Siobhan Doyle."

"Well, Miss Doyle, I don't know what you were told, but you already have the position." He removed his reading glasses and used them to punctuate his words. "As a matter of fact, you were *requested*. Requested, I might add, over far more experienced applicants."

He stopped speaking to purse his lips before setting his glasses on the desk. Rising, he mumbled to himself, crossing to a nearby metal file cabinet. "I suppose what Dr. Conroy wants, Dr. Conroy gets. He's the 'expert', after all."

He grabbed a large manila envelope from a shelf and stared at it a moment before handing it to her. "You'll find everything you need in there. You're expected to check in a week from Sunday. Returning to his chair he set his glasses on the bridge of his nose, his attention concentrated on the papers in front of him.

After a few minutes of silence, he sighed and looked up at her. "Was there anything else?"

Startled, Siobhan looked up from the contents she'd pulled from the envelope. "Oh. No. That's it. Thank you." Stuffing the envelope and its contents into her satchel, she turned and slipped out of the office.

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It had been a long trip and Faelan needed a break. Twenty miles from Destiny, he pulled off the highway to stretch his legs.

At just under six and a half feet, he had considerable leg to stretch.

Turning off the truck's engine, he pulled out his keys, grabbed his black leather jacket from the passenger's seat and climbed out of the cab. Oblivious to the appreciative stares of the female population of the rest area, he strolled across the parking lot.

His muscular frame was clad in all black—jeans, tight T-shirt, and biker boots, making him a striking sight. His smooth movements, elegant and adroit, exuded power and sensuality in pheromone waves with every step. His dark hair and intense gray eyes had always garnered female attention anywhere he went, and he had learned to brush it off at a young age.

Women adored him, although, in all his thirty years, he had yet to have a relationship that lasted any length of time.

Unlike some of his colleagues, he believed that liaisons with young co-eds held more risk than payoff, and he had never indulged. He had chosen instead dalliances with experienced women who wanted, and expected, nothing more than a pleasant diversion, avoiding serious entanglements.

Only twenty miles to go and he'd be home, with all the problems that entailed – old and new. *Christ, I'm not looking forward to this!* 

He liked himself a reasonable man, but there were limits, even to his tolerance.

The Council had definitely not followed everyone else into the twenty-first century. *Hell, they hadn't even made it into the twentieth century yet.* 

And he wanted no part of their arcane traditions.

His future was not a community project to be voted on. If, or when, he married it was nobody's business but his own. He was only going home to try to salvage the family business, for the sake of his cousin and brother, and perhaps see what he could do to repair Clann business.

Otherwise, Da and the council could rot in hell for all he cared.

His left boot rested on a low rock wall framing a "scenic overlook." Supporting his elbows on a raised knee, he studied the verdant mountain landscape, so different from the high deserts of Arizona, and let the chill of the mountain air seep into his pores, filling him. Despite his anxiety at being with his family again, he felt lighter, freer, more in his element. An errant breeze carried the crisp scent of an approaching storm and, from his right, the over-perfumed odor of an approaching female.

She smelled needy and aggressive.

Just his type.

Regretfully, he had neither the time, nor the desire, for any type of interlude right now. Still, he would be polite, playing out the drama in a manner that would leave both their egos intact.

"Beautiful, isn't it? You come here often?" Her voice was low and throaty.

Turning his head he studied her a moment before answering. Tall and reed thin with hazel eyes and short blonde hair, her makeup impeccable, she fidgeted. He detected an aura of edginess surrounding her and, when he caught the whiff of a nicotine patch, knew its reason.

Smiling exposed the dimple in his right cheek. "Not in a long time."

Her eyes widened, and she moved closer. "You traveling with your family?"

She wasn't very subtle, but he didn't have time to stay and dance anyway, not even a Minute Waltz. Pulling his foot from the wall, he stretched and turned to face her. "Nope. Unfortunately, sweetheart, they *are* waiting for my arrival."

She glanced pointedly at his crotch then walked her gaze leisurely up his body to his face. "A pity. Another time, perhaps."

Beautiful, and dangerous, white teeth flashed as he grinned, a complement to his dimple. "One can only hope."

Returning his smile, she pulled a card out of her pocket and offered it to him. "If you're ever in the area ..."

He took her card and glanced at it before tucking it in his pocket. "Thanks. I'll be sure to keep you in mind. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I'm already late."

He could feel her eyes caressing him every step of the way back to his truck.

A pity indeed. The sacrifices I make for family.

Siobhan tied the laces on her running shoes, grabbed her water bottle and keys and called Aingeal, her Lab-Shepherd mix, to take their run. Since they would be leaving early the next morning for Montana, this might be their last chance to stretch their legs.

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Hooking his leash to his harness, and her water bottle to her belt, they left the small student-housing apartment for the track across the street. Tempe, Arizona, even in October, could be sweltering. Ninety degrees brought a fine sheen to her hairline, and moistened her T-shirt just on the short trip to the track.

Being just short of six foot, and possessing a wonderfully toned body, Siobhan would have been imposing as a male, but her lush breasts guaranteed that she would never be mistaken for one.

She stopped at the bleachers next to the track to stretch, dropping Aingeal's leash to free her hands. With no other animals around, she knew he wouldn't stray. She'd always had a special understanding with dogs and could read them, experiencing what they felt, whether it was fear, sorrow, or joy.

Sort of like a dog psychic.

She saw through their eyes, smelled through their noses, heard through their ears. The blur of the mechanical rabbit as a Greyhound rounded the track, on feet too swift to follow; the scent of a lost child, whose fear left an acrid taste on her tongue, or the mournful chorus of wolves, separated from the pack, their moist tongues tasting coats as they were reunited.

Maybe she should have gone into showbiz instead of wolf research.

Aingeal panted contentedly next to her. He stood about hip high and weighed just over one hundred pounds. With medium length gold and black fur, he appeared more German shepherd than Labrador retriever. He was her best friend, even if that dickhead Bill had given him to her.

Bill. Her first love, her first intimate experience. Her first betrayal. "Men seriously suck!" Aingeal whined. "Not you, Aingeal." He forgave her slight with a lick, and a doggy smile. Siobhan found herself wishing Aingeal could speak to her in words. Dogs just felt and sensed, thinking in pictures, not in words, at least, not for her.

Maybe what she really wanted was a friend, a confidant, a soul mate.

Jogging onto the track, moving to stand next to her, a tall, blond and definitely male runner removed his T-shift in an obvious attempt to draw her attention to his physique. She recognized him as a member of the Men's Volleyball Club team. They often shared a practice gym with her Women's team.

"Excuse me. Aren't you on the Women's club team?" As an intro, it wasn't too bad. She had heard worse.

She rewarded his effort by turning her head toward him, a slight smile on her lips. "Yes, and you're the Men's middle blocker, right?" He smiled, pleased and encouraged moved closer, only to back up a step when Aingeal growled.

*"Easy, Aingeal. You can't blame him for trying,"* she thought, pushing calmer emotions in her pet's direction.

"I didn't see you at practice this week," he mentioned.

"I'm moving, so I'm no longer on the team." His disappointment was palpable.

"Well, maybe we could get together before you leave." She paused and considered his invitation.

She had to admit that he looked delicious, standing a couple inches taller than she. And that was not so easy to find. The same sun that had turned his skin a nice even bronze had streaked his light hair. He looked cute, pleading with those puppy-dog eyes warm, brown eyes. Nice eyes. Comfortable eyes.

She'd never see him again after tonight. Who would know? She sighed.

She'd know. Right now, she could still look at herself in the mirror and she planned to keep whatever dignity she'd gained after the disaster that was Bill. "Sorry. I'm leaving in just a few hours. It was nice running into you, though."

"Just my luck. Well, have a good trip. Maybe I'll see you at Nationals."

"Sure. Maybe. Bye." The last place Siobhan would be anytime soon was a volleyball court. She turned her head away to finish stretching, having little desire to pull anything with the upcoming long drive, and the runner grabbed his shirt and walked away.

She picked up Aingeal's leash and started slow on the outside of the track. A quarter of a mile into her run she felt the first burn, followed closely by the return of a piercing headache, a gift of recent sleepless nights. Her nightmares had returned with a vengeance, making her sleep miserable and nearly impossible.

She had all but forgotten her childhood terrors until three months ago when her dreams had started all over again, increasing in detail and intensity.

Her life before 'that night' was a blank, a gaping hole.

Well, not quite.

One image still haunted her, chasing her through her days much the same way as it chased her through the night.

Running through the night, pursued by a shadowy menace, heavy wet snow adhered to her nightgown, freezing the garment to her already cold body.

neck.

*Exhausted, she slogged through drifts of glacial sludge, more afraid of what tracked her than the icy death she might find in the snow.* 

Inhuman howls of rage, and pain, pierced the night.

The acrid odor of burning wood, flesh and fur raised the fine hairs on her arms and back of her

She glanced over her shoulder, searching, when a burst of light, and pain, filled her head, and she fell.

That was all she remembered.

And she relived it vividly with every nightmare.

It had been almost thirteen years since Maeve had found her shivering from near hypothermia, hiding in the barn. She had been told that she had been found curled on a stored cot, two of the ranch's Border Collies tucked around her body for warmth. Wearing nothing more than a long nightgown and a pair of torn slippers, it seemed she was just damp and cold until Maeve had seen the large purple bruise covering her right temple.

*Her* first clear memory of that night was waking up to a gnawing hunger and unbearable headache, having to pee so badly she thought she would burst. She had pushed the dogs off the bed, swung her legs over the side of a small cot and promptly heaved.

An unforgettable introduction.

"Ah, colleen, why did ye have to go and do that? Ah, well, never mind. Lay back down. I'll get tha floor, and ye, cleaned up. What should I call ye? Siobhan? The tag in yer gown has 'Siobhan' on it."

It was that Siobhan had realized she couldn't remember her name, or even where she was from.

And she still remembered nothing, nothing except those damn terrifying dreams.

That had never changed.

The frequency of the nightmares had tapered off over the years, and rarely bothered her.

Until lately.

The small rural ranching community of Destiny, Montana contained few public services and the sheriff, Seamus McMahon, had searched for Siobhan's relations. Without any missing person's reports, or help from Siobhan, her temporary stay with Maeve soon became permanent. They chose May 1st as her birth date, and twelve as her age. Maeve had said that she thought it was a pretty close guess, taking her size and development into consideration.

Maeve had often teased Siobhan that she had taken her in more for Maeve's benefit than any other reason. She had claimed she needed some company, living so far from town. Siobhan never heard her talk of any other children and thought it was because she had been lost, and Maeve had wanted someone to take care of.

Well, that and, of course, because Maeve's heart was bigger than the world.

Once Siobhan had taken Maeve's last name, everyone, even Siobhan, had forgotten she might belong elsewhere, with other parents.

They rarely left the small ranch or had many visitors though, occasionally, Sheriff McMahon had stopped in for Sunday dinner or to deliver their supplies. Siobhan had never questioned their isolation, keeping busy with lessons, livestock, and the dogs, while Maeve had home schooled her, using a surprisingly extensive library that included several handwritten texts.

Siobhan remembered pouring over the old books as part of her curriculum, memorizing and reciting passages on a regular basis. Many of her lessons had included detailed usages of plants and herbs. Perhaps her education had been a little too esoteric for a *conventional* education, but it had been interesting and her knowledge of botany helped her in her biology studies

Siobhan was curious to see how her home had changed, and her mind took her back to the last conversation she had overheard there. The one that changed her life, the one she remembered the most clearly.

It had been five years after she had been 'adopted' by Maeve, and she had been going down the stairs for dinner. Not wanting to butt in to 'adult conversation', much of which was boring to her at the ancient age of eighteen, she had hidden and listened, when her name was mentioned in hushed tones. When she had heard frustration lacing the sheriff's tone, her ears had perked even more since he was the most even-tempered man she knew.

And something had definitely riled him.

"Maeve, you know it's for the best. With Deirdre gone, he's started wondering again. You know how he's always wanted to merge your family line with his. I'm sure he's convinced himself that it's fated for the O'Briens and the Conroys to fulfill the old prophesies, and that it will happen during his lifetime. What if he decides that Faelan is too weak, too young or never coming back? After all, who knows if, or when, Faelan will return?"

"Eamon has always been power-mad. He wouldn't be an alpha if he weren't competitive. If he comes looking for her, you know yours will be the first place he looks. Too much has happened for us to not protect her with our last breath."

She had heard Maeve's voice shake with what had sounded like tears. "*Oh, Seamus, ye don't think he really would, do ye? Oh, I couldna' bear it if it started again.*" She remembered being upset that somebody was upsetting *her* Maeve and had started down the stairs only to stop when Seamus had started talking again.

"I don't know. He's been making noises again about finding out if she's alive. Guess he doesn't believe she died in the fire. I still have contacts in Arizona and it would be difficult for him to learn anything if we send her there."

"I can always get word to Faelan and warn him. He will need to know so he can be ready to move in case things change quickly. I think it would be best for everyone if we move her now. Make her disappear... until the time is right." She'd heard Maeve sobbing like her heart would break, and then Seamus said, "I'll be by at six am. Have her ready. She'll be gone before he suspects anything."

She remembered how Maeve had looked when she had walked in the kitchen, hurriedly wiping wet eyes and hiding any tears. Unclear of the reasons behind their 'talk' she knew she was the '*she*' they had been discussing. When she left for Arizona the next morning, Maeve made it sound like a grand adventure, promising her that she would be gone only for just a short time.

But that 'short time' had turned into eight long, lonely years.

And, in all those years and hundreds of letters from Maeve and Seamus, neither of them ever once told her the real reason behind her move or what had them both so frightened, no matter how many times she had pleaded for answers.

It was just recently that she had started getting letters with a much different slant.

Both Maeve and Seamus had written several times, urging Siobhan to come home to Destiny. It was simply the luck of the draw, she supposed, that she had been chosen to work with an expert on the wolf reintroduction project so close to home. Though it had always been her dream she had never thought it would happen anywhere close to her old home.

Guilt struck her like a hammer, guilt that she hadn't been back since she left eight years ago. Though for much of that time she had been busy with studies and getting screwed over by Bill, she hadn't really wanted to face them. They had hurt her when they had shipped her off, not telling her anything except that it was 'for her own good'.

Maeve's last letter still had her puzzled. It had hinted at so much while saying nothing at all. Going to her bag, she pulled out the creased envelope, unfolding the mysterious note.

My Dearest Siobhan,

I have often wanted to call you home but knew I needed to wait until it was time. Situations have changed and it is time that you knew the truth about that night, when you came to live with me.

*I know that you will return home, if for nothing else but to discover your heritage and have your questions answered by those who can.* 

*Curiosity always had more than a little hold on you.* 

Your parents were very dear to me, more than I can say in this letter. My heart breaks that you do not remember them. I am sorrier that I can ever tell you that there was never a time, before now, when I could tell you about them.

Keeping you safe was all that mattered.

*Siobhan, I pray when you know all the facts you will understand, and forgive my actions. Until we meet again may God hold you in the palm of His hand.* 

Your loving Maeve.

That Maeve had known about her past, known who she was and never told her? It didn't matter how many times she read those words, Siobhan remained puzzled. What could be so horrible that she couldn't know before now?

At long last, it looked as though the secrets were finally going to be brought to light. All it was going to take was to get back home

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Faelan stared sightlessly at the ranch house he hadn't visited in thirteen years, nearly half his thirty years. Nothing seemed to have changed much. He had expected to feel something on his return but he was nearly overwhelmed by memories, and old fears swamping him. He breathed deeply to clear his thoughts, and gain control.

He'd hesitated at first when Seamus had first written, on behalf of his father, asking him to forgive and come home. Even when Tristan and Quinn's letters had followed it, he had his reservations. But Seamus' second letter, stating Siobhan would be home and the 'time' had finally come, had decided things.

Two tall men, wearing black Stetsons, approached his truck cautiously and he grinned, immediately recognizing his cousin, Quinn, and his younger brother, Tristan. Quinn, with

Faelan's same ebony hair and silver-gray eyes, was only a year younger and slightly shorter than Faelan's own six and one-half feet. Quinn could easily be mistaken for his brother since Tristan, younger by three years, had curly dark-blonde hair, and amber eyes.

Grabbing his briefcase and jacket, he quickly exited the cab, happy to see two familiar faces "Tristan, Quinn, you've grown up." He shook their hands embracing each of them in turn suddenly glad to be home. He glanced toward the house, unconsciously lowering his voice. "So, is *he* up and about?" Quinn nodded. "They're both waiting for ye. Uncle Eamon hasna' talked about anythin' else since ye agreed ta come home." Faelan raised his eyebrows in surprise. "And Da wants ta get his two cents in." Quinn paused before continuing.

"Listen, Faelan. As far as I'm concerned, whatever ye want goes. I love Da but I've grown up always knowin' that ye would be back, and that ye be tha rightful successor. I'll be supportin' whatever ye decide." Faelan clapped him on the shoulder as the trio started walking toward the house.

"Quinn, I appreciate that. But I don't know if I'll be staying. I want to set the businesses to rights, and I really haven't thought past that. Besides, ultimately, the council does what it wants." Pausing at the bottom of the steps, he glanced at his two friends. "Any further word about Siobhan?"

Tristan laughed, stopping to punch his brother, sibling-like, on the shoulder. "Ah, yes, the sweet Siobhan. We thought Da, and Kieran, would both have strokes over that one. Imagine it. Her livin' that close, for all those years, and none knowin' - Council or Da."

With a touch of hurt in his tone Quinn muttered, "Ye know ye could have trusted us. We would have kept yer secret and hers. Ye dinna' have ta leave us for so long."

Faelan smiled tenderly. "There be na' need for ye ta have ta leave too. And it wasna' me secret ta tell. Besides, I'm ta be tha trigger. Siobhan's rememberin' starts when we meet again." He hesitated.

"Tha 'tis if Maeve really be as powerful as we all thought. From me letters from Seamus, 'tis obvious, though, that Siobhan doesna' remember anythin' before tha night her parents died, so Maeve's power seems ta be all 'tis purported ta be. Anyway... "He grinned. "Ye two were barely out of diapers at tha time. I couldna' have told ye anythin'." Faelan laughed at the disgust on their faces. "Sooo, what have ye heard?"

Tristan shuddered. "Maeve be a scary lady. This last month runnin' messages and doin' errands for her hasna' been fun a'tall." He grinned, always the first to promote any type of mischief. "Maeve mentioned that Siobhan should be arrivin' in 'bout a week or so. Should be here in plenty of time but we dunna' think anyone has told her 'bout tha succession, or anythin' else. Heard that she isna' bad on tha eyes though. So, if neither of ye wants her, I'd certainly be willin' ta step in for ye."

Quinn and Faelan looked at one another and answered in concert, "Nah."

Laughing, the trio walked up the stairs, their steps in perfect sync. Pushing open the heavy double oak doors, they stood in a spacious great room, its flagstone fireplace dominating the wall facing the huge doors. Setting his briefcase by the doors, and hanging his coat on the ever-present coat rack, Faelan looked around and saw the inside hadn't changed much more than the outside. Time had added a soft patina to the furniture, the same as he had seen on the outer walls.

He had a moment to note that someone had carved an office area in the left corner of the room nearest the fireplace, a perfect spot for him to commandeer for his own, with enough space to add another desk. It would be an adequate working space, the large windows letting in ample light, and he was determined that if he was going to be forced into fixing this mess they had gotten themselves into, he might as well be as comfortable as possible.

Stepping further into the great room, he was stunned when a dread, intense and vile, threatened to overwhelm him, as old sights, old smells and old emotions assailed his senses, freezing him in his tracks.

#### Suffocating sensations, he had not experienced in thirteen years.

Shit! This is not going to happen!

He quickly schooled his expression, regaining his hard-won control, as Quinn questioned his sudden stillness. "Problem, Faelan?"

He grunted. "What could be wrong?"

"What indeed." Quinn snorted as he started across the room.

Clapping Faelan on the shoulder Tristan encouraged, "Come on, *bráthar*. Let's beard tha lion in his den." Laughing at his own joke, Tristan followed Quinn across the great room to the hallway leading to the north wing of the house, and to his father's study.

His boots echoed hollowly as he deliberately strolled across the polished hardwood floors, taking in the lemony scents of wax and polish blending with the sweet, smoky burning wood from the fireplace. The creak of the settling house played counterpoint to the whistling wind through its eaves, and a sweet familiar ache settled between his shoulders as he walked down the darkened hallway toward the light coming from his father's study.

Entering the imposing room, he stood, impassive, and resolute, as all eyes turned to appraise him, the child turned man.

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After a week of driving, eating bland food and sleeping on lumpy mattresses, Siobhan was eager to be home. Parked off the highway, in yet another "scenic outlook," she double-checked the hand-written map and was thrilled that it looked like she only had about twenty more miles to go.

She was thrilled that someone thought to include it her information packet. She would have never been able to find her way back to Destiny, Montana, simply from memory. And sincerely doubted that it would appear in any Rand-McNally publication.

Aingeal whined, reminding Siobhan that it had been hours since his last constitutional. Laying the map on the dashboard, she gathered his leash off the floor. Snapping it to his collar while he slurped his thanks across her check and nose.

"Oh, gross! Let's just get this over with so we can get there before full dark." She wiped the doggy drool off her skin, thinking it odd that another idiom had crept into her vernacular. It had been happening periodically ever since her nightmares had returned.

She giggled, remembering the odd looks she had gotten when she had mentioned that it would be good to be home for Samhain. Just another mystery to be added to the growing list of questions to be answered.

She led Aingeal to the empty visitor's area and seeing no other pets, or their owners in the vicinity, she unhooked Aingeal's lead while she perched on a rust-colored sandstone outcropping. While he investigated prairie dog burrows with gusto, and complete concentration, her thoughts went to Maeve's weird letter and all the questions she had been mentally listing since she had gotten it.

Who was she? Where did she come from? Who were her parents? What happened to them? What happened to her? And who had chased her? The questions had been tumbling around in her mind, disturbing what lttle peace she thought she might have from her insistent nightmares.

A single whistle brought Aingeal bounding back. He paused in the open door, as she removed his leash, staring up with his enormous amber eyes and she 'felt' him touch her mind.

This time it was in *words*, not just sensations.

"Don't worry. Everything will be fine. It always is."

She stopped and stared in disbelief, bemusedly shutting the door.

Walking around to the driver's side she could see him fidgeting, eager to be off on their new adventure, and thought that she definitely must be extremely tired...or simply going crazy. It was a given that she had a special connection with canines.

They just had never talked back.

Pushing the impossibility out of her tired mind, she turned her face the myriad of stars glittering in the darkening sky of the cold, clear night. She had missed seeing them living in the civilization of the city. Feeling a damp touch on her nose, she crossed her eyes and giggled in delight. Closing her eyes, she stuck out her tongue and captured sweet snowflakes, dropping out of the darkness. They tasted cold and clean.

New.

A portent perhaps, for new beginnings.

Climbing behind the wheel, she started the engine, refreshed, eager to travel those final few miles.

# **Chapter Two**

She pulled onto the gravel driveway, the Blazer tires crunching and popping loose rocks along the way. The snow had fallen faster, painting the landscape in surreal strokes of stark white. The house looked like a Kincaid painting, its lights glowing welcomingly, guiding her through the dark night.

"Ready, Aingeal? We're home."

Turning off the engine, she noticed the Sheriff's truck parked close to the side of the house. *Well, seems I get to kill two birds with one stone.* 

Aingeal followed close on her heels as she strode up the steps, knocking briskly on the door before walking in. Entering the foyer of the front room, she saw Maeve and Seamus sitting on the couch.

Maeve's dark auburn hair had a few more gray streaks than Siobhan remembered, but it seemed little else had changed. Seamus was still tall and solid, with soft brown eyes, and gentle mien. His thick chestnut hair belied his eighty some odd years.

Time seemed to have forgotten to touch either of them.

"There ye be." Maeve stood, pulling her into a comforting hug and she inhaled her scent—vanilla and cloves, a poignant reminder of childhood. Released from one embrace into another, Seamus hugged her hard to his chest.

"How are you, little one?" Pushing her to arm's length, in order to examine her from head to toe, he held her by the shoulders. "Well, you're gorgeous, and obviously not all that little any more. Your parents would be very proud."

"Seamus..." Maeve warned.

"It's time, Maeve. You two get started and I'll be right back. I'm going to get her luggage..."

"Seamus...wait. You don't need to get my bags. I can do that later." He merely waved her off and headed out the door. Aingeal, instantly comfortable in his new surroundings, turned a couple of times and lay in front of the warming flames, settling in for the night.

"Would ye like some peppermint tea while we have our little chat? I remember 'twas always yer favorite." Without waiting for an answer, Maeve headed for kitchen and the three cups of steeping tea she had prepared earlier.

Siobhan helped her, carrying her cup and saucer and a small plate of sugar cookies to the maple dining table. Maeve set two cups and saucers on the table as Seamus shoved the door open with a booted foot, his arms overloaded with Siobhan's overnight case and two suitcases. "I left all your books and papers in the back of the car. Figured you could do without them for tonight."

"Thanks, Seamus. You can just leave everything there. I can get them before I go up to bed ton -"

"No. No, that's okay. I'll just take these up - "

"Seamus," Siobhan interrupted, "come sit down and talk to me. I won't bite." He sighed, knowing the time had come for disclosures. Setting her bags down, he looked more like a recalcitrant little boy than the only law enforcement officer within miles. Even after he sat at the table, and was handed a cup of tea, he didn't not quite meet her eyes.

After several minutes of silence, Siobhan decided to take the lead. "Okay, I guess I'll start. Who am I?" She leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table, waiting for some answers. Maeve and Seamus shared guilty looks, each gesturing for the other to begin.

Seamus shrugged, knowing that Siobhan was not going to be happy with their explanations, no matter who started them. "I would like to say I feel comfortable with this, but I don't. I'm afraid that I'll have to defer to Maeve here. I'm not sure just how much...sharing... is prudent, at this time."

Maeve looked uneasy, realizing that Seamus had neatly tossed the ball in her court. "Well now, luv...who ye be isna' very easy ta answer in a few simple words."

"Then how about we start with something easy? You said in your letter that you knew my parents. Who were they?"

Seamus cleared his throat and answered, "Your father's name was Donal and your mother's name was Brigid."

When he went no further, Siobhan urged, "And their last name?"

He hesitated. "McMahon."

Siobhan frowned. "But your name is McMahon. Does that mean we are related?"

Seamus nodded. "Yes. Donal was my son."

"Your son? Then that makes me..."

"Yes. You're my granddaughter."

"Then why did I live with Maeve? Why didn't *you* take me in?" Old insecurities made her stomach cramp, tears welling up in her eyes. Seeing her prepared to bolt, Maeve stopped her with a firm but gentle touch on her tense arm.

"Shush, luv. Yer mother was me own daughter. I be yer grandmother and ye have ta ken that ye were always loved and wanted. We feared for yer safety when yer parents were killed, and couldna' let ye know."

Silent tears coursed unheeded down Siobhan's face with their words, her headache returning to hammer chimes in the confines of her skull, threatening an explosive escape. She hid her face in her hands, shaken by their admissions. When she lifted a ravaged, tear-stained face, sorrow and disbelief in her eyes, their hearts ached.

"Why?

Seamus looked down, shame evident on his face while Maeve's emerald eyes, so like Siobhan's, darkened. "The *why* of it need not concern ye tonight. We had good and sufficient reasons for doing what we did. It kept ye alive. It will all come back ta ye at tha pace it needs ta." She studied Siobhan, seeing the exhaustion and pain bruising damp eyes.

"Take ye ta bed, and I'll be bringin' ye a cup of willow bark tea for that pain in yer head." Siobhan's eyes widened in surprise as she looked at her newfound grandmother, having forgotten how uncannily skilled she was at reading other's thoughts and feelings. "Yer questions be normal and we'll be talkin' more in tha morn.

"Now get ye ta bed. I'll say me goodnights ta tha Sheriff, and bring yer tea up." Siobhan swallowed the remaining peppermint tea in a single gulp and, hesitating for just a moment, put her arms around Seamus and kissed the top of his head. Renewed tears glistened in three pairs of eyes as Siobhan hugged Maeve tightly, kissing her soft cheek, before calling Aingeal. Siobhan grabbed her overnight case and reluctantly started up the stairs, deciding to leave the remainder of her luggage for the next day, when her head wasn't pounding every time she moved too quickly, or bent over. She opened the door to her old room, setting her bag inside the door before loudly closing the door.

Giving Aingeal the "down" sign, then the "stay" signal, she waited anxiously for Maeve and Seamus to continue their conversation now that she had left the room. She knew they would never speak freely while she was within earshot, and tiptoed to the head of the stairs to listen in, hearing concern in Seamus' voice as he spoke.

"Are you putting something in that concoction there?" She heard Maeve snort and softly giggled at the telling sound.

She couldn't stop the touch of anger, a small feeling of betrayal, as she heard her grandmother's next words.

"Nay, ye silly old fool. I put that in her peppermint tea. This "concoction," as ye put it, is for her headache. I'm thinkin' that her nightmares must have returned ta plague her sleep, seein' those dark circles under her eyes. Dunna' take on so. I'd rather cut me own arm off than harm a hair on her precious head."

"I know that, Maeve. So...what happens now?"

"Well, she'll be seeing *him* on tha 'morrow. With me brew, and seein' him again, it will all soon be comin' back ta her. There be just na' tellin' tha order of things, ye know. He'll be watchin' her, just as we will, ta guide her along."

"What about the Council?"

"There I be na' so sure. We'll have ta wait and see when 'tis tha best time for all that." "But..."

"Enough, Seamus. We'll just have ta wait and see. 'Tis na' yer science, ye know."

"Alright, Maeve — for now. But I won't hesitate to do what needs to be done should everything start going to hell. I already lost my only child. I won't lose my grandchild."

She could hear the gruffness in his voice and wondered if they realized how much pain she was in, knowing there were things she didn't understand, things they wouldn't tell her, things she *had* to know.

"As did I, Seamus. As did I. We'll not be losin' our only grandbaby as well. Now, off with ye. Go home. Say yer prayers and trust in tha Lord's mercy, for there's naught more ye can do here this night."

When she heard a chair scraping the floor and heavy steps slowly making their way to the front door, she silently opened her bedroom door, a bedroom that didn't seem changed in the eight years she had been gone, and signaled Aingeal to follow.

There was much she still didn't understand.

But she would. Given time...

\*\*\*\*

Faelan stripped, hanging his clothes in the large walk-in closet. Wearing his comfortable jeans, he knelt and lit the fire that had been laid in readiness for his arrival. Within minutes, the room was uncomfortably warm.

He walked to the window and pushed aside the curtains, opening the sash and allowing the cold, fresh air to caress his heated skin. The snow-covered landscape sparkled in the full moon's glow and a pull, a longing, an overwhelming urge he hadn't known for years, tugged at his gut. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, exhaling his yeaning with fogged breath.

Opening his eyes, he studied the moonlit range beyond his window, wondering how long the wolves had until extinction.

Man, always a selfish and shortsighted animal, would not sacrifice his own comfort and petty desires for a creature they thought supplied nothing tangible to their world. They often forgot the immeasurable importance of predators within the food chain, the necessity that Mother Nature had added to the circle of life escaping most people.

Even ranchers, who lived close to the land, didn't stop to think of the repercussions that would result from their thoughtless slaughter.

Beauty would lose to pragmatism every time.

Faelan sighed and turned from the window. Locking his hands together, he raised his arms to stretch, pulling each torso muscle taut. The bones, along his spine, made loud popping noises as they realigned themselves. Rolling his head from side to side, he stretched his neck and shoulders as he lowered his arms, snorting as he remembered his mother scolding him for popping his back when he had been younger.

His mother. He still needed to visit her grave.

It was the least he could do considering he never said goodbye when he left.

Never saw her. Never wrote her. Never spoke to her.

Hell, he'd barely even thought about her.

Deirdre O'Brien Conroy had been a mousy, plain woman, but Faelan wondered now if she had started out that way. He realized that Eamon's obsession with Siobhan's mother, Brigid, had grown progressively worse over the years and, to Deirdre, his father's callous disregard must have been painful.

Had Brigid accepted Eamon's proposal, instead of running off with Siobhan's father, Donal, Faelan doubted Eamon would have treated her any better than he had treated Deirdre.

His father's obsession with Brigid had had more to do with losing to Donal McMahon, than to any softer emotions.

Kieran, Eamon's acquisitive younger brother, had married Eileen, Deirdre's twin sister, so it was no wonder that Quinn and Faelan looked so much alike. Until Tristan, competitiveness in the Conroy males was ubiquitous.

Tristan, however, could care less about approval, or politics. As long as Tristan was content, he'd never leave of his own volition. He simply couldn't be bothered.

Then there was Quinn.

Quiet. Reserved. Enigmatic.

Faelan had been back home for over a week and, though he'd seen his father only a handful of times, he'd seen Kieran every day. Except for some gray hairs, and a few new wrinkles, his uncle had changed very little.

There was a cagey look about him that Faelan didn't remember existing before. But, then, seventeen year-old males aren't exactly known for their perceptiveness.

This new Kieran reminded him of a half-starved coyote, waiting for the jackrabbit to turn his back so he could pounce.

And Faelan planned never turning his back.

Eamon was another story.

Kieran and Eamon had once resembled each other as much as he and Quinn. Now, though, his father barely resembled the man Faelan once knew. Only the piercing gray eyes, eyes that he had inherited from him, remained unchanged. The once dark hair was nearly completely white, and the powerful body had become a frail old man's frame. Brian Murphy, husband to the ranch's cook and head housekeeper, Molly, danced in constant attendance to the now wheelchair-bound patriarch.

Faelan turned back to the window and looked out at the full moon.

An itch, a craving slithered down his spine and he closed his eyes, breathing deeply, pulling in the scents traveling on the light breeze. A lone wolf's howl ruffled the early morning's serenity, reminding him of the night he had left, thirteen years before...

The snow had started falling early in the day and, by late afternoon, there was nearly a foot on the ground.

Da had called him into the office, berating him for spending so much time with Siobhan. "Did ye mean ta be disloyal, Faelan? Ye be me eldest and I expected more from ye than tha'. Ye will na' spend any more time with that whelp of Donal McMahon's, ye hear? Nay! No son of mine will be tied ta them." An angry Faelan had chosen to spend the night with their wolf pack instead of celebrating Samhain with the Clann, leaving his father's office in a petulant rage.

It would be the last time he would see his father for more than eight years, though he did not know it then.

Later in the evening, playing with his canine brethren, he had become aware of a disturbance in the air. Sniffing the wind, he had sensed a raging fire, burning out of control, filled with a stench he did not recognize, one that burned his senses, imprinted itself on his memory.

His heart had ached as it was stabbed with a sudden pain, pain from wolves being hurt, killed.

Realizing that it came from the direction of Siobhan's home, he had rushed to investigate but, when he had reached her house, he realized that he had arrived too late to be of any help.

No one, wolf or human, remained alive.

He had found her parents' bodies outside the enclosure where they had kept recuperating wolves. He had searched the rubble of burnt home, unable to find signs of Siobhan anywhere. Circling the house, he had expanded his search, picking up her trail. Larger feet covered her tracks as they had led into the woods, veering toward town.

Icy fear had gripped him as he had followed both sets of prints, and he remembered praying as hard as he knew for her safety as he saw they all but obliterated her small imprints with their immense size. The depth of the loosely packed snow had hampered him and, when he had glimpsed a large shadowy figure moving cautiously through the trees, he had stayed back, his inner voice telling him to hide, to be wary. He had briefly lost sight of the man and had hurried through the trees, throwing caution to the wind, when he had heard a reverberating thump, followed by a soft cry of pain, and then eerie silence.

As he had ran around a copse of trees, he had stopped suddenly as he saw the large male, who strongly resembled his father in size and countenance, drop a large branch. He used his foot to poke at a pile of white cloth, his low maniacal laughter dancing on the wind before he strode heedlessly through the trees, never once looking back.

Faelan had neared the pile of cloth cautiously, his horror growing as he uncovered a beaten and unconscious, delicate Siobhan, still as death in the snow, sprawled like a discarded rag doll, bleeding freely from a deep gash on her right temple. She laid utterly still, her skin pale with a bluish tinge.

A snow angel where there should be none.

He had carried her gently to Seamus, her grandfather, running lightly, his extraordinary strength making the quarter mile trip easy to traverse, encouraging his tiny burden to fight, not to give into the darkness.

"Oh, dear Lord. Siobhan, dunna' be dead. How can ye marry me if ye dunna' grow up? Come on, Princess. Stay here with me. I surely would miss ye if ye were gone. The wolves would miss ye too."

Seamus had maintained a calm demeanor when shown the form of his tiny granddaughter and, as he had explained to Faelan much later, losing control would not have done any of them any good. He already lost too much, with the deaths of his son and daughter-in-law, to jeopardize the life of his granddaughter.

After seeing the brutality of Siobhan's wounds, he had said he would take them both to Maeve's. It would be the best place and they would be protected. "That way you will both be safe, out of harm's reach. We can't risk Siobhan's life further by calling for aid, or taking her to a medical facility. We don't know who did this, and must take every precaution. "Whatever heartless bastard did this won't stop until she's no longer any threat to anyone."

He had taken them to Maeve's, laying Siobhan on a cot in the barn before going to see to his son and daughter-in-law, to take care of what needed to be done.

But Faelan had barely noticed.

He had sat still as a mouse, watching Siobhan's shallow breaths while Maeve gathered her supplies from the house. He had almost jumped for joy when the tiny figure had moved, finally sitting up, only to throw up blood, staining the straw covered floor. A panicked shout to Maeve had brought her running, and she had ordered him to carry Siobhan gently into the house. He had spent the rest of the night, well into morning, fetching and carrying as she feverishly worked to save Siobhan's life.

Skilled in ancient Druid healing methods, he had watched carefully as she had employed herbs, hot and cold poultices, chants and prayers in a valiant effort to preserve Siobhan's tenuous hold on life, encouraging her to fight to stay with them, in the land of the living. He vaguely remembered Maeve reassuring him that Siobhan would grow stronger the longer she rested and it must have been about then, sometime towards dawn, when Seamus had returned to stand beside them, watching Siobhan's more normal breathing.

Faelan remembered Seamus had hugged Maeve, telling her that it had been 'done', which he had thought curious. They had never told him *what* exactly had been *done* but, later,

he had gone back and found no traces of Siobhan's parents' bodies, the murdered wolves, or even Siobhan's bloodstained resting place.

All had been obliterated, erased as if it had never happened.

He knew there had never been any inquiries within, or outside, the Clann. With Seamus being sheriff, he had full authority to handle any investigations. How could there be an inquiry if there were no bodies? He remembered Seamus mentioning that if the killers assumed everyone had died, they would not be looking for Siobhan, so she would be safer hidden away at Maeve's and away from the others.

He thought back to that time, as they had sat at the kitchen table, weariness reflected on all their faces...

Seamus had made them a pot of strong coffee while Maeve dropped exhaustedly onto her chair after seeing Siobhan tucked into bed. Faelan had been exhausted, emotionally and physically, wanting nothing more than to rest his head on the table and sleep for a week. Though Siobhan had been given a sleeping draught and was currently stable, they all feared for her life. With the brutality of her attacker, and the deaths of her parents, she had to be their first priority.

"What are we ta do, Seamus? Siobhan will be in danger tha minute it be known she still lives."

Seamus had leaned back in his chair, rubbing his burning eyes before answering. "You'll have to take her, Maeve. Hide her. She can live here. With you. You've been on the outs with the Clann for such a long time now that I'm betting that most of them don't even remember that you're her grandmother."

Faelan's head had jerked up at Seamus's words, turning toward Maeve in surprise. "I never knew ye be her grandma."

Seamus had snorted, showing that he words carried truth. "See?"

"Alright. But we must protect her, even from herself. We canna' have her givin' herself away, lettin' tha bastards that did this know they failed." Maeve rose, wringing her hands as she paced. Suddenly, she had looked at them, her eyes bright with intent. "I do have a spell ta make her forget everythin' that happened. It would make gone all her past and she could start new when she wakes in tha mornin'. Maybe it be best she na' remember."

"Maeve, it can't be forever. I don't want my granddaughter to never remember her parents, her life."

Faelan had watched as the healer chewed her lip, pacing the room, thinking of a solution. He had been dozing, only to be rudely awakened when she snapped her fingers under his nose to get his attention. Faelan, me darlin'... I'm very much afraid that ye will have ta be goin' as well. 'Tis probably safer for ye anyway. I'll make ye her trigger, for reversin' tha spell and, when next ye meet, tha spell will work itself backwards. She'll be able ta recover everythin' she thought forgot...well, eventually."

"Faelan had felt shivers of unease, uncertain if he felt comfortable being the 'key' in the healer's magickal machinations. "Seamus, those relatives of yers...tha ones in Arizona...could probably help house tha boy 'till he's able ta start college in tha fall."

Seamus had considered a moment before saying he thought it could be arranged. "What about the boy's family?" The older couple had both turned and looked at him questioningly.

He remembered straightening, standing tall and suddenly feeling older than his seventeen years, suddenly a man when yesterday he had been a child. "I have reasons of me own ta want ta leave home and now is as good a time as any. But I canna' grieve me ma like that. Ye will have ta promise ta tell her that I be fit and well, or she'll fret."

Seamus reassured Faelan. "Of course. I'll tell your family that you're safe. They won't like that they'll have to go through me to reach you, but that might be best for now. The day will come when you will return, when you will both return. For you know, from the actions this night that her memories will be dark and painful."

He had nodded, squaring his shoulders, determined to be an adult, seeing the wisdom in the decisions being made.

But his heart had ached for the wee bit asleep in her bed up the stairs.

"Can I see her 'fore I go?" He thought back to Maeve's understanding smile as she led him into Siobhan's new room.

"I'll leave ye two alone...but ye will have ta hurry. Time grows short and ye need ta be gone."

After Maeve had left them alone in the room, closing the door behind her, he had knelt by the bed, kissing Siobhan softly on her bandaged forehead. "Be happy and safe, me wee *sidhe*. We'll be meetin' again and 'twill na' be that long. And ne'er forget...I promise I'll always come for ye.

"Ye be mine, always."

He had left that very night for Arizona, going on to graduate with honors from the local high school in the spring and earning a scholarship to Arizona State University for the fall. Once finished with university, with a Ph.D. in environmental studies, specializing in the protection of wolves, his studies took him all over the globe, with his last two years spent "incommunicado" on a wolf study project in Alaska.

His brogue had softened, almost disappearing from his normal speech and only occurred when he felt strong emotion, so he guarded himself well, seldom losing control. As the years passed, he had slowly smoothed out his rough edges, becoming a popular student then professor. After publishing several papers for various environmental periodicals, as well as participating in specialized studies, he wrote a book, which pushed him to the top of the collegiate list. The book, well accepted by his peers, made him highly desirable as an instructor, or any type of project lead at universities around the country. He joined the teaching staff at ASU with the understanding that he would participate in, and lead, his choice of assignments.

After thirteen years, he had nearly forgotten his previous life.

Until he had received Seamus' note, telling him of Eamon's stroke and the other problems facing the family's ranching business and Clann leadership, he thought that he might never return to Montana.

He was comfortable in his life, having carved out a niche in the academic world, which suited him. The added news that the Clann Council wanted Siobhan to return to the fold, having discovered Maeve's granddaughter was still alive, had forced him into changing his plans. With the announcement of her existence, they had decided that her bloodline made her the perfect Alpha mate for their new leader.

Him.

He had learned that he, being the current patriarch's eldest male child, was the preferred choice of Alpha Male, the new leader of the Clann.

He remembered what a vibrant little girl she had been; recalling that overwhelming sense of shame he'd felt when he saw his father standing over her broken and still body that dark night.

There was that, and his heart-felt promise...

"I promise I'll come back for ye."

He owed it to Siobhan to help her reclaim her life, the life *his* family was responsible for taking.

He still remembered that long-ago conversation when Maeve had explained that Siobhan would need him to trigger her memory recall, and wondered if that was still the case.

Maeve had been so certain all those years ago. But how could *he* be sure?

He had accepted the responsibility of heading the wolf reintroduction project for the Western Montana area, using his considerable influence to see Siobhan received the enviable position of his assistant.

He had come full-circle.

She had come full circle.

Soon his responsibility to her would be over and he could put that night forever behind him. Siobhan could begin remembering her past, get that part of her lost life back.

He could go back to his.

Siobhan deserved her life back, and justice needed to be served.

His father looked old and tired and Faelan wondered if the stroke had affected his father's memory as much as it had affected his body. It was possible that Eamon didn't even recall that night, with everything that had happened these past years, but he was determined to learn the truth, regardless of the pain it might cause to the family, and the Clann. He knew that the consequences could destroy them all, but it didn't matter.

The die was cast. Let the games begin.

More howls sounded in the distance and Faelan closed his eyes, clenching his hands into tight fists. His reaction, visceral and intense, produced a sweet, familiar pain that cramped his stomach. Sweat moistened his chest and back and dampened his hair.

He felt his incisors lengthen and his remaining teeth ached to accommodate his elongating jaw. He threw his head back and groaned as pain shot through his temples, grasping the windowsill, his nails gouging grooves in the soft wood. His temperature escalated and he slipped quickly out of his jeans. Pushing the window sash higher, he vaulted into the moonlit yard below.

It had been so fuckin' long since he'd been able to shift. It wasn't something he could safely do in the midst of a city as large as Phoenix. Three million people were a few too many possible witnesses, and he didn't get into the wilderness as often as he'd wished.

As he landed, his muscles bunched and his figure shimmered until an enormous wolf, with silky, black fur and smoky gray eyes, stood shaking off any remaining moisture.

The huge wolf raised his snout to the moon and opened his jowls in a deep-throated howl. With a leap of joy and exhilaration, he raced off to join the pack.

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The willow bark tea did its job and her agonizing headache disappeared. Maeve's other concoction granted her some much needed sleep, without the nightmares that had been plaguing her, offering instead delicious dreams...

Silver mist on a foggy morning, storm clouds gathering on a summer afternoon, while she stood on top of a hill overlooking a meadow of tall grass and watched a familiar figure stride up the hill toward her from the trees. She stood frozen, spellbound by the man, clad only in jeans, loping towards her. Her gaze traveled slowly over the hills and valleys of the six and a half foot frame.

*Oh, my. He is beautiful.* 

He was all muscle, the kind that comes from working rather than working out. And, as hard and unyielding as his body appeared, his hands seemed elegant, long, tapered fingers similar to those of a musician. Her eyes followed his right hand as he combed through hair the shade of deep obsidian, polished to a brilliant sheen, to be drawn and captured by smoky gray eyes.

Fear of falling forever into the pools of that hypnotic stare, she moved her gaze to the shoulder-length locks that captured cerulean streaks of light without relieving their inky cast. His thick waves looked heavy enough to be able to anchor one's hands while losing one's soul to passion, and she sighed.

In the distance, a chorus of night cries met a lone wolf's howl and she nearly wept at the poignancy of the wordless message, their bays of joy and ecstasy at simply being alive. She closed her eyes tightly, her fists clenched at her sides, as the chorus resonated throughout her body. Her chest felt tight, as though it could expand no further, and she feared her heart might burst free.

She wanted to join them.

The effort of holding back was nearly more than she could endure.

The man chuckled, the sound vibrating through her though he still was a distance away.

"Siobhan let it all out. While ye decide what be worth doin', all that be worth doin' will have passed ye by." With that said, he turned his head towards the wolves' song. Lifting his head to the moon, he let out a deep-throated howl, primitive and raw.

The sound, sweet and full, curled her toes.

When he turned his head, glancing back at her over his shoulder, a look of indecision crossed his face before he stripped off his jeans and left them lying in a puddle at his feet. He smiled and his figure briefly shimmered, transforming into the most massive, darkest wolf she had ever seen.

Joyfully speeding toward the pack, the wolf joined his musical brethren, sounding another howl before disappearing into the trees.

*Oh, my, he was beautiful.* 

## **Chapter Three**

Faelan realized that he had been reading the same sentence for the past five minutes and sighed, swiveling his chair around until he faced the picture window. Just like thirteen years ago, an early snowfall had begun the day before and, by dark, there would be half a foot on the ground. Giving up all pretense of trying to read the latest *"Wolf Conditions"* report, he laid the papers on top of an already impressive stack and racked his fingers through his hair, a gesture he habitually used when anxious.

*She* would be here in less than an hour and he wondered if Siobhan had any idea what the others wanted from her. Had anyone bothered to let her know what she could be getting into?

From everything he had heard she was smart, and beautiful, but, of course, for all he knew she could be fully aware of what was wanted, and be willing to go along with all the set plans.

He, on the other hand, was having trouble making them believe that his stay was temporary. That as soon as the ranch, Clann, and his father's legal business were settled — one way or the other — he would be leaving.

He had already put out feelers for another assignment, roots holding little appeal for him.

Maeve, and the Clann, weren't the only ones who wanted Faelan and Siobhan to accept the proffered alpha positions. His father was counting on it, wanting their bloodlines to mix, and had been vocal with his opinions.

Which, if one really thought about it, was ironic, since the last time it had been brought up they had fought over him spending too much time with Siobhan.

He thought about the first time he'd met her and wondered how the years had changed her.

I guess time changes all things...

He had been seventeen, and she twelve, when they first met and, normally, the fiveyear age difference would have precluded their having anything in common. But Faelan had considered Siobhan the little sister he'd always wanted.

She, in turn, had worshipped him.

They had met on their common birthday, May 1st. Within the Clann, it was celebrated as Beltane, the beginning of summer and he had gone to the meadow, where wolves gathered, and found a skinny little girl gaily singing and talking to them as though they were puppies.

She had appeared unafraid, oblivious to any possible danger from the powerful animals. His first instinct had been to position himself between her and the pack but something about the scene had made him pause.

The wolves seemed to be answering her in low growls and whines and, when he listened more closely, he had recognized her song as an old Celtic lullaby that he had not heard in years. Fascinated, he had continued watching the tiny sprite.

Standing all of about five feet tall, and not weighing more than ninety pounds dripping wet, she danced and twirled in the afternoon sun, her braid flying, capturing the reflections of

its rays. Her hair had been a fiery red, with golden streaks woven throughout, the single braid stretching to her waist holding the majority of the escaping locks.

He remembered being entranced by the wisps that had evaded capture, dancing like bright fairies around her face and shoulders.

She had blown on a milkweed, her laughter ringing across the fields when the sparkles of blue, green, red and purple floated on the afternoon breeze. Without turning, or acknowledging his presence in any other way, she called out, "Come out and play with us. Ma says I'm not to do that around other people, "she had paused, waving a delicate hand through the glittery flotsam floating on the wind, "but you're not *other people*, are you?" With that said, she turned to face his hiding place. "The wolves know you well, and say you're okay to play with. That you know how to play. Some don't, you know. I think that is good for someone as old as you."

This last was said with a small giggle, showing she was teasing.

She had turned back to the flowers and gathered a fistful of blossoms, informing him that she was going to take them do her Da, since they were his favorites. "But first I'd like to go for a run. Not many know the old ways anymore, so I'm usually alone. Well…except for the wolves of course. It's more fun with others, don't you think?" When he didn't answer, or move, her face had fallen and she had morosely continued, sounding much older than her years.

"Maybe...since you're '*his*' son...you don't want me tagging along. My Ma and Da said your father doesn't like us very much." He remembered she had sighed, as if feeling quite sorry for him. "That's too bad 'cause I really wanted to run with someone else who *knows*." Without any thoughts of modesty, the strange little girl had slipped off her heavy brogues and began unlacing her shift.

"Wait!" He had stepped out of the copse of trees, holding out his hand to stop her from undressing. "I be promisin' ta run with ye later, but first let's talk some." After he had sat down beside her, he'd had to hide his grin when she suddenly turned shy, leaning back on her elbows, spindly long legs stretched out in front of her.

Her eyes had darted to his face before shifting back to stare at her tiny toes.

"Me name's Faelan."

"Pleased to meet you, Faelan. I'm Siobhan McMahon."

After another silent minute, wondering where he had heard that name before, he had asked, "Tell me, Siobhan McMahon, do ye only talk so much when there be only wolves ta hear ye?" He had smiled inside as she giggled and sat up, pulling her knees up to hug them close.

She had started giggling again, rocking merrily back and forth, and teasing him about his brogue. "You sound funny but I like it."

When she giggled, she warmed him from the inside out and he was tempted to think off manner of things to say to keep the smile on her face. He had leaned onto his left elbow, facing her, teasing her in kind. "I'm thinkin' that around here ye be tha one who sounds funny."

The sprite had stopped rocking with his comment, and he had watched her think on his words. "Faelan, I think you could be right." Standing, seemingly over her shyness, she had

reached a hand toward him, her small body offering his larger one a hand up while she laughed with the glory of the day. "Let's run, Faelan."

He had grinned, grabbing her hand as he rose and remembered that his heart had grown lighter as he answered her laughter, picking her up and spinning her around in dizzying circles. She had made him feel alive, returning joy to his day.

"Aye, *deirfiúir*, let's run."

They spent most of the summer together, running and exploring, their bond drawing them closer. Every once in a while Tristan and Quinn had joined them, which was how he supposed his father had initially learned of their fraternizing, changing all their lives in one fatal night.

The intervening years had done much to change his acceptance of magic, his belief in the unseen.

Siobhan had been relieved of those 'sure' memories long ago, by her grandmother's charm, and he wondered how she would react when the memories, the events of that dark night, started flooding back.

Supposedly she would begin recovering them today, after they met.

He was anxious to see her again and wondered if she'd remember him.

He hoped her memories of him were as kind as his were of her.

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The man from her dreams met her at the door, driving everything else from her mind. Siobhan stood transfixed, unable to garner cohesive thought and, when she made no move to enter, he leaned against the door jamb, his gaze traveling leisurely down her body and back up to her face.

When he looked into her eyes and smiled, her heart skipped. "I thought never ta see ye again, me wee *sidhe*, certainly not so grown up."

The lilt of Emerald hills, an ancient Celtic song, colored his words, sending shivers down her spine to tickle the soles of her feet.

"Faelan..."

Her whisper, barely audible, left her lips and she remembered, closing her eyes to see the boy of her childhood, opening them to see a man. The memories flooded her in dizzying waves, staggering her, and he reached out gently to hold her arms, steadying her as she swayed.

Pictures, scenes from another time, sped through her mind.

"Faelan will you marry me when I grow up?"

*"Princess, when ye grow up ye'll have so many suitors ta pick from, ye will forget all about me." "I will never forget you, Faelan."* 

"Whoa there. Maybe we should sit."

She nodded in agreement and allowed him to pull her into the foyer.

As they entered the great room, he tried for a touch of normalcy. "May I take your coat?" he asked, hoping she would follow suit.

He was curious.

What did she remember, and how much?

She slipped off her sheepskin coat, handing it to him to hang on the coat rack. Following him to a seating area, she dropped down onto the rose-covered sofa, her mind whirling with the influx of memories bombarding her.

He sat across from her in an over-stuffed rocker, slouched comfortably and watched him lace his fingers over his stomach, patiently waiting for her to come to terms with what was happening.

Extremely uncomfortable under his calm scrutiny, she gladly took a few moments to assess her surroundings, circumstances, and *his* presence.

"You're Dr. Conroy, Dr. Faelan Conroy the 'Wolf King'?"

Laughter burst from him and he straightened, swallowing his chortles. "After all this time and that's all ye have ta say? Ah, yes. Tha 'Wolf King'. I havena' heard that, at least not ta me face, for quite a while." He returned to his previous slouch, re-lacing his fingers and studying her face.

"Faelan Conroy means 'Wolf King'. It *is* rather fitting, though, do ye na' think?" His mesmerizing accent sent chills snaking down her back, and she lost the thread of their conversation.

"Huh?" Concentrate, doofus...

"Are ye quite all right, Miss Doyle?"

"McMahon."

"Pardon?"

"My name is Siobhan McMahon."

"Ah." So, they told her, at least that much.

"Dr. Conroy," Siobhan began.

"Faelan. Please call me Faelan. We'll be working closely together for awhile anyway."

"Okay, Faelan...and I'm Siobhan."

"Siobhan. Well, it only took us five minutes ta get our names straight. I'm hoping we'll be faster working with tha wolves."

Siobhan laughed with him as memories of sunny afternoons, the air redolent with the aroma of wild flowers mingling with the musky scent of grass and sun-warmed wolves swamped her consciousness. Endless hours of running and playing in grasses to her chin, a younger, smiling Faelan at her side, settled softly in her mind.

Oh dear, Faelan. What else have I forgotten?

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Going over the time schedules, and required reports, Faelan and Siobhan lost all track of time, their papers strewn around them on the floor as they tried to make sense of the required paperwork and endless forms, until Molly forcefully interrupted their animated discussion. "Well, now, I do believe even wolves know enough ta stop and eat when 'tis time, and past time." She pushed their papers to one side and snickered when they rushed to keep them in order.

An over-burdened tray was soundly set on the coffee table between them. With arms akimbo, she continued chastising Faelan. "Ye be as bad as e'er yer da was. Were ye plannin' on starvin' tha young miss then? A body needs ta eat."

He grinned unabashedly. "Not, and suffer me fate at yer wee beautiful hands." When he embraced Molly, she blushed a rosy hue.

"Schoolin's only made tha Blarney in ye worse." In spite of her acerbic words, she smiled, patting his cheek affectionately.

Reaching down a hand, to assist Siobhan to her feet, he smiled as she attempted to straighten the papers caught under her feet into some semblance of order. "Siobhan, I would be pleased for ye to meet our irreplaceable, and gorgeous, Molly, ruler of our kitchen and queen of our stomachs. " I do believe she's *discreetly* trying to tell me that lunch is ready." Siobhan giggled as Molly swatted him on his brawny arm, muttering about rapscallions, and sly tongues.

After telling him to behave himself or he would be getting more of the same, she turned and smiled genially at Siobhan, taking her hand and patting it motherly. "'Tis a pleasure ta be meetin' ye, Miss Siobhan. I knew yer parents well — God rest their souls."

Faelan thought he was the only one who noticed her stiffening at the mention of her parents, and softly touched her shoulder.

When she turned, her welling eyes met his understanding gaze.

Hoping to return the mood to its previous work-related discussions, Faelan waved a hand over their bounty. "Lunch is obviously waiting. And I promise we won't discuss anything more personal than the wolves." Siobhan smiled tremulously and followed Faelan's lead, dropping back down to the floor to gather the last of the papers and stack them haphazardly before sitting cross-legged beside the table, intent on enjoying their repast. They fixed themselves plates of salad and cold chicken and Faelan, the perfect host, poured glasses of iced tea.

Molly had added a festive touch: pumpkin-shaped sugar cookies for dessert.

Animated discussions about their research continued and they were surprised to find all the food seemed to have magically disappeared during the course of the afternoon. Placing their dishes on the tray, so that Molly did not have to clean up after them, they spent the remainder of the day completing the tedious forms, sorting the reams of paperwork until they were sick of it.

Having accomplished all they could, for the moment, Faelan showed her around the commandeered office, pointing out the essentials. "That desk, under the window with the daunting piles of paper on it, is mine. This one, soon to be covered in similar piles, is yours."

He watched her poke around, opening and closing drawers, taking a mental inventory.

The spaciousness of their office space was such a stark contrast to the crammed, haphazard working conditions in which she normally found herself in that she was at a loss. Trying to keep the grin from her face, and failing miserably, she commented, "Since I'm used to far more cramped and uncomfortable working conditions, I suppose this will just *have* to do." Her grin broke out when he raised one eyebrow at her facetious remark.

She liked the fact that he was taller than she. It happened so rarely, and his dwarfing her made her feel more feminine. She wasn't accustomed to having to look *up* to meet many people's eyes, but he stood at least half a foot taller.

She liked it a lot. She liked *him* a lot.

She was beginning to wish that she'd worn something a little dressier than her travel jeans and a comfortable turquoise sweater. A little makeup probably wouldn't have hurt either.

She surreptitiously eyed Faelan, dressed in pleated navy pants and steel-blue silk dress shirt. He had unbuttoned his collar, looking more casual than they had started, but still maintaining an air of complete control.

She had an overwhelming urge to reach up and muss his hair, just to see what he'd do. She sniggered to herself as she imagined what his reaction might be.

He glanced at her, his eyebrows again raised in question and she managed to blank her expression, though her dark green eyes sparkled with amusement. "I'm so sorry, Dr. Conroy. I think I'm still jet-lagged, or car-lagged. It was a very long trip, and I just arrived last night."

"It's Faelan, remember?" he couldn't help reminding her.

She met his smiling eyes, feeling their connection straight through to the pit of her stomach. A blush colored her cheeks. "Faelan." She smiled back, entranced by the peeping niche in his cheek.

He looked so stern most of the time that his dimpled smile was well worth waiting for. *Even his lips are cute. Oh, yes. This man is definitely trouble, with a capital 'T'.* 

"So tomorrow, at eight am? Okay?" When she blinked up at him, trying to look like she had actually heard what he said, as he continued, "I know it's early but there will be times when we visit the sites that we'll have to start even earlier."

'Huh? Oh, yeah, eight is fine." Siobhan hoped she didn't appear like a total ninny.

"Good. Let's get you your own set of keys." He moved to his desk and removed a set of keys from the top drawer. Holding them out for her, he pointed out each key's use. "This is for the front door, and this is the deadbolt key. Good to know, but they're hardly ever locked."

"Really?" She asked surprised they were so trusting.

"Yes. We're not in the big city any more, and this ranch is pretty remote. We know before someone gets within five miles of the front door. Here's the file cabinet key and it stays locked, there is too much sensitive material to allow access to the files. This green key is for your desk, and you can decide if you want it locked. The blue key is for *my* desk. Only you and I have a key to it. I have some things I don't want anyone else messing with." He pulled out second, smaller set of key. "You can hook this one onto the large set. They are for all three observation sites. We have equipment sheds, spare ammunition and fully stocked shelters and will need to supply them as necessary." She reached out to take the keys, jumping back when sparks arced between their fingers.

They both gasped and looked into each other's eyes, the moment frozen in time.

Still holding onto the keys, and her hand, Faelan muttered, "Static."

Agreeing, the stunned Siobhan glanced down where their hands touched, his skin so much darker, his large and powerful hand engulfing her smaller one.

She stared at the muscles playing just beneath the skin and imagined what those hands could do to her, with her, what they would feel like on her, caressing her. A man's hands had never before aroused her with just a touch, not even Bill's.

Faelan had an insane desire to kiss her, to devour her and, by the look on her face, he didn't think she'd mind. He had frequently felt an immediate attraction to someone but never this over-powering need, this desire to possess another, heart and soul.

*Christ, she's not even my type.* As though *that* had anything to do with it.

*Kiss her and then what? Chuck the project? Give in to Clann pressure and marry her? Marry her!* 

Where on Earth had that come from? It had just been too long since he'd had a woman.

And then it happened. He didn't know how it happened.

It just did.

He'd been thinking about it, watching her lips, and leaned over and simply kissed her, more a tasting really. Sweet and warm, her lips tasted of mint...and innocence. Releasing her lips was difficult than he dreamed, even though their embrace lasted mere seconds.

He jerked his head back, and the keys dropped between them. They both bent to retrieve them and nearly bumped heads. Avoiding crashing into each other, Siobhan slipped and landed on her butt.

It became a domino effect.

As she fell, she clipped Faelan's legs with hers as he tried to catch her, but missed. When her feet knocked his out from under him, he avoided falling on top of her by straddling her with his arms, bracing his legs on the floor as if doing push-ups. For silent seconds they stared at each other, connected by the awkwardness of their positions.

Siobhan burst out laughing at the look on his face. Laying back on the floor she gave in to the complete absurdity of their situation until tears rolled down her face. Bewildered at how she found such humor in a near disaster, Faelan turned his large body gracefully and sat down next to her.

Seeing the humor, he started chuckling, his chuckles accelerating to full-blown guffaws. As their laughter wound down they glanced at each other, and it started again.

Unbidden images of Siobhan, as a mischievous girl laughing up at him, crossed his mind and an unfamiliar tightness gripped his chest. He studied her face as she unsuccessfully tried to quiet her amusement, wiping at her happy tears. He remembered well when those tears had not been so happy.

He was enchanted and something hard, and cold, deep inside his soul, long time hidden from prying eyes, melted. Her merriment drove the shadows haunting him far away, at least for a time, and he suddenly could not wait to begin working.

With her.

His *work* had been his passion.

Tristan and Quinn chose that moment to enter the ranch house and, drawn in by the unfettered laughter, peered into the office.

"Faelan? Is everything' okay?" Tristan's concerned question, having noticed both of them on the floor, started another round of chortles. Perplexed, they walked into the office, staring down at the snickering couple lying on the floor.

Quinn asked dryly, "Were ye lookin' for somethin', Faelan? Or is this how ye entertain all yer lady friends?" Faelan glared up at the two smirking faces and stood up.

All three men reached out a hand to Siobhan at the same time and she started giggling again. Faelan's scowl was sufficiently lethal that Tristan and Quinn deferred to him. He

helped her stand while the other two removed their Stetsons, ever gentlemen in the house and in the presence of a female, waiting for Faelan to offer introductions.

"Siobhan, this ugly guy is my brother, Tristan and this even uglier one is our cousin, Quinn."

"Pleased to meet you," she said, extending her hand. As Tristan shook it, she noticed his hands were rough, but still oddly soft. She had to grin when Quinn gently pulled her hand from Tristan's firm grasp and held it close to his chest. She watched as he turned his head to Faelan, a wicked grin playing on his lips.

"Faelan," Quinn began, "do ye remember that thing I said about deferrin' that competition ta ye? For the Council's sake?"

"Aye, Cousin," came the dry retort.

"Well, see now...here's tha thing..." Bringing her hand to his lips, he gallantly kissed the back before continuing. "I do believe I've reconsidered me position. A friendly competition might be just tha thing." Siobhan blushed, a confused look on her face with the undercurrents flowing around the group.

Quinn released her hand and smiled confidently, ignoring Faelan's furious glare. "After all, it's been such a long time since we had a chance ta compete on an equal footin', so ta speak. Or since there be anythin' worth competin' for." He paused, eyeing Siobhan up one side and down the other. She was surprised the considering look did not make her feel like a heifer at auction. ""Such a prize deserves tha best effort we can give, da ye na' think?"

His expression unreadable, Faelan answered, "Without a doubt." His countenance grew darker at the thought of another man daring to touch that which was his.

As the two competitors stared at each other, identical scowls covering their faces, Tristan, deciding that someone needed to step in, broke the tension with a slight bow and offered to show Siobhan the rest of the house.

Uneasy with the spike of testosterone in the room, she took his proffered arm and they started for the door. "Oh, wait." Siobhan paused and turned around, watching the two males bristling in their standoff. As two heads turned to face her she wiggled the set of keys in Faelan's direction, grinning. "See? I got them. See you at eight."

She turned back, joining the sniggering Tristan who couldn't stop himself from tossing over his shoulder at the combatants. "Eight should give us plenty of time." His laughter trickled the door as Quinn and Faelan raised disbelieving eyebrows, watching Tristan waltz off with their prize, wondering if they had not lost the battle before it even began.

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Siobhan returned home with more questions than answers.

Having three very handsome, and extremely eligible, men vying for one's attention certainly boosted a girl's self-confidence and Siobhan was not immune. However, the more she thought about her meeting with the Conroy men, the more their cryptic comments about a competition, and the mention of the Council, started to bother her.

Since seeing Faelan her memories were returning at an alarming rate.

But they were not in any chronological order, had no frame of reference.

Scenes from childhood, many including a much younger Faelan, whisked into view for a few moments, then disappeared, leaving behind fragments that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, rebuilding Siobhan's elusive past. Her ever-present headache inundated her skull with shards of pain whenever she tried to grasp, hold any particular moment for more than it wished to stay. Desperate to remember her parents, she tried to recall forcibly as many memories of them as possible. And was paying for her eagerness.

The throbbing in her temples was taking precedent over any other need and, as she parked her Blazer close to the house, she grabbed her papers and keys, gingerly sliding out the driver's side. Squinting against the late afternoon sun, she slowly made her way into the house. Quietly laying her belongings on the credenza to the right of the doorway, every sharp noise another nail in her head, she gingerly pulled off her coat and hung it on the rack.

Delicious odors emanated from the kitchen, assailing her senses and causing her stomach to growl in a most unladylike fashion, reminding her that it had been many hours since her delicious lunch.

Aingeal greeted her, his tail beating an enthusiastic greeting in the air, "Welcome back!" She started at the distinct words in her head and, ignoring the harsh pounding for a brief moment, bent to scratch behind his ears, allowing him little welcoming licks. Curious at their new bond she looked him in the eyes and sent a silent message.

#### "Can you understand me, Aingeal?"

Aingeal sat with his head cocked to one side. *"Yes."* His matter-of-fact tone made it seem normal, as if it was an every day occurrence. Siobhan's heart skipped a beat and an inner excitement bubbled as she hugged him close, astonished at this new turn of events.

Maeve called her from the kitchen, telling her to wash up and come eat. Too excited to sit down after such a discovery, Siobhan rushed into the kitchen, Aingeal trailing behind. "Maeve, you'll never guess what has happened. I can *talk* to Aingeal, without saying *anything*, and he can talk back to me. *In words*! Not pictures like it usually happens."

Placing the casserole dish in the center of the table Maeve straightened and set her hands on her hips. "Of course ye can, ye daft girl."

Confused, Siobhan continued, "No, you don't understand. I mean I don't *have* to talk out loud, and Aingeal answers in actual words. Right in my head!"

Maeve turned back toward the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, "He be canid, nay? Now go get yer hands clean, and come sit down. The food will be gettin' cold."

Frowning, Siobhan made her way to the small half bath between the laundry room and kitchen. Moving on automatic, she washed and dried her hands, returning to sit down at the table. She watched Maeve, feeling like she was missing something that *should* make sense but didn't.

Maeve joined her, setting a steaming cup by Siobhan's place before blessing their meal. "I've made ye willow bark tea for yer headache, Siobhan." Her attention had been wandering as she puzzled through the events of her day while her grandmother set their food on the table and, with Maeve's words, her attention moved to her grandmother.

"How did you know I have a headache?" She asked suspiciously, wondering if the 'other thing' that was added to her tea the night before not only helped her sleep, but was instigating her massive headaches.

Maeve sighed. "I dinna' need ta read yer mind. 'Tis written all o'er yer face."

Siobhan closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "Why does it have to hurt so?"

"It wouldna'...but ye be pushing it. Everythin' will come ta ye at tha proper time. And in tha proper order. If ye try and force it ye will only hurt yourself." Maeve shook her head and frowned at her stubborn granddaughter, so much like her own sweet daughter.

"Magick has ta be called...handled with care...ta protect ye from unforeseen harm. That was tha point of all yer lessons. Why do ye think I made ye study our ancient family tomes so?"

"Those big leather books, with the funny symbols all over them? I just thought they were pretty family heirlooms, full of fairy tales and recipes. I remember you reading to me and then letting me read them for myself. I know you often asked me questions, had me study certain sections. And you always answered my questions when I didn't understand something. But I never thought they had anything to do with magic. You never said..."

Maeve sighed again, pouring iced tea into two glasses. Dishing out steaming plates of casserole, she placed her napkin in her lap and raised her chin. "Aye. I do believe it be time for more of tha tale now." Maeve gestured toward the meal in front of Siobhan. "Now eat while I talk. And dunna' forget ta drink yer willow bark tea," she ordered, pointing to the cooling cup.

Siobhan sipped at the hot tea and picked up her fork. "Okay, spill."

Maeve laughed. "Ye be so much like yer ma."

Lost for a moment in her own memories, Maeve sipped her cold tea and began. "Liam, yer grandda, was tha finest man I e'er knew. When he died I dinna' want ta go on and, had it na' been for my Brigid, I might na' have. As 'twas, I stopped seein' anyone from tha Clann, and shut meself off from tha rest of tha world here on tha farm. I daresay, most people had long forgotten that I existed and that worked ta tha good when yer parents were killed."

Siobhan continued eating, her headache fading in increments with the help of Maeve's tea. She watched Maeve's gaze drift to a sight outside their windows, reliving a moment far back in time that only she could see, and sat in the comforting silence, waiting patiently for the telling to begin again.

Realizing she had drifted away, Maeve brought her gaze back to Siobhan's face and continued. "The O'Briens, me family, have more than a few powerful Druid healers, in our line. We have served as healers, keepers of tha ways of Magick for our Lycan Clann. Ye do remember that we be Lycan, do ye na'?" Siobhan stopped eating, raising her eyebrows in disbelief.

There were vague recollections, as if dreams.

They *had* to be dreams.

"Lycan? As in werewolves?"

Maeve shook her head and laughed at the misconception. "Nay. Lycan, as in Shapeshifters. Tha 'Clann Mac Tire' means 'children of the wolf' in Irish Gaelic, or Gaeilge. We have always been caretakers of tha wolf. We brought our culture and language from Ireland, remained faithful ta tha old ways for a powerful long time. Lately the modern world has more influence on us than tradition does.

"Yer da's family, tha McMahons, was of those who moved away from old traditions and took on tha ways of others, becomin' more like tha people around them. That be why Seamus na' longer speaks tha mother tongue, and has na' accent. 'Tis why ye dunna' either, seein' as how ye be raised. But that be Seamus's tale ta tell." She paused, her index finger tapping her lips as she considered where to continue.

"For tha Clann, tha strongest alpha mates be tha ones where tha alpha male chooses tha strongest female, she with skills of calling Magick. As I said before, tha O'Briens produce strong callers of Magick. In me time, there ha been none stronger.

"Everyone thought that I would marry with Faelan's grandda, Rory Conroy, as tha Conroys have produced more alpha males than any other family in tha Clann. But I fell in love with Liam, and Rory loved his Eilish every bit as much."

Siobhan held up her hand, making Maeve pause. "What makes a male alpha?"

Maeve took a deep breath and exhaled noisily. "Well...Clann alphas, male and female, have always had a keen empathy, a telepathic link with all canids...wolves in particular." Siobhan nodded encouragingly, eager to know more.

"The alpha males are able ta shift in ta wolf form easily and at will, regardless of tha phase of tha moon. Most of us have ta wait 'til near or durin' tha full moon."

"Wait, wait. Are you telling me that people believe they can change into wolves?" Siobhan's voice rose, squeaking on the last word.

Maeve chuckled. "Aye. And ye know in yer heart 'tis all true. Yer dreams must be tellin' ye so, if not yer heart." Siobhan sat back in her chair, recalling her recent dreams of Faelan and the dreams she had before even meeting him.

"And Faelan is an alpha?"

"Aye, as are all tha Conroys of tha last generations."

"But what happens to all of them? They can't all be pack, er, Clann leaders."

"Aye, 'tis true. One is chosen and tha others are satisfied as betas, who are tha Clann enforcers. There may be several holdin' that honor, or they become lone 'wolves' of a kind. Most are happy becomin' enforcers, and possibly sirin' tha next batch of alphas." This last was said with a knowing grin as Maeve had first-hand knowledge of the passion burning within the Clann males.

"Where do the alpha females come from? In normal wolf packs, the alpha male chooses his own mate."

"'Tis the same in tha Clann, most times. Those were different times, with a different type of leader and a far less understandin' Council. There be a Clann prophesy that one day a powerful alpha male will be born, the most powerful male e'er, and he will choose tha most powerful Druid healer e'er born as his alpha mate.

"Then tha Clann will be united, saved 'n revived under their leadership." It came close ta that with me own daughter, Brigid, yer mother. There were hopes she would be tha chosen alpha mate, bein' born so gifted in Druid Magick. But her heart led her in another direction." Maeve paused, silently urging Siobhan to voice questions she could see were seeking answers.

"Was she very powerful or something?"

Maeve smiled fondly, remembering many a day her impish daughter would play a mischievous trick on a body. "Aye, she was tha most powerful Druid tha Clann had seen in centuries, certainly tha most powerful in livin' memory...at least until *ye* were born."

"Me?"

"Ye could call up elements before ye could talk. Pixie lights would dance o'er yer cradle and ye'd giggle, wavin' yer hands at them before goin' ta sleep. Ye talked ta wolves, and shifted, before ye were even twelve. 'Tis tha usual age of change for girls in the Clann."

Maeve watched Siobhan's incredulous expression at the news she contained, and had used, powerful magic. "Now, Siobhan, ye have ta give yer memories time ta come back ta ye. Stop rushin' them."

Siobhan relaxed and settled comfortably in her chair. "Okay, Maeve. Tell me this...did I know Faelan back then?"

"Aye. Ye two secretly met and formed a close friendship, often runnin' with tha wolves, right before he left town. Yer parents worried over it, though they had na' thinkin' against it. He made ye laugh, smilin' tha whole summer through and 'twas fine with them if ye ran around like a wee beastie. His da dinna' like it a' tall, and kicked up quite a fuss.

"It all started when Eamon was elected alpha of tha Clann, long before ye were a thought in yer parents' eyes. He was always competitive, but at least ye can tell what *he* be thinkin'. His brother now be another story.

"Kieran, Quinn's da, be far more competitive than his brother, winnin' at any cost. He'd grin at ye while knifin' ye in tha back, if he felt tha need." Siobhan smiled at the incongruent picture Maeve's words brought to mind but didn't interrupt.

"Anyway, that be beside tha point...where did I leave off?"

"You were about to tell me about my mother, and Faelan's family."

"Aye. Well, it be na' trouble with tha whole family as much as it be with Eamon himself. Everyone, except me Brigid, thought that Eamon and she would wed, or at least mate. That be before yer da, Donal, moved back to Destiny and captured her heart.

"Like I said, many families had left tha Clann, goin' out and tryin' ta make it on their own. Tha McMahons had left a few decades earlier and settled in Arizona with a few other families, includin' Caitlin Keating, Donal's mother. Ye might remember stayin' with them when ye left Destiny."

Siobhan frowned. "Yes, they were kind. I wish I'd known then they were relatives."

Maeve shook her head. "Nay. 'Twas because none knew ye were kin that Seamus was able ta send ye ta them. We dinna' know who could be trusted, and couldna', after tha tragedy. But I be gettin' ahead of meself.

"Donal's family moved back home after many generations and, like so many others who had been gone for a time, they had lost tha language, tha customs of tha Clann. Even more unforgivable, Donal became an environmental activist, and a *vegetarian*." Maeve chuckled; intoning *that* word, with all the shocked disbelief the Clann had felt learning of this development, still made her snicker.

"Brigid always loved wolves and that be how they met. They were both workin' ta save tha wolves from extinction, much as ye and Faelan are doin' now." She looked pointedly at Siobhan, who remained silent, deliberately acting obtuse. She worried her lower lip and turned her eyes to the setting sun barely showing through the kitchen window. Dust motes swirled in the dying rays as bits of fire reflected in her dark auburn hair, and tears glistened in her emerald eyes, as she thought back to one of her darkest nights. "Tha night me Liam was shot 'twas tha full moon. He had gone runnin' with tha pack, and been shot dead."

"You mean...he was a wolf when he was shot?"

Maeve snorted. "Aye. He had shifted. Make na' mistake about it. Someone murdered him. Seamus had just been made Sheriff and he and Liam had been lookin' inta tha recent wolf shootin's for Brigid and Donal. Liam's death was ruled accidental.

"Accidental, me arse! After that, I wanted na' more ta do with tha Clann, nor anyone in it. I moved here and raised me sheep. Sheep dunna' need much care, or muscle, unlike cattle." Maeve chuckled. "Ye should have seen tha faces on those mealy-mouthed Council members when they called me in ta a special meetin', tellin' me ta raise cattle, or nothin' a' tall.

"I told them ta stick their cows where tha moon dinna' glow, and that I would raise whatever I damn well pleased. They threatened me with censure, so I told them they need na' bother as I dinna' ever want ta see another member of me Clann until tha end of me days.

"'Tis ashamed I am that I dinna' even pay mind ta what 'twas happenin' ta me own child. I ran away and hid, tryin' ta deal with tha loss of me own beloved, ne'er once a thought ta tha loss Brigid had with tha passin' of her da." Maeve shook her head in despair, wiping ineffectually at the tears that had escaped down her cheeks. Siobhan walked to the ancient hutch, pulling out a tissue box and setting it on the table. Maeve reached for a few, drying her eyes and blowing her nose. Roughly clearing her throat, she continued, coming to the hardest part to share of the tale.

"Brigid and Donal spent tha next couple years buildin' a rescue and rehabilitation operation for wolves and other wildlife, though mostly for wolves. Brigid had tha talent for Magick but na' tha interest. At that point I dinna' care, ta pay attention ta anythin', includin' Clann affairs. If I had, maybe I would have seen tha signs.

"Rory Conroy, tha alpha at tha time, turned sixty a couple years after Liam's death, and 'twas time ta choose tha Clann's new alphas. 'Twas always assumed that one of his sons, Eamon or Kieran, would be tha next alpha male. With her skills with Magick, everyone assumed Brigid would be tha alpha female.

"Like I said, Eamon be tha stronger Conroy on tha face of it. And tha Council easily elected him tha successor. Everyone, includin' Eamon, assumed that Brigid would just do what she was told and, instead, she and Donal eloped and continued runnin' their wolf rescue. In a pique, Eamon married me cousin, Deirdre. Ever tryin' ta keep up with Eamon, Kieran married Deirdre's twin sister, Eileen. Eleven months later, on the first day of May, Faelan was born. Ye came along five years later, on May first, after Brigid had a couple miscarriages."

"Then I really was born on May first?"

"Aye. On Beltane."

Memories shining in her eyes, Maeve held Siobhan's hand and patted it. "Like I said, ye were precious ta us, a long awaited blessin'. We were a bit surprised when you turned out to be far more talented at Magick than any before ye, and ye parents loved ye more than anythin'." Maeve chuckled. "Even more than their precious wolves. Which says a great deal, seein' as how they gave their lives for their wolves."

Siobhan frowned. "What happened?"

Maeve sighed, holding Siobhan's hand tightly. "We're hopin' ye can tell us. Ye see yer parents were never welcome in tha Clann, not after me Brigid chose Donal over Eamon. It seemed ta grow worse for them when they went up against tha ranchers, protectin' tha wolves against further human encroachment. And tha largest consortium of ranchers anywhere around here is tha Clann." "But isn't the Clann supposed to protect the wolves, since they're a bunch of werewolves themselves?"

"Shapeshifters, Siobhan. They na' be werewolves. Powerful Lycans can shift at will inta many animal forms, na' just wolves. Some have been know to take flight in the forms of birds, like ravens."

"Okay. Fine. Shapeshifters. What about protecting the wolves? Isn't that a part of the 'code', or something?"

Maeve shook her head sadly. "Most of tha Clann have forgotten their duty ta tha animals, and have lost tha ability ta shift even durin' tha height of tha full moon. That has been a cross many of we older ones have borne, seein' those that follow lose their way." She gave Siobhan a tremulous smile. "But, now that ye and Faelan are here, that will all change."

Siobhan watched Maeve carry the casserole dish into the kitchen to reheat their forgotten meal, and a sudden and overwhelming dread washed over her.

Yea, right. Siobhan–savior of the wolf people. Boy, are we in trouble.

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Siobhan finished eating in a daze.

After helping clear the table and put away their food, she walked upstairs to her room. Deciding she needed some alone time, without another person, or dog, to distract her, she changed into her jogging clothes. Taking the least amount of time possible, she stretched, almost frantic to get into the open night.

She slipped quickly downstairs and Aingeal, when he saw that she was leaving without him, complained about not going, his voice whining oddly in her head. Siobhan pursed her lips and pointed to his pallet in front of the fire. "Go. I'll be back soon."

Maeve entered the room, drying her hands with a tea towel. "Why all tha ruckus?"

Siobhan opened the door and answered without pausing, "I'm going running. I'll be back soon." Not giving her a chance to question her further, Siobhan slipped out the door and pulled it firmly closed. The chilly, biting air caused her to catch her breath at first but she soon adapted to the frosty night, jogging off before sprinting into the darkness.

The moon, full and golden, lit her way along the leveled roadway. Gradually the quiet exercise soothed her tattered nerves and, after covering a couple miles, she eased up and stopped, a little dizzy from the higher elevation of Destiny. Her breathing slowly returned to normal and she turned to jog back home.

Moonlight streamed down, lighting a slight rise and throwing a lone wolf on it into silhouette. The animal turned and sat facing her, watching her on her trek back home. He raised his snout and howled a mournful note into the night and she slowed, stopping to watch as other wolves loped along the top of the rise to join in celebrating the night with joyful yips and whines.

She closed her eyes and listened as indistinct and jumbled words flowed in and out of her mind. Yelps of happiness at being together, snippets about a successful hunt, and their joy over the clear night and all the lovely scents drifting on the night air. As wolves' sang into the dark, tears flowed down Siobhan's cheeks. Her heart ached to be one with them.

She found herself walking slowly toward the pack, the rightness and sense of belonging silencing her human common sense. Movement to her right halted her progress and drew her attention. The figure, a man, strode out of the shadows, into the moonlight, and approached the wolves.

She hesitated instinctively knowing she should remain hidden, watching, shrouded in shadows, and staying downwind.

The man bent to scratch pointed ears, and to nuzzle uplifted muzzles, greeting the wolves in soft conciliatory tones. Siobhan recognized Faelan's voice as she hunkered down, making herself as small as possible, nearly invisible. He stood in the full, bright moonlight—the light flashing off his gleaming teeth, but swallowed in the depths of his quicksilver eyes. As she watched, he raised his head high into the air and rent the peaceful calm with howls barely human.

Waves of answering shudders shook her crouching form and she was forced to wrap her arms around her bent knees, holding herself together while ever fiber of her being craved nothing more than to call out in reply.

He laughed cheerfully at the answering wolf song and she watched him shrug off his coat, pulling off his boots and socks. Repeating his howl, he yanked off his shirt, dropping it on top of his jacket. Calls echoing from distant hills whipped the pack into a frenzy and the wolves danced around his legs, turning in circles, whining their impatience.

His full-throated laughter trickled down her spine as he unselfconsciously undid his belt, dropping his jeans to his feet and stepping out of them. He paused, a shimmer distorting the light bouncing off his torso, his form melting into a huge black wolf. Shaking his coat as if damp from his exertions, he spun once, and yipped for the others to follow, before streaking off toward the sounds of the far wolf calls.

The rest of the pack lost no time in playfully chasing him, leaving Siobhan squatting alone in the darkness. As if in a trance, she rose and covered the short distance to his clothes. She picked up his shirt and raised it to her face, inhaling deeply, immediately recognizing his scent. She watched the disappearing shadows of the wolf pack as they ran across the distant fields then dropped the shirt back onto the pile.

On autopilot, she made her way back to the house, her thoughts in turmoil. She stood in the driveway, staring at, but not really seeing, anything around her. No words could have prepared her for the beauty, and emotion, that watching the wolves, and Faelan, had evoked.

It was all true. Everything Maeve had said and more.

"We're a bunch of goddamn werewolves."

"Shapeshifters." Maeve corrected as she stepped out of the shadows. "Tea?" Siobhan nodded mutely and followed her back into the house.

## **Chapter Four**

Siobhan dressed warmly for the cold mountain weather and chose comfort over fashion, just in case they visited any viewing sites. She knew it would eventually happen, getting acclimated to her home town's winter months, but it hadn't happened quite yet.

Her faded blue jeans were comfortably snug while a loose red plaid flannel shirt covered her long johns. Durable tan hiking boots, with thick woolen socks, and a heavy sheepskin coat completed her outfit.

Not very elegant. But she did stop long enough to dab on some mascara.

As she knocked on the door, Faelan looked her over and grinned, gesturing for her to come in out of the cold. "It looks like great minds think alike," he commented, wearing a similar outfit, even down to his long johns.

"I thought we'd go out and check on some of the sites this morning, before we get caught under piles of paperwork. Would you like some coffee before we go?" He picked up his mug, with the caption '*I got out of bed and dressed. What more do you want?*' and waited patiently for her answer, sipping the strong brew. "I'm afraid I became extremely addicted to the stuff during finals week my freshman year of college and have never bothered to kick the habit."

"Yes, thanks. I think higher education makes a lot of caffeine addicts." She could smell the fresh brewed nirvana and her mouth watered.

He smiled, glad to see he was not alone in his vice, and picked up a maroon and gold mug with a caricature of Sparky, the ASU Sun Devils' mascot. Filling it to the brim, he handed it to her, pointing out the extras on the sideboard. "Cream and sweetener are there, by the pot, and I have a thermos in the kitchen that we can take with us. Let's get our itinerary set first. I thought we'd check the sites in their order of distance from the ranch. That way we have plenty of time to figure out a regular visitation schedule."

"Sure. Whatever you think best." She took a small sip of coffee, taking a few moments before speaking again. She wondered if he might be the perfect person to answer some of her questions, maybe he would have some answers to those pesky questions her grandparents had been avoiding answering. "Faelan, may I ask you something?"

"Sure. I may even answer you," he grinned, flashing that dimple which stole her breath and tightened her groin.

"Did you know my parents?"

"Yes. They were good people."

"Do you know anything about what happened to them?" Faelan frowned, not certain what she wanted to hear.

His inner voice cautioned him about telling her *he* had been the one to find them lying dead and he shrugged, hoping to distract her until she remembered enough on her own. Maeve had warned him that way was the best for her.

"I don't know much. I think that was around the time I left to go to college."

"Well...see...that's another thing. Did you already know about me, about my interests in wolves, when you decided to hire me in Arizona? I mean, is there a particular reason that *I*  was the one you chose?" He hesitated, knowing he needed to answer her questions as honestly as he could but, under the circumstances, he was uncertain how to proceed.

Treading carefully, surprised and caught unaware, his turbulent emotions brought out his brogue. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down. Tell me, Siobhan, do ye always ask so many questions?"

*"Tell me, Siobhan, do ye talk so much when there be only wolves ta hear ye?"* She grabbed the edge of the counter to keep from falling, a sudden wave of dizziness striking her off balance.

Flashes of a much younger Faelan, laughing and running in the lazy afternoon sun, spun through her head. She could feel wet tongues licking her face, and hear the haunting melody of wolf song. The peaty smell of earth, fresh after a summer shower, mixed with the damp fur smell of wet wolf drifting through her senses.

Fingers numb, she dropped her mug, looking up at Faelan in helpless confusion as she slid slowly down the front of the cabinets, her hands clutching for an anchor and missing the counter as the darkness claimed her.

Faelan grabbed at her with his free hand.

Setting his mug on the desk, he used both hands to catch her, preventing her from hitting the floor. She wasn't a small woman but he picked her up easily, carrying her to the nearby couch.

Damn them anyway. She is the one completely innocent pawn in this entire mess. There has to be a better way of doing this.

He removed her heavy coat and boots, covering her with the lightweight throw tossed over one end of the couch. Sitting next to her, he picked up her hand, and wondered what to do next.

With the freedom to look his fill, he berated himself as he watched her chest rise and fall rhythmically. The woman had passed out, and all he could think about was touching her.

Intimately and satisfyingly.

She has certainly grown up.

He hadn't been this horny since he was a teenager.

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Siobhan opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. When she sat up the throbbing in her head forced her to remain motionless as she combated her nausea. As it subsided, she slid her feet to the floor and leaned back against the couch cushions. She was fuzzy headed and could not make any sense of the confusing images flashing through her mind. Hearing footsteps, she gingerly turned her head and saw Faelan hurry in, carrying a damp cloth. Her heart skipped at the apparent concern on his face.

"Siobhan, I've brought ye a cold rag for yer head. Would ye like ta lay down again, maybe put it across yer eyes?" She nodded, closing her eyes when the pain stabbed.

Without moving her head she whispered, "Could I get a couple dozen aspirin please?"

He smiled at her request, relieved to see her conscious. Laying the cloth lightly on her forehead, he pulled her hand up to help anchor it in place. Staring down at her mouth pursed in pain and skin pale as snow, he offered, "How about we start ye off with just a few?"

She smiled weakly in agreement and slowly lowered herself back onto the sofa.

He walked to his desk and opened the top drawer, pulling out a small plastic bottle. "Water?"

Without removing the cloth from her eyes, she muttered, "Please."

He smiled sympathetically, having had a severe headache a time or two himself. Since he worked long hours, Molly kept him well supplied with fresh carafes of water and, filling a cup, he walked back to the couch. He hadn't noticed, when he had initially placed her on the couch, that her red flannel shirt had come untucked, slipping a couple strategically located buttons during her fall.

Two pert nipples pushed up against the cloth, making it abundantly clear that she wore no bra.

Siobhan sensed someone standing over her and, lowering the damp cloth, she saw Faelan standing transfixed, staring at her.

Her gaze followed his to her chest before shooting back to his face, pausing on the way to notice the telling bulge in his formfitting jeans. Blushing furiously, not sure if she was embarrassed or proud, she sat up and pulled her shirt back together, hooking the wayward buttons and stuffing the tail into her jeans.

Faelan, the objects of his rapt attention hidden, lifted his gaze to hers and heat flared between them. He handed her the aspirin and water, while assiduously avoiding looking anywhere below her chin, before turning and stiffly walking out of the sitting area, mumbling something that sounded vaguely like 'be right back'.

Siobhan blushed deeper, the heat intensifying her headache.

She swallowed three pills and set the bottle and cup on the coffee table next to the couch. She found her boots tucked under the front couch and quickly put them on, the ache at her temples lessening with each passing minute. As she stood up carefully, checking her legs would hold her, she glanced down to be sure everything was tucked and closed.

Walking towards their desks, to gather some paperwork to take home, she noticed the spilled coffee and broken mug. Paper towels gathered, she cleaned up the mess, muttering to herself, "*How will I be able to work with him if I pass out every time I see him? He must think I'm a total idiot.*"

She walked to the front door and tugged on her coat, intent on leaving. Avoidance is always a good way of handling that which one doesn't want to face.

That had been her credo for the past few years, every since her stupid 'Bill mistake'.

As she grasped the door handle, she stopped herself from opening the door. She couldn't run.

If she did, she would never stop.

Determined to face whatever might come of this...whatever it was, attraction or insanity, she strode back to the couch and sat down, hardening her resolve.

What ever will be, will be.

Ce sera, sera.

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Hiding in his bedroom, Faelan hoped Siobhan hadn't noticed his hard-on before he left the room.

## Dammit all anyway!

If he got this bad just looking at the silhouette of her nipples what was he going to be like if he should...God forbid...actually touch her?

She's going to think I'm some kind of freakin' sex maniac.

He readjusted his jeans and tried to think about anything but how much he longed to touch, to stroke, every inch hidden beneath her clothes. To wind his hand around the silky mass of her copper tresses and hold her close while he tasted every morsel.

To drive her as crazy as she was making him.

He opened his window and stuck his head out, inhaling large invigorating lungfuls of air. For one insane moment, he considered stripping, leaping out the window to run with his brothers, the wolves. He shut his eyes and could almost feel the wind rushing through his fur as he sped away, running for the joy of running rather than *from* a delectable female.

He opened his eyes and reached a decision.

Slamming the window shut, he leaned his forehead against the cool pane, muttering, *No, no, no!* 

He didn't run from anything, not even embarrassment.

He sighed, resolute in his decision. He walked in the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face in hopes of shocking himself into a saner state of mind.

This can't be allowed to happen. Needs to get nipped in the bud, here and now.

He could brazen this out, pretend nothing out of the ordinary had happened. After all, he had faced down rabid activists, deadly poachers, irate ranchers, and even territorial wolves. Surely he could handle one small, opinionated, stubbornly pig-headed, sexy, gorgeous, uh, devastatingly...beautiful...*dammit*. She didn't even come close to the jaded ladies he normally found himself interested in and, with everything else on his plate, it could just get messy.

He didn't have time for messy.

A few more adjustments to his pants, a few more minutes to compose himself, and he would be ready to face her again.

Calmly. Professionally. Reasonably.

Right...

With a tight smile pasted on his face, he walked back to the great room, praying she hadn't taken off after his unprofessional behavior. Seeing her sitting stiffly on the couch, staring a hole through the floorboards, her eyes downcast and her brow furrowed, he thought he might have just one chance to redeem himself, and prayed she would accept his offering of peace. From the looks of it, she had been planning to leave but changed her mind. That was a gift he was not about to ignore.

"Well, if ye're feeling up ta it, let's get goin'. We have enough time, before it starts getting dark, to check out some of the other sites." He waited, praying she would take his suggestion in the spirit it was intended.

"Sounds like a plan."

*Thank the gods.* Seemed she was going to ignore it, go along with pretending it never happened, and let his faux pas pass.

He grabbed his coat and opened the door. "Let's go see Number Seven first."

"Great! I've read about her in your reports. I'm ready." He watched her walk towards the truck, sighing silently over what 'could have been'.

Their trip was uneventful, both of them more than willing to push the earlier events of the day behind them in pursuit of peace of mind, if not heart. With their common interests, they soon fell into a lively discussion of varied wolf studies, with a debate ensuing with their different points of view as they conversed over their favorite subject: wolves.

Siobhan was surprised to find herself at ease with Faelan, laughing at his dry commentary and descriptive anecdotes as he talked about past studies, and some of the characters he had met in his travels.

She was astonished to feel more and more as if Faelan considered her his equal, something she had never felt before with any other male on past studies. He did not talk down to her and seemed to respect her opinions, even when they disagreed. They were so alike on so many issues, intent on preserving the wolves' lives and environment, educating the public on their history and benefits.

The underlying sexual tension had been shoved to the backs of both their minds, to be examined further at another time. They were both aware that one wrong word, one heated glance, one thoughtless touch, might cause the blaze to roar out of control.

Unrequited desire vibrated between them like a taunt wire.

Not forgotten. Never forgotten.

But not the thought foremost in their minds at this time. Today their goal was to find, and interact, with Number Seven, another elusive female.

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The previous night the snow had fallen heavily, leaving the world encased in hoary crystals. Siobhan drew in a lungful of crisp, clean air and closed her eyes, savoring the cool, refreshing taste.

Her cheeks and tip of her nose were slightly numb while her hands remained toasty in her fur-lined gloves. With her eyes closed, she stretched her senses, hearing Faelan's footfalls moving slowly through the snow. He had told her to wait, but she was eager to see.

He'd left her behind while he scouted ahead for the Virago Pack, an unusual wolf pack led by an equally odd she-wolf.

Number Seven had been confusing the researchers since she was a pup.

Completely white, and heavier by a good ten pounds than any of the males, Number Seven had arctic-blue eyes filled with uncanny intelligence. A keen hunter, she had "taught" her pack advanced stalking and cooperative hunting techniques, yet had taken no mate after hers had died a couple years ago.

Siobhan had nicknamed her 'Princess', in reference to her refined demeanor and icy beauty, a much better appellation, in her mind, for the legendary wolf than Number Seven. Having seen only files and photographs, she was anxious to have the chance to see Princess in the flesh, even if only from a distance.

A wind flurry stirred the tops of nearby evergreens, knocking piles of snow to the ground with soft plops. Siobhan opened her eyes when she heard his footsteps stop but could not see him through the trees. Soft murmurs enticed her as she made her way quietly through the snow, knowing Faelan would understand her curiosity.

"Good morning, *Banphrionsa*. I've brought someone to see you." Siobhan stopped rooted to the spot watching him kneel on the snow-covered ground, gently stroking the muzzle of a huge white wolf. The wolf, in deference to his dominance, approached him, her ears back and tail low. The remaining pack, of around ten wolves, lay in a clearing, soaking up the morning rays, about thirty yards away. Strangely, none of them seemed in the least concerned by the close proximity of the humans.

His eyes focused on the wolf, and his voice modulated to an even conversational tone, Faelan directed, "Siobhan...keep your eyes averted and walk toward us...very slowly. When you reach us keep your eyes down, and kneel to one side of Number Seven. Make a fist and let her sniff it, but do *not* attempt to make eye contact with her. Did you get all that?"

"Yes." She slowly made her way toward them, her eyes downcast. Reaching them, she knelt next to Number Seven as Faelan had instructed, watching the wolf from the corners of her eyes. The she-wolf raised her ears but made no threatening motion or sound.

Siobhan removed her glove, and lifted her fist toward Number Seven's muzzle. When the wolf sniffed it, sending warm puffs of air over her knuckles, she quietly gasped but kept her hand steady.

*"Man's mate."* Much as Aingeal did, the she-wolf invaded Siobhan's mind, causing her to stiffen momentarily at the unexpected intrusion.

"No, I'm one of the man's pack mates."

*"Humph. Your scent on him. His scent on you. Alphas. Mates."* The she-wolf was done with her part of the conversation and, with a short yip, whirled to return to her pack who rose to greet her.

"What do you think all that meant?" Siobhan muttered, watching the wolves disappear into the trees.

Faelan rose gracefully, and put out a hand, helping her to her feet. "Wolves rarely speak in riddles. I imagine she meant just what she said."

She stopped and stared at him. What do you mean by 'wolves rarely speak in riddles'?"

Faelan smiled and turned to head back to the truck, tossing his answer nonchalantly over his shoulder, "She thinks we're mates because we wear each other's scent, and we're both alphas."

Stunned, she stood motionless, shocked by his answer. She watched him walk a short distance before hurrying after him. "What? Could you hear her too?"

He laughed, never once stopping. "Sure did, darlin'. They don't call me 'King of the Wolves' for nothing."

Siobhan remained silent the entire hike back to the truck, mulling over what he'd said.

She slid into the passenger seat as Faelan started up the truck, turning up the heat and pulling onto the road toward his home. Scattered thoughts flitted through her mind as she tried to make sense of both her confusing returning memories and the perfectly rational way Faelan had stated the absurd.

Siobhan was gradually coming to accept the absurd.

Suddenly, a horrifying thought occurred to her.

What if he can read my mind too? Oh, God. Did I say or...er think anything really embarrassing? Oh, no. What about back at the ranch. Oh...my...God...I looked at his crotch.

With that thought, she glanced down at his anatomy, lecherous thoughts spinning through her mind. She quickly moved her eyes, staring with stern concentration outside the front window, her mouth gaping as if searching for the right words.

Faelan answered her unspoken question before she could utter more than a squeak. "Don't worry. I can't read your mind." Faelan continued looking forward, a knowing smirk on his face. Her mouth closed with an audible snap and she faced forward, mulling over his words.

She turned back toward him as she thought of another question, but Faelan interjected again. "I could only tell what *you* said to *Banphrionsa* by what *she* said to you. We wouldn't be able to read each other unless...er, until...well, it happens under special circumstances."

Relieved that he hadn't been able to read her thoughts, Siobhan didn't notice Faelan's hesitation at giving details about conditions necessary for human-to-human reading. "Well, good then. Fine. What does *banphrionsa* mean?"

Faelan's smirk smoothed into a warm smile. "It's Gaeilge for Princess. She's much too regal for 'Number Seven'. She's more like an ice princess."

"I thought so too. She's beautiful. As a matter of fact, I called her Princess, at least in private."

"She likes you. She doesn't allow many near her, let alone talk to them."

Siobhan looked at him and smiled, cocking her head to the side. "I guess my secret is safe with you. I mean you could hardly tell anyone that I talk to wolves without sort of incriminating yourself so to speak, now could you?"

He laughed. "Right. They'd probably send out the men in the white coats for both of us."

"Faelan, can everyone in the Clann hear wolves?"

"No. And I've never heard of anyone outside of the Clann being able to either."

They visited the remaining two sites and were able to locate most of the registered animals. All in all it was a productive day, considering how it had started.

They were famished and thankful that Molly had left them a late lunch in great room. Consuming the lunch, amid copious conversation, they lost track of time. Noticing it growing late, Faelan decided to postpone their paperwork until the next morning, in deference to Siobhan's earlier spell.

"Documenting our visits today is going to take the next two days," he laughed wryly as they walked to the door.

Siobhan joined in the droll laughter. "That's the thing you can be assured of, especially working for the government. You never run out of paperwork."

They reached the door and Faelan snapped his fingers. "I just remembered. You have a dog, as I recall."

"Yes. His name's Aingeal. Why?"

"Angel? I'll bet 'he' loves that."

Siobhan snorted. "I named him after the Angel on 'Buffy'. I'm a sucker for those tall, dark, handsome, brooding 'undead' types."

"I see. I'll keep that in mind."

Siobhan laughed. "Well, I'm sure you didn't ask me about him to find out about my taste in men. Why did you ask about him?"

Faelan shrugged. "I've heard that he's not only very large but also extremely wellbehaved, as well as well-trained. I just thought you might like to bring him with you. He'd be good company, particularly when you have to work alone. And I would feel better knowing you had some other protection when you're out in the field."

"Oh, he is. Thank you. You won't be sorry. You'll like him, too." She put her hands loosely on his shoulders and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

Surprised by her light embrace, Faelan caught her about the waist and drew her closer.

His eyes smoldered with banked desire as they stared at each other, each of them suddenly aware of their mutual heat.

Faelan slowly lowered his head to hers, capturing her lips in a gentle kiss.

Siobhan couldn't believe she was kissing him.

She drowned in his touch, revelled being kissed by such a master of seduction, who played her senses with all the virtuosity of his extensive repertoire.

But only for a moment. Memories of Bill's betrayal intruded, reminding her of the consequences of getting romantically involved with a colleague.

Not her best moment, nor her finest hour.

She jerked away with a mumbled apology, turning to face the door rather than his shocked countenance. She grasped the door handle, intent on fleeing, only to find that Faelan had placed his hand above her head, firmly pushing against the door, preventing her from opening it.

"Siobhan, I should be tha one ta apologize."

She glanced up, noting the regret in his eyes. Turning to look at his face, she smiled wryly at the fact that she had been placed in such a position for a second time in her life . "Let's just chalk it up to the end of an eventful day. We just got a little carried away, is all."

Faelan released the door and returned her smile with a charming one of his own. "Aye. That's all 'twas."

As much as he tried to bank the fires, the heat of his gaze belied his words.

Confused, she blushed, turning back around and opening the door with a hurried, "See you tomorrow," before she rushed to her car, locking herself in with an audible 'snick'.

Faelan smiled cryptically, watching her retreat. "Aye. Tomorrow." He closed the door slowly and returned to his office.

His workday grew longer than it should have as he often caught his mind drifting to far more pleasant thoughts, when he should have been concentrating on work.

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Faelan....

She couldn't stop thinking about him, and the best kiss, bar none, she'd ever received, or shared. Deep in thought, she failed to notice Seamus's truck parked by the house as she entered the front door. Hearing his deep voice rumbling from the kitchen, she eagerly hung her coat, hurrying to see both her grandparents. Maeve and Seamus looked up from setting the table as she entered the doorway and Seamus held his arms out in greeting.

Siobhan readily complied, eager to be hugged, coddled.

Delicious smells of fried chicken and biscuits wafted from the oven, making her mouth water and her stomach grumble. Hearing the noise, Maeve laughed, pointing Siobhan toward the washroom. "Go now and wash up. We've been waiting dinner on ye."

She quickly washed her hands, patting cold water on her face to cool her flushed skin. Her stomach was fervently protesting its lack of food, urging her to move faster. When she reached the table, Maeve and Seamus were already seated and ready to eat.

Taking the remaining place between them, she listened as Seamus said grace.

They passed around the dishes, enjoying their meal while discussing Siobhan's meeting the day before with the Conroy boys, and her first day observing the wolves.

Siobhan knew any mention of her blackout would frighten her grandparents, and chose to keep silent about *that*. Mentioning the Conroys brought to mind parts of conversation that had puzzled her the day before.

"I'd need to ask about some things that all three kept talking about, something about some type of competition, and the Clann Council. I never could get any of them to tell me what it was, any details. All they would do was grin like fools." Maeve and Seamus looked at each other then down at their plates, their eyes blatantly not meeting hers, almost as if they wished she had not thought to ask about *that*.

Siobhan looked at each of them in turn and dropped the bowl of mashed potatoes down on the table with a thud, causing Maeve and Seamus to both jump guiltily. She'd had about much of the secret 'Clann tradition' as she could stand. "All right, we're not leaving this table until you tell me what's going on."

Maeve shook her head at Seamus, placing a hushing hand on his arm as he opened his mouth. As he snapped it shut, Siobhan could tell he was unhappy about being coaxed into keeping silent. He crossed his arms stubbornly, laying them on the tabletop, and glared at Maeve.

"Now...Maeve...you know she's going to find out eventually, so why make her wait until she can't change the outcome?" Maeve nodded, unhappily resigned.

Seamus took a deep breath and began. "Do you know our Clann's history, and how we make our selection of our alpha leaders?"

"Yes, Maeve told me about it yesterday. Is that the competition? The choosing part?" "Yes. At least part of it."

"Part of it? Then what's the rest? Do they arm-wrestle, or is it pistols at thirty paces?" Siobhan tried to lighten up the dismal atmosphere with some poorly chosen levity.

Seamus glanced over at Maeve, helpless to explain, and took the standard male out. "Maeve, why don't you tell her the rest?"

Maeve sighed. "Aye. I suppose I should have told her all of it yesterday." She turned to Siobhan, knowing this explanation could go either way.

But at least Siobhan would know it all.

"Siobhan, remember how I told ye all about tha Magick, and ye, and yer mother's talent with it? How our family, tha O'Briens, has long been healers often relied upon by tha Clann and taken into service?"

"Yes, I remember. I don't feel anything special, at least nothing I would call 'magickal'. This odd way of talking to animals is my only gift." Maeve shook her head. "Nay. That be how it starts sometimes. We all saw it in ye, when ye were a wee child, and that talent doesna' disappear. At least na' forever. Give it time. 'Twill come back, more so with tha return of yer memory."

"Well, I suppose that's a good thing, right? What does it have to do with this 'alpha' competition involving the Conroys?"

"Siobhan, ye remember about Brigid, and tha trouble her choices made?"

"Yes...you mean about my mother choosing Donal over Eamon?"

"That, and her choice *na*' ta be Clann healer. There hasna' been one since I left shortly after Liam's death." Maeve paused, staring intently at Siobhan, who was trying to puzzle out what her grandmother was trying to say, without actually saying it.

"You mean that Eamon's wife, Deirdre, never became healer after their marriage?"

Maeve nodded. "Nay, Deirdre wasna' qualified. For all that, she was an O'Brien, she ne'er had talent in healin' or Magick, or even speakin' with canids. 'Tis a wonder that Faelan and Tristan are as strong as they be.

"Her sister, Eileen, Quinn's mother, had even less talent, yet Quinn is nearly Faelan's equal in strength, and speed, and with shiftin'." Maeve looked down, tracing an ancient pattern unconsciously into the tabletop while she thought about what might come to pass if the two young men decided to compete for her granddaughter's hand.

'Twill be a fearsome close competition 'tween them." She paused, looked up into Siobhan's face. "And ye could make all tha difference."

"Me? How?"

"Should ye choose one, or 't other, as mate, support could easily fall ta that man and make tha competition unnecessary."

"Mate? As in *marry*?" At Maeve's nod, Siobhan stared at both faces, seeing their truth and refuting it. "I have absolutely *no* intention of marrying anyone — at least not anytime soon, if ever. And I am not planning to stay, that was never my intent.

"I'm only here until I finish my stint with the wolf reintroduction project and find out what happened to me, and my parents. That's it." She looked at her grandparents, searching their faces for support, uneasy when she saw them wavering.

Seamus covered her hand with his. "Honey, I'll always support you, whatever you decide. You should know that you're going to be facing a great deal of pressure over the next few months. Even if you choose not to marry, the Council will definitely try to convince you to stay and become our 'healer'."

Siobhan snorted. "And I suppose all this Conroy attention thrown my way, all of the sudden, is their way of trying to sway my decision?"

Maeve and Seamus both laughed in genuine amusement, knowing their granddaughter did not see her own beauty, nor her attraction to the opposite sex. Maeve finally answered, her snickers erupting every once in a while at the thought of the young pups wrestling over her granddaughter as if she were a choice bone.

"Nay, Siobhan. If tha boys be chasin' ye, they be wantin' ta sway ye for yerself, and na' for any competition—not even 'tween themselves. Since those three became old enough ta appreciate females, females have been appreciatin' them. A little too much, if ye ask me. Their family loyalties are strong. But their integrity be stronger."

Seamus continued, wanting her to understand the full ramifications of what she might decide, and what had already taken place. "Siobhan, while Faelan was gone, Quinn had every opportunity to take control of the Clann. And the Conroy family business. His father, Kieran, certainly wanted him to. Quinn refused every offer and urging, certain that Faelan would return to his rightful place. Faelan didn't even want to come back home, wanted to leave it all up to Quinn and Tristan. He was asked to return and came. For his family's business...for the Clann...but also for *you*. We both wrote letters, asking him to come back so that you would be with those who love you when your memory returned.

"Be assured that neither Faelan nor Quinn is the type of man who would toy with you, nor pretend anything but what is true. They have too little time to play games with all the rest that lies on their plates right now."

"And Tristan?"

Maeve and Seamus laughed again but this time Seamus answered first. "Tristan is loyal, to a fault. But he is the least competitive person on this Earth. If he weren't such a Conroy in every other aspect, I'd suspect he'd had a different father. Still, the lad has no interest in running things, or being anyone's boss. He's far too content floating through life, enjoying all it has to offer.

"Now, don't get me wrong. He's as hard a worker as any Conroy. It's just he enjoys playing as hard as he works. And you don't have that luxury, when you're the boss."

Siobhan remained silent for several minutes, her thoughts churning in a hundred different directions. Shaking her head at all they told her, she smiled.

"Well, I guess I'm getting more of an adventure than I'd originally planned."

The hour was growing late but Faelan wanted to finish the last reports on his desk before Thanksgiving. He wanted the next day completely free so he could the spend time with his family, without interruption.

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Eamon had been particularly effusive as of late, and Faelan didn't want to miss anything his father might have to say. He didn't know if there might be something eventually said, or hinted at, about the night of Siobhan's parents' murders. He had been sly interjecting comments about that night into their after-dinner conversations and had been finding that Eamon's recollections of that night were hazy at best.

Faelan sighed and returned to the stack of reports on his desk.

He kept trying to concentrate but all his thoughts were focused on Siobhan, and she kept intruding, pulling him away from whatever other train of thought he'd been on. The last three weeks had been a combination of Heaven and Hell.

Heaven was getting to work with her, to smell her, to listen to the sound of her voice, to touch her, however briefly or innocently. Hell was getting to work with her, to smell her, to listen to the sound of her voice, to touch her...but never the way he wanted, or as much as he needed. All he wanted was Siobhan, in his arms, in his bed.

And that was bad on so many levels.

Faelan didn't screw colleagues, especially those he supervised. He also didn't screw anyone as "nice" as Siobhan. "Nice" girls wanted relationships and Faelan had always avoided any long-term entanglements. Yet, here he was.

Eyes wide open, deliberately courting trouble, a situation he worked hard to avoid.

Unfortunately, or fortunately 'depending on how you looked at it', the more he thought about it, the less onerous an affair with her seemed. After all, they spent a lot of time with each other, every day, alone.

Doing something they both loved, together. Well...that would inevitably lead to some type of special bonding between them.

Maybe he should do it and get it over with. He could get over this obsession to have her, to possess her, and the forbidden would become commonplace, lose its appeal.

It might be just the thing. Then everything could get back to normal.

Faelan stopped a moment to listen to the stereo, playing *White Christmas*.

Nostalgia assailed him with poignant remembrances of a childhood that might have sucked a great deal of the time, but still contained a mother, a father and family. Siobhan had lost her parents, and her memories. He would do anything, in his power, to restore as much of her childhood to her as he could. He just wished he were able to tell her all of it he knew, but Maeve was certain that it could only hurt her in the long run.

And that was the absolute last thing he wanted.

He sighed and looked down at the papers in front of him, frustrated that his thoughts wouldn't stay focused on the job at hand. He knew if he applied himself he could be finished and concentrate on enjoying the holiday instead of working.

This will take forever.

His mind kept going back to Siobhan. What she was feeling, what she was doing, how she was doing, what she was remembering. Should he call her? *Nah...* 

Maybe if he asked she would come in Friday and help him finish.

No. He would see her Saturday when they searched for missing wolves.

It was getting bad when he thought of excuses just to see her.

The best thing to do would be for them to have an affair, and that would get her out of his system. A woman was like food.

Once you ate enough, you weren't hungry any more. He just hoped she wasn't like pecan pie.

He never could get enough of that.

An hour later, he had finally finished his paperwork. Ready to file, he frowned when he spied the unresolved investigative reports. He wanted to go over them one more time before he met with Tristan and Quinn, on Friday, at the Do Drop Inn.

They had set up this meeting weeks ago to discuss the ranch problems. He'd been busy gathering information and checking the books, and the more he searched, the grimmer the picture became.

He'd checked out a few hunches before their meeting.

The day after Thanksgiving, at the Do Drop Inn, was a perfect opportunity to meet without Eamon or Kieran being around. Plus, Tris had only agreed to the meeting if they met at the local watering hole, so he could pick up women later. His appetite for diverse feminine company, and his ability to obtain it at will, amazed Faelan. But then Tris had a lot of unique abilities in that area.

Maybe it was a good idea after all. Meeting other women might take Faelan's mind off Siobhan.

Just thinking about her got his juices flowing, and they were all flowing south.

Setting the files on the edge of his desk, he picked up the reports and started going over them again. He knew what they said, nearly word for word, but he kept hoping he would see something different. Someone close to the family was embezzling large sums of money, and doing it well.

They had also discovered that someone else had been speculating on preserve land.

The two facts fit together to form a treacherous tableau.

Perhaps Tristan and Quinn would be able to help him sort things out. The implications left a frozen pit of dread in his gut for his family and the wolves the protected.

Stacking the reports on top of his files, Faelan locked them in his file cabinet for safekeeping.

Thanksgiving was tomorrow. They could wait.

## **Chapter Five**

The town of Destiny, Montana predated the Do Drop Inn, but not by much. The old saloon had outlived many of its owners, staying much the same as the day it was opened.

Faelan pulled into a parking space, to the right of a hitching post, and slid out of his truck. Outside the old-fashioned café-style doors, he stomped his feet on the mat, knocking the dried mud from his boots.

The Do Drop smelled of stale cigarettes, stale beer and stale bodies. He paused inside the noisy entryway, trying to spot Tristan and Quinn. Thick smoke dimmed the already murky interior, the concept of "non-smoking establishments" being ignored in Destiny.

Country music competed with alcohol-induced laughter, and raucous conversation. Friday nights, at the local watering hole, never changed and seemed to be the same no matter where Faelan traveled.

Quinn and Tristan spotted Faelan, raising their hands in greeting. Crossing the crowded floor he, wove his way between the ancient, scarred tables and dropped into the seat Quinn and Tristan had saved for him. A middle-aged waitress in jeans, red-checkered blouse and cowboy boots set a frothy mug of beer in front of him. She pulled a pencil from her impressive beehive hairdo and asked, in between gum snaps, "Anything else, Hon?"

"How about a pitcher?"

"Sure thing, Hon." She looked at Faelan closely, her gum ceased its popping. "Hey, ain't ya the eldest Conroy boy?"

"Yes. I'm Faelan Conroy."

"Heard ya was coming home. I knew your daddy but, I must say...mmm-mmm..." She paused to study him from head to toe. "Ya shore did grow up nice."

"How about me, Marge?" Tristan grinned before standing up and hugging the curvy waitress.

"Tristan Conroy, I ain't gonna say nothin' 'bout you. Ya already have a hat size twice as big as anyone else." Laughter sounded all around as she pinched his cheek.

She wrote something on a scrap of paper, folding it twice over before tucking it in Faelan's shirt pocket, patting the outside as if making sure it was safe. "Here's my daughter Trudy's number. Give her a call if ya want some company." With that said, she winked and sashayed back to the bar.

Quinn and Tristan laughed at the bemused expression on Faelan's face as he watched Marge walk away.

"Cousin, ye may want ta think twice before usin' that number, "Tristan warned. "Trudy's boyfriend, Gary, is as big as an ox, and twice as dumb. Marge doesna' like him much, though he treats Trudy pretty good."

Quinn had watched Faelan eyes as he had walked nonchalantly through the crowded room, and sensed they were not going to like what he had to tell them. "Faelan, how bad is it?" Faelan met Quinn's eyes and tried to read him, seeing reflections of a very solemn boy with a sensitive soul that he had tried to hide.

He saw no deception in Quinn, only familial concern. Still, it was nice to know that Quinn wasn't involved.

"Well now, Quinn...it looks like they are tied up in big-assed, nasty knots right now. Great big fucking Celtic knots. I follow a thread, and it twists, then it turns until it ties onto another thread. I am pretty sure that once I find the root of this whole mess, all I will have to do is give it one good tug and everything will unravel."

Quinn thought about what he cousin said for a moment and then smiled, *hoping* he knew the answer before he asked. "Think ye will be around long enough ta unravel things?"

"I plan on it." Faelan sounded as disgusted as he felt. The whole mess made his head ache.

"Ye will let me know how I can help?" Faelan nodded, gratefully accepting Quinn's unwavering support.

Tristan nodded and added, "I havena' yet been asked but ye know I'll do all I can ta help."

Faelan smiled. "Aye."

Tristan slapped his hand on the table and demanded, "Were we na' goin' ta relax, and find some eager females?" He stood and studied the dance floor closely, looking over the choice picks. "Well, I see a couple ladies who look promisin'." This comment was tossed over a broad shoulder as he sauntered toward the dance floor, attracting admiring glances from the bar's female patrons. Approaching two shapely ladies, each with at least a decade on him in years, he smiled in flirtatious invitation.

"They're a little old for him," Faelan noted.

Quinn shrugged. "They know tha score, and willna' be expectin' anythin' more. Na' muss, na' fuss."

Faelan grinned. "Why, Cousin...I never realized ye were so poetic."

Quinn smiled. "Must be me Irish risin'."

Faelan snorted. "Ye always were the sensitive one."

Quinn's expression turned serious. "Sooo, Faelan. What 'tis goin' on ... exactly?"

Faelan swallowed a mouthful of his beer, his eyes never leaving Quinn's. "Someone has been buying up options on land slated for sale should the Wolf Reintroduction Project fail." Quinn took a long, deep drink of his beer and gazed sightlessly out over the crowd. He turned his head back toward Faelan and asked, "I take it 'twas happenin' after Eamon's stroke? I canna' see tha old man lettin' it go under his nose."

"Aye."

Quinn took another draw on his beer and turned to watch Tristan, who had become the center of attention on the dance floor. A bevy of four females now circled him and he was grinning from ear to ear. Though his attention seemed still focused on Tristan's play, Quinn idly asked, "What else?"

"Well, it seems someone, someone with tha authority ta access ranch funds, has been 'borrowin' money from tha internal accounts. Seems tha figures mesh and look ta be about enough ta cover tha purchase of tha land futures."

"By 'borrowin', ye mean embezzlin'?" This last word was growled out between clenched teeth.

"Technically speakin'. Aye."

Quinn lowered his beer to the table and turned his attention fully on Faelan. "Technically speakin' then someone inside, other than me or Eamon, has been embezzlin' ta...purchase land futures?"

Faelan met Quinn's eyes and without breaking contact added, "I know 'twas na' ye, nor Tristan."

Quinn snorted. "What makes ye so sure 'twas na' me?"

Faelan grinned. "I would be able ta smell it on ye."

Quinn's eyes widened. He laughed at the thought of his cousin sniffing around them like a hound. "Ye can *smell* it?"

"Aye. And if ye had been paying attention to the senses God gave ye, ye would be able ta tell too."

Quinn raised a single eyebrow and asked, "So does this smellin' ability come and go, like yer accent?"

"No...er...aye. Somethin' like that."

Quinn laughed again. "Aye, it comes and goes?"

"No, ye fool. 'Tis tha accent that seems ta come and go since I've been home. 'Tis something new." Uncomfortable, Faelan pretended to stare out on the dance floor while his minded turned over the changes he had been experiencing. "Me sense of smell *is* gettin' stronger, though." He turned his attention back to his cousin, piercing him with a pointed look. "Are ye sayin' ye havena' noticed anythin', well, unusual lately?"

Quinn took another drink, considering his words carefully. Finally, he locked stares with Faelan and answered, "Aye. I may have been a bit itchy lately. Seems me senses take control and I have a need ta run a bit. I seem ta be experiencin' certain urges." A predatory smile curved his lips. "I thought perhaps Miss Siobhan would like ta help me out with relievin' some of it."

Faelan laughed. "Boyo, that race has already been run, won, and tha nag put up. I intend ta be tha only man concerned with Ms. McMahon's preferences. And ye can put *that* in yer pipe and smoke it."

Quinn eyed Faelan closely. "Ye may indeed be right. But be warned, cuz, that I feel obliged ta make sure ye dunna' hurt her and will guard her well."

Faelan opened his eyes wide, astonished his cousin would even think such a thought, but was curious about his response. "And if I do?"

Reminiscent of Kieran, Quinn wore a smile that in no way involved his eyes.

Or humor.

"Then I'd feel obliged ta kick yer ass from one end of tha world ta tha other. Ye may come out tha winner in tha long run, but na' way would ye come out unscathed. I know yer reputation with women, Faelan, but Siobhan isna' someone ta fuck and then discard. She is too much a sweetheart ta be treated as such."

Faelan was surprised at Quinn's strong feelings for someone he'd only recently met. And that he knew anything about Faelan's reputation with women.

They stared at each other for several silent seconds, neither breaking eye contact, emotionless, and motionless. After a time Faelan gave a small nod, saying, "Warnin' noted. But, for tha record, I have na' intention of hurtin' her."

Quinn stood and took up his mug, tossing down the last of his beer. Setting the mug back down, he considered Faelan intently. "See that ye dunna'."

Quinn glanced at the dance floor, seeing that Tristan was still occupied, then back at Faelan. "I'll check out tha lawyers, accountants, and anyone else I can think of who have had access ta tha accounts, and get back ta ye with a list of possibilities. I be hoping 'twill be short. In tha meantime, would ye like ta help me lighten Tristan's load by takin' a couple of those lovely ladies off his hands?" A slow smile rose on Quinn's face. "Ye know, kinda take tha edge offa...things?"

Faelan pulled out his wallet and tossed some bills onto the table before returning it to his back pocket. "Nay. I've agreed ta take Siobhan ta tha further most site tomorrow ta check on a wolf who hasna' been seen for a while. I do appreciate yer help in gatherin' that information, though. I'm going ta have ta call it a night. Ye two enjoy tha pitcher for me."

"Later then. Just remember what I told ye about Siobhan."

Faelan smiled. "I willna' be likely ta forget."

Quinn gave a short nod and headed for the dance floor. A couple ladies broke away from Tristan's group to dance with him and he tipped his Stetson slightly, swinging each woman in turn, his moves flowing smoothly to the music.

Faelan watched the two men for a moment, with their wealth of feminine companionship. He shook his head, wondering what he was doing turning down an easy opportunity to relieve his desires.

He knew, though, that he didn't desire just *any* woman.

He wanted Siobhan.

But here he was, off to spend another frustrating night alone.

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Siobhan adjusted a dial and turned the antennae forty-five degrees, finally receiving a signal from Number Ten. Overjoyed, she slanted her head to the left toward Faelan, kneeling while he logged their previous results.

"Faelan. Number Ten."

Faelan immediately stood, and grabbed the binoculars hanging on a strap around his neck. "Where?" Siobhan nodded toward the signal's origin and he raised the binoculars to his eyes. "That's Number Ten alright. We have been worried since he hasn't been seen for over a month. He's the Alpha, and his pack couldn't have afforded to lose him. The reserve will be happy to learn we sighted him. "

"How many in this pack?"

"There were five other adults, and three pups, but I only count seven following Number Ten right now." He lowered the binoculars and faced Siobhan. "Let's just hope the missing one shows soon, and isn't another casualty."

She frowned at his cryptic comment. "Casualty of what?"

Faelan turned back and raised the binoculars, scanning the area once more before answering. "The war between ranchers and wolves for territory."

Siobhan's scowl deepened. "What do you mean?"

Faelan lowered the binoculars and sighed deeply. "The ranchers feel threatened by our reintroduction program. Wolf predation isn't widespread and the responsible wolves are destroyed. However, any predation on any of their livestock incites fear, giving rise to age-old superstitions and prejudices. Add to that the competition over land and space, and some ranchers take matters into their own hands. Eliminating their competitors altogether."

"By shooting them?" Siobhan squeaked.

"Shooting, poisoning, trapping. Whatever is familiar, and readily available."

"Aren't these men prosecuted?"

"Sure. When they're caught. You saw how difficult it is to track one wolf. Imagine how hard it is to determine the cause of death on a corpse days, weeks or even months old. Let alone determine who did it." Horror widened her eyes, tears forming. She turned away and stared at the wolves, her heart breaking over their plight.

"Siobhan you have to understand. Many ranchers consider it simply a matter of survival. They believe it to be an 'us or them' choice. There is no 'sharing' involved."

She brought her gaze back to his, her expression lost and pleading. "But Faelan, once the wolves are gone, they're gone forever."

"Many want just that. The reality is you have to compromise, or you lose everything."

"How can the Clann accept this?" she asked snidely. "Aren't they supposed to be caretakers of the wolves?"

Faelan sighed fatalistically. "Not all the ranchers are Clann. Many of those who are, have lost the old ways, the knowledge of who they once were." He watched her face intently, but she turned away, refusing to accept what he said as truth.

"Ah, Siobhan. All things change. Ye have ta deal with tha way things are, na' how ye wish them ta be." He waited a few minutes, but she didn't speak. With a heart-felt sigh, Faelan gathered the equipment. "Let's pack up and head back ta tha truck. We've seen what we came ta see."

Siobhan's shoulders slumped as she quietly helped him gather the equipment, and load the truck. The trip back to the office was uncomfortably silent as she stared out the side window at the passing scenery, remaining mute until the truck pulled up to the ranch. She turned toward Faelan as he switched off the engine, her eyes intense and burning.

He suddenly realized she hadn't been sulking, or mourning. She had been fuming.

Passion rolled off her in waves, scorching the air around her and he realized that the fire her fury radiated singed him in ways he knew she wouldn't appreciate, at least not just now. He decided that it would be best for the both if he walked away before she noticed his reaction.

He quickly opened the door and hauled out some of the more sensitive equipment from the back of the truck. Striding through the front door, he stored what he carried in the corner of their office space and crossed to sit behind his desk, letting the desk hide the blatant swell in his pants.

Siobhan stalked in after him, and slammed the front door. "Faelan are you going to do anything...are *we* going to do anything about the slain wolves?"

Faelan smiled to himself. Christ, he loved her like this.

All passion and fury.

"We are. We're studyin' them. Reintroducin' them into the environment. And tryin' ta educate everyone on their value ta all of us. It at least gives the wolves a fair shot at survival, which is more than they had before."

"The wolves deserve more than a *fair shot*, considering what we've done to them. Don't you think?" Her eyes shot emerald daggers at him as she advanced into the room, placing her palms down on the top of his desk and leaning forward.

Even as he rose to meet her challenge, Faelan couldn't help but admire her audacity. Few people could withstand his glare, let alone his ire. The thought of Siobhan using that fire, in pursuits of a different nature, raised the corners of his mouth in a smirk.

Mimicking her stance, he placed his hands on the desk and leaned toward her, his movements slow and deliberate so that he maintained his control. Barely a foot separated them yet Siobhan struggled to catch the low tones of his controlled speech. "Ms. McMahon. Perhaps ye have forgotten who tha associate is, and who tha lead is."

Siobhan jolted upright and backed up a few paces.

Faelan noted the considerable effort she took in bringing herself back under control. He perched sideways, his left hip resting on the desk, and his arms folded, awaiting her reaction.

Her eyes, still flashing, and her hands curled into fists at her side, Siobhan answered evenly, with hardly a trace of sarcasm, "My apologies, Dr. Conroy. I'm more than a little emotional when it comes to *my wolves*."

Faelan smiled at her use of the term "my wolves." "That's understandable. We all have our buttons." Before she could come up with a rebuttal, he stood and unwound his arms, stepping around his desk to resume his indolent pose. He cocked his knee, to rest his hip on the desk front, his arms loose in his lap. "How about we start over again as Faelan and Siobhan, and resume this discussion in a calmer manner?"

Siobhan relaxed her hands and took a deep breath to harness her hard won control.

Faelan appreciated what it did for the blouse stretched across her breasts. It might be worth having her lose her temper at him periodically just for the scenery.

Still defiant, Siobhan lifted her chin. "Unfortunately I have an appointment for which I'm already late." With a slight nod, she turned and headed for the door.

"Until later then. Perhaps, next time, ye willna' have ta *run* off ta an appointment."

Siobhan hesitated at his use of the word *run* but didn't turn around. She jerked the door open and stalked out of the house.

"My, my, my. Such a temper." Faelan threw back his head in laughter.

He could hardly wait for their next encounter.

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It was late Monday afternoon and Siobhan had spent the morning, and most of the afternoon, observing at Site Two. The Timberline Pack had made a kill the previous day, a large six-point bull elk, and were able to remain close to their den.

Siobhan had settled in with logs, lunch and lots of coffee.

The Alpha Pair, Number Four and Number Five, were both large grayish wolves. They spent most of their time together and Siobhan doubted there would be any problems with this pack producing a litter come spring.

She feverishly copied copious notes to the logs, eager to capture this moment in time of a specie that she, herself, would probably outlive. Such beauty and grace would be lost forever to man's greed and superstition. She sighed.

The importance of family and their core of group had wolves mirroring mankind. Lacking the selfishness of humans, their weakness of "live and let live" would spell doom for the more noble specie.

As it had so many times before.

Faelan had been tied up all day with administrative tasks and ranching business, so he was eager to join Siobhan at the site, if only for an hour or so. The past month had flown by, each day bringing further revelations, many of an intimate nature.

Siobhan had an intelligence he found more compelling than even her very attractive body. Her dry and sometimes self-deprecating sense of humor constantly surprised and delighted him. And her body... her body, solid and muscular, though he was sure she longed to be delicate and petite, was absolutely delectable. He preferred her combination of soft, supple skin, covering toned muscles.

She could keep up with him, be a full partner in work and play. A body made to fit his to perfection.

He didn't want a China doll. He wanted a playmate, and workmate...a mate?

Despite his best intentions, and against his better judgment, he found himself obsessed with her. He had never wanted to spend every possible minute with any other woman.

Previously he'd had the philosophy that one woman was as good as another. Certainly no single woman had ever been important enough to distract him from work. Now he thought about a life here, in Montana, and the roots he'd always abhorred...before Siobhan.

His life could now be catalogued into two parts – before Siobhan and after Siobhan.

After Siobhan, he found himself thinking and imaging things in a way he'd never done before, taking a second look at ideals he had even considered important.

He wanted those things now.

He wanted a normal life, whatever that was, but only with Siobhan.

Parking his truck next to her Blazer, more than a mile from the site, he grabbed his gear and traveled along the snow-covered trail. Moving as quietly as possible, he moved through the trees. In less than half an hour, he spotted her, flashes of her coat visible through the trees. His approach was quiet, but she was so engrossed in what she was writing that Hannibal's elephants could have drawn near completely unnoticed.

He stood a few feet behind her, his eyes following the line of her back as she bent over the logs. He smiled when she tucked the pencil behind her ear, removing a glove with her teeth. Reaching blindly under her camp chair for the thermos, she lifted off the cup and filled it with the steaming liquid.

"How are the wolves today?" Startled, Siobhan rose and spun, dropping the logs, and spilling coffee down the front of her clothes. She gasped as hot liquid splashed over her ungloved right hand.

Faelan dashed forward and knelt at her feet, scooping up a handful of snow. He grabbed her burnt hand and pulled it to him, using the snow to swathe the reddened skin.

Siobhan was forced to stoop slightly, bringing her body within inches of his.

"Siobhan, maybe we could work out some kind of signal so that you don't hurt yourself every time I come near you." He chuckled and looked up into her eyes.

She glared back at him and smiled wryly. "Well, Faelan...how about putting a bell around your neck? Then I'll always know when you're coming."

The teasing glint in Faelan's eyes faded into pure lust. "There are other ways."

Siobhan blushed and looked down, avoiding his eyes.

He fixed his stare on her face, drew her blistered hand to his lips and gently kissed the scalded back of her hand. "Better?"

Siobhan looked into his eyes, dazed. "It's fine."

Never breaking eye contact, or releasing her hand, he stood and moved closer. Using his free hand, he cradled the back of her head, guiding her lips to his.

The kiss started slowly.

"Faelan, I think that this might be a very bad idea."

He smiled mere inches from her mouth. "I think ye think too much. Seems ta me ta be such a fine idea." He tentatively explored her mouth as she encircled his waist with her free arm and leaned into his body. Groaning, he moved his hands around her open coat, diving under her heavy cotton sweatshirt and undershirt.

She hissed as cold air hit her back and stomach but he swallowed her startled gasp. Without releasing her lips, he pulled off his gloves in order to touch her bare skin. Pulling her to him, he wrapped his arms around her torso and slanted his mouth for greater access. He trailed a hand to her breast, her skin, warm and satiny under his fingers. The loose undershirt of her long johns was easily pushed up, exposing her breasts to his questing hands.

He pinched a pebbling nipple and she groaned, teasing his erection to new heights. He ground his pelvis against hers but found no relief. Freeing one hand, to adjust himself to a more comfortable position, he slipped the questing hand down the top of her sweat pants. The long johns, under her sweats, proved hardly any barrier at all. He easily pushed under the flannel material and slid his fingers along her heated skin.

Surreptitiously untying the drawstring to her sweats, he slipped his hand into the front of her pants, following the loose edge of her thermal underwear to dip into her cleft, pleasantly surprised at the copious moisture he found. He parted her lips gently, covering his fingers in her abundant cream, deftly massaging her nubbin. When he sank his middle finger deep into her channel, her inner muscles quivered.

A muscular thigh slipped between her trembling ones, pulling her closer and holding her upright. In spite of their layers of clothing, the musky, exotic aroma of her arousal raised his temperature to a boiling point.

Siobhan moaned again and rocked against his body, the pain from her coffee burn easily forgotten. Easing her ungloved hand between them, she trailed her knuckles along the ridge of his impressive erection.

It was Faelan's turn to moan.

She increased the speed and motion of her fingers.

Siobhan gasped and desperately unbuttoned him. Freeing him, after removing her other glove, she grasped him with both hands. Moments later, she froze, hands that had been cupping and exploring him, immobile as she whispered his name hoarsely.

He could feel her slick walls pulse rhythmically as her orgasm overtook her and smiled, a purely masculine grin of triumph, as he stared down into her startled eyes. He dropped several kisses on her cheeks, and open mouth, before noticing the odd look on her face. Frowning he cupped her cheeks in his hands and turned her face to his. "Siobhan? Are ye okay?"

Siobhan brought her focus to his face and whispered, "Oh, my."

"Be that a good 'oh my', or a bad 'oh my'?"

Siobhan smiled up at him. "Definitely a good one."

Faelan snorted sardonically. "If I dinna' know better, I'd think ye were a virgin." When Siobhan looked quickly up at him, blushing, he moaned in disbelief. "Ah shit. Please dunna' tell me ye're a virgin."

Siobhan removed her hands from him and answered primly, "Hardly."

Faelan lamented the loss of her hands, but cavalierly remained unbuttoned. Siobhan started to retie her own pants but he grabbed her hands, holding them until she looked him in the eyes. "Then what was..." Stunned understanding dawned and he laughed incredulously. "Yer first orgasm?"

The disgruntled female jerked her hands out of his, and turned her back to him, rearranging her clothing with irate tugs and jerks. "I don't see why *that's* so amusing."

Faelan couldn't help feeling inordinate pride. "Nay. 'Tis na' *amusin'*." He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her back to face him. "Siobhan, ye be so passionate...so responsive...that I canna' imagine that ye'd ne'er experienced it before. Ye've either had very bad, or very selfish, lovers."

Her blush deepened and she pulled her gaze from his, looking everywhere but his smiling face. "Lover...not lovers. Just one lover." She paused, the corners of her mouth twitching before turning into a grin. "I'd say he was the latter, which made him the former."

Faelan sniggered at her spunk. Fastening his pants slowly, he gave himself a bit of time to cool down before sighing at the loss of her eager touch.

"Are ye on tha pill?"

Her arms akimbo, Siobhan frowned. "No. I'm *not* on the pill. I didn't think it would be an issue." She paused and raised an questioning eyebrow. "Besides, I know that I'm 'clean'. I was tested. How do I know *you* are?"

Faelan leered. "Darlin', Shapeshifters canna' get STDs, or any other blood-borne diseases. But we *can* get pregnant." He collected the gear, gloves and the forgotten logs, preparing to return to the car. "Besides, I've ne'er been in a woman without a rubber, pill or no pill. Some females have been known ta lie about protection."

Siobhan's tone became incensed, ending on an outraged squeak. "Dr. Conroy! Are you implying that I would try and trap you?"

His back to her, Faelan grinned. It was so much fun to tease her. Plus her temper was a definite turn-on. "You wouldna' be the first, Ms. McMahon."

She sputtered, "Why you arrogant, overgrown...dog!" When he ignored her and kept walking toward the cars, Siobhan bent and scooped up two large handfuls of snow, making a nice sized snowball, compacting it firmly.

Faelan was chuckling to himself, barely keeping his laughter silent, when the freezing lump hit him in the back of the head, spilling ice down the collar of his coat and shirt. Stunned, he slowly turned around to eye his assailant.

Siobhan stood, hands on her hips, glaring at him, daring him to retaliate. Unfortunately for Siobhan, she'd been raised an only child, and did not realize that retaliation was not only assured, but expected, if the sibling in question wished to retain any respect.

He dropped everything and stalked toward her. "Ye best run, little girl. 'Cause just bein' a girl isna' goin' ta help ye now." Siobhan stood her ground and tilted her chin, goading him. He was going to have to teach her a lesson.

Just what type of lesson, he wasn't quite sure.

But his hands itched to teach her one, nonetheless.

As he drew closer, he could see the spark in her eyes. That spark, old as time, spoke to something deep inside him, something feral and primitive, understood only by instinct, and never tamed by civilized man...or woman.

The game they had begun playing had changed.

Faelan saw the realization in Siobhan's eyes the very moment she realized it and slowly backed away, her hands held in front of her in a placating gesture.

He wanted her, needed her to run. Like any predator, he waited for her to trigger his chase reflex and then he would run her to ground, conquer her.

With a single mousy squeal, she whirled and dashed through the trees.

A smile of triumph on his face, Faelan gave chase.

Siobhan was quick, and clever. Placing trees between her and Faelan, she initially gained ground. Unfortunately for her, he was no ordinary man.

Fit and athletic, he was accustomed to singular physical labor...and he was a Shapeshifter. Shapeshifters are larger, stronger than ordinary men and Faelan, being an alpha male, was larger and stronger than most.

The centuries-old dance could have only one conclusion.

He caught Siobhan's ankle as she scurried up an embankment, tripping her and bringing her down. He pulled her toward him with no effort.

She turned on her back and kicked out at him with her free foot.

Laughing, he grabbed her ankle and, lying in the soft snow, pulled her the last few inches under him. Holding her immobile with his body he captured her flailing arms and raised them over her head, imprisoning both wrists with his left hand to leave his right free to roam at will. Though she squirmed and wiggled, trying to free herself, she only managed to incite his resolve to keep her prisoner.

When she tired and grew still, he brushed the hair off her face and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

Siobhan stared immobile at the ardent expression in his eyes as he gently traced the lines of her face. "Ah, Siobhan. Ye be so beautiful ye seem unreal. Such perfection could drive a man ta desperation, just ta touch ye."

"You're kidding, right?" She giggled. "Don't tell me that works."

Faelan met her eyes and grinned impishly. "Ye'd be surprised."

"Well, Mr. Smooth Talker. It's cold down here, in case you hadn't noticed."

He traced her lips with his index finger. "Everythin' has its price."

Siobhan frowned. "And just what is the price to let me go?"

"Hmmm, I'd be very foolish ta ever let ye go. Not after I went ta all tha trouble of gettin' ye in tha first place."

"How much to let me up then?" Faelan heaved an exaggerated sigh and bent his head to nibble on her neck.

Siobhan shivered and Faelan whispered, "Cold?"

"Huh?" Siobhan turned her head to grant him greater access to her neck.

Faelan smirked and licked a trail along her collarbone. "Dinner."

"Dinner?" Siobhan asked dreamily.

"Have dinner at tha ranch on Friday. Da and Tris will be there, as well as Quinn and Kieran. Da and Kieran want ta meet ye."

"Meet me?" she sighed.

"Aye. Meet ye."

She stiffened. "Why?"

Faelan chuckled. "Nothin' sinister. They havena' seen ye since ye were a girl."

Siobhan thought a moment and then sighed resignedly. "Okay. I'll be there. *Now* can I get up?"

Faelan suckled her earlobe, causing her to shiver again. "Aye. As soon as ye pay up."

"Pay? But your dinner isn't for four days."

"Nay, Siobhan. That's payment for lettin' ye up. There still be tha small matter of tha snowball. Ye could have seriously damaged me, ye know. Put me eye out or somethin'."

She snorted. "And what, pray tell, is fair recompense for a snowball?"

Faelan nipped her bottom lip, tracing her lips with his tongue before using it to explore her mouth. He moved his hand under her clothes, freeing her breast and caressing it in his palm.

Siobhan moaned into his mouth and thrust her tongue in to duel with his.

He freed her wrists to move both his hands under her clothes, cradling her shoulder blades in his palms.

She rested her hands on his shoulders, her head dropping back as he nibbled his way down between her breasts.

Faelan lifted his head and rested his forehead on her plump breasts. Groaning painfully, he complained, "Jaysus, *mo chroi*, what I wouldna' give for a condom right now."

Siobhan slugged his shoulder. "Get off me you dolt!"

Faelan laughed and rolled to the side. "Easy now. Yer temper be what got us inta this mess...By tha way, what is a 'dolt'?"

"My temper?" She stood, brushing the snow from her clothes before readjusting them.

"Aye." He stood, adjusting his own clothing. "Yer temper and yer uncommon beauty." "Don't you try and charm me, Faelan Conroy."

"Sorry, me charm is just part of me engagin' personality." He grinned. "Ye dunna' know what a dolt is then?"

Siobhan had already gathered her portion of the strewn belongings and started back to the car, her footsteps noisily proclaiming her irritation. Without looking back, she signaled her disdain with the middle finger of her still ungloved hand. "Look it up."

Faelan laughed as he watched her stomp away. Well, at least he'd taken her mind off chastising him, or making him promise not to try again. Of course, even if he promised, he doubted he could keep his word.

He took a deep, calming breath and got up, whistling tunelessly as he gathered the notebooks, and the other discarded objects, and sauntered back to his truck.

## **Chapter Six**

Siobhan, still fuming after her encounter with Faelan, had no desire to go back to the office. She decided, instead, to visit Destiny and look around, see what changes had occurred in the past thirteen years.

She hadn't brought Aingeal with her, leaving him sleeping comfortably in front of her grandmother's fire, and was free to explore inside, as well as outside, the quaint town.

As she traveled down Main Street, she noticed that there had been some additions, but nothing radical. It seemed as though the residents were determined that nothing about their town would change, and she wondered how much of that was the Clann's influence. It was a comfort, while also being slightly unnerving, that everything seemed to remain much the same as the day she'd left.

Seamus McMahon's office, one of the older buildings in the town, was located in its center. Its placement, next to the Do Drop Inn, the town's only bar, might have been accidental, but Siobhan thought it probably came in handy on weekends and holidays.

She entered the office tentatively, looking around for her grandfather. "Seamus? Seamus, are you here?" A single neatly kept desk occupied the outer office, but he was nowhere in sight. Hearing a clinking come from the back of the building, she smiled when her grandfather paused in the doorway, his large ring of keys jangling like spurs. Framed in the doorway, with the ancient jail cells visible in the background, he resembled a sheriff from the old west, rugged and stern, until he smiled.

His grin, upon seeing Siobhan in his office, lit his face like a Christmas tree, and she couldn't help but feel his warmth and love down to her toes.

"Siobhan, I didn't expect to see you. What brings you to my hole in the wall?"

She laughed and entered his arms for a grandfatherly hug. "It's been too long since I've seen you. I decided to pay you a visit."

"Too long, huh? It's been less that a week since Thanksgiving but I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Just let me lock this place up tight and you can accompany me on my rounds." He opened his desk drawer and lifted out his formidable holster and gun. He strapped them on, pulling on his heavy sheepskin coat. Leaving the coat unbuttoned, he dropped his hat on his head.

He held the door open for Siobhan and followed her out, locking the deadbolt behind them. She noted how much larger and imposing he seemed in his full regalia and threaded her arm through his, loving the sense of security he gave her. They moved down the wooden sidewalks, stopping in at various businesses.

As Seamus greeted the shop owners, Siobhan noticed that some were friendly while others were oddly wary, glancing at her from the corners of their eyes. She wondered if being a Clann member, or a 'normal' townsperson, made any difference in the warmth of their reception. As they walked, Seamus told her more about her father, Donal and their family history.

"The McMahons and Keatings, your grandmother Caitlin's people, left Destiny about a hundred years ago for Arizona, where the temperatures are far warmer, and, at that time, the land plentiful and cheap. Neither Caity nor I were partial to ranching, or farming, like our parents. We moved back to Destiny, which we'd never seen but heard about, when Donal started college.

"He finished his degree and moved back to Destiny, building a house near ours. He'd met your mother a few summers before, and I think it was just meant to be. There never was anyone else for either of them.

"They doted on the wolves as much as they would have children. I think they became their surrogate children after Brigid had lost a couple babies. I think they had just about given up when you came along.

"Then, as now, some ranchers considered wolves like any other pest, and tried to eradicate them. There were times I could barely keep Donal from going after suspected poachers. And I imagine it's what finally got them killed." He shook his head sadly, lost in the memories of those dark days.

They had arrived at a newer office complex just a short way from the Sheriff's office with a plaque that read, 'Dr. B. Keating, M.D.'

Siobhan raised her eyebrows and asked, "Is he another relative?"

"He?"

Siobhan pointed to the name "Keating."

Seamus started laughing. "Yes, indeed. Caity's family is spread all over. But the 'he' is a 'she'. It's Dr. Brenna Keating."

The receptionist looked up as they entered and smiled at Seamus. "Well, Sheriff, it's been awhile since we've seen you around here."

"Evening, Wendy. I thought that since it's getting quitting time, I'd bring my granddaughter in to meet Brenna. Since they both used to live in Arizona, I thought they would have a lot in common."

"It's nice to meet you, Wendy. I'm Siobhan McMahon." Siobhan felt Seamus stiffen at the use of her newly discovered surname and she glanced at him uncertainly. His beaming smile reassured her that she had his complete approval.

"It's nice to meet you too. We're actually here, tonight, until seven o'clock or so but, as you can see, no one is waiting. I'll let the doctor..."

"Seamus, I thought you'd forgotten about us." A voluptuous woman, with startling turquoise eyes, stepped from the back room and greeted Seamus warmly with an affectionate hug. Her thick, curly dark hair was pulled back, secured by an ornate turquoise clasp that matched her eyes. Tall, yet shorter than Siobhan by three or four inches, her presence nevertheless filled the room. "Ah...you must be the mysterious granddaughter. Siobhan isn't it?"

"Yes, Siobhan. Pleased to meet you, Dr. Keating."

"Please...call me Brenna. After all, I don't think I'm more than five years older than you are, and you'll make me feel ancient. Come on back and let's get acquainted."

As the two women started toward the back of the office, Seamus stopped them. "Brenna, is it okay with you if I leave Siobhan here for a little while, let you two girls get acquainted? I need to drive out and see a couple ranchers...they've been having some problems and it might take a bit of time. She would just be bored sitting in the car while I worked."

"But I thought..." Siobhan started.

"Sure it's okay. I'd welcome a chance to get to know someone my age, and another member of Clann Mac Tire."

"It's okay, Siobhan. Your Blazer is parked outside my office in case I don't get back and it's pretty a safe town for a young woman after dark." Hugging her tight he added, "I'm glad you stopped in to see me."

As her grandfather scooted out the door guiltily, she shook her head in confusion at the sudden turn of events. "Why do I feel like I'm being babysat?"

Brenna's smattering of golden freckles, gave her a whimsical look, and her merry laughter at the telling comment made Siobhan smile in return.

*Her patients must adore her.* Siobhan felt better just watching her glowing face. Brenna was obviously a true healer; she had that feel about her, a gentle touch. *Hmmm... and she's a Clann member. Maybe she can clear up some of these mysterious 'mo tells' I've been getting from the grandparents.* 

"Siobhan, you look so serious. Come on back and we can get acquainted. I have a strong pot of coffee going and we can gossip about all the single men around here. Unfortunately that will only take a few minutes, but I suppose that's to be expected when you move to a small town."

Siobhan laughed at Brenna's verbosity as the door closed behind them. Her office area was warm and soothing, the colors complementing pictures of people, of all ages, decorating the walls. Feeling comfortable with the young doctor Siobhan decided that this might be the perfect opportunity to ask some questions she had been mulling, every since her 'meeting' with Faelan earlier.

"Uh, Brenna, can I ask you a hypothetical question?"

"Sure, but I may need more than hypothesis to go on in order to answer it." Brenna sat in one of her visitor chairs, motioning Siobhan to sit next to her.

"Well, hypothetically speaking, what options are there for birth control?"

Brenna laughed. "Perhaps I was mistaken about the men around here. I don't have any other patients right now so we have time to start a chart, do a workup on you to get the necessary information and see what we can do...hypothetically speaking of course."

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Shouting. Jarring howls of fear and pain. Gunshots. The stench of burning wood and flesh. Frigid night air robbed her of breath.

"Run, Siobhan! Go get Grandda." Pain and more pain...

Siobhan's terrifying dream suddenly morphed into a different scene altogether and the dark night, and freezing cold, transformed into a midsummer's day.

The healing sun's warmth spread over her skin, driving away her pain.

She stood in a copse of aspens, overlooking a meadow of golden green summer grass. Soothing breezes stirred the long blades into waving serpentine paths, the pungent fragrance of new grass and blooming wild flowers floating into the air. Weighty humidity foreshadowed the imminent arrival of an afternoon shower, carrying the fragrant odors further into the trees, wrapping her in its warm embrace. Wind through the surrounding trees echoed her sigh, the quaking leaves sounding like rushing water. A yearning to meld into the nature surrounding her, while simultaneously inhaling it in, took control of Siobhan and her body shook as her limbs shuddered, and reformed. The playful breeze lightly ruffled the tiny feathers on her legs and arms, calling to her to soar on the soothing zephyr. Succumbing, her lightened body lifted into the late afternoon skies, buoyed by her substantial wings.

Drifting on balmy currents, she thrilled to the sensations of freedom and exhilaration. In the distance, she spotted a wolf pack, darting in effortless strides to flank a herd of buffalo, whose molting coats resembled enormous moth-eaten blankets. The herd had placed their most precious and vulnerable members, the calves, in the center of the fleeing herd, for protection. Dust, hip high, nearly camouflaged the smaller herd members. Focused intelligence allowed the wolf pack to keep up their easy pace alongside the herd, the deadly contretemps horribly alluring. The hunters selected their target—an older, injured male. Cutting him from the herd, the wolves maneuvered the great beast into a closing trap, harassing and pushing him into fatal exhaustion.

The pack feasted on buffalo.

The alphas received the first, and choicest selections, while the rest of the pack waited restlessly for their share.. Carrion crows picked around snapping jaws, finding unprotected and soft places to feast. Their meal complete, the wolves wove their way back to their den, supper for the pups and their sitters resting in their loping stomachs.

Siobhan soared into the treetops to follow the wolves back, alighting near them as they drank from a sparkling creek along the way. She peered into the water and cocked her head in interest at her reflection.

Sleek and shiny, her ebony feathers and eyes created an intelligent-looking and attractive raven. A single caw escaped her sharp black beak as she rose majestically into the late afternoon sky. Landing in the midst of her discarded clothing, she shook and shimmered back into human form. Shivering, her skin damp and unprotected by her feathered fluff, she quickly dressed then sat on the grass-covered ground, laying back to stare at the darkening sky.

Ominous gray clouds gathered overhead, pulling at unfamiliar strings in Siobhan's center. She closed her eyes, gathering and focusing her internal energy into her body's center of gravity. The winds rose as distant thunder echoed loudly throughout the neighboring hills.

Lightening struck somewhere near, bringing her instantly to her feet.

The churning ache continued to move through her and she opened her arms, turning her face skyward, toward the rising moon. The wind lifted locks of her hair, gently tugging them in play as they spun around her head and shoulders. Magick, thick and warm as blood, gathered along her limbs and streamed from her fingers.

Multicolored lights blinked and sparkled around her head, flashing on and off, in tandem with the lightening.

A tingling along her spine warned her that she was no longer alone and she lowered her arms. Opening her eyes, she scanned the trees circling the meadow. An enormous black wolf, with pewter-colored eyes, studied her intently and she dropped to her knees, offering him her hand. His head down, ears flat to his head, he approached her with caution.

She ran her fingers through his thick pelt, encircling his massive head with her arms, hugging his girth to her body. He shimmered, her arms still around him, and her eyes locked

with his. Shifting swiftly, he rose to his feet.

Before her stood a beautifully naked Faelan.

He smiled wickedly before lowering his lips to hers, wrapping strong arms tightly around her as he swallowed her mouth in a kiss. As he lowered her into the soft grass, her clothes faded away, disappeared. Moving over, and around her, his hands and lips worshipped her body. Cradling her in his hands, he traced a nipple with his tongue and bit the resulting mound teasingly. He repeated the gentle torture on her other breast then licked his way to her belly.

She clenched her fingers in his hair convulsively as he continued his relentless journey down her feverish body. He left her belly to continue, his tongue licking the way. He held her hips and moved to her inner thigh to alternately nip and lap around her heated cunt, teasing and exploring her moistened lips until she writhed in tortured need. He sat back on his heels, pulling her thighs up to his mouth, and finally relieved her torment by stroking and suckling her clit.

Her orgasm exploded and rolled over her, unending as he lowered her hips and roughly entered her, his movements raw and demanding.

He pushed deeply and groaned, gripping her hips possessively. His gaze, burning with silver fire, never left hers. He shouted her name triumphantly as his cum warmly flooded, and filled her, to her fingers and toes, forcing a new climax to seize and carry her over the edge, into the fiery light.

"Mine. Ye belong ta me, Siobhan."

"No, Faelan. You belong to me."

Wolfish laughter followed her out of her dream into the cold world of reality.

She woke lethargically, wanting nothing more than to crawl back into her dream world.

Her covers, damp with sweat, twisted around her legs, held her prisoner in her bed. The remnants of her dream echoed in pulses beating in her womb.

Her first ever wet dream. Faelan had also given her that *first*.

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Faelan hadn't seen Siobhan for a couple days.

She'd been avoiding him.

It had finally driven him out of the office, and into the field, in hopes of catching up with her. He had memorized her schedule, which site she was due to visit today. If the mountain wouldn't come to Mohammed...

He stood, sheltered by the trees, and studied the pack in the dying light of the sun, snowflakes swirling around them as they cavorted in the meadow. The wolves knew he was watching and that he was no threat as he waited for his mate to arrive.

Every molecule in Faelan went on high alert the moment Siobhan appeared. Hearing and smelling her, he closed his eyes, concentrating on inhaling her heady scent. He detected her nervous indecision and...hmmm...something else.

The faint odor of arousal wafted, mixing with the delicate smell that was uniquely hers. Faelan stiffened in surprise as he found himself stiffening elsewhere, in immediate reaction.

She had such a powerful effect on him.

He closed his eyes and drew in another lungful of her naturally seductive perfume, savoring the anticipation mixed with trepidation. When he heard her stop, as if wary of continuing, he opened his eyes and turned toward her.

"Siobhan," he whispered softly, intimately, "come here."

She paused in mid-step, having turned as if to retreat.

She had sensed him, but had not seen him until he had called her name. Approaching him tentatively, she stopped several paces away.

She waited, watching him warily as he approached.

He drew her in front of him and pointed to the pack in the distance. His hands remained on her shoulders as he whispered, "You wouldn't want to miss this."

She was in awe, watching the pack cavorting so close – rolling, nipping and yipping in delight, as if children playing innocently in the soft snow.

They silently observed the wolves until she began shivering.

"Ye're cold." He drew her to him gradually, avoiding startling her as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close to his burning warmth. After several minutes, he turned her to face him, cupping her face in his gentle hands. "I'm goin' ta kiss ye now. If ye're goin' ta leave, ye'd best do it quickly." Her eyes widened but she made no move to flee.

Faelan murmured, "Fair warnin'," as he lowered his lips to hers.

He began the kiss lightly but deepened it when her response grew hotter.

He parted her lips with his tongue, entering her mouth, moving his hands to her shoulders to pull her closer. She moaned, leaning into him, greedy hands grasping his coat lapels.

Pulling him even closer, she explored his mouth with her tongue in return.

Playful yelps from the pack broke the spell.

Siobhan withdrew abruptly, covering her lips with shaky fingertips as though her lips had acted of their own volition.

She backed away, whirling to hurry to the safety of her car.

Faelan followed, grabbing her upper arms from behind, stopping her flight. "Siobhan?"

He could sense her fear but the scent of her arousal was even stronger, more enticing than before. He drew her back but stopped tugging when she resisted. Moving himself forward instead, he enfolded her in his embrace, his front warming her back. He tucked her head under his chin, and silently held her close.

"Nothin' is goin' ta happen that ye dunna' want ta happen. Ye do know that it all be up ta ye. Force is na' me style." He felt her relax, and waited for what she would do next.

After a few moments, she sighed, dropping her head back on his chest with a defeated thump.

"I swore that this would never happen again."

When she showed no sign of continuing, Faelan teased, "It happened before? Where was I?"

She snorted. "I was twenty-one and had just graduated. I was so green..."

She stopped, thinking of those days when she had been young and trusting, before...

"I've always felt a kinship with wolves, you know?" Faelan nodded, remembering her affinity from when she was young, mutely entreating her to continue. "It was my first

assignment and I was thrilled, ready to save the world, or at least the wolves."

He understood her passion and wished he'd known her then. He wanted nothing more than to track down anyone who dared hurt her, and worked hard not to vibrate with his anger at her pain.

"That's when I met Bill Smith." She spat out the name, as if it was the most bitter medicine to taste.

He couldn't stop his body stiffening, knowing this sharing was not going to be comfortable for either of them, and clenched his teeth, remaining stoically silent, having heard rumors.

"He was my advisor...and project...leader. He seemed like some Greek god...or Oracle...something greater than I would ever be. Someone on a higher plane than I...someone I worshipped."

Faelan had run into Doctor Bill Smith a time or two at different gatherings, and had never been impressed with his cocky know-it-all posturing, or his blow-hard attitude. The man thought nothing of pawning his work off on others, taking credit for ideas he hadn't come up with, and claiming studies he never completed.

Good old Bill.

His unprofessional attitude, including his interaction with female students, had given many a university instructor a bad reputation, simply by association.

If Faelan hadn't already had enough reason to despise Dr. William Smith, he did now.

*Oh, I am definitely going to kick that weasel Smith's ass if we ever cross paths.* 

"I thought he really cared about *me*. Loved my mind, *and* body. Boy, was I naïve. Wrong on all counts." She shook her head ruefully, breathing in a deep, calming breath before continuing. "He was...you know...my first. Unfortunately that meant a lot more to me than it did to him."

"I think I would have done anything for him. Anything that was until the day I went to his office, to pick up a paper I'd forgotten, and he was *enthusiastically* 'welcoming' his new assistant." Siobhan sniffled remembering how her heart had felt like it had cracked into a million pieces. Opening that door had opened her eyes to the truth about that rat-bastard Bill. Maybe she *should* have let Aingeal bite him, in that tender spot, as he had tried more than once to do.

Now I'm just going to have to kill the bastard when I see him. Simply kicking his ass is far too kind.

Faelan looked forward to the chance of seeing Smith again at ASU, where their final reports had to be filed. And he would make damn sure that the idiot realized the full spectrum of his misbegotten actions, knew all the whys and wherefores, before he was offered a slow, but painful, death. Growling, he thought of all the enjoyable ways he would torture and destroy *his* Siobhan's tormentor.

Mentally rubbing his hands in futuristic glee, he froze in sudden comprehension.

Everything became so clear that he was amazed he hadn't understood it all before.

In that moment, in that most unlikely of places, Faelan knew that he had fallen in love. For the first time in his life.

Deeply, irrevocably in love.

With the shock and implications of this discovery, he understood that he had been

headed in this direction from the first moment they had met as children. All the intervening years, and temporary women, had merely been killing time until this point in his life.

Regardless of their families' desires, the Council's machinations, or even Siobhan and Faelan's best-laid plans, their intertwining fates were, and always had been, inevitable.

Siobhan continued with a sigh, "I swore I'd never again be so naive and look what happens? I go and get involved with my project lead...again. Damn. Will I never learn?" She stepped out of his embrace by placing a well-aimed elbow in his gut, and turned around, hostile in her intent. "Well, that's it! I may have been an idiot once but I'm never...never... going to be anyone's convenient *lay* again. Not anyone's!"

He stiffened, stung by the vehemence in her tone, rubbing his tender abdomen. *She has a sharp elbow…* 

Siobhan turned on an angry heel and stalked to her car.

Faelan attempted to grab her arm but she shrugged him off, determination evident in every step, every line of her seething body. "Siobhan." She paused, stopping in mid-stride but not turning around. "Ye be tha most inconvenient person I have e'er met." He walked up and stopped behind her.

Without touching, he bent to whisper in her ear. He felt her shiver, watched her tightly close her eyes as his breath brushed her ear. "I'll wait 'till ye be ready. *We'll* wait. But 'tis inevitable. *We're* inevitable. If I know nothin' else I know that ye belong ta me, and I belong ta ye. From tha moment we met, it was fated. I will promise ye this, *a chuisle*, I'll make ye forget that worm Smith e'er existed. Ye be mine, Siobhan. And I keep what is mine for me alone, convenient or na'."

Siobhan's eyes widened with his words, her heart pounding with his purpose.

His laughter was dark and roguish as he sauntered past her. Stopping at her car, he opened the driver's door and motioned her to slide in. "Yer chariot awaits, me darlin'," his brogue added melody to his words.

Siobhan stared at him as stood dumbfound, warring emotions battling inside: leap into his arms, or run as fast as she could.

Her feet moved under their own volition as she had followed him to her car, staring at his gorgeous face in stunned disbelief. Snapping out of her daze, she scooted quickly into the front seat, slamming the door behind her and snapping the lock, closing her inside.

Safe, away from the insane male.

He stepped back as the Blazer roared away, its back wheels spinning, dusting him with a fine layer of fresh snow while he laughed in delight at his discovery.

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With no firm destination in mind, she drove into town and stopped outside Brenna's office. Parked, a feat she was astonished she had managed without loss of life or vehicle, she shut off the Blazer and laid her head helplessly on the steering wheel.

Her hands shook, adrenaline rushing through her system at warp speed.

Inevitable? What did he mean? Nothing is inevitable.

Faelan's words had confused and excited her, all at once. His presumption, and possessiveness, should bother her but all she felt was exhilaration...and anticipation...

Which of them was more insane?

The waiting room was free of patients, since it was nearly six o'clock, and the receptionist was pulling on her jacket when Siobhan walked through the doors. Brenna sat at the front desk, making notes on patient charts, and looked up as Wendy nudged her, letting her know they had company.

Looking up she saw a rosy-cheeked Siobhan, standing in the doorway. "Siobhan, back so soon? Is everything okay? What did you forget?"

"Oh, sure. Everything's fine. Ummm...forget? Oh, nothing. I just thought that...maybe you'd have time for a cup of coffee...or something." Brenna's laughter trilled comfortably against Siobhan's burning ears and made her smile in spite of her recent shock.

"You must be a mind reader. I was just locking up and thinking how nice a cup of coffee sounded. Let me finish up back here, and I'll join you out front."

"Great. I'll meet you out front."

Brenna flew through her office and stacked files in her 'to be filed' basket. *Wendy can handle them in the morning.* Stepping outside her office, she saw Siobhan slouched against her Blazer, staring a hole through the sidewalk. Securing the doors, she looped her arm in that of her new friend and hauled her down the street.

A few minutes later, they were sitting in Bailey's Café's glassed-in patio. Their table was secluded enough for 'girl talk', but close enough to the freestanding fireplace to be comfortable.

"Well, Siobhan, what's up? I know you didn't invite me to coffee to talk about 'old times', since we just met yesterday, so I'm assuming it's about a guy. Is everything all right? You look a little shell-shocked. Is this about the 'hypothetical' guy we were discussing in my office?"

Siobhan grinned sheepishly. "Yeah. I'm kind of what you might call *conflicted*. Not exactly something I want to discuss with my grandmother, even though she would probably be ok with it."

"Conflicted, huh...? Hmm...that does sound serious. How about we start with why you're conflicted, and I'll see if I can't give you the benefit of all five of my...uhh...advanced years."

Siobhan sipped her coffee. "He's *sort of* my supervisor. That's the problem in a nutshell. Oh...and its Dr. Conroy."

Brenna held up a graceful hand, interrupting Siobhan's story. "Wait! Are you talking about *Faelan* Conroy?"

"Yeah. Do you know him?"

"Oh, baby! I got my undergraduate degree in Biology from ASU, before transferring to U of A's Medical School. Faelan and I were in many of the same classes. We haven't had much of a chance to do more than wave as he's driven through town, but I did hear he was coming home." Brenna chuckled. "He *is* a mighty fine piece of work, isn't he? So it must be the 'supervisor' part that's conflicting, huh?"

Siobhan responded to the drooling dryly, "Yeah. Since I consider my career '*mighty fine*' there is a tad bit of conflict."

Brenna sipped her coffee and eyed Siobhan closely, wondering who had screwed up her priorities. "Girlfriend, a career won't keep you warm at night. And this is experience talking so I should know. Why can't you have both?"

Siobhan looked away for a moment, trying to find the words to make her new friend understand. "I don't *do* one-night stands and, somehow, I don't think Faelan does anything else. I've seen the women looking at him and I am sure he has already cut his swath through town. I'm sure I'm just someone new, someone *convenient*."

Ye be tha most inconvenient person I have e'er met."

Brenna snorted then burst out with a quick staccato of laughter.

After catching her breath, she snickered. "I'm sorry...but *convenient*? Those Conroy boys have women lined up around the block, *waiting* to be their one-night stands. If that's all he wanted...well excuse me... but he really wouldn't have to chase one down, including yours truly. I don't know about the other two Conroys, since I've only seen them tooling around in their macho trucks so I haven't really met them yet. I don't really remember Faelan dating anybody from school, so I doubt that any of his 'dates' were anything more than dinner and sex. He never seemed to want to let anyone get too close. And believe you me...I watched plenty try."

Siobhan cringed at the thought of dinner and sex. It brought back too memories of the best-forgotten Bill – her biggest mistake – and their 'dates'.

Brenna laughed. "Surely I haven't shocked you, honey. I may not have *seen* Faelan since our undergraduate days, but if he's half as good looking now as he was then he isn't going to have to try all that hard to attract a female's attention. And many would be more than willing to forgo the dinner...and go straight to dessert."

Siobhan grinned. "I imagine he's at least half as good looking as he was in college. I just don't know if getting involved with my *boss* is such a great idea."

"You're not his secretary, you know. It's not as if you're coworkers in some big corporation, one that has a non-fraternization policy. Where do you think you're going to meet a guy with such specialized, and similar interests, if you don't work *with* him? It isn't like you are really working for *him*...you both work for the foundation."

"That's true. I'm not sure I'm ready to risk getting hurt again. I've been through this before, and it didn't turn out so great."

Brenna sighed, knowing that getting hurt did suck, but it happens.

"You won't get hurt if you don't risk anything. But going outside our comfort zone is how we grow. At least that's what I keep telling myself. You'll have to decide for yourself."

Brenna shrugged. "Me? I'd say go for it. Even if it's not forever, it can be for fun for a while."

## **Chapter Seven**

Siobhan, with Aingeal trotting by her side, thought she would avoid seeing Faelan for the rest of the week by heading to the site early every morning. She knew it wasn't going to work when she checked her cell phone for messages later that afternoon. There was a message, just in case she didn't make it back to the office later, reminding her of her promise to attend their 'dinner engagement' the next night.

She swore she heard him snickering when he ended his message, knowing she wouldn't dare call him to berate him for the reminder.

She made sure she arrived early the next morning, entering the office as though nothing had happened.

Faelan wasn't at his desk, or anywhere she could see, so her act was for naught.

She shoved her bag under her desk with an irritated kick, then draped the clothes bag, containing her dress, gently over it. She had pulled out the logs and was in the process of finishing the latest reports when her nemesis entered the office, a slow grin touching his lips, and two cups of coffee in his hands.

She watched a bit apprehensively as he approached her desk, her heart accelerating with each step. Stopping at the edge of her desk, he slid a mug of coffee under her nose, the fragrant steam tantalizing her, teasing her. "I thought you could use this," was all he said before turning and walking to his own desk.

She eyed the cup suspiciously and then glared at him.

He grinned. "Don't worry, it only has cream and sweetener added. I promise."

Embarrassed, she lifted the mug, inhaling the bracing aroma, and mumbled, "Thanks."

"You're more than welcome. Now let's finish up those reports so we can enjoy ourselves tonight."

As he bent his head over his own reports, she rolled her eyes, having an itchy feeling that it was going to be a *very* long day.

He seemed to take joy in teasing her so she decided to brazen it out and ignore his subtle, and not so subtle, comments, along with his periodic chuckles and smirks. She could see her lack of response was beginning to affect him and hid a few grins of her own.

Getting no rise out of her must have knocked a bit of the fun out of the teasing.

It was late afternoon when he stood and stretched, walking around his desk and leaning against the front, remaining stock-still as he stared mutely at the top of her head. As their desks faced one another, she had no recourse but to look up, or stare at his crossed feet, or, worse, his eye-level crotch, his eyes burning holes in her brain, scrambling what little sense she had left.

She raised her eyes from her paperwork, which was going nowhere fast, and demanded, "What?"

Faelan, arms crossed, had been waiting patiently with a distinct smirk.

"I thought you might like to knock off early since we're going to eat around six. Da can't stay up late, so we eat fairly early." She kept her expression impassive, unblinking, silently studying him. When furrows appeared on his forehead, she wondered if she finally succeeded in unnerving him.

She hid her grin as his frowned deepened.

"I mean...I thought that maybe you needed to go to Maeve's and take care of...things before dinner."

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her breasts, duplicating his posture. "Things? What...things?"

"I thought maybe you needed to see to Maeve...or those...those sheep, or something."

"There's no need. Before I left this morning, I told Maeve I would be getting in late since I was having dinner with you and your family, so she knows where to find me. I brought a change of clothes so I don't *have* to leave. Do you have somewhere I can wash up and change?"

Faelan's gaze remained fixed on her mouth. "Change?"

She smirked and repeated herself, talking slowly, and patiently, as if to an idiot.

"Yes, Faelan. I'd like to shower. Then change. For dinner. Tonight."

At the mention of a shower, his heated gaze dropped to her crossed arms, staring as though he could peel the cloth away, imagining her naked in the shower. She tamped down the first flush of indignant emotions, pausing to assess that he wouldn't be looking so intently if there weren't something he saw that he liked. She struggled to keep her face expressionless at his blatant fixation until, as his gaze remained on her breasts, a slow Cheshire cat smile curled the corners of her mouth.

She drew in a deep, slow breath, expanding her breasts, testing her theory.

He visibly swallowed.

Siobhan raised her chin, her self-confidence boosted by the sudden discovery of her feminine power, and she wondered if every woman felt this thrill, this rush. She was tempted to see where it might take her, but sincerely wished for a shower. Tormenting this gorgeous male was just going to have to wait. And she had brought the perfect artillery for the battle.

"Faelan?"

He looked up, dazed and bemused. "Hmmm?"

"Shower?"

"Oh, sure." He unwound his limbs and stood up, turning to face the window while he surreptitiously adjusting his trousers. Tilting his head, he calculatingly watched her reaction. "You can use my room."

Siobhan raised an eyebrow, no other expression flowing over her face. She was determined he wouldn't get a rise out of her, no matter what shivers ran up her spine at the thought of bathing in *his* bathroom. "Your room?"

Faelan grinned innocently. "Don't ye trust me, darlin'?" She mentally shook her head at the thought of the wolf leading the lamb to slaughter, keeping her answering grin hidden.

Walking back to his desk, he finished putting away his files. As he started towards the door, he stopped and turned to face her. "Coming? I'll show you where everything is and then I have to leave for a bit. I am picking up some supplies for the ranch before dinner so I should be back in an hour or so. Should give you plenty of time." Pacified, for the moment, by his almost-guileless expression, and the fact he would be gone from the ranch, she picked up her bag and case and followed him down the hallway.

On the opposite side of the house, far from the other bedrooms, his room was more of a suite than a simple bedroom. As they walked through its double doors, opened by Faelan

with a distinct flourish, she decided that it suited him perfectly, exuding masculinity from every surface.

A miniature of the great room's flagstone fireplace adorned the wall opposite the double doors, and a large picture window, set to one side of the fireplace, looked over the grassy expanse behind the ranch.

The massive king-size bed, covered in gold and green throw pillows matching the dark, rich striped down comforter, dominated the left area of the room. The hip high mattress looked decadently soft and inviting and she repeated to herself, 'to be avoided at all costs'.

A cozy alcove sat to the right of the doors and the built-in bookcases seemed to contain a bit of everything—from expensive-looking leather-bound tomes to contemporary paperbacks. The nook curved around an over-stuffed leather recliner fronted by a small oval table with a tall Tiffany lamp. Several open manuals, and magazines, lay about the table and she imagined he spent much of his free time hidden in his intimate den.

A sizeable walk-in closet was recessed into the wall to the side of the alcove, hidden from view by ornate sliding double doors and she inhaled his unique scent as they walked past it into the bathroom.

Earthy cedar and sandalwood permeated the room and called to her.

Resisting closing her eyes to savor the overwhelming sensory delight, she followed him through an archway, carved in the wood past the closet, into a luxurious bathroom. As large as her entire bedroom at Maeve's, she quietly gasped at the airy comfort and design.

The open curved shower, looking to have at least three different nozzles pointing to its center, sat in one corner of the large room. The large Roman tub with Jacuzzi jets looked as if it was large enough to fit four of her easily. Both the shower and tub tile matched the emerald-green marble of the floor and walls.

'L' shaped counters, marbled sea foam green, covered two walls. One, containing raised double sinks with elegant fixtures, flowed down the wall next to the water closet. The other held piles of large fluffy towels, matching the gold of the throw pillows on the bed. Upon asking about the facilities, Faelan pointed out the door of ornate wood and mesh grillwork, set across the room from the tub, hiding the toilet and bidet.

Potpourri, in colors of rust, brown, and gold, decorated ornate bowls placed around the room. The airy sanctuary was permeated with the fresh breath of outdoors.

"Here's the bathroom," Faelan stated unnecessarily.

Siobhan remarked dryly, "You could probably survive weeks in here."

"Not a bad idea...with the right companion." Faelan eyed her suggestively. He didn't bother hiding his lecherous grin when Siobhan shook her head in chiding denial. "Okay. Okay. I'm going since you won't share. There's soap and shampoo, and probably anything else you might need under the sinks. I should be back in about any hour."

Walking slowly toward the door, as if waiting for her to change her mind, he walked out, closing the door behind him with a distinct 'snick'.

Siobhan sighed with more than a touch of relief as she hung her dress on a curved hook set on the wall and set her personal items out on the counter. Walking around the room, as she undressed, she stretched, thinking that she wouldn't know what to do with all this luxury, but it was nice to borrow.

After a leisurely shower, the tension of the past few days beaten out of her shoulder

muscles by the pulsing spray, she dried her hair, deciding to leave it loose instead of tied back in her normal braid.

Her excuse, to herself, was that her head ached.

Her simple sleeveless, black silk A-line had a full skirt and tight bodice, with a plunging neckline. Sliding the slinky material over her miniscule black lace panties and barely-there bra, she smoothed the material over her hips. Pulling on silky black thigh-high stockings and slip-on dressy heels, she felt feminine.

A light application of makeup, a quick spritz of Chanel, and grandmother's diamond studs, adding just the right touch of elegance to her outfit, finished off her ensemble. Checking herself over in the full-length mirror, she smiled.

She cleaned up pretty good, if she had anything to say about it.

Spinning around, checking out her look from all sides, she felt sexy, and just a little dangerous. She checked the time, noting that Faelan should have returned by now, and quickly gathered and packed up her work clothes and feminine paraphernalia. As she picked up her bag and walked into the bedroom a discreet knock sounded at the door.

Thinking it was Faelan, and not sure if she was quite ready to see him just yet, she took a deep breath and answered it, exhaling audibly when she saw Molly standing outside.

A big smile covered her face as she looked Siobhan over with obvious approval. "Ye look lovely, Miss Siobhan."

"Thank you. I hope it's not too much."

A twinkle in her eye, Molly reassured her. "Nay, I think 'twill be just enough ta do tha trick. Come with me. I'll take ye ta tha men." Confused by Molly's odd comment Siobhan followed her through a door, set to one side of the large flagstone fireplace, which opened into a more formal sitting area.

As she entered the room the masculine laughter quieted, and the conversation ceased, as five men stared, slack-jawed.

Molly quietly pushed the stunned Siobhan into the room and closed the door behind her, chuckling on her way back to the kitchen at the looks on the addle-pated men's faces, struck by the vision of Siobhan.

Tristan, the first to recover, made his way to her side, a boyish grin on his face he lifted her hand to his lips. "Ye look delicious, Siobhan. Allow me ta introduce ye around." He winked at her, dulling a few of the butterflies roiling in her stomach.

As he led her gently to a distinguished-looking gentleman, sitting stooped-backed in a wheelchair Siobhan wondered how the gaunt, pale man could command the Clann from his wheelchair. As she extended her hand in greeting, his eyes met hers and she saw the leader within.

Eamon would be a compelling male until the day he died.

His power radiated like a light, illuminating that he was a force to be reckoned with. She could see that this man would fight for what he wanted, and what he believed in, with his last breath. She didn't see him giving up anything, whether it was his life or Clann leadership, on anyone else's terms but his own, without one hell of a fight.

Her admiration for her mother, for having stuck by her true love despite the pressure she must have endured from both Eamon and the Clann, grew by leaps and bounds.

He reminded her a lot of Maeve and she could see how the two of them had probably

butted heads a time or two.

"Da, this is Siobhan. Siobhan, me da, Eamon Conroy."

Eamon grinned, an appreciative glint lighting in his eyes, eyes identical in color to his eldest son. "Siobhan, ye have tha look of yer mother about ye. ' Tis enough ta steal a man's breath."

"Thank you. I'll take that as a compliment."

"As well ye should." Reluctantly releasing her, he turned to the tall, dark man standing behind him. "This is me brother, Kieran Conroy."

Kieran tilted his head, an appraising look in his eye. "Delighted, Siobhan."

"Nice to meet you. Are you Quinn's father?"

As she reached out her hand to shake his, Quinn stepped forward, pushing rudely between the two tall men to snatch Siobhan's hand, pulling her close to his side. "Indeed he is. And may I say ye are a most welcome addition ta our meal this eve." When he brought her hand to his lips, his gaze was warm and intimate.

She could see where Quinn had gotten his height and girth, as it seemed to be genetic, as well as the tendency to flirt with any female over twelve. She blushed, darting an inquisitive glance toward Faelan, who seemed to find the whole thing very amusing. Feeling a touch piqued at his cavalier attitude, she turned her attentions back to Quinn, who had not yet released her hand, and executed a small curtsy. "Thank you, kind sir."

Molly entered the room and announced that their dinner was ready in the dining room.

Faelan, not pleased to see his woman flirting with another man, looked at Molly with more than a touch of astonishment. "The dining room? Isn't that a little formal?"

Molly sniffed and raised her chin. "It doesna' hurt ye ta be civilized every once and awhile, ye know." The men snickered and headed for the dining room for a rare night of more 'civilized' dining.

Quinn wrapped Siobhan's captive hand through his arm and escorted her to the obviously minimized table. The table normally seated twelve, information whispered in Siobhan's ear by the friendly Quinn, and had been made significantly smaller.

Draped with a shimmering Kelly green tablecloth the table was set elegantly, as if for a small, élite gathering. Large mirrors hung on the walls, interspersed with pictures of family and friends, and reflected the light from the chandelier, the Waterford crystal and bone china glittered in the lights, the ornate Newbridge silverware glowing with the softness of well-beaten silver. The fragrant aromas made her mouth water as her eyes took in the elegance of the more formal eating area.

After seating her on Eamon's left, Quinn took the chair directly next to Siobhan, knowing from the glower on Faelan's face that his action would irritate his cousin to no end.

Siobhan heard a low growl, followed by masculine snickering, as Quinn settled into his chair beside her, leaning over to make sure her napkin was properly settled over her lap with an unmistakable leer. She had started to giggle at Quinn's antics, amused that he was going out of his way to make her feel comfortable with his teasing, when Faelan, who had been following close behind them, bent to whisper in her ear.

"Ye know, wanton doesna' fit yer image," before seating himself to Eamon's right, directly across from her. She stared at him in shock, seething he would even dare to insinuate that she was acting inappropriately.

Tristan, seeing the look on Siobhan's face after his brother had whispered in her ear, winked at her as he sat beside his brother, wanting a front row seat to what looked to be an interesting dinner.

Kieran, catching the tail end of the byplay between the two men, sat regally at the opposite end of the table across from Eamon, watching the table with a rakish gleam in his eye, as if settling back to watch the young pups fight over a choice morsel.

Their dinner consisted of savory pot roast made with Guinness Stout, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans and carrots, and Parker house rolls with creamy butter. As they passed around the dishes, conversation was sporadic as they filled their plates with the delicious repast and curbed their hungers.

Sated with their repast, the conversation centered on the exploits of the three younger men as boys, their fathers telling tales of exploits, tricks, and misbehavior. Siobhan had no trouble picturing the mischief, as the stories claimed, and wondered what other forms of mayhem had been left out.

Faelan's intense stare was purposefully carnal and predatory, a warning to his irreverent cousin that his claim had been made. His eyes never left her throughout the meal and he allowed the conversation to roll over him like fog over the dells, his mind on future exploits, rather than past. As talk turned to their work with the wolves, an uncomfortable undertone entered the room and Faelan's attention was momentarily diverted.

Siobhan was overjoyed when Tristan, ever the diplomat, gently diverted the talk away from wolf reintroduction plans, and its effect on ranchers, and more on his brother's tendency to forget that others needed to eat and sleep.

"Siobhan, is Faelan as much of a slave driver at work as he is on tha ranch?"

Siobhan watched Faelan, her eyes twinkling, as she answered, "Well, I don't know what he's like on the ranch but I do call him Simon Legree behind his back."

They all chuckled, including Faelan, but he quipped, with an exaggerated wink, "You can't let them get uppity you know."

Eamon slyly winked at Siobhan. "Nay, but ye must admit, Faelan...Siobhan is a vast improvement in the scenery."

"Aye, Da. But she is far more than just a pretty face." Siobhan frowned suspiciously, noting the impish gleam in his eyes at the words and set her fork down, waiting for the rest of it. She was not surprised that she didn't have to wait long. "She also has a great body."

The men all laughed when she glowered playfully.

Quinn came to her defense, pulling the 'tiger's tail'. "Well, Faelan, at least she makes ye look better." He winked at her, making her laugh with his antics.

"Aye, that she does," Tristan agreed, feeling his brother tense, thinking Quinn played a dangerous game flirting with another's woman.

Faelan's burning gaze shot across the narrow table and had Siobhan's stomach knotting, her breasts tingling. She was torn between the conversation playing around her and the intent visual battering from across the table.

*God, he doesn't even have to touch me.* Much more of those looks and he might as well take her right here on the dining table, in front of everyone. *Oh, dear Lord, that picture is sooo not going to help!* 

Siobhan squirmed in her seat, seeking any type of relief. It didn't make her any happier

to see his lips twitch in amusement, confirming that he knew how much, and exactly *how*, his intense scrutiny was affecting her.

Deciding to fight fire with fire, she stopped fidgeting and sat up straight.

Two could play at this game!

Slipping off her heels, leaving them discarded under the table, she inched to the edge of her seat. Leaning forward, she rested her forearms on either side of her plate.

*Wanton doesn't fit my image, huh? I'll show him wanton.* Raising one leg, she slowly slipped it in between his legs.

Faelan stiffened at the touch of her toes. Surprise dawned on his face.

Siobhan leered at him, wiggling her toes against his growing erection.

He grabbed her foot and pulled her more firmly against him, his eyes remaining fixed on hers, enjoying this secret play.

She stroked him, moving her foot sinuously up and down his shaft, thinking to throw him off his stride.

He retaliated with a rhythm of his own, strong fingers massaging her foot and ankle.

The decadent pleasure, streaming up her legs to her core, stole the thread of the table's conversation from Siobhan's mind, and she asked Kieran to repeat his question. She almost swallowed her tongue when Faelan smugly pulled her foot closer, continuing the titillating fondling of her foot.

"Please, Siobhan, call me Kieran. After all, we're all family here."

She smiled politely. "Kieran then."

With an oily smile, Kieran repeated, "I merely asked, my dear, how long ye planned on staying in Destiny."

Siobhan heard all the unspoken questions, and implications, and hesitated in answering.

Faelan, cradling her foot more firmly against his lap, drew her attention when he pinched her big toe. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he fielded Kieran's question.

"Now, Uncle. The answer ta that question will depend on many variables. Then again, perhaps she will not want to leave at all."

Quinn spoke up, "We all hope that ye be here ta stay, Siobhan. Ye certainly are welcome."

Tristan scooted his chair back and patted his stomach. "Another excellent meal ta go with tha lovely company." He looked first at Siobhan, then Faelan.

Seeing their locked gazes, he smirked. "Well, tha heat in here is remindin' me that I havena' visited tha Do Drop for awhile. Comin', Quinn?"

Quinn glanced at the couple and leered. "Aye, Tris, I dunna' think our presence here is required. Come, Da, we'll walk ye out."

Kieran finally focusing on the heated stares of Siobhan and Faelan, frowned and suggested, "'Tis early yet. Quinn, Siobhan might like ta hear 'bout some of tha plans *ye* have for tha ranch." He looked pointedly at Faelan. "After all, 'tis what makes tha money ta support t'other activities."

Siobhan noticed the telltale tick of Faelan's cheek muscle, indicating how tightly he must be clenching his teeth, and started to defend their work. Quinn quickly took up the banner, knowing from past arguments how their opinions differed. "Nay, Da. Ye have that

wrong. Faelan's business sense has saved tha ranch, and all our asses to boot." Slapping his hands on the table, putting an end to the ensuing argument he claimed, "I see na' need to ruin a good dinner with a lot o'shop talk. An' we do seem to be superfluous here. 'Twas a pleasure seein' ye again, Siobhan." He shot a flirtatious wink in her direction and turned a teasing bow toward his cousin, who growled playfully at his antics.

Quinn did not leave the room until his father stomped out, frustrated at having his plans thwarted, and Tristan took command of his father's wheelchair.

Absently hearing masculine chuckles as the trio turned to leave the room, Siobhan's manners came to the forefront and she thanked Eamon for the lovely dinner, her eyes never leaving Faelan's. The room, and its inhabitants, faded from her consciousness as everything in her centered on the man across the table.

"Any time. And I do mean any." Eamon chuckled happily as he wheeled out of the room, ignored by all and nor minding one bit.

"Oh, ta be young again..."

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Once they were alone, Faelan asked innocently, "Sooo, has the gauntlet been thrown down, or shall we call it a draw?"

Siobhan watched him with smoldering eyes. "A draw is like kissing your sister, don't you think?"

Faelan sniggered. "Tha gauntlet 'tis then."

The light dancing in his eyes should have warned her as he grinned, and slipped gracefully under the table. Siobhan gasped, her mind whirling with the possibilities of devilment, and she tried to rise.

He had hold of her outstretched leg, preventing her from moving.

She was tugging in earnest, only to freeze when Molly entered the dining room to clean up after their meal. "Oh, sorry, Miss Siobhan. I dinna' know there be anyone left. I'll just get these dishes and leave ye be." Molly chatted merrily as she cleared the table, moving dishes to the kitchen cart she had brought in behind her, and Siobhan struggled to pay attention.

Walking his fingers up her leg, then under her skirt, he slid her hose off one leg, repeating the action with the other. She gasped as the last fragment of silk left her leg, his lips following it down each baring inch past her knee.

Attempting to push at his hands, whenever Molly turned her back, only succeeded in making noise, and piquing Molly's curiosity. She glanced questioningly at Siobhan's flushed face, then glanced at the table. The long linen tablecloth hid all but the tip of Faelan's shoe from her view and, with a knowing grin, she quickly gathered the dishes, eager to leave the two to their play.

As Molly turned her back to the table, arranging the dishes on the cart, Faelan began another sensuous assault, this time on Siobhan's feet. He rolled rough knuckles along her tender arches, making her toes flex in reaction.

Her hands were too busy to fight off the tormenting Faelan as she held tightly on to the edge of her seat, her body turning into mush with each inquisitive touch. She grunted, unable

to voice the groan she felt, or to melt into a puddle at his feet, which she feared she might. She fought to keep her eyes from closing in ecstasy as Molly piled the dish cart.

Brushing her hands on her apron Molly grabbed the handles of the cart and pushed it toward the kitchen door. Stopping in the doorway, she turned and smiled enigmatically at the dining room. "Welcome to tha family, Miss Siobhan," was all she said before pushing the lock in the door handle and softly closing the door

Siobhan had only a moment to consider the implications behind Molly's strange exit as Faelan replaced his knuckles with his mouth, and continued his lecherous attention to her feet. Biting and sucking, he traveled up the inside of her thigh.

Frissons of pleasure cascaded up her legs, pounding into her groin. Heat infused her limbs and flushed her face a rosier hue.

He tugged her forward.

She slipped more than she expected before she could stop herself. Grabbing the sides of her chair desperately, she clenched her jaw and swore," There's... no... fucking... way... I'm... going... under... the... table!"

Faelan laughed and chided, "Tsk, tsk, tsk. Be that any way for a lady ta talk?"

"Damn you, Faelan. Let me go."

He stopped trying to pull her onto the floor with him, but kept his hands firmly in place, refusing to free her either. "I believe I told ye before that I'd be very foolish ta ever let ye go when I went ta all tha trouble of gettin' ye."

"Errrgh." She clutched the sides of the chair in a death grip.

Shivering, she closed her eyes, surrendering to the skill of his touch.

Reaching under her skirt, he framed her hips with his talented hands, hooking fingers in the sides of her lacy panties. He moved himself from between her legs only long enough to finish removing them completely, bringing them to his nose to enjoy to scent of her arousal. Sliding his hands slowly from ankle to thigh, he pushed her legs apart, revealing her moist folds.

She felt him lean in and lick the crease where her leg and body joined and grit her teeth, stopping the gasp she could feel building into a scream. Unable to watch his ministrations only intensified her sensations. Giving in, she closed her eyes, allowing her head to fall back, luxuriating in the ecstasy of the wicked delight he was creating.

Framing her core with his thumbs, he spread the lips of her vulva and tongued the exposed ridges. As she moaned, he lapped up the increased flow of juices before concentrating his attention to her engorged nub.

Raw pleasure flowed through Siobhan as he sucked and nipped her thighs and core. Anticipation ebbed and flowed as he increased the movements of his mouth to the point of fulfillment, then stopped at the brink of her satisfaction. At the end of her control, she bent her head forward and pleaded, "Faelan, for god's sake! Finish it!"

As she felt him pull her clit into his mouth and suck, stroking it rhythmically with his tongue, she stiffened, her orgasm breaking over her, pulling her into that place of utter bliss.

Pushing her chair back from the table, Faelan crawled from under the table, kneeling between her thighs. He moved his hands to the sides of her chair and raised his head to watch her face flush with her pleasure.

As the tremors of her climax subsided, and she opened her eyes, she looked down into Faelan's face.

For a moment, neither spoke or moved.

Faelan pushed her chair further out and slowly rose. With calculated movements, he unbuttoned his jeans, freeing his thick cock, keeping his eyes locked on hers.

She eyed him hungrily, moving her gaze to the boldly thrusting shaft, framed by the rough metal zipper. She licked her lips avidly, devouring with her eyes what she wished to taste with her mouth, something she had never desired before.

Faelan groaned and closed his eyes, fighting for control.

He opened them and drew a foil packet from his back pocket. Ripping the package open with his teeth, he tilted her chin up to lock gazes with her.

"Ye see, Darlin', I rarely make tha same mistake twice. And not bein' prepared when givin' another chance would surely have been an unforgivable mistake." He unrolled the condom and she took it from him, slipping it over the head, rolling it down the length of his shaft.

His cock pulsed with a life of its own as her hands traced its length, fascinated by its beauty.

She tugged his jeans down to his ankles, her fingers shaking with excitement or fear. She wasn't sure which was more prevalent and refused to think it at that very moment. She pulled off his boots, then his jeans while Faelan balanced himself with his hands on her shoulders. She stared at his clothes, piled on the floor, unable to meet his eyes. She was unsure of what came next.

She'd never done anything like this before. Never lost herself in the moment.

Never given control over to the wanton, ravenous part of herself.

That stranger who hungered.

He lifted her chin bringing her gaze up to meet his eyes, lowering his lips to hers and tenderly kissing her. Siobhan wound her arms around his neck and he braced his hands on her waist, lifting her off the chair, pulling her shaking body close to his. He deftly unzipped her dress, tugging it up, and off. Her bra joined her dress, falling like a leaf to the floor to pile on the rest of their clothing.

She searched his face, her blood ignited by the fire she saw burning in his eyes as his heated gaze avidly roamed over her body.

He grinned.

"Christ, ye're beautiful."

Siobhan matched the smile on his face with a brilliant one of her own and unbuttoned his shirt slowly, sliding it off his shoulders and over his arms, dropping it behind her. Tracing his arms and chest brought the vision of a shifting Faelan to mind.

With a secret smile, she palmed over his nipples and felt him shudder. Moving closer she licked his nipple, taking it in her mouth, abrading it lightly with her teeth. He moaned and she felt his body flex involuntarily against hers. Pleased, and excited even further by his reaction, she moved to the other nipple, licking and nipping.

Faelan wrapped his hands around her upper arms and squeezed, moving her back slightly before sliding his hands up to cup her face in his palms. Tilting her face upward, he captured her eyes with his. He bent to capture her lips, their fiery kiss deepening as each sought to possess more of the other than was humanly possible. His hands moved from her face to wrap tightly around her, pulling her up, even closer than before, until her feet slid nearly off the floor.

She tightened her embrace, wrapping her legs around him, leaving the last of her inhibitions, with their clothes, on the floor.

Faelan felt for the back of the chair without releasing Siobhan, or breaking their shared embrace. Supporting her, with a large hand under her buttocks, he lowered them both into the sturdy ladder-backed chair. Straddling Siobhan over his lap, her legs spread over his, he rubbed her against his eager erection, her damp heat spurring it to new heights of hardness. He broke their passionate kiss to lean her back and work his way down, nibble by nibble, to her breast.

His right hand, pressed against her back, brought her closer, holding her still. He cupped her right breast and fondled it, taking the nipple into his mouth. As he sucked and bit eagerly, she groaned and Faelan released her, afraid he'd hurt her. She clutched his head, fisting his hair and pulling him close.

"Don't stop, Faelan. More."

He returned to his task with renewed vigor.

A few moments passed and Siobhan tugged on his hair, forcing him to look into her eyes. Their scorching depths seared him.

"Now, Faelan. I want you inside me now."

He groaned deeply and, placing his hands under each thigh, he easily lifted her up, and over his shaft. She sighed as he impaled her. He kept still, despite the abundant moisture coming from her, feeling her body adjust to his size.

She thrust her pelvis forward, her hands on Faelan's shoulders and began rocking, her hunger and boldness combining into a rhythm of perfection as she pushed herself down and rotated harder, feeling every glorious inch.

The feel of them moving together as one, their bodies teasing and caressing, her body clenching and releasing, nearly drove him over the top. "Siobhan, I dunna' think I can last much longer if ye keep movin' like that."

She opened her eyes and they locked gazes. "Then don't."

"Ah, fuck." Faelan tunneled his fingers through her hair, holding her head with one hand while his other wrapped his arm around waist. Slanting his mouth over hers, he drove his tongue into her mouth as he took control of their movements. The exotic taste of her, the sound of her moans, the musky smell of her arousal, her skin hot and smooth beneath his hands, her hair sliding like silken fibers through his fingers and over his chest...he couldn't get enough.

Like a kid in a candy shop, he wanted to sample it all...now.

He could feel the pressure build, pulling his balls tight. Reaching between them, he rubbed her clit, bringing her with him. His muscles tensed, almost painfully, as the overwhelming pleasure of his climax radiated throughout his body. The remnants of Siobhan's pulsing climax kept him soaring higher, longer than ever before. Lightning struck around the ranch on all sides and thunder rolled in as the wind whistled a mournful tune through the eaves. The lights in the room flickered and dimmed, its occupants oblivious to it all.

The air crackled with electricity, mixed with the miasma of magick surrounding the couple.

Their lips met, their cries muffled by their shared breath as ecstasy claimed them.

Silence settled once more over the ranch, inside and out. The storm surrounding, dissipating back into the calm winter night as quickly as it had gathered. A faint burnt sulfur odor lingered, the only remnants the magick had been.

Siobhan remained collapsed against Faelan, her legs hanging limp, her arms still crossed around his neck. She had laid her head on his shoulder and he stroked her hair, an unfamiliar tenderness accompanying the expected physical relief. Usually he'd be thinking of the best way to extricate himself gracefully from his companion.

Now, all he wanted was to stay right where he was, forever.

Siobhan groaned, "Oh, god, what have I done?"

Faelan grinned in spite of himself. "I thought what *we* did was pretty spectacular. And I think that *we* should do it again. As soon as possible."

She sat up and pulled away to look at him, her forearms resting against his chest, her forefinger tapping his chin. "Don't you dare laugh at me, Faelan Conroy."

"I want ta do many things with ye, for ye, and ta ye. But laughin' at ye isna' one of them." Pulling her head toward his, he nuzzled her neck where it met her shoulder. "Stay with me."

"We shouldn't do this. It complicates so many things," she moaned, but moved her head aside to grant him easier access.

"While ye decide what be worth doin', all that be worth doin' will have passed ye by."

Siobhan stiffened and jerked away, staring intently at Faelan. "What did you say?"

"I said, stay with me tonight. Here. Stay tha night with me. Complications be damned." While she studied him, indecision written plainly on her face, he held his breath. He felt that this was important, though he didn't understand why.

"Okay." "Ye will stay?" "Yes. Tonight I'll stay"

Faelan wasted no time removing and disposing of the condom, and pulling on his jeans. He left them unbuttoned and slipped Siobhan's dress over her head, leaving it unzipped. Seeing they were both clothed, more or less, he seized her hand and started for the door.

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She dug in her bare feet, refusing to be dragged from the room and leave their clothes on the floor. "Faelan, stop! We can't just leave our clothes here, and traipse half naked through the house."

He grinned wickedly, turned around and gathered their clothing haphazardly in a large bundle, and opened the door. "There's no one home who is awake, Siobhan. But, if ye want ta wait, Tris should be back soon. Ye may want ta come with me and yer clothes though." He crossed the house to his room leaving her little choice.

Siobhan double-checked the corridor was clear, then quickly scampered down the hall. Reaching his room she warily tiptoed in, fussing, "Faelan? Where are the lights?" Faelan came up behind her, whispering, "Later."

Turning her to face the wall, he nuzzled her neck and pushed her dress off her shoulders, pressing his body against her back from shoulder to thigh.

The rough texture of the hair on his legs and chest rubbed in erotic contrast against her bare backside and she shivered. He pulled her arms over her head, their hands linked, maintaining slick contact.

His erection, nestled in her cleft, became impossibly harder with each sinuous movement of his hips grinding against her.

He buried his face in the hair at the back of her neck and inhaled deeply, pulling in the expensive scent of her perfume, and her unique musky fragrance. The soft sweet skin, behind her ear, gave way to the salty smooth of her neck and shoulder, still dewy with sweat. "Do ye feel tha heat, Siobhan?" His voice flowed over her like warm honey.

She shuddered and groaned, "Oh, God, Faelan."

His hands caressed her as he brought them down to her side. "I want ta touch ye. Taste ye everywhere." He moved his hands to cup her breasts and her hands joined his, covering and riding the backs of them as he kneaded and rolled her nipples, pulling at unknown nerves in her groin when he pinched them, bringing shards of pleasure just short of pain.

Siobhan leaned back and rested her head on his shoulder, allowing his to do with her as he would.

Faelan continued working his magic as he played her body, making it sing to his tune. Still fondling a breast, his other hand wound sinuously down her abdomen to the curls covering her mound and delved into the swollen folds, finding her sensitive nub.

She raised her arms, tunneled her fingers into his hair over her shoulder, and captured his lips.

His hips moved, rubbing his shaft through her cleft, matching the rhythm of his fingers to the cadence of his thrusts. He could feel the beginnings of her orgasm in the pulses of her muscles, and the frantic murmurs escaping their joined lips. "Come for me, *cailleach*, let me feel ye lose control."

Though sweat dampened them both, Siobhan could tell that, in that last sane moment before she knew nothing but the absolute ecstasy of completion, Faelan had lost none of his steely control.

As she settled slowly back into herself, she knew that it wasn't enough. She wanted more than physical release.

She wanted to watch him spin out of control and return to the safety of her arms, knowing that forever after only she would ever be enough. Only she would ever satisfy the hunger, and desire, of any of his dreams, or his waking reality. She wanted him to love her as completely as she loved him, unable to maintain his control.

She wanted all of him.

As he had all of her.

Faelan swung her up into his arms and carried her into the shower, his erection hard and hot against her hip. Standing her to one side, out of the reach of the water, he turned on all three nozzles. Wrapping his arms around her, he planted small nibbling kisses on her brow, her temples, her nose, before beginning a full assault on her mouth. Steam rose from the shower floor, enveloping them in moist heat. Their kiss heated as well, and Siobhan raised her arms around his neck. He lifted her, walking them easily into the sultry warmth of the spray.

And she was lost again in the vortex of sensuous pleasure he created.

Desperation rode Faelan and he growled low as he cupped her buttocks, pulling her up his body.

She responded in kind, and wrapped her legs around his waist.

He braced her against the shower wall and pulled his lips from hers, his burning gaze holding hers captive. "I wanted ta be gentle and take my time but, now, I just want ta fuck ye until I canna' move."

Siobhan shuddered and closed her eyes as he entered her. All coherent thought left as the spiraling excitement built again. As he pumped, her back caught and held against the cool marble tiles, the magick flowing over, and around her. She could read his thoughts and emotions.

The sensations, mixing with her own, sent her into flying into an explosive climax as he filled her with his essence.

She unwrapped her legs and slid down his body to collapse on the shower floor.

He sat propped against the far shower wall, his fingers laced through hers, locking them together as one. He brought her hand up to kiss the back, then laid their joined hands on his thigh.

When their breathing slowed to normal, he laughed, then groaned.

Siobhan looked at him, her brows raised in question and a smile playing on her lips as his free laughter.

"Sorry, darlin'. I was just wonderin' how I was goin' ta get up and get showered, when all I want ta do is lie down, right here, and sleep a bit." He suddenly closed his eyes, banging his head against the tile. "Oh, God, I forgot a condom that last time."

Siobhan shrugged. "I already took care of it."

Faelan's eyes snapped open and he looked sideways at her. "What da ye mean?"

"I got a shot when I was in town on Monday. It's supposed to be good for at least three months."

Faelan grinned. "Monday, huh?"

She giggled and stood, tugging on their linked hands. "Don't be so smug. Come on. I'll help you get up and washed."

Faelan stood and grabbed her around the waist, his sinful leer and stroking hands belied his words of exhaustion. "Perhaps ye can convince me ta stay up a wee bit longer?" He kissed her and walked them under the spray, grabbing the soap to caress and wash her back.

Trading soap, kisses, and caresses, they eventually finished their shower and turned off the water.

Faelan stepped out and snatched up a large towel, tossing one to Siobhan. It took only minutes for him to convince her she was dry enough to test the comfort of the mattress.

Siobhan woke disoriented in the pale false dawn light, Faelan spooned intimately behind her. She smiled, remembering their previous night's activities, and raised her head to see the time on the bedside alarm clock.

Six o'clock. Already.

She thought she might have a tough time explaining her absence to her grandmother.

Or not.

She was going to have a hard enough time wiping *her* satisfied grin off her face, to be worrying about anyone else. Wincing, she made her way to the toilet, unwilling to waken Faelan. Muscles, she hadn't used in awhile, screamed their displeasure at being disturbed so early.

I doubt some of those muscles have ever been used before.

It's not as if Bill would ever have expended that much energy for anything, let alone for her benefit or pleasure.

And it had definitely been for her pleasure.

As quietly as possible, she dressed in her previous day's work clothes, braiding the mess she had from going to sleep with wet hair. Washing her face the best she could, she brushed her teeth and gathered her things together.

"Going somewhere, darlin'?"

Startled, Siobhan jumped and dropped her dress bag. "God, Faelan, you scared me half to death."

He moved out of the shadows into the dim light she had left on in the water closet. Naked, he leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, his facial expression hidden by the light now at his back. "Siobhan? Where are ye going?"

"What do you mean? I'm going home."

"And if I want ye ta stay?" His brogue warned her that he wasn't as calm as he appeared and she picked up the dropped bag, frowning at his question. Though the shadows hid details, she had a adequate memory of the finer points of his body.

Faelan, in his current state of undress, was more intimidating than a fully clad Faelan.

"I need to get home before it gets late. There are already going to be a lot of questions." "So?"

"What do you mean 'so'?"

"Why do ye care if there are questions? Are ye ashamed of somethin'?"

"Of course I'm not ashamed. Listen, Faelan, we had a good time, a great time... but we both have careers and people to answer to, and..."

"Was it just sex then, nothin' more?"

"Yes...uh no...uh...damn! I don't know what it was. I'm not making demands, or expecting anything, so can't we just go back to the way things were before?"

"No. Things are na' tha way they were before. I want ye ta move in here. I want ye ta sleep with me every night." He unfolded his arms and stepped close, brushing stray strands of hair off her face with his knuckles. "I want ta make love ta ye in tha middle of tha night, and hold ye tha rest of tha time."

"Why?" She waited. She wanted the words.

She needed the words.

Faelan shrugged. "I think we're good tagether. We have tha same interests." He smiled smugly. "We do well in other areas too. I'd like to see where it leads."

Siobhan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them again, she shook her head 'no'.

She wasn't going to be the only one losing her heart. Not again.

"I had a great time but let's keep it light, no commitments. I'm leaving eventually, and so are you. And I'm really not interested in collecting regrets."

A muscle in his jaw ticked and she could hear him gritting his teeth. The rising sun lightened the shadows with each passing moments and she could see the icy steel of his eyes as he stared at her, seeking any chink in her hastily erected armor.

His voice betrayed no emotion, only the frozen tone of total control. "So be it, darlin'. We can just be fuck buddies then." Before the shock of his words had time to register, he had her in a punishing embrace, her lips captured by his. In spite of the anger riddling his words, his kiss was full of tenderness and emotions he refused, or was unable, to voice.

Siobhan squirmed in his tight grip, seeking some easing to his hold, becoming aroused at his touch.

He pulled his lips away and rested his forehead on hers, his breathing labored. "Ah, Siobhan, not like this." He raised his eyes to hers, pain replacing his stern control. "I canna' let ye go."

Why, Faelan?" Her question asked so much more, and again he didn't offer her the gift of his words.

He turned and walked past her.

Pulling on his discarded pants, he left, leaving her to gather her scattered belongings, and bruised heart, and go home,

Alone.

## **Chapter Eight**

The rest of the day had been miserable, with the night not much better.

Arriving home, she had found the house empty. Searching out a cup of tea, she found a note saying her grandmother was seeing to ailing lambs and that they would talk about her 'sleepover' when she returned.

The rest of the day, she had moped.

Even Aingeal's whining at his inability to make her laugh, no matter what silliness he tried, did not penetrate her gloomy countenance. She had spent the evening hiding from her concerned grandmother, who had come knocking when Siobhan did not go down to dinner.

Then there were the dreams.

The few minutes of sleep Siobhan had managed were filled with dreams of Faelan, of what they had done, his touch, his pain-filled expression the last time she had seen him. When images of burning fires and crying wolves intruded, she decided to get out of bed and take a walk.

Maybe a leisurely walk through the trees, close to the Virago Pack, would clear her mind. As she walked, her eyes scanned the trees and the horizon, hoping to see 'Princess' and her pack, but didn't spot a single wolf.

The early morning wind rose, bringing a bite to the air. She had heard that snow had been forecasted and the dropping temperature made it seem likely. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin into the breeze, enjoying the solitude she needed like her next breath.

"Ye look just like a fairy, communin' with tha wind."

Siobhan's eyes snapped open to find Quinn smiling at her. "You Conroys sure do move quietly." She smiled as he purposely crunched the twigs beneath his boots with a playful grin.

"Care for a little company, Darlin'? 'Tis not often I have tha pleasure of strolling with the *sidhe*."

"I'd be delighted. A handsome escort is always welcome."

Quinn tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and they strolled along the snowcovered trail marked by missing trees and muddy puddles. "Siobhan, what brings ye out here? I can see ye have no equipment, and 'tis Sunday ta boot."

"I just like to walk. And I needed some thinking room."

Quinn grinned. "Thinkin' room, huh? Ye dinna' seem ta need much thinkin' room Friday night." Seeing no smile on her blushing face, he turned it toward him with one finger. "What's this then?" He frowned as he studied her face, seeing her sleepless nights in the circles under eyes. "What did Faelan do ta ye, sweetness? I'll kick his arse for ye, if that's what ye want. Actually I'd kinda like ta do that anyway."

Siobhan laughed at his wagging eyebrows, just as he had intended.

"My hero." Hugging him tightly she shook her head and changed their direction. "He did the unforgivable. He asked me...no, *told* me...to move in with him."

"Tha bastard." Quinn smiled tenderly. "Bet he dinna' tell ye he loved ye, though', did he?"

She turned toward him, puzzled by men's minds. "Is it so wrong of me to want to hear him *say* the words?"

Quinn waited until they had started walking again before replying, "Nay. 'Tis na' wrong. Faelan just has ne'er said the words before. Na' sure he knows how."

"What do you mean? Surely he's been in love before." Siobhan couldn't believe that had *never* happened.

"Nay. Oh, there have been lots of women. But he's ne'er loved any of them. Ye'll have ta do what ye think best, but I think he be worth waitin' on."

Siobhan laughed. "Do you happen to know a Dr. Brenna Keating by any chance?"

"Ye mean tha new doctor in Destiny?" She nodded. "Nay, but I've been meanin' ta go by and check her out." He grinned boyishly. "Seamus told me it could be worth me time to play at havin' a bit of a cough."

Siobhan laughed again. "Indeed it would be. I was noticing how much alike you two think."

"Now I'm intrigued. Next week is good for me. Care ta introduce me?" He wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

She giggled. "Oh, I wouldn't miss it."

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Faelan lounged in front of his fireplace, staring sightlessly into the dancing flames, a tumbler of bourbon in his hands. There was something so primitive and comforting about a roaring fire.

You fixate on it and all thoughts, and ideas, are clarified. Refined to their barest essence.

He closed his eyes and leaned back, letting the warmth seep in, and through him. The part of his mind, dedicated to mulling over the ranch, and Clann concerns, had filed all information he had been studying away, to be dealt with later.

Siobhan.

He could still smell her fragrance.

His fingers itched to touch the satin of her skin and taste her—everywhere. To move inside her, feeling her surround him as he covered and drove himself inside her. It was all of Heaven he'd ever need. No matter what she thought, they weren't finished yet. He'd never given up in his entire life and this was no different.

Pain lets you know you can feel, tells you that you're still alive.

He opened his eyes and sat up downing the last of his drink. In the distance, he heard the soothing song of howling wolves. Standing he stripped quickly, feeling the familiar ache of muscles yearning to carry him into the night. Problems couldn't be escaped, but they could be run off.

At least temporarily.

He opened the window and closed his eyes, breathing in deeply. The promise of snow laced the night air and added a tantalizing crispness.

Faelan laughed joyfully before vaulting into the night, shifting as he landed.

Leaves swirled around him, captured in an eddy that ruffled his damp coat and moved on across the snowy landscape. Faelan raised his snout toward the sounds of the pack, and began trotting before loping to join them. He ran ahead of his thoughts, finally leaving them behind with his other human concerns. The crisp winter air ruffled his fur and stung his lungs but he sped faster into the night. His muscle and sinew stretched, and sang with the blood pumping furiously through his veins. He became one with the night, a piece of crystal moonlight and dark sweet scent of the breeze.

The pack followed him gleefully, stretching full out to absorb all nature surrounding them.

There was such a joy of living, just being and belonging to the pack was enough.

All complications narrowed down to a single point, then faded into insignificance.

The life of a wolf was the distilled essence of what it meant to exist. Something mankind had lost eons ago.

Faelan ran into the night that welcomed him into her embrace until he could forget, for just a little while, that he too must return to the crueler world of man.

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She didn't feel much like eating but it was Sunday, and Seamus always came over for Sunday dinner. Distracted, and bone-tired, Siobhan missed much of the conversation between her grandparents.

"Siobhan, did ye hear me?" Concerned with the child's dreaminess, Maeve watched her closely.

Siobhan pulled her thoughts back to the 'here and now' and tried concentrating on her grandmother's words. "Did you ask me something?"

Maeve snorted. "I asked ye about yer dinner at tha Conroy's Friday. Did ye see Eamon and Kieran?"

"Yes, I did."

Frustrated, Maeve sighed. "And...?"

"And we had a very nice dinner. Then Faelan and I...talked."

"Ye talked, huh? Ye either had a lot ta say, or ye spoke a might slow. After all, ye dinna' come home until..."

Seamus laid a hand over Maeve's. "Let the girl be, Maeve. She's told you what she wants you to know."

"Humph." Maeve sat back in her chair and folded her arms, but didn't persist.

Siobhan rose. "I'm sorry, but I'm feeling a little funky. I think I'd like to just curl up with a book and go to sleep."

Maeve frowned. "Funky? 'Tis only eight o'clock. Do ye need some tea?"

Siobhan smiled. Maeve and her tea, the solution to whatever ails you.

She didn't think tea would help this time.

"No, thank you. I'll do it the old-fashioned way, a hot bath and aspirin. Please excuse me, and don't end your evening on my account."

Seamus rose to hug her tight. "Take care of yourself, honey, and get some sleep."

Siobhan bent over Maeve to kiss her cheek. "Don't worry. I just need a good night's sleep."

Aingeal whimpered, following her closely up the stairs. "Hurt?"

*"No, Aingeal, just tired." "Still Faelan?"* At her heartfelt sigh, Aingeal growled softly.

Faelan showered after his run and memories assailed him. His body ached as he remembered the satiny feel of Siobhan's skin under the water, her body writhing sinuously against him as she sought completion.

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Her taste tantalizing his senses. Her scent inciting him, exciting him.

Her voice calling his name tightened his body painfully and he turned the temperature to freezing in a losing attempt to cool off.

He toweled off and crawled wearily under his covers, thoughts chasing themselves around his head. Eventually he fell asleep only to find himself reliving the night of her parents' deaths. He watched his younger self carry Siobhan to Seamus, and felt neither the biting cold, nor the terrible anguish of that night.

"Oh, dear Lord. Siobhan, dunna' be dead. How can ye marry me if ye dunna' grow up?"

The scene changed and he and Siobhan were in the shower. He wrapped himself around her, holding her tightly to him, unwilling to release her for even a moment.

"You can't keep me by holding me, Faelan."

"I don't want to ever let you go. You have to stay with me."

"Faelan, if you want me to stay, you have to let me go."

"I'll never let you go!" She smiled sadly her form fading into mist and mixing with the steam.

Faelan reached for her, intent on holding her tight, loathe to lose her again. As the mists swirled and he held her close, her body pressed against his, the room changed to a surreal ballroom, a hidden orchestra playing a playful tune.

They twirled, swaying and dancing as music and mist swirled around them, swathing and obscuring all else. Faelan looked down to see himself garbed in a seldom worn tuxedo. The soft folds of Siobhan's black dress brushed his legs, the edges curling around him as if to hold him close as they waltzed around the floor, elegant and graceful, in step like Rogers and Astaire.

The music changed, the light waltz fading into a more haunting and sinister melody, Baroque tones heavy and ponderous.

Siobhan stopped dancing and stepped out of his arms, cocking her head as if listening to a faraway voice, a voice he could not hear.

"What are we doing, Faelan?"

"We're dancing." He reached for her, but she stepped back and away.

"It's not enough." She was fast disappearing into the haze, being pulled away from him by a force he could not see.

"Wait. What do you want?"

"Say the magic words."

"I've given you my heart, but I can't give you my soul."

She shook her head sadly. "It's not enough, Faelan."

She vanished into the mist and he jerked awake, early morning light playing around the edges of the shades.

He rolled onto his back and laid his forearm across his forehead, staring at the ceiling while the last dregs of his dreams curled around him. He knew what she needed, and he feared it.

Giving up control would cost him everything.

He didn't know if he was even capable of taking that last step, of entrusting someone with all of him.

Siobhan was a forever kind of woman and wouldn't be had on a temporary basis, not the best part of her anyway.

Faelan craved it all, wouldn't settle for less. He sighed and got up to shower and dress.

Siobhan would be at the site they'd scheduled to visit today, in just a couple hours. He figured she wouldn't come into the office first, avoiding facing him on his home turf.

He wouldn't have.

He had a couple hours to decide on his next step.

\*\*\*\*\*

Siobhan tossed and turned, haunted by nightmares of fire and pain, frozen nights and howling wolves. Faelan's voice called to her and calmed her restless dreams. *"How can ye marry me if ye dunna' grow up?"* 

A woman's voice, calm and soothing, sang softly in Celtic lilts. Warmth stole over her as she touched the woman's smiling face as it hovered above her own. The woman laughed and kissed her palm, whispering, "Siobhan, luv, 'tis past time for ye ta sleep. I dunna' want a fussy girl in tha mornin'. Close yer eyes, and let tha angels guard yer dreams."

The scene changed and she ducked into the sweet summer grass, listening intently for footsteps.

A man, wearing a goofy smile on his face only those playing with children seem to possess, popped up close to her. "I have you now, my little munchkin. You'll have to pay me in kisses, my dear heart, for me to let you go."

"I'd be very foolish ta ever let ye go after I went ta all tha trouble of gettin' ye in tha first place."

She giggled and wrapped her arms tightly around the man's neck, planting baby kisses everywhere she could reach while he stood, lifting her in his arms. He began walking across the field chanting, "Home again, home again. Jiggedy, jig."

Siobhan's dream left the serene scenes of childhood and she saw herself studying Princess and her Virago pack as they romped around the snow-covered site. The peaceful day swiftly dissolved into chaos as gunshots shattered the silence, the bullets kicking up puffs of snow. The wolves stood motionless, assessing the danger.

Siobhan ran toward the pack as if in slow motion, unable to shout a warning as a bullet ripped into Princess' side, blossoming into a crimson bloom. The wolf stumbled and tried to rise, but collapsed again as Siobhan reached her side, tears streaming down her face as she cradled the wolf's head in her lap.

Pain and confusion emanated from Princess, but nothing more. Soon there was nothing at all.

Siobhan screamed in horror and rage as her dream fragmented and died.

With the echoes of her scream still in her ears, and a lump of a sob lodged in her throat, she awoke to a darkened room. Sweat dampened her t-shirt. Unwilling to spend any longer in the dark, she switched on the bedside lamp and turned over pulling the covers tightly around her shoulders, attempting to sleep a little more before the sun rose.

Dozing, Siobhan looked out over the same snow-covered field, watching the wolves as her dream unfolded as it had before. *Something bad was about to happen, but what was it?* 

When the shots shattered the tranquility of the scene, she remembered. Struggling against the slow-motion chains of her dream, she watched Princess fall and, running, screaming, she pulled the wolf's head onto her lap.

As tears streamed down her cheeks, Princess morphed into an enormous black wolf. He opened his soulful gray eyes, pinning Siobhan with an accusing glare before closing them, cold in death. He shifted one final time into a bloodied, and nude, Faelan.

She shrieked and clawed her way into the waking world. Breathing heavily she waited for the last remnants of her dream to leave her. She might prefer her old nightmares to these new ones after all.

They were far less terrifying.

Her heart rate calmed, easing into a more normal pace, and she got up to get dressed...to see Faelan.

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Dread rode Siobhan hard and she figured it must be thoughts of seeing Faelan again that caused the lead ball to form in her stomach. Her headaches had returned with her dreams and, feeling in poor form, she left Aingeal at home. She didn't need to have anything else to think about today.

Deciding to skip the office first, and avoid Faelan just a little longer, she drove her Blazer straight to the site. When she pulled up, she parked next to Faelan's truck.

*Oh well, might as well get it over with.* Pulling up her collar to block the sudden blast of frosty wind, she hurried to the site.

Faelan looked up as she approached.

Hunger, deep and abiding, glittered in his eyes before he shielded them from her sight.

He had shielded his thoughts and emotions as well, but she didn't need to read him to know what he was thinking. Without saying a word he ignored her, going back to what had been doing, acting as if she was not even there.

Siobhan shivered from more than the wintry weather.

She picked up the logs on the chair next to him and sat down. Deciding not to break the silence, she read the entries he'd made for that day, noting that the wolves had made an early morning kill and were relaxing. Only Princess appeared watchful and uneasy.

Siobhan turned to ask Faelan about Princess' behavior when they heard a sharp rifle report followed by a yelp. They turned simultaneously to see Princess, her coat blending with the snow, lying motionless, a scarlet stain spreading quickly down her side. The pack, confused and afraid, nosed her still body and whined pitifully. They paced anxiously, not wanting to leave her but afraid to stay.

Faelan began disrobing and spoke harshly. "Siobhan put tha Blazer inta four-wheel drive and bring it here quickly."

Panicked and confused she watched him for a moment. "What are you doing?"

He stopped and stared intently at her. "Shiftin'. We have ta get tha pack away from her if we're ta help her." He pulled his boots off leaving them where they dropped. "Go!"

Jolted into action, Siobhan ran the mile to her car, stitches pulling at her sides, icy air stinging her lungs. As she drove closer to the site, she grew alarmed remembering her dream and Faelan's death. *Oh, God, don't let anything happen to him.* 

She drove as fast was prudent and arrived to see Faelan, a dark, furry Faelan, standing over Princess' inert form. The Virago Pack surrounded them, stirring uneasily.

Faelan's ears lay back, flat to his head, low rumbling growls and periodic snaps of his powerful jaws keeping the pack at bay. Siobhan pulled close to the pair, dispersing the pack further. Faelan paced around the Blazer, checking for any possible danger before standing over Princess while Siobhan opened the back storage area of the truck. As Siobhan reached Princess, Faelan shimmered, standing in all his naked glory by the wounded wolf's side.

He easily lifted Princess and carried her to the car.

In spite of the situation, Siobhan flushed, aroused by the sight of Faelan's glutes as he walked away from her to the car. Her fingers itched to grab a couple handfuls and perhaps more.

She shook her head, dispelling the inappropriate urges and jumped into the driver's seat, starting the Blazer. Faelan quickly gathered his clothes and slid into the passenger side, naked, his clothes still in his arms.

"Brrr. If I could figure out a way ta carry me clothes while in fur, I'd sure wait ta shift back." He dressed quickly and jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat, turning to watch the still wolf.

Once they reached the main highway, Siobhan hesitated and looked to Faelan for guidance. "Okay. Where do we go?"

"Uh oh...Dr Fahey is away for tha month of December and I dunna' know another vet anywhere close. Maybe tha ranch?" Siobhan bit her bottom lip and made a quick decision of her own.

Turning toward town, she explained, "We'll take her to Dr. Keating."

"Tha new people doctor?"

"Yes, do you have a better idea?"

Faelan shook his head. "Nay."

They arrived in Destiny a few minutes later, parked haphazardly in front of the doctor's office. Siobhan jumped out and ran into the waiting room while Faelan carefully and gently lifted Princess from the back of the Blazer.

A single patient waited, idly flipping through a magazine, while Brenna leaned over Wendy's shoulder, scanning entries on the computer. "Siobhan, what on earth is wrong?"

Leaning against the door, Siobhan gasped, trying to catch her breath. "Princess. She's been shot."

"Princess?" "Wolf." "A wolf? Siobhan, I'm no vet." About the same time she made the announcement, Faelan pushed through the open door, carrying the still, and bloody, Princess.

"There's no vet in town now," Siobhan pleaded. "Please, Brenna."

Brenna hesitated then snapped out instructions. "Wendy, reschedule Mrs. Canady's appointment." She turned toward the back office. "Bring her in here." Siobhan opened the door leading from the waiting room to the examination rooms and he gently carried the wolf, crooning to her in soft tones.

"Lay her on the paper on the table. And you two stay right there. She might handle it better knowing there are people she is somewhat familiar with in the room. Plus, I'm sure you know far more about wolves' anatomy than I do." Brenna put her stethoscope in her ears and listened to the wolf's chest, probing the wound gently.

The wolf never stirred.

"The bleeding's stopped, but her lack of response doesn't bode well. I'm not sure there's anything I can do." Her hand still lay on the wolf's side as Brenna squeezed Siobhan's hand in sympathy. When sparks arced between them, and into Princess, all three jumped as though shocked.

Princess cracked her eyes and then closed them while the women stared at their joined hands.

Faelan bent over the wolf, murmuring softly as if to calm her.

Brenna glared accusingly at Siobhan. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure."

Faelan's tension-lined face relaxed marginally. "She's responding. I can hear her speaking again." Brenna looked at him as though he'd grown another head and placed her stethoscope against the wolf's side, moving it every few seconds to a new location.

Brenna touched the wound tentatively, pressing on it, and blanched with shock. "Oh, my God."

Siobhan's color drained to match the doctor's. "What?"

Distracted, Brenna answered absently, "Her heart beat is stronger...the edges of the wound have started closing. Her respiration has improved...and...well...there is no way in hell any of this could have happened in quicker than a day. I know what I am seeing...and it is impossible. It happened in...a matter of...minutes!"

"Oh." Siobhan looked at Faelan. "Well, that's good, right?"

Brenna stood shaking her head lost in thought. "Well...damn. I don't know. I suppose it depends on what caused it." She looked up, glancing between Siobhan and Faelan and the odd expressions each wore. "You know something about this. Neither of you look surprised. What's happening?"

Faelan shrugged. "I guess that one of ye...or both of ye tagether...brought... uh... healing ta tha wolf. Since it dinna' happen when ye touched her separately, I'd be guessin' it had ta be both of ye tagether."

Brenna frowned. "Healing? Like in magic?" She looked at Siobhan who looked away sheepishly. "Siobhan?"

"It's new to me too, Brenna. Maybe we should just go with it and analyze it later."

"Go with it? Go with it!" Brenna's voice rose higher with each word.

"Calm down, doctor. Ye dunna' want ta upset Princess."

Brenna focused her attention on Faelan again. "No, we wouldn't want to upset...the wol-- Hey, you didn't have that accent in school."

He smiled. "Ah, ye be that Brenna Keating. I thought ye looked familiar. But, if it's alright with ye, I'd just as soon be havin' our talk after Princess is out of danger."

"Of course. We'll talk later. Why not? I'm treating a magical wolf...or *we* are. What questions could there be?" Getting no response to her ranting, she sighed and turned to Siobhan. "What do you want me to do?"

The three worked for another hour on the wolf and found that it was only necessary for Siobhan and Brenna to touch, touch anywhere while Brenna worked on Princess, for the healing process to accelerate astronomically. When the wolf started coming around, Faelan bent over her, soothing and coaxing her to remain motionless and allow the doctor to finish her work.

In the end, Brenna just accepted that there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in her philosophy, and did what she did best – healing.

Siobhan and Faelan, promising to explain when they could, returned Princess to her pack before moonrise and watched as the wolves melted into the trees.

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The elusive Sirocco Pack contained fifteen wolves, led by a massive alpha and his diminutive mate. All but three of the wolves had radio collars attached. Siobhan took down the information necessary to prepare the collars, as well as anesthetize the wolves in order to fit the collars around their massive necks.

That is if anesthetizing became an option again.

Faelan had some crazy idea that he wouldn't need to sedate the wolves before collaring them, but she figured she'd stand by prepared, just in case.

Only three o'clock and the sun already sat low in the sky. The temperature had dropped noticeably and the wind had picked up.

The wolves had ceased their play, leaving the area in a hurry, obviously spooked by something, or someone. Moments later, Siobhan heard the crunch of footfalls on the ice-encrusted snow and turned to look behind her. Kieran stood a few feet away, his rifle cradled comfortably in his arms. Sunlight reflected off his diamond pinky ring as he stared greedily at her, licking his lips with a distinct leer.

She felt like the main course, and not in a good way.

"Hunting, Kieran?"

He snorted. "Nay. Just protectin' me herd."

Siobhan frowned, puzzled. "Now what would your herd be doing around here? We're miles from your land."

Kieran produced his humorless smile. "Ye know, ye be much too smart for such a lovely face."

"Somehow I don't think that was meant as a compliment."

"Nonsense. I have the utmost respect for tha work me nephew, and ye, do." He moved closer, holding his rifle with one arm, pointing it down toward the ground.

"You just wished we'd do it elsewhere?" Siobhan's smile matched his, not quite making it to her eyes. She refused to be, or at least to show, that she was affected in any way by his obvious attempt at intimidation. "I thought we Clann Mac Tire people were supposed to be caretakers of wolves."

Kieran grunted. "Clann...caretakers...shapeshifters...werewolves, whatever you want to call it, 'tis all a lot of blarney. Ye dunna' truly believe all those fairytales do ye?"

"What I do or do not believe about all that has no bearing on how I feel about my wolves. I'll do everything in my power to protect them."

He chuckled humorlessly. *"Power*. Now that be the operative word." He shifted his weight, his gaze falling on the field now empty of wolves. *"*'Twould indeed be a shame ta lose all because ye want ta give up none."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Me son Quinn thinks a great deal of ye."

"And I think a great deal of him. Your point?"

"Bein' tha alpha female could give ye tha power ye need, ta protect yer wolves, if yer alpha male could be controlled."

"Let me guess. You think Quinn can be controlled."

Kieran shrugged. "Well, I know Faelan canna' be." He propped his foot on a fallen log and leaned forward. "Quinn knows his duty and he'll do it."

Siobhan smiled sardonically. "Just what a girl wants to hear - that she's a duty."

Kieran smirked. "I'm sure neither one of ye would find the duty onerous. There would be perks ta tha union ye both would enjoy."

Siobhan couldn't hold back the blush now covering her cheeks. "And what about Faelan?"

Kieran shook his head. "Ye surely dunna' think Faelan plans ta stay here. He will find things...engaging for a time...but men like him, they be needing variety. They ne'er can settle for tha boring life of a rancher. They have ta have new challenges, and new diversions. Ye willna' be able ta keep him with ye." He straightened with a sneer. "Tha choice is quite simple really – Quinn, and yer wolves, or a fling with Faelan that will ne'er come ta good."

He turned to wink at her before he left. "Think about it...before 'tis too late."

Siobhan watched him walk away, a frisson of fear icing down her spine.

## **Chapter Nine**

The day dawned cold and blustery so Faelan decided to postpone his trip to Helena.

He knew he was just making excuses, hoping to see Siobhan but she had been distant lately, when she was even around, avoiding him most of the time. A patient man for the most part, Faelan found himself edgy and anxious. He knew something was up, and he intended on find out exactly what it was.

He checked his watch just as the front door opened and Quinn walked through the door like a man on a mission. Since his cousin had made a point of making this an *'appointment'*, Faelan felt a touch of trepidation.

Leaning nonchalantly on the front of his desk, he crossed his arms, waiting for his cousin to get comfortable. "Quinn, good to see you. What can I do for you?"

Strolling over to sit behind Siobhan's desk Quinn grinned and answered the question cryptically, "'Tis more what I can do for ye."

Faelan studied him silently for a moment before asking, "And that would be?"

"Sit down, Faelan. Ye make me nervous, bein' serious 'n all."

Faelan moved behind his desk and leaned back in his chair, giving the illusion that he was control, and that whatever his cousin had to offer would make no difference.

But he had a feeling it would.

"Well?"

Quinn's grin widened. "I've come ta tell ye that ye be a fool, and tha biggest idiot God e'er put on this Earth." He raised his hand to stave off any of Faelan's pesky questions, or scathing comments, continuing blithely with his decree.

"Ye have tha love of tha best woman I've e'er met, yet ye whine around 'bout yer stupid independence that ye dunna' even want. I be here ta warn ye that I willna' give ye a second chance with her. I dunna' care 'bout the Council, or politics, or even family concerns when it comes ta her happiness. Ye will lose her, Faelan, if ye dunna' come ta yer senses."

Quinn rose and walked to the door before turning around. ""Tis that easy. Tell her ye love her 'fore 'tis too late."

Faelan flushed and stiffened in anger. "And what makes ye so sure she'd have ye?"

Quinn's grin returned. "I think ye just attempted ta insult me, but I'll let it pass seein' as how ye be upset, an' all. And, for yer information, we've already gone out walkin' tagether."

Faelan leapt to his feet. "What! Ye took her out?"

Quinn gave a self-satisfied laugh. "Nay. We just used our feet and walked, ye damned fool. Ye see though? Ye keep playin' these little games and ye'll lose her. And, as much as I might look forward ta beatin' yer scrawny arse, I'll still give ye fair warnin'. Last I knew she was at the 'Sirocco' site." Quinn turned around and started back toward the door.

"How do ye know where she is?"

Without turning around, Quinn answered without answering, "Not a second chance, Faelan."

Faelan didn't know whether to kiss, or strangle, his cousin, but he did know he wouldn't lose Siobhan without a fight.

He approached the site and watched a few minutes as she tried to pinpoint the pack's location with an antenna. As she completed her arc, she spotted him.

For several minutes neither moved, nor spoke. He could sense her pain and confusion for the wolves, and for themselves as well. He closed the distance between them. As he neared her, she still did not move. He watched as she searched his face for something, something that seemed important.

When it appeared she had not found it, her shoulders slumped and she set the antenna down, defeat evident in her posture. "I suppose it was too much to ask that the ranchers who were out 'hunting', or 'protecting' their livestock yesterday left the pack alone. I've been searching with no luck. I hope we find them alive.

He reached out to cradle her cheek in his palm, to comfort her, to hold her whatever way she would allow. Threatening to spill any moment, her unshed tears dampened her lashes, turning her eyes a vibrant emerald green.

She closed them and turned her cheek into his hand, seeking solace.

He moved closer and ran his thumb along her bottom lip. The softness like petals tempted him to sip their nectar. He moved no closer but lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. Lightly his tongue traced the seam of her mouth before he fit his lips to hers. Stroking and caressing in delicate forays he seduced her mouth into opening for him, that he might enter and possess it.

Siobhan dropped her arms from him and stepped back a pace. "Faelan, this is *such* a bad idea."

Faelan raked a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the furrows on his forehead. "Quinn came ta see me today."

Siobhan brightened. "Did he? I saw him last Sunday afternoon." A smile lit her face when she thought of their walk.

"Aye, he did." Faelan watched her closely, her glowing smile at the mention of Quinn's name clouding his joy of the day. "He seems ta like ye a great deal."

"Yes, well...he's been a good friend. He always makes me smile."

"Does he now?"

Siobhan cocked her head to one side, bewilderment in her scowl. "What's wrong with you?"

"Do ye want him, Siobhan?"

"Who? Quinn? Don't be absurd." She pulled away, turning her back on him. She was surprised that his mind would even carry his thoughts in that particular direction.

He moved closer, grasping her upper arms gently and whispering, "I couldna' stand ta see ye with him. I couldna' stand ta see ye with anyone." She closed her eyes, holding back tears, yearning to give in and give him whatever he wanted.

She swayed, her head laid against on his shoulder, and he enfolded her in his arms, pressing his lips to her temple. A crack in the trees, unwelcome, unnatural, warned him and he stiffened, diving to the ground, rolling Siobhan under his body shielding her.

A single rifle shot echoed through the trees as a bullet hit a tree a couple feet from Faelan's head, right where they'd been standing. They remained silent, listening for evidence that their assailant waited. After several minutes passed, without anything happening, he whispered hoarsely in her ear, "Are ye okay?"

She nodded, her body quaking only partly from the cold.

He pushed her down, gesturing for her to stay there, and rose to his haunches. Leaping to his feet, Faelan sped through the trees, silent and deadly. Siobhan turned and watched him until he disappeared, jumping, her skin icy, when he spoke from in front of her. "Darlin'? Whoever 'twas is gone now." He helped her stand, holding her close as she shivered in shock.

"Did y-y-you see anything?"

Faelan smiled grimly. "Na' a thin', which be worrisome in itself."

"W-W-W-Why?"

"Well, me wee popsicle, because it means tha attack be deliberate, and premeditated. They left little, or na' evidence, behind, so they, or he...whoever, canna' be traced. I dunna' think they are professional, but they may be."

Siobhan drew back and looked up at him. "We've got to tell Seamus. He can get the state police or FBI...someone."

Faelan watched her closely. "I'll be letting Seamus know, but I'm thinkin' there be na' need for us ta be tellin' anyone else about this, just yet."

"No need?" Siobhan asked incredulously.

"Nay. But I do want ye ta stay at tha ranch while I be in Helena. And bring Aingeal wit' ye. Keep him with ye at all times. I should be back by next Thursday, Friday at tha latest."

Siobhan backed away from the pushy male and pursed her lips. The crossing of her arms and setting her chin should have been his first clue. "Number one, I'm not running and hiding. Ever. Number two, we should tell the authorities. Now."

Faelan watched her a moment before answering. "I'll be tellin' Seamus. He's tha authority 'round here." She snorted and he sighed. "Okay. Fine. How 'bout we let Seamus decide *who* needs ta be contacted?"

She relaxed a bit. "All right. But I'm not staying at the ranch. I'll be fine, and I had already planned on keeping Aingeal with me."

His frustration evident, Faelan sighed. "Why can ye na' just do as ye be told?

"Do...as...I'm...told?" Siobhan enunciated slowly. "You have got to be the most arrogant person I've ever met. Do you know me at all?"

He grinned. "Aye, better than most."

"Errrgh." Siobhan spun on her heels and stomped toward the cars, muttering to herself. "Men! Think they know everything."

Faelan followed closely behind. "Siobhan, I really would feel better if ye would stay at tha ranch where Tristan can watch ye."

She stopped and turned so abruptly that Faelan barely avoided running into her. Putting her hands on her hips, she bit out, "I'm not a child, Faelan. I don't need to be watched over, or taken care of, or babysat, until you manage to get yourself back here. Period." She turned back around and stalked toward the cars.

"Ye dunna' have ta be so stubborn about it." He paused. "Will ye at least be careful?"

"No, Faelan. Of course not. Why would I do anything like that? I thought I'd cover myself in honey and crawl into the nearest hibernating grizzly's den just to say hello. Maybe I'll make a new friend. Think I might?"

"Okay. Uh, what did ye say after tha part 'bout coverin' yerself in honey?"

Despite his teasing, Faelan was concerned about Siobhan's safety, so he left her driving herself home while he drove himself straight to the Sheriff's office. Seamus looked up from reading his paper, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

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"Well, son, you're about the last person I thought I'd be seeing anytime soon. You seemed to have upset my granddaughter more than a little. Do I need to defend her honor?" Faelan reddened in spite of himself.

Seamus' words called up memories of Friday night and Faelan had to fight his instinctive reaction to those images. "Nay, I intend to do right by her...if she'll let me."

"Yeah, she does tend to be a little independent." Seamus smiled understandingly. "I have confidence in your powers of persuasion. As long as you plan to take care of her for the next one hundred years or so, that is."

Faelan nodded. "That's the plan."

Seamus sat back in his chair and removed his reading glasses. "So, what brings you here?"

"Someone took a shot at us a few minutes ago."

"What!" Seamus asked sharply, sitting up and taking notice.

"I'm pretty sure it was just a warning, but I'm not taking any chances. I think it's about the problems I've been investigating on the ranch. I'm still not sure how much of it involves that Clann. "He explained about the ranch, the land deals and, finally, the embezzled funds.

"You think it's someone high up in the Clann, maybe even a Council member?"

"It makes sense. I think we should keep this quiet for now. If we call in the state patrol, or feds, I have a feeling whoever is responsible will just go underground and wait us out."

Seamus nodded. "I agree. But I'm not burying any more family." The intense look in Seamus' eyes reminded Faelan of the night Brigid and Donal died. He never did find out how Seamus had taken care of things and he wasn't sure he ever wanted to find out.

Seamus had always been an enigma.

In their eighties, he and Maeve seemed much younger. Shapeshifters lived longer than normal humans, often past the century mark, but it was said that only those who regularly shifted were that long-lived. It had something to do with the metabolism needed for, or because of, shifting. The same was said for them being disease-resistant, and quick healers.

But Seamus had never shifted, not as far as Faelan knew.

In any case, Faelan knew Seamus made a better friend than enemy, and making him a promise about Siobhan was not hardship anyway. "Seamus, no one will ever touch Siobhan, this I promise on my life. I just need to make sure her own damned independence doesn't get her into trouble." The two men sized each other up, finding the reassurances they sought.

"What exactly do you want *me* to do?"

"I'm heading out to see my brother and Quinn when I leave here. I'm sure they won't mind doing a little bit of surveillance on the sly. Siobhan need never know she's being watched, which is just as well since she'd probably play hide 'n seek with them just to be perverse."

Seamus chuckled. "Get used to it. Siobhan is just being female. They drive us crazy and then wonder what happened when we finally flip." He stared into space, remembering something from another time. He drew his attention back to Faelan and smiled. "But what a way to go." Opening the top drawer of his desk, he lifted out his gun and holster. "So you want me to watch her, when Quinn and Tristan can't? I'll probably have to get Maeve's help, but I'll get some extra home-cooked meals out of it." Strapping on his gun he grabbed his coat. "When do we start your 'Operation Siobhan'?"

Faelan chuckled. "I'd say starting Monday, but she's a little peeved with me right now and likely to keep away from the office, and me, for the next couple days so we better start right away. I don't think there's any real danger for a few days, at least not while whoever delivered their 'message with a bullet' waits to see if we heed their warning. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

Seamus picked up his hat and gestured toward the door. "You'd better show me where this took place. Luckily, it will be easy to keep it quiet, at least for a while. Being the only lawman around does have a couple of advantages."

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Faelan took Seamus to the site, but neither found any evidence of their assailant's identity. Quinn and Tristan were working on fence repairs together and easy to find.

Quinn's initial smirk was replaced by a frown of concern as he listened to their news and they all agreed to follow Siobhan, strictly for her own good.

Tristan laughed. "I think this is tha first time I have followed a female without wantin' her ta... ye know. Are ye sure she willna' just let us accompany her?"

Faelan and Quinn looked at the other and vehemently replied, in concert. "Aye."

Faelan scowled. "She is the most contrary female God ever made. I'd say use reverse psychology, but she'd figure it out." He hesitated, glancing at Quinn before continuing. "By the way, try and...um...shield your thoughts, especially your emotions, while you follow her."

Tristan eyed him quizzically and raised a single brow. "Shield ourselves? What is she, some kinda psychic?"

Faelan shrugged and Quinn answered laughter tinting his voice. "Nay, she isna' psychic, but she can sense things about people."

"Can she now?" Tristan watched Faelan squirm uncomfortably, curious to know what had him wiggling like a worm on a hook. "Guess I'll be shieldin' then."

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Faelan had been gone for nearly a week – six days, six hours, and change.

*Counting the hours?* Boy, do I have it bad. Siobhan set down the report she'd been trying to read for the past hour, not having managed to get through even the first page. She read,

then reread, but her mind refused to focus on the words on the page. It could be gibberish for all she knew.

She kept recalling things about him: his face, his smell, his seductive voice, his smile lit by his dimple and his luminous gray eyes. His hands worked magic while his mouth swallowed her soul. When her body ached like this, it was difficult to recall why she ever resisted giving him anything he wanted, anything he asked of her.

She stretched and yawned in a lungful of air. Rising and crossing to the coat rack, she took down Faelan's leather jacket and pulled it on. Hands in the pockets, she wrapped it around her and breathed his fragrance in, letting it fill her, surround her.

She closed her eyes, nearly able to feel his hands, and lips.

She sighed and crossed back to her desk determined to finish her reports before Faelan returned in a couple days. Molly had started the fire in the great room when she'd brought Siobhan a sandwich and coffee and the logs popped and crackled as they burned. The sap sizzled, releasing piney scent to permeate the air. Aingeal slept peacefully on the braided rug in front of the fireplace, indifferent to his mistress' turmoil.

He'd already made his disgust of human emotions quite clear.

To dogs, to wolves, to all other pack animals, save man...the pack, its survival and wellbeing, was the most important thing in any of its members' lives. After the whole came individual survival. It was so seldom that animals sank to that third level, greedy for something another possessed simply because, to be unheard of. The emotions prevalent in man—jealousy, greed, and the remaining deadly sins had no place in the animal kingdom.

It was quite simple really. Aingeal had reiterated the facts, as he saw them, countless of times.

As alphas, it was Faelan and Siobhan's duty to mate. End of discussion. She didn't know why she even bothered to talk to, or whatever she did, with Aingeal. There certainly was no sympathy to be found there.

The grandfather clock in the hallway echoed loudly in the nearly empty ranch house. Its rhythmic tick lulled her to sleep and she jerked awake, reaching for her coffee. Cold and stale, it brought a grimace to her face, providing little relief for her tired body, or sleepy mind. She rose to pace, turning thoughts over in her mind, searching for answers. Her life had certainly not turned out as she'd expected.

She doubted anyone's ever did.

Still, Faelan had brought the unexpected. She couldn't imagine waking up to a world without him in it.

She walked to the large picture window and leaned her forehead against the cool panes. Moonlight streamed in, lighting corners her small desk lamp failed to reach. Her stomach clenched in need and yearning, the siren moon calling her. She closed her eyes and groaned.

## Faelan.

She may as well face it. She was goner. There would never be another man for her. It didn't really matter whether or not he ever gave her the words — she belonged irrevocably, inevitably to him.

She sighed, walking back to her desk and plopping heavily into her chair. She grabbed the edge of her desk and pulled her chair up to the stack of papers. She grabbed the discarded report to try again, leaning her elbow on the desk and resting her cheek in her palm. Her eyes

grew heavy, grit lining her lids and she set the report down, rubbing her weary eyes. Yawning she stretched and decided to rest her eyes for just a minute.

Just long enough to get her second wind.

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Faelan stepped down from the truck. Yawning he stretched stiff muscles, his joints cracking. Leaning inside the cab, he grabbed his briefcase from the floorboard. Climbing the stairs, he noticed a light coming from his office window. On the porch, he set his briefcase down against the side of the house and peered into a corner of the window.

Siobhan slept with her forehead on her folded arms, on top of a sea of paperwork. Light from the single desk lamp haloed her head. Faelan smiled and retrieved his case, entering the house soundlessly.

Aingeal stretched and shook himself, padding to greet Faelan. "Some watchdog you are," he whispered, scratching the ruff behind Aingeal's ears.

Lowering his briefcase to the floor, he removed his heavy sheepskin coat, hanging it on the coat rack with his Stetson. He loosened his tie and rolled up the cuffs of his shirt to just below his elbows, finding the room chilly. He squatted in front of the stone fireplace, and stirred the dying embers, watching until they caught and flared to life. Within minutes, the blaze warmed the corners of the room.

Resting his arm on the mantel, he stared into the fire, digesting the information he'd uncovered in Helena. It was just as he'd feared. Someone was using embezzled ranch funds to purchase land futures. Worse yet, they were also collecting quite an assortment of leveraged loans on land belonging to Clann, and Destiny property owners.

They, whoever they were, needed to be stopped while there was still a chance.

It was becoming obvious that he needed to take control of the ranch, and the Clann, and find out who was responsible for the problems of both. The fastest, cleanest way to do that would be to become the Clann's alpha male.

But he sure wasn't going to do that with any female other than Siobhan.

Being married to her might have some fringe benefits – like alleviating his constant state of arousal. He glanced fondly at her still sleeping form, loving her even when she looked so peaceful, instead a livewire. *She's going to have a mother of a neck kink tomorrow though*. Faelan glanced at his wristwatch...*or rather today*.

Watching her steeled his resolve to capture her heart as surely as she had captured his. Desire could lead to love.

It was fortunate that his needs and the Clann's coincided so well, but it wouldn't have mattered.

He wanted, no...needed her, regardless.

Grinning mischievously, Faelan moved behind her chair. Bending to place his mouth to her ear he whispered, "Sleeping Beauty, it's time to get up and greet your prince." When she didn't respond, he continued, "As much as I'd love for you to sleep over, I somehow pictured it a little different." He placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed the nape of her neck. "You smell good, like sunshine and lemons."

Siobhan slowly climbed through the layers of sleep, unwilling to leave her dreams. For a change, they were pleasant, not the nightmares that had been haunting her lately.

Faelan had been setting her on fire with his voice. "Faelan," she murmured sleepily.

"Yes, Princess?"

Siobhan sat up and stretched, freezing in place when she realized she was not dreaming of Faelan's hands massaging her neck. *He really was massaging my neck!* "Oh," she gasped.

Laughing, Faelan raised his hands in mock surrender and backed up a few steps. "Whoa. It's okay. I'm going back to my own corner. I'd hate to give you a heart attack or something." He strode to his desk chair, sat and swiveled to face her.

Siobhan rubbed the back of her neck. "What are you doing here?"

Amusement tinged his voice. "Gee, I thought I lived here." When she rolled her eyes at his droll comment, he laughed and relented. "I finished early, so I thought I'd come home instead of spending another night in Helena. I was delighted...by the way...to see you waiting here, since I haven't seen you all week. "

He laced his fingers on the desk and cocked a querying eyebrow, curious to see what her response would be.

Siobhan stuttered out an explanation. "Well, I...I was busy with observations and...uh then I thought I'd finish up the reports...since you were away and all." She raised her chin and finished defensively. "And I didn't want to bother you."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, Siobhan. You don't have to make excuses. I know you have been avoiding me." He raised his hand stopping any further protests on her part. "It's okay. I know I behaved abominably, and I apologize." He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. "I would, however, like to propose a deal. Interested?"

Frowning, Siobhan asked, "What kind of deal?"

"Nothing illegal, I assure you."

"Illegal hadn't occurred to me. Amoral, uncomfortable, and perhaps even humiliating, now those *did* occur to me."

"Why, Siobhan, ye wound me," Faelan teased placing a hand over his heart. His brogue slipped out and Siobhan blushed. He stood and leaned back on his desk and crossed his arms over his chest, his normal stance when puzzling out a particularly difficult issue. "I...or rather we...have a problem. It seems that, not only is someone shooting at our wolves and us, but someone is buying up options on the land that would become available should the reintroduction program fail."

"Not good, but what does that have to do with a deal?"

"I'm getting there," Faelan paused to gather his thoughts. He'd have to approach the rest with care to get her to agree to his plans without a major battle. "The Clann leader controls the funds, and direction of the Clann...at least indirectly. My cousin, Quinn, or I, will be the next Clann leader. Which means that one of us will have the right to decide what we do with the land.

"If Quinn is leader, Kieran will want the wolves gone. Since Kieran controls Quinn, or appears to, this could be a big problem. If I'm the next leader, the wolves not only have a home, but will have Clann protection as well. I think you know that no one controls me."

"And the deal?"

Faelan smiled, knowing this would be the tricky part. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?" When Siobhan shook her head, Faelan continued, picking his way thru the coming minefield. "Okay. Right now, the vote on the council is split evenly, with the old timers leaning toward Quinn. More of a case of 'better the devil you know...' with Kieran as the devil. The other half realizes that it's no longer possible to remain isolated, that we need fresh ideas and new directions without selling our souls. I'm their choice because I've been out in the world, and I've returned with not only fresh ideas but I also see the value of keeping some things the way they are. I don't think the world is quite ready for 'our souls' yet."

Faelan knelt in front of Siobhan, holding her hands in his. "This is where you come in.

"Because you're Maeve's granddaughter the council wants you to be the next alpha female. You want the wolves to be safe. I want you. Marry me and we all get what we want." Siobhan squirmed and started to protest but Faelan stopped her by placing one finger over her lips. "Think about it. Your marrying me would shift support to me from the old-timers. I want to protect the wolves and so do you. Together we could influence the Clann, and do what's right for the wolves."

And, the best part, I would get you.

Raising her eyebrow, she remarked, "And they all lived happily ever after."

Faelan raked a hand through his hair, his brogue showing his frustration. "I know there will be problems but we can work them out. After all, 'tisna' like we dunna' have anythin' in common. I like ye, and ye like me." When Siobhan smiled at his nonsense, he grinned. "I think ye be tha most generous, carin' and gorgeous person I've e'er met, and ye think I'm cute."

"Okay, now you're laughing at me," Siobhan chuckled.

"Nay...'cause ye do think I'm cute."

Siobhan laughed and answered, "Oh, I think you're adorable. But I wouldn't want you to get a swelled head."

"Honey, with ye around that ne'er will be a problem. Ye have a penchant for deflatin' me ego. Come on, what do ye have ta lose? I promise that what e'er happens 'tween us will still be on yer say so."

"Why would you do that?"

"Siobhan, I want ta save me ranch, tha Clann, and tha wolves. But I also want ye. That be tha truth. There be a time constraint for tha ranch, tha Clann, and even tha wolves, but I'll wait as long as it takes for ye. I'm a very patient man when I have ta be. Say ye'll marry me."

Siobhan bit her bottom lip and asked, "What exactly do you mean that whatever happens will be on *my* say so?"

Faelan knew that he had her now. He grinned and replied, "We get married 'fore tha Solstice, but we wait ta...uh...sleep tagether...until ye be ready."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Colleen, I'd do what e'er it takes for ye." Faelan's brogue nudged the butterflies in Siobhan's stomach into flight.

*Why not*? Siobhan gnawed her bottom lip and considered his proposal. She wanted to save the wolves, and it wasn't as though there was anyone else. He could curl her toes just by speaking. When his accent appeared, it was even worse. A web of need and desire wove about her, and her heart. Why fight it?

Besides, could she walk away from him forever? Let another women have him, have his children, *touch him*?

Closing her eyes, she stilled her rampant thoughts and opened her mind to reach for his, anxious to get a feel for his emotions. It was getting easier. She read his emotions nearly effortlessly. He was hopeful, anxious, and wary, afraid of being rejected and hurt. She could feel the desire and softer emotions. He wanted to protect and care for her. Tears pricked her eyes and she drew herself together.

"Yes." Quietly.

"Aye, ye'll marry me?"

"Yes, I'll marry you. Under one condition."

Guardedly he asked, "What condition?"

She smiled and replied, "It will be a real marriage...from the beginning. I'm only going to do this once. If you're planning on something different you're going to need to find someone else." She didn't need any extra-sensory perception to feel the relief radiating from him.

Desire followed closely, and swamped Siobhan until she was wet and throbbing in response. She rose to her feet and Faelan followed, bringing her hands to his lips and kissing her fingertips. His heated gaze never left her face as he turned her right hand over, bringing the palm to his mouth. He leered then licked her from palm to wrist. Tugging, he drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her waist. Mesmerized by his every movement, Siobhan was unable to resist, or even to break his stare.

"I can do real," Faelan whispered.

Siobhan trembled and closed her eyes as Faelan met her lips tenderly, teasing her with light nibbles and licks. She moaned and fisted her fingers in his hair, pulling him roughly to her. Not in the mood for gentleness, she plunged her tongue into his mouth claiming it ferociously.

Faelan tightened his hold on her and returned her intensity. Realizing where they were headed, and not wanting to ruin the concessions he had won, he pulled slowly away and laid his forehead on hers, breathing heavily.

*She'll never believe I want anything but her body if I allow this to continue.* Between clenched teeth, he growled, "Christ, *cailleach*, what ye do ta me."

Siobhan pulled back and smiled up at him, draping her hands on his shoulders. "I'd say it's mutual." She signed and dropped her hands, clasping them together in front of her. "When?"

"When?" Faelan was still trying to bring himself under control.

Giggling, Siobhan elaborated, "When are we getting married?"

Faelan grinned and replied, "Na' soon enough." He frowned in thought for a moment. "Saturday. I have a friend who's a judge and owes me a favor."

"Saturday," Siobhan squeaked. "But it's already Tuesday, or rather Wednesday."

Deflated, Faelan's face fell. "Well, I suppose we could wait a couple of weeks if we have ta."

"No, I was just surprised. It's just so quick is all." Smiling, Siobhan offered him her hand and finished, "Dr. Conroy, I'd love to marry you on Saturday."

Raine McIntyre

Faelan raised her hand and kissed it tenderly. "I'm hopin' that ye'll be callin' me somethin' a wee bit more intimate than Dr. Conroy by then, *a ghrá*."

#### **Chapter Ten**

They agreed to let Molly handle any preparations for the reception afterwards and decided they would only be inviting family, with a *very* few close friends, like Dr. Brenna Keating.

Introducing Brenna to Tristan, and Quinn, seemed like a good idea.

Siobhan called Brenna and they agreed to meet Wednesday night at the Do Drop for drinks, around seven o'clock, after Brenna's office hours. After their last meeting with Brenna, Siobhan was a little apprehensive about how she might treat them, after all the 'healing touch' and all. But she needn't have worried.

Seeming to take everything in stride, including magical wolves and unexplainable sparks, Brenna readily agreed, anxious to meet other people her own age. "You know, Siobhan, it's always a pleasure to meet single, healthy males, especially since I usually only meet men who aren't feeling particularly chipper at the time." Her laughter had rolled through the telephone wires. "Are Quinn and Tristan as good looking as Faelan?"

Relieved at Brenna's easy acceptance, Siobhan had snickered before answering the pointed query. "Well, of course *I* don't think there's another man to compare with Faelan, but I must admit they come close."

"Better and better. Okay, I'll meet you at seven. If I'm a couple of minutes late, start without me. I sometimes have late patients."

Faelan had no trouble convincing Tristan and Quinn to meet them for drinks. Knowing the doctor had been included and would be joining them, seemed to intrigue them both. "So what does she look like, Faelan?" Tristan was eager to make the acquaintance of any female – young, old, single, married. It never seemed to matter. He loved every incarnation of the feminine form.

"Well, she has dark hair and light eyes...I think."

"You think?" Quinn grinned.

"Yeah, she's shorter than Siobhan. And she's not as muscular as Siobhan. She has light complexion like Siobhan...but I think she has more freckles. She had a nice voice and laugh."

"Like Siobhan?" Quinn teased.

"Well...not exactly." Both Quinn and Tristan burst out laughing. "What?" Puzzled, Faelan watched both of them hold their sides as they laughed until tears ran from their eyes.

"Oh, bráthair, you have it bad."

"What do you mean?"

"When was the last time you noticed any woman besides Siobhan?"

Faelan grinned as understanding dawned. "There are other women besides Siobhan?"

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The Do Drop was crowded for a Wednesday night but they managed to snag a table, and appropriate chairs for five. It was after seven and Brenna hadn't shown up yet, but no one worried. Their waitress, Marge, was friendly, in spite of Faelan's not dating her daughter, and

brought them a pitcher and mugs on the house, congratulating them on the upcoming wedding.

"She's a good sort, "Tristan observed.

'Tris, have ye e'er met a female ye dinna' like?"

Siobhan smiled. "Quinn, I find it much more telling that he's never met a female who didn't like him."

Tristan grinned. "It's a gift."

Ignoring Tristan, Quinn asked, "Have ye two told Da and Eamon yet?"

"I told Eamon and he was thrilled. He made Brian take him into Butte to get a suit. He'll look better than I do."

Siobhan covered Faelan's hand with hers. 'I sincerely doubt that it is possible for anyone to look better than you." They smiled at each other, forgetting everyone else around.

'Hey, ye two. Knock that off. Ye'll have tha rest of yer lives ta make goo-goo eyes at each other." Quinn checked his watch. "Seven thirty. Are ye sure tha doc said she was gonna make it?"

"The doc made it." Brenna stood behind Siobhan's chair and trilled her musical laughter at Quinn's reddened face.

"Brenna, so glad you're here. The blond one is Faelan's brother, Tristan, and the embarrassed one, with the red face, is Quinn, his cousin." All three men stood politely and Brenna shook hands with Tristan first before turning to face Quinn. As she offered her hand, he stood without moving, still as any statue but for the muscle jumping in his jaw, twitching reflexively.

Brenna frowned at him in question.

"Quinn?" Faelan questioned.

Quinn stepped toward Brenna, towering her five-foot nine-inch height and grasped her shoulders, pulling her toward him. She watched in fascination as he lowered his head toward her.

He fastened on her lips like a man half starved.

Instead of resisting, she leaned in and gave him complete access.

He drew back slowly and whispered, "Dance with me."

"Okay." They walked out to the dance floor, arms entwined and oblivious to their surroundings.

"So, do you think he likes her?"

Faelan guffawed at Siobhan's sarcasm. "Do you think they even realize they're not alone?"

"Well, I'll be damned." Tristan grinned. "Life sure is gettin' interestin' lately." He laughed and sauntered to the dance floor to find some entertainment of his own.

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"Do ye love him, Siobhan?"

"More than I ever thought possible, Maeve."

"Good. Then we can get started with yer lessons."

"Lessons? What? A sex lesson? I don't think I need any lessons in..."

"Nay. A control lesson. If ye dinna' really love him, it wouldna' have mattered. But, since ye do, 'tis imperative."

"Why?"

"So tha magick doesna' get out of hand." Siobhan remained silent, thinking of that first night. "Ah, I see ye have experienced some of tha effects," she teased as Siobhan blushed and looked away, embarrassed. "Dinna' worry for I remember tha feelings. Ye ne'er get too old for that. Now, let's concentrate on how ta channel yer power. For ye need ta remember that neither of ye are meant ta contain tha magick for long. Ye must let it out and let go. Ye will also find ye can hear the other's thoughts, read each other's emotions, almost at will. Tha combination can be nearly overwhelmin'. As strong as ye two are...well let's say 'twill be quite a ride."

"What kind of ride exactly?"

"Well, there be the weather, but also energy. Sex has been used to produce energy and call up elements by healers for centuries. Dunna' worry. We'll be practicin', goin' over all tha old texts and, eventually, ye'll be able to call up elements *without* sex." Maeve smiled. "Better control, but na' nearly as much fun."

Siobhan laughed and began relaxing, interested in learning more about this new development.

The remainder of the day went quickly and Siobhan easily picked up the basics, as well as the intricacies of harder solutions. The more knowledgeable she became, the less she feared what she had not understood.

She had to admit, the lack of control would certainly have made for an interesting honeymoon.

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Siobhan and Aingeal arrived at the ranch after lunch to finish moving in, with Aingeal making himself at home on the braided rug in front of the fireplace, after having checked out the new locations of his food and water bowls in the kitchen. He circled a few times and lay down, wrapping his tail along his body and around his nose like a sled dog...or wolf.

Siobhan appropriated half the drawer and closet space, and spent the remaining afternoon putting away her clothes, and arranging her personal items in her half of the bedroom and bathroom. The office already contained most of her research books and articles so the new bookshelf in the bedroom stood ready to receive her personal reading materials.

She would spend her last single night at Maeve's and had left one overnight case packed, sitting on the floor by the front door.

Faelan had spent the earlier part of the day in their office, but had stopped working when Siobhan had arrived, her Blazer full. He had helped her carry in the majority of her belongings before starting their dinner. He was happy to grill their steaks, arranging baked potatoes and salad, while she finished putting away her belongings.

When everything was to her liking, Siobhan followed her nose to the kitchen. She stopped in the doorway, admiring the picture Faelan made, and fantasized about their future. She blushed when he looked up and smiled tenderly at her.

"I hope it's okay to eat early. Quinn and Tristan insist on taking me out tonight for one last fling. I'd much rather spend it with you, but they won't take no for an answer."

She smiled and entered the kitchen. "It's fine. I planned on going to bed early tonight anyway." Drifting over to his side, she watched as he tore the lettuce, adding it to the other fixings in a large salad bowl. "Can I help with anything?"

Faelan nodded indicating the breakfront across the kitchen. "Would you mind setting the table, please? There are plates, bowls and glasses in those cabinets, the silverware is in the top drawer. Napkins are on the counter. How do you like your steak?"

"Bloody."

"I had a feeling." She smiled, loving that he knew her so well, and set the table.

Faelan turned out to be an excellent cook, but Siobhan barely noticed her food.

Their lively conversation about wolves and their mutual work held her complete attention. Faelan seemed equally captivated as they shared a laugh over the clumsiness, and accident-prone behavior, of one of the clerk's in the biology department at the Arizona University.

Faelan grew serious and took a final drink of wine, placing his glass on the table and sliding a hand under Siobhan's. Lifting her fingers to his lips, he raised his gaze to her face and waited for her to meet his eyes. "Are ye ready for tomorrow, Siobhan?"

She looked down at their joined hands and Faelan could smell her renewed nervousness. He searched her mind but found only determination, no regrets. She looked up, her resolution at going through with their decision drawing her lips in a line.

"Surely 'tis na' all that grave an idea." He reached for her face with his free hand, smoothing the line on her forehead. "Perhaps ye need a distraction. Hmmm, now what could we do instead?"

Siobhan laughed. "I don't think even you could make me forget about tomorrow."

Faelan leered and leaned closer. "Ye wound me. I'm thinkin' I'll have ta prove me prowess ta ye. After all, I canna' be lettin' ye think me less of a man."

Something about the glint in his eye alerted her to his underlying desire. And she withdrew her hand from his, rising to back away from the table. "Now, Faelan...no one's questioning your manhood...or anything else."

"Nay? Then why do I have tha feeling that ye dunna' believe me capable of takin' yer mind off yer worries?" Faelan rose and slowly started stalking her around the table. "Darlin', I really do think I need ta show ye."

Not at all sure what game they were playing, Siobhan darted into the sitting area by the fireplace to avoid Faelan. Feeling secure at the distance now separating them, she taunted, "It's just not that easy, 'Darlin', and neither am I."

Faelan grinned. Now here was a game he could get into. "It's a challenge then. I suppose it's only sportin' that I let ye know how very much I detest losin'."

"As do I." She chuckled at the scowl he wore at her taunt.

With arms akimbo, she watched him follow her retreat into the sitting area. As he glided across the floor, it occurred to her that she might have made a small tactical error in goading him. Keeping a cautious eye on his approach, she backed toward the wall keeping sofa was between them.

Then it wasn't.

Faelan stood within a few feet, his previous scowl a confident leer. He crossed his arms over his chest, satisfied she would see the error of challenging him. "I believe that be check, and mate. Ye seem ta have run out of real estate."

Siobhan lifted her chin, stubbornly defiant. "It ain't over 'till it's over, Bub."

"Bub? Is that a term of endearment?"

She shrugged. "In some circles, I suppose."

Faelan chuckled low and earthy. He took a step toward her, waiting for her to concede victory, but she held her ground. "Shall I see if I can find other equally charmin' endearments for ye, Siobhan?"

He stood close enough to reach out and touch. She could smell the heated arousal rolling off him in waves. An answering fire rose in *her* belly. An intense visceral ache settled in her groin and coaxed juices from it.

He halved the distance between them and she had to tilt her head to meet his eyes. Slowly, deliberately he lowered his head toward hers, but she turned her head aside moments before he could complete the kiss. He nuzzled her neck where it joined her shoulder. She tried to back away, but met the wall, her stopgap.

Faelan closed in rubbing his body against hers. She gasped and he used the opportunity to taste her lips, slipping his tongue past them to explore her mouth. She moaned, raising her hands to his chest as if to push him away. Lacing their fingers together, he raised their linked hands, pinning them to the wall above her head. He moved his body into her, rubbing his torso sinuously against her breasts, growling. He deepened his kiss, grinding his erection against her body, seeking entry, relief for his sweet agony.

Feverishly Siobhan pressed against his palms, seeking to free her hands...trying to touch him. He kept her hands imprisoned, pressing more of his body into, and around hers. She whimpered, retaliating by the only means available, plunging her tongue into his mouth, returning his incendiary kiss. She writhed against him, seeking relief for the desperation riding her soul.

Faelan moaned and pulled back slightly to stare into her eyes. Releasing her hands, he fisted a hand into her hair at the nape of her neck and pulled her toward him. Her scalp tingled, sending erotic chills to her groin. He wrapped his free arm around her waist as he bent his head to her breast, biting her nipple through the thin silk blouse.

She collapsed against him, her arms tight around him, her legs too weak to hold her upright. When he turned his fevered attention to her other breast she squirmed in exquisite torment, her hands hungry as she clasped his head, her fingers tunneling through his thick, ebony waves.

A log, burning in the fireplace, shifted shooting sparks up the chimney, releasing its acrid piney scent to the room. The wind outside picked up, blowing skeletal branches of naked trees rocking, and scratching, against the windowpanes. Far off thunder rumbled, echoing through the room as he turned his attention to the pulse in her neck. Pushing her head to one side, he licked the tender skin behind her earlobe.

She shivered as he pulled her lobe into his mouth, nibbling and suckling.

She moaned and swallowed convulsively as he slid his arm from around her waist to move under the hem of her blouse, his hand cool against the heated skin of her back.

He licked the seam of her lips and plunged his tongue into her mouth when she opened to him. He removed his hand from her nape to join his other under her blouse, wrapping her close and slanting his mouth for better access to hers.

Across the great room, the front door rattled and opened.

Quinn and Tristan entered the house slapping their Stetsons against their thighs to dislodge snow and moisture. Siobhan stiffened as she realized what she and Faelan had nearly done, where anyone could, and had, walked in on them.

With calculated delay, Faelan drew back from her mouth and drew his arms from beneath her blouse. Smiling seductively, he propped his hands on the wall on either side of her head. "I win," he purred, placing a perfunctory kiss on her startled mouth before straightening and pulling away from the wall.

He turned toward the door and ran his fingers through his hair, bringing some order to his mussed appearance and giving him time to gather some composure. "Have I e'er told ye two how much yer timin' sucks?"

Quinn laughed and placed his hat back on his head. "Jaysus, Faelan. Can ye na' wait? Ye're marrying tha girl in tha mornin'."

Faelan glanced over his shoulder at Siobhan and then back at Quinn. "Would ye?"

"Point taken." Quinn conceded.

Tristan replaced his hat and gestured toward the door. "Be that as it may, yer arse be ours tanight, Faelan. Come on, we'll have ye back in time for yer 'appointment' in tha mornin'. Promise."

Faelan waved them away, his attention still concentrated on Siobhan. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go on with ye. I'll be right there."

"Even-in', Sio-bh-an." Quinn and Tristan chorused in a singsong tone, walking back toward the door.

Faelan turned to Siobhan, who had yet to move from the wall, and tilted her chin up. Kissing her tenderly he promised, in a seductive whisper, "Sleep well, darlin'. We can schedule a rematch tomorrow."

He crossed the room and plucked his Stetson from the rack. Placing it on his head, he grabbed his coat and pulled it on but, before opening the door, he paused a moment and threw Siobhan a cavalier smile.

She finally moved at the sound of the closing door. The approaching storm had dissipated and she could hear the distant truck horn as it pulled away from the house. She stepped away from the wall and ran her hands down her clothes to straighten them.

Glancing around she spied Aingeal still lying in front of the fireplace, his head on his paws. "I think I'm in real trouble here, Aingeal."

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Judge Malone stood five foot five inches tall in his lifts, but his twinkling blue eyes and bushy white hair gave him an attractive, fey appearance. Siobhan could well believe the good judge had attracted five wives, and might be searching for number six.

An inveterate flirt, the judge had thrown quite a bit of attention Maeve's way.

Siobhan smiled, wondering if even Judge Malone's considerable charms could convince Maeve that he was not alone in his attentions, that other men found the widow worth the effort to try and attract her attention. Seamus looked more than a little disgruntled by the judge's attentions, even if Maeve wasn't, which caused Siobhan some inner laughter.

Both Seamus and Maeve had been without spouses for a long time. Just maybe...

Eamon seemed happy and involved for a change.

His eyes were sparkling as he monopolized Faelan's time, having cornered him to discuss some grand plans for the ranch. Faelan appeared relaxed and engaged in the conversation. In fact, he looked good enough to eat.

And Siobhan planned to do just that as soon as everyone left them in peace.

When are these people leaving? It's my wedding night and I don't think I can wait much longer. As though called, Faelan glanced up at Siobhan, his heated look and the pumped emotions offering Siobhan little doubt that he shared her desires, and impatience. With an intimate smile, full of pure lasciviousness, he returned to his conversation with his father, leaving her stewing in her own juices.

"Lovely ceremony and little get together, dear."

Siobhan wondered how Kieran managed to compliment, and condescend, all in one sentence. Her teeth set in a grimace of a smile, she turned her cheek to her new uncle-by-marriage to buss. "I do hope you're enjoying yourself, Kieran."

"Aye that I am. I was just thinkin' what a shame 'tis that yer dear parents couldna' be here ta see ye married. I'm sure they would have been very proud." Siobhan cringed, wondering if he had been trying to upset her, or if he'd just gotten lucky. Since Kieran was watching her expression so closely, she suspected he knew exactly the effect his words would have.

She contemplated the best way to escape any further painful conversation when his next words captured her entire attention, wrapping her heart in dread. "Ye know, I always suspected yer parents' deaths were at least partially responsible for Faelan's leavin'."

"What do you mean? Faelan was already gone by then, wasn't he?"

"Oh, nay. That be tha night he left town, or rather tha night before he left. I be na' quite sure which because he ne'er returned. I think Faelan suspected that his father instigated tha whole unfortunate mess since, of course, Eamon was...feelin' na' pain, as they say, and doesna' remember that night anyway. I dunna' know if anyone's mentioned that he had been harassin' yer poor parents at tha Samhain celebration somethin' awful. That be just how Eamon was back then. Conroys are notoriously poor losers, and Eamon *did* lose yer mother ta yer father, after all."

"Faelan and Eamon were both there that night? And Faelan suspected his father of being responsible for my parents' deaths?"

"Oh, me dear, I can see that I've upset ye. And on yer wedding day too." Kieran picked up her hand and patted it ineffectually, his damp flesh causing her stomach to churn.

"I'm sure that Faelan and Eamon have come ta some sort of an understandin'. Why, just look at how well they're gettin' along now. I'm sure Faelan would have said somethin' if it be important so I must be mistaken. Let's just forget that I said anythin' at all. Oh, look...there are yer grandparents. I must speak ta them 'fore they leave and congratulate them

too. Please excuse me. Again, me congratulations, dear." He kissed the air next to her cheek, slimily patting her hand again before hurrying over to join Maeve and Seamus.

Stunned, Siobhan stood stationary for several moments, her mind whirling in turbulent thought. *Faelan and Eamon were there that night*? Why hadn't Faelan told her? Was he hiding something? Had Eamon been involved in the deaths? Did Faelan hear something? See something? Know something? Ice encased her heart.

"Hello, beautiful. Did that scum of a husband of yers leave ye alone already?" Tristan grabbed both of her hands, spinning her around. Looking into her face, he saw hurt and confusion. "Ah, now, what's troubling ye, darlin'?"

Dazed, Siobhan looked up at him. "Tris, did Faelan leave Destiny before, or after, my parents were killed?"

"Why? Is it important?"

"I need to know."

"He ne'er came back home after that night."

"Did Eamon have anything to do with my parents' deaths?"

Tristan hesitated, glancing at Faelan and Eamon before answering. "Well, I dunna' know everythin' that happened that night...but I know that be tha night Faelan left." He scowled, thinking back, trying to place everyone that fateful night. "Da couldna' have been there, because he showed up a couple hours after we got home, before tha other men left tha celebration. As a matter of fact, I think he passed out in tha den before tha fire happened."

Siobhan chewed her bottom lip, afraid to ask the next question. "Was Faelan there, at my parents' that night?"

"Well, now, darlin', I think ye should be askin' Faelan that."

"Yes, I guess I'd better."

"Siobhan, I dunna' know what ye be thinkin', but I tell ye that there be na' better man than Faelan. I'd trust him above all others, brother or na'."

"Thank you, Tris." She pulled herself together and managed a smile. "Please. Go. Enjoy yourself. I'm fine. Besides, I see that Quinn is making short work of the shrimp. You'd better hurry if you want your share."

Tristan laughed. "Na' need ta worry 'bout me. I'll be takin' care of Quinn." He grew serious again. "Are ye sure ye'll be all right?"

"I'm sure. I'll speak to Faelan and clear this all up."

Tristan kissed her cheek and made his way back to the party.

Siobhan managed to avoid Faelan for over an hour, and even convinced Maeve that everything was fine when she was asked why she was so quiet. Although only eleven, all the guests had gone, leaving only Molly and Brian remaining behind to help Siobhan and Faelan clean up the celebratory mess.

Faelan loosened his tie and entered the kitchen to find Molly and Brian still cleaning up. Anxious to be alone with his bride, Faelan sent the older couple home. "Brian, take your wife home. It's late and we can finish this up later."

Brian smiled conspiratorially at Faelan and set the last of the dishes on the counter next to the sink. "Come, Molly darlin'. Let's be goin' now."

"But tha dishes..." Molly looked up at her husband, then at Faelan. Understanding dawned and she quickly removed her apron. "As ye say, 'tis gettin' late." Setting it on the

counter next to the dishes, she pulled her husband toward the door. "We'll be seein' ye bright and early Monday then."

Faelan grinned. "Well, maybe not that early?"

Molly laughed. "Noon then. Congratulations, Mr. Faelan." She kissed his cheek and Brian shook his hand.

"Have either of you seen my elusive bride lately?"

Brian grinned. "I did see her on tha terrace a few minutes ago. By tha way, that mongrel of hers has been fed and has taken his usual bed in front of tha fireplace."

Faelan chuckled and shook his head. "Thanks, and have a good night." He watched them leave through the side door and made his way to the terrace to find Siobhan. She sat on a marble bench looking up at the moon, her profile to Faelan. He caught his breath as he watched her, the familiar yearning gripping his gut. He felt the first tentative touches of her mind seeking his, and opened for her.

She gasped and rose from the bench to face him.

Something was very wrong.

She clenched her fists, barring her mind to him, holding her body rigid, straining to pull away from him. Tentatively Faelan approached her. "Siobhan? Is something wrong?"

"The night my parents died..."

"Yes, go on."

Her face was colorless, except for two spots on her cheeks, as she asked the telling question, asked between clenched teeth, "Were you there?"

"When yer parents died?" He looked confused, uncertain what she was asking.

"Were you there, Faelan?" Siobhan barely contained her anger and hurt.

"Later. I was there later."

"Why didn't you tell me? I had a right to know who I was, and what happened to my parents." She crossed her arms over her chest, and glared in impotent rage. "Were you involved?"

Faelan met her eyes. His expression shut down. "What do you think?"

Ashamed, Siobhan turned away knowing Faelan would never hurt her deliberately, but she was not yet ready to give up her righteous anger. It had been too long, and she was tired of being without answers, without any control.

She uncrossed her arms, and clenched her fists at her side. Defiantly, she raised her chin and met his stare. "Why did you marry me? What is it you *really* want from me?"

Faelan stepped toward her, backing her up to the wall. He braced himself, a hand on either side of her, trapping her between his arms. Glaring, he leaned in echoing her question. "What do I want with ye?" He cautioned, "Ye mean besides tha lovin', and constant need for ye?" The expression in his eyes belied his smile as he nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent, taking in her essence.

He drew back a few inches, his eyes capturing hers. "What do I want with ye?" he purred. "I want ta taste ye, smell ye, touch ye and move over every part of ye 'till our scents merge. I want ta hold ye, fill ye, posess ye 'till I canna' tell where I leave off and ye begin. I want ta rise with ye every mornin' and lie down with ye every evenin'. I want ta fill yer belly with babes and grow old with ye, surrounded by tha family we've made tagether."

Drawing back, his expression dejected, he added, "All that takes trust. Trust that doesna' yet exist between us." Defeated, he dropped his arms and released her, turning his back. "Go, Siobhan. Go, and return when ye understand, when ye can trust me. But know this. I'll na' be lettin' ye go. I keep what's mine, and ye be mine, Siobhan." He remained immobile, his back to her.

Wide-eyed, Siobhan slowly, silently walked to the door and left her new husband behind, making her way to Maeve's.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Surprised to see her, Maeve opened her mouth to question Siobhan. After one look at the set face, she pursed her lips and left the kitchen without speaking.

Siobhan paced, muttering to herself.

Memories of childhood, and of dreams, played incoherently in her head. The pressure built in her skull, pushing against her temples, causing ribbons of pain to ripple through her head. Siobhan put the tips of her index and middle fingers to the sides of her head and rubbed her tender skin in tiny circles, trying to relieve the throbbing.

She closed her eyes tightly against the light, wincing as a kaleidoscope of fluctuating pictures continued playing randomly in her mind.

Maeve returned a few minutes later, a frown on her face and a belligerent tilt to her chin, waiting for her granddaughter to answer her unspoken questions.

Siobhan stopped pacing and faced her. "Faelan was there. He never told me but he was there." Tears streamed unheeded down Siobhan's cheeks while Maeve remained stolidly quiet. "Maeve, you knew didn't you. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why dinna' I tell ye that Faelan was there? Have ye na' been listenin'? Things happen when they happen, and we couldna' force yer memories without harmin' ye. It be time ta tell ye this though. Faelan wasna' only there, but he saved yer life, brought ye to us. Think on that, and return ta yer husband's side where ye belong." Despite her harsh words, Maeve kissed Siobhan's check and left the kitchen.

Angry shouts. Howls of fear and pain. Gunshots. Mama's frenzied voice urged her out the window while the stench of burning wood, and flesh, and frigid night air robbed her of breath.

"Run, Siobhan! Go get Grandda."

Her laborious progress through the icy drifts. A white-hot flash that exploded her head into oblivion.

Just as in her dreams, except now there was more.

Faelan had saved her.

The biting chill disappeared when Faelan held her and she had felt safe after having been so very afraid. She struggled to awaken, wanting nothing more than to crawl back into the blessed dark when she whimpered at the horrendous pain.

She could still smell him.

His scent had filled her, had enveloped her in a cocoon of security as he urgently commanded her not to die.

Siobhan, ye arena' goin' ta leave me. Do ye hear? How can ye marry me if ye dunna' grow up?"

Before she had remembered nothing else until she had awakened, much later, in Maeve's barn. Now she did.

She remembered everything that had happened earlier that evening.

Eamon had been drunk at the Samhain celebration, and his constant needling had forced her parents to leave, to take Siobhan and leave their friends at the celebration far earlier than planned.

But Eamon's was not the voice she heard later, the voice chasing her, the voice mixed in with the fire.

Gunshots. Mama crying. Fire. A monster stalked her in the cold and dark.

No. Not a monster.

A man. One who had chased Siobhan from the cabin, calling to the others to find her, shoot her.

Make sure she was dead.

She knew that voice, that monster.

Kieran! Not Eamon, but Kieran.

With no voice for her anguish, Siobhan wailed her rage, her sorrow, and her pain.

Aberrant lightening streaked across the evening sky, ominous rolls of thunder filled the night. Sleet pelted panes of glass in the open window as tears of pain streamed down her checks.

Siobhan stopped her sobs and forcibly blew her nose, drying her eyes with determined swipes. For she knew what must be done.

For her parents and their wolves.

For Faelan, the ranch and the Clann.

For herself.

Faelan. It was inevitable.

She picked up her keys and purse from the side table and grabbed her coat from the stand. Flinging open the door, she rushed to the Blazer, jerking on her coat.

She jumped into the car, gunned it to life, and pulled onto the road. *Faelan*.

Faelan slumped in his over-stuffed rocker and stretched his long legs toward the fire. His white linen dress shirt was untucked, and unbuttoned. Bits of firelight danced off his silver belt buckle as he cradled a tumbler of whiskey held nonchalantly in his palms, a crystal tumbler from their wedding gifts, from which he periodically downed burning mouthfuls.

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Rainbows of light danced through the prisms of angles created by his tumbler, playing in the firelight across the ceiling.

"At least it's good Irish whiskey," he snorted.

Saluting Aingeal, who slept at his bare feet. "Ta Siobhan, tha only woman I'll ever love." He took another slug, sightlessly contemplating the fire and mumbling, "And may have lost forever."

Hearing Siobhan's name, Aingeal pricked his ears and lifted his head. Seeing no one but the pitiful Faelan, he laid his head on his paws, snuffled, sighed and closed his eyes.

Faelan's brogue thickened as he muttered, "Am I na' just tha most pathetic creature on God's green Earth? Christ, why dunna' I just slit me bloody throat and be done with it? Nay, on second thought, I'll be gettin' roarin' drunk like tha good Irishman I be," and tossed down another large gulp.

Lights from an approaching vehicle flickered through the panes in the door and flashed off with the car's engine. A car door slammed followed by footsteps running up the stairs, and pounding on the front door.

"Go away. Na' one be home."

"Faelan?"

"Siobhan? Bloody hell..."

Slamming his glass on the table, Faelan rose and padded barefoot to the door. He unlatched and swung it open, the wind catching and crashing it against the wall.

Aingeal, disturbed by the noise and the storm, rose, tucked his tail between his legs, and quickly moved down the hall to Eamon's study.

Freezing rain poured down in sheets off the porch roof behind Siobhan. Eerily, a roll of thunder surrounded them as lightening backlit her sodden form. For endless moments, an eternity it seemed, they held each other's gaze without moving.

"I remember," Siobhan said calmly, belying the maelstrom of emotions churning inside her. She crossed the threshold to Faelan who held his ground, eyeing her warily. Tilting her head back, meeting his eyes, Siobhan whispered, "You came back for me. I remember everything..."

With a sigh, she moved her hands behind his head, sinking her fingers into his thick waves. She pulled his head down, placing her mouth over his as if never to let him go again. She moved her body into his, rising up on her toes and deepened their kiss.

Groaning, he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed almost painfully, sealing her to his body short of cleaving himself to her core. Neither noticed the swirling debris and slush sweeping across the entryway as the storm outside echoed the furor inside.

Their tongues mated as they attempted to devour each other.

Faelan lifted his head and promised, "I'll always come for ye, *a banphrionsa*." Swinging her into his arms, he strode to his room. He stood her gently next to the bed his eyes sweeping hungrily down her body.

"Ye seem to be wet," he remarked unnecessarily.

She smiled seductively. "Yes, I seem to be very wet."

He grinned at her uncharacteristic innuendo. "Let's see what we can do about it."

Siobhan watched his face intently as he removed her clothes piece-by-piece. He lovingly inspected each area of skin revealed and she felt like a birthday present, and shivered as he unwrapped her. When her jacket, dress, and bra lay in a heap on the rug, he knelt, raising her legs one at a time, to pull off the sodden loafers she had slipped on when leaving Maeve's in such a hurry.

Siobhan placed her hands in his hair for balance and left them there, running, tugging fingers through his silken curls.

Faelan peeled her thigh-high stockings off her legs and slowly kissed his way back up her body. Reaching the panties covering her fiery curls he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. He nuzzled her, drawing in her scent as he slowly pulled her lacy underwear down, and off her legs. Raising one leg, so that it draped over his shoulder, he ran his tongue between her nether lips, sipping deeply of the dewy moisture he found there.

Her back arched as she moaned in ecstasy, her knees weak.

Encouraged, he continued his tongue's caresses, suckling on her nub until her knees buckled. He lowered her shaky leg to the floor and pulled her up, into his arms, and devoured her sweet mouth.

She relished the taste of bourbon, mixed with Faelan's unique flavor, and herself on his tongue as she ran her hands frantically over his shoulders and back, as if checking to make sure that he was there. His shirt slid off and dropped to the floor with a little help from her greedy hands. Moving those hands upward, she plunged them into his hair to pull his mouth to her while she wrapped a trapping leg securely around the back of his, as though to climb into his skin.

He backed her to the edge of the bed without ever breaking their kiss and lowered her back onto the comforter. Burying his face in her hair, he whispered to her Gaelic words she couldn't translate, but understood nonetheless. The music of his voice, and soft lilt of his brogue wove a sensuous web, trapping her heart and soul. His breath warmed more than her neck as he interspersed heated kisses with those ancient and magical words.

She could feel her magick sizzle as he trailed kisses down her neck and circled her nipple, pulling the puckered skin into his mouth. Her skin tingled where flesh met flesh, magick sliding around her like a second skin.

Thunder rumbled and lightening lit the night as the torrential downpour increased.

Running his fingertips down her stomach to her wet curls, he slid his fingers into her cleft, gathering her moisture to massage her clit. He swallowed her cries as she screamed her pleasure, then moved down to capture a pebbled nipple.

Tonguing and nibbling first, Faelan pulled it into his mouth to suckle.

Siobhan arched her back as spears of delight shot from her breast to her core.

He treated her other nipple to an equal amount of attention and returned to devour her mouth. While she was otherwise occupied, panting at the pleasure sparkling through her body, he reached between them, unfastening his buckle and pants.

Siobhan replaced his hands with hers and pushed his pants to his knees. She slid her legs up to hook her feet into the tops of his pants, pushing them the rest of the way down his legs. Faelan chuckled at her unorthodox ingenuity, gasping when she grasped his member in firm, warm hands.

Wanting to show him the dark magic he'd shown her, Siobhan circled his nipple with her tongue as she cradled and caressed him. Rigid and silken, he quivered as she coated him with glistening drops emerging from his cock. Unable to wait any longer, Faelan laced and raised her hands to anchor them above her head, entering her, seating himself to his hilt.

They both moaned as Faelan began a slow rhythmic rock.

Sweat and rain coated their limbs and soaked their hair. Their eyes met increasing intimacy, sending darts of ecstasy skidding along their nerves.

Faelan clenched his teeth, his neck muscles roping as he strained to control the speed of his strokes.

*"Faelan, please...more."* He faltered when her pleas echoed only in his mind. His eyes fastened on hers as he regained control.

*"More 'tis, a ghrá."* Her eyes widened at his inaudible reply, and Faelan laughed at her startled expression. He lowered his head to capture her lips and increased the pace of his

strokes. Pleasure swamped their senses as each was inundated with the other's thoughts, emotions, and sensations, as well as their own.

The storm outside raged, sending gusts of wind down the chimney to stir the remaining embers in the fireplace. Unnoticed, multicolored sparks twinkled around the lovers, joining the shimmering waves encasing them. Invisible bits of magickal energy wafted through the room, tugging at curtains and swirling discarded clothing into tangled piles.

The pyrotechnics increased, crescendoing as Siobhan and Faelan climaxed together.

Faelan growled deep and low, his body shuddering as he fought to control the Shift.

The glow in the room dimmed as Siobhan came back into herself.

Faelan's lower body collapsed onto Siobhan's. He laid his forehead on hers then released their interlaced fingers, rolling onto his side beside her. He wrapped a weighty arm around her as she settled her head on his chest, draping a leg and an arm over him as if playing blanket. Too exhausted for conversation, she closed her eyes, letting his heartbeat lull her to sleep.

In the silence she heard, "Ah, Siobhan, I fear I love you more than is wise,"

And groggily murmured her response. "I love you too."

He chuckled softly before succumbing to fatigue, and the two exhausted lovers fell asleep in each other's arms, replete.

Spent, the storm calmed as snowflakes replaced raindrops, blanketing the sleeping ranch.

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Faelan had risen at dawn to remind the ranch hands to check for cattle in the gorge, since the damn animals tended to get lost during snowstorms. Showered and shaved, he crept out for coffee without waking Siobhan.

Siobhan awoke and found herself alone, Faelan gone from their bed. Fresh from a rejuvenating shower, she stepped out of the bathroom, as Faelan returned to their room, wearing only a fluffy towel, her hair blown dry.

The gleam in his eye sparked an answering twinkle in hers. "Do ye always look so temptin' in the mornin', *mo chuisle*?"

Siobhan laughed. "Faelan, I could wear a potato sack and you'd be tempted."

He leered wickedly. "Now that would depend where ye wore it."

He set his coffee mug by the sink and wrapped his arms around her toweled body before feasting on her lips.

The towel dropped between them and she writhed sinuously against his still clad body, the coarse feel of the fabric deliciously abrasive on her naked skin.

He wasted no time picking her up, and effortlessly carried her to their bed. His clothes dropped on the floor and he knew that, as long as they lived, regardless of how they changed, he'd never tire of touching her.

Magick sparked, igniting at his touch, painting Siobhan's body in a fiery glow.

It coalesced and grew, charging the air and encasing them in liquid fire. An inhuman growl rose from Faelan, sending frissons snaking down her spine.

An orb of gleaming purple fire glowed over them, a voyeur to their passion.

He shuddered as the beast within him clamored for release. Downy, black hair coated his back and limbs, and his jaws ached as he clenched them in an effort to hold the shift at bay.

"A chroí, I canna' hold back."

His agonized thoughts touched the hidden knowledge, buried in her deepest memories, memories spawned eons before by her Druid ancestors, woven into the molecular cells of generations. Genetic memories sparked and played in an instant across her mind and she knew what was to come, and what had to be.

"Faelan, let go."

The last vestiges of his humanity vanished and he howled as the shift shimmered over him, the change gripping him as he climaxed and released his seed deep within her.

Siobhan screamed as she reached her own climax moments after, and a blinding pulse of light shot from the lovers, piercing the hovering orb, shattering it into droplets that bathed them in molten pleasure.

They shifted together, exchanging bodies and essences back and forth in an orgasmic rhythm. Magick throbbed around their merged forms for several minutes before finally releasing them to their individual bodies, forever joining them in a special bond none would break, not man, not death.

Faelan lurched to his back beside Siobhan as soon as the magick subsided, and freed their physical and psychical bonds. "What tha fuck was that?"

Siobhan laughed at his expletive and found herself unable to stop. The contagious laughter captured Faelan and it was several minutes before they were able to stop their chortles.

"Faelan, I do believe we have learned a new trick." Turning on her back, Siobhan chuckled and turned her head toward her husband, who had turned on his side to face her, propping himself on one elbow.

He grinned and swept the hair off her forehead. "Well, luv, da ye think we could try somethin' safer next time...like self-immolation?"

She smiled and captured his free hand, bringing his fingers to her lips where she tenderly kissed the tips. Treating him to a sultry leer she opened her mouth and drew his index finger inside, swirling her tongue over the sensitive pad.

Faelan closed his eyes and moaned as his cock hardened insatiably. "Ah, *cailleach*, I dunna' think I'll live through this." Siobhan chuckled and treated his middle finger to the same carnal assault. Faelan opened his eyes, his blazing regard trained on her face. "Aye, again then. I'm sure I have some unsinged body parts left." He lowered his lips to hers and began their erotic dance anew.

Several blazing minutes later, they rested together, Siobhan in his arms, tracing the ridges and swirling the hair on his chest. "Faelan?"

"Woman, give me a few minutes."

She giggled. "No, this time I have to actually talk to you."

"Okay. I think that listenin' might be easier right now."

"It's about that night, and what I've remembered."

Faelan stiffened. "Okay."

Siobhan propped herself on an elbow and laid her palm against his cheek. Turning his face toward hers, she tenderly kissed him. "Thank you for my life."

He smiled, his dimple tugging at her heart. "Ye be most welcome. Ta lose ye would have meant losin' meself."

She smiled and watched shadows dart behind his eyes. "Faelan, it wasn't Eamon."

He frowned, and then relaxed noticeably. "It wasna'?"

"No, my sweet, loving wolf. You have to learn to let others help with the burdens before they destroy you." She kissed him again, her heart touching his. "It was Kieran."

Faelan closed his eyes briefly and opened them again, fresh pain pouring out. "This will devastate Quinn."

"It can wait awhile, but I don't think you give Quinn enough credit. He's been carrying the burden of his father a long time now. I doubt he has many illusions left about him."

"Ye deserve justice, and Kieran has ta pay for what he's done."

"And he will. One thing I've learned in the last few months is that none of us escapes destiny. What happens was meant to happen. And eventually we all reap what we sow."

Faelan's gin and heart-melting dimple returned. "And what made ye so wise?"

"My very own big, bad wolf."

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Solstice and Christmas were spent in a whirlwind of activity with family, friends and Council members. Most on the Council were relieved about Faelan and Siobhan's marriage, anxious for a return to older values, and a stability for their members. There were those, however, uninterested in the welfare of the wolves, or even the Clann.

For them, or because of them, Faelan spent the last couple of weeks of the year arranging land leases for the disputed land. He signed them over to the one person he knew he could trust to watch out for the welfare of the wolves.

Siobhan had been thrilled with her wedding present.

Surprisingly enough, her eyes filled with tears when he presented them to her. "It's come down to this then? This will force their hand now, won't it?"

Faelan sighed. "Aye, it probably will."

"Why don't they remember, Faelan? Why don't they remember their pledge to the wolves? They hate so completely they can't see they're destroying their own world?"

He held her as she sobbed softly. "Ah, dunna' cry, *mo chro*, for 'twill be fine. We willna' let anything happen ta our wolves."

Siobhan remembered her mother crying that night, and her father comforting her with nearly the same words. She remembered the cries and howls of the wounded and dying wolves as Kieran and the other men shot and burned without mercy. Her mother's anguished sobs as she cradled her dying husband in her arms echoed in Siobhan's mind until she almost wished she'd never remembered anything.

She remembered too the sound of the shot that silenced her mother's tears and, in that moment, she felt a rage so cold and sharp that it begged for release. Only Faelan's arms, and murmured endearments, prevented her from seeking out her husband's uncle and heaping all manners of vengeance on his head. Instead, she nestled closer to Faelan, her husband.

Her lifeline.

She knew then that there would be no repeating history.

History had come full circle. This time it was their turn.

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The day dawned clear and crisp, a definite portent as far as Siobhan was concerned. The first Monday of the year was the day the Council voted for their chosen alpha male.

While Faelan was pretty much a shoo-in, he still needed the opportunity this public forum presented to influence more recalcitrant Council, and Clann, members.

The closed Do Drop Inn was the only building large enough to host nearly one hundred adult Clann Mac Tire members at one time. Ranching closed down considerably in the winter months and that, along with the clear weather, afforded the perfect opportunity for most of the members to make the meeting.

Seamus stood next to the entrance, a constant reminder that he'd brook no nonsense from the attendees.

Tristan and Quinn leaned against supporting posts, their relaxed poses belying their lethal abilities. Seamus had asked them for help in maintaining order — should it become necessary. The way the Clann glanced at them reassured Siobhan that the threat, or warning, would be enough.

Brenna hurried in to sit next to Siobhan in the front row.

"Nice to see you, doctor."

Brenna had turned to smile at Quinn who was grinning uncharacteristically back at her. 'Hmmm? Oh, yeah, nice to see you too."

Siobhan laughed as Brenna sat forward.

"What's so funny?"

"I never thought I'd see so many normal expressions on Quinn's face in a lifetime, let alone in a couple weeks. You're good for him, Dr Brenna Keating."

Brenna ducked her head and blushed. "He's been pretty good for me."

"Has he now?"

"Good grief. You sound just like them. Pretty soon you'll be 'ayeing' and 'naying' just like a native."

The crowd grew quiet, but an overlying buzz accompanied Faelan and Eamon's entrance. Eamon had given up his wheelchair in favor of a cane to support his weaker left side. His chin was held high, proud to be included as the Clann leader, passing his crown to the next generation.

Siobhan saw the strong genes and masculine beauty he'd bequeathed his sons, and was grateful. A vision of Faelan's future, and their proud, shared heritage, all that would be passed to their children, overwhelmed her and brought threatening tears to her eyes.

Kieran followed, strutting to the large table containing the Council and Faelan. Siobhan's heart froze as she strove to keep the hatred and fear from her eyes as she watched him take his place.

Kieran stopped to stand beside the table, his eyes slowly traveling over Faelan whose expression, Siobhan proudly noted, remained impassive. "Why is Quinn na' up here?"

Quinn straightened and stepped away from the support beam he'd been leaning against. "Because Quinn isna' competing, Da. Faelan has me support."

Kieran shot him a look of disgust. "And Tristan?"

Tristan remained where he'd been, his expression uncharacteristically emotionless in an exact match for his brother's. Eamon smiled his eyes portraying the humor his left side no longer could support. "Uh, Tristan, I think you uncle expects some kinda response from ye."

Remaining in the same position, Tristan spoke, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "Really? And here I am thinking it be one of those rhetorical questions." He sighed and straightened. "Well, then ye shall hear it plain. Me brother always had, and always will have, me support." He leaned again against the column and folded his arms. "There be some of us Conroys who understand *loyalty*."

Tristan's words caused a renewed buzz that quickly quieted when Eamon raised his hands and pleaded for silence. "Quiet please. Kieran, I believe you have yer answers."

Siobhan glanced quickly behind her at Tristan, whose eyes twinkled in response, winking reassuringly, but his face remained stoically free of emotion as he maintained his distance from the council seats.

Brenna sat with her head bowed, trying hard not to laugh.

They had given her the short version, after which she had claimed the man, uncle or not, should be hung by his feet and gnawed on by the surviving wolves. Snickering at the thought of his uncle hanging like an opossum, Faelan had talked her into relenting, explaining that Kieran's karma would eventually catch up to him.

Judge Malone, his eyes filled with merriment, spoke up. "Perhaps we should just get on with tha votin'. However, seein' as how Faelan's the only candidate, perhaps we should forego..."

"You'll excuse me, Judge," Kieran interrupted, "but there is tha matter of a majority of Council members needing ta sanction any appointment."

"Certainly, but I thought..."

A disturbance at the entrance interrupted the discussion.

"Seamus McMahon, let me in ta this farce of a hearing."

Seamus bowed toward the entrance. "Of course, Maeve. Who am I to deny entrance to the Clann Healer."

Imperiously, Maeve crossed the room and strode up the steps to the Council table.

Dressed in black, from her head to her toes, her hooded magenta velvet cloak was her only bright spot, covered in glowing Druidic runes.

She inclined her head slightly in Eamon's direction, paying homage to the current leader of their clan, smiling gleefully when the time-honored gesture was returned. She ignored Kieran, sniffing disdainfully as if scenting a noxious odor. "I see tha Council has forgotten protocol. Or has it being ignored, like everything else we have learned to be true?"

Judge Mahoney, his appreciative gaze trained on Maeve, answered deferentially, "We meant no disrespect, Maeve, uh Madame Doyle. Please accept our apologies, and continue."

Maeve sniffed an acceptance of the Judge's apology and turned to fix Siobhan with a heated stare "Siobhan McMahon Conroy, I release my duties and responsibilities ta ye as Guardian of Clann Mac Tire. Ye shall be in charge of tha spiritual well-being of yer Clann, and of our charges, tha wolves." She motioned to Siobhan to rise, and placed her cloak around Siobhan's shoulders.

When she turned to Brenna, there were rumblings, her actions setting a new precedence, of which she had not bothered to inform the Council before now. "Dr. Brenna Keating, ye are charged as Healer ta tha Clann Mac Tire. It be yer responsibility, until ye die or until ye pass yer duties ta another, to be a guide, a healer of those wounded of flesh rather than spirit." Brenna rose slowly at Maeve's nod, surprise evident on her face, for she had not expected to be given such an honor. Maeve removed her heavy cross and kissed it before hanging it around Brenna's neck.

Maeve then kissed the cheeks of each woman, bidding them sit, following that order with another. "Now learn Gaeilge so ye can sound civilized." A titter rustled through the crowd at her command, many having never bothered to learn the old words.

She stiffened, turning to glare daggers at Kieran before addressing the Council as a whole. "Be there any dissension on tha matter of me grandson's confirmation?"

The other Council members nervously looked at one another, not sure any wished to stand against such power, and shook their heads. Eamon answered for them with a grin. "Nay, Maeve, I believe that be endorsement enough for all of us."

Maeve nodded, happy they had understood her request. "Ye look like hell, Eamon. But a hell of a lot better than tha last time I saw ye."

Eamon coughed an unexpected laugh. "An ye, Maeve. Lovely as always." He nodded at her, knowing that she more than his match in any play of words, and Maeve returned the gesture, following protocols.

Turning to face Faelan, they stared into one another's eyes, sharing a moment of complete understanding. Maeve inclined her head, honoring his new placement and Faelan stood, bowing deeply in respect. With one last telling glare at Kieran, and a jaunty grin for her grandchildren, she quickly left the bar.

The judge smiled at Kieran. "I take it, then, there are no further objections and Faelan Conroy is tha new Alpha Male of the Clann Mac Tire."

Kieran pursed his lips, but said nothing.

Eamon started to rise, but Faelan stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, dropping to his knees beside Eamon's chair and bowing his head. Eamon's eyes teared but his voice remained steady as he removed his cross and draped it over Faelan's head. "Ye be alpha, the Leader of Clann Mac Tire, Faelan, for tha rest of yer life, or until ye pass on tha responsibility." Eamon bowed his and Faelan returned the nod, tears in his eyes.

Judge Mahoney laughed. "This may be superfluous, but 'tis time ta choose yer mate, and alpha female"

Faelan rose and faced Siobhan holding out his hand to her. "Siobhan McMahon Conroy." Siobhan stood, putting her hand trustingly in his. He pulled her to him, kissing her possessively.

Cheers and howls erupted around the room.

Siobhan blushed as Faelan drew away from the kiss. He pulled her to his side and waited for the room to grow quiet.

"Clann Mac Tire, it is past time for us ta return ta our roots and remember that our name means 'Children of the Wolf'. We need ta join tha rest of tha world, that canna' be avoided. But never again will we do it at the cost of those we protect."

## **Chapter Twelve**

The month of January had always been known for family togetherness in lean times. Wolf packs of old would glean from human habitation during this time of year, due to the poor hunting, and the first full moon of January was known as the Wild Wolf Moon, in recognition of the similarities between families and packs.

The Wild Wolf Moon would rise later that night, a little over a week after the Council meeting.

Siobhan and Faelan had spent the past week restructuring the functions of the Clann's Wolf Reserve. All the land that Faelan and other Clann members had managed to appropriate would be donated, the paperwork scheduled to be completed within the following week. Siobhan kept telling herself that there wasn't anything to worry about, but she wasn't convinced. She had tried to reach Faelan via his cell phone but had gotten noting more than his voice mail. She knew he'd spoken to Quinn about his plans, but he and Brenna were spending a rare day off together, which Siobhan was loath to interrupt.

Her husband was more than an hour overdue, and sundown was less than two hours away.

Her uneasiness grew as she'd tried to reach Tristan and Eamon, who'd gone into town for supplies. They had been running in and back, no other stops had been scheduled, and there had been no answer on either their cell phones, or the truck phone.

Her warning tingle of danger was fast becoming a sense of chilling fear.

"Come, Aingeal. Let's go look for him."

"Faelan?"

"Faelan."

The site was empty of wolves, and of Faelan. Aingeal hopped out of the Blazer and began sniffing for clues. Aingeal began frantically barking and Siobhan ran to his side.

Faelan's cell phone, shattered in a mangled pile, lay half buried in the snow alongside a spent dart, similar to what they used in their anesthetizing rifle.

Oh, God. Faelan.

Her cell phone rang and she eagerly answered it. "Faelan?"

"Oh, sorry, my dear. But nay. He's indisposed at tha moment. However, if ye'll be a good girl and head home, we'll be bringing him ta ye in about fifteen minutes. His life, and that of his brother and father, depend on yer following me orders, and following them quickly."

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Siobhan waited on the porch for Kieran and his men, her rigid posture and calm, closed expression at odds with the panic rapidly enveloping her. She crossed her arms to hide their shaking and leaned negligently against a column at the top of the steps. Aingeal stood immobile by her side.

Three white pickups pulled into the yard. The middle one backed up and was turned with a sharp spin, backing towards the house so that its tailgate faced her, a tarp covering a

large mass. When the engines were cut, three burly men exited each cab, with Kieran exiting the passenger side of the middle vehicle.

He sauntered nonchalantly up to the porch steps, sneering his words. "Well, Siobhan, 'tis nice ta see that ye at least can follow directions. I really would hate ta see anythin' more happen ta me oh so stubborn nephew And dunna' be forgettin' me brother and Tristan. They willna' fare any better. I had to insist on detaining all three for a bit."

"You have all three?"

"Aye."

"Where are they?"

"Kevin, Connor," Kiernan commanded without turning. Two of the ranch hands jumped into the bed of the middle truck, unlatched the tailgate. One lowered it while the other tore off the tarp.

Siobhan's heart stopped when she saw Faelan, trussed and unconscious, curled on his side in the bed of the truck, clad only in jeans. Large purple and red bruises covered his torso, while scrapes criss-crossed his face and arms. His right eye appeared swollen shut and duct tape covered his mouth. Outwardly calm, Siobhan clenched her teeth, struggling to remain in control.

In her mind, she heard gunshots and her mother's cries.

Aingeal growled, pulling her back to the present, his hackles erect he tensed to launch himself at the men. "Aingeal, stay."

Silently she continued, "The pack is much more efficient than the lone wolf."

Frustrated, Aingeal whined, but relaxed. "For now, I obey."

"What about Eamon and Tristan?"

"They be waitin' ta see how well ye can follow directions."

Evenly she asked, "What do you want?"

Smiling Kieran answered, "'Tis glad I am ta see that ye still be as intelligent as ye are beautiful." When Siobhan failed to react, he continued, "Okay, down ta business. Ye want yer husband back and I want tha land leases he gave ye as a wedding gift. Sign them o'er and ye can resume yer honeymoon."

Aingeal silently muttered, "More fox than wolf."

Siobhan knew that their chances of remaining alive any longer than two minutes after the transfers were recorded were slim to none. Desperately she tried reaching out to Maeve, or Seamus, anyone who could help, but sensed no one.

Aingeal looked up at her. "I go."

"Who are you? Lassie?"

His return message was the equivalent of "Bite me!"

Turning his back on the men, he walked down the side of the porch, continuing leisurely down the side stairs and trotted toward the meadow.

"Where's he goin'?"

Siobhan shrugged and answered, "It's nearly dusk. He takes off for a couple hours this time every day." Distracting Kieran from Aingeal's leaving, she turned back to the group of thugs, and advised them in the coldest of tones that there would be no paper signing until she saw that her husband was released and could check his injuries. For

several tense moments, the two adversaries silently measured each other, neither budging.

Kieran, knowing he had her between a rock and a hard place with his men and guns, carelessly tossed out the order to untie Faelan, and remove his gag. "Of course, should he forget his manners, or try ta call his wolves, we'll have ta take measures ta see that he can na' longer do anythin' at all." Mutely Siobhan agreed with a sharp nod.

She neared the truck, grimacing when the tape was ruthlessly ripped off his face and his bonds were cut, then yanked away by unfeeling hands. She was almost relieved that he was unconscious as she hopped effortlessly into the bed of the truck, kneeling over him, touching his cold flesh. Her heart ached when she touched him with the lightest brushing of her hands and he groaned in pain, turning on his back.

Desperately she opened her mind, hoping to reach him, nudging their link.

Groggily Faelan murmured, "Siobhan?"

Siobhan could sense his quick return to consciousness, and admonished him to play possum a little while longer. Dazed, Faelan silently reassured her that he was lucid, and would do what he could to get them out of this trouble.

The two men, who had been sitting near the back of the truck, watching her every move, hopped out. As the truck rocked, Faelan was unable to stifle a small groan as his bruised flesh was jarred against the cold metal. Siobhan covered the noise by loudly asking for a blanket, holding out her hand imperiously, uncowed. Kieran acquiesced, glowering at her proud attitude, and one of his men reached into the cab of the truck and pulled out an old horse blanket. Wadding it up, he tossed it at her.

As she covered Faelan with the pungent blanket, she had ample time to discover the extent of his injuries. Grateful that it was still light enough to camouflage the heat coming off her hands, she touched his body while tucking the blanket around him, sending healing deep into his battered body. A bruised kidney and a couple broken ribs seemed to be the worst of it. She silently thanked Maeve for insisting that she train to learn the secret ways. She also knew that the power of their love was aiding her in her magick.

The fact that she was able to perform this healing, without Brenna's help, was proof of her control, and their bond. That, and the fact his injuries weren't any more serious than they were.

Caressing his face, as any loving wife would do, she touched his cheek and lowered the swelling of his eye, enabling him to see more clearly. He kept his eye closed while she propped him up, leaning him against the back of the cab. She was very careful to hold the blanket securely around his shoulders, as if he was chilled, covering the healed wounds.

She let him know that Aingeal had gone after the wolves, and anyone else who would, and could, come. *"It's about time that that mangy mutt earned his keep."* 

Faelan's silent teasing reassured Siobhan that he was quickly healing.

They both heard the growly voice. "Siobhan, the wolves are coming, and someone else." "Someone else? Who?"

"I can't tell yet, but definitely human."

Siobhan and Faelan responded in unison. *"That's not a lot of help."* They laughed with silent chuckles that their minds were so in tune, happy to find *some* humor in the dire situation.

Kieran, impatient to be done, scowled. "Okay, you've seen him, tucked him in all nice an' proper, like a good wife. Now get tha papers and we'll be on our way."

When Siobhan stood and belligerently crossed her arms over her chest, Faelan warned, "*Careful. Those papers are all we have to negotiate with.*"

"And where are Eamon and Tristan? Are they unharmed?"

"They'll be enjoying me hospitality just a wee bit longer. And will stay as safe as a babe in it's mother's arms as long as ye follow me orders. We wouldna' want anythin' ta interfere with tha recordin' progress, now would we?"

"What guarantee do we have that you'll let us go once I've signed those leases over to you?"

"I guess ye'll have ta trust in me benevolence," Kieran smirked. She remembered the scope of Kieran's 'benevolence'. He had given her a taste of it the night he had murdered her parents, and tried to kill her. A headache crawled across her temples as she closed her eyes in pain, the memories of that devastating night buffeting her senses.

Visions of her home, consumed by flames. Fatal shots, echoing in the dark night, signaling the end of her parents' lives. Agonizing howls and whimpers of dying wolves. The pungent odor of burning flesh, the heat of the raging fire, and her mother's agonized cries as she bent over the body of Siobhan's father, would ring in her ears forever, as signs of Kieran's benevolence.

His mercy' wasn't something she was anxious to ever experience again.

Thunder rumbled ominously as dark clouds gathered in the sky behind Siobhan, the intensity growing in cadence with the increasing pain behind her eyes. A vagrant wind lifted locks of her hair, dancing them around her face before gently laying them against her shoulders.

Rage over her parents, for Faelan, for her wolves, and for herself seeped into the air surrounding her and Kieran's men stirred uneasily, moving further away as the air crackled with static, the wind scented with the perfume of acrid ozone and magick. Lightening bisected the sky as the wind picked up, and the thunder rumbled ever closer.

Kieran's men muttered and backed completely away from the pickup holding Faelan and Siobhan, their blood running cold as her voice touched each of their souls, resonating with her power. "Tell me, Kieran. How did you imagine this would end? Did you really believe that I would allow you to hurt those I love? Again? My parents were pacifists. I have no such inclination."

Without taking her gaze off Kieran's face, she addressed his men. "You may leave, if you leave now. Lay down your weapons and go! All may leave but Kieran, for Judgment Day has come, and you won't get offered another chance."

Kiernan shouted, "She's bluffin'. She's usin' yer own fears ta fool ye inta thinkin' tha comin' storm be her doin'." The men looked doubtful, but no one dropped his weapon. Kieran's confident smirk reappeared and he turned to Siobhan. "Seems yer little ploy willna' work. Now, be a good girl and go get those papers, or we'll be finishing tha job we started on Faelan, and be forced ta include ye too."

Slowly Faelan rose to his full and impressive height, allowing his covering to slide off. "I don't know, Uncle. I dunna' believe ye've e'er seen her really pissed off. I know ye've ne'er seen tha sparks that fly when we be tagether," he finished with a grin. As he put his arm

around his wife, a bolt of lightening struck a tree fifty yards from the trucks, the singed air redolent with burnt wood as gusts of wind stirred flaming remnants in small circles around the remains of the tree.

"Do you feel it, Siobhan? Christ, the power, and the energy, is intoxicating. Still, we need to be careful. Ready?"

"I'm ready. He's never going to hurt anyone again."

"That's my girl. Look, I do believe our reinforcements have arrived. Its show time!"

Over the rise a pack of approximately twenty large, full-grown grey wolves of various colors, led by their Princess, encircled the compound in a spread reminiscent of their normal tracking patterns—weaving back and forth, and in and out, covering the entire ground between the rise and the ranch.

Aingeal kept close to the side of a tall dark individual whose long strides kept easy pace with the pack. Reaching out, Faelan touched the mind of the person accompanying their wolves. "*Quinn*?"

"Aye, cousin."

"What are you doing here?" The astonished tone could not be hidden.

*"Protecting my alphas, of course,"* came the laughing retort, as if the most foolish question had been asked, and answered.

"You know it's your father, don't you." Sadness, the bonds of familial trust forever shattered.

"*Aye*." Bitterness colored the quietly intoned word.

The wolves stationed themselves in a half circle around the trucks, out of reach of the porch lights, casting phantom shadows against the side of the rise in the dying light of the burning tree. Quinn stepped forward and sat down on the open tailgate beside Siobhan and Faelan, showing where his allegiance lay, while Aingeal jumped into the bed of the truck and sat down next to his mistress, ready to leap into the fray at her first word.

"Hello, Da. Ye have a party and forget ta invite me?" Quinn asked mockingly.

Faelan smiled at Kieran, remarking, "Bet ye dinna' see that one comin'."

Dismissively, Kieran shook his head and said, "Go home, Boy. This doesna' concern ye."

Slowly Quinn slid off the tailgate and stood. He folded his arms over his chest and said, "It concerns me." Over his shoulder he asked, "Siobhan, are ye okay?"

Without looking at him, Siobhan answered, "So far, so good. You should convince your father, though, to cut his losses and let his men leave before someone gets hurt. And by someone, I don't mean us."

"Sounds generous, Da."

"Ye be na' falling for this bull be ye, Quinn? Come on. Druids? Werewolves? Our ancestors told these fairytales ta control tha clan by fear. Tha world is what it has always been - survival of tha fittest."

"Dog-eat-dog?"

Not recognizing the irony in his son's voice, Kieran stated, "People need ta be told what ta do. They want ta be told. It makes them feel secure."

"So ye be just a big humanitarian, huh, Da? And what about tha wolves?" Confused, Kieran asked, "Tha wolves...?"

Quinn widened his stance and enunciated distinctly, each word dropping like ice. "What... happens... ta ... tha... wolves?"

"Son, it be us, or them. There be na' choice." Sensing that he was losing Quinn, Kieran became more emphatic. "We need tha land ta expand. Things were doin' just fine until yer cousin let his dick do his thinkin' for him." Siobhan latched onto Faelan's forearm when he started forward and the thunder rumbled closer, forceful winds blowing the hats off the ranch hands' heads, skipping them over the compound like leaves on a summer's breeze.

A slight smile lifted the corners of Quinn's mouth. "I do believe both Faelan and his wife object ta yer erroneous characterization, Da. As a matter of fact, we are all thinkin' ye meant ta be deliberately insulting."

Angry now, Kieran bit out, "Dunna' tell me ye be infatuated with tha little bitch, too."

Faelan's eyes smoldered and an inhuman snarl rumbled from deep in his throat, followed by enraged growls from the all but forgotten wolves, standing guard on the perimeter.

"Careful, Da. Ye know what they say about paybacks bein' a bitch..." He smiled wickedly and thumbed toward Siobhan. "I'm thinkin' ye have bit off more than ye can chew." Shaking his head at his father's stubbornness, his refusal to see what was in front of his face, he spoke loudly enough over the increasing noise of the eminent storm. "I'll repeat Mrs. Conroy's offer. Anyone may leave, unharmed, if they lay down their weapon and leave *now*."

A tall brawny ranch hand swaggered forward, moving closer to the truck and turned to face the rest of the men, bragging, "I'm not afraid of a little wind. There's no such thing as controlling the weather. Mr. Kieran's right."

Quinn glanced over his shoulder at Siobhan and moved back to the truck and away from the burly man. When he'd put a few more feet between himself and the braggart, he nodded to Siobhan but said nothing.

She glared at the man, regret a fleetingly emotion crossing her face. The wolves stirred restlessly as her features hardened.

A single bolt of lightening pierced the sky, entering the man through his crown and traversing the length of his body, throwing him three feet back. Trails of smoke wafted from the soles of his boots, streaming out of the barrel of the rifle still clutched in his right hand.

"Anyone else?" With the pointed question, they watched the men waste no time piling into a single truck. The group of males froze in mid-climb when the soft feminine voice strongly suggested they *not* leave without their fallen comrade. "He *will* need to be taken to a hospital, but he's alive...for now." Two ranch hands jumped out, lifted the unconscious man into the truck bed, and diving in after him as the pickup started toward Destiny.

Kieran was shaken but held his ground. "Are ye na' forgettin' somethin'? Somethin' tha might have ye treatin' me with a tad more respect?" When the trio turned toward him questioningly, he reminded them of his hostages. "Eamon and Tristan. They are still bein' held at me ranch. If I dunna' call in another," he checked his watch, "fifteen minutes, well..." he shrugged.

Quinn laughed and called, "Tristan."

The large golden wolf closest to the porch trotted up to Quinn and sat, its tongue lolling in a canine grin. A blurring flash of motion and Tristan stood, gloriously naked, in place of the wolf. "Hello, Uncle."

Kieran paled and sat down heavily on the porch.

Faelan placed his free hand over his wife's eyes and growled, "Aingeal, make yerself useful and take that blanket to my idiot brother."

Aingeal grabbed it up and grumbled mentally as he carried it to Tristan, *"Fetch this. Fetch that. Don't bite the humans. Did you have to mate with such a dominant alpha, Siobhan?"* 

Tristan laughed and wrapped the blanket around his waist, covering his lower half. "Boy, it sure is cold. How do ye stand bein' out of fur in this weather?"

Faelan jumped out of the truck's back end and helped Siobhan down. "I have clothes inside that will fit you, Tristan."

"Na' need. I'd like a wee bit more exercise. Those guards at Kieran's ran away as soon as I shifted," he grumbled disgustedly. "Da is waiting for me with Seamus. I'll send Seamus over for his prisoner when I get back." Bending over Siobhan's hand, graceful despite holding his blanket in place, he teased, "Glad I am ta be of service ta ye, Milady." Grinning, ever irreverent, he dropped his blanket and shimmered back into the large golden wolf, a wolfish grin on his face. He turned, howled, and rejoined the pack, who echoed his call. Turning as one, they raced over the meadow, topping the rise and baying their joy at being alive to the full moon.

Faelan stood in front of Kieran and said, "Come, Uncle. Quinn and I have some business ta transact with ye. Ye are going ta sign a Power of Attorney, handin' all yer family assets over ta Quinn. Then ye'll list all Clann, and Family properties ye've accumulated, acquired, or appropriated, and sign a Power of Attorney for them over ta me. Quinn and I will sort out what be what 'tween us. *Then*, if ye've cooperated in a nice enough fashion, we'll turn ye over ta tha law for tha murders of Donal and Brigid. If not...well, we really dunna' need ye conscious, or even alive, ta take care of everythin' that needs ta be done. It just makes things a wee bit more expedient."

Quinn added expressionless, "Try and cheat us, or dissemble over these matters, and we'll throw ye ta tha wolves', so ta speak. Ye can face tha Clann's justice." If possible, Kieran paled even more, but rose when Quinn held out his arm to the suddenly old, and broken, man.

Siobhan pulled on Faelan's arm to stop him from following Quinn and Kieran up the steps.

Faelan turned toward her, his eyes raised quizzically. "We'll be right there, Quinn. Feel free ta make use of tha whiskey on tha bar." Quinn nodded and pulled his father into the house. Now, me darlin' wife, what is it ye be wantin'?" Faelan smiled warmly, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close, tucking her head under his chin.

Siobhan melted, her arms wrapped tightly around his back. "Do you have any idea what just the sound of your voice does to me?"

"I'll keep that in mind. Now what be botherin' ye?"

"Did you know that Tristan could shift?"

Faelan chuckled. "Darlin, do ye na' remember runnin' together when we were kids?"

"I remember you, but that's all. Why?"

"Well, Tristan and Quinn couldna' shift back and forth very quickly then, so ye probably mostly saw them as wolves."

"Quinn too?"

Leading toward the house, he commented, "I can see that we'll be needin' ta reintroduce ye ta yer Clann, *anamchara*."

Before entering the house, Siobhan turned to look at the full moon shining brightly in the now cloudless sky and smiled.

#### THE END

# The Gaelic

Aingeal	ang-gul	Angel
a ghrá	ah g <i>raw</i>	my love
anamchara	on-um-kor-ah	soul mate
banphrionsa	ban-free-on-sah	princess
bráthair	vraa-hair	brother
cailleach	kall-yuckh	witch
Clann	klown	family, children of
Conroy	khan-roi	king
deirfiúir	drih-foor	sister
Faelan	fay-lahn	wolf (diminutive)
Gaeilge	gwayl-geh	Irish Language (Gaelic)
Mac tire	mock teerah	wolf
mo chroí	muh kree	my heart
mo chuisle	muh kwish-la	my pulse, my love, my darling
Seamus	shay-mus	James
sidhe	she	fairy
Siobhan	shuh-vahn	Jean (feminine John)