

SAMHAIN publishing, Ltd.

*Ritual
Love*

*Kate
Davies*

The Beginnings Anthology

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Beginnings: Ritual Love

Kate Davies

Dedication

To Mom. For always believing in me, for sharing the magic of Iona, for being my friend and my biggest fan. I love you.

Now go practice your piano.

Chapter One

Damn.

Moira Sinclair scratched a line through the last listing in her guidebook. There wasn't a single room available on the entire freaking island.

The proprietor had been apologetic, but firm. The entire village had been booked for weeks, she'd said. It was just poor luck that Moira had come to Iona today.

Poor luck. Moira snorted as she let herself out through the gate and started walking towards the village. More like a comedy of errors.

The first mistake was listening to that damn backpacker in Loch Lomond. "The place is full of B and B's," he'd drawled in his laidback Australian accent. "Just knock on a few doors and you'll be right as rain, mate."

Ri-i-i-ight.

She never should have come to Iona. It was a stupid, foolish, ridiculous idea, and there was no reason for her to be here.

Her grandmother was dead. Long dead, so long ago Moira barely remembered her. Hadn't her parents always complained about Gran filling her head with foolishness? Look where those fairy tales had brought her.

To an insignificant island on the other side of the world, on a cold, nasty, October night, with nowhere to stay.

Not just October, though. If it was just a day in October, finding a place to stay would have been a snap. But tonight was Halloween—also known as Samhain, an ancient Celtic holiday. And Iona, apparently, was a big draw.

Who knew that neo-druids would have booked the island solid, weeks in advance?

Not Moira.

Out across the harbor, a whistle blew. Moira looked up, her lips pursing as she realized the last ferry for Mull had just pulled away from the docks. Her stubborn insistence on finding a room had made her miss the last opportunity to get back to civilization.

She should have gotten on the ferry as soon as she realized her mistake. Spending time on an island Gran had loved in her youth wasn't going to bring her any closer to the woman.

Disheartened, she trudged down the main road toward the harbor. Maybe, if she were lucky, there'd be someone with a boat willing to take her back to Mull.

Gran may have loved this island, but to Moira it was no more than a pile of rocks on a bare patch of land.

Magic didn't exist. And neither did her grandmother. Not anymore.

"Hey!"

Turning at the sound, she saw a gangly, stringy-haired guy in a black polyester cape standing on the beach next to a pile of wood. "You here for the ceremony?"

"What ceremony?"

"The Samhain ceremony, of course." He stretched out a hand. "Lughaidh Saidear."

"Excuse me?"

"Lughaidh," he repeated. "You can call me Luke."

“Nice to meet you, Luke,” she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

He leaned forward. “Actually, Luke’s my real name,” he confided, as if she hadn’t already figured that out. “But we’re using our Druid names for Samhain. For realism’s sake.”

Realism. Moira smiled politely and tugged her hand out of his grasp. “Big night, huh?”

“The biggest of the year. We’re having a bonfire and performing a true-to-life reenactment of sacred Druid rituals. You’re welcome to join us.”

She’d rather poke her eyes out with a sharp stick. “No, thanks,” she said. She cast about for a reasonable-sounding excuse. “I’m going to check out the rest of the island. Scientific inquiry, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, you’re a scientist?” His face fell. “Huh.”

People tended to have one of two reactions to the fact that she was a scientist. They either assumed she was too brilliant to bother mixing with “real” people, or they decided she must be boring and predictable. Either way, it was a conversation killer.

Hell. According to her parents, she wasn’t a real scientist, anyway. Cultural anthropology wasn’t a pure enough science to suit them.

She shook off the bad memory. She was through trying to please them. Or anyone else besides herself.

“Yeah,” she said. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

With a wave, she walked away from Luke, the harbor, and the little town clinging to the eastern edge of Iona.

She followed the paved road to the edge of the village. Before her lay uninhabited Iona, which took up far more space than the village and monastery.

The warmth and light of the village faded behind her as she trudged up the tallest hill on Iona at a whopping three hundred feet in elevation.

From her vantage point she could see the bare landscape, sweeping down to the rocky beaches on the far west side of the island.

Even at twilight, the moon was bright enough for her to be able to pick her way down the rough and tumble rocks. Waves lapped at the deserted coastline, playing tag with her feet as she walked the beach. Though geology wasn't her field of study, she hadn't been kidding when she told Luke she was interested in studying Iona. But it wasn't science-related, as she'd implied. What she really wanted, the reason she'd made this crazy pilgrimage in the first place, was to connect to her grandmother again.

Gran had been dead for almost fifteen years now, passing away in her sleep when Moira was only nine. It had been the worst day of her life, and the end of the only soft place she'd ever had.

Her scientist parents had been supremely uninterested in their only offspring, surfacing only when their research grants ran out. They'd been happy to leave her to Gran during school holidays. Free from the stifling restrictions of boarding school, Moira had blossomed under the care of her sweet, slightly dotty Scottish grandmother.

She'd loved everything about Gran's farmhouse, from the old-fashioned steel-cut oatmeal at breakfast to the hours spent puttering around in the garden. Most of all, though, she loved the stories.

She hadn't thought of those stories in years, not after her parents had sat her down for a very serious, thoroughly terrifying lecture. If Gran kept filling her head with nonsense, they threatened, she'd just have to stay at school during breaks instead of going home.

And because home *was* at Gran's place, not school, and certainly not the sterile apartment her parents kept for their infrequent stops between research trips, she'd kept her mouth shut from that point on.

Once Gran had died, though, the stories died with her.

At least Moira had thought so, up until last year. She'd finished her Masters in Cultural Anthropology and suddenly found herself at loose ends. No close friends, no plan for the future, no family ties to speak of—and all she'd been able to think of was coming to Iona.

She crossed her arms over her chest as the wind picked up. The weather had shifted while she was distracted by old memories, a thick fog now swirling around her legs.

She'd left the rocky beach behind, though she could hear the waves clearly enough to identify the coastline to her left. Theoretically, that meant the village had to be somewhere to her right.

Swallowing down a rush of nerves, Moira began picking her way through the fog. Keeping the sound of the waves to her back, she navigated the twists and turns of the rugged landscape, hoping she'd run into civilization soon.

It was a tiny rock of an island. How in the world could someone get lost on it?

Moira trudged across the deserted fields, the fog so thick she could barely see her own toes. Suddenly, something caught at her boot, sending her stumbling onto one knee. Swearing under her breath, she inspected the damage.

Deciding that her jeans had taken the brunt of the fall, Moira stood, brushing off the dirt and leaves. A tall ash tree stood a foot or so away, insubstantial in the swirling fog.

Trust her to find the one tree on the whole damn island, and then trip over it.

Moira squinted through the fog at a flicker of light. Apparently, the village was closer than she'd thought.

The faint red glow grew steadily brighter as she approached. She could hear low, indistinct voices as well. There was a peculiar cadence to

their words, an ebb and flow that made her breath catch in her throat. She was too far away to understand what they were saying, but it was clear that this was more than just chanting around a campfire.

Luke had struck her as a poser—someone who played at being a Druid just to be different. He must not have been representative of the rest of the group. Even without seeing them, she could tell the people around that fire were deadly serious.

A twig snapped beneath her foot and she froze, suddenly hesitant to intrude on their religious rite. More trees she hadn't noticed before rose up through the fog, creating a natural barrier between her and the bonfire. Slipping behind one, a thick-trunked elm, she peered at the group gathered around the fire.

The bonfire was huge, with a fragrant smoke that curled and mingled with the thick fog. The flames crackled and snapped, sparks dancing through the trees.

Moira looked around. Trees ringed the open area where the fire burned. There was no beach, no sign of the little town. Somehow, she'd gotten lost—and in the process, stumbled on a completely different group.

“Tonight!”

The deep, resonant voice snapped her attention back to the fire. Even from her hiding place, she could identify the owner of that voice. He stood apart from the other celebrants, his body still. An almost palpable aura of power wrapped around him, as naturally as the cloak that covered him from shoulder to ankle.

He was the leader—in position, in bearing, in sheer physical presence. And Moira was drawn to him just as strongly as the celebrants gathered around him.

Creeping forward, she kept the trees between her and the gathering. If only she could get close enough to truly see them—to see *him*...

“Tonight, the veil is lifted,” he intoned, the red glow of the fire catching on the planes and angles of his face. “And though there are those who would banish us from hallowed ground, we dinna bow to their god. We will not abandon *our* gods, not on this day, when the veil is thin and the dead walk among us. We will welcome the turning of the season in this, our sacred grove.”

“Earth!” A bearded man sprinkled dirt in a circle around the fire.

“Water!” A pitcher was used to dash water in the four directions, the fire popping and hissing.

“Air!” A different celebrant took a tree branch, making sweeping motions that stirred the fog and sent the smoke of the fire spiraling into the trees.

“Fire!” The leader stepped forward again, casting a handful of something directly into the bonfire. The flames roared upward, lighting the grove and startling a gasp out of Moira.

She shouldn’t be here. This was too private, too intimate, to be watched in secret. She crouched down and began to scoot backwards, intending to slip away and find her way back to the village somehow. These men deserved to go through their ceremony without her prying eyes despoiling it.

Suddenly her foot bumped into something solid. Shifting a little, she moved again—and shrieked when a hand clamped down on her shoulder.

The blood drained from her face as rough hands hauled her unceremoniously to her feet.

“Laird Aedan!” A forceful shove sent her sprawling forward, landing with a grunt in the dirt on the edge of the clearing. “We have no need for a calf now. This spy will make a much better sacrifice.”

Chapter Two

Sacrifice?

These neo-pagans were taking their role-playing a bit too far, if you asked her.

Moira spat out a mouthful of dirt. “Look, I’m sorry,” she started, but a swift kick to the ribs stunned her into silence.

“No slave of Columba will defile our rites with his lies,” snarled the man who’d discovered her. “Laird Aedan, how shall we dispose of him?”

Moira scrambled to a sitting position, not quite confident enough with this crowd to stand, at least not yet. “I’m sorry I ruined your celebration tonight. But come on. ‘Defile the rites?’ Can’t you just drop the period accuracy and talk like normal people?”

A malevolent silence met her comment. Moira imagined that even the wind stopped shushing through the trees. Then the man she’d identified as the leader stepped forward and spoke.

“Brave words, from a spy and a slave,” he said, stalking around the fire to stand in front of her. “Ye have spirit, I give ye that, lad.”

“I guess I should take that as a compliment,” she muttered. Moira looked up at Aedan. From her vantage point on the ground, it was a long way up. The man topped her five-feet-seven-inches easily.

His hair, a rich golden brown, was pulled back from his face with a leather thong. His face was set in harsh lines, his forbidding expression heightened by the stark light of the fire.

She swallowed and looked away, a flutter of something dark and delicious settling deep inside her. She struggled to find something coherent to say. Finally, she blurted out, “Happy Halloween.”

God, she was an idiot.

“I dinna understand one word in five this boy utters,” grumbled a large, bearded man standing off to the side. “Can ye make sense of his comments, Laird Aedan?”

“Nay,” Aedan said with a grim smile. “We must do the best we can, given the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” Moira threw her hands in the air, then pulled them back protectively when half a dozen glowering men surged forward. “What the hell are you talking about?”

The one they called Aedan flicked a brief glance at her before turning back to his men. “Check the grove and outlying areas. We shall see if he is alone, or part of a larger group.”

To her astonishment, two of the men stepped forward and grabbed her by the elbows, hauling her upright until she stood between them. She tried to tug her arms out of their grip, but they held fast.

Crap. This was getting out of control.

What had started as an embarrassing incident had turned into something far more sinister. These “Society for Creative Anachronism” rejects just weren’t letting go of their characters. And she had no idea what to do about it.



“Naught but the one, me laird,” reported Keir, returned from his search through the grove.

Aedan nodded once, staring hard at the intruder. Behind them, the bonfire cracked and hissed, a reminder of the incomplete ritual. A pang of regret pierced him, but he set it aside for more serious matters.

A spy in their midst could spell the death of him—and of his men.

Two of his men held the stranger in a punishing grip, one to each arm. The stranger had struggled briefly, but subsided soon enough. Aedan did not doubt that those arms would sprout bruises afore long.

The spy glared at him, but said naught. And if Aedan did not miss his mark, there was a touch of fear in those eyes.

Good. He needed every weapon at his disposal in this battle. The element of fear was a powerful weapon, indeed.

One of the men jostled the intruder, who stumbled before pulling upright. “Look, I said I was sorry,” he said again, in his high clear voice.

Aedan frowned at the reminder of just how green this lad was. The first time he had spoken, it had taken all of Aedan’s skill to mask his surprise. Why, the lad’s voice had not changed yet. Had Columba truly sent a mere child to search out followers of the ancient rites?

Christians. In all his years, he would never understand them.

“It wasn’t deliberate,” the boy said, the words almost tripping over one another in their haste to escape his mouth. “I got lost in the fog. I know you neo-pagans take this seriously, so I’ll just go and let you commune with whatever you’re communing with. Okay?” He tugged once again at his captors’ grip, but they held fast.

Aedan narrowed his eyes. It did no good to let the lad chatter away when every second word was nonsense.

“Can’t you just let me go? Please?”

Aedan shook his head. “And let ye run back to Columba with tales of our forbidden rites? Nay, that I canna do.”

“Who?”

Keir stepped forward with a forbidding glare. “Do ye deny that Columba sent ye?”

“I don’t even know who you’re talking about,” the lad said.

At the blatant falsehood, Aedan crossed his arms over his chest. “Bind him,” he said with a nod to his men.

One of the men took both of the captive’s arms and tugged them behind his back, holding them fast. Another man brought out a length of rope and began to wind it around his wrists.

“What the hell?” The spy struggled in earnest now, twisting against his much stronger opponents. The strange garment he wore pulled taut against his chest, and...

Aedan stepped forward, eyes narrowed, as he looked at the captive more closely.

“Halt!”

At the sound of his voice, all movement ceased. Even their intruder froze.

“I see I have been mistaken.” He took another step forward. “I thought ye were naught but a green lad.”

“Wh-what?”

With one hand, he traced the intruder from the shoulder down, his palm skimming over the curve of her breasts, the indent of her waist, the luscious curve of her hip.

In dress and manner, she portrayed a man. But in truth, she was a woman born.

“How dare you?” The lass gave him a heated glare that rivaled the Samhain fire. “Who do you think you are?”

He straightened, a smile fighting to break free. She had spirit, this one did. “I am Aedan ap Crannog,” he said. “Laird of Ormaig. And the knowledge that ye are a woman changes all.”

He heard a murmur of disbelief from his men, but it faded to the background as he locked eyes with the woman in front of him.

“Who might ye be, lass?” He searched her face. “And why are ye abroad at night disguised as a lad?”

Because she’s heard tell of the other ancient rites,” said Keir with a low chuckle. “As a good Christian woman, she would wish to protect her virtue.”

“Fool! Those are Beltane rites, not Samhain rites,” jeered another.

“And how would an intruder know the difference?”

“The gods wouldna mind them being performed on this night, I dinna think.”

“And are ye offering yerself for the rites?”

Aedan stepped between them with a glare directed at both. The two bickering fools faded back into the crowd. He could not have staked his claim more clearly if he had shouted *mine*.

Though why he sought to claim a woman who did not follow the old ways, he could not explain.

He looked back at the stranger. Her face was stormy, furrows marring the clear line of her forehead. He clenched his hand into a fist, still feeling the imprint of her curves against his palm.

“I’m not in disguise, you morons,” she snapped. “You’d think you had never seen jeans and a zip-up sweatshirt before.”

What in the world was she talking about?

“I mean, I know you guys all live in your parents’ basements, but this is ridiculous.”

Aedan crossed his arms over his chest. “I have told ye my name. Who might ye be?”

She pursed her lips, eyes narrowed. “Moirira.”

Aedan nodded once. “And ye still deny that Columba sent ye?”

“Who the hell is Columba?”

“Brave words for a liar,” shouted one of the men.

“Mayhap she does have a point,” said Aedan thoughtfully. “None of us here are welcome on this island. She may wish to conceal her presence from Columba as well.”

“Then she is not a spy?”

Aedan looked at Moira, his eyes unblinking, though his words were for his men. “Ah, I didna say that.”

“I’m not,” she insisted.

“So ye say.” Perhaps if it had just been the two of them...but he could not risk his men. He turned away from her. “’Tis not safe to release her now.”

“So we hold her until the dawning?”

“What other choice have we?”

“She is fair enough, Laird Aedan,” said Keir. “Mayhap ye should perform the ancient rites with her. ’Twould fill the hours to the dawn quite nicely. I vow the gods would not look askance.”

His groin tightened. An image of the two of them, naked in the glow of the Samhain fire, coming together in the ancient ritual, teased the edge of his consciousness.

“Nay.” He skimmed a knuckle down the side of her face. She shivered again. “Both parties must be willing for the ritual to honor the gods.”

Orin spat on the ground, close to Moira’s feet. “I say we use her for the ancient sacrifice instead.”

There was a low murmur, but Aedan stopped that idea with a harsh look. “Nay.”

Chastened, Orin stepped back.

Though Aedan’s voice remained low, it carried no less weight. “No harm shall come to the lass.”

“Thank God for that,” Her voice shook. “Now could you please just let me go?”

“Unbind her.” He gestured at the man who still held her.

As the bonds loosened, she shook her hands free. “Thank you,” she said. “I promise, I won’t tell anyone about your—what the hell are you doing?”

He looked up from her wrists, which he had caught up in front of her. He looped the rope around her wrists and bound them securely. “What does it appear that I am doing?”

“You asshole! You said I wouldn’t be harmed!”

“And so it shall be,” he said calmly. “But I canna let ye go, either.”

“Why bother untying me if all you’re going to do is tie me up again?”

“Tis more comfortable to be bound in front.” Satisfied, he wrapped one hand around the bond between her wrists. “Tis time. Come.”

“Like I have a choice,” she muttered.

Aedan signaled to his men. They set to work removing the signs of their presence. He watched with bitterness as two of them doused the Samhain fire, using dirt to bury the wood and ashes.

Despite all the planning, all the effort, they had failed.

He had failed.

A heaviness settled on him, the weight of fighting to protect the ancient ways in a changing world. Even on this sacred night, they could not escape the encroachment of these newcomers. The cradle of the Druids no longer belonged to the old ways.

Jaw clenched tight, he turned away from the destruction of the fire, only to be confronted by the sight of his unwanted prisoner.

Logic dictated that now she was bound, she was no longer a threat.

But the hint of compassion in her face told him she saw more than he wanted her to see, and he realized with a shock that she did, indeed, threaten him.

He would not have true peace of mind until she was far, far away from him.

Sucking in one last smoke-scented breath, he turned to his men. “We must away,” he said. Refusing to look at the sacred grove again, he took hold of the stranger by her bonds and led the group toward the distant shore.

Chapter Three

Moira struggled to stay upright as Aedan marched her along the uneven landscape. “Sorry,” she muttered as she tripped on a rock, then rolled her eyes. What kind of an idiot apologized to her kidnapper for slowing him down?

And what kind of an idiot felt sorry for him, too?

She’d watched him as the evidence of the ritual was systematically taken down. The regret on his face touched an answering pang inside of her. She knew what it was like to have something—or someone—special taken away.

So she’d felt badly for him. Which made no sense, considering he’d tied her up and was dragging her all over the godforsaken island.

“Come.” Aedan tugged her forward, catching her arm as she stumbled again, this time over a tree root. “Time is not on our side.”

Moira glared at him. “Don’t presume to talk about us as an *us*, buddy.”

In response, he ignored her. Which was pretty much par for the course.

She tried to pay attention to where they were going, but the fog was so thick—and the landscape so unfamiliar—that she wouldn’t recognize the way back even if she had an opportunity to escape.

“Almost there,” he murmured, not bothering to look back at her.

Moira glanced around. The other men had faded into the thick fog, and though she could hear mutterings and the tramp of footsteps, Aedan was the only one she could see.

He looked to the left, then the right, finally choosing a path Moira couldn't even begin to see. His fingers looped casually through the ropes binding her hands together, urging her forward with that unspoken authority that suffused his every movement.

He adjusted his grip on the ropes, taking a little of the pressure off. She flexed her hands, trying to get the blood flowing.

"Are ye all right?" Aedan finally glanced back at her. "I regret the need to bind ye, but..."

"Bullshit." Moira pulled back. He automatically tightened his grip on the ropes, his hand sliding between hers. "You don't regret it at all."

He shrugged. "Aye. I never regret that which is a necessity."

"And tying me up is a necessity how?"

He heaved a sigh that telegraphed his annoyance. "If ye are free to move about, ye are free to tell Columba of our presence. I will not jeopardize my men."

"Is there any chance you could drop the bad Robin Hood dialogue and talk normally?"

Even through the fog she could see the furrows on his brow. "Ye must be verra far from home, lass. I dinna understand more than a handful of the words ye say, though they sound like my own tongue."

Yeah, I know how you feel.

It stands to reason, as ye are so ignorant of the island and its inhabitants."

"I am not ignorant," she hissed. "I'm a tourist. Couldn't you please let me go?"

He paused for a moment, then shook his head. "I canna take that chance."

Her shoulders slumped. "Well, it was worth a try," she mumbled.

"Aye." He flashed a grin at her over his shoulder before turning back again.

Whoa.

He was packing some serious wattage there. For some insane reason her heart did a slow backflip and her breath caught in her throat.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She stumbled again, this time over a slick, lichen-covered rock. Cursing under her breath, she glanced up. They were standing at the shoreline.

Somehow, while she'd been busy arguing with herself over the appropriateness of being attracted to the man who'd kidnapped her, they'd arrived at one of the beaches on the uninhabited side of the island.

"This is the place."

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me." Moira squinted through the pea-soup fog at the rugged cliff rising up from the rock-strewn beach. The men who'd accompanied the two of them on their march through the midnight darkness scaled the cliff with jaw-dropping ease, clambering quickly up the rough surface. One by one they disappeared into the caves scattered across the cliff face.

Moira bit her lip. "Please tell me you don't expect me to do that."

"Of course not." Before she could let out a sigh of relief, Aedan hefted her over his shoulder. "Ye might try to escape."

"You pig!" Her head jounced against his back, making sparks dance in front of her eyes. Her bound hands could do little more than pound ineffectually at whatever part of his body she could reach. Her feet did

more damage, drumming against his powerful legs and, once, connecting with a much more sensitive part of his body. "Put me down!"

"If ye unman me," he said, "we both will fall."

She stopped immediately. Holding herself still, she squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh, God, I'm going to die."

He ignored her, his attention apparently focused on finding hand-holds. His shoulder muscles bunched under her waist as he reached for an outcropping. He pulled them both up another couple of feet, Moira slipping precariously as he moved.

Her heels scraped against the cliff face as Aedan shifted again. At least the fog prevented her from seeing just how high up they were.

And then she gave a shriek as she tumbled backwards, landing with a thud on a flat rock surface. What light had been visible through the fog was cut off abruptly. Groaning, she rolled to the side, only to come up against a solid barrier. "Where the hell are we?"

Aedan pulled himself over the lip of the entrance, stretching out next to her. "Our safe place 'til dawn," he muttered. "And I'd thank ye to be silent for a wee moment."

"Oh, you'd just love that, wouldn't you?" Moira tugged her bound hands, swearing under her breath to find them just as tightly wrapped as ever. "So what happens at dawn?"

Aedan heaved a sigh, evidently recognizing that he wasn't going to get his requested silence. He drew himself up to a seated position. "At dawn, we retrieve our skiffs and return across the waters before we are discovered by Columba."

"I'll be so sorry to see you go," she said with barely disguised sarcasm. "We've had such a lovely time."

"And why would ye be thinking I would let ye stay?"

She actually felt her heart skip a beat. "What are you talking about?"

“If ye remain, ye could yet betray us,” he said. “We will take ye with us, of course.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Once we have escaped Columba’s influence, we will return ye to yer people,” he continued.

“My people?”

He ignored her. “Besides, ye are as unwelcome here as are we.”

“What are you talking about?”

He turned toward her. “Are ye daft, or just stubborn? How can it be that ye are here, and yet still so ignorant of the island?”

Temper flared, rushing a wave of heat to her cheeks. “Just because I didn’t memorize the guidebook doesn’t mean I know nothing about Iona.”

“How is it I have to explain everything to ye?”

“If you would just bother to make sense, we wouldn’t have an issue, Mr. Thinks-He’s-a-Druid-Priest.”

The silence that followed her snippy comment was full of barely repressed fury.

Feeling ashamed, Moira backtracked. “I apologize. That was uncalled for. Your religious beliefs are none of my business, and...”

“I would have given much to continue my studies with the Druids long enough to claim that title,” Aedan said softly. “Yer people have made that impossible now.”

“My people again. Who do you think are my people?”

“The followers of Columba.”

“You keep saying that name like I should know who you’re talking about.”

He laughed, a short humorless bark that echoed in the small enclosure. “I thought all Christians knew of Columba.”

“Why do you assume I’m a Christian?”

Aedan reached out and tapped one of her earrings, setting the tiny Celtic cross swinging. “If not, why wear their sacred symbol?”

Her face warmed at the featherlight touch. “It’s just an earring.”

“Nay, I think not.”

“Really.” She swallowed, wishing her voice didn’t sound quite so breathless. “I bought them at the gift shop this afternoon.”

She still didn’t understand why. One minute she’d been half-listening to the tour guide, and the next she was standing in front of a jewelry display. She’d been drawn to the delicate earrings immediately. Fifteen minutes later, she was fastening them onto her lobes as she walked out the door.

Probably because they reminded her of Gran.

Slowly she realized Aedan was staring at her, a puzzled frown marring his brow. “What is a gift shop?”

She rolled her eyes. “Tell you what,” she said. “I’ll tell you what a gift shop is if you tell me who Columba is.”

“The man who brought Christians to Iona and claimed our sacred island for his own.”

“Are you talking about Saint Columba? The guy who founded the abbey?”

“Aye.”

She snorted. “Maybe you could explain to me how I could tattle on you to someone who’s been dead for fifteen centuries.”

“Now ye are the one who makes no sense. He is building his kirk on the far side of the island even now.”

Moira started to laugh, but stopped abruptly. “You truly believe that, don’t you?”

“Tis not a matter of belief. I tell only the truth.”

She sighed. “Can’t you give up this charade for one minute?”

“I dinna ken what ye mean.”

Her eyes had adjusted now, and even in the twilight darkness of the cave she could see the expression on his face. It was a combination of skepticism and indulgence that chafed on her last nerve.

“Look,” she snapped, “I’ve been more than considerate. I’ve let you play your medieval faire games. I’m even a little impressed at your ability to stay in character way longer than any normal person. Frankly, though, it’s getting old. Come back to the twenty-first century, okay?”

“The what?”

“Oh, my God!” She kicked at the floor of the cave in frustration. “Would you quit pretending that we’re in the dark ages here?”

He shook his head, clearly baffled. “What are ye talking about?”

She counted to ten. “Answer me one question.”

“Aye.”

“What year is it?”

“By the Christian calendar, or in the ancient way?”

She glared at him.

“Very well. According to the Christian calendar, we are living in the year of yer lord Jesu Christe, 592.”

“Yeah. Like I said. You’re well on your way to delusional, fella.”

To her surprise, Aedan didn’t take offense. Instead, his expression turned thoughtful. “And what year do ye believe it to be?”

Moira rolled her eyes. “2006, of course.”

“Ah. Now I ken.” He turned and looked toward the entrance of the cave. “I have heard tell of passage through the veil between life and afterlife, but not across time.”

“What are you talking about?”

He leaned back against the cave wall. “Ye have slipped from yer time and entered mine.”

Chapter Four

Her jaw dropped. “What?”

“Samhain,” he said.

“What about it?”

“Tis the time when the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is lifted. And if the dead can walk among the living, why could a living soul not travel across time, as well?” He shoved a hand through his hair. “It explains much. Yer strange clothing, yer words, yer mannerisms.”

“Setting aside the fact that I could say the same thing about you, it’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“Time travel doesn’t exist.”

“Are ye so blinded to the world beyond yer ken, ye canna consider the possibility?”

“Of course I canna—can’t—consider it. I’m a scientist, for God’s sake!”

“And what would that be?”

Moira blew out a frustrated breath. “Someone who believes in facts and reality, who researches and predicts and accepts the natural world as it is, not someone who indulges in fantasy or wishful thinking.”

“And ye know all of the world as it is?”

“No, but...”

He raised an eyebrow. “Can ye devise another explanation?”

“Well, no, but...”

“But ye are unwilling to consider this explanation, at least for tonight.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine. Explain it.”

“Gladly.” Aedan stretched his legs out in front of him. “First, ye are right ignorant of life today.” He lifted a hand. “Not to say ye are a fool, just—unschooled.”

Unschooled? After two advanced degrees?

“Ye know naught about Columba, nor the struggle between his people and ours. Ye talk of things I know nothing about. Ye believe me to be something I am not, and I know naught of what you are.”

“How do I know you aren’t just pretending?”

He leaned toward her until their faces were mere inches apart. “I dinna lie, and I dinna pretend. Can you say the same?”

“Of course!”

His expression darkened. “Then I dinna understand why ye keep denying the truth, and yet call me the liar.”

She glared at him. “Okay, not a liar, but not grounded in reality, either.”

“Reality.” He snorted. “Ye deny reality.”

“I deny reality? *You* think I’ve traveled fifteen centuries back in time!”

“And why could this not happen?”

“Because the only way that it could happen is magic, and magic doesn’t exist!”

He regarded her with something uncomfortably close to pity. “It must be a sad, empty time ye live in.”

She opened her mouth, but clamped it shut again. How could she argue with him when she'd come to Iona because of that very reason? Once Gran was gone from her life, the magic had disappeared, too.

It didn't mean she believed his fairy-tale explanation for what had happened tonight. But he was right.

Her life was sad. And empty. But she couldn't bring herself to tell him so.

Instead, she closed her eyes. At least she didn't have to look at his too-perceptive, too-attractive face.

Why did he have to be so gorgeous, when he'd obviously been dropped on his head as a child?

Because face it, the man was about as close to perfection as she'd ever seen. She squinted one eye open, inspecting him surreptitiously in the dimness of the cave. His light brown hair was just past shoulder-length, tied back with a leather thong at the base of his neck. Rich brown eyes, the color of bittersweet chocolate, gazed out at the darkness beyond the cave. A fierce strength suffused his face, reminding her of a bird of prey.

The rest of him was just as impressive. A bronze torc circled his neck. Broad, strong shoulders strained against the rough woolen cape fastened across his chest. Underneath, he wore a tunic of the same indeterminate color over leggings that hugged his powerful thighs.

“And do ye like what ye see?”

Her gaze flew upwards in time to see the smug look on his face. “I wasn't...” But of course, she had been, so she just clamped her mouth shut and glared at him.

In response, he laughed softly and settled back against the wall of the cave opposite her, his long, muscular legs pressing against hers. Moira tried to shift, but in the cramped confines of the cave she didn't have

anywhere to move. Instead, the friction of their legs rubbing against each other sent an unwelcome shock of sexual awareness through her.

No, dammit. She did *not* want this man.

Well, she didn't want to want him, anyway.

"We have many hours until the dawning," he said. "Ye may sleep if ye wish."

Yeah, right. The last thing she wanted to do was fall asleep with a man who'd kidnapped her. "I'm fine."

He shook his head. "Ye are a stubborn one, aren't ye?"

"Me?" She threw up her hands, which she'd forgotten were tied together until they smacked her in the forehead. Swearing, she let them drop back into her lap.

Immediately, Aedan was up and at her side. "Are ye hurt, lass?" He ran his fingertips over her forehead, searching for a bruise or lump. "That was quite a wallop."

"Stop," she insisted, but it came out as more of a plea than a command. The breathless quality of her voice made her blush.

His hand stilled, and he looked into her eyes. She could see his Adam's apple bob. "If it is what you wish," he said, withdrawing his hand slowly.

As soon as his touch was gone, Moira was struck with a pang of regret.

Maybe *she* was the one who had been dropped on the head as a child.

"I do regret the need to bind ye." He crossed his arms over his chest as if to keep himself from touching her again.

She held his gaze as she lifted her arms, holding her wrists out in mute appeal.

"Nay, I canna."

“What do you think I’m going to do? Fly out of here?” She dropped them back into her lap with a huff of frustration. “God, you are the most stubborn, pigheaded, obnoxious...”

“High praise indeed, from ye.” He quirked a brow. “For I am sure that you are familiar with those qualities in yerself.”

“Is that some fancy way of saying ‘it takes one to know one?’” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why I even bother.”

There was a long silence. Then Aedan said softly, “Perhaps because talking makes the hours of darkness easier to bear.”

A shiver danced down her spine. Hadn’t Gran said almost the same thing more times than she could count, when nightmares drove Moira from her bed? They’d sat at the scarred wooden table in the farmhouse kitchen, drinking hot chocolate and talking.

“What is it, lass?” He leaned forward and placed a hand on her knee. “Is something disturbing ye?”

“I’m fine.” She shifted, dislodging his hand, and he pulled back. She wasn’t about to tell him how his touch sparked a flame that traveled through her entire body.

Was it some kind of sexual Stockholm syndrome, or what? And why, dear Lord, why did it have to happen to her?

“I’m fine,” she said again. “In fact, I’m a little tired.” She faked a huge yawn that mostly served to prove to herself that she never would have made it as an actress. “Good night.”

Then she scooted as far away from him as possible, given the confines of the cave, and rolled over to pretend to sleep.

Chapter Five

The lass was not asleep.

Aedan shook his head, gazing at the odd, prickly woman he'd managed to acquire on this most unusual of Samhain eves.

She was fair to look at, that was true; her form was lithe and curved in all the right places. Though why she covered herself in such odd, formless clothing was a mystery.

As was why she had passed through the veil to his time. She was here for a reason, of that he had no doubt. The trouble was deciphering what reason that might be. And then convincing her of that.

She shifted a little, one arm resting across her eyes. He shook his head and bit his lip against a smile. There was something compelling about the lass, even in her stubborn refusal to face the truth.

Outside, the surf crashed against the shore. The tide was turning; they were on the far side of night. 'Twould not be long before dawn arrived, and with it, new problems.

He could not return her to her people, 'twas now clear to see. She had no people in this time; beyond these shores there was nowhere for her to go.

Nor could he leave her behind. He would not deliver her to his enemy. He shuddered at the thought of this woman in the hands of those who looked on magic as evil.

But how could he keep her with him, either?

His ways were as foreign to her as hers were to him.

'Twas a puzzle with no solution.

Frustrated, he took out his dagger and began to sharpen the edge. With naught else to do until morn, a mindless chore would keep him occupied.

For several minutes, the only sound in the cave was the rhythmic stroke of blade on strop. Then a muted gasp drew Aedan's attention.

Moira was watching him with unblinking eyes. Every muscle in her body was tense; he could see it in the set of her jaw, the fine trembling in her hands.

"Are ye all right, lass?" He leaned forward, reaching out a hand to her, but stopped abruptly when she shrank back against the wall of the cave. Her gaze shifted down to his hand, then back up again, and he realized with a start that he was still holding the dagger.

With an oath, he cast it away, barely noticing when it fell against the opposite wall of the cave with a clatter.

"Did ye think I meant to harm ye?"

She said nothing, but the tension in her body was answer enough.

Moving slowly, he said, "I swore I would not hurt ye, lass."

She looked across the dark gloom of the cave to the spot where his blade had landed.

"Ye must believe me."

Though he did not know why it mattered. It should be of no consequence whether she saw him as a monster or a man.

Even as he thought the words, he knew them for a lie.

She swallowed once, convulsively, then whispered, "It looks so real."

For a moment, he was puzzled. Catching her meaning, he nodded. "Aye, 'tis."

"What were you doing?"

“Working the blade.” Hands held out in front of him to show he was no threat, he moved so he was sitting next to her against the rough cave wall. “Naught sinister, I promise ye.”

“Okay.” She shifted, too, so they were close but not touching.

No matter. He could feel the heat of her despite the lack of contact.

Her voice was low. “Do you truly believe we are from different times?”

“Aye.”

She was silent for a moment, looking away toward the entrance to the cave. “There are some things...”

“What things?”

She glanced at him. “You. The way you dress, the way you talk, the absolute period accuracy in everything you do. I find it hard to believe anyone could stay in character that long.”

Aedan didn’t quite follow, but he nodded anyway.

“Though that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m the time-traveler. You could have jumped forward.”

“’Twould mean all my men came forward, too.”

“Oh. Good point.” She pondered that, her gaze focused inward. “And then there’s the whole tree thing.”

Now he was truly lost. “What do ye mean?”

“There are no trees on Iona.”

The words pierced him through the heart. “None?”

“Oh, a few, here and there, but nothing like the grove you were celebrating in.”

Something of his emotions must have shown on his face, because she hurried to add, “At least, that’s what the guidebook said. I could be wrong.”

But he knew, in his bones, she told the truth. Running a hand through his hair, he said, “Tis of no consequence. Time circles on, and all changes.”

She shifted. Her leg brushed against his, sending a bolt of heat through him. “I know it bothers you,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

How could this woman, a stranger, see into his soul?

Uncomfortable, he muttered, “Tis nothing, lass,” and thankfully she let it go.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that I’m not totally denying the possibility anymore.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “It must be hard for ye to grasp, if such a thing is considered impossible in yer time.”

“I just don’t understand why.”

Aedan brushed a strand of hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “Why, what?”

Almost imperceptibly, she leaned into his touch, and he felt like shouting with fierce pleasure.

“Why did this happen?”

“For some reason the gods have brought us together. It is the way of Samhain.”

“But what reason could there possibly be?”

“The gods have not shown us yet. We must be patient.”

She laughed. “Patience is not one of my strong suits.”

“I had noticed that.”

“Hey.” She bumped her shoulder against his. “You’re not supposed to agree with me.”

“My apologies.” He slanted a glance at her. “I will be certain not to agree with ye again.”

She burst out laughing. “When did you get a sense of humor?”

“There has not been much to laugh about tonight.”

She sobered then. “True.”

He turned so he was facing her directly. “Have ye any other questions, lass?”

“How long?”

“What do you mean?”

“How long will I be here?”

“That, lass, I dinna ken.” He pulled himself upright and returned to the edge of the cave, gazing down at the thick fog blanketing the ground beneath them. It made it impossible for him to see any intruders, but it also kept him and his men from being discovered as well.

A blessing and a curse in one.

Turning, he asked her, “When did ye find yerself in my time?”

Moira shrugged. “Sometime after dark, I think. I left the village at dusk, and wandered around for a while before stumbling on your group. The fog made it difficult to see where I was going.”

He looked outside again. “Perhaps that is the key.”

She narrowed her eyes, puzzled. “The key to what?”

“I canna believe I didna think of it afore.” He paced over to where she was sitting, talking more to himself than to her. “Aye, it looks like a veil, in some ways.”

“Aedan, if you don’t tell me what in the hell you’re talking about, I may have to hurt you.”

“Come.” He leaned down and grasped her elbow, lifting her up. Leading her to the edge of the cave, he said, “Tis the fog, you see.”

“No. I don’t see.”

He waved a hand at the mist below. “Ye walked through the veil of fog to the past. It stands to reason that ye would be able to walk back in the same way.”

“Really?” She leaned over. “Right now?”

“I think not.” He steadied her with a hand on her arm. “The magic is strongest at the point between night and day. Ye passed through as day turned to night; ye must try again when night turns to day.”

He refused to think on why the idea of her going back through the veil disturbed him.

“And you think it will work?”

He looked at her earnest, hopeful face. “I think ‘tis the best chance ye have, yes.”

He would not lie and say he was certain, for the ways of the gods were beyond his ken. But he could not take that hope away from her, either.

“So, how long do we have until morning?”

The night sky was still black as pitch, though the stars twinkled in the distance. “A few hours at least.”

“Great! We have a few hours for my favorite activity.”

His groin tightened at the thought of using those hours in the pursuit of pleasure. “And what would that be?”

The smile that lit her face touched an answering chord inside him. “Research.”

“I dinna recognize that word.”

“It’s part of that science thing I was telling you about. I want to learn everything I can in whatever time I’ve got here.”

He could think of many more enjoyable ways to pass the time until the dawning, especially with a lass as fair as his reluctant prisoner. But he could not disappoint her. “What is it ye wish to know?”

Chapter Six

He was a treasure trove.

Moira itched for a notepad and paper, or her laptop. She didn't want to lose a single thought, even one piece of information on life in this time period.

Too bad she'd never be able to use it. No one in their right mind would believe her.

Hell, she hardly believed it herself.

But talking with Aedan had gone a long way to convincing her.

She was trained in anthropology, a student of cultural mores and practices. And she could not deny the depth of his knowledge, nor the evidence in front of her own eyes.

Even more fascinating than the technical information, though, was the man himself.

As the conversation ranged from topic to topic, he became more enthusiastic, more animated. The dour, forbidding man who had taken her prisoner disappeared, replaced by a gently humorous, thoughtful man.

He worried about the people under his leadership. He struggled with the changes happening so quickly in his world. Genuinely curious, he had as many questions about her time as she had about his.

She respected him. More than that, she liked him.

And on a primal level she hadn't even been aware existed before tonight, she wanted him.

She wanted him more than she'd ever wanted a man. And in a few short hours, she would never see him again.

Shaken, she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes.

"I apologize, lass. I dinna mean to bore ye."

"Stop it." She squinted one eye open. "You haven't been even close to boring."

"The hour is late." He turned her by her shoulders so she faced away from him. "Ye are unused to this uncomfortable setting. Here, let me soothe you."

He began rubbing her shoulders and neck, alleviating the stress in the muscles with deep, rhythmic strokes. She bit back a moan as his strong fingers found each cord of tightness, each sore spot. Part of her felt like she could melt into a puddle right there on the cave floor.

Another part was far from soothed. Tendrils of heat spiraled through her, setting each nerve ending ablaze. Her heartbeat accelerated and her breathing turned shallow.

She tilted her head back, resting against his broad shoulder. His hands stilled for a moment. "Are ye all right, lass?"

Never better. Moira nodded once, her cheek brushing against the rough fabric of his cloak. She breathed in his woodsy scent, so uniquely him, and she swallowed hard.

She'd been alone for so long, holding herself separate in a world where she was surrounded by people. Tonight, she finally felt connected to another human being, for the first time since she was a child.

Maybe this was why she'd ended up here.

When Samhain ended, she would be alone again, back in her own time.

But she wasn't alone now.

She squared her shoulders. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"About the sacred rites. Between a man and a woman."

His hands stilled. "What did ye wish to know?"

"Everything." She turned around, so close their knees were touching.
"On second thought, don't tell me."

Leaning in, she whispered in his ear, "Show me."

She was going to be the death of him.

Never in a thousand lifetimes had he anticipated the passing to be so pleasurable.

He leaned back, the better to look her in the eye. "What are ye saying, lass?"

Even in the dim light of the cave, he could see color flood her face. "I think you know."

"Why?"

She bit her lip. "I—I'm very attracted to you, Aedan. And this may be our only chance..." Her voice trailed off.

He had considered that fact, wanting to seek pleasure with her before the dawning. But never had he thought she would invoke the sacred union.

"But do ye know, truly, what the sacred rites mean?" He shifted so they were no longer in contact, though his very blood shouted in protest.

He had known that touching her was playing with fire. But he had been unable to resist the temptation.

Now, she was tempting him beyond his endurance. His body burned for her; the words she spoke turned him hard as stone. But he could not

take her in the ancient rites without knowing for sure that she understood the significance.

“Tis more than just a tumble, lass,” he said. “Tis the union of male and female, the sun and the earth. It celebrates the connection of the god and goddess.”

She nodded, her eyes wide.

“As said before, both parties must be willing. To do otherwise is to dishonor the ritual.”

“I’m willing.” She swallowed. “Are—are you?”

“Aye.” He took her hands, still bound, and brought them to his lap. He watched her eyes widen as she traced the length and breadth of him, her fingers exploring him through the rough fabric of his trews. “Most willing.”

He watched her closely, waiting to see a flicker of doubt, of uncertainty. Naught remained but her desire.

“Maybe that’s why I’m here,” she whispered. “One ritual was taken away from you. I can offer another. I *want* to offer another.”

He nodded once. “Then I choose ye, Moira of a distant time, to be my partner in the ancient rites.”

In that moment, everything changed.

For the first time, he had called her by name.

Moira felt her breath hitch in her throat. The air fairly crackled around them as he stood and held out a hand.

She stood as well, and leaned against the rough wall of the cave, anxious and excited. To her surprise, he knelt down again. With deft economy of movement, he removed first one shoe, then the other, leaving her in stocking feet.

It didn't matter. Even standing on the cold stone of the cave floor, Moira burned.

And as he stood slowly, stroking fingertips up her legs, over her hips, circling her breasts, she knew she had walked into the flames without hesitation.

With the pad of one thumb, he traced her lower lip. Moira's mouth opened on a breathless sigh, her eyes fluttering closed as he moved in.

The first kiss was no more than the brush of a butterfly wing, a whisper of sensation that sent a jolt of longing all the way to her toes. Even though her eyes were closed, she felt it when he stilled. The knowledge that he was affected just as strongly was a rush of feminine power.

"So *bonnie*," he murmured, and descended for another kiss.

This time, there was no gentleness, no soft exploration. His firm, unyielding mouth moved over hers in an unmistakable act of possession. His tongue stroked along the seam of her mouth, and she opened willingly, welcoming him inside.

He teased and tasted, his tongue dancing with hers, and she held back a moan.

Suddenly, he pulled back, his dark eyes gleaming in the dim interior of the cave.

"Nay," he said. "Dinna swallow yer cries. It pleases the gods for us to take our pleasure freely."

He licked his lips, drawing her gaze to his mouth. Moira's thighs clenched.

Eyes focused intently on hers, he reached forward and cupped her breast, rubbing his thumb over the beaded nipple. Even through her sweatshirt, Moira could feel the gentle touch, and the answering tug deep

in her belly. She hummed with pleasure, and the smile that flashed across Aedan's face was fierce and proud.

"Aye." He stroked once more. "Just like that."

His mouth crushed against hers again, moving with even more urgency. With each kiss, his hand trailed lower, stopping to rest on the curve of her stomach. She squirmed a little, and he smiled against her lips. He moved lower still, teasing under the hem of her sweatshirt until he touched bare skin.

They both groaned at the contact. Moira writhed with each featherlight touch, a trail of fire following his calloused fingertips. "Aye, lass," he whispered. His lips feathered kisses along the column of her neck, finally ending as he reached the neckline of her shirt.

He lifted his head, reaching out to smooth her hair. "Are ye sure? Is this truly what you wish?"

Outside, the tide rolled against the shore in a muted rhythm. Inside, their labored breathing mingled with the rapid beating of her heart. She lifted her bound hands to the front of his cloak, grabbed two fistfuls of fabric, and pulled him closer for a searing kiss.

His hips ground against hers, pressing her back into the rough wall of the cave. Her hands, caught between their bodies, kept a distance between them that almost made her weep with longing.

Aedan must have felt it, too, because he broke the kiss with a muttered oath. Taking her hands in his, he lifted them by the rope and pressed them above her head. He stroked a hand down her arm, tantalizingly close to the curve of her breast, across her stomach, then back up the opposite arm. He rested his hand on the knot between her wrists. "Keep yer hands aloft."

Stomach quivering, she acquiesced.

He stepped forward again, and this time there were no barriers between them. His hard, muscled form molded to her softer curves, the thick length of his erection pulsing against her thigh. Without conscious thought, she wrapped one leg around him, holding him close.

He groaned into her mouth, tilting his hips against hers. The heat of his body enveloped her, his scent intoxicating.

They stood that way for long moments, bodies entwined, mouths voracious in their hunger. Then he stepped back, breathing harshly. He unfastened his cloak with a brevity of motion that took her breath away. Shaking it out with one flick of the wrist, he laid it on the floor of the cave. Lifting her in his arms, he laid her gently on the thick wool fabric.

With the cloak gone, Moira could see Aedan's physique more clearly. A pale tunic covered him from shoulders to thighs, his muscular arms bare. A knotwork tattoo circled his left biceps. Close-fitting leggings hugged his thighs. He knelt over her, his muscular thighs bracketing hers. Again, he hooked one finger around the ropes, lifting her hands until they were stretched out fully above her head.

He crossed his arms over his chest and pondered her zip-front sweatshirt.

He stared so intently, and for such an extended period of time, she thought she'd go mad with the waiting. "You take the little pull thingy," she started, but he pressed one finger to her lips, silencing her.

"Let me explore."

Well, when he put it like that...

He traced one finger down the length of the zipper, sending fire skittering along her nerve endings and setting her entire body ablaze. He flicked the zipper pull, the clink of metal on metal sounding unusually loud in the close confines of the cave. Through the darkness, she could see the gleam of his even white teeth.

“I do believe I have unwrapped the mystery,” he murmured, taking the zipper pull between thumb and forefinger and lowering it, inch by excruciating inch, until the sweatshirt opened. One hand, wide and hot, splayed possessively on her quivering stomach. “Exquisite.”

Moira sucked in a breath as he spread the thick fabric apart, revealing her torso. His brows knit together in a frown as his gaze fell on her breasts.

“Uh, not the reaction a woman hopes for,” Moira said with an embarrassed laugh.

He looked up at her and shook his head, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “’Tis the binding that puzzles me. Why do ye cover yerself in this way?”

She glanced down. “Oh, the bra.”

“Is that what it is called?” He wrinkled his nose. “I dinna think I like it.”

Reaching out, he traced the outline of her white lace bra, fingertips stroking the hypersensitive skin. Her nipples beaded painfully tight.

“Although perhaps it has some charm.”

Moira shuddered under his touch, arching her back to silently offer her aching breasts to his waiting hands.

He didn’t disappoint. With masterful strokes he teased and tormented until she was tossing her head and whimpering. The delicate roughness of the lace gently chafed her nipples. Again and again his thumbs strummed across them, the rhythmic motion calling forth an answering cadence deep inside.

His eyes, dark and promising, watched her intently. “Does that please ye?”

Mutely, she nodded, then sucked in a breath as he caught one nipple between thumb and forefinger and tugged.

“Enough.” He pushed the straps down. “I must see all of ye.”

“The clasp—in front...” she panted, moving her hands to indicate the closure.

In response, he caught her wrists. “Not yet,” he said. With a quick glance, he found what he was looking for. Sitting back, he moved her closer to the cave wall. He pushed the sleeves of her sweatshirt up until they pooled at the edge of the rope binding her wrists. Holding the fabric in one hand, he lifted her arms back over her head.

In a flash, she understood why. An outcropping of stone extended from the base of the cave wall. Her bonds, caught over the edge of the stone, held fast.

A rush of moisture dampened her thighs. Biting her lip, she flexed her fingers around the cool stone.

“Just like that, my sweet,” he murmured. “Let it anchor ye.”

In a matter of seconds, he’d broken the front clasp of her bra apart. Moira couldn’t bring herself to care. Not when strong fingers were skimming it open, leaving trails of flame along her overheated skin.

They both groaned at the sensation. “Beautiful,” he murmured, then leaned over to draw a nipple into his mouth.

Moira tossed her head back and forth, Aedan’s cloak protecting her from the rough cave floor. Her fingers dug into the rock, holding herself steady beneath his ministrations.

Her hips arched upward, aching for more contact. Lifting his head, he moved to the other breast, then trailed kisses down her stomach to the top edge of her jeans.

Aedan was a quick study. This time, the zipper was no match for his clever fingers, and he skimmed her jeans and panties off in one swift motion. He sat back, his muscled thighs bracketing hers, and looked his fill.

Moira felt her breathing accelerate, her skin burn with a heated flush. She felt open, exposed, vulnerable.

And more excited than she could have believed possible.

Drawing a finger through the tangle of curls at the apex of her thighs, he gathered the moisture that flowed from her. He withdrew his hand and slowly raised it to his lips. “Ah, Moira,” he groaned. He moved back, giving himself full access to her. “I canna wait any longer to taste ye.”

And taste her he did, with long, lazy strokes of his tongue that sent her arching off the cloak. He pressed her legs wider, opening her to his sensual assault. Little mewling cries she barely recognized as coming from her own throat echoed off the walls of the cave. The only thing grounding her was the stone holding her bound hands.

He pressed one finger inside her and she gasped, little contractions starting to flutter around him. “So close,” he murmured, withdrawing it inch by inch until she could have wept. “Wait for me, sweet.”

It was only a moment before he had removed his clothing, yet Moira burned for his return. Her hands clenched her stone anchor, a rhythmic pattern that echoed between her legs.

The last barrier of clothing removed, Aedan stood before her, gloriously naked. Muscled and bronzed, his body showed every sign of a life of physical labor and hard work. A dusting of hair covered his chest, arrowing down his abdomen, drawing her eye downward.

He was fully, proudly erect, his penis jutting out from the nest of curls between his legs. A drop of moisture on the head was barely visible in the dim light of the cave. Moira gripped the stone, wanting to touch him, but holding herself back.

The flare of desire in his eyes told her he recognized her struggle. He knelt between her legs, lifting her hips for his entry.

“I take ye, Moira, in the ancient rites,” he murmured against her mouth, and in the same moment he pressed inside her.

They both groaned as he filled her. He slid forward, slow and steady, until he was seated in her to the hilt. Arms braced on either side of her shoulders, he began to move.

Moira tilted her hips upward as he surged into her again and again, each thrust building the fire inside to a roaring blaze. Her nipples rasped against his chest, the roughness of his hair beading them even tighter.

Her fingers ached to cling to him, to stroke down his back to the firm buttocks thrusting between her thighs. She wanted to fist her hands in his sweat-dampened hair, hold his head steady for her kiss.

Instead, she wrapped her legs around his waist, holding onto him in the only way she could. Skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, she touched him with her body and soul as the fire of their passion burned.

Heat gathered between her legs, the sweet friction of his thrusts bringing her to the edge. He was close, too, if the tension in his muscles was any indication. Suddenly, he reached to the side and grabbed his dagger.

“Aedan?” Her heart stuttered for a moment. He stretched his arm above both their heads and sliced through the bonds holding her hands together.

Tossing the blade away, he tugged her arms free of the severed rope and knotted sweatshirt. “I would have ye complete the rites a free woman,” he said, taking up their rhythm again.

It was enough to tumble her over the precipice, shuddering, convulsing, as he pumped into her. Her hands, free now, touched him everywhere, stroking his shoulders, his back, grabbing his buttocks to pull him closer. She sobbed her release, clinging to him with every ounce of strength left in her.

Moments later, he followed her into the flames, surging into her with a hoarse shout. Then he collapsed, panting, atop her.

Sudden tears pricked the backs of her eyelids, but she blinked them away.

He was right. This had been more than just a tumble. And she had no idea how she was ever going to walk away from him now.

Chapter Seven

Gods, but she was beautiful, naked and panting beneath him. He rolled to the side, taking his weight off of her. Her hair, snarled and damp from their exertion, spread out across the pale wool of his cloak.

He toyed with one of the curls, winding it around his finger. Draping it over her naked breast, he traced a gentle path along the creamy skin to circle the tight berry of her nipple.

Moira groaned. “You’re a wicked one, Aedan ap Crannog.” Her fingers stroked down his back, playing over the muscles damp with sweat. “But I find I have a taste for wicked now.”

He lifted up on one elbow and looked down on her love-sated face. A face that, even after their short time together, he was going to miss so very, very much.

A glance outside confirmed what he knew deep in his bones. “The dawn is coming,” he said heavily. “It is time.”

They dressed in silence. Moira stole quick glances at Aedan as he fastened his tunic over the rangy, sleek muscles of his upper body. Her stomach swooped and dove on a wave of longing. She could still feel him pressed against her, pulsing deep inside her body. For the first time in forever she’d felt comfortable in her own skin, as if she wasn’t alone in the world anymore.

“We have no time to lose,” he said in the low, rich voice that sent shivers down her spine. “Are ye ready, lass?”

Lass. She winced inwardly. Moments ago, she’d been Moira to him. “As ready as I’ll ever be,” she answered.

“I will descend from the cave first.” He strapped his dagger back under his cloak. “Place yer hands and feet where I do, and ye will be perfectly safe.”

“I trust you,” she said.

With a sharp glance, he nodded. Then he strode to the edge of the cave and began to climb down.

“Come, lass,” he called up in a hoarse whisper.

Leaning over the edge, Moira watched as he descended into the thick fog.

He reached a hand up toward her. “Place yer foot in my hand,” he said. “I will set it upon the right stones.”

She did as he said, clinging to the cliff face as he guided her down. Her stomach clenched as their cave was swallowed up by the fog.

Once Aedan reached the ground, he took her by the waist and lifted her down. She clung to him for a long moment, drawing strength from his solid form. He set her away from him and grasped her hand.

Twining their fingers together, he led her off the beach toward the interior of the island. The fog was starting to lift, false dawn lightening the shadows around them.

“Hurry, lass,” he urged her. “‘Tis almost too late.”

Faster and faster they moved, almost running over the rough terrain. Moira stumbled, but this time she had Aedan’s strong hand to hold her up.

Too soon, she recognized the trees, standing silent and tall before them.

Aedan stopped, turning her toward him. He tugged her forward for a gentle, heartbreaking kiss. “Ye must go now,” he said, his voice rough. “The magic will be gone soon.”

Moira looked around. The fog was starting to lift, breaking apart with the coming of morning. A faint glow touched the horizon beyond the grove.

If she was to return to her own time, it had to be now.

Giving his hand a squeeze, she let go. She took one step forward. Then she crossed her arms over her chest, turned around and said, “No.”

“No?” Aedan stared at her. “We dinna have time to argue, lass. Once the sun rises, ye will be trapped here.”

“I won’t be trapped.” She put her hands on her hips. “I choose to stay.”

The blank look on his face turned to disbelief. “Ye would choose to stay here? What of yer family, yer life back in yer time?”

She stepped closer, eyes intent on his. “I haven’t heard from my parents in over a year. I doubt they’d notice I was gone. And there is nothing else to hold me there.”

“And here?” His voice was low, thrumming with emotion.

“I came to Iona to try to capture some of the joy I had as a child, with my grandmother. She’s long gone, but I’ve found the magic she always wanted me to have.”

“There is that in abundance,” he agreed.

“I want adventure,” she said.

“Also in plentiful supply.”

“And you.” She reached out and stroked the curve of his jaw. “I find that I can’t walk away from you, Aedan ap Crannog.”

He said nothing for a long, breathless moment. Then he pulled her into his arms, groaning, “Thank the gods.”

Moira opened her mouth to do just that, but Aedan was too quick for her. He swooped down with a passionate kiss that chased away all thoughts of the gods, Samhain and the veil between the worlds.

Long moments later, he lifted his head, breaking the kiss. “Tis time to go, lass.”

“But I thought—”

He silenced her with a brief kiss. “I meant to the skiffs, Moira. Look around. ‘Tis the dawning.”

The sun had crested the horizon, and early morning light chased away the last of the fog. Moira smiled as she looked around the grove, the tiny island familiar and yet so new.

Gran would definitely have approved.

About the Author

Kate Davies first tried her hand at romance at the young age of twelve. Sadly, that original science fiction love story is lost to the ages. But after many years meandering through such varied writing fields as fantasy, playwriting, poetry, and non-fiction, she's made her way home to romance.

Kate lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and kids. When not chasing the rugrats around the house, she loves to write sexy stories about strong, passionate men and women.

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Beginnings: A Touch of Magic

© 2006 Cassandra Kane

A race against time to save a planet—will the price be too heavy to pay?

Captain Tirana Albasta leads the last scouting mission to mystery planet Samhain, which has already swallowed two previous missions and a starship full of New Wiccan colonists, Lalith's People.

Determined to keep the planet from UA Special Forces' harsh military control, Tirana finds much more than she expected. For the descendants of Lalith's People have split into two separate societies—the anti-magic Priests and the magical True People—and she has just been caught in the crossfire.

Complicating matters is her attraction to Loren, the broodingly handsome True People witch who ignites passions she has never before experienced, and who just might make leaving Samhain impossible in more ways than one...

Beginnings: A Warrior's Witch

© 2006 Mackenzie McKade

Legacy bonds them—betrayal will test them—but, love and a little bit of magic will keep them together.

Gifted with both Berserka and Wicce heritage, Sabine wonders which legacy will determine her fate. A path of freedom and independence? Or will the Berserka curse tie her to one man, not of her choosing?

After his father's death, Conall returns to Scotland to take his rightful place as chieftain. Fate steps in and unleashes his hot-blooded lust on one obstinate woman resolved on defying destiny.

A forced marriage binds them. Desire and their animalistic nature draw them together. But someone is threatening to destroy the fiery love growing between them. Salt in the water, poison in the wine has everyone looking askew at Sabine, including her husband.

When the clan demands Sabine's death, Conall must choose between family and the woman he loves.

Beginnings: Babe in Woods

© 2006 Lorelei James

Animal attraction takes on a whole new meaning...

Manhattanite Lacy Buchanan is out to prove she's a tough cookie by signing up for a survivalist hiking trip in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The last thing she expected was to get lost, forcing her to spend the rest of the hike alone with surly, too-sexy mountain man, Becker, who blames her entirely for their predicament. After Becker saves her from a rattlesnake, and gently calms her fears, Lacy feels lucky to be in his experienced hands.

But Sam Becker isn't really a hiking expert. He's strictly the moneyman in Back To Nature Guided Hiking Tours and a last minute, temporary fill-in guide. He can't believe his bad luck when his reluctant charge—a mouthy, but hot, blonde bombshell—pulverizes their only compass, destroying their chances of following the coordinates to base camp. Yet something about Lacy's trusting nature makes him want fulfill her idea he's her rugged hero.

As Sam and Lacy attempt to find a way out of the treacherous mountain passes, their natural instincts take them...farther away from civilized behavior and straight into the mating calls of the wild.

Beginnings: Night Music

© 2006 Charlene Teglia

When death marked her, he offered her rebirth...

Meghan Davies has been living a dream as the bass player for the all-female hit rock band, The Sirens. But the dream becomes a nightmare with the discovery that cancer, undetected and now too far gone, heralds the end of everything.

Romney Kearns has been watching the sharp-tongued, flame haired woman from afar, wanting, but never approaching because he can offer her nothing but death.

When he discovers that death already has her marked, he sets out on All Hallow's Eve to seduce her, claim her, and make her willing to accept his dark offer. An alternative. Not life as she's known it, but a kind of rebirth. Eternity with him and immortality for her to make night music.

Beginnings: Ritual Love

© 2006 Kate Davies

A lost woman. A hunted man. On a night of forbidden rituals, the veil between past and present lifts—and their worlds will never be the same.

Scientist Moira Sinclair doesn't believe in magic. Or at least she hasn't since childhood. She's only come to Iona in remembrance of her long-deceased grandmother, the last person who encouraged her fanciful side. But now she's stumbled onto a secret druid ritual—and into another time.

Aedan Ap Crannog is furious to discover an outsider spying on their sacred, banned Samhain rites. With her strange garb and stranger mannerisms, Moira is unlike any woman he's ever known. But she could cause trouble for him and the people who follow him in the ancient ways. To prevent her from sounding the alarm, he takes her captive, hiding her in the labyrinth of caves along the far shore.

Despite their differences, sparks burn between them as brightly as the Samhain bonfire. Now captive and captor must find a way to bridge the centuries before the magic disappears with the dawn...

Beginnings: The Last Prophecy

© 2006 Jennie Andrus

Hours before being murdered Maddy gives her last prophecy—her sister's death and salvation.

The MacElwain sisters had always been different. In search of a “normal” life, Lottie did her best to ignore her crazy sister, until Maddy predicts Lottie’s death. Suddenly Maddy is dead and Lottie has a very short shelf life and, according to Maddy, she’s going to need to find a moose if she wants to survive. Unfortunately, moose aren’t too plentiful in downtown Toronto.

Not willing to trust her life to an animal, Lottie runs to the shores of Newfoundland, where danger, love and acceptance wait for her to fulfill the last prophecy of Mad Maddy MacElwain

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