



SCOTTISH
WHISPERS

ROBYN WREN

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by

Robyn Wren

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

Scottish Whispers

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

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Dedication

For my family who have always been there for me through the good and bad, never once allowing me to give up on my dreams. For my friends who prompted me to strive to get my adventures out there for others who would enjoy the journeys as much as I do. You know who you are. And lastly for my good friend Tim who without his expertise and help I never would have gotten my site done as well as I have. You all are more than a person could have wished for.

Chapter One

A cool breeze blew in from the west, bringing with it a foretelling of a storm on the horizon. Katie and Jena exited the theatre, their footfalls echoing in the night air. They headed toward Katie's Mustang and Jena hurried to the passenger side, anxious to get into the car. One thing she'd learned long ago—when a storm was brewing, it was always a sign to get home. Too many times she'd been the recipient of bad news with the crack of thunder. A soft click alerted Jena that Katie had disabled the alarm, her cue to jump into the seat before the rain began.

"Come on Katie, let's go!" Jena screamed from inside the car. The movie had ended ten minutes ago and she wanted to get home. Shadows loomed in the distance, not to mention the growing sense of dread she felt inside.

"I'm coming, I'm coming. Hold your damn horses." Jena knew by the tone of her friend's voice that she was teasing. As far back as she could remember they'd always bantered back and forth. Tonight was no different.

"Well if you weren't so slow, we might get out of here before the next group pulls in. You know how crazy it gets at this time of night." Jena's gaze drifted to the oncoming traffic. Friday night and so many new releases she was amazed they'd even been able to find a decent parking spot. The moment Katie got into the car and slammed the door a loud crack of thunder roared overhead signaling the oncoming storm.

"Guess we got out of here just in time huh?"

Jena looked over at her best friend and smiled. She always did have a way of pointing out the obvious. "Nice observation there, Sherlock."

"Well?" Katie poked Jena, a smile plastered on her face. "What did you think of it?"

Jena couldn't help but smile. Katie had been trying for months to get her to agree to go see the new romance movie. Until this weekend she'd been able to dodge it.

Unfortunately, Katie had bugged her enough that she'd caved, the end result a boring two hours of wasted time.

"Katie I warned you. Romance movies are just not my thing. I like action and drama with lots of hack and slash. You know that." She would trade a weepy overdrawn tear-jerker any day for a night spent with Freddie Krueger.

"Oh come on, it wasn't that bad. Was it?"

Jena and Katie had never agreed on movies. Katie was a die hard romantic. She held onto the belief that everyone had a soul-mate, that one true love that stood the test of time. Jena knew it didn't. She'd been burned long ago and refused to trust in the heart. Too many scars were left open to believe someone could mend them. A rustle to her left reminded her that Katie waited patiently to hear her answer; her eyes wide with innocence.

A soft sigh escaped her lips. "Katie, it was an okay movie. But I mean, come on. Who in their right mind is going to believe that a woman would fall for a man she doesn't even know? It just doesn't happen." Katie's smile faded and Jena knew she'd hit a cord. Instantly she regretted her words.

"I'm sorry, Katie; I didn't mean it the way it sounded." She hated that her bad outlook on love had dampened her friend's passion for romance. "I'm sure you are right and will find that one man who just knocks your socks off someday." She had high hopes for her friend. They'd known each other all their lives, she couldn't have hoped for a better friend.

"I know Jena, but you need to believe in it as well. Love is magical if you allow it to be." Jena turned her head to look out into the oncoming storm, the full moon peaking out from behind the thickening clouds.

"Katie, I've not told anyone this but...I'm not happy in my marriage." The moment the words were said Jena wished she could take them back. Katie, herself and her husband Ted, had known each other since they were children in the orphanage. They'd practically grown up together. Ted had always been there to keep them safe, to make sure they never wanted or lacked for anything. Over the years it became obvious Ted had fallen in love with her; but she never felt the same way he did and knew she

never would. She had always thought of Ted like a brother, one she would do anything for.

“What are you saying Jena? Don’t you love Ted?”

Katie’s words tore at Jena’s heart. “Of course I love Ted, just not in the way a wife should love her husband.” Over the years she’d hoped she would grow to love him more, but she never had. Too many days had passed when she began to wonder what was wrong with her. Why couldn’t she return the feelings that Ted felt for her? Was she incapable of real love? She had asked herself those questions hundreds of times over the years, with silence her only answer.

“You’re holding something back I can hear it in your voice.”

“Yes, I love him...but...” She hashed out the words in her mind to find the best way to explain so Katie understood.

“But what?” Jena could see the confusion pool in Katie’s brown eyes.

“Katie when Ted saved me that day in the closet, I swore I would do all I could to make him happy. When he proposed, I knew that marrying him would be one way to ensure that I fulfilled my vow. I gave him back the thing he gave me...my life.” Maybe that was why she could never return Ted’s feelings. Perhaps that day had forever removed her ability to fall in love.

Katie nodded in silent acknowledgment of the unsaid words that floated through Jena’s mind. The assault. Fifteen years ago, back in the common room. Jena shuddered as she recalled the day. Ralph, one of the groundskeepers, had been in the room, insistent that she help him find a specific broom the headmaster of the orphanage needed. She had looked everywhere she could think of, when the man said he thought it might be in the closet at the end of the hallway. She had hurried down to the end of the corridor and opened the door. All she could see was darkness and pans on the floor; then she was shoved from behind.

The force had made her tumble into the closet; her head hitting the wall with a thud. The pain had been incredible but it was nothing compared to the fear. She watched as he walked into the closet and closed the door

behind him. Rough hands grabbed and fondled her small body; her screams were kept at bay by his alcohol laced mouth. Terror had become a real live being in those few moments and Jena thought she would die from the fear.

She had tried to fight. She'd kicked and pushed, but strong hands had held her tight. A quick back-hand to her face had nearly knocked her out as blood trickled down her lip. A punch to her stomach knocked the air from her lungs as fear thundered through her chest. She'd believed she wouldn't survive the attack and had prayed for the darkness to engulf her.

Darkness and shadows had begun to envelop her. Hands reached out to her, willing her to let them drag her into the unknown with them. She'd wanted to scream but fear had silenced her cries. She welcomed the darkness, wanted to give in from the horror of where she was and what was happening.

A quick bolt of light suddenly had intruded into her hell. All she'd heard was a loud crack of wood against skull. The next thing she'd remembered had been Ted's face, full of worry, as he pulled her from the closet. In that moment she had sworn to do whatever she could to keep him happy...and she had. From that day on she'd lived and breathed by his happiness. Given up the life she no longer thought of as her own and married him, never once regretting it, at least not really.

"Don't think about it Jena, it was long ago." Katie's voice penetrated her thoughts. How could she forget? She lived with it daily. It was a demon that haunted her nightmares.

"I know it was long ago. At times it feels like it was just yesterday."

"I know it does."

Jena's gaze turned to her friend's. No, she could never understand the scars she bore. No matter how hard Katie tried to erase the memory, Jena could never forget; not when it was something that haunted her every moment. She diverted her gaze into the night, her heart heavy at the thought of going home.

"The weather is peculiar tonight. The storm looks like a living being trying to break free." And it did seem

that way. Since they had left the theater things had felt off balance not as they should be.

“It’s just a storm Jena, nothing odd about it. I swear you watch too many shows on the Sci-Fi Channel. You need to grip yourself in reality for once.”

“Reality isn’t as much fun. Besides, there are things that happen all the time that can’t be explained. Just because you don’t see them happen doesn’t mean they don’t.” For as far back as Jena could remember she’d believed in alternate universes and things that went bump in the night. If that made her strange, then so be it. It was who she was and she didn’t care.

“Jena, you are one strange cookie.”

The moment the words left Katie’s lips, Jena’s gaze drifted toward the emerging moon, its silvery glow taking on a reddish hue. A sudden chill crossed her skin with the premonition of death. Long ago she’d heard stories that if the moon should turn a shade of red or crimson it meant someone would die. Above an owl dove after prey, its cry eerie in the backdrop of the approaching storm. A need like none other pushed through her veins.

“Katie, you know I would usually never ask this of you—but floor it. I need to get home.”

Jena rubbed her hands across her arms, desperate to dispel the wrenching feeling that was building up inside. She watched as Katie began to open her mouth but then thought better of it. The look on her face must have been reason enough. Without another word Katie pressed her foot to the gas pedal, her mustang’s engine roared in the darkness.

Chapter Two

Half a mile and she would be home. Jena prayed her feeling of distress was a fluke. Too many times she'd ignored her gut, only to be proven right. God—please let her be wrong this time.

“God, please...*please* let it all be ok.” She'd whispered the mantra over and over in her head the last twenty miles.

“Jena?” Katie's voice barely registered.

Minutes ticked by, each one longer than the last. Finally, in the distance she saw her house up on the corner, the kitchen light still aglow.

“See Jena, nothing looks wrong. Even your lights are still on.” Katie looked at her friend, a triumphant smile plastered across Katie's face. Jena wished she felt half as confident.

“I know you are probably right, but I want to be sure. Humor me on this will you?” She prayed her friend was right. Even though everything appeared to be ok from the back, she wouldn't believe it until she saw Ted herself. She needed to know he was okay.

As they rounded the corner, a swarm of blue and red lights flooded into the mustang, blinding their sight for a moment. As Jena's vision cleared she counted at least ten police cruisers parked in her yard. In an instant, her heart dropped into her stomach.

“Oh God...please no.” Before Katie could put the car into park, Jena bolted out the car and headed toward the front door. *Please, please let him be okay.* She hummed the chant in her head over and over as her heart increased in tempo.

“Ma'am you can't go in there.” A big burly officer stood in her way but she refused to stop.

“Try and stop me.” Her hand pushed against his chest as she slipped out of his grasp and toward the door. She heard him stammer out a string of cuss words from

behind her but she ignored him. Her mind was focused on one thing...finding Ted.

The moment she entered through the front door she found herself immersed in a pool of officers so thick she saw almost nothing but blue and black. Her eyes darted all around but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. She moved her gaze to the hallway that led to the bedrooms but again, nothing. Fear increased as she turned her head toward the kitchen where most of the voices were coming from.

"Such a shame..." She could hear bits and pieces of the men's conversation but couldn't put together what had happened.

Try as she might, she couldn't see past the line they had formed, their voices a mixture of confusion and regret. She inched closer each foot step felt as if wet concrete had replaced the tile floor beneath her feet. Though it took her no more than a minute to reach the kitchen she felt as if time stood still. So many voices moved about her, their heads shaking while they discussed what had happened.

"Excuse me." Her voice was a mere whisper that barely made it past her lips as she pushed at the shoulders of the men that blocked her way. Finally, she was able to get behind one of the officers, her gaze moving into the kitchen. The moment she'd pushed past the last of the blue uniforms her eyes landed on the still body of a man.

"No! Ted!" Had she screamed? She couldn't be sure. The last thing she would remember seeing was a portion of the left side of his head and his right hand as it grasped the shirt she had given him for his birthday; a pool of crimson blood soaked into the deep blue material. After that blackness engulfed her completely.

Black and grey filled her vision as voices she couldn't understand filled her ears. Shadows moved toward her their hands outstretched. Where was she? Her eyes drifted toward where she'd seen Ted's body, his lifeless eyes staring back. Horror replaced sadness as more shadows circled his body, their smoky hands outstretched toward his.

“Leave him alone.” Her words carried on the stagnant air. Their heads turned toward the direction of her voice; their soulless eyes boring into her.

“He’s ours Jena. Come join us.” They moved toward her, their elongated arms outstretched. Coldness wrapped around her body stiffening her movements. A scream lodged in her throat as darkness once again engulfed her. Would she die? Maybe it was best, now that she had no life left. She was tired of fighting.

“No Jena, you can’t die. I’ve waited forever for you. Come find me.” A deep voice enveloped her in warmth. “Rest easy and find me. You have to find me.”

Jena’s eyes snapped open with a need to find the owner of the voice paramount. “Where are you?” Her gaze drifted through the darkness to land on a tall figure in the distance, his deep blue eyes full of warmth, staring back.

“Hold on for me Jena and search for me, for I cannot survive without you.” Sadness laced his words and she could feel his need of her. Something deep inside reached for him. She wanted to hold him close and never let go.

“Who are you?” Her voice whispered on the stale air.

“I’m your past, present and future. You just need to look.” Mist wrapped around the man and his figure disappeared in the darkness. “I can only exist if you are with me.”

“Don’t go.” She could feel the coldness invade her once more as the bleakness of her life snaked around her like a vice. She tried to reach out to the man to pull him close. Never in her life had she been so drawn to someone.

“I’ll be close Jena. You just need to find me. Please save me.” Her heart lurched in her chest at the pain she felt in his words. She watched as the darkness enveloped him like a glove...removing him from her sight.

“Time to go Jena. Join us.” The voices of the others crossed her skin like thousands of ants. Shivering she pushed herself farther away from their grasp.

“Never.” Shadows moved about her, a fog of confusion wrapped around her mind. She welcomed the embrace of unconsciousness; allowed it to take her away from the pain in her life. Maybe she wouldn’t wake up this time. Then again, she couldn’t give up on the man who’d called out to her.

Suddenly the pungent scent of fainting salt broke through the fogginess of the darkness. "What...what happened?" Her voice felt rough as if she had eaten one of those steel wool scouring pads. Try as she might, she couldn't gain enough strength to sit up on her own. Her eyes adjusted to the light in the living room, her heart pounded out an erratic beat. "Katie?"

"I'm here Jena, I'm here." Her friend's voice held a hint of sadness and concern. So she'd not dreamt the horror her mind refused to let go of. *But what had happened to Ted?*

Her gaze fell on a tall lanky man, his face a mask of neutrality. "Ma'am." He could only be the captain, Jena mused. He held an air of authority about him, not to mention the fact that the other officers went to him for instructions. Putting her hand beneath her Jena pushed herself up refusing to allow them to see her as the weepy woman in distress. Too many times she'd seen friends get ignored because the police labeled them as helpless. Jena refused to appear that way even though she wanted nothing more than to cry her eyes out.

"I asked what happened." Her voice was a bit more forceful; she was pleased when the man in charge turned her direction. Though, he acted apprehensive at first. She could tell by the way he shifted, he knew he couldn't keep the truth from her. She wasn't stupid and she was not about to be bullied around by the police. She had lost faith in them long ago.

"Well Miss..." His voice held a bite to it that crawled up Jena's spine.

"My name is Jena or if you prefer, Mrs. Ted Jenkin." She hated when men called her Miss, it made her feel like a child. She had lived through hell and back and she refused to be treated like something that was so fragile it could break.

"Sorry, I meant to say Mrs. Jenkin." His rough voice agitated her further but she continued to stare back, stubbornness a thick trait that ran through her. "I am afraid your house was broken into tonight. Your husband, I mean Mr. Jenkin, attempted to fight off his attacker. Unfortunately, he did not win."

The words hit her like a physical blow. She turned from the man's challenging stare and looked out into the night. Her eyes drifted up to the moon, its glow still held a hint of crimson. It's how she'd known tonight would end badly, by that cursed moon. *Why was she always alerted too late; when nothing she could do would change the past?* She turned her determined gaze back to the captain; one thought pulsating through her mind. The man who'd killed Ted. Where was he? More than anything she wanted to rend and tear him to pieces for what he'd done.

"The person who did this...has he been caught?" She knew Ted could never be brought back but she held onto the hope that at least the person responsible would be held accountable.

"Well in that respect, there was a bit of luck. Even though your husband was fatally injured, he did get off a blow to the attackers head." The man's words echoed in her mind. *Fatally injured...* Try as she might, Jena found it tough to focus on the rest of the conversation. "The impact must have knocked the assailant off balance...we found him unconscious on the hallway floor." Her eyes shot toward the hallway, desperate to find what she knew wouldn't be there. She needed badly to face the man who'd changed her life once more, but all she found was the darkness of the night staring back at her.

"Where is he?" Though she was unsure if she meant Ted or the man responsible for his death, she decided to leave the answer up to the man before her.

"He's been taken down to the precinct for questioning. He'll be brought before a judge in the morning." The captain turned for a moment as if to head out the door, then he pivoted back and looked directly into Jena's eyes. Her heart stopped in that moment. "I am sorry for your loss Mrs. Jenkin. Truly I am." Sincerity laced his words and she couldn't help but accept his apology.

Jena watched as the police captain moved out the door and into the night, the flicker of police lights illuminated her doorway. In that moment she decided she would forever hate that shade of blue.

Chapter Three

Days turned into months and then into years. Looking at the paper, it was hard to believe two and a half years had gone by already. Sure, the guy who had killed Ted had gone to court. The whole case was plastered on the front page for weeks. Unfortunately, he had gotten off easy. Six years in a psychiatric unit...talk about justice. A small snort escaped her throat as she tried to concentrate on the paperwork in front of her. Nope...not going to work. Her eyes drifted to the last picture she still had of Ted.

"I'm sorry Ted." Still she wondered what she could have done differently that night. Could she have known? Were there signs she'd missed? True, the moon had alerted her, but that was after the fact. Ted had been dead long before they'd exited the movie.

Frustrated at the whole world, Jena couldn't help but laugh. Sure at first everyone came out of the woodwork to pay their respects, but as the weeks had gone by, the well wishers slowly diminished. The fact that they had no family didn't bother her; it was that she felt she'd failed Ted. She should have gotten home sooner. He didn't deserve to die. All her life she had never known him to be unkind to a single person. Yet in the blink of an eye he was dead. Fate had a cruel sense of humor and she was always the butt of the joke.

"Jena, are you there?" Jarred from her thoughts, Jena turned her head to the sound of Linda behind her.

"Sorry Linda, just thinking. What's up?" They'd known each other for ten years and Jena couldn't have asked for a better boss. In that time they had grown to become good friends and never once did she overstep her boundaries as her superior.

"Not much. I just wanted to let you know the proposal you drew up for the Catori deal was great. The board members approved it last night. I wanted to thank

you for your hard work.”

“Thanks, I’m glad it went over well. The funds we will get from the merger will help solidify our stock. Money like that you can’t turn away from. The board members would have been foolish to.” Too many times she had found money had a way of persuading even the kindest of people. It annoyed her but she wasn’t a fool to ignore the truth.

“Still, you spent a lot of time working on the data. To show you our appreciation, we’ve all agreed to give you some well deserved time off. Two months to be exact, all of it paid.” There it was. She knew there was a hidden agenda behind her boss’s visit. Linda had been worried about her for months now and she finally found a way to make her take a break. Great...forced time off.

“I know I didn’t hear you right. You’re making me take a vacation?” She had to ask. How could they make her take time off? Her work was flawless and she never was late. Agreed, she hadn’t taken time off since Ted’s death, but still. Why now?

“Look Jena, I’m worried about you. You need time off. You need to get away. From here and everything that might remind you of what happened. I know you are still hurt and I don’t blame you.” Jena wanted to yell and scream that she didn’t need to get away. She needed the normalcy of work, not a vacation to God knows where. What could she say?

“I wouldn’t even know where to go Linda. I’ve not thought about taking a trip in years.” That was the truth. She hadn’t even considered a vacation. Of course she could afford to go wherever she wanted, heck she didn’t even have to work and Linda knew that. One thing Ted was good at was planning. Without her knowledge he’d taken out a substantial life insurance policy in case something ever happened to him. If he’d only known. The thought drew another small sob that caught in Jena’s throat, her guilt about Ted’s death crept over her.

“That’s the fun part Jena.” Linda pushed a beige card into her hand. “Here, I have a friend who is a travel agent. Go talk to her. She will help you plan out the perfect trip. Now go, have fun. Everything will be here for you when you get back. I promise.” Jena knew it would be

a losing battle to argue with her boss when her mind was already set. The woman was more stubborn than anyone she'd ever met, aside from herself, of course.

"Fine Linda, I'll go talk to her, but I make no promises. I'm really not in the mood for a trip." Jena reached down to pick up her purse, making sure she had everything. She watched as a small smile crossed Linda's face.

"See you in a few months." Linda's voice echoed in her mind as she left the office slamming the door behind her. *Great. Just great.*

A trip? Why in the hell did they want her to take a trip? Reaching into her purse, Jena pulled out her keys and pressed the button to deactivate her car alarm. Couldn't they just leave her alone? She never acted upset at work. She just did her job and left everyone else alone.

The moment she was away from the building a dark cloud crossed above her, blocking out the sun. Shadows moved across the parking lot in front of her. Another feeling of foreboding crossed her soul.

"Jena come to us." *Those voices.* The same ones she'd heard back the night Ted had died.

"Go away." Why was she hearing them now? She was awake wasn't she?

"You belong to us Jena, just like Ted is with us. Come join Ted, you know you want to." A cry of anguish welled up in her throat. Could they be right? The idea pulsed through her mind. Perhaps her life was forfeit after not saving him from his fate; she wasn't sure anymore.

"Jena, don't forget me. You still have to find me. I cannot survive without you." A man's husky voice brushed against her skin, sending her heart hammering out a chaotic beat.

"Who are you? Where are you?" She couldn't place the accent or the man's voice. It held recognition, but she couldn't understand why.

"I told you. I'm your past, present and future. I need you to save me." His words wrapped like a blanket around her, sealing her in warmth. She could hear the hiss of the creatures that continued to haunt her fade further into the background until she could only hear the voice of the

mystery man.

"I want to find you but I don't know where." Never in her life had she wanted to find someone so much.

"You will find me, just don't give up." His words faded into the mist that moved into the area. A crack from behind her and she twisted her head to find a pair of deep blue eyes staring back at her.

"Who?"

"It's time for you to go back. Don't forget Jena...please don't forget." A crash broke her thoughts as the sun emerged from behind the darkened clouds.

Opening the door she heard a yell from behind and footsteps running toward her.

"Jena, wait up!" Jena smiled as she heard Katie hurry toward her. Chills continued to move across her skin. What was going on with her all of a sudden? She watched as Katie approached her, a smile plastered all over her face.

"What's up Katie? I have an appointment to go to." Well, she thought, she did promise to go see the agent so it wasn't a full lie.

"I know, Linda told me she finally got a chance to talk to you about taking some time off." Jena almost laughed. Of course those two were in co-hoots together. The three of them had gone out numerous times and were all friends. Nothing amazed her when those two were involved.

"I see. So you had your hand in this as well. Fine, you can come with me and go through the pain of helping me figure out where I'm going. But I warn you, I won't be smiling about it." Even though she didn't want to go anywhere, something about time away was beginning to feel right. There was her gut again telling her which direction to go. Why the hell didn't it come with an on-off switch?

"Jena, are you there?" She had been so deep in thought; she'd missed what Katie had been rambling about.

"I'm sorry Katie, just trying to see if there are any places that I've wanted to go to before. Any ideas?" The moment she said it she wished she could take it back. Katie's answer would be what Katie wanted which

ultimately was never the same.

“Well, since you asked.” Her smile, larger than life, shone through the murkiness of the day. “You should go on one of those nice long romantic cruises. The kind where you can wear next to nothing the whole trip and there are tons of gorgeous single men.” Of course she would say a cruise. What else did she expect? Anything Katie thought about had to do with romance. The woman was her own walking romance novel.

“Katie, I’m really not in the mood for some long cruise with a ton of men who are less real than Bugs Bunny.” She couldn’t help herself. For the last three months Katie had been dropping hints letting her know that it was time she started to date again. But her heart had been hardened long ago and nothing in this world would ever soften it. No, a cruise was definitely out of the question.

“Fine Jena, I won’t push you into going somewhere you don’t want to go. Please do take a trip somewhere, anywhere else but here.” She knew her friend was worried about her. Hell, she was worried about herself, but she refused to admit it to anyone. Okay fine, she would take a trip somewhere. She just needed to make sure it was as far from a romantic get away as possible.

“Ok, I promise.” Good. That settled, she focused her mind on the road ahead and wherever that might lead. Even her heart felt lighter with the knowledge that she would go somewhere else soon. Maybe for once fate would shine positively on her. Maybe. She wasn’t about to hold her breath though.

Thirty minutes later Jena found herself inside Linda’s friend’s travel agency. A wealth of posters of far away places littered the walls, as well as pamphlets for every imaginable destination were all over the desk. So many choices, she had no clue what to do. Jena began to tap out a nervous rhythm on the ground, unsure if she should really be here.

Her head turned toward Katie, a nervous smile on her face. “Maybe we should...”

“Jena?” A meek voice from behind her jarred her from her thoughts.

“Hi, um...yes, I’m Jena. Linda sent me.” She felt like a child caught in a stranger’s house. Her hands held fast to a napkin she had grabbed from her car, kneading it to keep her nerves in check.

“Nice to meet you Jena my name is Holly. Holly O’Callaey. Linda called and told me you would be by.” The woman’s smile was warm and friendly an instant rebuttal to the coldness she’d felt. “I’m glad to finally meet you.” Holly was being sincere, which helped some, though Jena still felt out of sorts in the office.

“Linda said you could help me plan a vacation. Everyone around me seems to think I need to get away.” A small sarcastic laugh escaped Jena’s dry throat. At that moment all she wanted to do was go home and crawl underneath her covers. Too bad she’d be found there as well.

“Ah...I see. And you don’t want to go anywhere I bet.” Okay, the woman was good.

“Well, not really. I mean, I know it wouldn’t be a bad thing.” Hesitation pulsed through her. She wanted to go home so bad yet she also wanted to stay. She was about to get up and leave but a look from Katie convinced her otherwise.

“Jena doesn’t like the idea of us pushing her into going somewhere. She needs to get away. It will be good for her, I know it.” What could she say to that? Katie was worried about her that much was obvious.

“Look, I agreed to going on vacation but I have a few things I want you to understand.” She took a moment to gather her thoughts; she felt as if the world held its breath as it waited for her to speak. “I do not want a cruise, or anything else that might be able to be construed as something ‘romantic’. I just want something out in the fresh air and away from everything and everyone.” There she’d said it. Let the woman find something to fit those requirements. If not...well she’d come as she’d promised.

A few minutes passed while she watched the travel agent turn her criteria over in her mind. Part of her hoped she couldn’t come up with anything that would meet her needs. On the other hand she prayed that she could get away. She knew she needed to get away; to finally have time to herself without others around to worry about her

well-being. Just when she thought she might get out of having to plan the vacation and actually going, she watched as a smile crossed Holly's face.

"I've got the perfect vacation for you. It's not any type of 'romantic' get away and it will keep you from being in the middle of people. It will allow you time to yourself in the outdoors in one of the most beautiful countries I've seen." The idea of finally getting away from everyone roused her interest. Could she finally have time alone?

"Is that possible?" Katie's voice broke through the silence.

"Katie." Her eyes moved back to the woman across from her. Questions burned through her mind. "So...what is this trip you're talking about?" She didn't want to seem too interested but God help her, she did want to get away after all.

"I know you said you have close to two months to play with so I was thinking we could plan a hiking trip through Scotland. You could begin in Inverness or one of the surrounding areas." She listened as the woman talked, but her mind was already in a far away place. Scotland. She had always dreamed of going but never had.

"I don't know. Jena, that's so far." Katie's voice held concern.

"How would this work?" The woman definitely had her interest.

"Well, we could start you out from say Orkney; put you up in one of the bed and breakfasts for a few nights. From there you take your backpack and just go. There are many castles and lochs around the area for you to visit and the people pretty much keep to themselves." It sounded like heaven. Could it be that easy?

"Jena..." Katie's protest fell on deaf ears. Her mind was already oceans away.

"I like the sound of being outside and going where I want to. How quickly can we plan this?" God help her she wanted to go. From the moment the woman had mentioned the trip she was hooked. The idea of outdoors and fresh air pulled at her, not to mention the lochs, castles and people who didn't know her or her past.

"Now Jena, are you sure you want to do this? I heard

it rains a lot out there and if you are alone who will you talk to? Who will keep you company and out of trouble?" Katie's voice held such concern that it broke Jena's heart. They'd always done things together but she knew this time she had to go alone. She needed to get away if for any other reason than to finally close the door on the past.

"Katie I'll be fine. I think this is something I really need to do on my own." Her gaze drifted across the wealth of posters littered on the walls till they settled back on her friend.

"But..." Her small protest barely moved her.

"I'll call you when I get there and throughout the time I'm away. I promise." It was the best assurance she could provide. She loved her like a sister but it was time to go on her own for a bit. She needed to find out who she was and where she was headed; otherwise she felt she would fade into despair eventually.

"Ok, but I don't have to like it. I mean it Jena; call me so I know you are okay." Always the concerned friend; it warmed Jena's heart that she had been lucky enough to know Katie.

"So that settles it. I'll make all the arrangements and send them over to you later today Jena." Holly's vibrant voice broke through the women's conversation. "I believe we can get you out of here as soon as tomorrow maybe the next day." Jena's jaw dropped. Wow, could it be that fast? She wasn't nearly prepared to leave that quickly. Or was she? Her mind began to go through a checklist of items she would need.

"I'm not sure if I'll be ready that fast. At least I don't think I can. Well maybe I can." Her mind a jumbled mess, she barely caught the smile crossing both women's faces. "What's so funny you two?"

"You are. You are hemming and hawing but you are aglow with the thought of this trip. This is the first time I've seen you even a little bit relaxed. Heck most times you are wound as tight as a rubber band stretched to its limit." That was Katie for her, straight and to the point. But she was right. She was relaxed at the thought of going and the sooner the better.

"Ok, fine, I'll go home and start packing. Or should I pick up some new stuff since I'll be going hiking. Hmm, so

many things I need to consider.” Her mind had already left the travel office and was going through more items she might need on her journey.

“Look, you go shopping Jena and I’ll give you a call this evening with all the specifics. Sound good?” Not that the woman gave her much choice as she was already tapping on her computer to locate all the information she needed to set up the trip. Without another word Jena got up and shook Holly’s hand as she headed for the door.

“Thank you so much Holly, I look forward to your call.”

“It’s my pleasure Jena. I’ll get the perfect trip for you...I promise. You’ll come back a changed woman.” Her smile, as bright as the sun outside, sent waves of reassurance through Jena. For once maybe luck was on her side. Returning her attention back to Katie she found that she too seemed to have caught the same smile.

“Let’s go Katie. I need to do some shopping!” For the first time in a long time, Jena felt at ease with a choice she’d made. Walking to her car she began to hum a happy tune to herself, a smile of her own crossing her face.

Chapter Four

Three hours and close to a thousand dollars later, Jena finally was on her way back home with all she had purchased.

“Think you got everything?”

“I believe so. If not, I’ll pick it up when I get there. I’m sure there are stores around.” She hoped she hadn’t forgotten to get anything, though even if she had it wasn’t that big of a deal. It wasn’t like she was going to the middle of no where. There would be stores. At least, she hoped so.

“Jena?” Katie’s voice wavered drawing Jena’s attention. Turning to face her friend; sadness seemed to have crossed her face, resonated from her eyes.

“What’s wrong Katie? I thought you were happy I finally caved in and decided to take a trip?” Not that she minded after talking to Holly but it hadn’t been her idea in the first place.

“I am happy, but...” Katie’s pause always meant she was thinking too much and that worried Jena.

“But what, Katie? Out with it.”

“Fine. I’m worried about you going alone. Are you sure you want to be gone for two months and in Scotland to boot? I mean...what if something happens? What if you need something and you can’t find anyone to help you?” She pounded questions and concerns until Jena felt she would laugh in hysterics.

“Katie, I want you to listen to me for a minute.” She paused a minute to make sure she had Katie’s full attention. “You and Linda were right about this. I need to get away to gather my thoughts on who I am and where I want to go with my life now.”

“But...why...?” Her unfinished sentence lingered in the air even though they both knew the answer.

“Ted has been gone for over two years now. It’s time I was out on my own. I have to find my place in this world.

I have been wandering around lost for too long.” She loved Katie like a sister and would never want to cause her concern. She needed this though, more than anything she had needed before. She felt it in ever fiber of her being.

“I know Jena, and I agree on those facts, but why so far away? I mean if it was a cruise that would be cool but a hiking trip in Scotland? Won’t it get cold and rainy on you?” A laugh erupted from her throat and she couldn’t stop herself. Katie always worried about the most insane things.

“Of course it might rain; it’s Scotland for Pete’s sake. But I’m ready for that Katie. It rains here and I don’t melt, at least not that I’ve noticed.” The whole idea was comical except the look Katie shot her bespoke concern.

“What else is bothering you Katie? Aside from the rain and the fact it’s in another country. What about this trip has you so worried?” She couldn’t understand why her friend was so concerned. It was a small hiking trip in a gorgeous country, what more could she want?

“Nothing I guess....it’s just that...well...oh I don’t know. I’m just being silly but for some reason the thought of you going away on your own scares me a little. I know it sounds stupid but it’s true.” The sincerity in her words kept Jena from laughing even though she knew nothing was going to happen.

“Listen Katie, I love that you are concerned, I truly do but I need you to understand that I am going to be fine. I need this more than anything I’ve needed before. Do you understand me on that?” She hated to be so blunt but she had so many things she needed to complete before leaving that she didn’t have the time to assure her friend that she would be fine. She’d survived worse and she could do so again.

“I know you will be fine Jena. Don’t mind me or my comments. You go and have fun but bring yourself back here safely. Promise?” Katie’s finger teetered back and forth in a very demanding manner and Jena had to choke back a giggle.

Instead she shot Katie a warm smile as she nodded her head. “I promise I will come back a changed woman safe and sound.” Of course she would come back safely. What could possibly happen?

Two hours later, Jena found herself exhausted as she pulled her car into the driveway. Turning off the engine a soft sigh escaped her throat. "Finally." The conversation with Katie had drained her energy levels big time. Why was she so worried?

Opening the door, she felt the cool brush of the breeze signaling another incoming storm. Despite her past and the premonitions she received, she couldn't help but appreciate the brewing clouds in the distance. Regardless of anything else she loved storms and the rejuvenation that always came with it. Thunder cracked in the distance a signal that the storm would be approaching shortly.

Getting out of her car Jena reached into the back seat and pulled out the bags full of what she had purchased earlier, her head connecting with the roof of the car.

"Ouch!" Mentally she checked off the items she would need, rubbing the roof of her head as she did. Backpack, eating utensils, warm clothing, water cooler, blankets and a bunch of other things Holly had advised her to get. Yep, she had it all. Or at least she hoped she did.

"My, my...been shopping?" Jena nearly dropped her bags at the interruption of her thoughts. Scrambling to regain her composure, Jena turned to face the sound of the elderly mans' voice, a small smile plastered on her face. Emmett had always been a kind, sweet man especially after Ted's death. She feared he somehow felt responsible for not having kept an eye out and seen the man enter the house.

"Good evening Emmett. How are you tonight?" She always enjoyed talking to him. He was a sweet old man, one she considered a grandfather if she had ever had one. He always had a twinkle in his eye and since Ted's death had been very protective of her. "I've been out shopping today. I'm finally going on a vacation."

"A vacation you say? Where to and when?" The man was inquisitive. But she never minded it before.

"I'm taking a two month trip overseas. If all goes well I'll be leaving by this weekend and returning after Thanksgiving sometime." The moment she said it she

remembered she'd promised to spend Thanksgiving with Emmett and his wife. How could she forget?

"It's fine Jena. You need to get away. The wife and I have had this conversation many times over the last year. It will be good for you." Jena chuckled wondering just how many people were conspiring against her to make her take time off.

"I'm beginning to think everyone has decided I need to get away. Guess it just took a bit for me to grasp the idea huh?" She watched as a look of confusion crossed the old man's face his hand reaching back to scratch his graying head.

"Well, I reckon you'll be needing someone to watch yer house while you're gone." Blast, she'd not even thought of that.

"Now that you mention it, I guess I do. I'm sorry to ask on such short notice."

"Oh child, think nothing of it. Me and the Misses will gladly keep an eye on things. You just go and enjoy yourself. Relax and refocus. It will be good for you." What more could she say? Everything was falling into place and she couldn't be happier.

Reaching up she wrapped her arms around Emmett, squeezing tight. "Thank you so much. Tell Agnes I said 'hi' and that I'll bring both of you something back special." She released her hold and backed up toward the house waving as she headed toward the door.

"Just bring yourself back safely and we will be happy Miss Jena." His words brushed against her skin like a foreboding. Why was everyone so worried she wouldn't come back?

With a quick tilt of her head as she headed toward her home she took in the man who'd been so kind to her. A shadow crossed his smile, his eyes taking on knowledge she couldn't fathom. A burst of thunder roared from the distance pulling her attention to the east.

"Looks like we are in for a bugger of a storm, Emmett." Her gaze moved back toward the old man to find a smug grin cross his face.

"Storms are good. They wash away the bad and bring in a fresh new world." Jena could feel he was trying to tell her something, but for the life of her she just couldn't

figure it out. It had to be the stress of the day.

“Take care and I’ll see you soon.” Without another word Jena turned on her heel and sped toward the house. Droplets of rain began to fall from the sky the onset of the storm urging her inside.

As Jena turned the key to unlock her front door she heard her phone begin to ring. “Damn.” Pushing the big oak door open never felt so hard. Jena rushed inside to grab the phone off the kitchen wall, tripping over the chair as she ran.

“Hel...hello?” Out of breath, Jena bit back the curse words that rattled her brain from the impact her knee had made with the metal chair. Not sure what else to do Jena dropped her bags on the kitchen table, the contents spilling all over the place. *Crap*. A second or two passed and she wondered if she might have missed the call after all.

“Miss Jenkin?” A soft-spoken voice resonated on the other end.

“This is she. Who is this?” The voice didn’t ring any bells but she was listed in the phone directory so anyone could have found the number.

“It’s Holly from the travel agency.” Jena’s heart stopped in that second.

“Hi Holly. I just got in.” She didn’t know what to say. What if she couldn’t find anything? What if everything was booked? Damn, just as she was beginning to look forward to leaving.

“I just wanted to let you know everything has been confirmed. Your plane leaves tomorrow from MCI at 3:00 p.m. You should arrive the next day at 11:35 a.m. You have to change planes once, but it shouldn’t be too much trouble. I went ahead and e-mailed your electronic ticket with all the particulars.” The details bounced through Jena’s mind so fast she felt the world spin on its axis. So it was done. Was it possible? Hard to believe just yesterday she’d felt stuck in a rut.

“I’m sorry. You said everything is booked?” She had to ask, fearful that she’d misheard something.

“Yep, everything has been arranged for you. You’re ready to go.” She could have sworn she heard a chuckle on

the other end of the call when another female voice came on the line.

“Hey Jena, it’s Linda. I’m so glad you are going on this trip. It will be wonderful for you.” Linda? What was she doing at Holly’s? Of course, they were friends why wouldn’t she be there?

“Hey Linda, it’s good to hear from you.” Jena had been afraid she wouldn’t have a chance to speak to her before leaving.

“Thanks. I’m glad to have caught you at home. Holly told me about the trip and it sounds like it should do you good.”

“I was taken off-guard to hear you there.” She knew they were friends, but she didn’t realize Linda and Holly were that close. She would have to find out more from about Holly once she returned. “So what are you two up to tonight?”

“Holly and I are going to see a movie tonight.” A movie? Could they have hot dates? “Now go, get ready to have fun!” There was her chipper voice urging her on. She would have to figure out a way to thank them when she returned.

“I’ll do my best. You two have fun tonight.” She could hear a muffled giggle on the other end. “I’ll catch you when I get back.” She could tell that they were preoccupied as a soft click was their only reply.

Crazy girls. Hanging up the phone, Jena moved back to the table and the items littered all over it.

“What a mess.”

A quick glance around the room brought back fresh memories. Tears began to pool in her eyes. God; how she hated this place. So many memories that hurt and so many things left unsaid. Had she done the right thing when she’d married Ted? How many nights over the last two years had she argued with herself over that very fact.

Come on girl, get past it. You loved him the best you could. Had she? Did she really love him or just used his love as a way to not deal with men? Maybe she’d done him wrong by marrying him when she knew she couldn’t love him that way? Unfortunately, she would never know the answers and that bothered her the most. A sigh escaped her lips as she reached back down and grabbed the bags.

Heading back to her room she pushed the bad memories out of her mind and for now, focused instead on the trip ahead of her.

“Scotland, here I come.” A sudden chill swept across her body, the warm touch of man’s finger across her face stopped Jena in her tracks. *God please, don’t let me be haunted by ghosts.* Her mind screamed out in defiance. As soon as it began the sensation disappeared. Jena’s gaze drifted across the room and out the bay window in her bedroom. Deep black clouds had begun to roll in with the lightning arching across the sky.

“So beautiful.” Yet the ominous clouds terrified her as her mind replayed the night of Ted’s murder. “God I hate this place.”

Chapter Five

The night had dragged on ruthlessly, her need to get everything done foremost on her mind. Hours passed 'til she felt she would scream out into the night. Moving around the bedroom, Jena looked at her gear and the checklist she held. Earlier, she had printed out the itinerary that Holly had sent, along with a brochure listing the local activities.

“Well I'll give her one thing, she's good.” She'd been surprised at the efficiency of the travel agent but at the same time she was thankful for her thoroughness. Jena had gone through everything she'd been given and plotted out a route that would take her to some of the more remote parts of the island.

“That should be good.” Looking down at her planner she closed the book and put it into her backpack. Now what? Just as she was about to get up the phone rang breaking the silence of the night. God she hoped it wasn't another salesman.

“Hello?”

“Jena?” She was relieved to hear Katie's voice on the other end.

“Hey there girl, what's up?” She knew Katie was still worried about the trip she could hear it in her voice. She couldn't blame her though. It was a long distance and they'd never been separated before.

“Nothing, I just thought maybe I'd come over for a bit and we could watch a movie or something.” She was fishing for something, Jena could feel it.

“Sure come on out. I'm done packing and could use the diversion. You bring the movie, I'll supply the popcorn.”

“Great, on my way.” With that she heard the finality of the cell click on her end as she replaced the receiver. At least she would have one more relaxing night in front of the TV before she headed out.

An hour later and Katie was at her door; a movie in her hand and a smile plastered on her face.

“What did you do?” She was almost afraid to ask.

“Nothing. Here...it’s the best I could find.” She shoved the blue covered case into her hand as she pushed her way passed Jena and into the living room, plopping onto the couch. Looking down at the covering, the script lettering jumped out at her. *Jason verses Freddy*. Jena’s eyes widened.

“No way! You actually got a horror movie? Where’s Katie? Who are you?” A small chuckle escaped her lips.

“I don’t want to hear it. So I gave in tonight and thought I’d give your kind of movie a chance.” She watched as Katie feigned a shudder. “Now let’s get this over with. I even brought some tequila with me, so it won’t be a total loss.”

“Ohh...tequila. You aren’t trying to make me miss my flight tomorrow are you?” Though the idea of getting hammered was appealing she didn’t want to miss her plane.

“Me? Never. I just can’t see watching this kind of movie sober.” The look on her friend’s face drew another round of laughter to burst from her throat. This was the Katie she knew and loved.

“Ok, you win; I’ll break out the glasses. I think I might even have some chips lying around somewhere. Somehow popcorn and tequila just sounds...yuck.” Jena headed toward the kitchen turning as she approached the doorway. “Thanks for coming out Katie...it means a lot to me tonight.”

“No problem chica. Can’t let you head off to the unknown without a proper night of drinking.” Katie’s laughter echoed through the living room.

A few hours later, Jena made her way up to her room to head up to bed just before midnight. Katie had stayed for the duration of the movie, even though she’d been repulsed by all the blood and gore, and proceeded to tell Jena in detail how warped her sense of humor must be to watch them. Still she had enjoyed their time together.

The moment she made it to her room, Jena fell to her bed like a rock, her eyes slamming shut in an instant. Waves of darkness embraced her as she drifted into a

deep sleep.

Black, grey and crimson filled her mind, along with the sounds of people screaming in agony.

“Come to us Jena. You still belong to us.” The monsters from her past crept back to her present.

“Go away. I won’t follow you.” Defiance laced her words.

“You cannot avoid us. We will always be here. You are coming to us. It will just take time.” Their coupled voices rang through her body in a shudder of chills.

“Never. I’ll never belong to you. Leave me be.” Try as she might Jena couldn’t move. She closed her eyes as her heart began to beat out an erratic beat she swore would burst.

“Just wait. You will have no choice.” Jena could feel their hands reach for her, their long tendril fingers grasping her nightgown.

“Go away.” Her voice cracked in the dryness of the abyss she was locked in. Just when she swore she would drown in despair of the being that hunted her; warmth spread across her skin.

“Jena...” His deep baritone voice penetrated her web of fatigue and terror. Her eyelids drifted back open, a haze of reds and blues filling her vision.

“Where am I? Who’s out there?” No matter how hard she tried she couldn’t move her body. The warmth of a hand caressed her cheek, sending shockwaves through her body.

“I’m waiting for you my love.” Her gaze moved from the large hand up the arm to his shadowed face. Once more, she could only make out the steel blue eyes staring back.

“Who are you?” His accent was not American and the sound sent her whole body into an uproar of feelings.

“I’m your destiny. Save me.” Again sadness filled his voice. What could hurt such a powerful looking man? Jena found her arms reaching out for him.

“I don’t believe in destiny.” She hadn’t for as far back as she could remember.

“You may not but both destiny and I believe in you.” His finger lingered on her skin; a light touch that sent her

blood burning as the mist enveloped him in its embrace.

“Don’t go.” Mist continued to shroud him in mystery, engulfing him in darkness.

“I have to. You will find me soon. You will know me. In your heart you will know me.” His voice turned to a whisper the sound a soft caress across her soul.

“Wait. Please.” Tears pooled in her eyes as the man disappeared once more into the shadows. “Who are you?”

“No one for you to worry about, Jena. You belong to us just as Ted did.” A cold clammy hand grasped Jena’s wrist the feel of it sending shivers across her skin. A tilt of her head met with soul-less eyes staring back. Not again.

“Go away.”

“Never. You belong to us now.” A scream lodged in Jena’s throat as a cold fog enveloped her, weaving around so tight she couldn’t breath. When would her hell end? Unconsciousness gripped her firmly and she took the vision of the man’s sad blue eyes with her as she descended into the darkness of sleep once more.

A shriek of Jena’s alarm clock rustled her from her dreams. How long had she slept? She could barely remember making it to the bed, let alone undressing. A quick glance to her nightstand proved why. Tequila. Okay, now she remembered. She’d have to thank Katie for that little present later.

“Katie, I’m going to kill you later.” Jena knew Katie wasn’t around but it felt good to say it anyway.

A stretch of her arms as she got up sent the blood rushing to her head. The second she was upright her head began to pound with the rush of blood into her brain. Oh ya...bad idea. When had she decided to drink? Had to have been somewhere between Freddy coming back to life and Jason drowning. Or had they watched another movie after that? Damn, she couldn’t remember. Thankfully she’d not been subjected to one of Katie’s romantic movies or berated with more questions as to why she was going overseas. If she had, she might have downed another bottle she held for emergencies.

A quick look about the room and Jena made her way toward the bathroom. God, how she ached. If she didn’t know better she could have sworn she’d run a damn

marathon instead of vegging out in front of the TV all night. She needed to clear her head of the cobwebs from the night before and the constant pounding in her brain or she'd never make it through the flight. The moment she stepped into the steaming hot spray of the shower, she felt the tension leave her body.

"Thank God." Even her voice sounded hollow against the tiled walls. A sigh escaped her lips. "Guess it's time we thought of moving." We? She'd not made that slip in a long time. There was no 'we' and she needed to remember that. How she hated the thought of leaving her home, but it was just too big now. Full of way too many hurtful memories she just wanted to bury with her past.

"Oh Ted." They'd had so many plans for their home, so many ideas. "Yet it's all gone in the blink of an eye." Her words drifted on the heated air to be heard by nothing but the ghosts that haunted her. Stepping out of the shower Jena allowed the water to slowly drip down her body as she reached for the towel on the counter.

Wrapping the cotton fabric around her, she moved into the bedroom, the slam of the cold air an instant wake up call. Dressing quickly, Jena pulled on a pair of khaki pants and a forest green shirt. With a slight turn toward her left and her gaze landed on the clock on the table. *1:30 p.m. already? Shit.* She needed to move quickly before Katie arrived. Jena pulled on her jean jacket and grabbed her backpack. She needed to move fast or else chance missing her flight. As she exited the bedroom she grabbed her bags off the floor her bed still unmade.

"Well, looks like everything is ready." Jena returned her attention to the list in her hand and made one more quick survey of the room to make sure everything was ready. Yep. Everything was prepared. Question was... was she?

Out front she heard Katie's car pull into the driveway, the rumble of the mustang's engine her call to go.

"That's my cue." Pulling her luggage behind she walked through the house and out the front door. Turning back, she looked at her home. Why did she feel like she was saying goodbye?

"Let's go Jena! You're going to miss your plane if we

don't hurry!" Katie's words bit through her like a cold winter wind. A quick shrug of her shoulders and she dismissed the odd sensation. Of course she would be back.

"Chill out Katie. It's your fault I'm moving slow today."

Behind her she heard the release of the trunk lid, a small click of the latch as the hood opened up with a creek.

"How the heck is it my fault?" The questioning giggle that followed only increased her own laughter. How she'd ever make it without Katie she would never know. "Now get over here."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." She couldn't explain why she suddenly felt the need to leave. It was as if something out in the distance was beckoning her to go. It was as if fate had a plan and it was not about to let her jeopardize it by staying.

"You've got everything you need?" Katie's questioning stare asked more than the obvious.

"I've got everything I need. Here grab this bag while I make sure I locked the door." She handed her leather backpack to Katie as she moved back to the front door to double check the locks, her inner system prodding her to do so.

"It's fine woman now get back here so we can go. I want to avoid traffic."

The moment her hand touched the door handle, a jolt of energy rocketed through her. Her head shot up and she found deep blue eyes staring back from the window pane. The man from her dreams. Yet she still couldn't see his face.

"Jena, are you ok? If so get your skinny butt out here so we can go. I don't want to deal with traffic on the interstate."

Jena tilted toward Katie a feeling of uncertainty moving through her. "Fine I'm done. You know you're worse than any mother I could have had; you know this right?" Her gaze returned to the door but found nothing but her own reflection. God, her mind was going.

"Jena!"

"I'm coming. Relax will ya? I swear you are horrible sometimes." The woman was bossy, yet she loved her

more than she could have ever imagined.

The closer she got to the car the lighter her heart actually felt. Maybe everyone was right. Perhaps she really did need to get away from everything. Clear her head so to speak. It had been a long time since she'd actually taken a trip. It would be good for her, Jena thought. And when she got back she would be able to re-evaluate her life and the direction it was going.

"Yep, and you are stuck with me." Sarcasm laced her words but so did warmth. She watched Katie duck into the car and she couldn't help but return the smile. They'd known each other too long to not understand what was meant. Yes, they were stuck with each and both were glad for it.

"Ready? Now you're absolutely sure you have everything?" Katie had smothered her ever since Ted's death. She couldn't blame her really. If they hadn't known each other for so long she might have told her to back off; but truth be told, they had always relied on each other.

"Yep, I have everything that Holly mentioned. If I did forget something I'll pick it up when I arrive in Scotland." Just the mention of her destination made her stomach flip-flop. How strange. As far back as she could remember she had never once been so excited to go somewhere.

Closing the trunk with a thud, Jena moved toward the passenger door and her gateway to freedom. Moving down into the seat she glanced back at her house, the warm glow from the windows a reminder of what had been. How many nights had she pulled into the driveway, hesitant to go in? To watch the glow come from the windows, while her stomach knotted at having to go through another night with someone she did not love, at least not the way she should've; knowing she hadn't married for the right reasons. No, she decided, as welcoming as the outside portrayed, she had lived a lie for over ten years.

"Jena? You ok?" Katie's question jarred her from her thoughts as she moved her gaze back to the dimming lights of what had been her life. Was she ok? That was a question she knew she hoped to figure out while she was away. For now she decided to placate her friend 'til she returned.

“Of course I am. Just thinking of all the events that I’m going to try and get to while I’m away. You can’t even begin to know all the things they have going on over there.” Plausible enough she knew, but she could tell by Katie’s burrowed brow that she only half-believed her response. True enough, they could read each other like a book, but for now she was just thankful that Katie didn’t push the issue further. There was too much on her mind, and her soul was too far damaged to try and explain the things she needed to figure out on her own.

“I’m glad. You need to do something fun. Take your mind off of things and all that good stuff. Hey maybe you’ll find yourself a good looking man out there. Do they have handsome men in Scotland? I mean it’s cold and rainy. They can’t be very tan.” Jena’s jaw dropped. Of course, she would find a way to spin finding a man into the mix.

“Katie! I’m going there to relax and hike. Not find a man. For once, will you just drop it?” Perhaps she would try and find a man for Katie. Maybe that would get her to leave her life alone for a bit. The thought did have its possibilities.

“I’m just saying you never know. Seriously though, you need to move on Jena. I know I promised not to push it but I can’t help it.” Jena watched as Katie’s gaze moved out the window and into the distance her fingers tapping a beat on the steering wheel.

“Katie, what’s on your mind? Say it now before I leave. I don’t want you upset while I’m gone.” They’d been through too much and she didn’t want to be worried while she was gone.

“Ok, fine. Hear me out first before you go on your tirade again, okay?” Just the sadness in her friend’s voice was enough to warrant her attention.

“I promise.”

“I understand your pain Jena. I even understand the scars you have on your soul and why you refuse to let yourself even try to find love.” Jena cringed at the path Katie was taking but she had promised and refused to break her word.

“Go on.”

“Ted loved you and knew you didn’t love him. He

knew this and still married you. You deserve to find love. You deserve to find a man who will steal your heart and leave you breathless." Each word beat at her like a drum. "You need to find someone who will make your blood boil and your skin heat to his touch." Okay, now she was just going too far.

"Katie."

"No listen to me Jena. You steel yourself from everyone but me, your work and your home. That's all you focus on. You give yourself nothing else. You need to."

"Why is that so wrong?" She lived her life, why couldn't everyone leave her alone?

"Why is it wrong? My God Jena, you are young and have never felt love. You've never felt the passion of love. Trust me; you need to sense the burning desire of a man's touch. I pray every day that one day a man will cross your path that will challenge the icy barrier you've got erected and will do everything he can to break it down."

"Now Katie, that will..." She could feel the conviction in Katie's voice and it scared her.

"Jena I swear to God, if I ever find out there is a man out there that has a chance at doing this I will do everything in my power to help him out." Why did she all of a sudden feel like Katie had said something irreversible? Cursed or blessed by her words, she didn't know but something felt as if it had woven itself around her. Shaking her head she turned her gaze out into the passing countryside, her head bumping the window as they ran over a stick.

"Ouch. Look Katie, I wish it was that simple." And she did.

"It is if you let it be, but I'll say no more." All that she heard from the rest of the trip was a soft sigh escape Katie's lips as they neared the airport. Getting out of the car Jena pulled her luggage out of the trunk, the silence a knife deep in her chest.

"Look..." What could she say?

"It's okay Jena; I said what's been on my mind for a long time. You take care of you and be safe. Call me when you get there." Katie reached out and hugged her tightly. "Come home to me Jena."

"I will Katie. I always do." A quick wave and Jena

turned toward the electric doors, her chance at escape.

Airports. She hated them more than going to the dentist. There were always so many people and all of them in a hurry to get to wherever they might be headed. Did anyone ever take the time to see what was around them? Doubtful. Oh well, Jena thought, time enough to dwell on those questions when she found her terminal. If she found it in this mess.

“Hello Miss, what can I do for you?” A cheery airport employee smile beckoned her.

“I needed to check in my luggage please.”

“Certainly. Your paperwork?” She handed over her boarding pass and ID to the man behind the counter. Never in her life could she imagine having his job. There were way too many people to deal with and never enough gratitude. Her eyes drifted around the terminal to take in the wealth of people lined up to check in. All deep in conversations with their traveling companions yet oblivious to their surroundings. That was, all but her.

“Miss?”

“I’m sorry yes?”

“Here’s your pass and ID back. Are you taking anything on with you?”

“Just my backpack. I already checked the size and it should fit.” Oh how she hated the security at the airports now. There were so many hoops to jump through, even though she understood the reasons behind them all.

“Here you go. Your terminal is in that direction.” The wiry man pointed to his left his eyes never leaving the person next in line.

“Thank you. Have a good day.” Jena picked up her backpack and swung it over her shoulder. She began to head toward the departure board when she felt the brush of wind move by her.

“Excuse me lady.” A tall business dressed man pushed past her holding his cell phone to his ear as he ran. Stupid people.

“Well, at least he said excuse me.” Jena hoped the man heard her but he never stopped and turned. Too into his phone conversation to be bothered...

Looking at the wall in front of her, Jena searched

through the wealth of flights and departure listings 'til she found what she was looking for.

"Flight 2164." Yep, that was hers. "Boarding at gate 15E." Jena did a double take. Boarding...Now? But her paperwork said it wouldn't be boarding for another hour. *Crap!* Picking up her backpack Jena whirled about and headed toward the direction of her flight. Fearful she would be late, Jena began to run. Damn it, she was not going to miss her flight. She couldn't.

Pushing through the other passengers Jena made her way to the terminal, her breath coming from her chest in rough gasps from the run.

"Wait for me." Why had they changed the time? Had Holly sent her the wrong information? Had the guy at the check in missed it? When she checked in, the agent never said anything about boarding early. A petite blonde ticket agent stood in front of the door to the plane her plastered smile a clear indication that she'd had a long day.

She was about to ask her about the time change but the lady put her hand on the loud speaker phone, her ruby red lips cracked from all the announcements.

"Flight 2164, non-stop to Scotland, now boarding rows 1-9. Please step forward and present your boarding pass for admittance." Non-stop? Since when? She must have missed something somewhere. Looking down at her pass, Jena noticed that Holly had booked her a flight in first-class. *What the hell?* She didn't want to know how she managed to slip that in, she just wanted to get on the plane and close her eyes to her memories.

"Miss?" A woman's voice jarred Jena from her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, yes?"

"Is this your flight?"

"Yes it is...why?"

"Just wanted to make sure, you seemed like you were off in another world." Was she that transparent?

"Sorry just tired is all." Fatigue ate away at her until she swore the next time she closed her eyes, she wouldn't be able to open them.

Minutes ticked by and Jena thought she must have missed the announcement for her seat. Standing up she moved toward the agent, her patience waning with every

step. When she was about four feet from the woman, the attendant reached over to the call box.

“Flight 2164 non-stop to Scotland, now boarding all remaining seats. Please step forward and present your boarding pass for admittance.” Oh sure. Now they get to her. Frustrated with the long wait and her initial concern over missing the flight, Jena moved up to the attendant, papers outstretched for her inspection.

“Welcome aboard, Ms. Jenkin. I hope you enjoy your flight.” Of course she wished her a good flight. It was her job. But Jena saw past that and noted the forlorn look in the woman’s eyes. She hated her job. Somehow she must feel as stuck as she herself had for so long. That in its self softened the lack of friendliness the woman had conveyed.

“Thank you for all you do to make things go so smoothly for everyone. I hope you have a great evening.” Jena didn’t know why she said anything to the lady, but the reaction she received shocked her even more. The woman, who according to her jacket’s lapel was Sandy, actually cracked a genuine heart-felt smile. But more than that, she noticed the woman’s eyes mist over; as if this was the first time someone had thanked her.

“Than...thank you. You have a wonderful flight today.” The woman’s voice actually softened, her smile warmer than it had been.

Not able to talk further, Jena made her way down the ramp and onto the plane. Looking around she found her seat. Reaching up she unhooked the overhead compartment and placed her backpack up top making sure it was secure in its place. Why were her emotions in overload lately? Was she more damaged than she thought? She knew when she got to where she was going she would need to sit down and have a heart to heart with herself. Thankfully, she knew that her destination would be somewhere secluded; somewhere she could finally be alone.

Jena sat down in her seat, her gaze fixed on the clouds as they moved by. Flying had always been a wondrous experience for her. Granted, getting on the plane had never proved more than a pain in the butt, but once on and in the air she forgave the tediousness of pre-boarding. She had always enjoyed just watching out the

window at the land as it went by. Now was no exception.

“Please take your seats and remain buckled while the flight attendants prepare us for take off.” The captain’s over-head message always managed to leave a lot to be desired in Jena’s mind. Why did they always state the obvious? Turning her gaze back out the window she watched as birds took flight into the sky. How she wished she could join them. A few minutes later, the roar of the engines signaled her journey had begun. How strange that her stomach actually began to flip-flop in anticipation. Had it been so long since she’d taken time away? Perhaps it was true; she’d needed to go and now was the time.

Chapter Six

Clouds and birds filled her vision for more hours than she could count. She'd stared out of the window from the time they'd taken off until she couldn't see anything more.

"Miss, would you like something to eat?" A soft spoken woman's voice penetrated her thoughts, pulling her back.

She'd almost forgotten about food.

"I'm sorry. I'll take a white wine and the chicken meal." Simple enough Jena thought. She'd heard the stories of drinking while on a plane but she figured one shouldn't be an issue.

"Not a problem. I'll be right back." She watched as the woman made her way through the rest of the aisle, her voice a low murmur to the remaining passengers.

"Thank you." She knew the woman didn't hear her but felt obligated regardless.

"That was very kind of you." A voice from behind caught her attention.

"I'm sorry?" Turning in her seat she caught sight of an elderly woman seated directly behind her.

"Not many people have manners, now a days. It's good to see some still survive." She could tell the woman was eager for conversation, at the same time she didn't want to commit herself to a long in-depth discussion on the inner workings of society either.

"Well, I saw no harm in thanking her. It's a tough job they do and they deserve to know they are appreciated for it." She could feel the woman turn her words over for truth. A slight nod of her head was her only answer.

"Very good child, you are a wise one. I would love to discuss more with you but it appears you've been saved by your meal." A small chuckle escaped the woman's aged lips at the approach of the stewardess and the tray of food. Turning around, Jena returned her attention to the woman who'd taken her order, a smile back on her own

face.

“Here’s your chicken and white wine. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Nope, that should be it for now. Thank you very much.” She allowed her own smile to radiate from within, a glow she didn’t realize she had, a certain shine.

“You’re very welcome Miss. Enjoy your meal.” Something she didn’t expect to happen did at that moment. The woman who’d brought her meal, returned her smile with one of her own, but this time it was full of warmth. Guess something could be said for kindness after all.

Looking down at her food the aroma of the baked chicken assaulted her senses. God, if she’d known she was this hungry, she would have ordered more. How long had it been since she’d enjoyed a meal that wasn’t fast food?

“Way too long, girl.” She hoped no one was listening at her sudden outburst. The lack of an answer proved no one had. *Good.*

After she’d finished her meal and the woman had come back by and taken the tray, she’d fiddled with some magazines for awhile. Nothing of real interest though. Looking down at her watch she still had six hours to go. God, she was bored.

Digging down into her handbag she found something she hadn’t noticed before. A small item wrapped with a note on top. Pulling apart the paper, she almost laughed as she read what had been written.

Jena, I know you don’t like these, but I can’t stop trying. For once in your life, let your heart lead the way, not your mind. Come home soon. Love, Katie.

“Oh, Katie.” She couldn’t fault her friend for trying. Opening the package Jena found exactly what she figured she would see. A romance novel. Lovely. Of course, it was one that took place in the Highlands, of all things. She almost chuckled and would have, if it wouldn’t have gained her some unwanted attention. Oh well, at least if anything she would be able to finally fall asleep. How wrong she’d been.

The hours passed by faster than she could have ever imagined. She was so immersed in the book, she barely noticed the announcements overhead.

Her heart hammered along with the heroine's, each beat a drum in her ears. Eyes misted at the true love the man and woman shared; she felt her heart grow heavy with need. She felt every pain, every joy they did. God...how she wanted to have those things. She could actually see it happen. Every tragedy that they went through, every obstacle they overcame to be together...To hell with the movies, books did a better job than they ever would.

She was almost done with the book when overhead she heard the captain announce that they would be landing in another couple hours. Damn, where had the time gone? Looking down into her lap she lightly caressed the cover of the book she had been holding. Now why couldn't love be that pure?

"Okay Katie, you won that round." Her whispers fell on deaf ears, but she knew somehow, that somewhere her friend knew. The book had been better than she had expected and she wasn't afraid to admit it.

A wave of fatigue washed over Jena as she leaned back and closed her eyes. She soon fell into a deep sleep. For once in a long time, she found herself not hounded by past demons. Instead, she was immersed in the story; herself lost in the Highlands. A man, tall dark and lethally handsome tried to pursue her, to win her heart. Throughout her dream she never saw the man's face but felt his touch and the warmth of his finger as it brushed across her face.

"Come to me Jena. Save me." There was his voice again. She could feel him close, his voice louder than ever before.

"How can I find you when I don't know who you are?" Never in her life had she wanted something so much; yet here she was, dreaming of a man who couldn't possibly exist, yet she was drawn to him.

"You will know me. Deep inside your soul you will know me. You are my other half. Find me, but you need to find me soon." Desperation laced his words.

"Tell me where you are and I will come." His voice began to waver, his presence fluttering in beams of moonlight.

"Find me Jena. Make me whole."

So real was the dream that when the voice overhead announced the impending landing, Jena awoke with her heart hammering in her chest.

Wow, now that was a dream. Now, why couldn't the movies make the watcher feel those things? If they could, she would go to them in a heartbeat. Too bad real life didn't mimic the fullness of passion like the books did. Shaking off the remnants of sleep Jena looked out the window at the land below. Her mind drifted back toward the mystery man that continued to haunt her dreams.

Who are you? Jena's mind screamed out into the world.

"Beautiful isn't it?" The woman she'd spoken to earlier was also gazing out her window, her eyes taking in the countryside. Her inquiry brought Jena back to reality.

"Yes it is. Is it your first time here?" She watched as the hills and mountains flew by, their multi-colored landscapes a breathtaking view. Oh, she was definitely going to enjoy this trip.

"No, I've been here a few times actually. I love coming back. How about you?"

"Nope, my first time. I have a feeling it won't be my last though." Jena found more truth in her words than she could have considered.

"Most say that many are called to the land, and once you come it binds you to it. That even if you leave you will always return." Jena's eyes drifted from the passing fields to the old woman, her gaze full of knowledge she couldn't even fathom. Something hidden deep in her spoke volumes.

"You're probably right." Shifting her shoulder around Jena grabbed her backpack from the ground and pulled it up and over, ready to begin her journey.

"Good luck child."

Chapter Seven

Getting off the plane and past customs proved an effort in patience for Jena. First, the blasted computer had an issue verifying her passport. Then, they almost couldn't find her luggage. Two stupid bags and they had issues? Now she remembered why she never traveled.

"Miss? Miss?" So deep in thought, Jena almost missed hearing the man across from her.

"Yes, sorry, I'm just tired from the flight." And she was although, the memory of her dream still haunted her.

"Not a problem Ms. Jenkin. Here is your passport and luggage though it appears one of the bags was accidentally shipped to Ireland.

"Excuse me?" Had she heard him right? Why did things always happen to her?

"I'm sorry Miss. We are working on getting it re-routed. As soon as it arrives we will call you." Great. Which one had they lost?

"How long will it take?" She was in no mood to argue, her body feeling the first signs of jet-lag.

"Shouldn't take too long Miss, we will call you as soon as it gets here. Everything seems in order. I'm sorry for the delay in getting you out of here." She watched as the man stamped her passport for arrival, his smile bright and cheery. Okay, she would let the issue slide by. His smile alone was contagious. Was everyone in this country this happy?

"Thank you. Now where do I find a car to take me to Orkney?" Jena wasn't sure how to get there and wasn't about to spend hours trying to figure it out. She had the money to pay for someone else to and she might as well start using some of it. "There should already be someone waiting for you Ma'am. According to your paperwork that was part of the arrangement your travel agent made. Go out through those two doors and you should find what you require. Have a wonderful visit in our grand country

Miss.” His words were as sincere as his smile.

“Thanks again.” Jena turned on her heel and headed for the door her eyes taking in the surrounding landscape. It was definitely going to be an interesting two months.

The moment she walked out of the doors her eyes caught site of an older man holding up a sign with her name on it. Wow, they were efficient here. Waving to the driver, Jena moved toward him her bag in tow.

“Hi, I’m Ms. Jenkin, are you waiting for me?” His smile was so warm she couldn’t help but return one even though her question was a mute one.

“Well Miss, let’s get your bags in da car and we’ll be heading out. Now, there is a wee ferry ride, it takes just about two hours. Though, I must be telling ya, the view is a good one.” His brogue captivated Jena’s attention. She had never heard a true Scottish accent. She found she truly enjoyed listening to the old man ‘til what he said registered in her brain.

“Two hours? Is there any other way?” After a fourteen hour flight she wanted nothing more than to get to her room and sleep in a regular bed.

“Nay my child, I fear that is the only way. You will enjoy it. Rest assured.” What could she do? She was tired of sitting and had welcomed the idea of resting on a bed. Well, at least this way she could get some fresh air while they traveled.

“Okay, I’m ready. Let’s go.” She ducked her head into the car as she heard the man secure her baggage in the trunk, a gentle click of the lid as it closed.

“All fastened in the back there lass? I dun be wanting ye to move about too much.” A small chuckle escaped the old man’s lips as he pumped the old car into drive.

“No, I’m fine thank you.” A laugh of her own escaped her lips as she watched the scenery passed by. The multitudes of green, brown and red that draped across the land was a kaleidoscope of colors that awed her repeatedly. Minutes passed and she found herself immersed in the view, barely noticing the little car as it made its way up onto the ferry.

“Beautiful isn’t it lass.”

“Yes it is. Breathtaking.” She wanted to take it all in and bottle the beauty forever. No wonder the old woman

kept coming back.

“Ye know they say once you visit you leave a part of yerself when ye leave.” Somehow Jena believed it.

“Who says it?”

“Ne’er everyone.” A smile crossed Jena’s face at the old man’s matter of fact response. He loved his country and who could blame him.

“Of course they do.” Her gaze drifted to the passing countryside as the car drew to a stop.

“We are set now Miss. If you’re wish’n to step out and stretch yer legs be my guest. You have time to do so.”

“Thank you.” Thank God! If she had to sit much longer, she wasn’t sure her legs wouldn’t be permanently numb from lack of movement.

“Yer most welcome child.” Opening the door she moved her feet out onto the ground, the brisk wind sweeping up her hair into a frenzy of waves.

“Is it always so windy here Sir?” She hated to use the title but she hadn’t gotten the old man’s name yet. She could tell he was used to the question by the knowing smirk on his sun toned weathered face.

“Aye Miss. ‘Tis a normal occurrence in these parts nothing unusual about it. Wind is something we are well-known for. You know they say if you listen very carefully you can hear the wind talk to you.” She could almost believe the old man since he sounded so sincere. Beauty and magic felt such an important part of the land, that anything felt possible. Or perhaps she was just too damn tired from the flight to think sensibly.

“What do they talk of?” She couldn’t believe she asked but once more fatigue took hold of her good sense. Though, she *was* intrigued to know more of the land and the people she would be spending the next few months around. Besides, her innocent question must have hit a redeeming cord in the old man as she noted the twinkle in his deep brown eyes.

“Ah child ‘tis many things the ghosts of ole speak of. You have but to listen.” Silence ensued.

Jena puffed her bangs. Damn it, why couldn’t he just answer the question? She watched as his face took on a shade of grey, his gaze delving around at the passing water, deep in thought about something she couldn’t

fathom. A sigh escaped his lips as he made his way to the far end of the ferry, his posture one of someone haunted.

“Sir?” She hated to bother him but she knew too well the feeling of one’s ghosts following one around.

“Tis nothing, child. The waters have a way of bringing to life the troubles of the past. Worry none of it.” Once more she found his smile warming the air around them.

Not wanting to bother him further, Jena moved to the edge of the railing looking out into the distance at the expansion of water. How beautiful. She’d heard friends who’d talked about the beauty of the open water but she’d bet nothing compared to where she was. Now she understood why so many called this place magical. There was definitely an underlying quality that bespoke mystery.

So deep in thought, she barely heard the driver call her name. Hesitant to release her gaze from the flowing sea, Jena turned around to face the old man, a sense of calm steeling through her veins.

“You were right; it is very peaceful taking the ferry. I’m glad I listened.” And the wind had never let up. It was like a living breathing being with a mind of its own.

“Aye child, ‘tis a good place to reflect on life and that which perplexes the soul. You will find many things in Orkney and the surrounding lands and lochs to marvel at.” She had no doubt the man was right. More than ever she was excited to begin her journey. Maybe finally, she would be able to put to rest the ghosts that haunted her nightmares.

“Thank you for your kindness, um, I never have gotten your name.” Hopefully he took no offense and by the smirk on his face she was sure he hadn’t.

“T’would be because I nay gave one, child. Alvis MacAgnew is the name meh parents parted on me.” Alvis...such a nice name, Jena couldn’t help but like the man. He had a sincerity about him that was evident in everything he did.

“Well it is very nice to meet you Mr. MacAgnew. Thank you for all you’ve shown me and for your kindness.” She meant every word. The man had been patient and kind, not allowing any abruptness she may

have shown him to sway his smile.

“You are most welcome child. Now, ‘tis time we got back into the car and get you on your way. The inn is a mere twenty miles once we reach shore. You should be all settled and ready for a good hot meal by then.” *A hot meal.* Now that sounded perfect. Up until he mentioned food she hadn’t realized how hungry she was. The airplane food had not done the trick.

“Aye, of that you can rest assured...believe me.” At her words the engine of the little car roared to life and they were on their way, the view of the ferry and the rolling waves slowly vanishing behind them.

Chapter Eight

How much time had passed Jena did not know. She was so tired from all her traveling, that the moment she leaned her head against the car seat sleep overcame her. The sound of the engine humming as it moved through the winding roads, aided in lulling her to sleep.

“Just rest easy, child. We will be there shortly.” Jena barely caught his words as a web of darkness moved across her. But it was not just darkness she saw when she slept, but the vision of a man. Tall and dark. His hair flowed in the wild wind of the land. Try as she might, she could not see his face, just his piercing blue eyes staring back at her again. Up until now, she had never dreamt of a man before. She couldn’t get this man out of her mind. Why now? Could she be so lost for affection that she was losing her mind? No, it couldn’t be that. Could it?

Jena. The deepness of his voice moved across her skin like a thunderstorm. *Come to me lass.* Her belly ached like nothing she’d ever felt before. It was a warmth that boiled and rolled like the summer storms she’d seen growing up.

Who are you? She was lost in the darkness of a land foreign to her. Nothing was as it should be. Even the stars looked different.

I’m your destiny Jena. Know me for who I am, not who those believe me to be. Jena tried to find him once more, distance growing between them as the wind picked up once more.

Where are you? Her voice echoed out into the darkness. Everywhere she turned she saw nothing but trees, bushes and the sharp drop of the cliffs. Roaring waters from below caught her attention.

*Jena...*His voice sounded faint.

I can’t find you! Tears filled her eyes as she turned in the direction of his voice only to find deep blue eyes staring back. The sudden appearance knocked Jena off

balance heralding her backward over the cliff and plummeting her down to the waters below. A scream lodged in her throat as darkness embraced her in that moment.

“Ms Jenkin?” The old man’s voice broke through the web of her dark dream. Chills moved across her skin, the vision she’d seen still fresh in her mind. Why was she haunted by things she couldn’t explain?

“Sorry. Took a small cat nap.” Yet she felt more tired now, than she had before falling asleep. Was she that overtaxed?

“‘Tis okay, we are at the inn now. I’ve already given your bag to the headmistress. She has taken it up to your room.” Was there anything they didn’t think of? Somehow she doubted it. She moved her body out of the tiny car her feet unstable on the old walkway.

“Thank you again. What do I owe you for all you’ve done?” She wanted to repay his kindness. Never before had she met someone who’d done so much for a complete stranger. He’d done far more than he’d been required to.

“Nay child, ‘tis my pleasure to help you out. You have an air about you that bespeaks kin of some line. I truly hope you find what it is you are searching for.” Without another word the old man was back in the front seat of his car and moving quickly across the road, headed back for the ferry.

“Quick little devil, isn’t he Miss?” A soft feminine voice came from behind her. Turning, she caught the sight of an older woman who could only be described as classic. She held a warm smile that eased any misgivings she might have had. Were they all well versed in making anyone feel as if they belonged? Too bad the people she was around all the time didn’t have this trait.

“Yes...yes he is. And please call me Jena. Everyone else does.” She hated being called Ms. Jenkin. Granted it was her married name, but it had never meant anything to her in the first place. A slight tinge of guilt swept through her at that last thought. *Ted*.

“Jena it is. Lovely name, child. My name is Tessa. Now...please, come in. Everything is ready for you and if you’d like, please feel free to take a shower while dinner is prepared. It will be ready very shortly.” Shower. No word

had sounded as pleasurable as that one word. God, how she needed to wash away the grime of her long flight.

“That sounds heavenly. Point me in the right direction and I’ll be happy.” And she was. Since entering this land she’d felt a calmness she didn’t know could exist cross her soul. Maybe they had been right to make her take a break. She was sure that this would have some healing effect on her battered emotions.

Moving up the stairs, she made her way down a long hallway and into the room Tessa had pointed to. Beautiful, yet simple, decorations littered the room. Great care had been taken when choosing each item for placement, yet it had a lived in warm feeling to it. She would have to take pictures to bring back. Perhaps she could re-do her own house in the same form. Bring something of this wonderful land back with her.

“God, Katie, you would love this place.” How she missed her friend already.

Pulling out a pair of jean shorts and a black fleece top, Jena made her way into the bathroom, anxious to wash away the dirt of the trip. Even the bathroom was done elegantly. Fresh flowers and candles were placed in specific locations, almost with a Zen feeling to it. Pulling back the curtain, she was amazed at the wealth of soaps available in different scents.

“Tessa, you are amazing.” She would have to remember to thank her when she went downstairs. The woman had a knack for decorating.

Jena grasped the handle and turned on the water. Fresh water rained down across her skin, washing away everything from the day’s flight. Allowing the water to flow down her body, she closed her eyes and saw once more the elusive man of her dreams. Was she that desperate for a man’s touch?

“I don’t think so.” Never. It wouldn’t happen.

Opening her eyes once more Jena finished washing her hair and body with the soap the inn provided. The smell, a mixture of jasmine and violets, was a wonderful combination that filled her senses with the vision of open fields and relaxed her nerves. She made a mental note to ask Tessa where she purchased the items so she could

take some home with her. Stepping out into the steam filled room, Jena dried her body and hair, enjoying the quietness the inn provided.

Katie, you would love this place. I have got to bring you back. She couldn't wait to delve into the history when she hiked through the countryside. Pulling her shorts and shirt on she brushed her long golden hair. Looking in the mirror, Jena decided she looked as good as she could; considering her lack of sleep.

Down below she could hear Tessa moving around in the dining room. The aroma of beef and vegetables drifted up and into the bedroom, filling her nostrils and making her stomach growl. One quick glance in the mirror and Jena turned and headed out the door and down the stairs, each step increasing her hunger.

"Tessa the food smells..." The moment she entered the dining room she hesitated. Reality dawned on her. She forgot there would be more here than just herself. The second she stopped she found herself face to face with a man who stood an easy foot above her. The surprise of someone else so close caused her to stop and step back.

"Excuse me." As she tried to make her way around him Jena found her balance less than perfect. One step to the side and she found herself falling backwards. So sure she would hit the floor, Jena braced for the impact only to find large strong arms catching her before she fell. The moment his hands touched her she felt fire race across her skin.

"You might want to watch where yer going lass." His deep voice penetrated her shock. There was a familiarity in his voice but she couldn't place it to save her life. Her initial embarrassment was instantly replaced by annoyance. Jena shook her head to dispel the affect the sexy sound of his voice had made on her.

"Who's to say *you* weren't paying attention? Besides I have an excuse. I'm still finding my land legs." After the words passed her lips, she wished she hadn't said them. The look the man gave her shook her to the core. Were men born arrogant or was it instilled in them after their birth?

"I pay attention to everything lass." His voice moved across her skin like a lover's embrace.

“I beg to disagree. You should watch where you are going. I’m still figuring this place out.” There was a bite to her voice but she didn’t care. This man scared her in ways she couldn’t even understand.

Her answer must have caught him off guard, though not for long as she watched a half grin cross his face. She braced herself for some sarcastic remark but instead he just released his grip on her and moved around the table his large frame filling up the room.

“Lass, did I *fleg* you?” *Fleg?* What the hell did that mean? And why did he have to have such an arrogant smile on his face?

“Well, I would answer that if I knew what it meant. But aside from that, the only thing you did was catch me off guard.” He also rattled her nerves in an odd sort of way. But she was not about to tell him that.

“Ah, lass, I see. At least you can admit to it.” *Admit?* What in the hell could he be thinking?

“Huh?” For some odd reason Jena found her voice had lost its strength. Her cursory glance took in more of the man than she’d like. He was tall, at least six foot four with long black hair tied at the nape of his neck. Then there were his eyes. They could stop a woman dead in her tracks. Deep blue with flecks of gold stared back. The man was lethal, there was no doubt about it.

“That I caught you. I definitely remember catching you as you fell.” His words rolled off his tongue like honey dripping from a beehive. Sweet and inviting yet, they held an undertone that gave her the feeling she would be in a lot of trouble if she delved deeper. She shook her head to remove the web he had woven across her.

“Yes, you caught me but I would have been fine on my own thank you very much.” She hated that she felt out of sorts around him. Aside from that she didn’t like that he had any effect on her at all.

“Ah lass, you are a fiery one aren’t ye?” God, he had to push her today. As it was her nerves were frazzled from the long flight. She didn’t need someone bullying her around to boot.

“Who are you?” She had wanted to say something more but felt since she was a stranger in this place it was in her best interest not to make enemies of the locals. His

laugh resounded through the room. Was he laughing at her or something else? Either way she couldn't be sure. What was worse it increased her annoyance.

"Ah...so you are interested in knowing the name of your rescuer then lass?" Okay, now he was crossing the line.

"No, I was just wondering the name of the big oaf that has no manners." Okay, so it was harsh, but she didn't care. He was grating on her nerves and she wanted nothing more than to smack that smirk off his handsome face. *Handsome?* Ugh, okay, now she knew she was tired. Could she act any worse in the company of strangers? Not to mention if she wasn't so tired she would have sworn his grin got even larger with every passing moment.

"Be nice to Miss Jena. She's had a long day." Thank God Tessa understood. She turned to see a warm smile that could only be construed as sympathetic across Tessa's face.

"Ah lass, fine, I will be more than willing to oblige by your simple request. You may call me Erick." That was it? And he was obliging her request? The damn man made it sound like he was royalty and bestowing some favor on her. If she wasn't jet-lagged she would have told him where he could put his reply. Instead of sparring Jena moved around the table and sat down, her feet weak from the day's events.

"I hope you enjoy your meal, dear. I'm sure you've had nothing more than the nasty food they serve on those planes." Jena couldn't disagree. Even though the meal had filled her up at the time, she'd found her stomach growling at the fragrance of the warm meal even before she'd entered the room.

"Thank you very much. It smells wonderful." She made every effort to keep her gaze from the thorn seated opposite from her. He actually sat down across from her, his motions fluid like a stream. Okay, so he was good looking. Hell, he was gorgeous, and she wasn't dumb enough to lie to herself. But his ego and arrogance outweighed everything else. More so, something seemed familiar about him. What that was, Jena couldn't put her finger on.

"So lass, what is yer name? I've given mine. Turn

around is fair play you know.” Her name? Ugh, she didn’t want this pain in the butt man to have it. But he was right and her sense of honor was at stake if she refused.

“Jena...” There she’d given it to him. Anything else he wanted to know was tough because she refused to tell him any more. Just his overbearing stance shouted testosterone. He probably prided himself on getting anything and everyone he wanted. Thankfully, she was resistant to any man’s charm, at least she prayed she was.

“Ahh...now that is a lovely name lass. Jena...a very beautiful name, if I do say so myself.” If it was possible his smile increased ten-fold and reminded her of a lion on the prowl for prey. His attention was focused solely on her and she felt it. His heated gaze made a path down her cheeks to the top of her breasts. Damn, he knew how to focus well. Well too bad. He would find nothing but her cold shoulder and disregard for him. Men could not be trusted. She’d learned that long ago.

“Do you mind?” Her annoyance was increasing.

“Do I mind what lass?” His bow furrowed and confusion crossed his face.

“Staring.”

“Nay, not one bit.”

“Huh?” Okay, now she was confused.

“Ye asked if I mind staring and I’m telling you no. Don’t you speak English?” Does she speak English?

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Then speak what you mean lass and let’s not get things muddled.” He was baiting her, she could feel it. Fine she would bite.

“Stop being a total jerk. Staring at someone while they eat is considered rude. Good enough?” Manners be damned, she didn’t care at that point. He’d gotten under her skin and pushed her too far.

“Now, had you said that first, you would not have gotten so hot under the collar, yes?” He’d turned it back on her. Damn the man.

“Thank you for your insightfulness. Now if you please, I’m very tired and would like to eat without being put through the third degree.” *By you.* Those two words never made it out of her mouth. His smile alone held an

air of aloofness she couldn't miss.

"Ouch, now lass, no need to be crass. I was just being friendly." Friendly? At what point?

"No you are being a typical male who can't seem to understand that not all women will fall helpless at your arrogant feet." Okay, so she'd been harsher than she had wanted, but if it made him shut up, all the better. The stunned look on his face proved that her words had not gone unheard though for some reason she actually felt bad for lashing out. Perhaps she should apologize. The moment she began to open her mouth to say something she noticed a look in his eyes that made her feel small and inconsequential. Hell no. If she did he would think she was a weak woman and she was far from that. No she would never again ask forgiveness from a man.

She turned her head toward her hostess the old woman's eyes warm and inviting. "Tessa this stew is heavenly. I'll have to get the recipe before I leave."

"Thank you it's an old family recipe. I'll write it up for you after you come back." A startled grunt caught her attention, her gaze shot up to the man across from her. Was that puzzlement crossing his face? No couldn't be.

Instead of asking, Jena returned her gaze to her plate, in an attempt to block out everything about Erick. Forget the man and everyone else. She had paid good money and needed nothing more than to relax. Thankfully she would be leaving the inn soon to begin her hike. The idea of no one around to bother her and just the wind at her back and the open land to keep her company, called to her soul. Yep, that's what she needed right now. Not some stupid overbearing male who believed he could get anyone he wanted.

"Miss Jenkin, I'm told you will be gone from here for a few weeks, hiking. Where will you be heading to if I may ask?" Tessa's voice broke Jena's concentration and her resolve to eat in peace. Damn, now everyone at the table knew of her plans. Her eyes drifted up from her bowl and toward Tessa her face questioning. She liked the old woman and didn't want to be rude and not respond. A quiet sigh escaped her lips as she calculated exactly what she should divulge in the presence of them all.

"Well, I have a hiking trip planned to the open lands

north of here. I'm also going to look into making my way toward some of the standing stones that are within the area." She paused for a moment to gauge her audience but mostly to see if the jerk across from her would butt in. Nothing but pure silence. She returned her gaze back to Tessa. "Mostly I just plan to walk until I need to rest." If it wasn't a good enough answer so be it. She didn't feel she needed to explain herself to strangers. Besides the intent stare from Erick was enough to unnerve her.

She heard Erick shift in his seat, a soft grunt escaped his lips. "I see. Are you planning on crossing over into MacClyne land?" A challenge laced his voice. Some untold intent she couldn't fathom. MacClyne land? No one had mentioned anything about there being restrictions to her hiking.

"I'm sorry but what is MacClyne land? I was told I could hike just about anywhere." Unsure why she felt compelled to answer him, she watched as his stilled composure filled the area like a beacon in the room. Did anything make him waver? She found her gaze drift to his chest and the biceps that rippled under his shirt. Damn, she needed to focus on something more mundane.

"MacClyne is the owner of much of the land to the north of here. You would need to have his permission in order to hike on the land. Besides, why would a woman want to hike across the rugged lands here?" It took a moment for his words to sink in. The moment they did Jena found her anger increased dramatically.

"Well, I hate to burst your bubble, Sir, but I've done a lot of hiking in my past. I don't need anyone to tell me what I should or shouldn't do. I've taken care of myself all my life." She was fuming now, her anger like a boiling cauldron she feared would overflow if she remained this close to him. She needed to get away before she completely lost control. Returning her gaze to Tessa she let her fork drop back to the plate. The old woman's face was full of concern for her young charge.

"Miss Jen..." Tessa's words stopped mid-flow. Jena figured it was more than likely due to the look she knew was on her face.

"Tessa, I'm sorry but I've lost my appetite. Thank you for the wonderful dinner but I'm going to go to bed now.

I'll see you tomorrow." She eased her way past the rest of the household, her grip on her brewing temper a mere sliver. As she walked past Erick she could actually feel his eyes bore into her backside. Damn him, he'd driven her from the room. Her annoyance for him increased with each step.

Chapter Nine

He watched her go, her deep blonde hair flowing like spun gold in the spring wind. When he had heard a woman was coming to visit from the States, he had made it a priority to seek her out. In all his years he had always had whatever he wanted and women were no different. He had found that they all wanted him for all the wrong reasons of course. But what did he care? He had everything a man could want in life. He had money, a home and people to do his bidding. Life was good. Wasn't it?

A slap across his arm grabbed his attention. "You could have been nicer you know." The whip of Tessa's words struck a cord in Erick's heart. For as far back as he could remember, Tessa had always been there to support him. Ever since he was a babe, she'd been his support, especially after his mother had died and when his father was away for months at a time. Even through the time of his change.

"What did I do?" Of course he'd teased the woman. She was prime for the picking. She was so young and naive to be out here alone. Too bad she was beautiful and very much an American. Americans...they always did think they were better than everyone else. He loved to flaunt his wealth and title around them to make them see how much better he was. Granted, he hadn't told this woman who he was but he found he was curious to see how she reacted to him before she knew his full lineage.

"What do you mean 'what did I do'?" You know exactly what you did. You pushed and teased that young girl for no good reason. Now she left and ne'er had a chance to eat. If you weren't a grown man I would put you over my knee and give you a good once over." Okay, maybe Tessa was right, but och did she have to be so blunt about it?

"Well what are yer wanting me to do 'bout it? I could

go and seek the young lass out and beg her forgiveness.” Nay, he knew he wouldn’t do that. If so he might also be tempted to sample her rosy red lips. Oh, but the woman was a sight, even though she was American.

“I know what yer thinking lad and dun be doing it. She is a fine girl, I can sense it. You’ll be leaving well enough alone. And why did you not tell her who yer were?” He knew he had no answer to the question. Instead, he just shrugged his shoulders and continued on with his meal.

“This is a wonderful meal as usual Tessa.” Try as he might he couldn’t get her out of his mind. Her beautiful green eyes and long hair haunted him.

“Dun you be thinking it Erick. I mean it.”

“Thinking what?” Was he that transparent?

“You leave that child alone. I don’t want you to harm her.” He could feel the sadness in Tessa’s words. Her memories had come back again.

“I won’t harm her if I see her, which I doubt I will.” Part of him prayed he would. He could still see her in his mind’s eye, her temper flaring at him. Gods how he wanted to touch her alabaster skin. He knew she would feel soft beneath his body.

“Erick, she’s an innocent who’s seen much tragedy in her life.” That little omission caught his attention.

“What do you mean? You’ve read her?” None spoke of Tessa’s gifts save for him and he was thankful for that.

“Aye, that I have, but I’m not telling you what I’ve seen; just that she’s been torn apart many times inside. So you best be leaving her be.” No one ever disputed what Tessa saw. She was highly revered and everyone went to her when there was a problem and it required deep listening.

“Are you done now? It’s been a long day and I have an early morning tomorrow. I promise to behave myself if I come across the lass next time.” Though teasing her was much more fun he also knew he didn’t want to face Tessa’s wrath. The woman had ice in her veins if pushed too far and for some reason she’d taken an instant liking to the woman upstairs and planned to protect her anyway she could.

“I mean it, Erick Yosef MacClyne, dun you be

bugging that young woman or there will be hell to pay. I swear it on Odin himself.” Och, yep, she was not happy with him at all. Fine, he would leave the woman alone... for now. But so help him, if she crossed him on his land then she was fair game. What a challenge she presented with those hips and her small trim waist. Gods be cursed his body hardened just thinking about her. He needed to go out and top someone soon or else he might find himself breaking his vow to Tessa.

He returned Tessa’s stare with his own. “Aye, I promise to be good.” Very good if given the chance, he thought. His unspoken words must have shone on his face because the look Tessa gave him would have killed any man. Her small fist punched him in the arm. Instead of waiting for a tongue lashing, Erick hastened out of the room and out the door. He needed to get home fast and take a very cold shower.

A dark figure moved at the door, the rustle of his coat barely audible above the wind. Jena moved about the room her eyes adjusting to the morning light. Where was her wallet? Her attention focused on her backpack while she searched through it. Not catching the quiet footfalls that moved just behind her the hair on the back of her neck began to stand on edge.

Her gaze shot around the room. “Who’s there?” No answer.

A large hand reached out, grasping her shoulder and turning her to face him. Strength she couldn’t imagine flowed from his body into hers; the warmth that of a tidal wave of flames.

“What the hell?” Were the only words that came from her mouth. Those eyes...the same piercing blue eyes that echoed in her memory. She still couldn’t see his face but his eyes were even more familiar than before. His head dipped toward hers and she found she had no desire to move, couldn’t have even if she had wanted to. The moment his lips were about to brush the tip of hers she felt her knees go weak.

“You are mine Jena...” His deep voice whispered against her soul.

“How can I be yours if I don’t know who you are?”

Something deep inside called to him; needed him like the air she breathed.

“You will find me. You know me.” His voice wrapped around her soul in a warm embrace. Jena felt like she was falling into a abyss of sensations she’d never felt before. Colors spiraled around her till she felt dizzy from the effect.

A loud buzzing sound surrounded her mind, so loud that it shattered her concentration.

Waking up from her strange dream, Jena shook her head hoping to dispel the grogginess of being woken up from such an intense vision. *Okay, no more romance novels for you Jena. If just one can make these dreams occur so often, they’re not worth it.* At least she hadn’t actually kissed the guy in her dream. Something about it still nagged at her, though. What about it, she couldn’t be sure. Oh well, no time to worry about it now. She had to get up and finish getting ready. She only hoped that Tessa wasn’t angry with her for not finishing her food last night.

Twenty minutes later, Jena found she was done with her shower and ready to face the morning, and Tessa. Grabbing her backpack Jena made her way back down the stairs. This time, she took her time so as to make sure she didn’t bump into any overbearing men.

God please don’t let him be down here. Her thoughts turned to Erick and she found herself annoyed at even thinking about him. What a jerk. She had met many men in her life and he was worse than them all. He held an arrogance about him that bordered on snootiness.

“Good mornin’ to you, child. I hope you slept well.” Tessa’s voice broke through Jena’s thoughts and she could feel the warmth of a blush steal across her face. Thankfully, she knew she was still rosy from the warm shower she had taken a few minutes earlier.

“Yes, thank you for your concern. I’m sorry about last night though; I really should have stayed and finished the wonderful meal you made.” She meant every word she said. After she had left the table she lost count of the times she’d considered turning around and coming back down. The idea of facing Erick and his devilish smile and to beat him at his own game had its appeal as well. In the

end, fatigue had won out and she had fallen asleep within the hour, her stomach growling the whole way. “Tis not a problem child. Erick can be a bit of an ogre at times. I just ignore him and go on about my day. Mayhap you should do the same should you run into him again.” Jena felt a hidden warning in there that she couldn’t put her finger on. Why would she bump into him again? Was he staying here? Had he said something after she left? Questions without answers coursed through her mind but she refused to ask for fear of sounding like a wayward child scared of the bogey man.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I can handle myself. I was just tired from the flight, so my defenses were down. He won’t have a second chance to annoy me next time.” She prayed what she said was true. The man had a way about him that frustrated and fascinated her at the same time. Bloody hell, why was she so antsy when it came to him? Well no time to dwell on it now, she needed to get her stuff together and head out while the sun was still low in the sky.

“Everything is ready as you requested. You should have enough provisions to last you two weeks. Now there are small towns throughout the lands so if you run low be sure to stop and refill. But remember stay off of MacClyne land. You’ve not received permission and I dun want you to chance a run in with the owner.” What was so blasted special about the MacClyne family? He was probably some high and mighty rich man who had more money than brains. She would do her best to avoid crossing over into their lands but she made no promises. Let them find her. What could they do?

“Tessa is there anything I need to be aware of?” She hadn’t wanted to ask but something about the area felt off. It reminded her of a web woven thinly across an opening.

“I’m not sure what you mean child.” She could sense Tessa was holding back she just wasn’t sure why.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing. Probably nothing more than my imagination that keeps going crazy on me when I sleep.” Jena heard a quick gasp escape Tessa’s lips, her hands flew to her throat.

“Come child, let me see your hand for a moment

please.” Not allowing her time to ask why, Tessa grabbed a hold of her right hand and turned it palm upward. After a few minutes of silence she heard Tessa speak something she couldn’t understand, her words filled with an emotion she couldn’t pin-point.

“Tessa, what is it?” The woman had bolted from the room, a tirade of words flowing from her mouth. She could hear her in the den rummaging around for something. Books were being dropped, items pushed aside, until a small sigh carried on the wind.

“Ah ha...here it is.” She watched as Tessa moved back out of the den and into the main hallway, something held tightly in her hand.

“Tessa?” She didn’t know what else to say. Something the woman had seen had set her off and she had no clue what it was.

“Child, I know you don’t know much of these lands or the history, which is fine. It doesn’t take belief by a stranger to make the magick that lies within these lands be real.” Her words brought the dreams flooding back into her mind. The heated touch of the man with no face...

“What are you...?” Tessa’s hand moved up to silence her, her eyes full of worry and knowledge Jena couldn’t begin to understand.

“Jena, I’m going to give you something that you must promise to wear at all times. You may not believe in magick or the ghosts of these lands, but they are very real.” Unsure if it was what she was talking about or the fact she’d mentioned ghosts...either way, Jena’s skin began to crawl.

“What did you see?” She’d lived long enough and seen enough death to know, things were not always as they seemed. That there was another plane within our world which existed.

“I knew I sensed something about you child when you stepped out of that cab. Your hand shows your past and the tragedies you’ve lived through in your life. Yet, it also shows strength in you to overcome an obstacle that you will face in the future. One that only you can choose to take on.” What did she mean?

“I don’t understand.” And she didn’t. Okay she’d had bad things happen all her life, there was no hiding that

and she'd grown into a stronger person for it. Great... wonderful...give her a cookie for it. What obstacle could she mean though? That's where she was lost...

"I fear that I don't know, but you must realize it's something you might not understand...at least not at first." Puzzles and riddles were two things she couldn't handle and especially about something like this.

"Tessa, give me something to work with here." God she hoped she hadn't sounded as curt as she thought.

"I can't. All I can tell you is this. Don't believe what you see, they are not always as they appear. Stay safe child." The moment the words left her mouth she pushed the item from her hand into Jena's. "Take this and promise to keep it on you at all times."

"But..." So many questions filled her mind.

"Promise me now child, I mean it." The push in Tessa's voice gave no chance for objection.

"I promise Tessa." The moment the words left her lips the air in the room lightened.

"I'm sorry to be so cryptic Jena, but there is not much else I can offer. Be very careful when you journey and go out only during the day. Be sure to keep your fire burning at night no matter what."

"I'll be extra careful of where I trek I promise. Thank you for your hospitality and I'll be back in a couple weeks. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Take care of yourself Tessa." She liked the old woman a lot. Even though Tessa had scared her somewhat it didn't matter. She'd never had a mother growing up and found herself wishing she had been blessed with someone as caring as this woman was.

As she exited the building she swore she heard Tessa's voice on the wind echoing a call. "Keep her safe my friends keep her secure. Don't let the beasts of the night devour her." If she'd heard her right then she prayed her words were heard. If not, she was keeping that small talisman she'd given her very close at all times.

Three hours and ten miles later, Jena found herself in the middle of no where. She had gone through the old narrow streets of the city, marveling at the old buildings that still stood. So many people had come out to greet her.

Even among the town folk their smiles were as bright and warm as the morning sun. Soon she made her way out of the bustle of the daily events and into the countryside. Green hills and grass lands surrounded her and she couldn't have been happier.

"Yes, I do believe I needed this." Pulling the map out of her coat pocket, she unfolded it to make sure she was headed in the right direction. A vibration in her pocket drew her attention. Pulling her cell phone out of the bag, she marveled that Katie was actually able to reach her out in the fields.

"Hi Katie, what's up?" Jena knew she'd forgotten to call her this morning but she'd been so sidetracked after her dream and then Tessa's strange behavior.

"Jena, you never called. Is everything okay?" Yep, Katie was already worried.

"I'm perfectly fine Katie. I just headed out a few hours ago and the land is gorgeous. I have to bring you back here one year. You will love it." She knew Katie would. Even though there were strange happenings, there was an air of romance that filled the land as well. She would be right at home.

"Sounds like a plan. Are you sure you are okay?" Her voice held concern and it was apparent.

"I'm fine. Now, I don't know when I'll have reception again but I'll call as soon as I can ok?" Although she wanted to toss her phone into the ocean, she needed solitude and so far she'd been denied.

"Okay, call me as soon as you are back. Stay safe Jena."

"I promise to."

"Oh, Jena..." Katie's words died out as the reception on the phone ceased. *Damn.* Figures it would happen before she'd finished. Now Katie would freak out 'til she heard back. Oh well, not much she could do about it now. Pulling out her map, Jena marked where she was at and looked to where she wanted to go.

Yep. Just about a couple more miles and she should be there. The thought of the sea breaking against the cliffs pulled at her imagination. There was so much beauty out in the open areas that she felt humbled by it. Thankful she could appreciate all Mother Nature had to

offer, Jena let her mind fly free. The solitude alone was worth the trip. Calm and peacefulness was a rare commodity and this place overflowed with it.

“Katie you would love this place.” God how she wished she could talk to her again. Now she’d had the chance, only to be lost in a dead cell area. She made a mental note to bring Katie back sometime.

In the distance, she thought could hear the water crash against the rocks, the smell of the sea prevalent on the wind. An addicting combination, Jena found herself jogging toward a jagged ledge. The wealth of water in front of her was massive and down below she marveled at the rock formations the waves had carved over the centuries. Such power and strength to have done so much, it amazed her. She felt humbled and in awe of the greatness of it all.

“So beautiful...so majestic. I swear I could live here forever.” Eyes misting, Jena felt oddly at home standing on the cliff overlooking the sea. Perhaps she had lived in this land in a previous life. She’d always believed in past lives and standing here with the emotions that were running through her, she was sure it was possible.

Once you visit, a piece of you will always stay. The old man’s words came back to haunt her. Never had she believed something more. So much truth was held in that one sentence. A few feet in front of her was a solid flat plateau which would be perfect to camp on. This was definitely worth the cost. Peace and quiet surrounded her, no arrogant overbearing man to annoy her.

“What the hell?” Okay, why her thoughts had turned to Erick was beyond her, but she brushed the idea aside and pulled out her camping gear. Lunch time had already passed and her stomach was in the first stages of hunger. It was bad enough she’d blown past dinner last night and breakfast this morning had been no more than a bit of toast with jam. If she didn’t get something substantial in her system soon her body would go on strike for sure.

A half hour later and she was settled in for the day. Who could have asked for a more perfect view? She had spread out her sleeping bag under the makeshift canopy she’d crafted. Her gaze lifted to the heavens, Jena watched as the clouds danced across the deep blue sky.

According to the map there should be caves a few miles ahead. She would get there tomorrow. For now she wanted to enjoy every bit of the scenery.

“We meet again, lass.” Erick’s deep voice pierced through her calm thoughts bringing with it a deep burning in her belly. Jumping to her feet Jena’s gaze turned to the sound of his voice. The moment they found him her breath caught in her throat. If she’d thought he was handsome before, he had surpassed himself now.

“What are you doing here?” She needed to keep her guard up. She couldn’t allow this man to know he’d surprised her. If she did she knew he would make sure she never forgot it.

“I could ask you the same thing. You do realize you are drifting quite close to the land I warned you about?” There was a hint of challenge in his voice and she hadn’t missed it.

“No, I didn’t but thank you for the information. I know you said they are mostly north of here and since I’m not going that way, I should be fine.” His body was so close she could actually feel the heat from him beckon to her. God she needed to move or else melt in front of him.

“Ah I see, and where exactly do you mean to go to lass?” He was fishing but she wasn’t biting. As it was, her skin was growing hotter by the second.

“Oh here and there—nowhere specific. Why are you here? Do you work for them?” Her last words were meant as a challenge. He met it with a long stare in reply, his steel blue eyes never leaving her face.

“I see the fresh air of the land has been good to you. It brings out the color in your skin.” A compliment? Shock rocketed through her body. He had to be up to something. No man ever gave a compliment unless he wanted something in return. She’d learned that long ago.

“Thank you, but you’re avoiding my question.” There, let him move around it this time.

“Not really. You see, I’ve chosen not to answer is all.” Damn he was cocky. She needed to put distance between them. The heat of his body still called to her. Moving up toward the tree that she’d tied her tent to, her hand held tight to the trunk. Her stomach continued to knot at his closeness her hands itchy with the desire to touch his

chiseled face.

“So you think it’s fair to bug me with questions yet you refuse answer mine? Typical.” She wanted him gone. Hell, she needed him to leave before she said something she regretted or worse did something bad. She diverted her eyes away from him and out to the sea, the call to the water’s edge something she felt compelled to follow.

“Don’t lass; don’t let it pull you too far.” Did he hear it as well? The thought brought with it a fresh shade of rose to her face. Was she that transparent?

“Nothing will ever pull me anyplace I don’t wish to go...Never again.” Jena watched as confusion crossed his tanned face.

“Did I miss something?” Sincerity filled his words, warming the tension in the air. Okay, maybe he wasn’t a total jerk, but he still annoyed her to no end.

“Nothing.” She didn’t feel the need to discuss her past with anyone, especially not Erick.

“Fine then. Now as I was saying...don’t stray too far north and ye should be fine lass. If yer heading where I think yer are, then you won’t be crossing the lands at all.” Did he know? The thought both intrigued and frightened her.

“I’ll make sure not to divert any farther north than I have to. Good day to you.” She prayed he would take the hint and go. Her nerves were going haywire being this close to him. A noise from behind caught her attention; she turned her head to find a small fox scamper across the field in the distance. A slight crush of footsteps was her only warning before a hand was on her shoulder.

“What—” Her voice broke when she found him near. His body was so close she could smell the mixture of musk and woods; that could only be his. It was intoxicating and made her head spin.

His voice brushed the tip of her ear, his breath a warm caress that sent chills ricocheting across her body. “Sweet little lass; this is not over by a long shot. I think we both have much to talk about soon. Heed this though...keep the fire burning throughout the night and stay near it.” Was that concern that she felt in his voice?

Her gaze rose to his. It was a clash of colors deep blue meeting emerald green. “Why?” Even her own voice

sounded foreign, a slight whisper on the wind. What was wrong with her?

“Trust me in this. You may not believe in the lore of this land but many do and much holds true. There is safety by the fire. Don't be letting it go out. Promise me this. Please.” She felt the desperation in his voice and recognized his need to protect her for some unknown reason. The thought warmed a place in her heart she didn't know existed.

“I promise.” At that moment she didn't know what else to say. There was a haunting look on his face, his eyes shadowed as if they'd seen too much and endured lifetimes of solitude. All the arrogance she'd witnessed had to be a front for the person he hid inside. Before she could think better of it her hand raised to lightly brush a stray tendril of his hair away from his cheek.

A groan escaped his lips. “Ah lass, that would not be wise. A man can only hold himself at bay for so long in your presence.” Had she ignited something in him as well? The look she found in his eyes had turned from despair to something else all together. Suddenly, she felt too close to him. Her body became enflamed by the thought his being so near.

“You should go. I'm sure you needed somewhere.” Hell, he probably had a few women waiting for him. Coldness once more seeped into her heart, hardening it against anything. Resolved, she returned her gaze back to his, the passion she'd seen seconds ago gone for the moment.

“Yes...of course, my duties. Remember what I've said Jena, and don't let that fire go out.” A slight sigh escaped her lips, knowing she'd made it out of her second encounter with Erick unscathed; when she found him back in front of her once more, his hands on each side of her face.

“What are you...?” Before she had a chance to finish her sentence she found his head lowering to hers, his lips descending to claim.

Seconds before his lips devoured she heard him whisper.. “Someday soon Jena, we will see each other again and you won't get away so easily. You feel the pull, as do I. You can't deny it.” Then his lips were on hers just

as she opened to protest.

The moment his mouth claimed hers the ground below began to spin, sending her mind whirling in a thousand directions. Heat, lightning and fire roared through her blood, her body became weak with just the battle of their tongues. She couldn't hold back even if she'd wanted to and God help her she didn't. Something about him called out to her, made her feel sensations she'd never had before. She needed to focus; to regain control and fast.

"No...don't. You need to go and now. I don't want this." She was lying and they both knew it, yet he stopped. The man could control his urges like nothing she'd ever seen.

"Fine Jena, but don't forget all I've told you." With that he spun on his heels and headed back in the direction he'd come. *North*. Was he part of the MacClyne land or worked for them? Her interest suddenly peaked. Part of her wanted to call out, to ask the burning questions that floated in her mind. But she held back, knowing she couldn't give him any show of interest. The man was a menace, that's all there was to it. Watching his silhouette fade into the distance with the setting sun, his words echoed in her mind.

Don't let the fire burn out. Why was he so concerned? Sure, there were wild animals, but she had a feeling that wasn't what he meant. Then there was Tessa's warning and the amulet she still held tight to. Perhaps there was more to the area than she'd initially realized. Looking over her shoulder she returned back to her sleeping bag fatigue working its way through her body.

"Don't let them get to you Jena. You're a big girl." Though truth be told, at the moment she was feeling a bit out of sorts. The haunted look in Erick's eyes had been real. She pulled her bedding closer to the fire and added more kindling. Enough, she hoped, to last throughout the night.

"Oh Katie, I could sure use your advice right about now."

Slowly she drifted off to sleep, her dreams chaotic and dark. Jena found herself back at the orphanage and stuck inside the closet, the smell of bleach enveloping her.

Ralph's rough hands were touching her, feeling her, knocking the wind from her lungs. Try as she might, no scream would escape from her throat. Would she die this time? Perhaps that would be the best path. To embrace the darkness that threatened to engulf her.

Take me to the safety of darkness and let the ghosts haunt me no more. She called out into the night her mind full of chaos.

Yes Jena, you belong to us. Those voices again. Like fingers across a chalk board—they sent chills across Jena's skin.

"Go away. I don't belong to you. Why do you haunt me?" Had she done something in a past life to be hounded by the demons?

Ted is waiting for you Jena. You owe him. You are ours. Don't fight what is inevitable. Denial pulsed through her brain.

"No. I don't believe you. You lie. Ted isn't with you. He was a good soul. He wouldn't have suffered in your presence." A cold clammy hand wrapped around Jena's neck, sending waves of nausea through her body.

You will never escape us Jena. Accept your fate. More voices joined in. Each sound different in pitch piercing through her mind and into her soul.

"No. I refuse." Jena blocked the sounds from her mind only to find herself back in the closet and the hands of the groundskeeper on her body once more. Try as she might she couldn't scream her voice silenced from her growing fear.

Another sound broke through the haze of the darkness, her eyes blinded by the bright glow. A thud was all she heard of the man who had accosted her. Ted...he had rescued her again. Even in her dreams he was there to save her. Would she ever be able to repay him? No, she knew she wouldn't. Not now. Not when his life had been ended so brutally and his soul imprisoned somewhere. Fresh tears dampened her cheeks at the memories.

A strong hand snaked around her waist and pulled her up. Her legs still wobbly from the assault she clung for her life. But something wasn't right. Ted felt... different. Scared of what she would see Jena refused to turn her head upward. Whoever held her, decided not to

give her a choice. His thumb and forefinger lightly touched her chin, the heat igniting tiny flames across her skin as he turned her face upward. Those eyes again. They penetrated right into her soul—so that she felt exposed to his inspection. Who was her dark savior? If her legs weren't shaky before, they'd increased trembling dramatically. What was it about him that nagged at her memory?

"Who are you?" She could sense his desire, his need to keep her safe. There was a danger about him that kept him at bay though.

"Ah Jena, my love, someday you will know and you will understand. In time you will remember. I've searched so many lives for you. I can wait a bit longer." Even his voice moved across her like a breath of fresh air. She didn't want to let go, to lose this man who she felt so drawn to.

"Why do I know you?" She searched her memory but nothing surfaced.

"You will always know me, it just takes time to recall. You will remember when the past and present finally meet." Confusion wrapped around her mind at his words but she couldn't help but hold tight to the belief that he was real.

"You must wake now Jena, for it's not safe to sleep. Wake now!" A sudden jolt of energy pushed through her, rocking her awake from her deep sleep. Groggy from the suddenness of the dream, she cleared her head with a quick shake. Movement in front of her smashed any remaining sleepiness from her body.

"Who's out there?" She held tight to a branch her entire body on full alert. Damn, if she couldn't get at least one night of a sleep without being bothered.

"We are who we are, Jena. Put down the branch and come to us." Their words slithered across her skin like hundreds of serpents.

"No. Go away. I don't want you here." Hideous laughter echoed through the area 'til she swore she would scream.

"This is our land, not yours. You're the trespasser and now you must pay the fine. Come; pay the fine to us Jena." There was power in their voices, Jena could feel it.

The amulet Tessa had given her pulsed at every word. Had she known? What had Erick and Tessa said? The fire. She reached in and grabbed one of the pieces of wood, the flames flickered into the darkness of the night.

“Get back.” She stayed next to the fire her hand swiping out into the air. Not stopping she continued till she heard a high pitched screech, followed by a hushed hiss.

“That wasn’t wise, not wise at all. You will pay for your deeds. The past always catches up with the present.” As the last of the words registered her dream came flooding back.

How? She moved about the fire, her hands pushing out into the dead of night. Nothing moved. The air felt still and lifeless. Had they left? What were they? How did they know her name?

“Because we know all.” A seething voice filled with hatred came from behind. Moving to the side she turned to face the sound of the voice to be met with blackness and red eyes. “Bide your time for now mortal, we will be back.” Then it was gone. She knew without a doubt she was alone once more. Even the trees had begun to sway with the night breeze.

“Of all the places you choose to go to, you pick somewhere with things bizarre that have to happen.” A slight puff of her bangs Jena glanced once more out into the night. “Typical.” Exhausted from the standoff, Jena laid back down the talisman held tightly in her grip.

“Thank you Tessa...” Her eyes slowly drifted close as sleep’s embrace found her once more. “And Erick.” Her last omission drifted onto the night air and into the sky. Without realizing it she’d opened her heart just a bit to a man she didn’t trust but who’d warned her of the danger that was out there.

A cold spray of sea water woke Jena from her sleep, the grogginess of her dream and the night’s adventure still a vivid memory in her mind. When would she be able to put to rest the past? She knew it had shaped her into who she was but she hated to relive it over and over. Yes, she had survived without many scars, at least not visible ones. But she could never trust another man again. She’d

trusted Ted but he had rescued her. She owed him her life...didn't she? What did it matter now? He was gone and she was still half-alive.

Then there was the little matter of her late night visitors. Who were they or better yet what were they? She'd always considered herself very down to earth but she couldn't discount what had happened last night. It was too real. She needed to be careful from now on. At least during the daytime she was safe.

"Great Jena. Only you could get yourself caught up in a place that has demons or whatever the heck they were." Pulling her jacket on, she moved toward the cliff, her eyes darting to the waves below. Looking out across the water she wondered what life would be like to finally erase the marks across her soul.

Lying back down Jena hugged her pillow. How she wanted to enjoy life. No matter what anyone thought, she wanted to find joy in what she was left with. She hated not trusting others, not allowing anyone close to her heart. Too bad she'd learned long ago that trust was something that had to be earned. What was worse, she'd found few people in her life who had deserved it. Slowly, her eyes drifted shut once more the song of the sea lulling her to sleep.

"Maybe someday, Jena. Maybe someday..." Finally succumbing to sleep once more, Jena found steel blue eyes watching her in her dreams; as she let the darkness pull her into its embrace once more.

Chapter Ten

“Where have you been Erick?” Justin’s voice roared through Erick’s head, his brain pounding from the whisky that still laced his mind.

“Does it matter?”

“Hell yes it matters. You left for a day and didn’t come back for a week.” Every word Justin uttered felt like a ram to his head. Okay, he would need to lay off the whisky next time.

“Can you just not be so loud for a bit?” Erick swore if he didn’t have quiet soon his mind would explode.

“Look, I normally don’t care, but when you are gone for longer than you tell me...well it isn’t smart. So...fess up.”

Gods, would the man never leave him alone?

“Justin, not now. All I did was visit Tessa and meet some new tourists...nothing more.” The vision of Jena filtered through his haze of a hangover. He still couldn’t believe she’d gotten so close to his land yet had stayed just south of it. If only she’d ventured a bit farther he could have had more of a hold on her.

“Erick, are you even listening to me?” Had he said something and missed it? Bloody hell, he couldn’t be sure anymore.

“Of course I am. I just don’t see the big deal. I’m a grown man Justin. I’ve been around here for how long? I don’t think you need to know my every blasted move.” He needed to get away again or else blow up big time. His thoughts drifted to when he’d found Jena. She’d looked so beautiful; her golden hair swaying in the late afternoon breeze. He’d almost believed she wasn’t real until he approached her.

“Erick, I don’t think you realize just how dangerous things are lately. There have been disturbances lately.”

“What do you mean?” His attention diverted from the vision of Jena and settled directly on his friend.

“This is what I’m talking about. You’re not listening lately. People are going missing Erick. Livestock are being found diseased and there is no good cause.” Erick’s gaze drifted from the roaring fire to Justin, his eyes full of questions he couldn’t answer.

“Have they found those that have gone missing? Any trace of a struggle? How long has this been occurring?” A list of possibilities wracked his brain, none of which had good outcomes.

“So far only one body has been found.”

“Body? Whose and where? I want to know what I’ve missed.” Erick could only imagine the condition the body could have been found in.

“It was old Jeris, from the smith’s house. His wife had reported him missing for over a week.”

“Why hadn’t I heard about it?”

“You were gone Erick.” Of course he had been. Damn.

“Where was he found?” Anger seethed in his blood.

“Don’t Erick, it doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does, now tell me.” Never had Justin refused to answer him till now.

“Damn it man.” Erick watched as Justin stammered around the room, his voice a murmur of words he couldn’t understand. “Fine. They found his body deep in the forbidden forest just east of town.”

“And? There is more, I can tell by the tone of your voice. Don’t avoid the answer Justin.”

“His body was clean Erick.”

“What do you mean clean?”

“I mean clean. There was nothing left on him. No markings, nothing. It was as if...just the shell of what was Jeris remained.” Erick’s mind reeled with the image of Jeris’ dead body.

“Did they find anything around it? Any cause of death?”

“Nothing. Although...” Justin’s hesitation bothered Erick. He was holding back something.

“Tell me.”

“There was a small piece of parchment held tightly in his hand. A symbol of the Falin.” Falin? The name alone brought a shudder through Erick’s body.

“Are you sure?”

“No we aren’t, but that’s what he had in his hand. It wasn’t natural how he died though.”

“Explain.” Erick was sick of Justin dodging and wanted answers now.

“His eyes were gone, and I don’t mean as if a animal got to him. I mean they were missing. It was as if they were sucked out of their sockets. I’ve never seen something so odd.”

Erick’s stomach knotted at the mention of the man’s condition, bile rising in his throat. “Ok, I get the picture. Did you dispose of the body properly?”

“Aye that we did. We made sure to sanctify the body before laying him to rest.” There was a fluctuation in Justin’s voice that Erick couldn’t miss.

“What else?”

“I think they took his soul Erick.” The mention of such a loss hit Erick like a ton of bricks.

“How do you figure this?” There were details he was leaving out and that was not like him.

“The elders ran their tests Erick. They couldn’t find any trace of his soul left. That coupled with the condition of the body...well, you put it together. It’s gone. They took it.”

“Are you sure?” He had to be positive. There might still be a chance.

“No. You can’t get it back so donna even be thinking it. We need to concern ourselves with what’s going on around here, and try and stop it before it gets worse.”

“Fine. I hear you Justin you donna need to be so blunt.” Gods, how he hated when Justin berated him.

“Then don’t go missing for days at a time. Now you look like you need some rest. Truth be told, you look like hell, Erick. Now I have things to do here. We can figure out what to do next. If I know you, which I do, you have ideas brewing already.” He did too. He would have to consult the Elders but there was something underway in the world beneath theirs and it wasn’t good.

“You are a pain in my butt—you know this right?” He didn’t care though. They’d know each other for so long he would take the ribbing even though his head was pounding harder than before.

“Get some rest. We’ll talk tonight.” He was being

dismissed by Justin. A chuckled erupted from his throat.

“You are getting big for your britches there mate. Donna be thinking you are going to be running this house in my stead.” Erick shifted on his heels and headed up to his bedchamber. He needed darkness and fast. Hell, he needed something to knock him out for a few hours or he would never make it through another day.

His feet drudged their way to his bedroom, his mind a jumbled mess of what he'd been told. Why would they chance causing a war? The elders had dealt with them before and won what would make them think to challenge them again? So many unanswered questions pulsed through his mind as he laid down on his bed. There was an evil that was always a part of their beliefs. It was something they were borne to live with. But this was something different. Never had they'd defiled one of their people and taken their souls. It was breaking the treaty that had been set up hundreds of years ago.

“Blasted.” Why now? A thought pushed to the front of his mind. Jena. If his people, who were used to dealing with the demons that roamed at night, were not prepared, then neither would she be. “Gods, please let her take my advice to heart.” He prayed that she'd stay protected. The idea of her soul being taken tore at his heart like nothing he had felt before. As his head reached the pillow, fatigue encompassed his body and his eyes drifted shut.

“Please keep her safe.” His words slipped from his lips as his breath eased from his lungs the darkness of sleep embracing him in its web.

No...Stay away from me. The terror in her voice drummed through his mind. Erick's eyes shot open, darting in the direction Jena's voice had come from. Nothing but darkness surrounded him not even the glow of a fire to illuminate the room.

“Where are you?” He knew he'd heard her voice before, but yet, he couldn't place it to save his life.

Help me please. I don't know what to do. They are everywhere. Oh crap. The demons had come out again. Try as he might, Erick couldn't locate the woman's voice. Nothing but darkness surrounded him.

Where are you? He knew she wasn't close but in his

mind. He was awake enough to realize that.

I don't know. They are all around me. Their arms keep trying to reach me. Talons long and sharp reaching to grab me. Her screams echoed in his mind.

Breathe easy and listen. Use the fire. Keep it close. They can't go near it. Don't let it burn out. The conversation felt familiar yet there was a fog of uncertainty that he couldn't push away.

I've got the fire but they keep saying it won't do any good. Their voices. Oh God, their voices are ringing in my mind. Erick froze at the terror in her voice. They were trying to widdle away her confidence and it was working.

Don't listen to them. They lie. Hear my voice. Hold onto the sound of it. He willed her to hang on; to hear the truth of his words.

I'm trying...it's just that there are so many voices. How he wanted to find her and pull her close. He felt his soul tear at the desperation she felt.

Please. He couldn't think of any other words to say. *Hold on for me. I need your strength use mine for now.* The words flowed from him as nothing had before. He could feel her move in his mind, a warmth spread through his body.

They are leaving. You scared them. They will be back. I know they will. How could he protect her when he didn't know who she was?

Just stay by the fire at all times. Who are you? He needed to know.

You know me. You always have. Erick could feel the darkness envelope around him, the coldness of solitude invade his body.

Wait. Your name? Desperate to find out her name he reached out to her voice.

I'm your past, present and future. You've always known me. Find me. Find me before they do. Barely able to hold onto her voice, he felt the grip of unconsciousness take hold, dragging him deeper into its embrace. His last image as the shadows wrapped around him were vibrant green eyes staring back, confusion pooling in their depths.

A knock on his door roused Erick from his sleep.

"What is it?"

“It’s Henry, m’lord. I have an urgent message for you.”

Frustrated, a sigh escaped Erick’s lips, his head was still reeling from the bout he’d had with the whisky bottle. “Come in. Oh and Henry...how many times have I told you not to call me that? Just call me Erick...please.” He was the man of the house, but he had always hated titles.

“I will try, m’lord.” A smile crept across Henry’s face and Erick couldn’t help but laugh. He’d known the man all his life and never could he hold a grudge against his way of doing things.

“Let me see the summons.” His hand reached out to the old man, a look of concern etched across Henry’s face.

“I donna like what is going on lately, m’lord. It doesn’t feel right. The balance between the worlds is changing.” Erick couldn’t argue. Something was definitely amiss. Opening the seal, he couldn’t believe what had been sent.

“Now? Oh, for the love of the gods.”

“What is it, m’lord?” There was concern in the old man’s voice and he couldn’t blame him. Not one to speak without thought, he’d let his tongue go too soon.

“Nothing Henry...Thank you. Do me a favor and find Justin for me. Have him meet me in the library. I need to speak with him.”

“Right away m’lord...er Erick.” Erick watched as the old man shuffled his way out of his room, his grey hair a disheveled mess from rushing to bring him the note.

Opening the summons back up, Erick re-read what it contained to make sure that he’d not missed anything. “Blast it.”

Justin wouldn’t be happy, but there was no choice in the matter. He would have to go. Grabbing his coat he pulled his hair back, tying it at the nape of his neck. Gods, how he needed a vacation and soon. His hand on the door handle; he moved out into the hallway and down the stairs. Oh, this evening needed to end soon or he would never make it through the night.

The moment he stepped into the library he caught sight of Justin; his head turned out into the night. Bigger this night was not going to go well, he had to deal with the summons. Blast it all to hell. He approached his

friend, his footsteps barely audible on the floor. The moment he got close his hand rested on Justin's shoulder, alerting him to his presence.

"Erick. You wanted to see me?"

"Here...read." He handed Justin the note and waited for what he knew would come. Walking over to the fire, he thought of Jena, as Justin read the note; a loud grunt his only indication that he'd finished.

"I dun wanna hear it Justin. I have to go down to the stables. There is an urgent matter that requires my presence." He hated going out this late at night but the summons he'd received gave him no choice. Blasted business.

"Erick, I'm just saying, why can't it wait 'til the morrow? It's late, and you know that it's not always safe on these lands." Justin's voice blasted over the music playing the background. Of course he knew. He owned the damn land. But what could he do? If the letter was valid, he had to go. Sometimes he hated his life. Granted he had all he could want for. Yet something always seemed to be missing. He had his home, his friends, his business partners and any woman he wanted. He'd lived a long time and seen many places. Wasn't that enough? Sometimes he wondered.

"Are you even listening to me Erick? Ever since you came back from Tessa's you've been a bit...off. Did something happen?" Had something happened? How could he tell his best friend about her?

"Of course not. What could happen there? I just wanted to visit for a bit. Meet any of the new tourists that love to come here." Sarcasm laced his words. Justin knew him all too well. He hated tourists...especially American ones. Well, okay, that wasn't totally true. The spitfire he met this time around was different. He just couldn't place his finger on what it was. Jena ignited a fire in him he'd never felt and until he could figure it out he didn't want to let Justin in on it.

"Still, you seem...pre-occupied. Anyway, that's beside the point. I think you should either wait 'til the morrow or let me go with. It's the reasonable thing to do." Okay, now he was getting annoyed. He had run his family's business

for years now and he didn't need anyone to baby-sit him. He was a druid for god's sake. He could do spells and weave time sifts. He could sure as hell walk to the stables on his own.

"I'm going Justin...without you. I'll be back in ne'er an hour. Then we can discuss your need to protect me so well." He couldn't help but laugh at the look on his old friend's face. Oh yes, he'd hit a cord. Even when they were children Justin had tried to keep him safe. They were almost the same age and build, yet Justin tried to be the bigger, older brother.

"Erick, I'm worried about the Falin and Barguest roaming around these parts. The reports we discussed earlier. Until they are taken care of it's not safe. Not to mention...there have been more reports." Justin's admission caught his attention.

"What do you mean new reports? What's happened?" All the villages had been taught to protect themselves from the demons that roamed the land at night. It was instilled in them as babes.

"I don't know. All I've heard is that there have been some disappearances, other than the ones I've told you about. I fear someone is working to gain the power to push us away." Never...He would never allow it.

"You underestimate the loyalty of our people." He knew that over time some might have forgotten the oath to his family, but never to the extent of siding with the demons. It would mean death for any mortal.

"Do I? Take this request. It came in just at sundown. Why now? He could easily have waited until the morning." Each question bated at Erick. Justin was right but he had no choice. He had to go.

"I understand your concerns and am thankful to have a friend who would worry. I'll be fine. Trust me in this." He watched as Justin moved across the room, and gulped down a shot of whisky from the table, his eyes locking onto the distant window.

"I don't like it. There has been an unbalance lately and doona be telling me you don't feel it."

"Of course I have. That doesn't mean I have to cower and hide inside here at nighttime on my own blasted land." He knew something was happening and he would

need to address it with the council soon but for now he needed to make his meeting.

“But...”

“No ‘buts’ Justin, I’m going. Nothing is going to stop me. Not you, not Jeris, not the bloody Falin if they come a callin’. Now just deal with it.” Erick’s anger was brewing but he didn’t care. He was sick and tired of everyone’s worry, not to mention the fact that the dream he’d had was still fresh in his mind. His nerves were shot and he didn’t know what to do.

“You really need someone to put you in your place one day...you know this right? I’ll wager when that day comes you won’t know what to do with yourself.” What the hell did he mean by that? No man could best him in a fight, at least not a fair one. “An I doona mean a fist fight if that’s what ye be thinkin’.”

Now his interest was peaked. No way could he mean a woman. “What is it you be a thinking man. Out with it.” All the women fell at his feet, begging him to please them. Of course he almost always obliged that request. But none ever spurned him. It was a blessing and a curse he lived with. Any woman would lay with him but none was ever willing to love him, because of his heritage.

“Someday my friend, and I pray to the gods it is soon; a woman will wrap you around her finger so tight that you won’t be knowin’ if you are comin’ or goin’.” A chuckle caught in his throat at the thought.

“It will ne’er happen Justin. I’ve yet to find a lass who won’t come to me when I beckon her. Such is my curse.” A curse he hated at times. Everyone knew who he was and every woman tried to gain his affection so that they could secure a place in his bed. Yes, he was a legend in the bedroom. He scoffed at the thought of ever being married. One day he would, but for now, it was not in the cards. Suddenly the image of Jena surfaced in his mind her golden hair flowing in the morning breeze. A tightness in his pants drew his attention such that he barely caught Justin’s words.

“Erick, as the gods are my witness, I beg them to have you find a woman who won’t fall at your feet and do your every will. One who will challenge you in ways you could ne’er imagine. To elicit a fire in your blood that

cannot be quenched by anything but her kisses.” The words filtered on the evening wind wrapping around his heart like a vice. He buckled to the floor gasping for air. For some reason the words his friend uttered felt more like a spell or curse, he was unsure which, but they produced a knot in his stomach none the less.

“Justin...”

“No. I don’t want to hear it. I hope the woman the gods find, challenges you at every turn and leaves you gasping with desire and confusion. She will not know what you are but she will sense you are different...yet she won’t care. She will be one who ignites feelings in you that cannot be sated by anyone else but her, and you will ne’er get enough of her through all the ages.” At the end of Justin’s tirade Erick felt his heart lurch and his soul stutter.

His hand firmly grasped onto the leather chair, Erick raised himself up, his gaze focused on his friend and what he’d done. “Justin, do you realize what you might have just done? Dun you know speakin’ words like that on sacred land can cause nothing but trouble? Have you gone and lost all your good senses?” He would give his friend a good thrashing if time permitted, unfortunately it didn’t.

“I did nothing that aught should have been done years ago. Now go and tend to your business and we can finish this later. I need some more to drink.” With that Justin moved out of the room and out of sight. If they weren’t such good friends he would have given him a good lashing for what he had said. Blast his friend and blast his stupid commitments.

“Enjoy your drink Justin, you’ll need it to soften the feel of my boot kicking your butt when I return.” Erick knew Justin was well out of hearing distance but it felt good to say it anyway. What had possessed him to utter the words he had? He didn’t need his friend casting spells on him now. Not when there was so much happening they didn’t have control over. No woman needed to be bound to him right now and he didn’t want one anyway.

One who ignites feelings in you that cannot be sated by anyone else but her, and you will ne’er get enough of her through all the ages. Justin’s words echoed through Erick’s mind as the image of Jena’s vibrant green eyes

moved into his vision. Och the woman was a fiery lass but she was American and stubborn as all get out.

“Never. It’ll never happen in a million years.” Somewhere in the back of Erick’s mind he could hear Justin’s laughter at his denial. “Blast it. Blast it to hell.” Grabbing his coat, Erick burst out the door and into the dead of night the summons he’d received burning a hole in his pocket.

Half an hour later Erick found himself at his barn, his patience wearing thin. He was supposed to have met his stable master fifteen minutes ago to look over a new stallion he was going to be purchasing. Instead of the man and horse, he found himself alone in the middle of the night, the cool wind whipping through the barn.

“I donna like this one bit. Something is amiss.” He breathed his words out into the night. Why hadn’t he listened to Justin? He whispered a prayer to keep him safe from his enemies.

A rustle behind alerted him to the fact that he was no longer alone. Damn the man it took him long enough. The horse better be worth it or the man was on the verge of loosing his job. He didn’t have the time to deal with this, at least not tonight. He wanted to get back home and to bed. Today had been hell on his senses and he wanted to sleep and forget. Not to mention his head still throbbed from his hangover.

He began to turn around, his hands in his pockets a scowl on his face. “What the blasted hell took you so long—” Erick turned to face two large burly men. Both wore black over their entire body, concealing their faces. The taller of the two held a gun pointed directly at his chest. *Oh hell, he’d been set up.*

“I told you it would be easy to get him here.” The taller of the two men whispered to the other.

“Details...details. Let’s get this over and done with. I’m hungry and have other things I would rather be doing.”

“Who...?” Erick’s voice sounded foreign in the hush of the night.

“Does it matter?” The moment the notion of what they had planned registered; a small click of the trigger

reverberated through his mind. Heat, pain and darkness engulfed him as he slumped to the ground. The last he heard was the uncontrolled laughter of the men who had shot him. Justin had been right all along.

Spiraling into the abyss of darkness, Erick could feel the pain of the bullet rock through his body. Steeling his mind from what was going on, he willed himself to go numb or else lose his mind in the process. Gods how could he have fallen into the trap so easy? Fury seethed through him like a living animal.

Don't forget me. Her voice, like an angel, called out to him.

Who's there? He knew he was not awake but he'd never discounted the validity of his dreams either.

I'm the one you've searched for. I'm your past, present and future or so you've told me. You've haunted me nightly. The warmth of her voice soothed the burning in his soul.

How have I done that? I don't know who you are. Confusion wove around his mind as he tried to place the voice. The familiarity of it hit home, yet he couldn't place it.

You've visited me in my dreams and kept me safe from the demons. You told me to find you. To save you. Where are you? I can sense your pain. Had fate intervened in some way to bring him a savior and he didn't realize it? Questions without answers pummeled through his mind.

I don't know where I am. Find me. Please find me. Erick held onto her voice like an anchor in the night. His head twisted to the sound of her voice to be met with deep jade eyes.

Don't lose hope. I'll find you. Trust in me. He found he couldn't do any less. He held on tight to her voice, the sound of an angel, as the pain enveloped him pulling him into a web of unconsciousness he couldn't surface from.

Pain and darkness wrapped around her like a vice, pounding at her in every direction. She'd gone to sleep just after dealing with her evening visitors in hopes of finding her mystery man. She'd found him but he was in such agony it brought tears to her eyes. Try as she might she couldn't find out where he was and what was worse,

he didn't remember her. Perhaps it was just a dream after all and he wasn't real? Had her mind been playing tricks on her all along?

We told you that you belonged to us Jena. Their voices reverberated through her skull like a jackhammer.

Never. I'll never belong to you. Go away. Why couldn't they leave her be? Had she done something so evil in a previous life that she was cursed to be hunted by demons in this one? Jena balked at the idea.

Ted waits for you here. You left him to die. You don't deserve to see the sunrise Jena and you know it. Jena chocked back a sob. They always knew the right cord to hit to hurt her.

He's not with you. He never did anything to be forced to live in your presence. You are full of lies and I refuse to listen. Now go away. In spite of the dread that continued to well up inside, Jena focused on thoughts of her mystery man. Something deep inside told her he was in trouble and needed her help. She needed to find him and soon or else.

We have all eternity to wait Jena. You will be ours soon enough. Their laughter echoed through her mind, a cold coil wrapping its tendril around her soul. If this didn't stop soon Jena swore she would never sleep again.

Jena...find me soon. Please. His voice sent warmth through her body, rousing her senses from the despair that threatened to choke the life from her body.

Where? I don't know where.

You will. Don't listen to them. Just follow your heart. Now wake. Wake and find me soon. His voice wavered with weakness she'd not felt before, her heart cried out to pull him close.

I will find you, I swear it! Never in her life had she felt the need to find someone as she did at that moment. Her resolve once given could not be broken.

Waking with a rush of adrenaline through her body, Jena glanced about the area, her eyes in search of anything maybe that ought to not be there. Nothing.

A sight escaped her lips. "Girl, you are really needing to see someone about those dreams." More and more she found she longed to find the man she dreamt of. So real, she couldn't help but believe he was flesh and blood, yet

there was no way possible for him to exist. Yawning, Jena stretched back out onto her sleeping bag, her mind moving back to the man she'd come to welcome into her dreams nightly.

"Who are you really dream man?" Her words drifted like a chant onto the night breeze a twinkling star her only answer. Fatigue overcoming her once more, Jena's eyes began to drift shut, her last thought of the man with the steel blue eyes who'd come to mean so much to her.

Chapter Eleven

Daylight slowly invaded Jena's mind, the soft chirp of the birds in the distance her alarm clock. Stretching, she reveled in the feel of the morning breeze across her skin. Yes, the last few days had been extremely peaceful, at least during the day. Nighttime, now that was a different story.

Each night was spent with the same faceless man touching her skin speaking to her of things that had happened to him in the past. Not to mention the night visitors who continued to harass her at every turn. Thankfully, she had an abundance of wood to keep her safe and shelter from any chance of rain to wash away her fire. She almost hated the thought of going back to the States. She had fallen in love with this beautiful country.

"Oh Katie, if you were here you would fall in love with this place too." She knew her friend would be worried about her, but she couldn't make herself go back just yet. Over the last few days she had slowly trekked across the land meeting the locals and enjoying all the country had to offer. Never had she seen such beauty or felt such terror. Since that first night she'd still been awoken by her night visitors. Thankfully her fire never ran out. She'd come to enjoy the dreams of her mystery man, that was, until last night. Her most recent dream had been one of chaos and pain. Even this morning, she felt as if she'd been exposed to some kind of trauma and that he was in dire need of her aid.

"Where are you?" Her words drifted on the morning breeze. She wondered time and again if he was real or just a figment of her overactive imagination. Either way something was different and she needed to figure it out.

"I so need to ask Tessa about this when I get back." Her eyes drifted to the horizon and she watched the breaking of the night into the day. Oddly enough, her dreams were silenced last night after the last dream.

“Where were you last night dream man?” A feeling of emptiness crossed her soul at the knowledge that maybe he wasn’t real. Had her imagination made him up? Was she that desperate for companionship that she’d invented him to compensate? No, she needed to focus on enjoying the rest of her trip regardless of anything else.

Returning her gaze out to the edge of the water she watched as the sun continued to rise, its prism of gold and red draped across the horizon, lighting the sea on fire. She pulled out her camera, her one electronic item she had made sure to bring along. A click of the button and the beauty of the sunrise was captured forever in her grasp. Such peace did not come easy, at least not that she had ever found. Time and again the lands that surrounded her gave her new appreciation for what they had to offer. Was there anything that Mother Nature couldn’t do here? Somehow, she had a feeling she had found a special spot here and never would she want to forget it.

Shifting her weight Jena headed deeper into her tent to retrieve her backpack when a sudden chill crossed her soul knocking her to her knees.

“Jena...” The voices from the night resonated from the hillside. How was that possible when the sun had already risen?

“Go away. It’s not your time to be here. I don’t have the time, nor the patience to deal with you right now.” She’d learned to handle them at night not during the day. Why had they chosen to test her now?

“We can come whenever we choose to. You still owe us.” Venom laced their voices, filling her ears with their words.

“I owe you nothing, now leave me be. I have things to do.” She refused to let her attention be drawn by their pranks. She felt they were trying to get her to stay, but why?

Picking up her gear, Jena moved out into the daylight, the hiss of the demons following her every step. Good, let them be pissed. She didn’t care. She began to head further down the coastline toward a cave she had scouted out the day prior. Though she preferred to sleep under the stars, she could feel an impending storm in the distance. If there was anything she had noticed about this

place, weather was not something you toiled with. Besides she didn't want to chance being out under the stars at night with a downpour putting out her fire. As persistent as her night visitors were, the idea of having no fire to fend them off was a really bad thought and one she didn't want to have to chance happening. If they were bad now, she couldn't even imagine what they would be like with the upper hand.

"Nope...that would definitely be a big no-no." A small chuckle escaped her lips.

"You can't leave the area. You must stay." They were agitated, she could sense it in their voices. Good.

"I can do whatever I damn well want to do. Deal with it." Jena couldn't help but bite back a small chuckle. She enjoyed having the ability to fight back with them for once. They might be able to bug her but she wasn't about to let them control her movements. Let them be mad. She would just suffer through their howling tonight.

A few hours passed as she made her way around the jagged rocks and sand until she found the cave. Its high ceilings and smooth floor were a wonder to behold. How many years had it taken to make? Mother Nature was definitely artistic, especially when it came to this part of the world. She marveled at the deep natural pool at the back of the room. The water inside must be good to drink, since there seemed to be nothing around to contaminate it.

"Perfect." For once, the fates were shining on her, since she was running low on her water supply. Even the demons had silenced finally.

After about an hour she had her camp set up once more with a fire burning bright and a large amount of wood to back it up for later that evening. Looking out into the great expanse of land, Jena wanted to just run into the sea and allow its purity to engulf her. How many had come here and thought to do the same? God she hoped not too many. The thought of her own private paradise appealed to her. Too bad she didn't have someone to share it with. Her mind traveled to the stranger she continued to see in her dreams nightly. Who was he? Could reading one damn romance novel do that? She shook her head. Never...nope...no way.

“You’re just being silly Jena, now stop letting your mind drift.” Yet her heart lurched every time she thought back to his voice and the warmth of his touch.

Fatigue began to ebb away at her as she leaned her head back against the smooth cave wall, her eyes drifting shut. Time slowed down as the drip of the water in the back lulled her into a fitful sleep.

“Maybe a small nap would be ok.” Her words echoed off cavern walls as her arms drooped down to her sides.

Black, grey, crimson and blue filled her vision as the embrace of sleep engulfed her. Screeches filled her ears as the cry of voices she couldn’t understand broke the silence of her slumber. Bolting from her sleep her eyelids opened to find a grey mist swirling around her.

“Where am I?” Not sure if she was dreaming Jena held onto hope that she’d not slept past the setting of the sun. God only knew what trouble would transpire if that happened.

“Jena.” Ted’s voice pushed through her thoughts.

“No. You’re not here.” Fear wrapped around her like a vice. “You’re dead.”

“How do you know I’m not here? Your mind keeps changing things. Nothing is as it seems to you lately.” There was an edge to Ted’s voice.

“You aren’t Ted. He wouldn’t say something like that. Who are you?” Jena’s warning system was going off in high gear. The air around her felt stale, as if she was surrounded by death and decay.

“You are losing your mind Jena. Your soul is cracked. You need to give up and give in to us. There is so much we can show you. Just let go.” Swirling mists of grey began to filter through the floor. The putrid smell sent Jena’s stomach into convulsions.

“You aren’t here. I fell asleep and you are manipulating my dreams again. Give up and leave me alone. It’s not going to work.” She needed to focus on something, anything to gain control.

“You won’t get away from us. You won’t find him.” Their last words shot through her like a knife. Him. They knew about him.

“Where is he? How do you know about him? Is he real?” They realized that they’d spoken more than they

should have and the apparition before Jena faded into the shadows, a hiss reverberating off the walls.

“You will not survive Jena. Heed our words on this.”

“I won’t give up. You’ve picked the wrong woman to mess with.” With a renewed sense of stubbornness Jena allowed a sigh to escape her lips, knowing she was alone once more. “Where are you mystery man?”

Find me Jena. His voice lightly caressing her mind felt weaker than before. Whatever had happened to him she needed to locate him and quick. If she was dreaming she needed to wake up and soon.

“I’m trying but you aren’t making it easy dream boy.” Sarcasm wasn’t what she was trying for but it came out anyway.

I have faith in you. Please hurry. She could feel him fading, his spirit a mere sliver holding onto life desperately.

“Hold on, please don’t let go!” *Don’t leave me. You can’t.* Her voice shouted out into the night her screams echoing in her mind. If he was real she would find him and if he wasn’t she was going to have to check herself into a hospital. Either way, she was determined to follow through or she was going to lose her mind at this rate.

I’m holding on Jena. For you I’m holding on. But you will have to wake. Wake now. They are coming back to deter you. Jena could feel the coldness invade her thoughts. He was right. The demons were coming back for round two. God, she was beginning to really hate these guys. She would definitely need to take a course in how to deal with them for future reference. A sudden surge of energy and Jena found herself spiraling through a kaleidoscope of colors blinding her vision, rousing her from her sleep.

“Okay, that’s it. No more naps for me or if I do fall asleep I’m going to make sure it’s one that I control from now on.” Rubbing the nape of her neck, Jena reached for her canteen, gulping down some fresh water to quench the thirst that refused to go away. Her dream still vivid in her mind Jena knew she needed to take a walk to clear her head. Moving her gaze about the cave she needed to make sure everything was situated for that night.

“Perfect. Try and mess with me tonight demon-boys.”

Assured that everything she needed was set and ready, Jena decided to take a walk along the shore. The water called to her, beckoning her to leave the cave and search the secrets it held. Who was she to say no? She still had a few more hours till sundown and God knew she needed a break to clear her head.

She headed out of the cave and into the afternoon sun. The breeze off of the sea wrapped her in a cocoon of warmth, thawing out the coldness she still felt from her dream. How she loved it out here. She would have to thank Holly when she returned home, that is if she ever wanted to go back. Granted she would need to ask her if she knew about the magick realm, but that was something she could deal with as long as she understood it. One thing she'd learned long ago, life was never normal if you stopped and listened. She actually preferred it that way.

So deep in thought she barely caught the sound of a moan in the distance. Fear rushed through her veins at the sound.

"Hello?" Who could be out there? She hadn't seen anyone for days, at least not since she last visited a village for supplies. Most of the villagers had told her that not many ventured to where she was going. It was a no man's land, which is why she'd decided to come.

Seconds ticked by when another moan louder than the first caught her attention. There was a weakness to it that worried her. She wasn't even sure if it was a person or animal that might be injured. Compassion overcame Jena and she began to jog in the direction of the noise. Whatever it was, it was hurt and she couldn't just let it suffer. She would figure out what to do once she figured out what it was.

Jena jogged about a hundred feet when she heard it again, this time closer and clearer. It was definitely not an animal. Someone was hurt and badly. "Oh God, please let them not die before I get there." Everything in her went on high alert. Her eyes scanned the area for anything that looked out of the ordinary, something to show who it was that was injured. Nothing. At least until her vision caught site of a half buried body only ten feet from where she stood.

“Oh...my...God!” Jena bolted for the person, her heart pounding out an erratic beat. The force of each beat so strong she was sure it would burst through her chest. She was so focused, everything around her blurred until she found herself next to the body, her breath burning in her lungs.

“Hello?” Why she spoke she was unsure. Perhaps to help normalize the situation or not...she didn’t know nor did she care. Kneeling down she carefully turned the body over. Her stomach knotted and her breath caught in her throat. *Erick?*

“Oh God, Erick...who did this to you?” Her mind was a jumbled mess. How had he come to this place? What had happened?

“My...where...who...” His voice cracked with each slurred word, blood was dripping from his lips.

“Hush now. We can figure the rest out later.” She had to concentrate. Oh hell. What did the first aid books say? Check for pulse. Okay, good there. Um...wounds. She felt around Erick’s head and neck and down his arms and legs. Nope nothing looked to be broken. Her hand landed on his chest and another groan escaped his lips. Lifting her hand she noticed a red sticky substance on her palm.

“Shit!” Oh no, he was bleeding. Crap! Okay, she cringed, be calm. *Think. You can do this.* She pulled off her jacket and placed it on his chest applying pressure as she did so. She could feel him cringe in pain under the pressure. Her eyes misted at the thought of placing him in more pain after what he’d gone through.

“Sorry.” She hated to hurt him but she knew it had to be done. God only knew how much blood he had already lost. Gurgles and moans continued to escape his lips the beat of his heart erratic under her hand. He was going into shock.

“Talk to me Erick. Who did this to you? How long have you been out here? What the hell happened?” By his appearance she guessed he couldn’t have been here too long. Had he accidentally gone onto the MacClyne land? She knew it was only a half a day’s travel from here. If that was the case, she didn’t want to ever come across them. A bolt of lightning danced across the sky with a resounding burst of thunder breaking through her chaotic

thoughts. Okay, she needed to get him to the cave and fast. If the wound didn't kill him the storm surely would. Not to mention when night fell she didn't want either of them outside and away from the firelight.

Jena moved her lips toward his ear and willed him to hear her. "Erick, I need you to hear me. I have to go and get something to carry you on. Don't you dare leave or die on me. I will be back. You hear me? I will be back. Stay with me please."

She needed something to place him on. There was no way she would be able to move him, he was just too big. Granted she was strong, but she was smart enough to admit she wasn't that strong. What could she use though? Her mind went over a thousand options 'til it settled on the right one. A tarp from her tent! Jena got up to head back to the camp when her leg caught on an uprooted branch. Falling face first into the sand she felt the jab of another branch into her side.

"Ouch! Damn it! Not now." She needed fate for once to be on her side. Regaining her balance, Jena got back up and ran to the cave. Nothing else mattered at that moment; not her fear and not the impending storm. As she reached the cave, her gaze moved about until she found what she needed. Perfect. Grabbing one of the tarps she headed out toward Erick, his moans still echoing in her mind.

Please...please...please...don't die on me. She screamed it over and over in her head. A mantra she held fast to. No matter how much of a jerk he was, no one deserved to die. Something about his condition jabbed her heart until she wanted to scream to the heavens. Why? She had no clue but she couldn't focus on that now. She needed to worry about saving his life.

She got to him as fast as she could, her side throbbing in pain as she laid the fabric next to him. Jena held her breath as she smoothed out the sides knowing what she had to do next and not happy about it. She knew it would hurt but if she didn't roll him over onto the blanket they would both get drenched by the downpour. A strike of thunder in the background reminded her of just how close the storm was. Gritting her teeth she pushed on Erick's side, his groans a stark reminder of his wounds.

"I'm sorry Erick but I have to do this. If we don't move quickly, the storm is going to get us both wet. Just bear with me a little bit longer." She wasn't sure if he heard anything she said. At this point she didn't care. All she knew was she had to move and quickly. Small droplets of water began to fall from the darkening clouds. Her time was running out fast.

"Okay big boy, let's get the hell out of here." Assured she had most of his body on the tarp, Jena grabbed both ends and began to pull. Damn the man weighed more than she figured. Another groan jarred her thoughts and set her adrenaline into overtime. She pulled and yanked with all her might, focused on nothing more than the cave up ahead and the shelter it provided. The gods be damned, she was not going to leave him out here to die. Why she was so concerned surprised her, but she figured it was just human nature taking over.

"We're almost there. I need you to hold on a bit longer. Please."

Ten feet, five feet and she was there. She counted her foot falls as they approached the opening her breath hard gasps that burned her lungs. The moment they were in the cavern the heavens opened up in a fury of a downpour. Lightning stretched across the sky, while thunder rolled in a barrage of octaves. If she wasn't so preoccupied with her new patient she would have loved to watch the storm unleash its power on the land, but for now she had more important things to attend to. Namely, making sure Erick didn't die.

Moving over to Erick's still body, Jena worried that the movement might have further injured the wound.

"Well." Jena sighed, "Only one way to find out." One quick movement and she was out of her jacket and kneeling down next to the fire. Her eyes adjusted to the light and Erick's ashen face. As the warmth of the flames sent goose bumps across her skin she wondered if she would be able to help him if there was something severely wrong with him.

"Please don't leave me." She prayed that she had everything she needed in her first aid kit or at least enough to bide them some time to get to help.

"I'm sorry but this is going to hurt again." She hated

to cause more pain but she knew the only way to help was to see how bad the wound was. His shirt was so dark she wasn't sure if it was made that way or due to the blood that had seeped into the fabric. Distaste for what she had to do, Jena began to unbutton his shirt, the smell of the dried blood turning her stomach over.

"You are so going to owe me when you are better." She'd always relied on humor when her nerves were shot and today was no exception.

Once the shirt was pulled open, Jena reached behind and grabbed her thermos filled with water. Gently she poured some of the fresh water across Erick's chest, careful not to jar his body and cause further injury. The moment the water touched his heated skin his body jerked and a grunt escaped his lips.

"I know it hurts, but I need to see how bad you are injured. This is just water. It will help cleanse the wound. Try not to move." She had no idea if he even heard her. Jena moved the damp cloth across his chest careful not to press too hard until she figured out where the blood was coming from. The moment the fabric touched his right shoulder she felt him recoil in pain. *Bingo. Survey says? Wound has been discovered.*

Upon closer observation Jena found a circular entry wound. "A gunshot wound? Why? Who?" Questions pounded her brain but she knew now was not the time to worry about such things. She needed to concentrate. She needed to make sure that Erick survived.

Her fingers held tight to his chin, turning him to face her even though his eyelids were half shut. "Listen to me Erick. I mean it." His eyes, glazed over by pain stared back, breaking her heart. Had Ted looked this way before he died? The thought of no one around to help ease his pain ripped through her like a knife. God, why did she go to the movies that night? Could she have prevented his death? Despair and sorrow filled Jena's heart till she felt it would burst from the pain.

"J...en...a..." His words pierced through her haze of sadness pulling her out of the vortex of emotions she was feeling. He wasn't Ted and God help her, he was not going to die.

"I'm here Erick. Don't talk. Save your strength and

let me see what I can do for you.” She had no clue how severe or how much damage had been done inside his body by the bullet, but the outer wound didn’t appear too bad. At the moment she was more worried about his loss of blood and the chance he might go into shock.

“I...need to tell you my...” Erick’s eyes drifted shut, unconsciousness taking over him. What was he going to tell her? Oh hell why now? Fear pooled in her stomach that he was worse off than she had first thought.

“Erick? Wake up. Damn it, don’t do this to me. I won’t let you die. Not like Ted.” Tears streamed unchecked down her face. She had failed Ted but she refused to fail Erick. Yes, the man was arrogant, egotistical and more than likely a womanizer, but no one deserved to die like this. She moved closer, wiping the blood from the wound. Inspecting it closer, it didn’t look too bad. Clean entry and exit from the looks of it. It appeared to have gone clear through. That was good.

“Thank God.” She whispered; a soft exhale escaping her lips. Until now, she’d not realized she’d been holding her breath. Pulling out her sewing kit, she began the task of closing the wound, thankful she’d learned to stitch even though she hated sewing growing up. Katie had always hounded her to learn feminine skills, she’d always balked but done so to appease her friend. Now she was grateful.

“I’ll have to remember to thank you later Katie.” Though part of her wished Katie was here to help her with her burden, part of her was also happy that she was alone with Erick. Something about the man made her legs weak and her pulse race. Odd sensation and one she’d never felt before.

She’d need to evaluate it later, when he was better and her nerves weren’t shot. Returning her gaze back to Erick’s wound she began the task of stitching him up, her mind racing with possible ideas of what could have happened and questions to ask him once he was better.

An hour and ten stitches later, Jena began to finish up dressing the injury. He would live, as far as she could tell. She just prayed that there was no infection. Fatigue made it way through her body, her eyes drooping from the day’s events. She would find out later what had happened. For now she needed to make sure he was

comfortable.

Jena moved closer, covering him up with her blanket. Her lips close to his ear, she whispered softly, hoping he heard her.

“Rest now and regain you strength. We can figure out what to do next when you are better.” Jena had no clue why she felt compelled to reassure him of anything but something drew her to him. His presence, even hurt, removed any common sense she had. So close to his ear she could feel the heat radiating from his body. God please don't let a fever begin. A quick touch of his forehead proved her fears to be true. A fever was present but not a high one at least.

Her fingers lingered across his face touching the small hairs that had begun to grow along his jaw line. His skin felt warm to the touch but rough from putting in hard days. The man was a complete mystery to her. What made him tick? Granted he was extremely handsome, almost too much so. She could see why women would throw themselves at him at every turn. He could be charming but arrogant. It was a deadly combination in her mind. Yet, there seemed to be sadness when she had looked into his eyes. Like something was missing in his life.

“Who are you really?” She knew he probably couldn't hear her but she had to ask. Deep in her soul she felt a wrenching every time she looked at the stress lines that covered his face. She couldn't remember seeing them before back at Tessa's. “Sleep well...sleep deep and dream of rolling brooks and flowing trees. May the gods protect and guide you back from the darkness that embraces you.” Unsure why she had whispered that into his ear, Jena placed a light kiss on his forehead. The gesture felt natural to her.

Jena moved over to the fire and added extra kindling. Tonight was one night she didn't want to deal with her unearthly visitors. “Please God, keep them at bay.” Not while Erick was recovering. Moving back to the wall of the cave she pulled another blanket up to her chin. The force of the storm outside rocked the inside of the cavern into a melodic rhythm, until she found her eyes drifting closed. In the distance, she swore she heard a female voice begin

to sing in the heat of the storm, a song of healing and warding. Fatigue finally winning the battle for sleep Jena embraced the darkness and the chance to dream of her mystery man. Would he be there waiting for her or just the demons that haunted her from her past? At this point she didn't care or she was just too tired to fight; one way or another she was going to sleep.

Erick's fever pitched dreams rambled through his head; the constant play of the bullet moving in a slow, twisting path at him. His fear was so strong that his body locked, not allowing him to move. The bullet had entered his flesh twisting it into a mockery of human endurance. The sudden shock filled his mind and his gaze searched for anything that would give him hope. Blackness covered his eyes, slowly creeping like a fog across the moor in the early morning light.

"Where am I?" The dryness of his voice cracked under the weight of the pain coursing through his body.

Voices cried out. Dark, gravelly pitched voices, all seeming to bay for his blood, wanting his soul to release itself. He screamed inside his head watching the shadows take form. Their claws grabbed for him, wanting to rip him apart. No matter which way he turned he couldn't move from the strength of the evil holding him at bay.

"Let me go!" His voice rang into the darkness the answering laughter slithered across his skin like a snake.

"Don't let go." A soft voice brushed against his soul warming the coldness that threatened to engulf him.

A small brief light flashed above as an angelic figure appeared. In a one swift movement her she held out her hand and reached down to him. He slowly grasped for it and the warmth it provided in the cold black void he was in. The moment his fingers touched the winged form, it burst into a thousand doves, their wings iridescent in the glow of the unknown light. Was he dead? He couldn't be sure. He looked around for the angel and found deep green eyes staring back at him. *So familiar*. Where had he seen them before?

"Who are you?" His voice echoed in the damp darkness of his prison of pain, as he reached out to find his savior.

A sound pushed through his chaotic dream. A movement near him roused Erick from the haze of unconsciousness. Where was he? He vaguely remembered arguing with Justin about going to the barn. Oh crap. Now he remembered. He'd been ambushed. Damn, how could he have let his enemies catch him off guard?

Were those responsible still near, waiting to finish the job? He held his breath and strained to hear. To see if anyone was about. Other than the storm outside the only sound he heard was the intake of air from the far end of the room.

A few minutes passed and no other sounds could be heard. *Okay, good, he was alone for the most part.* If there was just one person he could easily overtake him, regardless of how injured he was. Erick slowly opened his eyes, the light from the camp fire blinding him for a moment. As his gaze adjusted to the interior, he saw a body slumped against the wall. Good, the person was asleep. Turning onto his side Erick cringed as pain shot through his body. It was only when he looked at his shoulder that he noticed that the wound had been cleaned up and dressed.

"What the hell?" He forgot to censor his thoughts before he spoke, the figure in the distance moved at the intrusion into the silence of the room. *Crap.* He waited a moment or two to make sure the person across from him did not wake. *Good.* Erick crawled toward the covered person, each slow movement an agonizing progression to his target. Anger built in the pit of his stomach at the betrayal he'd been witness to. He would make them pay for it. That was, if he lived through it to make it back home.

A few minutes had passed and he found himself next to the blanket and whomever it covered. His hand reached up to the corner of the soft material as his fingers grasped the edge. He knew he had to be careful so as not to wake the person underneath. With a short tug at the end of the blanket, he removed it from the owner to reveal the body it concealed, a gasp lodging in his throat.

"How in the bloody hell?" His eyes drank in Jena's golden locks. *How?* He wracked his brain to see if he remembered her from his ordeal. Vagueness crept

through his mind as he recalled her voice, but he had thought it was from a dream. Reality hit him like the crash of the waves outside. The beach...the pain...her voice. Oh god, she had found him and brought him to safety. Dressed his wounds and talked to him while a fever had wracked through his body. Why? She didn't know anything about him or who he was. Yet she had gone out of her way to make sure he was safe.

His eyes drifted back down to her sleeping form, his heart softening at the notion that she'd gone out of her way to save his life. "Oh Jena, my sweet lass." He found himself humbled by her unselfishness, her willingness to give of herself for someone she didn't know or even like. He found that last idea bothered him. For some insane reason he wanted her to look favorably on him. He prayed for the day her eyes would sparkle when she saw him. He watched her chest rise and fall with each breath, the sound music to his ears. She began to move and he feared she might be waking. He held his breath in anticipation, his heart beating wildly. Thankfully, she only turned her body, her shirt button unhooked and partially exposing her tan skin underneath. In that one moment his pants got tighter just by that small movement. Gods but the woman was sexy, even deep in sleep.

"No...I'm sorry...please...forgive me..." Her voice pulled him back from his thoughts. Shock rocked through him when he heard her voice. She was so full of sadness and regret. What could have happened to her to fill her sleep with nightmares?

"It wasn't my fault. Don't..." Erick tried to listen but couldn't understand what she was talking about. "Go away. I don't want you here. Stop haunting me."

Erick found he wanted to chase all her demons away, but to do so he would have to figure out what had shaped her into the woman she was. What happened in her past that haunted her present? Before he knew it, his hand was on her forehead moving the stray sweat soaked tendrils from her face. His thumb gently caressed her skin the texture like fine porcelain.

"Ah lass, sleep deep, sleep well. Donna let the ghosts of your past haunt your dreams any longer." His lips gently touched her forehead. The moment he tasted her

skin he knew; he would know her anywhere and he would never get enough of her. Had Justin's words held more power than he'd realized or was fate having fun on his behalf? Either way he didn't care. He had every intention of winning her over.

His vision moved around the room. The flicker of the firelight bounced off the interior of the room. A cave? She'd brought him into one of the caves along the coast. How far had his attackers taken him, thinking he was dead? He still couldn't place who had shot him. He knew there were those out there who wanted him dead for no reason other than his wealth as well as those who feared his druid background. But why deceive him at all? He knew he would have to address the issues when he got back. He just prayed it didn't have anything to do with the disappearances that were happening as well.

His fingers continued to rub the ends of Jena's silken hair, his refusal to let go a compulsion he couldn't control. His gaze returned to her face as he watched her sleep. For now, he needed to concentrate on his more pressing issue. Jena.

For the moment, he would bide his time. He needed to get to know her better. Let her get to know him...the real him. Not his name or anything else but the man who he was.

"You will be mine lass." With that settled, Erick leaned back to rest his shoulder. All the movement had jarred the bandages not to mention how sore he still was from the wound. Maybe the gods had looked favorably on him finally. He prayed he would win this battle as he knew it would be the fiercest fight he would ever encounter. As his eyes drifted shut, he took with him the vision of her sleeping so soundly her supple skin, tan and soft.

Chapter Twelve

Gunshots echoed through her mind. Deep red blood splattered all over. Her eyes drifted to her shirt, her body covered in the crimson colors. Was it hers? She couldn't tell. A moan behind her caught her attention but she couldn't tell what had caused it. Where was she? Sluggish and out of sorts, Jena felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

"Hello?" Her call echoed out into the black abyss of nothingness. Darkness descended on her, a shadow that blew in with a cold wind. It dawned on her that she was no longer in the cave. But, where then?

"Is anyone out there?" Again, silence was her response. Without warning a rough, withered hand gripped her shoulder, the flesh hanging from the bone. Revulsion shot straight through her. She turned, fear thickening through her blood. Her gaze came face to face with Ted. His decaying corpse stood upright a snarl plastered across his face. A scream froze in her throat.

"You let me die, Jena. You should have been there to save me like I saved you." No it wasn't real. Her head pounded at the onslaught of emotions. She knew he couldn't be there. She just needed to wake up. Even though her mind knew this she couldn't help but feel the guilt resurface.

"I'm sorry, Ted. I didn't want this for you." Fresh tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

"It's your fault Jena, all your fault." More voices joined Ted's the sound eerie and distant. Red eyes filled the darkness surrounding her.

"Go away. The fire still burns bright." Her voice cracked under the dryness of the air that engulfed her.

"Yes, the fire burns bright where you are, but not in your dreams." Her gaze shot around her. True enough no light could be found.

"This is just a dream and not real. Leave me be."

Hands with talons for fingers reached out from the black abyss to reach for her.

“You’re ours Jena, all ours. Ted waits to see you. It’s time for you to pay for his death.”

“No...it’s not true. He would never want that.” Their words whipped across her with a vengeance.

“You didn’t save him. He wants revenge for his death.” Denial pulsed through her body. Another hand touched her shoulder and she jumped. She tried to move out of reach but it grabbed a hold of her, refusing to let go. A second hand grabbed her and shook. She opened her mouth to let out an ear piercing scream.

“Jena, wake up!” Erick shook her harder than he would have liked but the dream she was caught in scared him. She was talking in her sleep and what she had said worried him. And who was this Ted? He found an emotion he was not aware he possessed course through his blood. He was jealous of someone he didn’t know from a woman who didn’t even like him. Okay, that really took the cake. Her eyelids fluttered twice as she was released from the dream. “What...where...” He watched as confusion crossed her face. His heart broke at the despair he saw in her eyes.

“You were dreaming, lass. Take a deep breath in and tell me what caused you such a fuss.” God, how he hoped she would trust him enough to tell him what had happened; though he found he wanted to know more about this man she dreamt of. He wanted to be the only one she thought of whether she was awake or not.

“I was? Um...what was it about.” He could tell she was fighting an internal battle and it broke his heart. She was a strong woman; he had noticed that from the moment they had met. Something continued to haunt her and whatever it was had something to do with this Ted.

“Come lass; tell me what is on your mind. How did you come to find me? Was anyone else around?” Perhaps if he asked her a torrid of questions her defenses might drop and she would divulge her inner secrets. He could only hope.

“Nothing...really. It’s just a ghost that continues to haunt me. As for how I found you, pure luck I guess. Your

body was a few hundred feet from here. How did you get shot anyway?" Okay, now she was changing the subject. Fine. He would allow her this reprieve, but he would find out what she was hiding soon enough.

"How much time has passed since ye found me lass?" He needed to know how long he'd been out. Surely Justin had sent out a search party by now. This of course, was presuming his house wasn't in complete chaos after he'd gone missing. He watched Jena's face carefully as she recounted the days that had passed.

"Well, as of today, I would guess about three weeks since I found you. You were pretty bad off Erick. At first, I wasn't sure I could save you. Luckily, the bullet went clear through." He vaguely remembered the night he'd been shot or the faces of the men who had done it for that matter. How long would he have survived if she hadn't found him? He was afraid to even consider that idea.

"So I've been out this whole time?" The idea bothered him. If no one had found them by now, then something terrible might have happened to Justin as well.

"Yes, for the most part at least. You would wake up here and there but the fever kept you kind of out of it." Of course it would. "Erick...who shot you?" It took a moment for her question to register, his mind running through all the possibilities as to why they'd not been found.

"Erick?" Her words broke through his concentration.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. They wore masks, though I have a good idea who might be behind it." Anger raged through his body at the memory of the attack.

"Why did they shoot you then?" Her words held sadness in them, he could sense it. Something about what had happened to him rang true to her.

"Many reasons I suppose, but that's of no concern right now. Has no one come around here looking for me?" He still couldn't believe it. Justin had watched him like a hawk up 'til this point. Never in his wildest dreams could he imagine they'd not sent a search party for him.

"No, not that I've seen. Things have been quiet. I know when I went to the village nearby there was a big commotion over that MacClyne family."

Surprise ricocheted through him at the mention of his namesake.

“Really? What was said?” He didn’t want to sound too interested. Right now he couldn’t see telling her who he was.

“Not sure. The moment I heard the name I turned and left. The people sounded worried though.” He watched as her eyes drifted to the firelight. She looked so sad in the flicker of the flames.

“I’m sure everything is fine. Did you let anyone know I was here?” The moment he’d said the words he wanted to pull them back. He wasn’t ready to leave her, not when he still had to win her over.

“No, I’m sorry I didn’t. At the time I was more concerned with getting back here to make sure nothing happened to you. Not to mention the fact that I haven’t a clue as to who had shot you...I really didn’t want a repeat performance.” With every word that left her lips he felt his heart pound. “That and the sun was beginning to set.” The fear he felt in her words bothered him. What had scared her?

“Jena, what have you seen?”

He watched as she shuffled her foot into the dirt kicking a rock against the wall. “Remember that night you told me to keep the fire burning?” Of course he could. Every moment spent near her side he could recount in detail.

“Aye lass, I do. What of it?” Jena’s body shifted away as her hand gripped the blanket pulling it closer around her.

“They came.” Her simple words surprised him.

“Who came?” Curiosity came with fear.

“The night visitors. The ones with the red eyes and skull piercing laughter.” He could feel her pull away.

“Oh no. I was hoping they wouldn’t visit ye lass.” Damn it all. They’d found her even though she’d been just a few feet away from his protected land. Blast it all.

“Erick...” Her deep emerald eyes lifted to his in a plea. “Who are they?”

“Och lass, that is a long story and one best not discussed this late at night. I will tell you this. They roam the lands in search of those who are without aid.” Uncertainty of what all to disclose to her moved through his mind. Her questioning gaze left him no choice.

“And? Tell me all Erick, I’m not a child and I’ve had to deal with their pranks for longer than I’d like.”

Of that he was sure. Nothing about Jena was childish.

“They are demons from beneath the ground. Fire is the best way to keep them at bay.” A stifled cough was her only reaction.

“I see. I guess I can’t be completely surprised.” The moment her admission sank in, shock rocked through him.

“Excuse me? Most would ne’er believe me, let alone be so calm about it.” How could she not be fearful?

“If you are asking if they scare me, yes they do, but I can’t change the fact that they are. So, I’ve kept the fire burning and they’ve continued to bug me endlessly. Speaking of. Is there any way to annoy them back? I swear one night I’d like to give them a taste of their own medicine.” The woman was a miracle. If she could push past the fact of the unknown, could she also accept his druidic background? He prayed it was so.

“So the unknown and unexplained doesn’t frighten you lass?” Erick found his breath held in his lungs in anticipation of her answer.

“Why should it? Reality can be just as terrifying if not more so. Why fear what we cannot change?” That settled it. Something had happened in her past but she refused to say what. “Besides, it’s nice to think that some of the legends of the past could be true.”

“You are a paradox to me lass.” He couldn’t hold his thoughts at bay. She was nothing like the women he’d met in his life. She was more than he could have wished for.

“Not really. I just don’t think like most.” Of that he was certain.

“I need to get home soon.” He knew he needed to but he also wanted to spend more time with her. He needed to learn more about the woman behind the green eyes.

“Well, where do you live? I can try and get you back but we have to be careful not to jar your shoulder too much. It may be healing but you really need to take it easy for a few more days. I have more than enough food for us.” Okay, she had a point, which was fine with him. It

gave him a few more days to win her over.

“So what were you dreaming about lass and who is Ted?” He watched as she stopped dead in her tracks. He’d hit a cord and he only prayed it wasn’t a bad one.

“Like I said, nothing really. As for Ted I don’t know.” He was watching her, she could feel it. She had to censor her dreams somehow. She didn’t want to discuss her past with someone she hardly knew and she didn’t know him. God, how she ached. She’d been taking care of him for awhile now and had not slept well since. Not to mention how her dreams kept her busy as well. Her muscles protested when she stood, a knot forming in the back of her thigh. He had continually dropped questions out of no where. Asking her things about her past that she was afraid to answer.

“Jena, why are you avoiding me?” His voice rippled across her skin like a warm summer breeze. The man had an air about him that made her knees weak and her mind go numb.

“Erick, when I found you, you had started to tell me something.” Good, changing subjects was always a fast out. She could hear him behind her shift around and she wondered if he too had something to hide. Looking out at the sea she watched as the sun began to set further across the horizon, the red hues cascading down across the crystal water. It was so beautiful here she almost hated to ever leave.

“I don’t recall, to be honest. It had to be the fever and nightmares I was stuck in.” He was definitely holding back something. She couldn’t blame him though. She was just as bad.

“So you’ve no idea why someone would shoot you?” She still couldn’t get the image of his pale skin as she’d nursed him back from death. Never in her wildest dreams could she consider hurting someone no matter how much she disliked them.

“I have some ideas but it’s business left for later.” So be it. She didn’t care if she knew or not, though the heaviness in her heart made her wonder.

“Lass, you’ve picked one of the more secluded caves in the area. How did you come upon such a thing?” She could feel his breath on the nape of her neck. The warmth

of it lightly caressed her skin and sent goose bumps across her body.

Suddenly, the temperature in the cave increased as well as her body's internal warning system. He was so close and it was causing havoc inside her. Hell, she could even smell him he was so near. What had he asked again? Her senses were in overload. Never had a man done this to her before and that terrified her more than the creatures that haunted her nights.

"Huh? Oh...just happened upon it when I was walking. A storm was brewing and I didn't feel like getting wet at the time." The moment the words left her lips she instantly regretted them. She could feel him behind her, his body tensed at her omission. He moved closer. She could feel the heat seep into hers. God, how her body felt sluggish in that single moment. It was as if it wanted to lean back into his and vanish.

"You look beautiful lass. The hues of the setting sun set your skin of fire." His words moved across her like wings of a butterfly. Oh God, the man was lethal no matter what condition he was in. She could feel his arms wrap around her waist, pulling her into his embrace. She should move she knew she should, but her body had a mind of its own. He felt so good, his arms strong and sure. She knew she could lose herself to him and that scared her.

"Jena..." Crackling from outside the cave caught her attention.

"Oh God...not again." They were back. Why couldn't they leave her be for one single night?

"What is it? What did you hear?" Uncertainty crossed her mind. Did he not hear them as well?

"No...nothing." She hated to lie, but she didn't want to have him think ill of her either.

"Jena don't. Remember I grew up on these lands. It's them again isn't it?" He'd not forgotten their conversation. Her gaze moved up to his and in that instant she was lost.

"Yes." A sigh of defeat escaped her lips.

Jena drew in a calming breath praying to relax her nerves. At this point she wasn't sure if she was more on edge from her night visitors or Erick being so close.

"Jena..." She could feel his need to calm her fears.

She hated to feel this way, not sure if she was losing her mind or not. True she knew they were real, but still.

“Don’t worry about them. Give me a moment.” Jena watched Erick wander toward the entrance of the cave her hand desperate to grab hold and keep him close.

“Don’t go out there. Stay close to the fire...please.” Fear rushed through her like the waves crashing outside.

“Ah lass...ne’er you worry about me. I can handle these pesky intruders. Rest easy and I’ll be right back.”

“But...” His hand touched her lips, his fingers a light caress on her cheek. At that moment she didn’t know if she was lost in her dream once more or not. His steel blue eyes held such emotions, she wanted to stare at them for all eternity.

“Stay here lass, and donna you worry about them no more.”

Erick’s body moved with a fluid motion she’d seen before, his every reaction at one with all around him. Something nagged at her about him, but for the life of her she couldn’t place it. He continued toward the entrance to the cave his right hand outstretched toward the darkened sky.

“What are you up to Erick?” She didn’t like secrets even though they both had enough to fill a book. She was sure of it.

His head turned in her direction his black hair wild in the ferocity of the wind. “Nay, Jena. I said I would take care of these bothersome creatures. Tonight, I donna want you to worry your pretty little head about them.” The way his eyes moved across her skin, Jena swore he was undressing her with his gaze.

“I just don’t want you to do anything dangerous.” She didn’t trust the demons and they could be tricky if given the chance.

“I know how they can be lass. I’ve dealt with them before. Just rest and I’ll be back in a moment’s time.” That’s what she feared. His presence was one thing, having him too close to her was something all together different.

Whispers carried on the storm’s fury, a chanting she couldn’t quite make out. His voice filled the cave, increasing in tempo and time. Try as she might Jena

couldn't understand the language he spoke. Wonder filled her veins as he continued his tirade, each word accented by a strike of thunder.

"Erick?" Her voice cracked from dryness.

"Not yet, lass. I'm almost done." He returned his gaze back to the outside. What was he doing? Her eyes drifted to the campfire and out into the darkened interior of the cave. God she needed to move around, her muscles were tight from sleeping against the wall.

"Erick..." She stopped herself before she continued. He needed to concentrate and she needed to get blood moving through her body. Stretching her legs as far as she could Jena made her way farther in. Her eyes caught sight of something a few feet from her.

"Hello?" Her hand reached out into the darkness to find the side of the wall only to come into contact with a void of cold air. Terror moved through her like lightning. Pulling her hand back she found resistance in her efforts.

"Let go of me." Her throat tightened before her words could come out. Her gaze took in a long blackish finger slink across her skin like a snake wrapping around her wrist.

"We've got you now Jena. Time to pay the toll." Their idea of payment scared the hell out of her. Reddish eyes void of humanity stared out from the darkness at her. Had they diverted Erick's attention intentionally? God, she knew so little about what she now faced.

"Leave me alone." Visions of death passed through her. These things were not human and they had every intention of causing her pain. she could read it on the demon's expression.

"We can't Jena. Ted sent us here to collect you. You owe him you know." Their words whipped across her soul re-opening her wounds once more.

"No. I don't believe you. He wouldn't be with you. Not Ted." Tears pooled in her eyes but she refused to let them fall down her cheek. She breathed in a tightening of her chest at the thought of Ted pulled in with the beasts in front of her.

"You owe him your life Jena and we've come to collect. You belong to us now." The finger tightened around her wrist the pain like hundreds of needles

puncturing her skin. A stifled scream caught in her throat.

“You don’t belong here demons. Leave now before you force my will.” Erick’s voice came from behind a fury of anger laced in his words. She watched as the thing that held tight to her suddenly loosened its grip.

“You have no say in this Erick. Leave us be to take what we want. This isn’t the sacred ground.” Sacred ground? What did they mean? Her mind fished for possible answers with none to be found.

“That is of little consequence. She is under my protection and unless you be wishin’ to see me thoroughly pissed off ye best be going...now.” His words had an edge to them she couldn’t fathom.

“Heed our warning we will be back to reclaim what we wish.” Their voices moved in unison. It was an eerie mixture of hiss and moan that sent her skin crawling.

“I doona be thinking you will. That is, less you wish to have a nice war on your hands. Already you’ve been breaking the pact which will be investigated. Donna be thinking it will be overlooked.” Jena could sense their defeat. As strong as they were, they were scared of Erick. But why? At this point she didn’t care. As long as the things that held tight to her left. Seconds ticked by and slowly the tendrils that held her wrist loosened and faded into smoke.

“Are they gone?” She could barely breathe and her words proved it. An echoing laughter from the darkness answered her question.

“Aye lass, for now they are gone. Until you leave this land ‘tis best if you keep close to me and the fire. I donna trust them.” He didn’t trust them? Bewilderment replaced fear, her gaze moving up his chest to his deep blue eyes.

“You don’t trust them? They’re demons for God’s sake. What would there ever be to trust about them? I mean come on it’s not like you would sit down and have tea with them would you?” Her nerves shot, she didn’t care what she sounded like. She’d had enough. Between his overbearing attitude and having to keep him alive and dealing with demons, Jena was at her wit’s end.

“Jena, ‘tis ok. Let your frustrations out. All will be fine. They know not to mess with me and I’ve given you

my protection.” Her heart stuttered at his words.

“You’ve given me your protection? Who the hell will protect you? Look at yourself. You were shot Erick. Not to mention you could have died and we still don’t know who did it. How the hell do you plan to protect us both?”

“No worries love, all will be fine. There are things you donna know about me. Trust me in my judgment of the situation.” How could she? She didn’t even know who he really was. Before she could think, his arms snaked around her waist pulling her into the warmth of his body.

“Let go of me please.” Even her voice sounded foreign, huskiness and confusion laced each syllable. Her breath was coming in gasps, her heart beating wildly. Never had a man affected her like this, not in all her life, so why now?

“Ah lass, you words say to leave you be but your body wants me. I can feel it reach for mine. Can’t you?” She could and that was even worse. She moved away, as far back into the cavern as she could. Even the darkness didn’t frighten her at this point. She needed distance and suddenly in saving him she felt may have cost something, her soul.

“I need time Erick. I need to think things through.”

She continued to move into the darkness of the cave, her eyes slowly adjusting to the interior. She tried to distance herself and fast. Yet, he was stalking her. She could feel him getting closer. The man was persistent there was no doubt in her mind about that. But how many women had he seduced before? She had no desire to be a notch on his belt of conquests. No way, she would not give in to his affections, though he was temptation itself.

“Lass, I can see you and you cannot get away. Why run from what is brewing between us?” Why? Because you are a womanizer you jerk and demons are after us! She wanted to say the words but they wouldn’t form in her mouth. Every part of her body was fighting against her, wanting to go back to him and the promise of passion she knew he could deliver.

“Leave me be Erick. I am not someone you can take what you want from. I’m not going to end up like the scores of women I’m sure you’ve had.” There she’d said it and for some reason from the look on his face she’d hit a

cord. His progression toward her stopped his eyes closed as if in mediation. As much as she hated what she'd said she needed to keep her priorities straight. She didn't need a man and he didn't want her.

Ouch. Her words penetrated deep into his soul. Was he that transparent? Any woman wanted to be with him, why didn't she? He'd never met a woman that didn't enjoy herself in his company or one that regretted the time spent in his care. He watched Jena's face and found he didn't like what she thought of him. She ignited something in his body, something more than just desire. Damn it, he would win her over and make sure she never wanted anyone else ever again. Damn propriety and the demons that hounded her.

"Ah lass, that may have been true in the past, but I fear you've soiled any chance of that in the future." He meant the words and gods help him he wanted her to believe in them. His heart began to beat out wildly the closer he got to her, his body on fire, full of need. God he had to have her, needed to taste her sweetness.

"Please..." Even her voice held the promise of passion kept at bay, begging to be released. She diverted her eyes for a moment, one he took clear advantage of. He put on a burst of speed and gained on her, her surprise a choked cry caught in her throat. He didn't want to scare her but he needed to feel her body close, to know she was still with him, even though he knew he'd almost lost her to the Falin. A compulsion he couldn't understand drove the need to touch her long flowing hair with his fingers, the silkiness of each strand like spun gold. Seconds later he was there, holding her, breathing in her scent. It was an intoxicating mixture that reminded him of nature at its finest. His blood became an inferno that rushed through his veins setting his body on fire.

"Och lass, you are a ray of light and you donna even realize it. I promise not to hurt you, just give me a chance to prove it." He meant it as nothing he had ever promised in his life. She'd saved him from death and in doing so gave him a reason to live. He'd searched for so long for someone who wouldn't be afraid of who and what he was. Could he finally be blessed?

“I...” He brushed his finger tip across her lips, his need for her growing with each passing second. If she only knew how close to losing his soul he’d come, she’d understand. He wanted to return the favor. Her eyes had a haunted shine to them, like a ghost from her past continued to hound her. He wanted to chase that demon away as he’d done the others. She deserved so much more than she could ever imagine.

“Jena you look so sad sometimes. What haunts you so?” His heart broke each time he looked into her eyes. He could drown in the murky green depths. “I want to show you the wonders of this land; to see your eyes sparkle with happiness. You are such a miracle to me.” Erick watched as a shy smile crept across her face her hand pushing his away.

“Miracle? I don’t think so. But thank you.” Her voice was a mere sliver and it broke his heart. Nothing should have hurt this woman, no one should break her heart. He swore on his druid lineage he would make sure she never allowed another tear to be shed other than in happiness. He moved closer, pulling her into his arms. With his thumb he lifted her chin to gaze down into her deep emerald eyes. Tears shimmered in their depths and his heart broke even further. Never would he let her go. Not in a million years. He’d found his life and it was with her. Never had he been more sure of anything in all his years.

“Jena, donna cry. You are breaking my heart with each tear that drops. You are so much more than you give yourself credit for. Let me show you what life is to be like.” His lips descended to hers, anticipation a real entity that begged to be sated.

The moment his lips touched hers he could feel her knees buckle. His good arm snaked around her waist, pulling her into his embrace. Her body, so supple and pliant, fit into the frame of his like a glove. He drank in her sweetness as his tongue darted into her mouth. A soft moan escaped her lips. That simple release increased his need for her. He had to have her, to brand her as his for all time.

“Oh god...” A whimper escaped her parted lips.

“Ugh, Jena you humble me so.” His voice broke off as his need for her increased with each heart beat.

He continued to hold her close, his kisses making a slow descent from her lips to her ear lobe and then to the softness of her neck. God, she tasted like honey, a sweetness that was addicting. He pulled her closer, if that was possible; her body a perfect match to his. She must have felt the same need as her arms moved up and wrapped around his neck, a small groan escaping from his lips.

“Erick...” he silenced her cries with more kisses, her need so real that it mimicked his. Och yes, he was right. The woman had passion locked up deep inside. Reaching down Erick scooped Jena up into his arms the pinch of pain worth it to hold her close. He moved back over to the sleeping bag, his mouth assaulting hers with deep kisses. Each step he took increased his need ‘til he swore under his breath at the sheer torture her body was creating on his.

“Och lass, you are driving me insane with your sweetness. I’m going to show you why you will never have another. I know you feel it as much as I do. I donna want you to ever be without me.” There he’d said the words his heart had been hammering out the last few days. He placed her body on the sleeping bag, careful not to let the hard ground harm her.

“I...can’t...it’s been too long.” So she had been with someone before. That notion bothered him. But he couldn’t fault her. Look at how many women he had lain with before. But still...the idea of her with anyone else annoyed him.

“Aye lass...you can. I’ll make sure you are ne’er harmed again.” Why he promised such a thing eluded him. But the fear he had seen in her eyes reminded him of someone who had been hurt before. Not just on the surface but deep down inside, someone still reeling from emotional trauma. He swore to himself he would find out the answer to that someday.

“It’s just that. There are things about me Erick. My past.” A sob escaped her lips. How he reeled at the sadness in her eyes. His lips gently kissed her eyelids moving down to her lips. He needed to take her mind off the past. “I need to explain.” Tears cascaded down her cheek and onto his chest.

“Donna do that Jena, you’ll break my heart. We will figure out the past later. We all have things that have happened to us that form us into who we become.” He couldn’t handle the thought of Jena blaming herself for anything that might have happened to herself in the past. It tore at him like nothing had before.

“It’s just...” He hushed her before she could begin his lips assaulting her with kisses. Pulling her further into his embrace he wanted nothing more than to have their clothes gone and their flesh side by side.

“Och Jena, you are so warm. Can’t you feel the heat between us? It grows with each moment we are close.” Erick could sense her hesitation but he refused to allow her brain to talk her out of the moment. It was too right. He placed his body next to hers, his mouth a lethal weapon of desire as he continued to trail light kisses down her neck. She tasted so sweet he knew he would never get enough.

His fingers began to unbutton her shirt; a slow progression he swore would be his undoing. As much as he wanted to rip off her clothes, he didn’t want to frighten her; he needed her trust as much as he needed the air he breathed. One by one they came undone, her creamy skin exposed to his heated gaze. Erick moved his hand to cup one of her supple breasts, the rosy bud taut and hard. The moment the pad of his thumb caressed the sensitized tip he heard another moan escape her lips.

With that small sound he completely lost his self control. He never thought clothes could feel so offensive but at that moment he hated any kind of fabric that put distance between his body and hers. Where his finger had been his mouth took over. He could feel her arch to get closer, passion building up inside them both. While he assaulted her with suckling, his hand moved down to the shorts she wore. Unbuckling and pushing down, his hand made its way to the most sacred part of a woman’s body.

“I’m going to make love to you lass and you’ll ne’er forget it.” Another stifled cry of pleasure broke from her throat and he knew she couldn’t stop.

“You can’t Erick. Your shoulder is still healing.” They were both gasping for breath yet she was worried about his injury. He almost couldn’t hold back a smile

from crossing his face. If he hadn't wanted her so bad he would have thought it comical.

"Ah lass, if there is anything you donna need to worry about 'tis my shoulder. I will be right fine as long as I can feel you close." His lips moved back to hers. Gods she tasted so good he knew he would never want anyone else.

Erick slowly kneaded the junction between Jena's legs, the heat from her entrance igniting his blood further. She was so hot, so ready to have her passion released. Had any man touched her this way and gotten the same reaction? God he hoped not. Slowly he inserted a finger into her entrance, a soft cry escaping her lips. Yes. She was more than ready for him. He replaced the first one with another one, to help stretch her, to make her ready for him.

"I...can't..." Her desire flared hotter than the flames of the campfire.

"Yes, you can love." He was giving her no chance to stop and think. He knew if given the chance she would try and rationalize and that would be a bad thing.

He continued to suckle on her breast, the taste pure ecstasy. He couldn't wait any longer. He ripped the rest of his clothes from his body, the cool air from the sea only heightening the moment. A soft cry of denial broke from her lips, her eyes were a deep green and full of desire. Instead of allowing her to dwell on her concerns, Erick began to kiss away her fears, his tongue darting in and out of her mouth in an erotic dance. He could feel her finally give in, her defenses against their growing passion impossible to deny.

"Erick..." That single word was his undoing. He removed the remainder of his clothes, the offending fabric coarse against his skin. His erection so hard it was painful. He deepened his kiss as he positioned himself over her. With one sure stroke in he deepened his kiss to catch her cries. He found himself surrounded by her warm sheath, a firestorm of desire coursing through his veins.

"You are so hot my love. Can't you see how perfect we fit together? You were made for me." He found he meant every word. Her feminine sheath surrounded him in her firm grip. He continued to kiss her, his movements slow

and sure, to give her body time to accommodate the intrusion of his. He could feel her muscles tighten around him, embracing him in their warmth. When he felt her body relax he began to move, a slow rhythm that brought with it even more passion.

“Oh god.” Her cries were laced with desire, he couldn’t help but increase his movements.

So deep in the storm of their lovemaking, Jena arched her back, giving him full access to her breasts, one he took full advantage of. His teeth nipped at the taut nipple, sending a soft whimper to escape her lips. God, he swore he couldn’t get any harder, but that small innocent cry sent him over the edge. He began to push faster and harder, her body meeting up with his. The lass was a dam of passion that had been waiting for the right person to unleash her most hidden desires. He vowed she would never be with another. Never.

“Erick...I can’t handle anymore. Really I can’t” He knew she could. He planned to show her just how much she could take. He pulled her forward, bringing her up to sit on his lap.

“Put your arms around my neck and legs around my waist lass. I want to show you what it means to make love.” His breath was ragged with the heat of their lovemaking. He also wanted to get so far into her that she would never be able to get him out. Somehow, she’d wrapped herself around his heart, forged her soul into his. He knew she would be there forever and he needed her to feel the same. Thankfully she listened, her arms and legs wrapping around him in a tight embrace. Slowly he eased upright and moved to the wall of the cave, the sweat from their bodies mingling together as one.

The moment he got to the wall he leaned her back into it. The cool contact made Jena arch into him. He pulled her close and pushed his body upward; impaling her further till he felt her womb. He watched as her eyes grew wide with confusion and then change to a deep jade green as he began his slow sensual movement in and out. The friction of their bodies and the beat they moved to increased the passion that was building up inside. Erick’s erection increased, his need to fill her completely with the essence of him, into a blinding compulsion.

“Please...” Her whispered words caught his attention and he could see that she too was on the verge of a climax. That small word shattered his resolve to take it slow. His mouth descended on hers, his tongue swept inside her mouth in a kiss that could have rocked the walls. Their movements became a wild storm, one that took them to the stars.

Erick felt Jena’s body rock with shockwaves, her release so strong it shook him to his core and sent him over the edge. He saw the stars explode behind his eyes; colors so bright and vibrant he swore he would go blind by the kaleidoscope that rained in his mind. And then he was floating slowly back to earth, his body full of aftershocks that coursed through his veins. Before he knew it he was placing Jena’s soft body back onto the sleeping bag, her body flushed from their love making.

“Jena?” He watched to see if she held any contempt in her eyes. He wanted more than anything her affection, needed her to feel the same.

“I’m fine Erick, just a bit...sore.” He couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Tis fine my love. You will be fine. I’m sorry I wasn’t more...um...careful. But I fear ye took all sane thoughts from my mind with your beauty.” He found he wanted her again, that he would never get enough of her. His finger lightly traced a path from her swollen lips down to her still taut nipple. He watched as her body shuddered from his touch, her skin still sensitive from their love making.

“I need to...do something. Why don’t you start dinner while I get freshened up?” Ok, she was modest afterwards. He could deal with that. Soon, he would need to tell her who and what he was though. He owed her that. It dawned on him that she cared for him even without knowing about his heritage. Could he be so lucky? Erick watched while Jena moved to the back of the cave. She began to wash herself in the fresh spring, the water cascading down her heated flesh like droplets of crystal gems. His body tensed again just by her innocent movements. Oh, he definitely would never get enough of her.

Erick returned his attention back to her request. Start dinner. His appetite for food was non-existent, but

he owed her this much. He quickly pulled out what food she had left and began a fire. Soon he had a makeshift meal ready; when Jena came back, her face was still flushed but her eyes sparkled with a renewed freshness.

“Supper is all prepared lass. I hope you enjoy it.” And there it was. She smiled—one so pure it went straight to his heart. Aye, she was his perfect match.

“Thank you, Erick.” He watched as she sat, her legs crossed and hair pulled back. He turned his attention to his own plate, a desperate attempt to divert his attention from her supple breasts that filled out her shirt so well.

“How much time do you have left in the country lass?” He didn’t want to think of her leaving but he needed to know so he could make sure she stayed.

“Not much I’m afraid. I need to get back to the States soon.” She’d not said home. That thought lightened his mood.

After a half hour of sporadic conversation, Erick could tell Jena was getting tired. Her eyes had begun to droop and she had a tough time holding a coherent thought.

“Och lass, ‘tis time to turn in. If ye like, we can share the sleeping bag. I know that wall can’t be comfortable and I donna want you to get even more sore.” Besides, he found he needed to feel her close.

“Not tonight Erick. Your shoulder is still sore and I want you to keep it still for another night or two. Here, take this. It should be the last one you will need and will assure that you will avoid any infection.” Bloody hell, he didn’t want another pill. He felt fine. But the look in her eyes convinced him to do otherwise. He would give her the moon if she asked. He reached out and took the medicine, downing it with a swig of water from his glass.

“Happy lass?” Of course she was. Her smile couldn’t get bigger even if she tried, though he sensed a hint of regret in her actions. Soon though, she began to lean back, her eyes drifting down till he watched as she finally succumbed to sleep. Erick moved over to her side and pulled up the cover. She looked so peaceful when she slept, like angel sent to redeem his soul. A smile crossed his face when he thought back to the night he first bumped into her, her fiery temper equal to her passion.

“G’night my love. Sleep tight and let the angels guide your dreams.” He placed a tender kiss on Jena’s forehead and moved back to his sleeping bag, his shoulder a sharp ache from all the activities from the day. As he lay down and stretched his legs, he began to thank the gods for the idiots that had shot him. Had that not happened he would never have found the other half of his soul. Slowly his eyes drifted shut, the last vision he took with him before sleep overcame was Jena’s passion filled eyes.

Darkness swept across her soul, the cries of anguish filling her ears. Cold and despair crept into her veins ‘til she swore she would scream from the screams of the dead.

“Leave me in peace.” Jena knew she was caught in a nightmare again. Why couldn’t she get one night of peaceful sleep.

“You still belong to us Jena. You owe us.” Their voices crawled across her skin like millions of ants. God she wanted to just disappear forever.

“Can’t you leave me alone? I don’t belong to you. I don’t belong to anyone!” Anger rushed through her blood to replace the fear she’d felt earlier. She was sick of being pushed around by her past, not to mention the demon’s who continued to annoy her.

“We can’t leave you be...we won’t.” Their voices surrounded her in different octaves. She shifted her body to get a better view of her enemy. Nothing but an empty void of darkness stared back.

“You are afraid of me, demons. You must fear me if you refuse to show yourself.” Screw her fears and to hell with the fact they weren’t of this world. She was tired of running. If they wanted to scare her then she might as well face them.

From within the darkness a mist began to appear, the shadows taking form. Red eyes peered from within, their gaze boring into her soul. “You challenge us mortal?”

“I never said that. But if you wish to scare me at least show yourself. I’m tired of games.” Jena continued to watch, her senses on full alert as her hand grasped the talisman she held close. Seconds ticked by as the creature in front of her continued to take form. A head twice the size of its body took shape its teeth sharp and lethal.

“Have you finally decided to give in to us mortal?” Their words collided, each one separate but the same.

“Never. I just wanted to finally see the monster that bugged the living hell out of me. Now leave me alone.” Not knowing what gave her the knowledge to do so, Jena reached out and displayed the symbol she’d been holding onto so tightly. “Now go back to hell and leave me alone.”

“Where did you get that? No!” Jena watched as a bright light bounced off the metal of the charm shining directly into the middle of the demon’s chest. A burst of flames followed by a slow hiss reverberated through Jena’s mind. She’d won that round, she was sure of it, but they weren’t gone for good. Perhaps she’d gotten a reprieve for a short bit.

“Good, now I need to wake up. I’m tired of dreaming.” Never in her life had she wanted to wake up as she did now.

How many minutes had passed while Jena had slept didn’t know. She found herself groggy as she slowly woke, her body sluggish from the day’s events.

Her mind drifted back to what had happened during the day. God how she hated to deceive him like this but after what had happened earlier she knew she had to leave. He brought things out in her she never knew existed and that terrified her. True she’d had sex with Ted, but it had never felt the way it did with Erick. In all her years she had never experienced such a purity and passion as she had with him. She needed to get away.

At first she opened one eye, to give her vision time to adjust to the darkness. Her gaze moved to Erick’s sleeping form. A few minutes passed. Good, the medicine had worked. She hadn’t planned to drug him but she knew if she didn’t he would wake up too soon and come after her. She couldn’t chance that. Guilt swept through her at what she’d done, but it was for the best. Wasn’t it? Looking around, she picked up only what she absolutely needed to get back to the inn and on her way. Everything else she left for him, including her heart.

Pulling on her jacket she moved over to the fire and threw some more wood on it. Leaning down she placed a kiss on his forehead as he had done to her.

“I’m so sorry, but I am not what you are looking for.

You deserve more than I can give. Please know there will never be any other in my life. You've shown me what it is to be loved, but I don't deserve your love." Her heart broke as she walked out of the cave and out of the life of the only man who had ever made her feel alive. Yes, she lost her heart that day, but it was not hers to begin with. She owed it to the man who had saved her life when she was a child, the one man she'd failed to protect.

Her eyes drifted back across the incoming tide, the sun starting to rise across the horizon. "Please keep him safe from harm." Her voice drifted on the crash of the tides her tears mixing with the sea. Her song of prayer to a goddess she hoped was listening.

Chapter Thirteen

Jena made her way up out of the cliffs and back to the village she had seen while hiking earlier. She reached the edge of town by early morning. It only took her a few minutes to find someone willing to drive her back to Stromness. After a few hours and many conversations later she was back at the inn. She knew Tessa sensed a change in her, but she was polite enough not to ask.

"Welcome back Jena. I see the air of the land has done you well." Jena felt numb just standing there.

"Thank you for everything. You've been wonderful." She would never forget the old woman and found she didn't want to leave. Looking around she made sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

"Child, you look like you are missing something and I donna mean personal belongings." Was she that transparent? God she hoped not.

"I'm fine Tessa. It's just..." How could she answer when even she didn't know what was on her mind?

"Jena, listen. I am not going to pry. But let me give ye one bit of advice. One woman to another." Jena was afraid to listen, her heart was already half gone and she didn't want to have the rest of it break. "Don't close your ears to what your heart wants. Listen to it and it will naught fail you." Okay, how she knew eluded her. Though she would love to listen, she knew she couldn't.

A sigh escaped her lips, her heart breaking with each beat. "Sometimes things are just not meant to be. I've found that out enough times. I really need to go home now." Home. Never had the thought of going back to States seemed so foreign and wrong. But she didn't belong here. Did she? Her expression must have been full of confusion because the moment she looked up, Tessa was next to her and giving her a strong hug.

"Ah child, listen to me and listen carefully." Jena looked up and into Tessa's mocha eyes knowledge shining

in their depths. “Even when life seems at its most dark and despairing...there is within, the power to make change. Remember these words child, take them to heart. They will guide you on the right path, even if you falter for a wee bit.” She heard the words and took them with her as she grabbed her bag and headed out. The pull to stay was great, but she had to go. She had no choice.

As Jena headed out the door she turned to pay a final farewell to the woman who’d done more for her in the short time she’d known her than anyone had in her life. “Thank you Tessa. I will never forget you.” She wouldn’t. Not in all her life could she ever imagine not remembering her.

“Come back to us soon child. You have a home here.” Her words drifted on the wind, an open invitation she took to heart as she ducked into the cab and closed her eyes to the most she’d felt alive in her entire life. God how she hated to go back, but she had no choice. A sigh escaped her lips as she allowed the darkness of sleep to overcome her on the trip to the airport.

Two hours and hundreds of miles later, Jena was on the airplane and headed back to the States. Thankful it was a small flight and she ended up having the area all to herself. At one point, the flight attendant asked her if she was okay and it was then that she realized tears were falling down her cheeks. Damn, damn, damn. Why now? She swore the gods hated her.

She had assured the lady she was fine. That she had just attended a funeral for an old family friend. God how she hated to lie, but it was better than the truth. A voice inside her asked. What truth is that?

What? Admit that I'm too much a wimp to stay and face him? To try and figure out what had begun. Okay, so her conscious had a voice and it was yelling at her. It was too late now. Besides, she didn't even know who he was. More than that, he didn't know who she was. Fate...god how it sucked sometimes.

Jena leaned her head back and closed her eyes; Erick's face a permanent picture in her mind. She could still feel his touch, not to mention the scent he carried around. How much she wanted to cry, to scream out her

anger for even meeting him. She swore she would never regret it, not once. Fatigue finally overtook her, her muscles sore from the distance she'd traveled. Fitful from her long journey she fell into a deep sleep, her dreams full of Erick and the unbridled passion they'd shared. Toward the end of the dream she lost him his face replaced by the man who'd haunted her dreams since she'd arrived in Scotland. She could see his eyes and they reminded her of someone. Where had she seen them before?

"Miss? Miss?" The shrill voice of the flight attendant jarred Jena from her nap. Well damn. She had been so close to Erick in her dream, so close to figuring out where she'd seen the stranger's eyes before. "We are landing now Miss. You need to have your chair in its upright position."

"Huh? Ok, sorry about that." Still groggy from her nap, Jena smiled at the lady as a thousand jack hammers pounded through her brain. Landings always did give her a headache. She pulled her seat back into its correct position and waited.

The roar of the engine as the plane landed increased her headache, not to mention the damn popping her ears got at the altitude change. Now why hadn't they figured out a way to correct that? Oh, never mind Jena thought, they had. Gum, something she had none of. *Bloody hell.* Jena watched as the plane pulled off the runway and into the terminal. She was home. Great.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for flying with British Airways. We hope you enjoyed your flight. Have a pleasant day." Ya, right. How could she when she hated being back? Jena reached over and grabbed her bag; each step toward the entrance increased her anxiety to be home. What was Erick doing now? If she timed it right he would be waking up about the time she got home. Would he be mad? Would he miss her? Of course he wouldn't. He had throngs of women who wanted him. Damn them.

"Excuse me Miss, but could you move please?" Damn, her thoughts were getting her in trouble again. Not looking back Jena moved through the aisle and out the plane's door. The moment her feet hit the walk ramp that lead up into the terminal, she swore she could hear Erick's voice pleading for her to come back to him. Okay, now she would be haunted by two men. Lovely.

“Jena!” Katie’s voice broke through her fogginess of remembrance. She flashed her friend a makeshift smile and continued on up the ramp and out into the terminal.

“Hi Katie, thanks for coming to get me. I really didn’t want to take another cab ride.” Though she really couldn’t care less if she had, perhaps some time spent with Katie would cheer her up. Doubtful but it was worth a shot.

“I’m so happy you’re home! I’ve missed you girl.” Katie’s arms wrapped around in a tight hug comforting her though, she knew not why. “So...details. How was it?”

“I love the land there. You would too.” It was true enough.

“Nothing more? You were there for how long and nothing else happened?” What could she say? Tell her everything? No way.

“I’m just really tired right now Katie. That’s all. Jet lag is a pain.”

“Ok, I’ll give you that.”

They moved through the terminal and down into the baggage claim area. Fifteen minutes later Jena had her suitcase and they were on their way to Katie’s mustang. Silence grew between them and she feared Katie could read her face. That she would know she’d been crying. Damn, she should have freshened up on the plane before leaving. Through the double doors and Jena was home. The Kansas night breeze a welcome release from the stuffiness of the plane.

“Jena?” Concern laced Katie’s voice. Crap, she’d done it again. Lost in thoughts of what might have been.

“I’m fine Katie, let’s go. Where did you park anyway?” Not that she cared; she just needed to divert Katie’s attention from her for a few.

“It’s this way. Let’s get you home.” Jena was thankful her friend didn’t push the issue as they walked side by side to Katie’s car. A soft click of the door lock transported Jena back to the night they’d gone out, their carefree laughter silenced by the foreboding of the blood red moon. Had so much time passed? So many things had happened since that night, so much she still felt guilty for.

“Get in Jena. I don’t want to stand here all night.” At Katie’s prompting, Jena slipped down into the car seat her head coming into contact with the roof once more.

“Ouch, damn it. I swear this car hates me.” Sitting down she buckled up, her mind a jumbled mess of chaos, thoughts of everything she’d gone through the last few years. It was times like these she wondered if maybe she was cursed, or worse, had a debt to pay from a former life. Could it be possible? Under the hum of the mustang’s rough engine her mind turned to Erick and the time they’d spent together.

“Katie this may sound dumb but do you believe in past lives or in Karma in general?” The moment she’d asked, she regretted it. The look on Katie’s face was enough to make her feel like a child who’d asked the most insane question in the world. That was, until she got her response.

“I’m not going to ask, yet, what prompted this question but I will. Soon. But to answer you, yes...I do. Karma and past lives are an intricate part of our souls. It’s also why I believe that there is someone out there for everyone. Whether you find them this time around or not is another story though.” She was being honest and that shocked Jena. She had always known Katie was a die-hard romantic, but she never thought it was that extreme. Could there be something to it?

“How would you know...if you’ve found the right person that is?” Okay, now she felt really dumb. Katie would know something happened.

“Hmm, well that is a bit more difficult I would guess. I would think that there would be a familiar feeling between the two. There would be something that you recognized about that person, but you might not be able to put your fingers on why it was so familiar to you.” Fear ran through Jena’s veins, turning them to ice. Those eyes! She’d felt them before, had the sensation she’d seen them but couldn’t recall where. Could it have been? She needed to think of something, anything, else.

“What about Karma? Could it be my fault from something I did in my past, which caused Ted to be killed?” There, she’d finally said what had been on her mind for years now. Pride be damned, she needed to ask.

“I was wondering when you would finally ask me this. No Jena, there is nothing you could have done to mark Ted for what happened. Life has a reason for

everything. It was his time, no right or wrong to it. You have to get past the regret and learn to live with what you have." What she had? She didn't have anything and the one person she wanted, she didn't have a clue how to find. Fresh tears began to fall down her cheeks, her mind drawn back in time to the weeks spent with Erick.

"Katie, do you think Ted went to heaven or hell?"

"Whoa, where did that come from?"

"I'm serious."

"Jena, there is nothing that Ted could have ever done in his life that would get him anywhere but heaven, if you believe in that sort of thing."

"Thanks Katie. I needed to hear that." She never realized how much she worried about Ted's soul 'til then.

"Jena, I was going to wait but I have to know. What happened on your trip? Something seems...different about you." If she wasn't so tired she would have laughed at the question, but she also knew Katie wouldn't let up.

Her mind drifted back to the cave. "Well, to make a very long story short, I met the most egotistical, arrogant man who also happened to be the sweetest, kindest and most passionate man I've ever known." Uncensored by her morals, Jena retold the last few weeks' events to Katie, leaving no important detail out. By the time she was through she felt like she'd retold her own romance novel, except hers didn't have a happy ending.

A few moments passed as Katie digested what Jena had told her. The silence stretched on for an eternity in Jena's mind. If Katie didn't say something soon she was going to scream. A second before she opened her mouth Katie's head turned toward her, her eyes glittering with her own tears.

"Jena, you found love and let it go? Why? Because of Ted? Don't you know he would have wanted you to find happiness?" Katie looked like she wanted to say more, as if a secret she'd been bound to keep wanted to be released into the open. How right she was.

"Well..."

"Jena you are a total idiot sometimes." Shock rocked through her at Katie's remarks.

"Katie?" Silence. It was one thing she couldn't stand. The stretch between them grew until she swore she would

go insane. What was she hiding? Jena's gaze drifted out into the night, her mind full of all that had transpired over the last few years only to settle back on Erick and his loving embrace.

"Jena, I need to tell you something." Katie's voice wavered from sadness. Jena hated to see her friend like this. She waited and counted the seconds as they ticked by, watching as her friend worked to find the right words to say what she was holding back.

"I know Ted would have wanted more for you. He told me as much. He knew you didn't love him. He knew and understood. You need to move past this and forgive yourself. You gave more to him than you could ever know." Ted knew? Why hadn't he said anything to her? Had she said or done something to make him doubt why she married him? Damn and double damn.

"When did he tell you this?" Pained at the knowledge of so much time wasted, Jena had to know. Nothing could be done for the past but she needed to resolve this in order to ever move on.

"He told me about a year or so before he was killed. Jena, don't berate yourself for any of what happened. You gave him a good life and he loved you even more for that. But he told me if anything ever happened to him to make sure you moved on with your life. That you deserved to find love." They had discussed her and Katie had never told her. Why? Oh she knew why. She was a thick skulled idiot and never listened when she should. She had never wanted to hear it before and Katie knew it.

"I'm sorry for making you hold that secret for so long Katie. You shouldn't have had to. It wasn't fair to you." No wonder Katie had pushed her to go out and see people, to take this trip. She was fulfilling a promise she had made to Ted. God how she hated herself right now.

"Don't worry about it. You would have done the same thing in my position. Now let's get you home and unpacked. I want all the details on your Scottish man." Oh god, of course she did. Well, Jena knew she wouldn't be sleeping for awhile now. Katie would see to that.

Chapter Fourteen

“Erick...wake up man. Are you sure he’s okay? He’s never been this tough to wake up!” Voices pounded through Erick’s brain, too chaotic to separate. Och his head hurt. Hell, it felt like a ton of bricks had been dropped on his skull.

“Aye, he is fine. Whoever stitched him up did a fine job. I believe he is just having a tough time waking up after taking the sleeping pills. Give him a few and he should be fine.” That’s what they thought. What had happened? Erick searched his memory, the fog of sleep still thick as mud. Fleeting memories came back to him of being shot and carried to the shore, left for dead. Deep green eyes intruded into the darkness, warm skin that had rescued him from the black abyss. His body shot upright his head in instant agony from the sudden movement. He turned his glassy gaze to Justin.

“Where is she?” His voice sounded raspy even to his own ears. How long had he been out? Where was Jena? Why had she left?

“What she? You were the only one we found here. Some tourist left a message with Tessa that you were hurt and asleep. She gave Tessa the directions to get here. Tessa got into contact with me and here we are.” Of course. He had known that night that Jena had held back. She didn’t believe she was worthy of love, so she’d left. Damn her and damn himself for not refusing to see it. He would find her and teach her not to ever leave him again.

“Don’t suppose you caught the men who did this to me?” His friend’s eyes answered the question. Aye they had.

“Well, I followed you that night. I know...I know you said to stay put but damn man, it was late.” Justin began to retell how he’d decided to follow his friend down to the stables and watched in horror as they’d shot him.

“I see.” Of course Justin would follow. He wouldn’t

have expected less.

“Well damn it Erick, someone has to look out after you. I saw them walk in their faces covered. I tried to get there in time but all I heard was the echoing of the bullets and more men approach.”

“There were more?” He’d only recalled the two he’d seen before going unconscious.

“Aye, many more. I’d waited ‘til most left and followed the first two. This was before I realized they’d taken your body. Once I found that out...well let’s just say they met up with some nice accommodations in the basement for now.”

“Are they alive?” Rage seethed through him. He wanted to see their faces, to make them feel the pain he’d felt.

“Donna you worry. They’ve had their crimes paid for.” He didn’t ask more. If he knew his friend well enough, which he did, they’d paid with their lives and would ne’er be seen again.

“We have more issues than just those men. They are also working along side the Falin.” Justin’s face went ashen at the admission.

“Are you sure?”

“Aye. They’d admitted as much.” Erick still couldn’t believe it himself.

“Well, blast me.”

“We can figure it out later, though...Now, who’s this lass you are asking about?” Ouch, he’d gone straight to the heart of his concern.

“Jena...I have to find her. I need to find her.” His heart felt half alive, as if a part of him had left with her on the tide. All thoughts turned to her, wanting to know where she was, if she was okay and why she’d left him after all they’d shared.

“Ahh, the wee lil’ lass from the States I presume? So, it would appear that our fearless Erick’s heart can be won by the warmth of a woman. Dun suppose you ever got the lass’s last name?” Bloody hell, he hadn’t.

“Well...”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Justin’s smile couldn’t get any larger and Erick was half tempted to wipe it from his face. He prayed that perhaps Tessa had. He needed to find

Jena, had to find out what in her past had driven her away from him. He loved her. He knew that without a doubt. He was pretty certain she loved him as well; she was just too stubborn to admit to it yet. But she would, even if it took him years to prove it to her.

“Justin, I know I’ve asked much from you over the years but I need to ask your help in this. Help me find her, help me to complete my life.” The look in Justin’s eyes could only be described as pure shock; though a smile did creep across his old friend’s face.

“It’s about bloody damn time.” His hand slapped his bad shoulder sending shockwaves of pain throughout his body. “Let’s go find your woman!”

Erick couldn’t have been happier with his friend’s response. One quick look around the cave and he made a mental note of the area. He swore one day he would bring Jena back to their special place. With his hand outstretched Erick grabbed onto Justin’s hand and moved up and out into the morning light. A new found mission was carefully etched in his mind and no one would deter him from his path.

It had been a month and still no luck. Damn, he hated to wait. Tessa had given as much as she could but apparently Jena had paid in advance with cash. A tapping on the window roused Erick from his thoughts. Great, just his luck, rain. To his surprise, there were bits and pieces they were able to trace down and Justin was at this moment on the hunt for the cab driver who had whisked her back and forth from the airport.

“Please, please, *please* let there be news.” It had become his mantra day in and day out. He prayed something would break soon; otherwise he would go from city to city himself to find her. Christmas was approaching and he wanted to give Jena a present she aught not forget.

“Erick?” Justin’s voice pulled him from his thoughts his heart hammering in his chest. He hoped his friend had some good news.

“Tell me you found her. Something...anything.” He hated to sound desperate but truth be told he was. Never in his life had he wanted—no needed—something so

much. His anxiousness was apparent by the pounding beat he knocked out on the cedar desk with his fingers. Embarrassed by his lack of patience, Erick steadied his hands, grasping a pencil and paper and begun to doodle. "Well?"

"Aye, I believe we have. It appears the lass hails from a small town in Kansas. There is something you need to know though." Oh hell, what could he have found out? Erick paced the room, his nerves shot from the lack of sleep he'd lost over the last month.

"Well donna leave me hanging. What is it? No, let me guess, she's married." The thought of Jena married to anyone else but him fashed him to the core. Never had jealousy been an issue for him...until now.

"Well, depends on how you look at it. She was married, up until a few years back. Nay, she is a widow now. Her husband, Ted, I think they said his name was, was killed...murdered." Ah, so that was the Ted she'd talked about in her sleep. It definitely answered a few questions. Och, how he'd been wrong to be jealous. No wonder she had nightmares. Erick listened while Justin replayed what he'd been told about what had happened to Jena's husband. Sadness crept into his heart and wove around it like a vice.

"I need to go to Kansas. Now." Screw his business and his home. He needed to be with her right now, to make her understand life was worth living.

"Way ahead of you friend. Here are your tickets, your bag and your car is ready. Now let's go. The plane takes off in less than an hour." Damn, Justin knew him too well.

"Hold up, you're coming with?" Of course he would. He enjoyed the thought of Erick finally being taken by a woman. Sweet justice in his mind.

"Fine, but donna you be thinking of telling the lass about any of my past...um...indiscretions." He knew Justin wouldn't, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. Out the door and into the car without a look back, Erick settled into the back seat, his mind already miles away and focused on one thing—Jena.

"Dun worry Erick. All will be made right. Donna you worry about it none." Yes, it would...one way or another he mused.

Okay, he officially hated airplanes, especially around the holidays. Crammed to the hilt he was stuck next to an overzealous woman who sang a few octaves off key. If he'd had ear plugs he would have used them in an instant. Justin just smirked at him from across the aisle before taking up a conversation with a woman who could only be described as a clown in training. Och, why did some women use so much makeup? He swore he would never understand.

Erick closed his eyes and prayed sleep would engulf him for most of the trip. He'd avoided planes for as far back as he could remember. Demons and incantations were one thing, flying in the air totally different. Of course this was mostly due to his father's death, which was from a plane crash. Stupid phobia really, but it was part of him regardless. Whether he fell asleep or not he was unsure, but visions of Jena passed through his mind. He knew her lips would be so luscious that they would be ready for his kisses. Even her body was a haven for his, from the chaos of life. He needed her so much it terrified yet thrilled him. Somehow he had to prove to her they belonged together. How? That was the \$25,000 question.

"Erick, we've arrived." Startled by Justin's voice, Erick was surprised so much time had passed. Of course; when thinking of Jena, time held no value to him.

"Och, I must have fallen asleep." Or, he'd been rendered unconscious by the wailing of the woman next to him as she continued to screech out her rendition of *O' Holy Night*. Oh bloody hell was all he could think of when he heard her hit another wrong note. "Let's, get out of here Justin."

"Aye, I'm in need of some aspirin or something stronger at this rate. I was told there should be a car waiting for us once we get through customs. And doona worry I have a contact that should be meeting us outside." A contact? Who? And where did he find this person from. Did they know Jena? So many questions ran through his mind yet there were no answers to sedate his curiosity.

"Who is your contact?" And why hadn't he told him this before? Damn, he hated being left in the dark.

"You will find out soon enough. Bloody hell. Why do

they make these damn walk planks at such a stupid incline?" Justin sounded annoyed but Erick knew it was more a cover to keep him from asking further questions.

"Damn it man, can't you just tell me, who this contact is? Why the hush hush?" Now he was getting annoyed.

"There is no secret. I'm his contact." A soft feminine voice caught his attention. "Justin?" A tall woman with long auburn hair stood at the exit to the plane. Her big dove eyes questioning.

"I'm Justin...and you are Katie?" Erick watched in delight as Justin introduced himself. Could it be that his friend might have an interest in the States of his own? The idea had its potential and Erick made a mental note to find out more of the young lass.

"I'm Erick." He hated to interrupt them but he wanted to get moving. He had to find Jena. There was so much he had to tell her, to make her understand. Time was not on his side and he didn't want to waste any more of it.

"Relax big fella, all in due time. Now let's go get your bags and get to my car." Big fella? Who was she to call him that? Oh hell, he would never understand an American woman. No matter how hard he tried.

"Miss Katie...you can take us to Jena?" He needed to make sure. He was tired of dead ends and didn't need someone who wanted to run them in loops, only to end up with nothing to show for it.

"Trust me. I can and will. Now relax and let's get you through customs."

Hard to believe, it took them fifteen minutes to get through customs. Completely annoyed, he found his patience about gone when his gaze lifted to the window and the scene outside. Snow. How lovely Jena must look with snowflakes falling across her skin. Another bout of emotions drove through his veins. He needed to get to her soon to tell her all the things he should have that night in the cave.

"Where's your car, lass?" He'd never seen so many vehicles in one place. Ah how he missed his country already. But, truth be told he would stay years if it was what was needed to win over Jena's heart.

"Well, my name isn't lass, it's Katie, remember? And

they say women have a bad memory. Geez.” He could see why Justin liked her. She was a feisty one just like Jena. No woman in their country would treat them like this. Of course, neither knew who they were. Though he had an inkling it wouldn’t matter.

“Fine...Katie...where is your car? And where is Jena at? I really need to find her.” Patience, not one of his virtues, was rearing its ugly head.

“Don’t worry your little head over it. I’ll get you there. But there are some things you need to know before you talk to her.” Katie’s tone had gone mellow, a clear sign that what she had to say was important. What more could there be?

They continued to walk for a few more minutes, the cold winter wind blowing in from the North. Erick watched from behind as Justin and Katie bantered back and forth over silly things, their voices a mere whisper on the wind. Good for him. He needed a woman in his life. Perhaps this trip would be good for them both.

How had his life gotten to this point to where all he wanted was the smile of one woman? Was it because she wasn’t afraid to tell him to go to hell or the fact that she resisted his charms? Or more than that, was it because she gave herself freely to him when she had no knowledge of who he was, even though she was aware of the magick that ran deep in his country and it didn’t scare her? So many thoughts, yet so many unanswered questions racked his brain. So deep in thought he bumped his leg against a car sending its alarm going off in a tizzy.

“Erick, are you ok?” Justin’s voice echoed into the still of the night. Yep, his mind was a jumbled mess of what ifs and emotions.

“Aye, I’m fine. I’m just thinking of all that has happened.” His voice sounded odd even to himself. Aye, he needed to find her soon. He had to feel her touch, to make sure she was real and not a figment of his imagination. Her voice had haunted him every night since she’d left and he needed to make her real once more.

“Okay boys, here we are. Get in so we can get out of here.” A soft double beep and click resounded from the mustang, signifying the alarm had been disabled. Ah, a car alarm. How fun.

Erick maneuvered into the back seat his legs cramped into a position that could only be defined as torture. Why did they even make cars this damn small? Oh well, if it got him to Jena it would be worth the moments of discomfort. Hell he would go through just about anything to get to her, and somehow, he had a feeling he would.

“Ok boys, ready?” Katie slipped into the driver seat and buckled her seat belt. She had prepared herself to meet Erick, had even gotten a mental picture of what he looked like. But Justin, now he was not something she expected. He was everything her most recent romance novel boasted of and so much more. She needed to find out more about him. But for now, she needed to clue Erick in on some of Jena’s past. As much as she hated to talk about it, she knew he had to know. Then he could decide if he wanted to still be with her.

“What do ye mean lass...err I mean Katie.” What was it with Scottish men and lass? She tried to look more annoyed than she felt but it was hard to do. The rough brogue they spoke took her breath away.

“Ok, so you know about the fact that Jena was married to Ted and he was killed. One less thing for me to say. But you need to understand the whole issue behind it.” Katie could see that Erick was deeply interested, his confusion and love for Jena etched on his handsome face. Her heart broke knowing what he must have felt the day he woke to find Jena gone.

“Go on.”

“All three of us grew up together in an orphanage. Ted watched out for us and for the most part we were our own family.” He could sense something more coming and she knew he could. How she didn’t understand.

“I can understand that.” But she knew there was much she hadn’t said. Yet.

“When Jena was thirteen one of the grounds’ keepers threw her into a closet and tried to rape her. If given enough time, he more than likely would have killed her too.” Katie watched as shock and then anger surfaced on Erick’s face. Who could blame him? They’d been just as pissed off at the time.

“What happened?” Justin’s voice, sexy and sweet, broke through her memories.

“Well, Ted heard the commotion and broke down the door. He hit the man in the head and pulled Jena out. For the longest time she wouldn’t speak to anyone...she just withdrew from everyone.” Katie still remembered the day vividly. It was something that would forever be etched in her memory, granted over the years the pain of it had dulled some.

“So why did she marry Ted?” Katie looked through the rearview mirror at Erick, her eyes misted at the confusion he felt. Her own sadness for what had been done over the years came back to haunt her. Why hadn’t she stopped Jena from doing what she knew was wrong? Justin’s hand grasped hers, his eyes warm and comforting.

“That I fear is a bit more complicated. I can only think that she felt she owed Ted her life. She knew he loved her and then, when they were older, he proposed. She felt that by marrying him...it was her way to repay him. He knew she didn’t love him but he didn’t have the strength to let her go either. Unfortunately, a bullet took that choice away from both of them.” There, she’d told Erick the whole story, well the short version of it of course. Any more detail would have to be given by Jena and she really didn’t envy her for that.

“Och, no one should feel obligated to owe anyone their life.” There was pain in Erick’s voice, she could feel it. The man cared for Jena there was no doubt there. “Thank you for telling me. It answers a lot of questions.”

Katie looked over to Justin, his stare one that heated her skin. She could actually feel her heart thunder in her chest. Could this be real? Could Jena finally have found the other half to her soul? The smile on Justin’s face drew the breath from her lips. Perhaps they both would finally find love. It was about damn time.

“Are we almost there?”

“Impatient are we?”

“Hell yes. I’ve waited a long time to find her. I think I’ve shown more than enough to last ages.” Okay, so he had a point. She would concede to it for now. He’d flown a long way to find Jena and she needed to remember that.

“Yes. The cemetery is up ahead. I’ll get as close as I can but you are on your own after that. Jena will be at Ted’s grave, she doesn’t know you are here Erick.” Katie could tell that tidbit stunned him. Didn’t he know? One look at Justin and the sheepish grin on his face was all the answer she needed. What a rascal. At least he was a handsome one.

“So...she donna know I’m here then? That is fine. I’m still unsure as to what I’ll say to her. How far from the entrance is she?”

“Hmm, it’s just over the hill to your right. But Erick, one thing...Be gentle with her, but firm. She doesn’t believe in fate.” But I do, Katie whispered in her mind, her eyes moving back over to Justin. She prayed her heart was not wrong.

“Aye, thank you Katie. I’ll be walking the rest. I need to clear my head of what you’ve told me and figure out what to say. You two be...er...have.” Katie could feel her face warm as a blush stole across her body. Was she that transparent? A slam of the door jarred her from her thoughts.

“Aye lass...ye both are.” Erick’s words drove right to her heart setting it off on a sporadic beat. Okay, that just didn’t happen. She looked up and over at Justin, blue eyes meeting steel grey. Locked in a battle of emotions she couldn’t even begin to understand.

Chapter Fifteen

Jena had gotten to the cemetery a half hour ago, fresh tulips in her grasp. Any other time she'd visited his grave she felt the sorrow for his loss. This time tears ran down her face for a completely different reason. This time her thoughts were no longer of Ted but of Erick and how much she missed him. Oh how she'd made a mess of things. Life truly sucked.

A quick glance at Ted's gravestone and Jena sighed. What do they pay the grounds keepers for? They sure as hell weren't keeping Ted's area clean. Jena moved about pulling off the old weeds and discarding them to the side, laying the fresh flowers she held in her hands on the grave. Sadness overtook her and she fell to her knees her hands covering her face.

"Oh Ted, I'm so sorry. Sorry I wasn't there to stop your death and sorry I never loved you the way you should have been." Her heart felt as if it was full of stones, her mind jumbled from fear and uncertainty.

"I wanted to love you, truly I did. No matter what I did, I couldn't. I swore to myself I would never be with another, but again, another promise broken." She was determined to come clean even if it was only to his grave.

"I met someone Ted, someone I fell in love with. He is so much more than I could have ever imagined. I gave him my heart and soul even though I tried not to. I'm so, so sorry. Sorry I failed you in every way possible." Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks, her heart an open sore that refused to heal. She was only half alive and she knew it. She wasn't stupid enough to not admit that she'd left all that was her back in Scotland. Back with Erick.

"Please forgive me. Forgive me for finding someone and giving him my heart, though he doesn't know. I'll pay for it for the rest of my life, alone and half alive. Be at peace Ted and haunt me no more. I beg of you." Jena could actually feel her heart drum out a beat she swore

would burst through her chest. Why couldn't she just fall asleep and never awaken?

"Forgive yourself, lass. Ted would have wanted you to." If she wasn't so upset she would have sworn she heard Erick's voice close by. No way. Couldn't be possible.

"No...no more ghosts. Please." She couldn't handle anymore hauntings. Every night Erick had laced her dreams, following her with his steel blue eyes.

"Turn and look at me Jena. Look at the man who has given you his heart and soul, just as you've given yours to me. Gaze on the man who would move heaven and earth just to make you smile. To give up all I have to be with you." His voice moved across her soul like a breath of fresh air.

Yep, that was definitely his voice. Fear pooled in her stomach at the idea of facing him and of him seeing who she was and her past. Jena buried her face further in her hands, a cry of anguish stifled from release.

"Don't hide from me my love. Please."

"I can't face you. My past is too horrible."

"There is nothing of your past that hasn't made you the woman I love." His words drifted across her easing the pain that threatened to choke the air from her lungs.

"But?" Erick's finger lightly touched her lips his eyes full of compassion and love.

"You know of the things that surround my life yet you were not frightened by them."

"Of course not. They are part of nature which in turn made you who you are. I see no reason to have that be held against you." True there were things she still didn't understand, but never in her wildest dreams could she think ill of him for them.

"Then you need to understand that your past is what made you into the person that sets my soul on fire. The one woman I want to spend eternity with."

Jena felt Erick's warm hands grasp her arms, pulling her up and into his embrace. He held her so tenderly it shook her to her core. All her emotions, all her fears poured out in her tears, as she held onto him for dear life. She understood at that moment how much she did want to live. She wanted to be loved and love back. Romance was real to her now and God help her, she didn't want to

give it up. In the distance she heard a raven cry out, a song that reminded her of a soul passing into the afterlife.

“Ah lass, you hear it too? Ted has given his blessing and is moving on. He wants you to be happy in this life, to embrace it with all the passion you are capable of. Love me and let me love you back. I promise, you will nay regret it.” Jena could hear the sincerity in his voice and felt his love, how could she not? More than that she knew she loved him with all her being. Somehow in that moment she swore she heard Ted’s voice in the distance.

Jena, don't dwell on the past but look toward the future. You are capable of so much. Embrace the love that you are due and return it in kind. Find peace in love's embrace.

Could it be that simple? Jena prayed so. She could feel Erick’s thumb touch her chin, the warmth of his finger setting her skin ablaze. A slight tilt of her head and her green gaze met his blue one. The love she saw shining in the depths of his eyes stole the very breath from her lungs. She loved him more than anything and he felt the same. Never had she imagined it could happen to her, yet here he was before her.

“Aye lass, you are the keeper of my heart and soul. I give them as freely to you as a person would give a gift on the Eve before Christmas. What say ye lass? Will you be mine forever? You know me as none have known me before.” How could she say anything with her heart in her throat? She did the one thing she could think of. Jena reached up and pulled his head down, her lips in search for his. The moment they touched lightning arched between them. God, how much she missed his touch.

“Yes Erick, I’ll be yours forever. You know me as I know you now.” And she did. Everything they’d been through, everything they’d seen had done nothing more than bind them closer together. True, there were things she didn’t understand about him, but she didn’t care. He was what made her whole and for once she felt complete. Eventually, she knew she would figure them out but for now she would revel in his love and the feel of his body close to hers.

“I love you lass.” Jena looked up into his eyes and saw such tenderness that it took her breath away. How

she'd dreamt of a day when she'd find such a thing, never believing it would happen. Now it had and by God she would never let it go.

"I love you Erick." Never in her life had she believed she would say those words back and mean them. Now she did more than anything she'd ever said in her life. Her soul was at peace and she was in love. The demons of her past had released their hold on her and she could move on. Yes, she was finally home and she couldn't be happier.

"Lass?" His words pushed through her dreaminess.

"Yes?" Her mind was still reeling at knowing Erick was here in her arms and she wasn't dreaming.

"Can we get out of the cold now? Katie and Justin are waiting in the car for us." Katie? So she was behind this! She should have known.

"I'm so going to..." Her mind raced at the notion that Katie had orchestrated finding Erick and getting him to her.

"No yer not and you know it." His hand caught on her bottom pulling her close. Instant warmth shot through her. "If it wasn't for the both of them, I wouldn't have found you so soon."

"Fine, but I need to rib her some. She doesn't need to know she's right. It's not healthy for her." She'd not lived it down the past month since she'd returned. Day in and day out all she'd heard from her had been how she needed to find Erick. Now she knew why.

"Well, I think she's got her own hands full at the moment lass. Let's let her be for now."

His words penetrated a bit belated but when they did her head turned toward him. "What do you mean?"

"Let's just say she's got her own 'issues' to deal with." The sparkle in his eye took her breath away. As they neared the car she heard the hushed giggles from within mixed with a hearty laughter.

"Erick?" Confusion mixed with curiosity as she took in the scene of the two in the car deep in a heated conversation.

"I think the two are drawn to each other my love." No way. If so Jena would have fun making sure they stayed together.

"Do they know it?"

“I donna think so. At least not for sure. I think they feel it but they are both somewhat stubborn.” Sounded familiar.

“Guess we will have to fix that then, huh?” Her eyes lit with mischief but she couldn’t help it. For once, she felt at peace.

“Aye, my love, that we will. So...will you be staying in the States or coming back to the old land?” She could feel his hesitation. Never had she felt so alone as she had when she’d returned back to the States. No, home was not here.

“I’m going wherever you are Erick.” She watched as his face relaxed at her admission.

“Even with the strangeness you’ve witnessed? The things that I’ve yet to explain to you fully?” She knew what he meant but how could she not? She’d had her own demons to battle. How worse could it be? She loved him with all her heart and felt at home back in his lands.

“Aye, even with the pesky night visitors. I’ll come back to your world with you, just show me how to keep them at bay and I’ll be fine. The rest can be sorted out in due time.” Her world would never be boring she knew that, but she was never one for the mundane. Her mind drifted to the cave and the time they’d spent exploring each other’s bodies. Never in her life had she imagined she’d find solace in this life. But she had, and his name was Erick.

A word about the author...

Growing up in the country allowed for a lot of time to expand my imagination. For as far back as I can remember I've always let my mind travel to far off places to adventure where others couldn't. It wasn't until recently at the prodding of good friends that I've decided to finally put to paper all the adventures I'd lived out in my dreams and thus the Wolf/Raven series was born.

When not writing and reading other paranormal romance novels I love to sit and watch Sci-Fi movies with my family or play with friends on my favorite MMORPG. What is that you ask? It's an online role-playing game that helps to stretch your imagination even more. An active imagination that knows no bounds is a wonderful thing to have.

Visit Robyn at www.robynwren.com

