



### **Praise for the writing of Lucynda Storey**

#### ***Reynardine***

"Lucynda Storey tells a tale and paints vivid pictures in your mind of romance, love and hot sex mixed with some definite action. Rey is a tortured soul you quickly fall in love with. *Reynardine* moves steadily from first page until last page. If you're a lover of romance, this one has it."--Nikita, *Enchanted In Romance*

"*Reynardine* is a temptation waiting to happen. An intoxicating hero with a killer smile and gorgeous eyes, and the woman who fights by his side, this is one story that shouldn't be passed up."--Sinclair Reid, *Romance Reviews Today*

#### **Warning**

This e-Book contains sexually graphic scenes and adult language. Store your e-Books carefully, where they cannot be accessed by under-age readers.

# REYNARDINE

Lucynda Storey

Aspen Mountain Press

Reynardine

Copyright © 2006 by Sandra Hicks

This e-Book is a work of fiction. While references may be made to actual places or events, the names, characters, incidents, and locations within are from the author's imagination and are not a resemblance to actual living or dead persons, businesses, or events. Any similarity is coincidental.

Aspen Mountain Press

PO Box 473543

Aurora CO 80047-3573

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

Second edition by Aspen Mountain Press, October 2006

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

This e-Book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction fines and/or imprisonment. The e-Book cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this e-Book can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the publisher.

ISBN: (10 1-60168-009-0

ISBN: (13 978-1-60168-009-9

Printed in the United States of America

Cover artist: Jinger Heaston

## Dedication

*This book is dedicated to JR, my real life hero; to my family for putting up with me while I wrote it; to Uncle Dirty Toes, a band I can only describe as electric Celtic, and whose song “Reynardine” provided the fuel for my imagination; and to J. Poupard, who 24 years ago gave his 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher a pen to sign autographs with when her first book was published. Thank you all for your support and belief in me.*

## Acknowledgements:

*This book would never have seen the light of day except for the prodding of Ms. Lena Austin who told me after I wrote my first fantasy that I should show some versatility and write in a totally different genre; and to Raven McKnight who believed in the value of Rey as much as I.*



## Prologue

Mist snaked over the island, coiling low across the beach. The waning moonlight, muted by thick clouds, gave them the perfect cover. If only it would continue. The Atlantic fog might last an hour, or a few days. The beginning of fall heralded unpredictable weather, brought longer, deeper nights of darkness. Tonight, luck was with him. The thick mist blanketed sound and movement. It would take a strong torch to illuminate their activities.

The tide lapped at the shore, the ebb of the water slapping against its own waves. The sound was steady, lulling. Perfect for concealing the soft cries that mingled with the dull thrum of boat engines.

To the north lay the Cliffs of Mohr, to the south, Kilkee Bay, and the road between blissfully empty. The tourists were gone. There would be no witnesses to tonight's activities. He loved this off-season, when the community fought closing down for winter, trying to grasp every last Euro. He could purchase the goods and services he needed, at a fraction of their cost. Throwing a few extra coins into the captain's hands guaranteed the silence of the crew carrying his precious cargo.

"Sean," he whispered. "Have you the sacks?"

"Aye."

"Chloroform?"

“Aye. Would you relax?”

“I’d rather be uptight than risk a mistake. There is a boatload of money to be made, I tell ya, as long as we are well-positioned.”

He turned his back on Sean to face the shrouded sea. To the north, the clouds thinned. Damn, the weather wasn’t going to hold. It would be a race against time to receive the delivery before the moonlight illuminated their activities. The engines’ rumble faded while he peered into the eerie clouds. A low whistle knifed the mist-laden air.

He’d win this race after all. Smiling, he motioned for Sean, and they headed toward the sound.

The pleasure of his victory didn’t last. A mournful howl cut through the silence and chilled his blood. He’d heard *that* sound before. No longer concerned about being revealed by the advancing moonlight, he stepped into the mist, his heart pounding erratically. They really didn’t have much time left at all.



## Chapter One

Light, unusually brilliant, streamed through the second-story windows of Reynardine's home. The shaft of brightness stabbed him between the eyes. He squinted and turned his head away from his tormenter, only to see the very real manifestation of his depravity the night before. How could he sink so low?

He doubted his leased companion for the evening -- what was her name? -- would consider the pleasures of the flesh they'd shared depraved. Given the amount of moaning she'd done, she'd probably considered it more like heaven.

Reynardine eased from the bed and stalked to the bathroom, pausing once to look at the redhead occupying his bed. He shut the door and looked at himself in the mirror, shaking his head in disgust. At thirty-five, he was in the best shape of his life. Working out enhanced his already exceptional strength and had given him muscular arms, as well as a solid torso. Dark hair fell past his shoulders. Women, for some reason unknown to him, loved it. Now it was just a tangled mess from the games he'd played with the hired woman.

Oh, the games they'd played. He got hard just thinking about the creative ways she'd used her body on him. She had drunk him like a guzzler swallowed mugs of ale, then used her hands to bring him back to full attention.

Perhaps it was better this way. He wasn't committing to anything more than a one-night stand, despite what his heart yearned to do. He loathed the never-ending loneliness, but the curse prevented him from sharing more with women than singular nights of sexual gratification. It was all for the best. He could never risk siring a child who would be shackled by something so heinous.

Grabbing his black bathrobe off the door hook, he headed downstairs to find his butler, Seamus Maly. Some member of the Maly family had been with his own line for generations. The Malys understood the curse as well, if not better, than Rey's own family did.

"Seamus!" Rey bellowed from the landing, suddenly not caring if he woke the woman in his bed. A short man with strawberry-blond hair surrounding a bald pate hustled into the room.

"Get the woman out of here." He tossed fifty Euros onto the oak letter table near the front door. "Take her back to wherever you found her, and get her so thoroughly lost she'll never find her way back here."

Seamus disappeared up the stairs, and a moment later Reynardine heard the protests of the woman being dragged from his bed. Storming into the kitchen, he poured himself a shot of Bushmills. What was wrong with him? Not all that long ago, he'd reveled in taking a woman to his bed and finding mutual pleasure together late into the night or the next morning.

Not so anymore. Perhaps it was his pessimistic thoughts. Maybe he was tired of his self-imposed prison. Other than his monthly trip to the tavern, he kept to himself. No one in the vicinity knew him well, and the less they knew regarding his unusual condition, the more likely they would live worry-free lives.

No, his depression was something more. He was thirty-five and longed for a mate he could share his passions with, a woman who would be his soul mate, intellectual equal, and an avid sexual partner. Being holed up in this luxurious lodge made it impossible to find her. He stormed into the bathroom, stripped off his robe, and turned the hot water on full force.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis Fitzgerald knew a good thing when she saw it. And she was seeing it now. The University of Dublin was taking her feasibility studies regarding the reintroduction of the wolf to the native Irish habitat seriously. Oliver Cromwell had put a bounty on wolf heads, thereby ensuring the canines wouldn't survive English rule, and so thoroughly wiped them out that not one single pair survived.

Since the Bern Convention, there had been serious discussion about bringing wolves back to the habitats they once ranged. Having earned her undergraduate degree in biology at the University of Dublin, Agnis directed her post-graduate education to research biology, studying avidly the works of Dr. L. David Mech and the wolves of the Arctic. The grant for this impact study would allow her to complete her doctoral thesis at the University of Dublin and be in a prime position to have an effect on the future of the animals in Ireland. It might even help erase the odious crime committed by her great-grandfather.

She pushed her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose and reread the letter that acknowledged approval of funding for her grant request. The missive included a generous check for several thousand Euros. It would provide room and board and cover other expenses while she gathered intelligence regarding a potential relocation site in the western part of the country.

Quickly, she formulated her plans. Her roommate could keep her few furnishings. It wouldn't take long to pack her clothing and other necessary items for the study and make good on the enclosed airline ticket. She smiled as she pushed a loose strand of long brunette hair behind an ear. She was on her way, finally.

She made plane reservations to Shannon and arranged to rent a car that afternoon. She'd stay in Kilkee, where she could lodge until she found a place to rent and use as headquarters. The project had two major goals: educate the population about the benefits of the reintroduction of wolves to County Clare, and find an area that would provide a haven for a small pack of wolves.

Within the month, she'd have to have her belongings shipped to an as-yet unknown location, and begin a new, exciting phase of her life and career. Atonement for the past mistakes of her family was at hand. She picked up the phone to finish the myriad calls she'd only just begun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three weeks later, Agnis was unpacking and setting up her study in a small, whitewashed, thatched cottage not far from Doo Lake, Slieve Callan, and the Atlantic Ocean.

"Might as well go into Shanavogh and see about some dinner." For a moment, she was seized with an aching sense of emptiness. Things would be perfect if Bernard were here to share in the first throes of her triumph.

*Don't go there.* Bernard had left her life months ago for someone thinner, and not so serious. Time hadn't eased the pain of not having someone in her life. She brushed her hair and sighed. Might as well get to town and begin meeting some of the locals.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reynardine opened the doors of the Shanavogh Pub and entered the smoky room. It wasn't the best pub he'd been to, but it was the closest. He stalked to the end of the wooden bar and settled in to watch the football game on the television. Once a month, he exposed himself to the sensation of being with a crowd. Listening to the dull rumble of speech satisfied the part of him that wanted to be around people, while also reminding him of the luxury of silence.

Daniel Malone was at a table in the far corner with some of his cronies. Malone's short stature belied his formidable dealings within the business world. More than once, through his attorney, Rey had gone head-to-head with him in land dealings.

Rey was working on his second pint of Guinness when he heard the door open and glanced into the mirror behind the bar. He did a double-take when he saw her enter the room. None of the masters could have painted a more perfect goddess. The woman was a knockout brunette with a soft, curvy shape. Her tits alone made his dick stand up and take notice, and her hips just begged to be straddled. Rey wet his lips. She exuded class and carried herself like a real lady; she was different, and out of place here.

The woman scanned the room before she took a seat at a table in a corner opposite Malone. Rey's enhanced sense of smell let him know she was uncomfortable and nervous, indicating she might have been from out of town. He smelled something else, too -- the delicate scent of her musk. Watching the brunette in the mirror, he contemplated ordering another Guinness and taking it to her.

"Hey." Damn, Malone had carried an extra pint to her first. Her gorgeous, deep blue eyes, magnified by glasses, looked up at Malone. Rey was a sucker for glasses, maybe because his eyes had always been so damn good.

"Hey, yourself," she responded.

"I'm Daniel Malone. You would be...?"

"New to town."

Ouch. Rey couldn't help but smile at her hands-off approach to Malone. Her soft, lyrical voice showed Malone his place in her world at the moment. Rey watched as the man pulled out a chair and sat near her, intent on charming her. She didn't move. The terse conversation wasn't encouraging for Malone at all, but Malone was too pig-headed to heed the warning signs.

"American?"

She nodded her head.

"I thought so. Have a pint?" Pushing the mug toward her, Malone waited. She lifted the earthenware to her lips.

Rey's gaze followed her hands as they neared her magnificent chest.

“Thanks,” she replied to Malone. “You should know, though, I don’t do one-night stands.”

Rey watched her swallow the dark beer, followed the length of her neck to the top button of her pink blouse where he could see a hint of her cleavage, and watched Malone’s reaction. The bloke’s tongue was nearly on the floor, and he didn’t seem to register her comment. It would be interesting to see what happened next.

“You have fine jabs, lass.”

“Excuse me?”

Rey watched her cheeks color, and then Malone’s. “I didn’t mean that -- I mean, you do have gorgeous breasts, but I didn’t mean to say that out loud. I was just thinking it.”

Rey chuckled. Malone was in real trouble, struggling like a turtle turned over on its back.

She lifted the mug to her lips once again, drinking deeply before placing it back on the wooden table. “I came here for dinner, but I think I should go.” She stood and picked up her bag. “Thanks for the drink.” She moved toward the door, leaving Malone sitting dumbfounded at the table.

From his position at the bar, Rey heard her parting comments. Perhaps he could stop her from leaving. He’d seen her first, damn it all, and Malone was a certified creep when it came to women. The man had had more than one allegation regarding sexual abuse of women dropped, thanks to his hefty bank account. Local females knew to keep away. This beauty obviously didn’t know of Malone’s proclivities.

“Lass, don’t let the likes of Malone scare you off. Have a seat at the bar, watch the game, enjoy some dinner.”

The invitation halted her departure. “I did come here for supper,” she stammered, with a sweet lilt. She sat on a stool next to Rey, and then glanced at the telly. “Game any good?”

“Not bad if you like watching the Brits. Our lads aren’t playing for a few days.” He watched her study the bar menu. “Beef and Guinness stew is good.”

“Thanks.” She motioned to the bartender, who approached and took her order. Her elegant hands looked practical, with short nails and a pink polish.

“Been here long?”

“Not in Clare, but I’ve been in Dublin for the past six years.”

“What brings you to Shanavogh, if I may be so bold?”

“I’m finishing work on my thesis.”

“Here? What could there possibly be here that would garner the attention of higher education?”

She smiled, and it seemed to Rey that the entire room became brighter. “Wolves. More specifically, the economic impact that reintroduction could have on this region.”

“Beautiful animals.”

“I think so. By the way, I’m Agnis Fitzgerald.”

“Rey O’Brien. It’s a pleasure to meet a lady interested in wild animals.” In his peripheral vision, he could see Malone scowling. Rey smiled. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he enjoyed thwarting the man.

“Unfortunately, I don’t get to work with them as much as I’d like. I do a lot of number crunching and educational presentations regarding the positive economical impact eco-tourism can have on a region. People have a lot of misconceptions when it comes to wolves.” A steaming bowl of stew was set on the bar. “This smells wonderful.”

“I hope you enjoy it.”

She smiled again. This time, Rey was positive the area around her lightened. “So, Agnis, what do you do when you aren’t working with wolves?”

“I sketch, play chess, read. Pretty tame stuff.”

“You up for a game now?”

“Of chess? Sure.”

Rey motioned for the bartender. “Have a chess set back there?”

In answer, the barkeep set the board and the box with the chess pieces on the bar.

“White or black?” Rey asked.

“We do this fair and square.” Agnis reached into the box and pulled out the white queen and a black knight. “I’ll mix them behind my back, and you can choose.”

A moment later, she held out her hands. Rey touched the back of her left hand, surprised by how soft her skin felt beneath his fingertips. “I’m white. Defend yourself.”

“Oh, I will, count on it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey was pleased with her strategic game performance. She’d battled him to a draw. He’d countered her best defensive moves, but hadn’t been able to defeat her. “That was some game, Agnis. I haven’t had the opportunity to play someone of your caliber in quite a while.”

“Since I didn’t beat you, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It is, believe me.”

She glanced at a watch on her wrist. “I hadn’t intended to spend so much time here tonight. I need to get home. Thanks for the game.” She placed some money on the counter and slid from the barstool, headed toward the door. Over her shoulder, she called, “Good night, Rey.”

Malone moved in while Rey settled his tab. Now it was Rey’s turn to scowl as the short man held the door open for her. She continued through the doorway and into the misty night.

“Wait,” Malone demanded.



Agnis halted abruptly and turned to face Malone. “What? Why?” The sweet hyacinth aroma on her skin captivated Rey’s receptive nostrils, as did the first scents of her well-concealed nervousness.

Daniel continued, “I’m not a pervert, but I do enjoy a good shag. And you, my sweet, look like a good roll.”

Rey saw Agnis grimace as Malone reached toward her and lifted a strand of her dark hair to his lips before he inhaled. “When I make love to you, you’ll never forget it.”

“Not interested,” she flatly stated as she tried to proceed.

The tone of Malone’s voice changed drastically, to one filled with contempt. Rey knew Malone was a sore loser. The man grabbed her arm and spun her around. “You bitch.”

Before Rey realized it, Agnis had slapped Malone, hard. He grabbed her arm. “No one strikes me.”

“There’s a first time for everything now, isn’t there?” She tried to yank her arm free of his grip.

Rey tapped Malone on the shoulder. “I don’t think the lady is welcoming your attentions, Daniel.”

“Buzz off, O’Brien.”

“I don’t think you’re understanding me.”

“I understand perfectly. Buzz off. I’m busy.”

“Agnis?” Just let her to say something so he’d be justified in punching Malone. “Do you welcome this man’s attentions?”

“No,” she snarled.

Rey yanked Malone around and shoved him out the door. Malone landed in a heap on the sidewalk. “Go home and sober up.”

“You’ll pay, O’Brien. This wasn’t your concern.” Malone stood and tottered off toward his car.

\* \* \* \* \*

With widened eyes, Agnis watched Rey toss her attacker. All that latent strength was packaged in over six feet of height. Daniel Malone's unwelcome attentions had been disposed of with ease. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. Most of my countrymen aren't quite so rough around the edges. The fact is, if I'd moved faster, you wouldn't have had to go through it. Malone just had too long a session tonight and is gee-eyed. I doubt he'll remember a thing in the morning."

"Guys like him should be given some time with the guarda to think things over."

"Wouldn't do much good here. He's been bought out of more tight spots than Houdini escaped."

Rey drew closer, invading her space. It didn't frighten her, just filled her with the sensation that there was no world outside the bounds created by this man's cosmos.

"Malone does have a good eye for beautiful women, I'll give him that."

The light from the pub's windows highlighted the mist blanketing the area. The brilliant greens and reds of the merchants' doors paled. Heat rose to her cheeks. No one called her beautiful. The mist swirled about, creating an illusion worthy of a fleeting dream. She shivered -- not from the chill, but from something else. Anticipation.

Stepping nearer, his strong arms enfolded her. "You're cold."

She wanted to pull away, but couldn't force herself to, not when a well-built, handsome hero had just defended her. Rey made her feel secure, Agnis realized. She liked being held by him. She lifted her face to meet his, only to find him staring at her. Leaning closer, he grazed her lips with his, leaving behind a trail of fire that ignited her very core. Her heart rate jumped, and the tension created by Malone fled her body. Behind her, she heard the door to the pub slam shut. "You'd think the least they could do is get into the car to make out," a voice said.

The words slapped her back to reality, to the present. With Daniel Malone angry, she'd have enough flak to deal with. Embarrassed, she ducked her head into Rey's solid chest, even as she felt his arms tighten around her. It was difficult, but she pushed Rey away, her chest heaving as if she'd just run the Dublin marathon. "Thank you."

Agnis opened her car door and slid in as Rey gently closed the door. She shoved the keys into the ignition and roared away. In the rearview mirror, she momentarily saw Rey standing at the edge of the road. His sexy, lonely image seared her memory. Now what was she going to do?

## Chapter Two

Agnis had the answer. She always had the answer to this particular quandary. She threw her purse on the couch and went straight to the bedroom.

Men like Rey made her feel sexy. But they also made her self-conscious. Did they really like what they saw, or were they just interested in getting off, and found her an easy target? That's what Bernard had been interested in after all. He'd even said so when he left her, adding that she wasn't all that great in the sack, anyway. The man had definitely rocked her world -- and not in a good way.

Since then, she'd honed her skills to avoid the most potentially damaging men. Somehow, she'd missed Rey on her radar. His Irish brogue was charming, but not all that different from the accents she'd heard over the past few years. Yet his rich, baritone voice fueled her latest fantasy.

Standing in front of the mirror mounted on the bedroom door, she pictured herself once again in his arms. They were strong, powerful arms. Her breath quickened. Rey had the kind of arms that made a woman feel safe in the afterglow of lovemaking. Her hands slid under her light pink blouse and up to her breasts. It would have been easy for him to fondle them.

Moving to the bed, she caressed the orbs through her cotton bra, her nipples tightening at her touch. If she were to run into the likes of him again, she would

have to find something a hell of a lot sexier to wear. What was the use? She couldn't entice a man like him. But the vision of being held in his arms wouldn't dissipate. She stretched out on the bed and unbuttoned her shirt, imagining Rey doing it instead. Closing her eyes, Agnis pinched her nipples, sending shivers of delight through her body.

She lay on the bed and spread her legs. The scent of her creamy desire added to the experience her imagination created. His hands, she envisioned, gentle and sure, were stroking her heat. Rey's fingers caressed her crotch. Longing flushed her skin. Her hand went to her breast and she squeezed hard as her other hand rubbed her clit over and over. God, she was blazing with unquenched heat.

She unzipped her jeans and shimmied out of them before she flipped onto her stomach, opened the door of the nightstand, and pulled out her vibrator. She needed more than her own fingers tantalizing her. The firm rubber would substitute for Rey's shaft. Once, after her parents divorced, Agnis's mother had told her she had no need of men when she had her battery-operated boyfriend. After Bernard left, Agnis purchased her own, remembering the caustic comment of her mother.

The machine had brought her pleasure when the desire to be touched possessed her. But not intimacy. The vibrator hummed when she turned it on low. Would his voice rumble through her skin as he nibbled her neck? Would he tease her earlobe and prolong foreplay, making her hot for him? Or would he just bury himself deeply within her, knowing how badly she needed to be filled?

Rubbing it over her panty-clad clit, she moaned with each pass. What would it be like to sleep with a virtual stranger, to have a one-night stand with someone as sexy as Rey? She slipped her finger under the satin panties into her vagina to test her readiness to accept the machine. Oh, she was good and wet; her imagination fueled by images of Rey licking her, tasting -- no, devouring her essence.

The memory of his kiss increased her pulse rate. The vibrator slid through her folds and into her heat, fueled by thoughts of Rey taking her from behind, his cock rapidly driving deeply into her.

Agnis turned the machine up a notch. She pushed it in, and then pulled it out, over and over, increasing the speed of her hand and the machine. Rolling her nipple between her fingers, she could feel the beginning of her climax build. The tremors started slowly, rising to a rhythmic crescendo. She held her breath as her legs tensed.

The vibrator's pulses were subdued as her body took control. The throbbing intensified when she pushed the rubber cock further into her heat. If only it were real. If only it was Rey making her feel this way. The pounding of her pussy sent jolts of pleasure throughout her body. She cried out her orgasm into the lonely room, and collapsed onto the bed. As the erotic sensations faded, she pulled the pseudo-cock out of her vagina, barely remembering to turn the toy off, knowing she was totally alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis had left Rey in a miserable state. When he thought of the way her mouth had responded to him, and the way her sweet, soft curves molded against him, he got a raging hard-on. A cold shower hadn't helped.

It was time to take matters into his hands, literally. He upped the water temperature and let the heat seep into his body. The memory of the feel of her soft skin against his rough hands and the taste of her ale-spiced mouth made his dick all the harder. He hadn't wanted someone in his bed this badly in years.

With a good lather in his hands, he stroked his cock as he thought of her. The soap was slick around him, the way Agnis would be. The heat of her mouth would envelop his dick as she took him, willingly. He ran his hand up the shaft and around the head imagining it. Yes, it would be good. She would be a great experience in bed. His hand moved faster as he braced himself against the shower wall.

He closed his eyes and pictured his cock pushing into her enthusiastic, hot cunt. Soft, hot, ready for him. She'd want him as much as he wanted her. Hadn't he

smelled her lust earlier? His hand tightened around his cock as he stroked it harder. Faster and faster, he'd drive into her depths until they lost control. She'd moan, then cry out his name in the throes of their joining, her receptive body clutching his cock in throbbing waves. His hand fastened around the shaft, slid up and down its length, and caressed the dark, red crown. The hot spray of the shower pounded into his sensitive flesh. He groaned as he shot cum into his hand, his dick jerking from his self-gratification.

Despite the fact that he'd unloaded his balls, his cock was still hard. He'd been wrong. Jerking off hadn't lessened his lust. Rey wouldn't have another peaceful night of sleep until he'd had the curvy, buxom beauty riding him, hard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis was tired after a full day of interviewing a half dozen local farming families regarding their property. Patiently, she'd explained the benefits of wolf reintroduction, and now she was making her final pitch for the day.

"Mr. O'Deas, with the cooperation of the farming community, the reintroduction will be an economic boon to the area. Increased tourism will demand the real products of Ireland. Eco-tourism emphasizes the use of local foods and other goods."

"So, yer saying this will benefit more than just farmers?"

"Absolutely. There will be more jobs in hotels that have a higher occupancy rate, more chefs, bakers, and the like to create the cuisine of this part of the country. That means there will be a need for more waiters, maids, people to fill other supplemental industries."

"And what of the men and women we're losing to the likes of Shannon and Dublin, where the 'good' jobs are?"

"Reintroduction is more than just bringing wolves back. There will be a need for engineers to build environmentally sound hotels, scientists to help reduce the pollution that even now poisons the air and ground. Biologists and laboratories will be used to oversee and restore diverse animal populations. It's not just one species

that will be affected. This whole community will be stimulated. If properly handled, the benefits will make County Clare one of the most sound eco-systems in the world, for both man and beast.”

“That may be as you say, lass, but what about the killing of the animals that graze these fields?”

“Once a sound plan is developed for the county, the government is set to reimburse farmers whose animals are lost to direct contact with wolves.”

Paddy paused a moment, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I know people hereabouts are reluctant to talk about it.”

None of the people Agnis had spoken with thus far had been reluctant to talk. Paddy’s statement ignited her curiosity. “Reluctant about what?”

“Every now and again, for time out of mind, there’ve been sightings.”

Agnis’s senses went on alert. “What sort of sightings? Mr. O’Deas, what are you talking about?”

“The full moon, Miss Fitzgerald. It brings him out.”

“Who?”

“The werewolf.”

Mrs. O’Deas arrived and gave her a sympathetic look as she handed Agnis a cup of tea. “Paddy telling you wolfman stories?” She wagged a finger at her husband. “You shouldn’t be messing with the girl’s head, Paddy.”

Agnis nearly choked trying to hold back her laughter, but one look at Paddy’s rigidly held face and she knew he was serious. “Isn’t that just a legend, a superstition?”

“On the night prior, the day of, and the following night of the full moon, there have been some that have seen him; a massive wolf, howling as if in great pain.”

“Why do you think it’s a werewolf?”

“Ain’t no one seen it except at the full moon, and then only occasionally.”

“No one has looked for him? Hunted him?”



“Aye, there have been some that ‘ave tried, but none have succeeded. Even Daniel Malone has failed. And he don’t take well to failure.”

Agnis wrinkled her nose at the mention of Daniel Malone, and then shook her head, getting back to Paddy’s subject. “When was the last sighting?”

“It’s been since June, at least,” the older man said. “Up on the Slieve.”

“Are you sure, Mr. O’Deas, that it isn’t just a large hound?”

Paddy scoffed. “I know the difference between a dog and a wolf, lass. I’ve seen them in the States.”

She set her teacup on the end table, trying to tread carefully. There shouldn’t be wolves in the area, but if her neighbor had *seen* one... I could change the focus of my thesis to preservation rather than reintroduction if there was an existing wolf pack in the area.”

This time, Paddy openly laughed. “No chance of that, lass, no chance at all. Why, there ain’t been real wolves in this area in centuries.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, Agnis was at the foot of Slieve Callan. The sun was setting as she drew sketches of the four-hundred-meter mountain. It had been a crisp October day, the kind she remembered from back home in Colorado when the aspens in the mountains began their annual change. Red and gold leaves scurried across the grasses, pushed by a cold breeze. She pulled her powder-blue jacket closer about her and zipped it up. The warmth of the sun was fleeing.

Her small, family-to-family discussions were going well. Some of the younger sheep farmers in the area were interested in increasing their profitability by supplying local hotels with fresh lamb, should tourism to the area become more intense. Michael Keane and his family had asked a lot of intelligent questions. He would be a good ally in forum discussions, should there be a need.

Now Agnis was at the Slieve for a bit of relaxation before she returned to her cottage and translated her notes into her laptop.

A small outcropping had caught her interest and she worked a couple of hours, through the twilight, drawing the area. Later, she'd paint the sketches with watercolors reminiscent of the spectacular sunset she'd just witnessed.

A noise came from behind her, a howl that chilled her blood. She turned and saw a large canine on the crest, pointing his snout toward the sky. Behind him, the moon was rising. Paddy's story rushed back. Wolf? Dog? Something else? The biologist in her couldn't help but wonder what species this animal truly was.

Adrenaline surged through her, and she shoved her sketchbook into her backpack and jumped to her feet. She should stay put, call the authorities or something, but by the time anyone arrived, the creature would be long gone. Surely, her eyes were deceiving her. She yanked her camera from the pack, aimed, and shot, thankful for the automatic light metering.

The animal stayed at the top of the mountain, howling, like Paddy said, as if it were in great anguish. She pulled her flashlight from her pack and turned it on. Once she looped the camera strap over her head, she reached back into her bag and pulled out the stungun she'd bought a few years ago in Dublin for personal protection. Agnis slipped it into her jacket pocket to keep it handy, just in case the animal rushed her. She then hefted the large pack onto her back and began to follow the animal, keeping a respectful distance behind it.

Hampered by the heavy bundle and bouncing camera, Agnis began a slow jog, knowing she had to see for herself if this were a wolf, or just a big dog that had wandered from its home. With the light of the sun nearly gone, her time for a good close-up shot was diminishing. If she could get closer for a better photograph, she could have the image enlarged. Then she'd be able to see the details that set dog and wolf apart.

She tackled Slieve Callan from the west side, the going tougher than she'd thought. By the time she got to the summit, the animal was gone. She looked about, trying to find some sign of what she'd seen.

To the southeast, a river meandered down the mountain. Agnis moved toward it when she saw another glimpse of the creature. The canine was beautiful. Its dark pelt gleamed, reflecting the light of the higher full moon. Surely this was someone's beloved dog to have such a stunning coat.

As if sensing her nearby, the dog began an easy lope. She hurried after it, in hopes of identifying the creature, or at the very least finding information that would lead to an owner. She was gaining on the animal when she slipped, her foot caught between moss-covered rocks, and her ankle twisted. Pain ripped through her.

Agnis looked around. It would be a good hike back to her vehicle, or to any neighboring farm. She removed the stungun from her jacket and placed it in the pocket of her jeans, the handle easy to grasp in an emergency. She pulled off the blue windbreaker and used the sleeves to tie up the sprain.

When she stood, pain shot through her leg. She'd have to find something for a crutch. In the dim light, it was difficult to tell what was real and what was shadow. Swiveling her light around the area, she realized there was nothing to help support her weight. All she could do was hobble toward her car. With the moon as her guide, she began to shuffle back the direction she'd come from.

A big, wet sensation on her hand froze her to the spot. The canine was at her side. She glanced down, noting his extended snout and close-set front legs, the two predominant features that distinguished wolf from dog. "Oh, my god," she whispered. "You are a wolf." She slowly moved her hand to her pocket and palmed the handle of her stungun.

The wolf licked her left hand, and then nudged it, as if he were attempting to communicate. He dashed forward and then returned. "Okay, you came back. I don't know why, but I think you want me to follow you."

Ridiculous, talking to an animal as if somehow it could save her, reports of their aptitude notwithstanding. Gradually, the wolf headed back the way she'd last seen it. He lingered as if sensing her injury. Interestingly, the creature hadn't tried to take advantage of her in her injured state. Many predators went after prey that was weakened. Yet, this one hadn't given her any indication of an impending attack. Perhaps the wolf had recently fed.

Maybe he'd even been domesticated. Biologists theorized that the earliest dogs descended from wild wolves. There were reports in the United States about people trying to raise them as pets, so it wouldn't be totally unheard of. But if someone in the region had tamed the animal, they'd want it kept secret. Agnis had been given no reports of any exotic canines existing legally in western Ireland. The penalties and fines for owning a wolf would be severe, the international outcry crushing.

The wolf unexpectedly stopped. Agnis swung the light around them, and at her feet was a long sturdy branch. Just the sort she'd hoped to find earlier. This splendid animal had led her to one. Keeping a close eye on her four-legged escort, one hand in her pocket grasping her stungun, Agnis knelt. She picked up the branch by its stalk, and then glanced into her companion's golden eyes. This was an intelligent, compassionate creature. She sensed it in her soul.

Cold seeped into her bones, and the jacket supporting her ankle was filthy and torn. She hadn't planned on being out this late. The swath of light from her flashlight gave her a degree of comfort, but no heat. They weren't making very good time wherever it was he was leading her. Fog, cold and damp, crept onto the Slieve.

Above, heavy clouds were blanketing the moon, now at its apex. She continued to follow the wolf at a safe distance, her sense of direction skewed. The pain nauseated her, but finally she discerned the outline of a building. At least there would be shelter for the remainder of the night. But right now she needed a breather. She sat on the soft ground and placed her foot on a rock, the stungun gripped tightly in one hand, the tree branch in the other. She wasn't afraid; the wolf

had not so much as raised a hackle. But she did know what a wolf's incisors were capable of doing to a deer or elk.

She elevated her ankle in hopes she might be able to give it enough rest to lessen the pain and make it to the building. Suddenly, the wolf circled back, frightening her. She realized she was at a horrible disadvantage. Her clutch on the stungun and tree limb tightened. "Back off," she yelled, brandishing the weapons.

The wolf stepped back and stared at her, before taking off at a fast run. Agnis let go a long, deep breath, trying to calm the panic that had surged through her. Struggling to her feet, with the branch to brace her, she watched him climb the crest of the hill they'd just descended, thankful her close encounter with the magnificent wild animal hadn't ended with a vicious attack.

Once calm, she realized the wolf had exceeded all the studies she'd read regarding leadership, intelligence, and strength. And somehow, he'd chosen her. That tidbit defied all she knew. The sooner she got help, the sooner she could file her weekly report, and send the photos.

Even if the wolf had been domesticated, he didn't belong here without the proper legal protection. She'd have to notify the guarda, as well. Between them, they could find out who was responsible for the wolf and make sure he was properly cared for, rather than wandering the hillside at night. If a local saw him... The thought nudged her forward. This wolf had to be protected.

Hampered by her injury, she continued toward the structure, more detail coming into focus. It wasn't some sort of shepherd's shelter; it was a house. More like a lodge, really, with large windows that beamed light toward her. Here, she would be able to get some sort of assistance. The building wasn't as far it had seemed.

The timing couldn't be better. The pain had worsened and Agnis knew she couldn't have gone much further. Pushing the doorbell, she leaned against the wall and hoped the light glowing through the windows meant someone was still awake.

Eternity seemed to pass before she heard noise from inside. With a final backward glance to where she'd been, Agnis once more saw the wolf at a distance. At least, that's what she thought she saw. She blinked, and the animal was gone. In its place, she thought she saw the figure of a tall, silhouetted human.

Impossible. *Paddy O'Deas stories must have really gotten to me*, she thought, as the door to the house creaked open.

### Chapter Three

A short man with gray-streaked, red hair swung open the door. A wave of bright light flooded Agnis's eyes. "I'm hurt." She held back a moan.

Without question, he opened the door wide. "Come in, Miss. We can't be having ya out wandering injured, now can we?"

Graciously, the older man offered his arm to her. She limped heavily as she leaned against him. He was surprisingly strong, taking her weight as he led her to a wingback chair. He pushed an ottoman toward her. "The master isn't home right now, Miss, but will be shortly. In the meantime, let's get your leg comfortable." With great gentleness, he lifted her ankle and placed it on the stool. "Is there someone I can call for you, Miss...?"

"Fitzgerald. Agnis Fitzgerald. No, I'm afraid there isn't. I left my car on the far side of Slieve Callan."

"You've come quite a ways. What were you doing out so late?" he asked with fatherly concern, as he untied the sleeves of her lightweight jacket from around her ankle. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to her so tenderly.

"I was sketching on the Slieve."

The deep wrinkles of his brow deepened as he frowned. "It's a bit dark, Miss Fitzgerald."

"I found a perfect location just before sunset. I'm afraid the time got away from me. I don't know how long I've walked. I followed --" She gulped. "This is going to sound crazy, but I followed a big black wolf."

"A wolf? There haven't been such animals here in centuries. Are you sure it wasn't a dog?"

"Quite. I study them. He came right up to me and led me here. I got a good look at him. A photograph, too. It was definitely a wolf."

The man's creased face wrinkled more. "You don't say." He looked down at her ankle. "I'd best wrap that properly and get some ice on it. I expect that after your long night, you must be tired. We have a spare room..."

"I really don't want to be a bother." Then she yawned.

"Let me get you some tea."

"Hot tea sounds lovely." It was the last thing she remembered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once every quarter or so, he allowed himself the privilege of running free. Natives stayed away from Slieve Callan, fearful the ancient stories of a bloodthirsty werewolf might be real. When he crested the rise and saw her at the bottom, he just had to howl his frustration. The woman who'd besieged his restless sleep for the past week was on his mountain.

Rey couldn't stay away. The feel of her satin-soft skin under his fingertips at the pub was a vivid memory. The need to possess her, just once, tossed aside his better judgment. The soft perfume she wore was etched into his mind. The taste of her, when he licked her hand earlier, inflamed his senses. Even in his accursed form, the desire to kiss her, experience her pliable lips under his again, was nearly his undoing.

A game of hide and seek had developed on the hillside. If he could lure her to his home, he might have a chance to seduce her. She'd exhibited her intelligence



several times at the pub. Could she be passionate in bed? If Agnis were to fall in love with him, perhaps she'd be the one to show compassion and accept the truth of his curse. His soul mate would need those qualities in abundance.

That had been his plan, until she fell. At first, he couldn't decide how near her he should get. But her soft moans of pain emboldened him, and he'd walked right up to her -- until she'd yelled, brandished the branch, and pulled the stungun on him. From a distance, he led her to the lodge, as far as he dared.

The change, returning him to human form, would have to come upon him before he could see to her needs. Seamus would substitute for him, in the meantime. He waited in the open office of the dog kennels until the subdued morning sun had climbed well past the horizon.

A loud knock set the two remaining dogs of the kennel into raucous barks. "Sir," Seamus announced as he entered, "the woman is asleep. She won't deduce anything by the timing of your return."

"Great. I can clean up before I speak with her."

"I would have a private conversation with you before, sir."

Seamus and Rey had been together all of Rey's life. "You have a concern?"

"Are you daft? Bringing her here could risk everything you've been able to keep secret. The woman studies wolves, for pity's sake!"

The irony didn't escape him as he rose to leave. "All the more reason she should be here, don't you think?"

"You're playing with fire."

"Aye, that I am, Seamus. This is the woman I told you about."

His servant voiced his startled opinion as they headed across the lawn. "From the pub?"

Rey nodded. "Isn't she lovely?"

"Sir, this isn't good. Trouble arrived when you brought her to our doorstep."

“Nonsense, Seamus.” He strode purposefully into the house, stopping to run a wet cloth over his face, then headed down the paneled hallway toward the first-floor guestroom.

After knocking on the wooden door, Rey entered the room. Blue curtains covered the windows, and he pushed them aside to let in the muted morning light. The green of the hillside remained carpeted with a low layer of fog. He turned to the beauty that was almost in his bed, and smiled. Half the battle was won. She was in his home where he had the advantage. “Good morning.”

Her eyes fluttered open, then grew wide in apparent shock. Her hand fumbled for her glasses, resting on the nightstand. “You? Where am I? Why are you here?” she murmured as she tried to sit up. Her attempts ceased immediately. “Ow!”

“You seem to have twisted your ankle. Somehow, you made it to my home, and now I have you right where I want you.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Where would that be?”

“In my bed.” He laughed.

“That’s not funny. I have to leave.” She paused. “No, *you* have to leave.”

“You don’t, and I only have to *if* I want to be a gentleman.”

She pursed her lush lips. “I need to get my car.”

“Seamus has already seen to that. You said something to him about a sketch? You’re an artist, then? I thought you were a biologist.”

“It’s a hobby. I’m a biologist, and I really need to get back to my studies.”

“Not before you’ve had something to eat.” He scanned the shape of her body under the coverlet, taking in the outline of her large breasts. Her leg was wrapped around the edge of the blanket, her injured ankle resting on a pillow. Helpless, she became more tempting.

Those soft lips formed a perfect ‘O’, and looking at the shape of her mouth, he knew he would never be satisfied with another woman until he’d had her lips, lush and full, around him. He stirred restlessly at the thought as he tried to cloak

himself with civility while his trousers tightened. Taking a deep breath, he pushed an intercom button near the bed. "Bring a bowl of soup for the lady to lunch on," Rey commanded. He gazed at her, starting at her lips, lingering at her breasts. Her voice interrupted his staring.

"I could stand a couple of minutes to freshen up."

He nodded, and amended his order to Seamus. "Soda bread, too, in about ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," his butler answered through the light static.

When she struggled to push herself up into a better sitting position, Rey quickly put his arm around her. "Let me help you to the bath." She leaned heavily on him as she tried to stand.

As they walked to the doorway, Rey marveled at how Agnis personified what he desired. Her busty physique, unique scent, the soft texture of her skin, and her intellect all turned him on. "Use what you can find," he said after she shut the door on him. A moment later, Rey heard a thump. "Are you all right?" he called.

"Yes, please don't worry. I swear I'll let you know if I need help."

The sound of running water filtered through the door. The intimate sound only served to remind Rey of the nearly empty house that mirrored his life. A few minutes later, the door opened and Agnis stood there, leaning against the frame in an attempt to keep her weight off her troubled ankle. Her pale face radiated her newfound alertness, and her combed silky tresses begged him to touch them.

Without a word, he placed his arm around her and helped her back to the bed, where he elevated her ankle once more. A moment later, Seamus brought a tray of food into the room and set it on the nightstand. Without a word, the man left the room, closing the door behind him. Rey watched Agnis sniff appreciatively.

"That smells great."

"Seamus makes the best potato and leek soup. Here, let me." He dipped the spoon into the tureen and carefully brought it to her lips. He leaned close and blew

on the hot soup, his lips dangerously close to hers. God, to kiss her again, to taste her mouth. The thought consumed him. When she opened her mouth to partake, he pulled the spoon away. "I was just thinking, you have the most dazzling mouth. I could..."

She didn't give him a chance to finish. She lunged forward and took the spoon into her mouth, visibly wrapping her tongue around the end before withdrawing the liquid. He quickly dipped the spoon again, and watched her repeat the performance. Did she know how arousing it was to watch her tongue work like that?

Disappointment seemed to reign in her features when the spoon finally clattered against the empty bowl. Her lips turned downward in a tiny pout.

"Looking for something else?"

"A big, black wolf."

"Really. Can't say I've ever heard of wolves around here. You do know that Cromwell put a bounty on their heads in the mid-1600's."

She nodded her head. "I've read the decree. It's in the public domain, not held under lock and key. Fascinating read."

\* \* \* \* \*

For the past half-hour, Agnis had fought the arousal Rey induced. She hadn't expected to wake in his house, nor had she expected Rey to do the wakening. She couldn't keep her eyes from staring at his lips. *Remember that you don't need a man for sex.* It was a good mantra to repeat, especially when he'd made that comment about her being in his bed.

It didn't help that his voice alone had the power to make her do darn near anything. Or that his desire for her was blatant. She tried to banter with him, attempted to dilute the fact that she was with this sexy man, in his room, wishing to experience his touch and taste. When his brown eyes became molten pools of desire, tiny licks of flame danced on her skin.

“I’d like you under lock and key,” Rey murmured.

The image aroused her, but instead of throwing herself at his feet, she ignored the response of her pussy, frowned, and retorted, “I’m sure you would, but I’m not into that sort of thing, myself.”

“I’d be happy to show you, teach you the lighter side of submission, the exquisite pleasures I could give you.”

The image of sizzling sex with him burned into her brain. Rey couldn’t be serious, could he? Did he know how he’d fueled her fantasies? “I’m sure you could. But I’m not into one-night stands.”

“It would take months for me to give you every pleasure I know. Making love with you, dear Agnis, I can’t ever imagine it being a one-night stand.”

Her nipples hardened at the thought of making love with Rey. She glanced up to find him staring at her chest. The conversation came to an impasse as she imagined his hands where her vibrator had been, then those hands being replaced by his sexy lips and eventually that hard shaft between his legs.

He was undoubtedly the most delectable male she’d ever encountered, and the first to pay her any sort of attention since Bernard. Men this good-looking liked their women to come out of magazines like *Vanity Fair*. For Agnis, there was no doubt about it; she wasn’t rail-thin *Cosmo* material.

Without warning, he struck. His lips came down hard and possessively on hers. She opened her mouth to protest, and he used the opportunity to invade it.

“Why me?” she gasped, once he gave her a chance to breathe properly again.

He laid her back, until she was stretched out fully beneath him. “You’re brilliant, beautiful, and when you look at me, I know you’re thinking of no one, nothing else, but me.”

Her hands went to his neck, and her fingers entangled themselves in his long hair, pulling him closer. Dizzying pulses raced through her as she welcomed his kisses, kissing him back. Like a lioness attacking prey to bring back food for her

cubs, she pushed against his shoulders and forced him onto his back. She straddled his hips, choking back a cry of pain when she moved her ankle wrong.

“Agnis, are you okay?”

“My ankle. It’ll be fine.” Ignoring the momentary stab of pain, she descended on his throat while she felt his hands cup her breasts through the powder blue blouse she wore. She tugged at his shirt. Buttons popped off it and scattered across the bed. Agnis leaned over his torso and took his tiny, hard nipple into her mouth.

Rey reached over her back and grabbed the hem of her blouse, pulling it over her head, not pausing to unbutton it. Damn, she hadn’t gotten around to wearing that sexy underwear yet. It didn’t matter. He’d unsnapped her bra in record time, sliding the straps over her shoulders and freeing her breasts. “These are as beautiful as the rest of you,” he groaned as he palmed them.

Her nipples turned as hard as diamonds when he began to pinch and roll them between his fingers, sending electrifying sensations to her core. When he lifted his lips to take a nipple into his mouth, Agnis shuddered with delight. Her pussy was moist with the eagerness of experiencing what else he could do to her.

Beneath her, his clad penis jabbed into her stomach. When she slid her hand down to his zippered shaft, he moaned. “Agnis.”

She rubbed him through the material before she unbuckled his belt. His rod jumped out of its confines once the zipper was down. “Were you planning on something?” she taunted as she shoved the jeans down, and then grasped him in her hand. “You aren’t wearing any underwear.”

His hands hadn’t stopped moving, even during her ministrations, and produced exquisite torture to her breasts. It was time to turn the tables, make him feel what she felt -- unfulfilled lust. She pushed herself to a sitting position, leaned back on his thighs, elevating her ankle on his shin. She began to fondle her own breasts, throwing her head back as she rubbed up and down his shaft with her jeans-covered cunt.

She stopped her writhing and watched his eyes grow as large as CDs. "What are you doing?" he gasped.

"I need a drink," she responded, then slid down his body to take him into her mouth.

"Oh! Gods!" was all he managed to pant.

Placing her hand around the rod, she caressed it as she licked her way up and down its length. His cock was thick and long. How far she could take him into her mouth? She didn't get a chance to find out. He stroked his cock upward as she fondled his sac. The force of his quick orgasm sent hot, salty cum deep into her throat. Greedily, she licked up every drop that tried to escape her mouth and tongue. "Stop, Agnis, I can't stand it."

Pleased, she sat up and lifted her good ankle over his legs, satisfied she'd given him a blow-job he'd never forget. "You taste marvelous."

Rey growled as he returned to a sitting position. "I want the same, to pleasure and taste you."

Dragging her backward toward the headboard, he stopped once she was supported by the down-filled pillow. He moved to the side and stared at her bare chest. With one hand, he caressed her breasts. Each inch of skin his hand touched ignited her senses. His subtle domination kept her wet with desire.

His mouth descended on hers as his unoccupied fingers worked the button of her jeans. He shoved them off her hips and down her legs, gently pulling the material over her injured ankle, then pushed her thighs apart. His hand went straight to her pussy, fingering her clit, sliding her cream around her sensitive folds. Rey kneaded her breast, his forefinger flicking against the underside of her nipple while he kissed her.

Her muscles throbbed as he slid a finger into her. When he added a second finger, she thought she wouldn't be able to stand any more. When he placed another digit into her sopping opening, using a come-hither motion, her hips bucked up to accept him. No one had touched her like that. The petting within her stroked spots

that shot pulsing sensations throughout her entire body. She cried out her orgasm as he continued to pump her with his hand.

He stroked his tongue along her throat. "We're not finished, not by a long shot."



## Chapter Four

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Rey murmured as he felt Agnis go limp with pleasure. “That was far too fast and easy for you.” He took her lips fiercely, branding her as his. His fingers continued to stroke her pussy as he kissed his way lower to her heat.

He breathed in her scent, then said reverently, “Ah, nectar.” His mouth captured her clit, sucking gently before he tasted her moistness. He continued to tease her bud, making her writhe, and then halting to let the sensations he created calm. She squirmed and pulled his face tighter into her cunt. He inhaled deeply the scent of her arousal before he used his tongue once more.

Over and over, Rey moved her to a climactic edge, listening to her ragged pants, and then backing off and letting the tension ease. Every time she neared orgasm, her juices flowed hotter and faster, and he lapped at her hungrily. She was so close, one lick, suck, or nibble would hurl her from the erotic pinnacle he created. As he stroked her ass with one hand, he used the other to insert two fingers deep into her. That motion, combined with his tonguing, gave her the last push over the edge. His reward was the clamping and releasing of her pussy around his digits.

“Rey!”

Long seconds passed before the tremors in her body ceased. Her slightly salty taste and hot, erotic scent made him want more than just this singular experience.

Bending slightly, Agnis caressed his face and then gently brought him back to her lips. Words were wholly inadequate. Something magical had occurred between them with this simple act of mutual pleasuring.

“I want it all, Agnis.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Yes,” Agnis whispered.

There was a ripping sound of foil, and she knew he covered himself before he took what they both wanted. It was all that was left before he conquered her totally. She spread her legs wider for him, and he slid into her in a single, smooth plunge. His balls slapped against her vulva, a new sensation that aroused her further. A breathless sigh escaped her.

“Grab on, sweetheart. We’re going for the ride of our lifetimes.”

Clutching his hips, she met him thrust for thrust, their pace accelerating at breathtaking velocity. Their warm bodies collided with one another, then separated before they crashed together with cataclysmic speed. Rey was making her body sing, the erotic music he created in her setting their rhythm.

Rey’s musk-scented after-shave melded with his aroma, made him smell oh-so-masculine. She moaned as he made small, primeval grunts. With each push, she came closer to the edge she’d just left behind, amazed she could handle the experience of going over again so soon. It was like flying and falling all at the same time.

She snaked a hand into his long, dark hair, then stroked his cheek. “Kiss me.”

Taking her mouth with his tongue, he continued probing her depths with his powerful cock. As their tongues mated, she could feel herself slipping over the threshold once more, vibrations seizing her. He filled her, stroking the alert nerve endings in her cunt as if he’d been made just for her body.

His eyes glazed over and he groaned. Within her, she felt the expansion of his cock. Agnis realized he was close, too. The tremors resurged throughout her body. With one final thrust, they both hurled over the precipice together, their bodies meshing in an explosive climax.

At that moment, she knew she was his, forever, always. It made no sense, how a single lovemaking experience could affect her so profoundly. A single tear of ecstasy escaped her, and when she once again met Rey's eyes, she saw moistness shining in his, as well. Something incredible had just happened. They were connected in a way she hadn't expected. And if she were to place a wager, he hadn't anticipated it either.

They languished in bed the entire day, talking and making love. She protested when Rey started intimately playing with her yet another time. "Please, give my hips a chance to recover."

He nuzzled her breast. "How long?"

She fondled his dark hair and laughed softly. "How am I to know?"

"I can't get enough of you, Agnis."

"I noticed." A satisfied smile came to her face. Could Rey be the one to accept her just as she was? Would he resist the temptation of trying to make her into something she wasn't?

He pulled her to a sitting position. "Sore, are you? I have just the right thing for us. Come with me."

She couldn't help but chuckle. "I've done that several times already."

"Silly girl," he grinned. "Let's get out of this bed for a while."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Just what did you have in mind?" she responded as she gingerly stood, grabbing the deep blue bed covering.

"You have no need of this. I don't ever want you to hide your body from me. It's - you -- are gorgeous." He pulled the blanket from her hands and let it drop to the floor. The look in his eyes as they took in her nakedness had her hot again. His

large hands encircled her breasts, stroking them softly, teasing her nipples back into hard tips. Then he let go of them and lifted her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Taking you to my rooms,” he rumbled.

“But, I’m naked!”

“So am I.”

“What if someone sees us?”

“There is no one here but Seamus, and when he’s not busy, he entertains himself in the solarium.” He winked. “Don’t worry about your exposure.”

There was strength in his grasp. Wrapped in its warmth like a butterfly in its cocoon, she willingly accepted where he took her. Would this be a metaphor for their relationship, following him with complete trust? Over the past several years, while there had been relationships, there hadn’t been one that inspired such confidence. Protective, intelligent, and sexy, could Rey be the man she’d longed for?

Intuitively, she knew the answer. She’d always believed in love at first sight, though she knew the notion was at odds with her otherwise logical way of thinking. Okay, so this was love at first possession or some such aberration of her tenet. But she wouldn’t mention it. Most men found the word “love” no more than a verbal trap. She’d keep her secret secured in her heart where no one could trounce it, the way Bernard once had.

Rey carried her upstairs, through a dark bedroom filled with massive oak furniture, and into a magnificent tiled bathroom of delft blue and white. Cubed glass set as a curved wall separated the shower area from the rest of the room. He reached in, turned on the water, then enfolded her in his muscular arms.

“Is this how you treat all your women?” She whispered the question against his broad, well-built chest, fingering the dark hairs that were sprinkled across it as she waited for an answer, not willing to look into his eyes and face the truth.

Rey didn't let her get off so easily and tilted her head to face him. "You're right, there've been other women. Too numerous to count."

Of course, a man with a body like his, and a skillful lover to boot, would have women falling all over him. A woman would be insane to refuse him, should she be chosen. She broke their eye contact, and ducked her head into his chest. She really didn't want to know the answer to her question.

"You are the first to be here, with me, in my room," he whispered against her hair. Her heart seemed to swell with his revelation.

Steam rolled gently over the top of the block glass and began to cloud the large mirror across from the enclosure. He turned her toward it, and she saw reflected a stunning woman with long brunette hair, nestled against a tall man with powerful legs. "Never forgot who you are."

"Who am I?"

"You are mine, Agnis Fitzgerald, for as long as this roller coaster ride lasts." He lifted her, then carried her behind the glass blocks. As Agnis leaned back against the warming tiles, Rey made love to her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, she woke alone. It didn't alarm her. His words were etched into her spirit. She was his, for the time being. She soared, high and soundless like a glider skimming over the green hills of County Clare. For the first time in months, Agnis felt as if her life had finally taken the right turn and had gotten back on track. Between Rey's loving and her research grant, what more proof did she need?

Seamus had taken her home in Rey's Range Rover, mumbling about her inability to drive with an injured ankle. Her car, delivered sometime before, was parked near the front door. The thatched cottage seemed empty without Rey's presence, but she knew that if he'd been there, she wouldn't have been able to record her interviews or her astounding observation.

She would have been sitting astride his hips, driving down on his cock and racing toward another incredible orgasm. The thought made her wet and ache to be filled by him.

Turning on the little radio she'd purchased shortly after her arrival in Kilkee, Agnis tackled her work, documenting in particular the peculiar actions of the large black wolf that had led her to safety. Again, her thoughts turned to Rey. The man jumped into her thoughts with alarming frequency. She turned up the radio a touch more, attempting to smother those thoughts with sound.

A wailing siren, a rare occurrence, pierced through the afternoon quiet. Considering the narrow roads, it was likely an accident. Tourists going to or coming from the Cliffs of Moher were probably involved in a collision. When the wails died away, Agnis returned to transcribing her notes. She'd go back to the Slieve later tonight, better prepared, with field glasses and warm gear to look for the lone wolf.

Lost in her work, time passed, and it wasn't until there was a knocking at her door that she looked up from her work. She opened the door, her eyes slowly adjusting to the dim, twinkling light. A moment later, she made out Paddy O'Deas, standing in the gloom. "How may I help you, Mr. O'Deas?"

"Inspector Berke would like to see you."

"The police? Why?"

"They think you might be able to help them, but they need you to come to them right away. They've a bit of a mystery on their hands." Gathering her jacket and keys, she followed Paddy to his small Ford. "They would have called you, but your telephone isn't working yet."

"It works. I've been using the Internet." She paused and peered at the short, elderly man. "Paddy, what are you involved with?"

"Lass, most of us hereabouts can't believe what's been seen."

"And what is that?"

He gave her an odd look. "Tracks, lass. The likes of which haven't been witnessed in these parts in centuries."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Inspector Berke, these aren't the tracks of a local mastiff." Agnis tapped the photographs of footprints left behind in a farmer's fallow pasture.

"Aye, Miss Fitzgerald. I didn't think so. "My cousin," he nodded toward Paddy, "told us this was your sphere of expertise. What do you think?"

"I think, as much as I would love to believe a wolf pack truly roamed this area, that someone here is perpetrating a hoax."

"How do you explain it, then?" The inspector had an excellent question.

"Perhaps someone has gotten true wolf paws from the Americas, or even a natural history museum. I'd check the latter for any thefts or missing items, and perhaps make general inquiries about people who've traveled of late, anyone who might have some sort of interest in wolves. Could you tell me again what area these were seen in?"

Of course she remembered; she just wanted to be accurate. Tomorrow she'd go look at the tracks herself. If she could ascertain other prints nearby, she'd prove the hoax.

\* \* \* \* \*

If it were a hoax, it was a damn good one, Agnis thought as she surveyed the marks the next morning. There were tracks from at least four different animals. They had different strides, and varying impressions in the soil indicated several weights.

The prints weren't far from the spot she'd twisted her ankle a few days before. The overlay of the configuration suggested animals, most probably dogs, had come to the water to drink. Once on the grass, the pattern disappeared. Besides the

possibilities she'd shared with the inspector, there was another one that came to mind. What if someone, with or without the government's blessing, had decided to reintroduce the wolf population to the area?

The idea wasn't all that far-fetched. Wolves had been reintroduced to parts of Europe. Currently, Scotland was preparing a wolf center in the Highlands. If one were able to get the wolves, a bribe to the right official might get the animals admitted as German shepherd or husky pups. It would put an individual in a prime position to begin a captive-breeding program with varied DNA.

A more sinister idea intruded into her thinking. What if someone wanted to discredit a potential reintroduction? Raising and releasing wolf pups, as a threat in the region, might set back reintroduction plans for a generation.

It was crazy enough to work. But who would do such a thing, and why? Most Irish didn't care that wolves once inhabited the Emerald Isle. They didn't have a vested interest in their return. The majority would resent the forced reintroduction if they weren't ready. The inspector had a mystery on his hands.

Of all the scenarios she concocted, the worst was of hunting parties tracking the animals down as they had in Cromwell's day, or just like her great-grandfather had, with the sole intention of destruction. Her objectives were clear-cut. She had to make sure no individual fanned the flame of ignorant fear, and that under no circumstances would wolves be blamed.

When she broached the idea to Inspector Berke that afternoon, she was relieved at his response. "I couldn't agree with you more, Miss Fitzgerald. Any news blokes here would muddle any investigative work we do."

"All we have are tracks, anyway," Agnis said, picking up the photographs of the paw prints stacked atop a pile of paper on the inspector's desk. "Unless there is an actual sighting that proves there is a pack of any sort, the entire story could make County Clare the laughing stock of the country."

It would hurt her, too, interfering with her thesis, and causing a downward spiral that would destroy all she was working toward. There wouldn't be a chance



for the wolves to be brought back, if a wild dog pack was found. There would be no chance to indemnify her ancestors. For the public, it would be too similar to the sort of damage they feared wolves could do. If the negative publicity hurt the local economy, it would be an uphill battle to get the locals to see the possibility of future economic rewards associated with wolf reintroduction.

“Inspector, can you handle the news? I’ll educate the families I come in contact with. The last things we want are rumors or a panic.” The man nodded, and Agnis left the station satisfied that the dike had been plugged.

## Chapter Five

Once she'd finished another set of interviews near Slieve Callan, Agnis searched for the lair of her lunar escort. On the west side, she found evidence of recent animal activity, but not enough to determine if the creature had been a dog or something else.

Her thoughts reminded her of how she arrived at Rey's home and the incredible, passionate lovemaking they'd shared. In the past two weeks, she'd been with him a half dozen times, laughing, playing chess, and making enthusiastic love. He called each night they weren't together and seduced her with promises of how they would make love when he saw her again.

She sensed his home wasn't far, but the route Seamus had taken was circuitous and shrouded in fog. There was no way she would be able to find her way back without the help of her late-night wolf guide, or an escorted daylight trip.

As if on cue, Rey called her name. When she turned, the man who'd fueled her lustful fantasies was walking toward her, carrying a large pack and a blanket. She stood and swiped her dirty hands on the thighs of her jeans. She smiled. "What brings you here?"

"Why, you, of course!" Rey held out the backpack and grinned. "I thought you might want some lunch."

She took the red-checked blanket from him and led him to a sheltered area under a tree filled with golden orange-colored leaves. A light breeze played with her dark locks, and when she turned to Rey, her breath caught in her throat. The wind teased his long, dark hair, dragging it toward his gilded brown eyes. When Rey shoved it back, she could see the strong column of his neck, the well-honed muscles of his shoulders before they disappeared under the dark blue windbreaker he wore. No one had a right to look that good.

Spreading the velvety blanket, she sat, then patted the red material next to her. "What did you bring in that bag?"

"Bread, cheese, wine, the usual items a man would bring to seduce the woman who's haunted his nights."

Agnis laughed nervously. "You really expect me to believe I've been haunting your sleep?"

Hunger for her leapt into his eyes. "I've resented having to attend business in Dublin. I'd rather make love to you, every night I can. I told you it wouldn't be a one-night stand."

It would be easy to want him with her always. The memory of her parents' divorce knifed her. Could she risk hoping for more than a series of one-nighters?

Rey was only willing to commit to however long the roller coaster lasted. The thing about a roller coaster was that once you finally managed to get on the ride, the thing flew wild, fast, hard, and suddenly was over. It left you breathless, wanting more, and the damn thing was just... over. "I know it wasn't, Rey. We had," she corrected herself, "have incredible, mind-blowing sex. I don't expect anything more."

"You need to set your expectations higher." He moved to her, putting an arm about her shoulder and drawing her close.

"Higher than mind-blowing? I don't know how much higher one can go."

Rey's eyes narrowed. "Be serious."

The behavior of the men she'd been previously involved with came to mind. Not one of them had looked for anything close to serious at this stage of their relationship. Rey wouldn't be any different. Protecting her heart became paramount. "Look, I'll concede that the time we spend in bed is the best sex I've ever had, and that I'll never forget it, ever. But it's just sex, nothing more, and absolutely not a commitment..."

Before she could say anymore, he cut her off with a kiss that totally encompassed her mouth. Rey pulled her tightly against him, fiercely possessive. Agnis liked it. Not once had Bernard ever held her like a valued treasure. Rey's hand stroked her back through her jacket, and she found herself wishing he would touch her bare skin. Instead, he abruptly pulled back.

"Quiet, woman. Drink." He pulled two non-breakable wineglasses from the backpack and filled each with a deep red burgundy he removed from another pocket. "To us." He paused and narrowed his gaze upon her. "For however long we have, with no regrets, no excuses."

She couldn't speak. Hunks like him didn't want women like her. Period. End of story. Yet, here he was offering her something semi-permanent, a half-promise of a future. A ride that would someday come to an end, her heart reminded her.

"Say it, Agnis," he prompted. "Say it because it's what you want to say."

The paralysis of her vocal chords weakened. "To us, Rey, for however long we have."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey pulled a cheese board and knife, and a block of cheese from the picnic pack. Deftly, he cut a piece and extended a black and pale-yellow piece of Cahil Porter to her on the knife's point.

"That's odd-looking."

"Cheddar aged with Guinness gives it the unique coloring." She opened and he inserted, withdrawing the blade carefully once she'd wrapped her lips about the

piece. "Thank God you don't protest about what you can't eat," he mumbled. "I hate it when a woman is fussy over something as simple as food." The thought of her eating and drinking him flashed through his mind. "As a matter of fact, I like all the things you consume."

Pushing the cheese away, he lowered her to the blanket. "I have something I want you to eat soon." He wrapped her in his arms and rolled on top of her. Rey slowly unbuttoned her blouse, his fingers caressing the skin of her breasts as they were exposed to the light. Her pale mounds were barely contained in a lacy red bra that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Rey hardened even more. He gulped, fighting an animalistic urge to take her right then.

With her blouse completely undone, he could have swept the red lace from her shoulders, but he didn't. He moved to the metal button of her jeans, popped it, then unzipped the garment, revealing matching panties. He pulled the jeans over her hips and let them languish at her feet.

"Blood-red against such pale skin," he whispered before he used his tongue in an attempt to move away the tiny scrap between her legs. The material interfered with his tongue delving into her core. Frustrated, he ripped the material from the waistband. His mouth descended on her clit the way a starving man would attack a crust of bread. In and out, he worked his tongue's magic, devouring her essence.

"I want you, Agnis."

"Right here and now?"

He moved to kiss her, leaving his hand where his mouth had just been. "I want to take you right here in the wide open where you can scream your ecstasy, my name, and no one will hear." He twirled his fingers around her pussy, tiny ripples of a future orgasm announcing their presence to him.

He returned to her lush lips. Once again, as before, their tongues danced together, mating, foretelling of the delights other parts of their bodies would soon experience. Still fully clothed, Rey straddled her and nudged at her opening with his cock.

She pulled his Aran sweater over his head, and then forced the tee underneath to follow. She struggled momentarily with his belt, but once undone, unzipped his trousers efficiently. Now they were in equal states of undress. His cock, with no undergarment restricting it, sprang free.

“This is just sex, Rey,” she whispered against his chest as she worked to align her cunt with his rod. “So just fuck me.”

Lifting on his arms, he pushed her torn panties down and poised his cock at her slick entrance. His jaw ticked as he tried to contain his frustration. “Is that all you want, Agnis, for me to just fuck you?”

“Yes. Just do it.”

“Anything the lady wants.” He ripped open a condom and shoved it onto his cock before he slammed hard into her. He grabbed her breast in his hand and yanked it out of the lacy cup, trying to contain his disappointment. “Ya want it rough and dirty, do ya?”

She writhed beneath him. Each time his cock hammered home, he felt her cunt grab him tighter.

“Yes...today.”

Grasping her hips, he tilted her up, the angle allowing him to drive deeper. His mouth latched onto her hardened nipple, biting and nipping, and then sucking it into his mouth deeply.

“Harder, Rey, harder.”

The words spurred him onward until his balls slapped against her. She moaned.

“No, Agnis, not yet. My name. I want to hear it screamed from your lips.” At least he’d have that gratification to complement his physical release. He thrust harder and faster as he covered her mouth, then her neck, with bruising kisses.

She gripped his hips with her legs, her muscles stroking his length with strong ripples as he rode her. Each penetration brought him closer to shooting his load. Her breath came in short gulps. She was close, too.

“Agnis, oh, my...Agnis.”

“Rey!” she shrieked as convulsions tore through her and stroked his cock.

His cock exploded. Hot spurts of cum filled the condom. Collapsing on top of her, he ground out, “Satisfied?” He fastened his hand onto her breast, caressing the peak of her nipple to an even larger, harder point before pulling, then pinching it hard. He rolled onto his back, bereft. Agnis had erected an ice wall that denied him the possibility of hoping for something more permanent between them. “Let me know when you want me to fuck you again.”

Surprising him, she dove between his legs, slipped the filled condom from his penis, then wrapped her hand around his softening shaft. A few forceful caresses and his rod thickened. She attacked his dick with her mouth. Taking him in deeply, she moaned around him, erotic vibrations rocketing through him. His cock returned from its flaccid state faster than he thought possible.

He struggled to sit up with her mouth attached to his rod, and soon had his hands entangled in her hair. A fresh drop of his semen escaped, and she rolled it around his cock head with expertise. She’d taken control and seemed to love every lust-filled second. “Agnis,” he groaned, surrendering to her sensual assault.

She lifted her face for a moment, and then his eyes rolled back. She established the rhythm by the intensity of her sucking. He grew larger in the confines of her mouth, signaling an impending orgasm. She moaned around his cock again, tonguing the length, licking the ridge around its head, her vocal cords making vibrations that had him squirming. As she fondled his balls, he felt them draw up, just before he shot his load into her mouth, shouting her name.

When his quaking was finished, she crawled up to his shoulder and nestled in its hollow. Maybe he’d been wrong. If this was ‘just sex,’ she wouldn’t want to cuddle, would she? The way she’d milked him with her mouth, the selfless release she’d given him -- that had to be more than just fucking, didn’t it?

“Don’t you think we should put our clothes back on, Rey?”

His attitude brightened. “I’d only have to take them off you again.”

“Be serious. In a bit, the sun will have set and the air will be cold.”

He twisted her hair around his fingers. “Let me do the honors.”

They sat up, and he stroked her nipples until she gasped, before he replaced her breasts into the cups of the bra that he’d never gotten around to totally removing. He buttoned her blouse, then hauled her up before he knelt to draw her ruined panties up between her legs. Tiny kisses traced the outline of her knee, the inner part of her thigh, lingering long enough to taste her thoroughly yet again.

Her musky dew and light floral perfume combined with the scent of his cum and cologne to make a magical, unique scent. They smelled of the moor and of love. He inhaled deeply and smelled her increasing desire. He wanted to laze back in the grass and make love to her. But not just sex. He wanted to possess her heart and her body, taking her as his woman.

A soft sigh filtered down to him as his face remained buried between her legs. “We must stop this madness.”

Rey pulled the torn panties into her crotch, and then reached down for her jeans, pulling them up to wedge everything tight against her. “I rather like this madness.”

She squirmed at the tautness rubbing her. “We can’t live on sex alone.”

“Ah, but wouldn’t you like to give it a try?” He winked at her, then kissed her on the cheek before pulling up his trousers. Grabbing his tee shirt and sweater from the grass, he changed the subject before she could answer and reject him outright. His sexual hunger for Agnis had grown into something far more intense. “Shall we get a bite at the pub? I could do with a little something to replenish my energy stores.”

“You, sir, are incorrigible.”

“And you, madam, would have me be no other way.”

\* \* \* \* \*



They arrived in separate vehicles, minutes apart. Agnis spotted an open table not far from the bar and waited for Rey. A few of the patrons acknowledged him as he entered, including Daniel Malone. Venom dripped from Malone's voice. "Hello, Rey."

Rey stopped at the bar and ordered a couple mugs of Guinness. When he sat down at the table with Agnis, he whispered, "Malone's rather a blow hard, but generally harmless."

"He wasn't harmless the first night I met him," she hissed. "He's causing trouble for me, too, riling up the locals about the reintroduction study." A moment later, Daniel pulled out a chair from the table and turned it backward to straddle it.

"And will ya be officially introducin' me to your fine lass, Rey?"

"Daniel Malone, meet Agnis Fitzgerald. Agnis, Daniel."

"Mr. Malone." Agnis responded with all the politeness she could muster. What she really wanted was to slap him for his boorish behavior, and for the inaccurate stumbling blocks regarding the wolves he was throwing in her way, too.

Malone's voice held contempt. "American, Rey? I'd thought you'd want a good Irish lass. Your tastes are truly international." Daniel turned toward her, his next words sickeningly sweet. "I'm sorry to have come on to you like that. I had a bit too much of the black." There was a pause, then Daniel continued, "What brings you to County Clare?"

Agnis watched the man's tongue lasciviously lick his lips. He knew why she was here. He'd cast vituperations on her work to several of the farming families in the area. Her skin crawled. If she'd been a wolf, her hackles would have stood on end. And if he cornered her once again, she had no doubt the event would conclude in some bloody fashion. "I'm a research biologist."

"Then you've heard of the recent activity?"

Rey took her hand. Instantly, she calmed. "We've been busy of late, Daniel," he said. "What activity would you be referring to?"

“Where have ya had your head buried, man?” He stopped, then grinned lecherously. “Never mind the answer to that.” Daniel leaned in closer to them. “The werewolf and his pack are about.”

“Rubbish,” Agnis replied, a little loudly. “There is no such thing as a werewolf, and we all know that wolves have been gone from Ireland a good long time.”

“Aye, but that hasn’t stopped the werewolf from returning and bringing more of his kind, especially the females he can sire pups on. Their prints have been found in several areas. Soon the county won’t be safe for man, nor beast. I don’t intend to sit around and let a savage army of werewolves take over!”

“There’s no proof,” Agnis retorted.

Daniel tapped her on the forehead. “Then here’s a news flash for you, dearie. Two of Michael Keane’s sheep were found dead this morning, torn to bits by werewolves, what was left of their bloody remains strewn about his pasture. “

“And what makes you so certain, Mr. Malone? Wild dogs could do damage of that nature.”

Daniel spoke loudly, and several heads turned toward him. “I’m certain, lass, because I’ve tracked the relatives of the beasts in the States. And I’d swear to buying a round for the entire pub that I saw wolf tracks.

“As a matter of fact, I’m putting together a little hunting party. At the next full moon, when the light is bright, I’ll be hunting for the bloodthirsty leader of the pack, with silver bullets in my rifle.”

“And just where do you think you’ll be hunting these animals, Daniel?” Rey quietly questioned.

“Why, on Slieve Callan, of course.”

## Chapter Six

“Slieve Callan? That’s not far from my property,” Rey responded. “Michael Keane’s place isn’t anywhere near there as I recall.”

“No, it isn’t. You know well and good he’s near Doo Lake.”

Rey prodded, “Then why go to the Slieve, Daniel?”

“There were signs the animals went that way.”

Shaking his head, Rey continued. “Best make sure you have your facts right. I wouldn’t want anyone or anything hurt unnecessarily.”

“You can count on it, Rey. It’s part of the reason I’ll be delaying the hunt until the full moon. Two weeks to gather facts, permits, and any other evidence that may be found in the meantime.”

Agnis gasped. “Surely you can’t get a permit to hunt dogs?” But another thought countered. What if the old Cromwellian laws were still on the books? With wolves being extinct, and no conservationists around at the time, what reason would there have been for removing them, especially if the demise of the animals went unnoticed for a long period of time?

She finished the last of her beer. “As interesting as this conversation is gentlemen, I have no wish to be a part of it. I find hunting in general repugnant.”

Malone sneered. "What of the man that hunts for his food, lass?"

"That, Mr. Malone, has more to do with survival. What you propose is nothing more than sheer destruction for the sake of destruction. It's violent and senseless."

Her speech finished, Agnis wished she had more Guinness to cool the fire she felt. Men like her great-grandfather had to be stopped. Rey stroked the back of her hand, a motion intended to calm and comfort her. It didn't work. She had a nearly irresistible desire to throttle Daniel.

"Ach! Just another of those do-gooders, are ya?"

"Mr. Malone, I don't want to argue more with you. Suffice it to say, I don't agree with your prejudicial thinking and that on this topic, we won't find agreement." She looked from Daniel to Rey, then stood. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"Between his sheets, I'll be thinking."

Agnis felt the color drain from her face, shocked by his audacity. She didn't have time to think. In the next second, all hell broke loose.

Rey's left fist connected with Daniel's jaw. Blood dribbled from the corner of Malone's mouth. The short man countered with a punch of his own as Agnis scrambled out of the way. Rey and Daniel grabbed at one another, falling onto the table, then tipping it over. Mugs crashed to the floor and shattered, their contents splashing onto nearby patrons. Two other men joined the fray, trying to hold back Daniel and Rey.

"Stop it! Stop this fighting!" Agnis yelled, pulling at Rey's arm.

Rey ducked a swing and turned to her. "This is my business, Agnis, not yours." Another swing was directed at Rey, but it went wild. Rey pulled her from its path. "Keep out of trouble. I can't watch your back and avoid these fists!"

Daniel lifted a chair and threw it toward of one of the men, who sidestepped the odd missile. The chair smashed into the floor and skidded to a rest against another table. His partner let go of Rey and went after Daniel instead.

More men jumped into the skirmish. Agnis backed away. A woman screamed as a body went flying onto her table, her dinner and drink landing in her lap. A chair crashed through a window. Cutlery clanged to the floor. The heavy smell of spilled ale permeated the air.

Agnis shrieked as someone grabbed her by the arm. She turned to see Rey grasping her.

“Let’s get out of here.”

She nodded, and they slipped out the back door. They made their way around the building to the parking area where their cars were. “You didn’t have to do that,” Agnis said breathlessly as they neared Rey’s vehicle.

“The hell I didn’t. You’re my woman, and he was out of line to cast aspersions on your behavior.”

“I think we’ve done well enough on our own,” Agnis snapped.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The anger in his voice should have stopped her, but she recklessly continued. “We exposed ourselves. Anyone could have seen us this afternoon.” She took a calming breath. “I liked my life better before you tried to convince me our relationship would be more than a one-night stand.”

She stalked toward her car but wasn’t fast enough. Rey caught her again. “You know it’s more than that, Agnis.”

“Do I?” She didn’t dare believe Rey would be willing to stick around once her work was completed, anymore than her father had for her mother. “A relationship requires a lot more than being proficient in bed!”

“It’s a damn good start.”

“No, Rey, it’s not. We have incredible chemistry when we make love. But neither of us is planning for this to be a serious, long-term relationship. What do we know about each other, really?”

“I know I want you in my life and in my bed.”

“For how long, Rey? A season? A year? I like you, but I’m not fooling myself into thinking what we have going is anything more than a craving we’re both indulging.”

He looked at her as if he was going to say more. He didn’t.

“What happens when I can’t be the sexual plaything you want right now, when the roller coaster comes to an end?” Damn it, tears rimmed the edge of her lower lashes, threatening to unleash a torrent.

Her voice cracked. She knew what happened. Hadn’t she seen it with her own parents? Two years after her youngest brother left home, her parents divorced. They called it irreconcilable differences, but it was really nothing more than a lack of common interests and goals. It still stung.

The muscle of his jaw ticked. Through clenched teeth he whispered, “Agnis, it’s not like that, not with you.”

Tears streaming down her face, she got in her car, and drove away before Rey could say anything more.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following day, Agnis drove to several farms, touting the benefits of eco-tourism. A few voiced Malone’s diatribes. The biggest concern of the farmers, though, seemed to be compensation for the loss of their livestock, an issue easily addressed. Various agencies vowed to pay a stipend for any proven loss due to wolf activity.

The day had been extremely long since her argument with Rey. Despite what had happened, she couldn’t keep him out of her thoughts. Truth be told, the man had gotten under her skin, and had used sex to do it. Calling her his woman in that primitive tone, reminding her they had something more than just a one-night stand. He was so fervent, it made him sound sincere. She almost believed him, wanted to, but knew better. It was far safer to accept that their relationship was temporary and not based on anything more than their physical attraction to one another.

She'd enjoyed their bedroom antics just as much, if not more, than he had, including their little adventure on Slieve Callan. Rey made sure she climaxed and had her pleasure before he finished taking his. But when she thought of their argument, of how he thought good sex was what was needed for a reliable, healthy relationship, and that she was "his woman" like some piece of chattel, her ire rose.

Once her chats were completed for the day, she went in search of evidence of dog or wolf activity in the area near the Slieve. Something was definitely happening, she thought, when she found the remains of a fresh feeding. Around her were scattered bones, some with red flesh still hanging from them. Faint paw prints were left behind in the soft ground. The patterns seemed a bit off compared to similar feeding sites she'd examined in the past.

Trying to shrug off the thought, she recorded her findings and prepared to leave. But something about that site bugged her. She pulled her camera from the knapsack and took a couple photos. Perhaps she'd see what disturbed her once the pictures were developed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey paced the length of the sitting room. He needed to apologize for his part in the argument with Agnis. Of course, she would think their relationship lacked permanence. What had he shared with her about himself? He hadn't even told her what drew him to her other than her willingness to be his bed partner. Now he'd lost that, too.

So why hadn't he done what he knew needed doing? Pride. He rolled his eyes. Pride always seemed to get him in trouble. Of course, it had protected him a time or two from confessing his condition to an untrustworthy female. Perhaps his attitude had lent him an air of arrogance, but that, too, insulated him from uselessly risking his life.

But it wasn't the same with Agnis. She wouldn't betray him. The night before the full moon would be here in a few days. When the change came upon him, he'd

venture into the areas he knew Agnis to visit. Maybe her scent would calm him, make him swallow his pride and go to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis walked into the Shanavogh Pub where the brawl occurred, hoping for some gossip regarding her discovery of the feeding site. Not willing to be exposed to more commentary regarding her after-hours activity, she piled her hair haphazardly on top of her head and stuffed it under a Kilkee Bay fishing cap. With her blue overshirt hanging loose about her, she prayed no one would notice her sitting at the dark oak bar.

Thoughts of Rey and the things she'd said the last time they'd been at the pub consumed her as she ate her butter and cheese sandwich. Why hadn't she apologized? The dry bread stuck in her throat. She knew. Fear had her shove Rey away from her heart so she wouldn't end up among the walking wounded again.

She took a swig of her warm Guinness. She was nearing the end of her meal when the door opened and she heard the cocky voice of Daniel Malone.

"Ah, good to see so many of you fine lads here."

She angled her head in the direction Malone had sauntered. He was addressing a small group of men who seemed to have an interest in his words.

"By now, many of you have heard about the attack on Keane's farm. I've been out to his place, and I can tell you that it weren't a dog that perpetrated that skawly destruction of those defenseless animals."

"Then what was it, Malone?" a voice at the back of the room asked.

"It was a werewolf."

There was a general mumbling in the crowd. "Away with you, Daniel Malone. There's no such thing."

Agnis couldn't believe the man had said it either.



“There’ve been no werewolves talked about in these parts in years, Daniel,” a different man commented.

“Be that as it may, I know what I saw.”

The first voice came through the muffled sounds again, loud and clear. “How do you know, Malone?”

“I saw its prints. Big as a man’s hand, I tell you. There’s no dog around here that big. The length of its stride was well over six feet. The vile creature looked as if it had devoured two whole sheep. Not much was left but blood and bones.” He paused a moment. “Barkeep, I’ve a throat on me.”

A mug of foamy ale was handed to Daniel. He took a long pull before continuing. “None of you here are gobshites, so I know none of you will be wantin’ your woman or babes to fall to the ravenous beast. He’s got his females to feed and sire, and soon the region will be overrun. Any man, woman, or child that survives an attack will become one of the onerous creatures, too. You remember that movie, “American Werewolf in London”. They said it was fiction, but it wasn’t. The truth would be too hard for the public to take. I’m telling you, none of us hereabouts will be safe until his blood is drained upon the ground, and the beast is dead!”

“You’re full of malarkey, Malone,” another man called.

“You won’t be thinking so when your woman is found murdered, as has been the history of this spawn of evil. Have ya forgotten the brutal murder, two summers back, of that young woman whose heart was cut out of her chest, her body mutilated nearly beyond recognition, near the Cliffs of Mohr? The gashes caused by long sharp teeth? And while you think I may be full of malarkey, you can’t deny the carnage at Keane’s. I, myself, am loading my gun with plenty of silver. It’s the only thing that will stop him, you know. If you’re smart, you’ll do the same. Mind yourselves that you not fall his victim. I have the silver bullets available for a small price. You’ll be wanting them, lads, you can count on it.”

There were more whispered words that Agnis couldn’t hear. Could this man really be trying to form a werewolf posse, complete with Hollywood’s silver bullets,

to end the threat? It was insane. Or a great way to bilk money from the superstitious men.

“You may think this is gammy, but all you have to do is show up here Friday night. Either we catch and kill the werewolf at the full moon, when the evil creature is at the height of his power, or we find out it was nothing to fear and you have a couple pints on me. There’s no way you can lose, men.”

Again, there was a general mumbling. Agnis saw Daniel as he got off his oratorical chair and made his way into the crowd. Every once and again she heard the words “werewolf,” “silver,” and even “full moon.” She could only guess as to the context, and those guesses sent shivers down her spine.

Somehow, she was going to have to find a way to stop those men from killing whatever poor creature had wandered into Keane’s paddock and made for itself a meal of mutton. Placing money for her supper on the counter, Agnis slipped off the barstool and out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the first night of the full moon, Agnis headed for the hollow on Slieve Callan. Earlier in the week, she’d found the remains of a large animal’s meal. The decimated carcass strewn on the ground, the remains spread in a large arc, bothered her. A niggling thought had pestered her since Malone’s speech. What if he’d placed those vestiges there in a premeditated attempt to win the locals to his side? What better proof would Daniel need to corroborate the existence of a marauding meat-eater and its destructive nature?

Thank goodness the spot was far from the location of an overgrown cave she’d discovered. The shallow opening had been home recently to some sort of carnivore, if the bones in the corner were any indication.

Covered by the black sweats she wore, her face smudged with black grease paint picked up at a local sports shop, Agnis was confident she merged with her surroundings. Her black satchel held her notebook, flashlight, and stungun.

*This is foolish. I don't have a plan to stop Daniel.* Nonetheless, she knew she was doing the right thing. She checked her satchel again and spotted the camera. If she could get pictures of Malone doing something -- anything -- illegal, perhaps she could thwart whatever scheme he was attempting.

She didn't have to wait long. A heavy cloud covered the rising full moon and distant lights flickered in the darkness. Malone's hunting party was on the way, their crisscrossing lights moving nearer.

Abruptly, there was a soft rustling in the shin-high grasses to her right. Agnis twisted her head to look in the direction of the sound. It seemed ages before she finally located a pair of shiny eyes. The fox-like animal didn't move. To her left, the lights of the hunters grew larger. When she glanced back to where she'd seen the animal, it was gone.

She breathed a sigh of relief. At least that was one creature that wouldn't fall at the hands of Daniel Malone's band.

As if someone turned on a stage spotlight, the area was abruptly bathed in light. The cloud, propelled by a steady breeze, had drifted away, leaving the moon the brightest object in the night sky. Silhouetted, against that amazing backdrop, stood a large canine, its snout pointed toward the stars.

The only other time she'd seen anything as beautiful was when she participated in a tracking field trip in Yellowstone. She'd returned to the site of her great-grandfather's crime, and had seen a beautiful light gray wolf, poised on a crest, just like this wolf was. The Irish wolf's black pelt gleamed, light bouncing off it as if the fur was covered in diamonds. She recognized him immediately, her rescuer, the wolf that led her to Rey's.

A great howl erupted from his depths as he closed his eyes and tipped his head toward the moon. All the loneliness and sorrow of the world was contained in those mesmerizing seconds.

"There he is, lads!"

A shot rang out sharply, loud and amazingly clear through the night, followed by another, the reports echoing ominously. The howl turned to a frenzied yelp of pain and the wolf ran, limping, from the surreal landscape. The men shouted, invigorated by their seeming success. A steady march began toward the top of the Slieve.

## Chapter Seven

For one heart-wrenching moment, time stood still. Eyes wide in shock, Agnis caught the breath that had fled from her lungs when the guns fired. She glanced about, looking for the mammal she'd spotted earlier. It was nowhere to be seen.

But the other? What if the wolf wasn't mortally wounded? He would need medical attention, given the cry of pain she'd heard. She'd need to get to him before the hunters did. Time and stealth were of the essence.

Malone's band moved its way toward the crest, guns at the ready. Now that they had seen a large, wolf-like animal, they acted as if they believed his tales of a werewolf.

Hunched down, Agnis kept to the darker shadows, out of the swath of light shed by the moon. She headed toward the ridge, keeping far from the advancing group. The dark hampered her, but she didn't dare give away her location by turning on her flashlight, not until she was at least out of their line of sight and the reach of their lights.

Travelling faster than her opponents, she reached the crest just as another cloud covered the moon's face. Near her feet was a small a dark blotch. Hurrying down the far side of the Slieve, she tried to follow the trail of the injured animal.

She nearly stumbled when she tripped on a small branch, downed by some earlier wind. A scene from a Hollywood film came to mind and she grabbed the branch that held a few scraggly twigs and leaves, and brushed the trail she left behind. As demanding as it was for her to track the animal in the dark, Daniel Malone's difficulties would be doubled.

Agnis, hands shaking, destroyed as much of the trail as she found. When the tracks headed toward the creek she'd explored days before, she knew the wolf would at least make it to a safe hiding place for the night. Once in the water, he would be more challenging to track. She sighed, glad she had been given more time to find the wounded creature.

Casting a glance over her shoulder, she saw Daniel's party at the top of the rise, stooped over as if looking for clues. Agnis kept to the deeper shadows of the Slieve, thankful for her growing knowledge and experience of the mountain. Soft grasses absorbed the sound of her feet crossing the hollows. She traversed the open grass, constantly checking over her shoulder. She couldn't afford to be caught, not while Daniel was filling the locals with wild stories.

It wasn't long before the contour of the rocks near the cave came into view. Switching on the flashlight a few minutes later, she gasped. Something was in the miniscule cave. Its eyes reflected the reddish glow of her light. She spun around to check on the hunters. There were no signs or sounds of Daniel and his company. Perhaps she'd managed to throw them off the trail. She turned back to the rocks and kept the flashlight pointed down.

The arc of her light filled the niche under the cave lip and swung back to her feet. Just before she switched off the flashlight, she saw a puddle of something dark. Blood. The wounded wolf was crammed within the undersized fissure. Searching her bag, she laid hold of her stungun. A wounded animal could be dangerous. To dress his wounds, she'd need to be prepared to defend herself, in case the wolf attacked.

Somehow, she had to coax him out so she could examine the injury. Searching through her bag, the only food she could find was a single stick of chewing gum. It wasn't much of a lure. As she leaned back against the jagged rocks, Agnis unwrapped the gum, then placed it near her feet.

The meager supper she'd had hours ago wasn't enough to stop her stomach from rumbling at the sweet smell. Hopefully, it would do the same for the wolf in the cavern. She needed patience now. The wolf would have to come forth from the fissure at his own pace. In the meantime, she'd keep an eye out for Daniel and his band of interlopers.

A scrabbling sound reached her ears. She aimed the flashlight at a spot near the opening of the outcropping, staring intently, and was finally rewarded when she saw a pair of dark paws. On one, the fur was matted. "Come on, boy," she cajoled, steeling her nerves for the worst. "Just a little further, and ol' Agnis here can take a look at what that evil man did to you."

Her reward was another forward motion by the animal. "Yes, that's it, come on out. I'll do my best to help you." Wouldn't the gang back at school just roll about this? Agnis, talking to the animals like some modern Dr. Dolittle? If she hadn't been so concerned about the amount of blood she was now seeing on his upper leg, she might even laugh. But she couldn't.

Rivulets of blood ran down the injured limb. Gradually, Agnis slightly curled her fingers, then held one hand, palm down, toward the wolf's long snout, a gesture meant to help develop a sense of security and familiarity, while keeping a tight grip on her stungun in the other. Prepared to snatch her hand back should she hear a growl, she was pleasantly surprised when a rough tongue licked her fingers.

With her eyes adjusting to the dim light, Agnis was assured it was her wolf. Not that she would admit it to anyone she saw. They would either think she was crazy or try to kill him.

He was beautiful. He had dark fur streaked with paths of gray, intelligent eyes, and an aura of gentleness. And she was sure it was a he. In all her studies, it had

been the alpha male that began the howling songs of the pack. The breadth of his shoulders indicated he was strong. Only the strongest survived to lead the pack.

She pulled off her black sweatshirt, then tore the sleeve from the shoulder. Digging around in her satchel, she found a small pair of fingernail clippers to help her rend the soft material. Her persistence paid off, and Agnis was finally able to wipe away some of the blood to look at the wound itself.

The bullet appeared to have lodged in the meaty portion of his shoulder. She had no doubt that the projectile would have to be removed. She needed stable light, proper equipment, and help. The wolf would have to be either restrained or subdued, neither of which could be easily accomplished alone. With Daniel's gang searching the Slieve for some proof the wolf was real, it was totally impossible to treat the wound here.

She folded the strip of cloth, and gingerly placed it over the wolf's injury, then tied another length of material firmly around the makeshift bandage. It was no tourniquet, but it would at least slow the blood flow until she could get him somewhere safe. "I could drag you if you'd let me," she mused aloud, "but that won't do your hindquarters much good. You don't need further injury."

Agnis rubbed her arms to warm herself. "You led me over hill and dale not long ago. If you can manage, maybe we can get back to Rey's."

The wolf licked her hand as if it agreed with her assessment. "Okay, then. We're off to see the wizard." She lightly laughed at her own feeble joke. "All right, so maybe Rey isn't the wizard, but I had the definite impression that he isn't fond of Daniel Malone."

She stepped away from the outcropping. It seemed they moved so slowly that only a time-lapse camera could document their forward momentum. "When I tell Rey that Malone was responsible for this, I think you'll find a knight to champion your cause." She looked behind her and smiled when she saw the furred animal, limping heavily, following her. "Now listen, I'll do my best not to go too fast for you,



but you have to do something, anything, to let me know if we aren't going the right direction. Deal?"

Again she felt the wolf's tongue on her hand. "I'll be damned. I think you can understand me."

\* \* \* \* \*

The moon was past its apex when, once again, Agnis saw the outline of Rey's lodge. Unlike her last emergency stop, the home showed no active life within. She rang the bell anyway. If Rey and his man were sleeping, they'd understand her urgency.

Seamus came to the door, a robe belted tightly around his middle. "Miss Fitzgerald," he said, covering an escaping yawn. "What are you...?" He stopped abruptly when he saw her companion. "Oh, my. Is it bad?"

Agnis nodded. "He's been shot. Where can I take him?"

"The kennels, just behind the house. I'll gather some supplies." Seamus turned and ran toward the kitchen.

"Okay, boy, just a little further. Around back, we can get you some help. Seamus is one of the good guys."

Seamus was waiting for her by the time she'd led the wolf into the kennel. "Here, Miss, there's room for him in here." A few barks from the kenneled dogs, and a whimper from the wolf, echoed in the building. When those few sounds died away, all that could be heard was the labored breathing of the wolf.

Seamus held open a door that housed various dog supplies, and pulled a blanket from a closet. The wolf gingerly lay on his side, exposing the injured limb for their scrutiny. From another shelf, Seamus extracted a pair of scissors and began to cut away the material binding the wound. Congealed blood stuck to the sweatshirt sleeve better than Super Glue. More than once she winced, as Seamus got closer to the entry point.

“Seamus, where is Rey?”

“Out of town for a few days, business,” he replied as he continued to work the material off the wolf. “He should be back tomorrow or the next.”

The wolf didn’t move, whimper, or do anything to indicate the pain she knew he had to be enduring. She stroked his head and rubbed his muzzle gently. “I think he must be in shock,” she whispered. “Do you think we should call a vet?” The words escaped her before she realized that calling for professional help wouldn’t be very smart. “Never mind. Daniel Malone is after him.”

“Malone, heh? Never thought the likes of him brave enough to do something like this. Look about for another blanket or two. The best we can do is keep him warm and see if I can’t get this hole closed.”

“Shouldn’t we try to get the bullet out?”

“I’m afraid we may do more damage to his muscle. And with him walking a ways, he’s probably wedged it in nice and good. I’m content to stop the bleeding.”

When the last of the cloth was removed, Agnis helped Seamus clean the wound. Already it was showing signs of healing, the blood flow having lessened considerably. Seamus pulled a large piece of gauze from the first aid kit and placed it over the wound. Together, they wrapped a long sports bandage around the wolf’s upper shoulder.

“You’ve been amazing, boy,” Agnis murmured to the wolf as she stroked his head.

“Aye, that he has, lass. I’ve done all I can. He’s lost a fair amount of blood, but not nearly as much as you thought. Your quick thinking is what’s made the difference.” He paused and wiped his hand on a towel. “It’s best we let him stay here and sleep.”

Agnis stroked his snout again, before rising to her feet. “Where can I find a bowl for water and food?”

“The far stall is empty. Mr. O’Brien hasn’t replaced Aul Wan since she passed on. Her things are yet there.”

It took a moment to gather the bowls, and find water and food to partially fill them. Agnis set them down, near the wolf’s head and reached out to scratch him behind an ear. “Here you are. Be good, and don’t gobble your food and drink too quickly. You don’t need to be getting sick on top of everything else.”

“Good thinking, Miss Fitzgerald. He needs his rest now, and I suspect you do, as well. You can finish out the night in the guest room, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Seamus. I’ll take you up on that. Then I can see how he’s doing in the morning.”

They left the room. Seamus closed the door before pulling out a key to lock it. Agnis curiously stared at the door a moment before following Seamus. Why on earth did he lock the door?

## Chapter Eight

*Candles lit the room. Every nook and cranny was aglow with the soft light each flame gave forth. A waiter, complete with hand towel over his sleeve removed the vestiges of a fancy dinner, then returned with champagne flutes and a bottle of Château du Pape. The fizzing dwindled and he poured two glasses, but where was her host?*

*He answered her question by coming to stand behind her. Strong hands massaged the tops of her shoulders, sending exciting shivers down her spine. Tenderly spoken words of love mingled with murmured promises of what was to come. A long black velvet box appeared on the table. Open it.*

*It was a command she readily obeyed. Within, displayed on red silk, was a three-tiered pearl necklace. It's beautiful, she thought she said. But she wasn't sure. Her lips didn't move. His hands reached down and lifted the necklace from the box. Soon she was fingering the strands of smooth pearls around her throat. My family heirloom is only as beautiful as the woman who bears my son.*

*One by one, the candles went out until she was in total darkness.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Agnis couldn't get away, no matter how fast she ran. It was behind her, and she could feel its hot, moist breath on the back of her calf as it puffed heavily. She ran faster and faster toward the narrow opening on the horizon, the only light growing smaller as the fissure began to close.*

*She didn't know what it was, only that it came for her, and when it caught her, her life would end. Agnis didn't want to die, wasn't ready to die. The crevasse was near. Safety was within her reach. She sighed in relief, then turned around. Her pursuer leapt upon her, his jaws at her throat. Agnis let loose a blood-curdling scream.*

\*\*\*\*\*

“What were you thinking, man, when you went out on the Slieve?” Seamus chided while he tended the shoulder wound as Rey sat at his desk in the great library. “You’re lucky someone other than Daniel Malone hit ya. And it’s a good thing yer lass was there to make sure you didn’t bleed to death.” He cleaned the wound with antiseptic, then slammed the bottle on the desk. “Damn lucky the bullet was easy to pull, too.”

“She kept her head about her, I’ll give her that,” Rey responded as he cautiously shrugged into a white cotton shirt.

“What were ya thinkin’, man, what were you thinkin’?”

Rey couldn’t answer Seamus immediately. He didn’t have a good answer. Somehow saying he wanted to see Agnis again seemed flimsy. He groaned. Not only had he risked his life, he’d risked hers. He was about to reply when a terrified scream tore through the house. Agnis!

“Guest room!” Seamus announced as he hurried through the library doors. The two men burst through the guest room door. Agnis was sitting bolt upright in the bed, clutching her neck. While Rey went to Agnis, Seamus headed toward the window, checking the lock. “Nothing here, sir.”

“Check the grounds. Agnis, you’re safe,” Rey crooned as he sat on the bed, put an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her toward him. “Wake up, it’s only a dream.” He shook her gently, loosening her hands from her throat. “You’re okay. Wake up.”

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Rey could see her pupils were dilated. Something had frightened her badly. Turning toward him, her eyes began to focus on his face. “Rey?”

“I’m here. You had a nightmare. The monster of your dreams is gone.”

“It wasn’t a monster,” she whispered. “It was the wolf. He tried to kill me.”

“The wolf? You mean the German shepherd you brought to the kennels last night?”

She shook her head. “That was no dog, I swear it.” She inhaled deeply. “I don’t understand. He’s not a vicious brute the way Daniel makes him out to be. But he had me by the throat. The blood...my blood...it was everywhere.”

Rey thought quickly. “There, there. Don’t get yourself further upset. I’m here and you’re safe.” He stroked her sable hair, trying to calm her. “Perhaps your subconscious is telling you that while your wolf may seem tame, he is still a wild creature and capable of violence. Dreams are often warnings for us to beware.”

She shuddered. “It was just so vivid. I mean, I was dreaming this lovely dream in black and white, and then the next thing I knew, I was running for my life. There was crimson everywhere.” She inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“Of course, I am. Why don’t you get dressed and join me for breakfast?” He stood to leave. “Afterwards, we can go visit this fellow you brought back last night.”

Seamus closed the door behind them. “Are you thinkin’ what I am?”

He looked at Seamus directly, meeting his gaze head-on. “If you’re thinking it’s the curse revisiting this household, then I am. Her dream is a premonition, similar to those of my mother and grandmother.”

“What do ya propose to do about it?”

He clapped the man on the shoulder with his good arm. “I wish I knew.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Breakfast with Rey was enjoyable, despite the feeling of fear that resided just under Agnis’s calm exterior. The nightmare had been awful. Involuntarily, she lifted a hand to her neck, caressing the spot where she’d dreamt the wolf had sunk its teeth. She could still feel the warm blood as it streamed down her throat from his brutal attack. The nightmare had been all too real.

There was a loud rap upon the table. “Earth to Agnis, Earth to Agnis. Anyone home?”

She started. “I’m sorry, I was gathering wool.”

“Isn’t my conversation stimulating enough?” There was a smile on his face, but it didn’t seem to reach his golden brown eyes.

“It’s not that at all.” She hesitated. The nightmare refused to fade. “That nightmare, it seemed so real, especially after...”

“After what?”

“Never mind. It’s silly.” She really didn’t want to talk about it. No matter how beautiful or romantic the dream, it still ended up with a large wolf trying to tear her throat out. She needed to see the wolf, see if the animal she’d come to know was the vicious one of her dream. “Can we see our patient?”

Rey pushed back from the table and came to her chair. “As you wish, my dear.”

With a proffered arm, he helped her from her seat and led her outdoors, toward the kennels, wrapping her arm around his. She drew strength from him. “You know, I don’t remember seeing your kennels or any dogs when I was here last.”

He patted her arm and leaned close to her ear. “We were a little busy when you were here last.”

The blush hit her face in record time, judging by the heat she felt in her cheeks. Rey was an accomplished lover. The times they'd been together were fantastic.

They entered the kennel, and Rey walked directly to the door Seamus had locked the night before. "How did you know he was in here, Rey?"

He turned the handle. "Seamus told me," he responded as he pushed the door open.

Agnis expected something, some sort of sound, a whine, a thumping tail, even a throaty growl. What she got was silence. She pushed past Rey into the room. Silence was appropriate for what greeted her. The wolf was gone.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"I don't know," he replied, a little too smoothly for her peace of mind. "He must have gone back to wherever he came from."

"Through a locked door?"

Rey shrugged. "Wolves are roamers. I'm sure wherever he is now, he's better off."

"Better off!" Agnis couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "He had a bullet in his shoulder, for Pete's sake. What if he has to defend himself? What if Daniel and his friends come back looking for him?"

"The wolf wouldn't have left if it wasn't well enough to go."

Understanding dawned. "You! You let him go!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Let the lass go," Seamus counseled later as they went through business correspondence in the office. "You can't stay involved with her. You put her life at risk."

"Don't you think I know that? She's had the dream, and I was the one who killed her in it." Rey paced to the window. "She's going to die because of me. My



God, Seamus, she's begun having the dreams! You know as well as I, that the premonitions tie her to me better than a marriage certificate ever could."

"Ya have to stay far from her, then."

"And how am I supposed to do that when she's continually on the Slieve?" He returned to his desk and sat heavily in the leather chair, his finger tapping on the desktop. "She's dedicated to her study, intent on proving the region is a prime candidate for wolf reintroduction." The padded thrum of his fingers on the desk continued for long minutes.

How could he get her away from County Clare and the danger he posed to her? He closed his eyes and pictured her hard at work, typing notes into her laptop. If she didn't have her technology, she'd be forced to go back to Dublin. And the best way to get rid of her technology was to remove its funding. Yes, that was it! He could pull a few strings and have her grant rescinded.

"Perhaps it won't be as hard as I believe. Agnis has accepted me for who I am, not some wanker with a lot of money." Rey snapped his fingers. "If I want to get Agnis off the Slieve, all I have to do is cut off her money. She'll have to go back to Dublin, or America, and won't be anywhere near County Clare."

"What if she finds out it's you?"

"She already believes I let the wolf go. I doubt I could sink any lower in her esteem." He rubbed his shoulder. "By the way, good patch up."

"You owe much of that to the girl. She got enough pressure on it to keep you from bleeding to death, and I still say you're lucky. You'd be good and sick in your bed if the bullet that hit you had a silver jacket."

"I won't argue with you there." He paused, remembering Agnis's gentle ministrations to him. Her touch was calming, and infused him with warmth and a sense of value. She'd been dedicated to getting him to safety. He really didn't want to do this to her. But he had to. It was the only way to save her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis shook with fury. It had been three weeks, to the day, since she'd emailed her preliminary findings. The seventy-page document included detailed maps, drawings, and current attitudes toward the idea of reintroducing wolves to the region. Hours of effort had gone into the creation of that manuscript. Her work hadn't warranted what she received; a complete dismissal and notice that her grant would end in thirty days. Her work had been discarded, without a second thought. She hadn't even been given the courtesy of a face-to-face or voice-to-voice discussion.

She punched in the numbers to the University of Dublin, striking the keys hard. She followed the damned phone tree before reaching her advisor, Alan Hibbart. "Alan," she practically screamed into the phone, "What the hell is going on? I thought my grant was good for a year!"

"Slow down, slow down, Agnis. It *was* good for a year."

"Then what happened?"

"The donor pulled the funds for the project."

"Why?"

"No explanation. Just said he wouldn't be assigning any more funds to the project, effective immediately. Didn't want the locals riled up about wolves and the problems they'd create. Since we'd just gotten his last gift, that left you with thirty days."

"What did Bernard have to do with this?"

"Bernard? Nothing, that I'm aware of. Haven't you two patched up your differences?"

"Who's the donor?"

"You know I can't reveal that information without the donor's approval. At this time, I don't have that authority."

"This isn't over yet, Alan. If I have to scrimp together every last pence, that's what I'll do. This is important. Clare is a prime reintroduction study location. Damn it! My doctorate depends on it, and that damn grant!"

She slammed the phone back into the cradle. She didn't want to hear anything else that sounded like platitudes. Okay, so someone was cutting her money off without giving her a chance to defend her work. She'd just find another way to get her thesis accomplished. It wouldn't be easy, but she could do it. She had to if she wanted to clear the family name. She'd get a job at the Shanavogh Pub if need be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis was in Ennis, doing research at the Mill Road library trying to make the most of the time she had left. She had several spiral bound notebooks piled haphazardly near her, one of which was open. She scribbled notes into it from a particularly large volume of local history. Stories of Brian Boru permeated the oldest volumes. Agnis could see why the locals adored him. The great strategic battles he'd waged soundly defeated the Vikings on several occasions.

Earlier in the morning, Agnis had found a small reference to wolves in one of the Boru histories. The clue allowed her to trace other references, but the going was slow, and she was exhausted. Historically, she could prove the wolves and animals they survived on, contributed to a healthy eco-system and economy in the county. Proper planning and management would create an environment that wolves and man could benefit from. Long days of research, writing, interviewing, and the development of economic predictions were taking their toll. Lassitude overcame her, and her head fell softly into the open tome.

*They fell into one another's arms in the clearing on Slieve Callan. Around them, the pines created a shelter from the wind. Above them, the full moon gave them light by which to gaze upon one another in love. His hands encircled her waist, then moved up to her shoulders, removing the delicate robe from her body. "You are beautiful," he whispered against her lips before he kissed her. He slid the straps of her nightgown from her shoulders, exposing her pale, voluptuous breasts.*

*He removed his cloak, then his doublet, placing them on the soft mantle of grass at their feet. She trembled as he untied his breeches, and stepped out of them. He was magnificent, and hers, she thought as he tenderly laid her on the bed of clothing.*

*She gasped in delight when he placed a muscular hand upon her breast and rolled the nipple before placing his lips around her hardened peak. Soft moans left her mouth as he took his time between each mound. Tentatively, she reached her hand toward his hardened length. "Make me yours this night."*

*His mouth came down again on hers, gentle at first, then increasingly hard as his tongue mated with hers, claiming her as his woman. "You are sure about this course?"*

*"I am. I love you and would know no other." It was for him that she was doing this, giving him her body. He would find release within her, and they would be tied together throughout eternity with their joining.*

*Pushing her gown to her waist, he nudged her legs apart with his knees. He straddled her and then let his member rest at her feminine entrance. "You are sure?" he asked her yet again.*

*"I am."*

*His hand stroked between her thighs, and her body responded, preparing to allow him to penetrate her. His mouth once again fastened on her breast, and he began to push into her, ever so slowly. "I would spear you once, darling, then the pain would be over. Do you trust me?"*

*"Yes," she replied breathlessly.*

*With a thrust, he plowed through her maidenhead. It was as he said, a sharp pain that quickly subsided. Slowly, he pushed further, then withdrew only to enter her again. He repeated the process over and over until her body began to match his pace. Never before had she known sensations like the ones that she experienced between her thighs. Each thrust of his powerful member created a wave of passion that echoed throughout her body. Faster and faster those waves came, until she thought she could bear no more.*

*Rapidly, he entered her, so fast she could not control the crests of pleasure. Each wave crashed one upon another until she screamed out his name to the bright moon. His lips crashed down upon hers as he moaned her name against them, before collapsing onto her and taking her into his arms, rolling his clothing about them.*

A hand touched her shoulder. "Agnis, are you alright?"

## Chapter Nine

The last thing Rey had expected to find was Agnis asleep at the County Clare library in Ennis, and then waken her as she moaned. It was a sound he'd heard before, while she was in his bed climaxing. Yet, here he was, shaking her shoulder. When she finally lifted her head, sleepy eyes greeted him.

"Rey? What are you doing here?"

"I might well ask you the same. This isn't much of a place to get a good rest." *Or to have an orgasm.*

"Oh." Awareness crept into her eyes. "I fell asleep, didn't I?"

"It seems so." He looked at her carefully. Blue darkened the hollows beneath her eyes, the whites striped by thin red lines. He couldn't keep the concern from his voice. "What have you been doing?"

"Research. Double time. My grant has been cancelled." She rubbed her eyes. "I'm compiling references on the pre-Cromwellian natural environment. It will be necessary to know what other animals existed in order to restore the balance of predator and prey. With primary source documents, there will be little argument about what was here."

He glanced away as guilt washed through him, trying to find something else to focus on besides her exhausted looking features. Instead of packing her things and

running back to Dublin, it appeared she was attempting to get the most for her remaining money.

“You’ve got moxie, girl. Most people would have quit.”

It was true. Most people would have given up without a fight. Not Agnis. The little spitfire was determined to see things through, despite having no money to continue her studies.

She grinned. “I’m not most people.”

“When did you lose the grant?”

“Last week.”

The graduate studies program at the University moved quickly, he thought. “And you’ve been putting in sixty hours or so a week on this project?”

She shrugged. “At least that.”

No wonder her beautiful face looked haggard. “Are you daft? You can’t be doing that.”

“I don’t have a choice. I have to get as much done as I can before I have to get a job. Once I have to work, my research time is going to be halved or worse. I won’t be able to interview nearly as many people as I’ll need to.”

Work? He hadn’t even considered the possibility she wouldn’t leave. He had to convince her that working to finance this thesis was not practical. “You’ll get ill, not resting or eating properly.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “I can’t remember the last time I was sick. I’ve worked these hours more often than I want to recount, especially during my undergrad years.”

“Jobs round here don’t pay much. It’s why so many people leave and go to Shannon or Galway.”

“You’re here, aren’t you? You support yourself in that big lodge house just fine.”

“That’s different. I inherited the place with a goodly sum to maintain it. Without the financial windfall of my family’s estate, I couldn’t afford the taxes or

upkeep.” That much was true. The O’Briens had fared well over the centuries, a necessity, given the problems the family curse created.

“So, you’re telling me you wouldn’t be in the country, but you’d be a working stiff in Shannon, Galway, or even Dublin?” She shook her head. “I don’t believe that for a moment. You’re too solitary to enjoy the fast pace of the city.”

It took work to contain his surprise at her astuteness. She’d seen into the isolated life he lived. “So you say.”

“So I know. Doesn’t it get lonely, Rey?”

“Being alone and being lonely are two different things. I enjoy being alone.” But he hated being lonely, and he was immensely lonely, caught in the prison of the family curse. There were days the depression drove him to despair. The rare days he’d gone into town and drowned his sorrows with a bottle of Bushmills, not brave enough to take his own life, hoping a drunken accident would do it for him.

When Agnis had been in his home, he’d felt more alive, more connected than he had in years. That time with her represented the biggest risk to his secret he’d ever allowed. This train was taking them in the entirely wrong direction. Quickly, he changed tracks. “When was the last time you ate?”

Agnis shook her head. “Ate?”

“You know, food, bread, sustenance.”

“Ah, um, I don’t remember. I’ve been working pretty hard. I had some cheese and crackers a while ago.”

“Today, or yesterday?”

Rubbing her face she replied, “I don’t remember. I haven’t really been all that hungry anyway.” Her eyes darted to the book she’d been searching. “I really need to get back to this. My time is severely limited.”

He reached over her and gently closed the book. “It won’t matter if you get sick, or pass out from hypoglycemia.” He held out his hand. “Lunch is on me.”



At first, he thought she'd refuse, but then she moved to scoot the chair away from the long oak table. He couldn't let her do this to herself, not when he was responsible for the cancellation of her grant. If he had to feed her to keep her from landing in the hospital, he'd do it.

"Where are you planning on working when your grant runs out?" he asked her a few minutes later over a plate of warm soda bread at the Black Sheep's Inn.

"I thought the Shanavogh Pub might be a good place. I'd be sure to hear about any unusual happenings. I've some barkeeping experience and bartenders get told things. I might get lucky."

The thought of Agnis getting lucky in the bar he frequented didn't set well with him. She was pretty and vivacious. Someone would surely hit on her, maybe even someone like Daniel Malone. The thought of her in another man's arms punched him like a fist to the stomach.

"I doubt the pub would pay enough for you to hang onto the car you're renting, or the cottage. You need a roof over your head."

"Something will turn up; it always does. In the meantime, I need to keep a close eye on the Slieve." She popped a bit of bread into her mouth. Watching the way her tongue came out to meet it, then wrap around the piece before she pulled it between her lips, had him aching to feel her around him again.

"What's this really about, Rey? I wasn't in a very easy place to just bump into."

A waitress deposited two large bowls of steaming Irish stew in front of them. Chunks of lamb, carrots, and potatoes in an onion and beef broth made Rey's stomach growl. He hadn't realized how hungry he'd been. He was about to answer Agnis when he looked into her face. Her eyes were closed and she waved a plume of steam toward her face.

"This smells heavenly," she said reverently.

"Tastes better."

"How'd you find me, Rey?"

Damn, she wasn't easily distracted. "Paddy O'Deas knew you were doing a lot of research in the library. Ennis is the best place for that." He shrugged.

"Why?"

He knew what she was asking, and he ignored her. "It has the most exhaustive collection of historicals in the county."

"You know what I mean."

He placed his fork carefully on the table. "I had a call from Daniel Malone."

"The wolf?"

"Says he tracked him to my property, despite your care with his trail."

"Did he find tracks leading away?"

"A few," he lied.

Agnis gave him an icy stare. "The wolf isn't safe, not since you let him free."

"Daniel's convinced I had something to do with his survival."

She pounded a fist on the table and the silverware rattled. "That wolf is endangered."

"So are you."

"Me? Why?"

"You're on the Slieve nearly continuously. It won't take Malone long to figure out your affinity for the wolf. If he thinks you're getting in the way of catching his werewolf, he'll see to it that you're removed."

Agnis's eyebrows shot up. "Do you think he had my grant rescinded?"

"I don't know what measures he'll take, only that he's determined. You have to be cautious."

"You be careful, Rey. Someone might think you care." She finished the stew, wiped her pink lips, and stood, peering at him through her glasses. "Thanks for lunch," she said. She left the inn without a backward glance.

He mulled over her last comments as he wound his way back home in his Aston Martin. Of course he cared. It was why he'd gone looking for her, why he'd warned her about Daniel. If it hadn't been for her damn dream, he'd be shagging the lovely Miss Fitzgerald right now, getting his needs filled over and over and erasing every minute of loneliness he'd ever experienced.

The thought of her mouth nibbling the length of him made him uncomfortably hard. It was far too easy to envision those pink lips around him, bringing him electrifying pleasure. He pulled into the garage, knowing he'd be spending a long while in a cold shower.

Instead, Seamus greeted him. "You've a visitor, sir. He's been waiting the better part of an hour in the solarium."

"Business?"

"It concerns you intimately."

Rey's curiosity was engaged. "Who's here?"

"Daniel Malone."

Rey stormed into the sun-filled room. "Why are you here?"

"What, no pleasantries?"

"I haven't thrown you out yet, if that's what you mean."

"There's been activities on Slieve Callan."

"So you've said, loud and clear, several times."

"I've proof."

"Of what, Malone?"

"Your American slut brought wolf pups to Clare."

Rey's hands fisted at the slam to Agnis. He forced his fingers open; he'd have to stay calm a few more minutes if he wanted to find out what the hell Malone was talking about. "She isn't mine, and you need to watch your mouth, Malone. It's why I busted your chops the first time. Miss Fitzgerald is here to study the economic and environmental impact of reintroducing the wolves *legally*."

“She’s a clever one, but not clever enough.” He reached toward the floor and that was when Rey noticed the burlap bag at Malone’s feet. “She didn’t know there’d be a local expert to contend with.”

“What’s in the bag?”

The short man reached into the sack and pulled out a fresh-looking pelt. “My first wolf kill, man. And your woman knows about ‘em. Her tracks are all over the place.” He twisted the hide back and forth before returning it to the bag.

Rey smelled the spoiled odor of death. His mind raced. “Of course they are. She hikes around the Slieve so she can sketch.”

“I know.” Malone put a hand into his pocket. “That fellow we tracked up this ways, we found plenty of his blood in a cavern. Your Miss Fitzgerald left this behind.” He pulled out a small charcoal pencil.

“What’s that, Malone?” But he already knew. He recognized the name imprinted on the wood. It was one of Agnis’s art pencils.

“She’s behind it, O’Brien. We can’t have those marauders wandering our pastures and killing our sheep. Especially when we don’t know how many of ‘em are werefolk.” He shoved his evidence back into his trouser pocket.

“So now you’re accusing Agnis of bringing *werewolves* to Clare?”

“She showed up the same time the most recent sightings began, her tracks are all over the Slieve, and the woman is pushing us to accept them back on our lands. How much more proof do we need?”

“Stay off my land, Malone.”

Malone reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a piece of folded paper. Slowly, he opened each fold, and then held it in front of Rey’s face. “Ya haven’t got a baldy. The guarda gave us permission to hunt for the creature or creatures that attacked Keane’s sheep.”

Rey scanned the document. “This is a hunting permit, nothing more. You have no legal right to be on my properties, or those of anyone else without express

permission. You might make plonkers out of some of the folk around here, but the bulk won't be tricked by your malarkey."

Daniel refolded the permit and returned it to his pocket. "Me and the boys are going to be around whether you like it or not, Rey. We're going to find each of those monsters and turn them into wall trophies just like this guy." He picked up the bag, and shook it. "I just wanted to let you know that we're going to be around. Warn you to keep your woman away from our moral duty. And that goes for you, too."

Rey clenched his jaw. "You're bolloxed up, Malone. You warned me, now I'll warn you. Anything happens to that girl, and I'll come looking for you. You'd be wise to stay as far from me as you can. Don't come back here."

Malone moved to the solarium's door. "It looks like we've drawn our line in the sand."

"Seamus!" Rey bellowed.

Seamus rushed to the solarium. "Yes, sir."

"Show Malone out." Rey stormed past Malone to his office, and slammed the door. It rattled in its hinges.

Moments later, he heard a soft tap on the oak entry. "Come in, Seamus."

"Sir, this isn't good."

"I've made a right hames of it. Agnis isn't safe in town now that Malone has fingered her. She'll be Malone's scapegoat."

"But, sir..." Seamus began.

"I know," Rey interrupted. "The dream. She's not safe here, either. But she can't be deserted." He reached for the phone.

## Chapter Ten

The ringing of the doorbell cut through the quiet, sharper than a surgeon's scalpel. Agnis pushed her glasses over her forehead and rubbed the bridge of her nose, puffing an errant strand of hair away from her eyes. She missed Rey, but she'd cut off nearly all contact with him so she could concentrate on finishing her thesis before her funds ran dry. She'd been working on transferring her notes into her laptop for three hours this morning, after having spent two hours meticulously recording the details of her recent dreams. And it was only nine.

She doubted they were related, but the dreams were so detailed that she worried they were trying to tell her something, just as Rey had suggested. Grabbing her robe, she hurried to the door. The ringing had changed to incessant pounding. "Keep your pants on, I'm coming." With a final cinch of the belt she threw open the door.

"You better not be."

"Rey," she exclaimed softly. He was handsome in snug jeans and a navy blue wool sweater. She forced herself to stay still when all she wanted at the moment was to throw herself into his arms. Instead, she satisfied herself with looking into his golden brown eyes. As before, the look of desire in those eyes nearly stole her breath.

He took a step into the cottage, kicked the door shut, and encroached on her space. She took a step back. "You can't stay here any longer, Agnis."

"Why not?"

"Malone has a half-cocked theory about how you've brought wolves to Clare."

"Me? That's nuts!" He came closer and grasped her shoulders. Heat flooded her, sending waves of yearning through her being. The itch to wrap her arms about his neck and bring his lips to hers kicked her heart rate into high gear. She had to fight this attraction if she wanted to finish her work on time.

"It is. But," he hesitated, his strong fingers massaging the tops of her shoulders before lifting to play with her long hair, "he's serious. He all but came out and threatened your well-being at my home yesterday afternoon."

"What?" She blinked rapidly, trying to think.

"Agnis, I think you should stay with us, Seamus and me. You can set up in the guestroom. We'd be able to keep watch over you."

She shook her head. The morning had taken a turn she hadn't considered. "I can't do that. What will people think? What about my work?"

A smile lit his face, and he took a strand of her hair and ran it down her cheek. "That we're lovers."

Those three words thrilled her to her toes. Her heart did a flip-flop. Then her brain kicked in. After Bernard had left, Agnis had decided it was better 'never to have loved at all' than deal with the pain of rejection. "I can't, Rey. I tried to tell myself that it was 'just sex' with you, but I can't do that any longer." She had to protect her heart and her work. "I can't be involved with you and finish my thesis."

"Why?"

"I can't concentrate when I'm around you. I do have a deadline to meet, and you're far too distracting."

Rey wrapped his strong arms around her. "The safest thing for you to do is to go back to Dublin."

She narrowed her eyes. "This dissertation means everything to me. It's the culmination of all I've worked toward since I found out..." she abruptly stopped. "I'm not quitting now."

"I didn't think so." He pulled her into his arms. "I've been thinking on what you said at the library, about being alone. You've brought light into my home. Stay with me."

Agnis hesitated a moment too long. Rey's lips claimed her mouth. Tiny moans fluttered from her throat. His hands slid under the lapels of her robe, stroking the soft hollow of her shoulder. He fanned her spark of desire into a smoldering ember. Her momentary resolve disappeared like an ash floating in the air. A moment later, she felt his hand close about her breast, as his fingers toyed with her hardened nipple.

"Love me, Rey."

"I intend to," he replied, releasing her long enough to sweep her into his arms and carry her to the rumpled bed. He tossed her onto the sheets, her head landing softly on the pillow. The front of the robe separated, exposing her to his view. "Mmm, you're beautiful."

Rey seductively stripped off his clothes as if he were a pro, used to women tucking dollar bills into his g-string. He tossed a condom toward the dresser. The foil packet bounced against the edge and landed in front of the nightstand. He stood before her, the embodiment of all her sexual fantasies.

His right shoulder, though, had an ugly wound. "So, that's why you've favored your arm. What happened to your shoulder?"

"An accident a while back. Nearly impaled on a whale harpoon, of all the oddball things."

"Oh." The thought nauseated her. The queasiness fled as she watched his muscular hands hold his erection. He ran one palm over the head of his penis, then squeezed his rod. She looked into his face, then deeply into his brown eyes and her



breath caught. No way could this hunk be here with her, making her burn with desire. She gulped, “Why are you...?”

It was as if he read her mind. “Because you’re not.”

A drop of his cream appeared on his cock, and she licked her lips in anticipation. When he was in her, she felt whole. “No, you should be here.”

She spread her legs wide for him, warming to his game. She teased him, and played with her clit. In his eyes, she could see the effect she was having on him. When she slowly dragged a finger to her creamy cunt and inserted it, Rey inhaled sharply. Slowly, she withdrew her forefinger and waved her hand in the air before returning it to her aroused bud.

It was a game of sexual chicken. She hoped she didn’t get off before he decided to make love to her. Who would give first? She watched, fascinated as he grabbed his cock tighter.

“Rey.” His name was torn from her lips as she began to feel the first shivers of her orgasm building. She inhaled rapidly, then let out a shudder. “Please, hurry.”

It frightened her to realize how much she needed him. She wanted to hope for more, but Rey, she wasn’t sure what he wanted.

He knelt next to the edge of the bed and his shoulder bumped against the nightstand. The wooden door creaked open. “Ah,” he whispered, and then jumped onto the mattress, straddling Agnis. His husky voice asked, “Is this what you want? Me to make love to you?” He leaned over her, his hands delving beneath the pillow.

All Agnis could do was nod her head. She wanted his love, but for now she could accept the pleasure he gave her. It seemed enough. There was a crumpling sound, then she felt his covered cock, hard and ready, against her. Rey slipped into her cream. She threw her arms around him and brought his lips to hers. She’d do everything in her physical power to show him how much he meant to her. She pushed past his tongue and took his mouth, staking her claim.

A moment later, he pinned her arms above her head with a single hand, forcing her breasts to jut upward. He teased each hardened peak with his mouth. Each

thrust driving deep into her core was accompanied by the smooth slap of his balls against her pussy. “Harder, Rey. Harder.”

With every stroke, it felt as if he sought to brand her as his. She met each plunge with uplifted hips, trying to bring him into her more fully. Her foot, ankle, shin, thigh fit against his, right to the hip. “Come for me, Agnis.” She bucked wildly, perspiration rolling down her chest.

His hand moved back to the pillow to cradle her neck when he suddenly stopped. “What’s this?” he asked as he dug beneath the pillow and brought forward a long, semi-hard plastic rod. “Your vibrator.” A wicked smile lit his face as she felt him pull out of her. “Turn over and get on your knees, you naughty girl.”

“How did you get that?” Blood rushed to her face, and then she remembered Rey’s satisfied ‘Ah.’ “What are you going to do?” she asked as she complied with his command.

“You’ve been bad, little Agnis, playing with plastic when you should have been playing with me.” He caressed her ass with his large hands, and then followed with stinging strikes on each cheek.

Agnis yelped and then the warmth of the spanks flooded her cheeks. She longed to experience another orgasm at his hands. “Rey, finish me, I need to come.”

Once again he spanked her, then played with her clit and pussy, teasing her with his long fingers before finally entering her. It would only take a few powerful thrusts before she climaxed.

“Babe, you are so tight. I could do you all night and not get enough.”

“You don’t have all night.” *But you can have a lifetime, if you want it.*

He pumped and she clamped down on him, tightening her muscles around his amazing length. Skin on skin, his balls slapping against her, they moved faster and faster. “Are you ready, babe?”

“Yes, oh yes, please, Rey.”

He grabbed one of her hips with his hand. She was vaguely aware of a soft buzzing.

“Then come for me,” he whispered leaning over her back.

The buzzing grew louder. Her sensitive skin tingled. “Oh, fuck,” she whimpered when she realized the cause of the sound she heard. Then she felt the vibrations as he pushed the dildo slightly into her tight hole. The strength of her pussy’s clenches intensified. The sensations of the vibrator melded with the thrusts of his cock. She screamed. “I’m coming!”

Over and over, waves of pleasure crashed through her. She clamped tightly around him, her final reward when she felt his cock jerk once within her. She fell onto the bed, and Rey collapsed on top of her, the vibrator falling to the floor.

There was no afterglow. Rey began another sexual assault almost immediately. Stroking her clit with a free hand, he commanded, “Agnis, live with me.”

Already his fingers were sending waves of tormenting desire through her body. His mouth, near her ear, began to nibble the lobe. “I’ve got to do my work,” she sighed against her pillow.

“Work me,” he responded, moving in and out of her once again. “I need you. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

A chord was struck within her. She needed him, too. Rey had irrevocably captured her heart. His romantic overtures, self-confidence, and his protective nature bound her to him.

Agnis lifted her buns, sliding back up to her knees. He filled her completely and moved faster within her. While she was on her knees, he grabbed her breasts as they swung in time to his thrusts. He flicked the nipples, first one, then the other. Harder, faster, he drove into her as he sent shock waves from her breasts to her cunt.

“Come again, babe, come for me.”

The climax ripped through her unexpectedly. She felt as if she were falling and there was nothing to stop her. It was the safest free-fall in the world. As her muscles convulsed, she felt, and then heard, Rey come. He rolled off her and pulled her into his arms. She watched his face and the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he struggled to regain even breathing.

“You’re brilliant Agnis. Why are you with me? Why don’t you say no to me?”

*Because, I want to do everything in my power to make you happier.* “That’s easy. I...” she hesitated. She wanted to tell him she loved him, but she couldn’t. Fear of rejection ruled her words. “I’ve never known a man quite like you. You’re fascinating.”

“I don’t think anyone has ever described me quite like that.” Rey paused. Had she offended him? “Don’t feel as if you have to answer me now. But, I want you to stay with me.”

She felt utterly spent and relaxed. Being intimate with Rey bolstered her self-esteem and her spirits. She could do anything, knowing he accepted her just as she was. Her heart longed to stake her claim on this intelligent man. But she couldn’t. Not until she’d righted the wrongs of her great-grandfather. That wouldn’t happen until her work was completed.

She needed her thesis accepted and her doctorate granted before she could seriously entertain long-term thoughts about her relationship with Rey. Agnis had to get all the reintroduction interviews complete, hold some open forum meetings, then assess the real economic potential of community.

But the facts he’d shared with her earlier replayed in her mind. Daniel was accusing her of bringing wolves into Ireland, and had threatened her life. Daniel’s band had shot the wolf. The loss of her grant and the rapid depletion of her funds -- all were stumbling blocks that would cost her additional time and trouble.

Could she stay safe with Rey? Could she make her grant money last until she had that thesis done? Would she even be able to work on it, or would her free time be spent in the consuming physical passion with Rey that left her wanting more?

Could she hold him at arm's length until she was finished? She didn't have any answers.

His large hand stroked the length of her tangled hair. "Sixpence for your thoughts."

The hypnotic caresses continued. "It feels good to be in your arms."

"I like holding you, Agnis."

The sound of shattering glass broke the moment. Rey leapt from the bed and ran toward the sound. Agnis followed, throwing on her robe. She surveyed the sight. "My window..."

Rey bent and picked up a stone the size of a man's fist. A rubber band held down a folded slip of paper.

"What does it say?"

He pushed the band off the rock, freed the paper, opened it, and read, "Yankee Leave."

## Chapter Eleven

Rey called the guarda after he pulled on his jeans. He watched Agnis don a bra and panties before pulling on her own jeans and sweater. Her eyes continually sought the broken window, and the rock he'd set on the table. He slammed his fist into his hand. "Damn!"

This time her gaze rested on his face. The ignominious behavior of an unknown assailant clearly frightened her. "I'm sorry, Agnis."

"Why would someone do something like this?"

The question nagged him, too. "Are you upsetting anyone with the chats you've been having?"

She sucked in her lower lip, then worried it with her teeth. "Most people aren't convinced it's a good idea, or a feasible one, but they've had the courtesy to listen. A few of the younger farmers can see the economic benefits of either selling their lands to the state, or supplying the increased tourism that will come of having such a center in the area. So far, everyone has treated me well..."

She trailed off, and Rey seized the moment. "Who's been less than cordial to you?"

"Malone. He's made my visits more difficult."

Rey felt his eyes narrow. "How?"

“He told several of the families that what happened to Keane’s sheep would happen to theirs, and that the government isn’t likely to cover their losses.” She stopped again, as if to catch her breath. “Though I didn’t think he’d resort to any sort of violence against me. The half-truths are damaging enough.”

He held her as they fell into silence. Malone was turning out to be a bigger problem than he’d envisioned. Rey couldn’t let Agnis continually cross paths with this troublemaker. He stroked her hair. Her sable tresses were always silky and soft. She belonged in his arms, permanently. He just had to figure out a way to make it work for both of them.

Agnis opened the cottage door to the guarda a few minutes later, still struggling to contain her fear. The guarda surveyed the scene, took photos, and left, but not before admonishing her to be careful. “These are dangerous times, what with all the political fightin’ going on. And with all this werewolf nonsense.” The guard tsked. “Malone’s stories are only making it worse. It’s not safe for you to be alone, lass.”

Their words echoed Rey’s sentiments. He gathered her into his arms again and watched the guarda drive away. Now he could make sure she heeded his advice to stay with him. Daniel Malone was a stray dog after a bone. “I think that’s rather settled then, isn’t it?”

“Are you sure you can provide a safe haven for me and my research?” She broke free of his arms and wandered to the broken window.

Damn, the girl was stuck on this project of hers. He needed her off the whole thing if he wanted to keep her safe and his alter-identity a secret. “Not only will I promise to keep you and your work safe, I will assist you.

“*You’re* loaning *me* your body? To be my bodyguard?”

He grinned, despite the worry that gnawed at him regarding her project. “I’ll guard your body very carefully. In the meantime, you can do with mine what you wish.”

Agnis bit her lower lip. “I *can* think of several things I’d like to do with it.”

“You shouldn’t be such a tease,” he replied, licking his suddenly dry lips.

“Me, tease you, about this?” She stroked him through his jeans, but her hand shook.

Instantly, his cock sprang to life again. How was she able to do it? Make him want to be deep within her again so soon? “Get your things together, Agnis,” he growled, “or we’ll never make it out of here.” He put his hands on her shoulders and gave her a gentle shove toward the bedroom. “You’ve got work to do, remember?”

“If I must.” She sauntered toward the bedroom, swaying her hips in invitation.

Seizing the moment, Rey grabbed his cell phone and auto-dialed home. “Seamus, get the Rover over to Agnis’s place. Someone just tossed a stone through her window. We’ve got some loading to do.” He held the phone away from his ear as Seamus laid into him. During a pause in the butler’s oration, Rey interrupted. “I know, Seamus, I know. I’m between a rock and a hard place. Without grant money and this vandal’s attack, Agnis has to come home.”

Tapping his foot, Rey waited for the next barrage to wind down. “I don’t know what we’re going to do about that.”

“Do about what, Rey?” Agnis asked.

“Listen, I’ve got to run. Hurry over. We’ll sort this all out later.” He snapped the phone shut as he looked at Agnis, delectable in form-fitting jeans and a soft pink sweater, her hands full of folded clothes she set on the table. His own jeans became tighter.

“Oh, um,” he struggled, “getting your equipment properly installed in your room. We may be able to arrange it so you can have the guestroom, and an office to work in. I hope that will be satisfactory for your needs.”

“I won’t take up much room. You don’t have to redesign your living arrangements to accommodate me.”

“Dear, dear Agnis, you aren’t going to live like a stranger in my home.” He moved toward the table. “You’re to use and change what you need. I want you to be totally comfortable.”



"I'm not sure that's possible," she responded, running her tongue over her soft pink lips.

The temperature of the room blazed as if he'd entered an inferno. He leaned closer to her. "Why not?"

A heartbeat later, she stood closer to him, her hands against his chest. "Because we can't seem to keep our hands off one another."

"I don't see that as a problem." His lips descended on hers. She kissed him back, passionately, and he knew he would never be able to get her out of his system. His mind filled with thoughts of how he would taste her mouth, how their tongues would dance before he used his tongue to bring her clit to a hardened, aroused bud.

Her delicate fingers toyed with his nipples through the cotton of his sweater, putting his nerve endings on full alert. Repaying the favor, he stroked her nipples into hard peaks. Once they were home, he'd have her again, tangled in his bed sheets, and somehow he'd find a way to keep her there for the next century or two.

Outside, he heard the crunching of tire wheels. He glanced at his watch. It was time for Seamus to be here. The hyacinth scent of her hair tantalized him as he whispered into her ear, "Don't forget where we left off."

In less than an hour, they had her suitcases, laptop and other belongings loaded into the rear of the Range Rover. Rey sighed as he watched Seamus turn the vehicle toward home.

"I was beginning to think he'd never leave," Agnis whispered as Rey seated her in his Aston Martin.

"Why is that?"

"I've been wanting to do this." She reached over and stroked his crotch through his jeans.

As if it had a life of its own, his penis returned to its former hardened state. "And this," she continued, as she lowered her head and began to nibble his shaft through the denim.

He groaned. "No more, Agnis. Not until we get home."

"Then you better step on it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Her hands continued to torment him as he drove at breakneck speed toward his lodge. Gravel flew in all directions as he wheeled the sleek sports car into the curved drive. Jumping from the car, he raced to her door, but she already had it open and was giggling on her way to the entrance hall. He grabbed her hand, then led her through the house to his bedroom.

Within seconds of his closing and locking the bedroom door, she had his belt unbuckled and his pants unzipped. His rock-hard erection sprang forth, ready for pleasure. Before he had a chance to remove her sweater, she was on her knees, taking him deep into her mouth.

"Oh," was all he was able to groan as he felt her tongue slide down his length, then slowly lick back up to the top of his shaft. Her tongue toyed with the sensitive ridge around the swollen head, flicking here and there as one hand cupped his balls, while her other closed around his flesh and began a rhythmic stroking.

He closed his eyes, imagining making love this frenzied after they'd been married twenty years or more. Dare he hope that somehow his love for her would help him deal with his curse? He opened his eyes and looked down at the brunette pleasuring him with her mouth. He had to tell her about the lycanthropy, if he hoped to win and keep her love.

Her intimate kissing, without a request for her own satisfaction at his hands, sent shards of desire through him. He could easily shoot his cum into her mouth, but he wanted more. He wanted to totally erase the fear that had flooded her earlier, give her such intense pleasure with his own body she'd have to forget the threat. Only then would he assuage his rock-hard dick from the uncomfortable tightness her mouth had created. The total burial of his cock deep in her pussy would bring the bliss they desired.

With a great force of will, he pulled his rod from her hot, moist mouth, hauled her to her feet, and turned her around to face the door. Quickly, he reached in front of her and unzipped her jeans, pushing them down her shapely legs to lie in a puddle at her feet. Rey returned his hand to her slit and played with her clit.

Agnis wriggled against his hand. "Mm, that feels good."

He rubbed the heel of his hand a little harder against her clit, using his other hand to push against her back so her ass stuck out. He poised the tip of his cock at her creamy entrance.

"You're too slow," she gasped as she rammed back onto his cock and began to screw him.

Bent over like this, Agnis was incredibly tight. Her muscles gripped him like a baseball player in the World Series grasped his bat. The cream of her pussy spread its heat around his cock as it swelled. "Baby," he groaned as she pushed harder onto him.

Reaching his hand higher, he caressed her breasts through the sweater. He loved it when she burned for him this way. He began a steady thrust into her pussy, attempting to retain some control of the situation.

"Come on, Rey," she murmured. "Do me."

He slapped into her harder, resolving the next time he had her, he would keep her quiet and still. The thought of Agnis tied and gagged while he made love to her made him hotter.

"How'd you like a little bondage next time, babe? You don't seem to be able to keep quiet." He wrapped one arm around her waist, while his other hand gently pulled her long dark hair over her shoulder so her neck was exposed to him. His heart hammered. He'd find a way to keep her with him. He loved her too damn much to let her go.

She quietly gasped. Only in her wildest fantasies had she considered bondage. Helpless, needy sex, the kind that kept you wet just thinking about it. Oh yeah, she'd love to indulge in some bondage fantasies with this man. Rey nipped at her

neck, sending hot flashes to her core. "I wouldn't mind tying you," she whimpered, as he continued to drive into her.

The arm about her waist slid under her sweater. He pushed down the bra cup and returned to her sensitive breast. "That's not what I had in mind."

Jolts of delight surged through her at his masterful touch. Coupled with the erotic vision she had of being bound by him she knew he'd conquered her. He'd tied her heart to him, why not her ankles or wrists? Every nibble and lick that feathered against her neck or her shoulder added to the strength of electricity coursing through her body. "Ooh," she moaned, writhing against him.

"I've got to kiss you, Agnis." Rey withdrew his cock, and spun her to face him. His large hands framed her face as his lips caressed hers, coaxing them apart for his tongue to make love to her mouth.

A moment later, she was in his arms, carried to his bed, where he placed her at the edge. He spread her legs further apart with his knees. Kneeling, he gently sucked her clit, and with long, languid strokes of his tongue brought her close to climaxing. He was driving her wild. She moved her hands to his head, running her fingers through his thick, dark hair.

With one last penetration of his tongue in her pussy that ended with a lick that swirled around her clit, he thrust her over the edge of the sexual pinnacle he'd skillfully taken her to. The intensity of her orgasm clamped her thighs against his temples as she pulled his mouth deeper into her, making the orgasm last longer. Rey knew her body better than a virtuoso knew a Stradivarius.

Short pants of air escaped her lips. Agnis had no time to catch her breath. Rey pushed her further back on the bed and began caressing her inner thigh, placing her leg over his good shoulder. His other hand caressed her aroused bud as he continued to tongue her slit. He raised his chin, glistening with cum from her pussy. "I love how you taste."

“I love how you taste me,” she replied as he moved to straddle her hips. He slowly inched into her with his long, thick cock. The orgasmic sensations that had scarcely subsided began to build within her once again.

Her throbbing muscles clenched around his length. When he withdrew, Agnis lifted her hips to bring him back. She grabbed his muscular buns to hold him more tightly within her. The rhythmic pulsing began again in earnest, creating a tempo any drummer would envy. They fell into a harmonious sync, each giving what the other needed in a ritual that tied their desires together.

They belonged together. Agnis had spent years in higher learning in Ireland, and never expected to find the unstinting support she’d gotten from Rey. Now he was offering to protect her from an unknown assailant. Only here, in the Emerald Isle, could there be the magic of knights in shining armor risking all for their maid.

Her knight was here, making love to her like a man possessed. She parried each stroke with a lifting of her hips, every thrust with a clench of her muscles around his shaft. Claspings her thigh tighter, he began to increase his pace. Tightening her hands in his hair, she cried out as she felt his final, powerful thrust expel his seed into her. Her body shuddered around him as the intense sensations exploded into tiny fragments.

Rey released her leg, and collapsed on the bed next to her, an arm across her waist. They lay together utterly spent. Agnis doubted she could even lift her arms. The only sound in the room was their ragged breathing. He belonged here with her, she realized. It was more than just sex. It was a completion of two halves becoming one. There would never be another for her, no matter what happened with Rey in the future.

She closed her eyes, willing the erratic beating of her heart to slow. She turned her head toward Rey and kissed him. The feeling of unity astounded her. “That was amazing.”

“Yeah,” he gasped. “I think you might have actually worn me out for a while.”

Worn him out? The feelings taking flight within her being had more to do with her heart than the sexual aerobics they'd just completed. Couldn't he feel that? How was it she wanted to pummel him for his stupidity and go for another session in the same moment?

She opted to lay there and think of the tender, yet possessive, way he'd taken her. By moving her in with him, even with separate bedrooms, he'd shown affection and concern for her well being. Rey had taken their relationship past the one-night-stand mentality, and moved it to another plane. She enjoyed this new level of unspoken commitment he made to her. That same commitment she couldn't verbalize, at least not until she had finished her thesis.

"Awfully quiet, babe." He softly stroked her arm. "What's occupying your thoughts?"

I want to talk about us and where we're going with this, she wanted to shout. But more than that, she didn't want to frighten him away. She sighed as she turned on her side to face him, throwing her leg over his thigh and edging closer. She ran her hand over his chest, grazing the dark hairs that sprinkled the honed muscles there. "I need to get to work soon," she whispered against his throat.

## Chapter Twelve

Rey wanted to strangle her. How could she possibly be thinking about sitting in a tomb-like library or interviewing relative strangers after what they'd just shared? The woman baffled him. He couldn't remember another woman who'd been able to turn from the afterglow as quickly as Agnis.

Okay, then, if she didn't want to revel in their intimacy, he wouldn't push it. He'd promised to be a dutiful helper in her quest to finish her doctorate, and he'd keep his word. Still, he couldn't resist another look at her sumptuous body, another chance to touch her satin-like skin.

Drawing small circles around her navel with his fingertip, he asked, "Are you sure you have to get back to your studies? I think I can find a way to engage your intellect without leaving the room."

She pushed his hand away from her abdomen. "Rey O'Brien, didn't you just tell me you were worn out?"

"You have a way of invigorating me."

"Yes, well, I'm fortunate you appreciate my physical attributes, but I really must get back to Ennis. I've got to find a way to counteract Malone, and eliminate the growing support for his silly werewolf malarkey."

Apprehension infused him. She had to leave that damn study of hers alone for a while, until Daniel was contained. “I want to fuck you again.” He fastened his lips around a breast, drawing the nipple into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it.

His teeth scraped against the pointed peak as Agnis pushed him off. “And I told you I had to get busy. If you can’t accept I need to finish my work, then I can’t stay. I’ll go back to my original plan.”

He watched her get off the bed and storm to the bathroom. Desire, and fear for her safety, engulfed him. He couldn’t let her go back to the cottage, wouldn’t let her work in the pub. Couldn’t she see she was risking more than her thesis? Daniel was a dangerous loser.

The desperation he felt moments before disintegrated into panicked anxiety. He couldn’t let her leave his home, not before a stop was put to Daniel Malone. Hearing the stream of water, he knew he’d have to get to her, apologize before she finished her shower and left, upset. He quietly opened the door, then paused, looking at her through the steamy block glass. She was beautiful.

Loneliness had been his constant companion until she’d shown up in his life. Intelligent and artistic, she’d brought him into the light. Her concern and ministrations to him during the first stages of his injury touched his heart. The uniting of their bodies was an experience so intense he knew he’d never forget it. Her loyalty, while he was in lupine form, would transfer to him once he screwed up the courage to tell her of the curse. His heart beat wildly at the possibility. Would Agnis become his wife?

But she was only going to stay a part of his life as long as she was in Clare working on her doctorate, his heart reminded him. Once the process was complete, she’d head back to Dublin or some other European capital to start her career.

Endangering his heart with her was a bad risk. Wolves had been reintroduced in Europe. There would be plenty of work for a woman with her specialized knowledge. There was no way he could allow himself to fall in love with a woman



who wasn't going to stick around. He wouldn't share the secret that had burdened him all his life, and all the lives of the O'Brien's before him. He wouldn't be able to stand the derision of the scientist she was or of her certain departure. He turned from the doorway and retrieved his clothes, knowing it was too late for his heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis spent the next two weeks in the Ennis library, pouring over the old tomes from the stacks. Today, she found more unused books. Dust rose in sunlit swirls, the volumes she'd selected having seldom seen use. Several held references to the werewolves of superstition that supposedly inhabited the region. She had to know what the legends were in order to combat Malone's smear campaign. "There's no such thing as werewolves," she muttered.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, lass."

She jumped, then spun around. Sunlight entering the windows of the library's back room shimmered. She relaxed when she saw her neighbor. "Paddy, it has no scientific basis." Agnis waved him to a seat. "People don't change into other animals. From all I've seen in the literature, the closest anyone has come to 'changing' into another animal is when he or she has been bitten by something rabid. You can't spread an ointment on your chest or wear a wolf pelt and change into a werewolf!"

"I don't know about that," he replied as he sat in a chair next to her and placed his well-worn fedora on her assemblage of books. "There's magic in these hills. Things that no one can explain have happened under the full moon. Other times, too."

"Oh, Paddy," she laughed. "Next I suppose you're going to tell me that leprechauns really exist."

He winked. "I suspect that the little fellows have long since fled this area since their pot of gold was found some time ago."

"No," she said in mock shock.

“Aye, lass, there isn’t a coin of the king’s gold to be found here that isn’t in someone’s collection.”

“Just so long as you don’t go telling me the lost city of Atlantis is just off the west coast, or that the Seven Cities of Cibola are really made of gold.”

“Now lass, don’t jest with an old man like myself. Everyone knows the city of Atlantis is buried beneath the ocean near the Azores, and Cibola is nothing but glinting sun on the mesas in the Mexican territories.”

He stood to leave. “Just don’t ignore the fact that there is magic here. And be careful when you’re out sketching on the Slieve. I don’t care much for the rumors I’ve been hearing regarding Daniel Malone. Nor seeing that window of your cottage boarded, like you’re ready for a hurricane.”

“So there is a logical part to you after all, Paddy.”

“That Malone is trouble.” He crossed his heart, and then waved both of his hands over Agnis’s head. “Anyone with an eye could see that.” He grabbed his hat from the pile and knocked several antique tomes off the table. Golden flecks of dust danced in the air.

Agnis jumped from her chair and began picking up the books.

“I’m sorry, lass, I didn’t mean to toss them.” The old man began to kneel.

“Stop, Paddy! It was an accident,” she said with concern. “It’s too hard for you to get down and back up again with those knees. I can do this. Don’t fret about it.”

The elderly man stood upright, hat in hands, head down. The sunlight gave the illusion of a halo-like glow around his head. “I apologize all the same, lass.”

Agnis returned to the task of gathering the books together and then stood, patting his arm. “See, no harm done.”

“One of your papers is sticking out kind of funny. Be careful you don’t lose it.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks for watching out for me.”

With a nod, he turned and walked away from her study table.

Agnis looked at her watch. She'd been here three hours already. It was lunchtime, but she didn't feel like eating. The past several days the thought of eating anything made her sick. If it hadn't been for Seamus and Rey, she wouldn't have eaten anything at all.

Rey. Now there was an enigma. After the intensity of their lovemaking, he'd seemed to back off. Instead of being glad he was letting her compile her information and begin the actual thesis writing, she missed the way his caresses sent lustful thrills through her. It was all for the best, though. If all her thoughts were about how they were going to make love again, she'd never get finished.

She glanced back at the book Paddy had mentioned. There was some sort of document protruding from the book's edges. She sat back in the wooden chair, opened the book to the marked page, and pulled the piece from the leaves. It appeared to be a note or missive of some sort, and quite old. Carefully, she unfolded the fragile sheet.

*The 17th day of August, in the year of our Lord 1578*

*Dearest,*

*I know that you suffer horribly from the hand fate has dealt you. I also know this fate is what keeps you from me, what keeps us from becoming man and wife. In this regard, I have endeavored to seek a solution to your ailment.*

*I have sought the advice of a man acquainted with one of the exiled druids. He is sending word by the hand of my manservant, MacCreevy, regarding the cure and necessary instructions for application.*

*Patience, my darling. We will soon have an end to the unnatural changes your body endures at the full moon. Then shall we marry, and the O'Brien line shall continue in perpetuity.*

*Yours, in utmost devotion,*

*Glenna*

Agnis blinked at the spidery writing on the paper, then reread the note. The very thing she and Paddy had just discussed was before her very eyes. No, the writer was wrong. Her beloved could not suffer from some magical malady that physically changed him every month. It was impossible.

Checking the date again, Agnis realized one thing. The letter, over four hundred years old, had been written while wolves ranged the Emerald Isle. With great care, she refolded the dispatch and replaced it in the treatise. The book the missive was placed in might have belonged to Glenna or someone in her beloved's family.

Poor thing. To be in love with someone who was so ill. Maybe an animal with rabies had attacked Glenna's paramour. Was he manifesting the symptoms? Could the fever, headaches, hypersalivation, insomnia, and anxiety attacks have seemed like signs of lycanthropy when witnessed by superstitious minds?

No, her lover couldn't have rabies. Glenna wouldn't have the needed time to prevent his demise. Once there were visible symptoms, death resulted within a week to ten days. Based on Glenna's letter, the couple seemed as ill-fated as Juliet with her Romeo.

As she was with Rey. They didn't have an illness or debilitating condition between them, just the gulf created by her work. Of all the times to find the perfect lover, it had to be when the clock was ticking on finishing her thesis, the most important goal of her life. Fate, it seemed, was being unkind to them, as it had been to Glenna and her inamorato.

Longing to be with Rey filled her. She needed to be in his arms again, to feel him making love with her, to experience those mind shattering climaxes as often as possible. But it wouldn't be today or any day soon. Time was running out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey picked her up at the Mill Road library at five, just as she'd asked. Every time he saw her, his heart leapt into high gear, and his pants got uncomfortably

tight. Abstinence, self-imposed since his promise two weeks ago to assist her with finishing her thesis, was killing him.

“You look pale, Agnis.”

She slumped against the leather upholstery of the Aston Martin. “I’m tired.”

“You aren’t getting enough sleep,” he responded. “And you can’t blame it on our bedroom activities.”

She gave him a weak smile. “No, I... Rey, pull over, I feel ill.”

He slammed on the brakes and pulled off the narrow road. Agnis jerked open the door, ran to the shallow ditch, and began to heave. He raced around the boot of the car and put an arm around her shoulders. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he handed it to her. “How long have you been feeling sick?”

“It’s been coming and going a couple of days now.”

“Days?” How had he missed it? The woman had been living in his home two weeks, and he hadn’t seen a thing to reveal her illness. “Agnis, you have to tell us when something is wrong. Seamus and I can’t help if we don’t know what you need.”

“I just need to get some rest. I’m really tired.”

He led her back to her side of the car, seated her, and tucked her legs back into the vehicle. “Just close your eyes, babe.” He removed his jacket and draped it over her arms and torso before he closed the door and returned to the driver’s side.

She sniffed, then settled into the seat, eyes closed. Putting the car in gear, he turned it around and headed back to Ennis. Her skin was pale, and the skin beneath her eyes was shadowed with a hint of blue. He cursed himself. He’d been so concerned with his own physical needs and desires, he hadn’t seen to hers.

An acquaintance of his ran a clinic on the far side of town. Liam could run a few tests, make some recommendations for getting Agnis back to her normal self. Rey pulled into the lot and went to her side of the car. Since their first meeting eleven weeks ago, she’d lost weight. Her lush curves had declined toward sharp, protruding

bones that poked him as he slid his arms under her and carried her toward the front doors of the clinic.

“Where are we?” she asked sleepily.

“Making a stop at a skin’s place. Liam will check you out, make sure everything is okay.”

“You’re taking me to a doctor?”

“No,” he replied. “We’re already here.” Rey turn the knob, then pushed open the door with his hip as he carried Agnis into the empty waiting area. “Liam!”

A tall, thin man with blond hair and glasses pushed open a door and rushed to the front. “Rey, who have you there?”

“Agnis. She’s not well.”

“Take her on to the back, then.” He led the way and opened a door to a smaller room. “Put her on the exam table. I’ll finish locking up, and then we’ll have a look at her.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Eternity. Rey had been waiting nothing short of an eternity for Liam to come from the exam room and tell him what was wrong with Agnis. He paced to the clinic entrance, to the door that led to the exam rooms, past the length of the appointment desk, and back to the entrance. Five, ten, twenty, forty times he made the circuit until Liam appeared. “Okay, Liam, out with it. What’s wrong with her?”

“Couldn’t keep your wire covered, could you?”

“My wire? You mean...”

“Yes, she’s up the flue. You’ll be pushin’ a pram come summer.”

He tried to remember losing control to the point he hadn’t remembered a condom. The day he’d brought her home. “My god, is it possible? It’s only been a few weeks.” He sat on an end table with a thump, a spark of joy lodged in his chest.

“Aye, these tests are more and more sensitive all the time. She only has to be late a day. Are you okay, Rey?”

“Aye. How is Agnis? Have you told her yet?”

“She fell asleep while I was waiting for the test results. She doesn’t know.”

“How is she otherwise, Liam?” He got to his feet and began pacing again.

“She’s running low on iron. I’ll be giving you some prenatal vitamins. She needs to take them every day to make sure she and the baby stay healthy. Other than that, her health is good.”

“Then everything is okay?”

Liam nodded. “You can tell her the news yourself, if you’d like. She’s in three.”

Rey grabbed Liam’s hands, then pumped them between his own. “Thanks.” He was off like a sprinter to the exam room. At the door he slowed, not wanting to frighten her if she still slept. He crept into the room and pulled a black vinyl stool close to the table. In sleep, she looked peaceful and delectable. It took every ounce of restraint he owned to not wake her and make love to her on that table.

The even rise and fall of her breasts was hypnotizing. He watched them as he thought of the different ways that he could share with her the news that they were going to be parents. Parents. He’d never believed that possible. He, Reynardine O’Brien, was going to be a father.

The thought drove the air from his body as if he’d been punched in the gut. He couldn’t be a father. The curse was passed on to the firstborn male, and there hadn’t yet been a firstborn child that wasn’t a son. Agnis carried his son, doomed to become a werewolf, damned to bear the agony of changing into a bloodthirsty animal once a month. Clarity of purpose filled him. He couldn’t allow her to bring his son into the world.

### Chapter Thirteen

Rey shoved the box of prenatal vitamins further back in his sock drawer, a place Agnis was sure not to go. Guilt had been his constant companion over the past several days. It was wise to let sleeping werewolves lie. Agnis was better off not knowing she carried the spawn of hell within her womb.

Every time he looked at her luscious body, he wanted her. But the guilt always returned, stronger than ever, accusing him of keeping two weighty secrets. Once she found out she was pregnant -- and that he'd known -- she'd be gone.

Then there was the whole lycanthrope issue, and the fact that their son would suffer as he did; a fate he couldn't allow. No way would Agnis believe he went through the accursed changes every month at the full moon. Not unless she had empirical evidence, which meant she'd have to see him change, which would put her in mortal danger. She'd had the dream, after all. The one where he ripped her throat out.

Over the years, he'd been fortunate. Seamus loaded him up with red meat the day before the beginning of the full-moon cycle, and then if needed, locked him in the soundproofed room in the basement. No one could hear his groans as the change wreaked havoc on him, or his vicious growls as he tore into whatever meat Seamus had set aside. And only when he'd feasted on a live rabbit or other living creature



would Seamus allow him out, assured his ravenous appetite for fresh blood had been sated. Three days, each and every month, he endured the atrocious cycle.

He detested the killing, which was why he endured the dark, dank confines of the musty basement. This last time he'd ventured outdoors had been disastrous. If it hadn't been for Agnis binding his gunshot wound, he would have been caught and killed, or simply have bled to death.

No, there was absolutely no way he was resigning a child of his loins to this life, no matter how exciting it would be to have a child to love and nurture. He sank into the mattress as he sat on the bed and lowered his head into his hands. What the hell had he gotten them all into?

A rap on the door broke his melancholy thoughts. "Rey?"

God, it was Agnis, the center of his pleasure and pain. Every night it became more difficult to sit near her, knowing what he did and what he would have to do. "Yes."

"It's dinnertime."

"Go on without me. I'll be there in a few moments." He needed those seconds to compose himself so he could share another meal with Agnis in a semi-civil state.

Once he had his act together, he joined her at the long, oak table in the dining hall. Again her radiant beauty struck him. He'd been told women who were with child had a special aura, that their skin glowed, and they looked exquisite. If he were to judge by looking at Agnis, he would support the belief.

"Rey, is everything all right?"

"Yes," he replied woodenly. "Why?"

"You keep staring at me."

He put a piece of tasteless beef into his mouth. "It's hard not to gaze at your exquisiteness." Crimson stained her cheeks at his compliment. "Are you feeling better?"

“I think the bug has passed. I’m feeling much better now. It’s a wonder you didn’t catch it yourself.”

“I’ve an iron constitution and, I think Seamus slips some sort of multivitamin into my breakfast.”

Suddenly, she placed her fork on the table. “Oh, I didn’t tell you what I found the other day in the library.”

Her dark blue eyes had a sparkle he hadn’t seen in some time. “A great find?”

“Well, not particularly for my research, but for some historian somewhere.”

He watched her tongue rim her lips. As it had so many times in their recent past, the action aroused him. “Are you going to keep it a secret? Or tell me what has you so excited?”

“I found an old letter in one of the books I was using for research. Really, really old.”

Touching his napkin to his lips, he replied, “How old would that be?”

“Would you believe the mid 1500s? I could hardly believe something so old would be overlooked.”

“What did you do with it?” he asked, his curiosity building.

Smiling, she leaned closer to him, as she took a sip of wine. “I read it, of course!”

Her enthusiasm for her find was contagious. “And it said?”

“There was this woman named Glenna, and she had a lover that she couldn’t marry. He had some sort of disease. She’d written to tell him she’d found a cure.”

“What was wrong with her lover?”

“She said something about unnatural changes and seeking help from the druids. Whatever was wrong with him, she thought magic would help. The tone of her letter seems to support something debilitating.” She tapped her forefinger on the table. “Poor Glenna. She probably had no clue what was really wrong with him.”

A dozen thoughts leapt like deer through his mind. “Unnatural changes? Did she say anything else?”

“She did mention that he suffered during the full moon. It sounds like some of the folklore I’ve come across in the library. There were several references to werewolves.”

Unnatural changes at the full moon? Could this be a clue to releasing him from the family curse? “Often, the cures of the druids, midwives, and shamans worked because they used herbs and other plants that had medicinal value. She could have been referencing something like that,” Rey said.

“Perhaps.” Agnis furrowed her brows. “You know, she mentioned a couple of names. I should do some more research and see if the families are still about. Maybe they’d be interested in seeing what happens to this historical document.”

“Ah, now there’s a place I can really help. I’ve known many of the clans around these parts since I was at my mother’s knee. What names did she mention?”

“MacCreevy was one.” She paused for a long moment, as if trying to remember the contents of the letter. “Oh, my! The other name was O’Brien. Your last name! That could be you!”

Lightning couldn’t have hit him any harder or shocked him any more completely than the name that fell from her lips. Not only was the missive an amazing historical find, it really might be able to help him. If there was something to the druid business, perhaps, just perhaps, he could save his unborn son.

“Rey, let’s go to the library first thing tomorrow and get that letter.”

“It’s at the library?”

“I figured it was the safest place. God knows how long it had been there; a few more days wouldn’t matter. If I couldn’t find a descendant, then I thought I’d find a museum or someone else that might be interested. But now... I bet you’re a descendent of the O’Brien mentioned.”

Slowly, the shock lessened. “I could be. There should be a genealogy around here somewhere.” His enthusiasm for the concept of a cure grew. Nowhere had he heard mention of any sort of reversal of the curse. No one in recent memory had tried to find references to O’Briens in history. Agnis had handed him a golden

thread to a solution, a doorway into the past that had eluded his family for centuries.

Dare he hope for the impossible? He was currently prepared to accept the loss of his son. Would he be able to steel himself once again to the ugly duty, should the “cure” be false or of no benefit? The longer he waited, the more difficult it would become. Gods, he’d been given a beautiful gift. A son! A family of his own!

But, could he condemn his child, or Agnis, to the horrors they must face? His stomach painfully clenched. If Agnis didn’t know of her pregnancy, he could cause her to stumble and initiate a miscarriage. He could spare her the emotional suffering of knowing she was having a child, and that the child would be abnormal. She wouldn’t have to face the agony of their son in great anguish. His son spared the torment of his joints dislocated, his muscles stretched into something inhuman. No being deserved to be in such pain.

Vaguely, he was aware of Agnis speaking again. “I do have something else to share with you.”

He forced himself to concentrate on her words. “Another amazing discovery?”

“For me.” She averted her eyes from his gaze. “I hope for you, as well, but that may not be the case. You talked about our ‘relationship’ as being more than a one-night stand. Something has happened that can make that a reality, that has the potential to keep us actively involved and interested in one another’s lives.”

A burning sensation lodged in the middle of Rey’s stomach. He flinched when she took his hand, so lost had he become in imagining the things she said, and was going to say.

“Rey, what is it?”

Self-loathing filled him when he heard her voice filled with concern. The course of action he’d considered might buy him some time, but eventually Agnis would find out. The truth always found a way to come to the light. She would never be able to understand the sacrifice he was willing to make for the three of them.

“Rey?”

“Sorry.”

“Perhaps you’re coming down with something?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” He inhaled deeply. “You sound as if you have something weighty to divulge.”

“I do.”

This time she looked him in the eyes directly, with the look of...what? Love? It was nearly his undoing. Her demeanor sent shock waves right to his heart. The excitement he saw in her earlier was magnified, enhanced by a secretive, knowing radiance.

“There’s no easy way to say this except straight out. Rey, I’m going to have your child. I’m pregnant.”

He gulped. “You’re sure?” Why was it he was surprised when he already knew?

“I took a home pregnancy test earlier today.”

He stood abruptly, knocking the dining room chair to the floor as he stormed to the window. “You can’t be.”

“I know I am, Rey. I can feel it, here.” She followed him and touched his elbow before her hand went to her heart.

Tears threatened to fall. Not hers. His. Anguish tainted his next words. “You can’t be, Agnis. You can’t be.”

Tears glistened in her eyes, as well. “Rey, what’s wrong?”

He pulled her to him. Silky, sable hair slid against his skin and caught in the rough residue of his stubble, her head fitting perfectly under his chin. A subtle floral scent tantalized him as warmth from her body flooded him where they touched. It was an easy leap of his imagination to picture her here in his arms, belly big and round with his son, ready to be born. Another simple step to picture them as a family.

It couldn't happen. He wouldn't allow his son to come into the world with this curse hanging over his innocent head. Warm tears soaked through his shirt, as his fell into her hair.

## Chapter Fourteen

This was the time to tell her about being a lycanthrope. But he couldn't. The beautiful gift she'd shared with him would be marred by his ugly truth. There was no way she'd understand such a far-fetched tale and how it would affect them all. "Agnis, it's not that I'm upset by your revelation, but..."

"You're not prepared to be a father. I know. I don't feel prepared to become a mother, either. We'll muddle through somehow. This baby will have all the love and nurturing we can give it."

Speechless, he held her in his arms tighter. He had no choice. He couldn't hurt her, couldn't take this child from her. How could he have even considered being so hard-hearted? That only left one choice. He had to see the letter, find a cure. "I'm overwhelmed. I'm not in a condition to talk about this in any sort of reasonable way. Please, forgive me."

"Forgive you? You've done nothing wrong, Rey." She looked into his face, and he could see the streaks left on her reddened cheeks by her tears. Even in her pain, she could forgive him for hurting her. A halberd couldn't have cut any deeper into his heart.

"For a long time, Agnis, I never thought I wanted to be a father. I wanted to live the carefree, one-night-stand sort of life. Then you entered my world, and

everything is arse-backwards from what I thought it was before. I don't know that I'm ready for the responsibility of raising a son. It's terrifying to think I'd be responsible for making him a decent human being. What if I make a mess of it?"

"It's thrilling, too. We can show this baby how to care for others, love people, hate evil, champion justice, and discover miracles in the world around us. It's not control, it's exposure, and we can show this baby the best there is. Don't be afraid, Rey. It's going to take both of us to do this right."

"Agnis, sweet Agnis. I've got to get my mind around this fully. I don't mean to hurt you in any way." He stroked her hair, then softly pushed her away from him so he could put an arm around her shoulder and walk her to her room. This should have been the perfect night for making love. To celebrate the creation of a special life based on their relationship. Losing himself in her body tonight, though, would only add to the struggle he now faced.

Once at her door, he released her. "My reaction, I know, isn't probably what you expected or wanted. Please, don't take it to heart. I just have to sort this out in my own way and time. Things are so much more complicated because it's *my* son you carry."

Chastely, he kissed her on the lips, savoring her flavor, inhaling the hyacinth scent of her hair. He had a lot of work to do, to make this right. "Go to bed now. I'll talk with you in the morning."

The hesitance in her response proved to him what he suspected. His reaction had wounded her. He reached out and ran his hand gently down her face. "Agnis, the problem is within me. I promise, I will do the right thing, by both you and our child." He turned the knob of her bedroom door.

"I'm not looking for that, Rey. No matter what happens, I won't rope you into anything you don't want. This child is yours and mine. I won't keep him from you. Just know this: I love him already, no matter what you decide." She stepped into her room, her eyes still shiny, then softly closed the door.



The heavy oak door quietly clicked shut. It was chilly against his forehead as he leaned against the wood. What a mess he'd made. A downright hames of his whole relationship with Agnis. They'd had incredible sex, and somehow as careful as he thought he'd been, he had gotten her pregnant. The thought held a sliver of joy. She was right. They would, from this moment on, be united with one another through their son's pain-filled existence. He could only pray love would mitigate their bleak future.

He wandered back through the house to his office. Not bothering to turn on the lights, he went straight to the wooden side table that housed his decanter of Bushmills. Cool against the overheated skin of his hands, he used tongs to pick up cubes of ice. The ice clinked against the glass, making a brash, irritating sound. Rey quickly poured the amber liquor, then tossed it back. The burning sensation of the alcohol didn't dull the grief and guilt he felt. He didn't deserve anyone as good as Agnis. Another shot rapidly followed the first.

The crystal decanter and glass remained in his hands as he went to a bookcase filled with old leather volumes. To hell with the glass. He slammed it on the desk. Rey brought the decanter to his lips and tipped.

All he wanted to do was howl his frustration, and yet the very act would not only terrify Agnis, but give more credence to her dream. The one premonition had been bad enough. She hadn't shared any of the others with him, but if the history of his family was repeating itself, she'd had them. He banged the decanter onto the desk.

Books crashed as he searched for an elusive tome, savagely pulling them to the floor. Somewhere, there was a bound genealogy, going back centuries. Did it go back to the 1500s? Was one of those listed ancestors married to Glenna? He would have a starting point in his search if he could find out that much.

The genealogy escaped him. Damn it, he knew several were in this room. Where had they gone? More dusty leather books hit the floor. Three shelves had been totally divested of their holdings. He had another swig before he attacked a fourth

shelf, knocking an expensive piece of art glass to the floor, where it crashed and splintered into hundreds of sharp shards.

Seamus burst into the room. "Sir, what are you doing?"

Rey picked up the decanter in one hand, and his glass in the other. "Drinking."

"I can see that. What on earth for?"

"I'm adding to the fine line of O'Briens within nine months."

He watched his friend and butler's eyes grow wide. "Oh, my."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Why are the books on the floor?"

"Agnis read about a possible cure in an old book she found in the Ennis library. It mentioned a Glenna, and an O'Brien." He tottered, then regained his balance, before he poured another drink. "I'm trying to find them."

"Making a mess of things, by the look of it."

Rey smiled. "Can't find the damn book. Can't let my son live with this curse. I've got to find a way to stop it, Seamus." He stumbled against the wall, then slid down the smooth paneling, landing hard on his ass. Rey patted a tossed book. "Where the hell did that family history go?"

"Sir, you might try taking a look underneath your hand."

A loud whoop erupted from Rey. "This is it; this is the book I've been looking for." He rifled through the thick pages. He scanned the dates, 1900, 1850, 1700, 1600, 1580. He was getting close. Agnis had mentioned the mid 1500s. Willing himself to slow, he finally found what he had been looking for. Logan O'Brien married Glenna McLaughlin in 1578. Both Logan and Glenna died within months of each other the following year, leaving their infant son the direct O'Brien heir.

The curse had been passed on, the cure a failure, given that Rey, as a direct descendent, remained a lycanthrope. He needed further information. Maybe they didn't follow the directions exactly. Or perhaps they didn't have a chance to perform the curative rites. It didn't matter. Right now, this was the only hope he held. He

had to follow this thread to the end before they were all condemned to live in the isolation he'd come to despise.

Tomorrow, once he'd slept off the alcohol, he'd begin a search for the McLaughlin family line, and hopefully, a descendent that knew something of the relationship between Logan and Glenna.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I discovered Glenna's last name," Rey told Agnis over breakfast. "She married one of my ancestors, Logan O'Brien." He spoke slowly, trying to keep his head from pounding too hard. Agnis didn't respond. "It seems they didn't share marital bliss long. They both died shortly after their wedding."

Still, Agnis didn't react. Rey took her hand in his. Her skin was soft and smooth, but cold permeated it. "Are you ill?"

Defeated blue eyes looked up at him. "Rey, I have to know. Do you want this baby?"

"Where on earth did that question come from?" He thought he'd reassured her of that last night. Perhaps he wasn't as clear as he could have been. "Agnis, more than you know, I want you and my son to be a part of my life. I don't want anything to happen to either of you. Why are you asking?"

"I... I had a dream last night."

He closed his eyes and felt them roll. Based on family history, precognition seemed to be something that developed in the women who joined the O'Brien line. "What happened in your dream?"

"I had the baby, alone. Then someone took it from me. I didn't even know if it was a boy or a girl. Whoever took it tried to make me believe the baby never existed. I know this is silly, Rey, but I'm afraid. These dreams feel real."

The cognition was happening already. "I promise you, babe, I'll be with you, no matter what, when our child comes into the world." Irony that in her dream was

the underlying action he'd seriously considered, allowing the child to die, with Agnis being none the wiser. Now he was thankful his random, ill-planned considerations had been unable to reach fruition.

If it hadn't been for Agnis mentioning the letter... He shuddered. He would have been responsible for the death of his own son, guilty of infanticide, the murderer of their dreams and future. The letter had given him his first real hope since he'd learned of the family curse when he was twelve.

With her growing precognitive abilities, Agnis would have been able to see the desperate actions he'd considered, despite his caution. Eventually, no matter what separated them, there would be no secret she wouldn't know about. Agnis was his mate in heart and soul, confirmed by generations of O'Brien women having the same troubling dreams. Today, he'd discovered his real purpose for living. He had to protect Agnis and their baby.

The best way to do that was to get into Ennis and start looking for the descendants of the McLaughlin family, as soon as Agnis was ready to get back to her research. In the meantime, he had to keep her near.

"Marry me, Agnis. I'll keep you both safe."

## Chapter Fifteen

Time stood still. Rey was sure of it given the fact that the expression on Agnis's face didn't change one wit. No one moved, or spoke. No birds merrily chirped outside, no clattering dishes were heard being loaded into the dishwasher. The clock didn't tick. He still held her hand, and rubbed the back of it gently. "Did you hear me? I want to marry you."

"Oh, Rey."

From her exclamation, he couldn't tell if that was a good 'Oh, Rey' or not. "I'm totally serious, Agnis. After I found out about Logan and Glenna, I spent a lot of time thinking about us. We can take the chance that fate didn't give them. We can be happy together, raising our son, making love, completing your research." He paused before he took the plunge and revealed his neediness. "I want you here with me."

Still, she delayed.

"Don't feel you have to answer me right away. The past few days have been nothing short of shocking. This is another. I know that." He stood, went to her side of the table, and brought her to her feet. "I want you so badly, I can taste it. We're meant to be together. I know you feel it, too. The way we make love..." he trailed off,

and then put his hand on the spot where his son grew within her. “Just think about it, okay?”

Relief flooded him when she finally nodded. “Would you like to go to Ennis with me? I’ve got some work to do there.”

With a barely audible whisper, she answered, “I think I should get some more rest.”

“Do that. I’ll be back before dinner.” He kissed her on the forehead and then left, not turning around once to see what her reaction had been. Longing to be with her filled him. He wanted to hold her, make love to her, and show her she had nothing to be afraid of with him at her side.

Driving the Aston Martin faster than the posted limits, he reached the assessor’s office, seeking property information on current McLaughlins in the region. Frustration filled him when he realized the local line had left for the Americas in the late 1800s.

“You know, you might be able to find some old maps and the like at the Ennis library, man,” the agent behind the counter told him. “They’ve an amazing section of old stuff. You might find what you need there.”

Of course, he should have thought of that. Agnis used the rare books, but the library housed other historical documents.

The librarian, a young woman, showed him to the area he needed. Another woman instructed him in the use of a microfilm machine that held copies of the old archived information. The collection was extensive, but didn’t date back as far as he would have liked. However, he did find a possible McLaughlin estate on a map from the 1790s.

He returned to the assessor’s office with the old coordinates and was given a probable location based on current geographical designations. The property was located near the coast, an easy drive from Ennis. He hurried to his black sports car, clutching the information.

The country was nothing but rolling green hills as he approached the sea. He turned down a narrow, poorly paved lane, crested a hill and saw a magnificent sight. In the far distance, a small Atlantic island was shrouded in a pale gray mist. On the near coast, rolling, thunderous waves broke upon the rocks where a single tower stood. Two lines of post fences with slack wires ridged the mounded earth on each side of the lane, where grasses grew in wild abandon.

The property seemed familiar, as if he'd seen it in a movie or one of his dreams. Odd, he'd driven the main road thousands of times and never noticed this lane. He drove down the road slowly, prepared to stop if sheep or other farm animals found a way through the fencing and entered his path. As he neared the tower, he could make out a wall around it. Perhaps the tower had been one of the many Brian Boru had built as lookouts against the Vikings who'd brought devastation to the lands of his ancestors.

Rounding a corner, he was surprised by a remarkably well-kept cottage. Aged thatch covered the roof, and the dwelling sat in a small grove, surrounded on the north and south by leafy trees, and the west by a small stone fence. The roof was just a few meters higher than the trees. To the east, Rey could see the ocean relentlessly pounding away at the shore. Something within his soul connected with the isolated wildness of the place.

How many other wonders did this property hold? He pulled his car off the lane and got out to explore the buildings he was seeing. The views in every direction were incredible. Without a doubt he'd find a way to own this magnificent property. The setting would be ideal when he needed a place to howl his frustrations. If it had some sort of holding cell, so much the better, for the nights when his change came upon him.

Thigh-high, browning grass blades slashed at him as he opened the car door to a furious wind. While the turret intrigued him, Rey believed he'd have better success within the cottage. As he neared the small building, he could see it had been left unoccupied for some time.

Grime coated the windows, whitewash had peeled from the stone walls, and dead grasses mixed with struggling greens to make a thickening mat over what once had been a walkway. The hidden house was old, preserved as if by magic.

Rey walked carefully around the perimeter. Perhaps there would be an unlocked door, or unlatched window. The front door was locked, as he'd suspected it might be. He went to the east side of the house and found several windows that looked out onto the ocean. All were locked. Either the house had been extremely fortunate, or vandals hadn't discovered it on this stretch of beach. Magic, his mind whispered once again.

The north side of the home was devoid of any opening that allowed even the tiniest badger to enter. But along the back, in the wall not far from the corner, a possible entrance existed, an old rope frame window. "Yesss!" he yelled as he high-fived the air.

A few meters away from the rear of the house were fallen stones. The dilapidated rear fence had suffered since the departure of its last occupants, but it was to Rey's benefit. He hauled several of the downed pieces underneath the window, stacking them three high. They were enough for him to examine the casing. Luck was with him, he thought, as he saw the window hadn't been tightly shut. He tried to lift it, but it didn't budge.

He returned to his car and came back with the lug wrench. Carefully, he placed it under the sash and used it to lever the window up. The wood creaked, and the frame moved a few centimeters. Rey tried again, and the window moved a little more. Now, at least, he had room to maneuver his arms.

He jumped from his makeshift stool to the soft ground, and retrieved more stones to add another level. It was enough. This time when he pushed up on the sash, it moved nearly a full meter. Extending his arms over the sill, he dropped the wrench. It hit the floor with a dull *clunk*. Pulling himself through the window, he landed on his knees on the dusty floor.



Tattered remains of a once-white curtain covered the far window. Around him the air shimmered, the way heat rose from the pavement of an unusually hot day. Rey sensed he landed in another time, a world far different from his modern society.

The curtains billowed. "Bout time you got here, boy."

Rey's head snapped up, searching for the origin of the voice. "Who said that?"

The air shimmered, and then Rey saw a figure walking toward him. Slowly, the being came into focus. "Paddy?"

"Aye, lad. You're the first."

"What are you doing here?" He paused a second, confused. "First what?"

"To seek out Glenna. I've been the keeper of her family place since her descendents emigrated to America."

"Glenna? What do you know about her?"

"Plenty."

To Rey's left was a large stone fireplace, easily as tall as a mature woman. Next to it sat a dark wooden spinning wheel, the likes of which he'd only seen at Bunratty Castle or other living history museums. A trestle table was in the middle of the room, and an old rocker, made of the same dark wood as the spinning wheel, sat in a corner near a window overlooking the beach. Rey moved to the table, shaking his head. "I don't get it. What do you have to do with Glenna? Why hasn't this place been vandalized?"

"I'm her leprechaun."

Rey jerked, as if he'd been slapped, then nearly retorted that no such being existed. But neither did werewolves, and he was one. "Okay. Why me? Why Glenna? Why now?"

"Those answers will come to you in time. The answers you seek, you'll find easily enough. But to change your fate... That, boy, won't be so easily done. You're the first to seek out Glenna with the right heart. All I did was protect her place.

Until the right man searched for it with his heart, it's remained hidden in a shroud of magic."

"I don't understand, Paddy."

"Not to worry, boy. If you love Agnis, understanding will dawn." Paddy turned and walked back toward the curtain. "Get your answers while you can. Once you leave, nothing here will be as you found it." When the white shreds of the curtain billowed out, Paddy stepped behind them and was gone.

Rey shook his head, then rubbed his eyes as he rushed to the window. Pulling the curtain back, he saw nothing. Outside, the wind roared furiously. He stood stoically at the window, his head filled with visions of Glenna and Logan sitting at the table with her parents for a special holiday. Did Logan bounce his son on his knee here? A son cursed like Rey?

On the far side of the fireplace, opposite the rocking chair, he saw an old trunk he hadn't noticed before. It was leather, bound by bands of steel, held fast by a large, archaic lock. He approached the trunk, while his heart beat rapidly.

If only Agnis could be here. She would understand the awe, the value and uniqueness of this moment and place. But she couldn't know the reason he was in this antiquated cottage. Maybe, someday, if he were able to remove the family curse, he would bring her and their children here. He'd tell them the tale of how he'd come to purchase the property and what it really meant to them. Wishful thinking for a future he couldn't be sure he would have.

The lock, while gritty and frail looking, didn't budge when he pulled at it. He wanted to rant and rave as he stalked toward the fireplace, less careful now that he'd seen the miraculous object that offered him the most hope. Through the window, he no longer saw the sun, although light entered the front and rear windows. If he was going to find the key before darkness descended, he'd need to find it quickly.

Running his fingers along the top of the wooden mantle that supported the chimney and oversized opening, a sudden jab into his finger caused him to jerk back

in pain. He'd wedged a splinter viciously into his forefinger, so deeply he knew he'd need Seamus to help dig it out. But that was later. Right now he needed to concentrate on finding the key for the old trunk.

A ceramic figurine sat on the mantle, beckoning him. Gently, he lifted the fragile figurine, revealing a key underneath. He grabbed it, then returned to the trunk. The key fit, but when he tried to turn it within the lock, nothing happened. Wiggling it first one way, then another, he heard the grinding of the dirt that had drifted into the lock. In the silence of the cottage, it sounded unnaturally loud.

Finally, the right combination of determination, perseverance, finagling, and a healthy dose of luck released the lock. He tossed open the lid. There wasn't much inside. He fingered soft cotton laces, lifting the intricate pieces for a momentary inspection before he laid the materials aside to search further down in the trunk. Someone had done some fine tatting in bygone days. Was it Glenna?

Rey moved the last of the material when his gaze fell upon a small, leather-bound book. His long fingers opened the cover. Inside the front cover was the initial 'G', with the date, 1575. He sat back against the wall, near the window, and began reading the delicate, aged pages.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis knew she needed her rest, and didn't resist when her body told her she had to lie down. In the pregnancy literature she'd found on the Internet, she'd discovered exhaustion was part of the expectant process. This was going to put her really behind in her self-imposed thesis deadline, but keeping her baby healthy was a higher priority. She stretched out on the bed in her room and allowed herself to drift.

It was hard to relax when her thoughts kept returning to the sexy master of this house, the father of her baby. Where was he? She finally decided to give up worrying about his whereabouts, and started a series of breathing exercises designed to help restore her calm.

*She stood, wrapped in the arms of her lover atop the mountain, overlooking the rolling hills that were slowly being swallowed by dusk. "Someday, all this will belong to our sons," he told her in a worshipful tone. He turned her toward him, and kissed her with the same sort of veneration.*

*The gentle kiss became more insistent, igniting the fire of passion she felt for her man. Never had two people been more meant for one another, so perfectly matched in temperament, love, and patience. When their bodies joined, it seemed to her as if two halves were finally able to be one, as was their destiny.*

*The setting sun gave way to the emerging full moon, creating a subtle light. She returned his kiss with the intensity of her devotion for him, knowing they would again make love on the Slieve. Every time he intimately touched her, another thread was added to the cord that bound them together.*

*She could feel his hard length pressing against her. That, too, seemed created to fit just her, a part of his body that had given her pleasure, and would allow her to bear him many sons. She placed her hand on him, tentatively stroking the solid shaft.*

*Slowly, he unlaced her outer gown, the deep blue overskirt falling to the ground. She stood before him in her chemise and underskirt, and felt the heat of his fingers as he removed the skirt. The cool air chilled her. It caressed her loose breasts, making the nipples harden.*

*It astounded her, how she trembled when she released his doublet and splayed her hands on the linen covering his chest. His strength surrounded her with a sense of security she hadn't known since her childhood, when her father occasionally allowed her to sit in his lap. She tugged the fabric loose and helped him lift it over his head. Underneath, he was all she felt and more. Rigid muscle paired with sparse dark hair that led to a trim waist. There wasn't a part of him that wasn't perfectly sculpted. And he was hers.*

*He lifted the chemise from her shoulders, and she stood before him gloriously naked. How had she managed to deserve the love and protection of this wonderful man?*

*Leisurely, he used his hands to touch her skin, a subtle smell of grass and leather tickling her nostrils. He lingered at her lips, allowing his mouth to take what he touched. She quivered in expectation as she kissed him back.*

*Her love was different from the cold aura she'd seen Dacey display to him.*

*It was the difference between love and an alliance, she realized. His own father had chosen to let love die, and had become an angry, bitter man, according to the servants that gossiped in her father's manor. Surely, her beloved would not make the same mistake.*

*When his hands palmed her breasts, she was once again reminded of how well they fit, physically, mentally, and emotionally. She gasped as his fingers played with her nipples, sending waves of heat throughout her body.*

*At the sudden intake of her breath, he lowered her to the pile of clothing that would pillow them. She spread her legs for him willingly, and as he untied the lacing of his breeches she knew that she would always treasure their times of love.*

*Now when they coupled she knew no pain, just the pleasure of their joining. He gently entered her. "Your desire for me makes our loving more pleasing," he whispered. He lowered his mouth to take a breast and suckle, his tongue playing with her nipple until it hardened more. He turned his attention to the other, all the while riding her with languid strokes.*

*"Please, Trace, fill me with your seed."*

*Her softly spoken words seemed to urge him on. Sliding his hands under her hips, he pulled her more fully onto him, her body accepting his deeper penetration by encasing him tighter.*

*More light illumined their loving, as the moon rose higher in the night sky. He lowered her and reached a hand between her upper legs to tease the small button at*

*the top of her thighs. At last, she began to convulse around him and he drove into her moistness harder yet. "Trace. Oh, Trace..."*

*Throwing back his head, he roared as his seed pumped deeply into her. The expulsions continued for long seconds. When he finished, he withdrew and wrapped her in his arms, and she sighed against his chest.*

*There had to be a way for them to have night after night of such pleasure. He had to speak to his father about breaking the betrothal with Dacey's family. Perhaps if she spoke to her own father, he would help them find a way to be together.*

*"Trace O'Brien! So this is where you have gone to!" The voice was rough and bitter, and continued in derision. "I see you have your slut with you. This is how you keep your betrothal promise, by spilling your seed into the likes of her."*

*"Stay calm, Arluene," he whispered. Then Trace released her and stood upon the crest of the Slieve, silhouetted by the moonlight, splendid in his nakedness, his voice booming. "Dacey, don't do anything you will regret."*

*"You've already done that, Trace. When my father finds out how you have slaked your lust with this cheap whore, he will demand you pay with your honor."*

*"Do not call whom I have chosen such filthy names."*

*The woman laughed, and it sent chills down Arluene's arms. "You chose me, Trace, or have you forgotten? I'm thankful for the timely information I received." She paused, and then shook a finger at Arluene. "I think I shall ask for her honor, as well. You do know what that means, don't you?"*

*Silence settled around them. Arluene shivered as she tried to use some of their garments as covering.*

*"Actually," Dacey continued, "death is too easy for the likes of either of you." She advanced on Arluene and pointed a long finger at her. "Loving under the full moon is not without its own particular penalties. And to take from a woman her man... The gods will see that the penalty is suitably just and harsh."*

*Dacey lifted her arms as if praying to the lunar orb, her face pale and filled with anger and hatred. "Bring down your vengeance, oh Cynthia, that my honor not be impugned and the perpetrators of this betrayal are justly punished." Dacey pointed at Arluene again. "The fruit of your womb, which you now carry, is hereby cursed by the strength and timing of the moon, to last until the truth of your deeds is exposed and the ultimate sacrifice of love is made!"*

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey closed the diary, unable to reconcile what he'd read with the reality of the world around him. None of it made sense in this day and age. Yet he knew his curse had more to do with the things science couldn't explain than with those things it could.

Within the book, he'd found the answer. There was, according to Glenna, a cure. The woman he loved, and who loved him back, had to sacrifice herself. It was the only way that Dacey said the centuries' old curse could be broken. He cared for Agnis far too much to allow her to die on his behalf. If he wanted her to live, Agnis had to leave.

## Chapter Sixteen

The dream left Agnis frightened, but not terrified -- so different from the dream in which the wolf had ripped her throat apart. The lovers in the image seemed doomed, not unlike the other lovers she and Rey learned about. In light of what they'd discovered about Glenna and Logan, perhaps her mind had conjured a story in which to set their problem. Why else would she dream of people she didn't know?

Rested, Agnis left the bed and looked out the window. The sun was descending toward dusk. She pulled on a large wool sweater and prepared to use the final hours of the afternoon to sketch on the Slieve. She grabbed her notebooks and headed out the door.

"Miss, where would you be goin'?"

"I'm headed toward the Slieve, and possibly Doo Lake," she told Seamus.

"Aye. Well I see you have something sensibly warm on, but you shouldn't leave without a bite. Don't go just yet."

The man disappeared, leaving Agnis waiting in the entrance hall. A few minutes later, he returned carrying a brown paper bag. "Just a little something to tide you over in case your wanderings take more time than you'd thought."

She gave him a kiss on his weathered cheek as she accepted his gift. "Thank you, Seamus. That's very thoughtful."



Seamus blushed as he shrugged into a jacket. "I best take good care of you. Mr. O'Brien has been much easier to live with since you came into his life."

Now she felt her cheeks heat. "I'm glad I've been of some help," she managed to stammer. "What are you doing?"

"I'll be accompanying you."

"That's not necessary, Seamus."

"The master has shared with me the happy news of your pregnancy."

"You know?"

Seamus nodded. "I'd be remiss not to keep a close eye on you while he is away."

She checked for her flashlight, camera, and stungun in her backpack, crammed already with notebooks. "We're not going to be gone long. We should be back within an hour after sunset."

"Very good, Miss."

She shouldered her backpack and clutched the paper sack in her hand. Seamus held, then closed, the door for her. He placed his hand on her arm, halting her. "I'll take that, lass."

"What?"

"The pack. I'll carry it," he replied.

She reluctantly handed the stuffed bag to him. Outside, the afternoon was pleasant, the sort of weather she enjoyed when she went to football games. Once the sun dipped beneath the horizon, it would get chilly. They hiked together in silence.

Her perusal of the Slieve sometime later left her satisfied that Malone hadn't attempted to perpetrate any more of his werewolf hoax. There was no sign of fresh activity. With a well-honed sense of direction, she headed in a southerly direction toward Doo Lake, wondering if Daniel Malone had found a different way to frighten the populace. Seamus dutifully stayed at her side.

Near Doo Lake, she found a nice copse of trees in which to make observations. “Seamus, no need to carry that pack any further. Set it under the trees. I’m going to take a look around the lake.”

“For what, lass?”

“Malone is telling tales of wild animals. Werewolves, to be specific. I’m going to take a look for animal tracks.”

They circumnavigated the small lake, looking for tracks or other signs that canines had been near. Rounding the last corner of the lake, she found what she’d been looking for. “Something’s been here. Canine, from the look of those tracks. Let’s head back to the trees and keep watch. Maybe we’ll observe something of note.”

“Very well, lass.”

Within a few minutes, they were seated, Agnis leaning back against a sturdy tree, Seamus next to her. Removing a drawing pad and charcoal pencil from her backpack, she began sketching. High grasses gave way to shorter plants that rimmed the small lake. The greenery bowed as a gentle wind touched them. More than an hour later, just as the sun was about to send forth its last rays, she spotted several small animals leave the tall grass and head toward the water’s edge.

They looked around, as if sensing the presence of humans, but didn’t swerve from their goal. She turned the page of her notebook and began to sketch the new scene.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey’s plan was exquisite. Its beauty resided in sheer simplicity. To keep Agnis away from Daniel, all he had to do was find what the man was using to give the appearance that wolves or wild beasts were in the area, then remove the paraphernalia.

Hiding his car several kilometers from the border of Malone’s property, Rey began his investigation. Malone’s place was much like that of anyone else in the

region. Wild grasses grew with abandon, then tapered to open, rolling green fields where sheep grazed. In the distance were several out buildings. Quietly, he approached them. A soft, high-pitched whine alerted his sensitive ears to which building he should check, but he was stopped before he could enter. Malone and another man were speaking.

“I can’t find all the pups, I tell you,” Malone’s man argued.

“They have to be somewhere. Get your hound out and track them. Those whelps are too valuable to lose. If anyone sees them, this whole thing will come down around our heads.”

“It weren’t me, Malone, that ‘napped those wolf pups and mixed them in with your own.”

Bastard! Rey thought as he crept back to the grasses. He’d brought the animals over before the public was ready for them. If Malone had waited, the wolves would be legally protected as endangered creatures. Instead of people hunting the wolves out of fear and revulsion, they’d respect the animals. Hell, perhaps the wolves, reintroduced slowly, could help properly control the badger population. As it was, people were trapping those animals to the brink of extinction because they considered badgers as nothing more than pests, he thought as he returned to his parked car.

He’d head to the Slieve and begin searching for the pups. They might recognize his scent and try to find him. The strongest scent would linger in the lair he’d lain in after he’d been shot.

Going to the crest to get Agnis to notice him had to have been one of the dumbest stunts he’d ever tried. If it hadn’t been for her binding his wound, he would have bled to death, or worse, been caught by Daniel. And Daniel was sadistic enough to watch him suffer. Once he saw Rey return to human form, everything Rey held dear would have been destroyed.

Arriving at the Slieve, he hiked toward the cavern. He lifted his face to the eastern breeze. A faint scent wafted to his nostrils; the pack had been at the cave.

He followed the scent in a circle that meandered toward his car. He'd missed it before, so consumed was he by his self-anger. Another stupid mistake. He couldn't afford them; not with the lives of Agnis and his unborn son at stake.

He quickened his pace, crossed the road, and tracked the scent. It grew stronger. The whelps had passed this way during the day. Instinctively, he knew where they'd gone. He'd wager the family estate on it. They were looking for fresh water, and Doo Lake was nearby. Small mammals they could hunt would do the same, especially now that the sun was setting.

Rey sat in the tall grasses near the lake and removed his clothes, folding them neatly and placing them under a stone. His change would begin soon. He didn't need to run around the county with shreds of clothing on his body. Anyone seeing a sight like that could only think one of two things, both bad. Either there was a werewolf in the area, or the wolf Malone spotted had attacked a human. It was far from a win-win situation.

The speed of the change, and the intense pain it caused, never ceased to astonish him. He willed his mouth to stay closed, so he couldn't howl forth his agony. His feet lengthened and narrowed, as did his hands while they turned into paws. Hair developed in every pore of his body. His jaw dislocated as his face became narrow and canine.

He rolled from his supine position, stretched, and sniffed the air. The others were nearby. He began an easy lope toward the water, cruising through the grasses. When he neared, he let out a stern bark. Moments later, he heard the pups coming toward him. Two of the six pups were wolves.

Head low, he began to lead them away from the lake, headed west toward the Atlantic Ocean and the cottage he'd discovered. There was ample room for them within the walls of the keep should a need for concealment arise. As they journeyed, he kept them between the beach and the grassy knolls, skirting every human habitat.

The group hadn't gone far when Rey heard a strange noise. Humans, with a dog, were thrashing through the grasses. Above the sound of their heavy feet, he heard the voice of Agnis. She wasn't happy. He ordered the eldest male of the pack to lead the group west. Rey didn't move until the pups had disappeared into the tall grass.

Advancing silently toward Agnis's voice, Rey listened as it rose shriller in the deepening dark. From the cover of the grass he could see her. A large hound accompanied three men carrying rifles. Rey recognized the short one near Agnis as Daniel Malone. He had a smaller hunting party this time, which was sure to be more silent than the last group. In this case, silent could equal deadly for whomever Malone crossed paths with.

"Daniel Malone, I will not leave because you tell me to. This is not your property, and I've permission from the owners to be here."

The calming voice of Seamus reached Rey's ears. Good, Agnis wasn't alone. "There now, lass, don't let this man get to you."

Malone continued as if he hadn't heard Seamus. "Miss Fitzgerald, I am telling you I cannot and will not be held accountable for your safety, should the unforeseen happen."

Rey edged closer and watched as Agnis put her hands on her hips. "And what safety threat would you be referring to?"

"Stray bullets, Miss. It wouldn't be the first time a civilian has been accidentally shot."

"I see. You're trying to frighten me with the strength of your gun. Tell me now, would that be at close range? Or just some stray bullet that goes through the window of my car?"

"I'm not saying anything of the kind. Just stay out of our way, and you won't have ta worry about it at all."

Seamus laid a hand on her forearm. "Lass, perhaps it's best if we go."

Leaning over, she picked up her sketchbook and stuffed it into her backpack. Standing tall once more, she folded her arms across her chest, staring at Seamus. “And in the meantime, I’m just supposed to stand here and let him hunt without a fight, without saying a word?”

“No, lass, there are other courses available,” Seamus whispered.

Agnis directed her next comment to Malone and his group. “What’s in it for you, Malone? Fame? Fortune? An opportunity to be on syndicated television? You and these men with you are nothing but cowards.”

Malone raised his hand and slapped Agnis, knocking her back. “I’m telling you, you need to be minding your own business.”

Rey growled.

Seamus rushed to her side. “You’ll not want to do that again, Malone.”

“You think you can stop me, old man? She’s been a thorn in my side since I first laid eyes on her.”

With the assistance of Seamus, Agnis staggered to her feet. “All the wildlife in this area is my business. I’ll legally stop you. It’s against the law to hunt any endangered species.”

Seamus picked up her backpack. “Come, lass. It’s time to go. Don’t be letting your temper get the best of you. You’ve others to consider now.”

Malone grabbed her by the arm. “Call the law, and I can guarantee that wolf’s pelt will be hanging in the Shanavogh Pub.”

Rey couldn’t stand Malone touching Agnis another second. Growling, he sent a warning to the hound. The dog retired a healthy distance away and laid its head on its gargantuan paws.

Rey never should have let Malone hit her the first time. He raced toward Agnis, Seamus, and Daniel, fangs bared. He leapt upon Daniel, snarling and clawing.

“Get him off me, get him off me!” Daniel screamed.

Someone grabbed Rey by the nape of the neck. He swung his muzzle around and snapped at his captor's wrist, sinking his teeth deeply into the tender, sensitive flesh. The man holding him let go abruptly, his wrist bleeding profusely from the bite. He screamed and pulled his arm up to his chest. Seamus wrestled him to the ground.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Agnis grapple with Malone's rifle. She twisted the butt end in her hands and rapped Daniel hard underneath his chin. Malone's struggles immediately ceased. Rey had to get Agnis and their unborn son away from the bastard.

Agnis was moving toward Daniel when the man Seamus had downed turned his gun on her. Seamus was a motionless heap on the ground. "Oh, no, you don't, lass. Malone is going to have plenty to say to you, and I wager most won't be pleasant."

Rey couldn't wait and see what this clown might attempt. With a ferocious snarl, he leapt at the man.

"No!" Agnis screamed and jumped toward him, as well.

Chaos reigned. Legs, fur, hands, feet were everywhere, all at once, rolling about the ground. Then suddenly, the air was rent with the sound of a forceful explosion. Rey tasted the man's blood, saw it spurt from his neck. He let go of Agnis's attacker and began to back away.

Already on one knee, Daniel Malone struggled to find his balance; his unsteady, smoking rifle aimed directly at Rey. In her battle to regain her feet, Agnis lost her equilibrium and fell against his would-be executioner. Malone's head hit a nearby tree with a thud.

Rey used the opportunity he'd just been given to drag Agnis away from the scene. When she stood, he growled, intentionally frightening her. She fled in the direction of his home and safety.

He watched Malone help his accomplish to his feet. The man's bloody hand was pressed against his neck, staunching the flow of his blood. They hurried toward the road.

He returned for Seamus, licking the man's face until he stirred. "Thank you, sir."

Rey stared at Seamus, breaking his frozen state by swinging his head in the direction Agnis had gone. Finally, understanding seemed to dawn on Seamus. "I'll find her."

Rey loped into the grasses and raced after the pups, not slowing until the scent of Agnis had totally faded.



## Chapter Seventeen

Angels couldn't have carried her much faster, Agnis thought as she stopped, gasping for breath. The stitch in her side was nothing compared to the scene she'd just been a part of. She had to get back to the house quickly, before something worse happened to Malone's man. Damn him. Malone brought the whole situation to an ugly, violent end.

As the horror subsided, clarity of thought returned. Seamus! Oh, dear Lord, she'd left Seamus behind in her panic. She jogged back toward Doo Lake, easing off when the pain in her ribs kicked up.

The guarda would have to be called. Not only had there been a ghastly injury, but Malone had also threatened her life, and that of the wolf. She had to protect him somehow. She shivered as she remembered the violence, then forced herself to go forward.

With the light of the moon guiding her, she made good time. "Seamus!" she yelled as she saw her companion on the near side of Doo Lake. "Are you alright?"

He smiled weakly. "It's been some time since I've been in a scrap, lass."

"We've got to get you back to the house, call a doctor or something."

"I'll be fine, truly."

“Nevertheless, we have to get you home, and call the guarda.” Agnis glanced into his face as she wrapped an arm about his waist. Worry filled his features. “We need to get help for you and that man. The wolf nearly ripped his throat from him.” She shuddered, recalling what she’d seen earlier. Even though she was safe, her heart continued to pound at an irregular, rapid rate.

Seamus rasped. “He’s gone.”

Agnis stopped moving. “The man the wolf attacked?”

“When I woke, they were all gone. Every last one of them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The going was slow, but they finally made it back to the house. Agnis pushed open the door. “Rey! Rey!” All she heard was the grandfather clock in the hall ticking. “He’s not back yet.” She grabbed the phone off the hall table and dialed the guarda. “Where’s the Range Rover?” she asked as she waited for her call to be answered.

“In the garage. Are you calling the guarda, Miss?” Seamus asked Agnis.

She nodded. “I have to. Malone is dangerous.” She looked Seamus over again. He was too pale for her tastes. “Are you going to call the doctor?”

“I’ll wait until Mr. O’Brien returns. He can drive me, if need be.”

“I could do the same.”

“No, lass. You’re right. Daniel Malone needs to be stopped. While he’s in a fever, neither man nor beast will be safe.”

She hurried out the door, headed toward the garage. She slid into the cool leather seat of the Range Rover and slipped the key into the ignition. As she traveled toward the attack site, she placed a call to directly to Inspector Berke and informed him of the accident. Had Malone really taken care of his henchman?

Hopefully, the guarda would be at the lake and she could let them know about Malone's threats. His intimidation, both veiled and open, were directed at her and her work. She'd be damned if she'd let the man keep her from achieving her goals.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Rey got home, dawn had arrived. Agnis was nowhere to be seen. It was for the best, he thought, as he shoved his bedroom door closed. Neither she nor Seamus deserved the fallout from his failure. The night had been an unmitigated disaster, and he was in a foul mood. He wanted to collapse onto his bed and sleep, but there was too much to do. First, he had to find out how seriously he'd injured Daniel Malone's partner. Then, he had to find a way to diffuse Daniel. No doubt the man had already begun to inflame the locals about the wolf attack.

The taste of the other man's blood was still in his mouth. In order to expunge the bloody essence from his mouth, he'd run all the way from Doo Lake to the far side of Creegh to find a creek that he could drink from. The taste was still there, fresh and strong, as if the flavor had embedded itself in his taste buds. Little kept him from becoming the animal at heart he changed into during the three days of the full moon. If it hadn't been for Agnis, he would have killed the man outright and lost the last vestiges of his civilization.

He turned on the radio and listened to the local news. There was nothing unusual to report. Good, it gave him a few minutes to get into the shower and ease the aches caused by the muscles stretching and shrinking from the changes his body suffered.

Steaming water flowed over his muscles, relaxing the spasms he frequently developed after the return to his human form. As the steam rolled over the block glass of his shower, so did his anger. He'd been close to moving the pups to a safer location. Now he knew for sure that Daniel would track, hunt, and destroy each member of his canine pack. That left him with two choices. Move the wolves, or destroy Malone.

It wasn't possible to make a rational decision, yet. He had to find out what was being said about the last night's incident. If it hadn't been reported on the local station, it meant that Malone hadn't reported the engagement to the guarda. Malone would only do that if he had something to gain by keeping out of a potential investigation.

Yes, the sooner he got to the Shanavogh Pub and heard the news, the better his intelligence would be. Then he could discern the correct course of action. One thing he knew for certain -- Agnis, Malone, and he were advancing toward a direct, head-on collision.

But first, he needed to stop by the scene of the attack and make sure the pups were long gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis followed R474 toward the split to Mullagh. She'd be near Doo Lake soon.

She'd made the phone call just before she left, and expected to see the guarda pulled off the side of the road at any point.

The sudden arrival of Daniel at the lake last night concerned her. It was as if he'd known exactly where to look for the puppies.

She eased the vehicle to the southwest, following the road. Abruptly, she halted the car. "Why aren't there any squad cars here? Something's not right," she muttered as she turned the engine off. Agnis dashed from the car toward the small lake. On the far side were the trees she'd watched from last night.

Overcast gray skies reminded her of the muted moonlight the night before. The region had a surreal feel, as if she'd stepped into a Jane Austen novel. Tall grasses brushed against her thighs while she hurried to her former vantage point. Behind her, she heard the sound of footsteps and men talking. The inspector with the guarda had finally arrived. She turned and raced down the slope of the hill. "Thank you for coming!"

The inspector took her hand. "Now, lass, what is this all about?"

“Last night, I came here to sketch. There were puppies, drinking from the lake.” She led them near the water. “Look, you can see their prints.”

“Aye, I see the prints.” He scribbled in a notebook as he nodded toward the officer following him. He approached the prints. “Take some photos.”

“Anyway, Malone showed up. He threatened me.”

The inspector didn’t look up from studying the ground. “Were you alone?”

“No, Seamus Maly was with me.”

“Then what happened?”

“Malone struck me. There was a fight.”

Inspector Berke looked up from his note taking, a frown on his face. “Hmm. Another fight involving Malone. Do you want to press charges?”

“Absolutely. He threatened me.”

“Did he now? What did he say?”

Agnis detailed Malone’s words to the inspector. He intently listened, writing down all she said. “Is there anything else?”

She sighed. She might as well tell the inspector before he heard tales elsewhere. “There was a serious injury.” She moved toward the copse of trees. “Right up here. I know this sounds, well, fanciful, but a wolf attacked one of Malone’s men. He was bleeding heavily.”

She stood in the area where Malone had shoved her. On first appearance, it looked just like any other small clearing. Nothing seemed awry.

“Are you positive, lass, that a fight occurred at this location?”

“I am.”

The inspector motioned for the guarda again. “Take photos of this entire area, after you tape it off.” He pointed. “Start at that tree, going west. Section off thirty meters square.” He turned to Agnis. “Will that properly cover the area of the confrontation?”

She nodded. Strands of her brunette hair flew into her face and she savagely pushed them aside. Dropping to her hands and knees, she searched for anything that might prove what had happened last night. It looked like Malone had done a good job covering all their tracks, but why?

The area where the fray occurred had been flattened. It wouldn't be long before the grasses returned to their pre-crushed height and any proof that Malone and his boys had been there would be gone. Agnis continued to search, looking for anything, a splatter of blood on a leaf, a piece of material, something that would be evidence. "Look, inspector. The grass is trampled."

The inspector laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Come now, lass. No need to disturb the scene. We'll get the photos. If there is a stone out of place, we'll find it."

She stood. A moment later, she was startled to see Rey stalking through the grass. "What are you doing here?" she stammered once he arrived.

"Looking for you."

He held out his large, strong hand. Grasping it, he drew her close, a seemingly effortless exertion on his part. Warmth coursed through her body at his contact. It seemed centuries ago since she'd received such a tender touch from him.

"Have you heard what happened?" she breathlessly asked.

"Only what Seamus told me." Rey acknowledged the presence of the other men. "Hello, Inspector. Officer. What is it you're looking for here?"

"Evidence." Agnis interrupted. "Daniel came hunting with his buddies last night." She paused, afraid to reveal Daniel had struck her. She didn't know how Rey would react, and they didn't need to make a bad situation worse by having another altercation with Malone. Yet, the rest of her tale would make no sense without the reason why the alpha attacked. "In the course of our conversation, Malone hit me. An alpha came out of nowhere."

Rey's eyes widened, then narrowed. "That was a foolish thing of Malone to do."

“It got worse. Malone and I tussled, and one of his buddies pulled a gun, and suddenly the alpha was on top of him, his teeth in his neck. And then it went off.”

“Whoa, slow down, woman. I can see this was traumatic. Its not often an intellectual like you has a gun pulled on her.” He pulled her in close, and hugged her. His arms exuded the security she’d experienced the first time they made love.

“Have you found any verification, Inspector?”

“Not yet. We’re cordoning off the area. I’ll have some of the lads go over it with a fine-toothed comb. Something will show up. There’s nothing more the lady can do here. Take her on home, will ya?”

Rey smiled. “That I will do.” He relinquished his hold and escorted her back to the Range Rover.

“The alpha pulled at me, and growled. It was like he thought I was going to hurt him. A wolf has never frightened me this badly.” She gulped for air. “I panicked. I left Seamus here, hurt.”

“Seamus is a little sore, and resting comfortably.” He paused. “The wolf was protecting you.”

Standing in the shorter grasses near the road, Agnis reexamined her memories. She could see how the facts might fit a protection scenario. “It’s possible, I suppose. I won’t rule it out, but I was terrified. I mean, I saw him with his maw on that man’s throat. And there was blood. A lot of it. I can’t believe they haven’t found some yet.”

Rey moved a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Malone is up to something. I’d bet a round of Guinness on it.”

“I agree. And there’s something else. When I ran, I left all my research behind. I haven’t found the backpack.” She looked into his strong face, concern radiating from it. “Rey, it has everything. The economic impact on the county. All the locations I’ve identified as potential relocation areas. It even has the favorable and unfavorable responses of the locals regarding the possibility of reintroduction. He could wage an ugly campaign with that information.”

Rey frowned. "I believe he's smuggled in wolf pups. Could be why he was here last night. For the life of me, I don't know why. Malone has a plan for using these animals. If I know Daniel Malone, great white hunter, he won't rest until the last one is recaptured."

"Rey, I saw puppies, and I'm positive they weren't all the same breed. Some were huskies, a couple with German shepherd markings, and some could have been wolf pups. Then, there's the alpha. Malone won't rest until he collars that one."

"This is too dangerous for you, given your condition. Let me handle Malone."

She shook her head, then looked up into his intensely serious eyes. "I understand your concern. Really, I do. But I can't stand by and do nothing. I've been thinking about this all morning. There is a way we can thwart his plan."

He lifted a strand of her hair and rubbed it against her cheek. Such a simple gesture, and so loving. Each and every one of these little moments she'd treasure for the rest of her life. His care and concern for both her and their baby was touching.

"How's that, babe?"

"We can track them ourselves and move them to a safe haven."

"Have you thought of where that protected sanctuary could be?"

"I haven't had time to study a map yet." She began to pace around the car. "There's got to be some sort of isolated place we can take them, until we can get them legally protected."

Rey kept up with her pacing, even passing her and returning before she reached the driver's door. "We can't wait that long. Governments move slowly."

Agnis laid a hand on his arm. "Then we have to move first. Can we trust Seamus with something this big?"

"Absolutely. This job is too large not to have his help. Seamus has a fondness for puppies."

"Okay, the first thing we need to do is figure out how we're going to catch them, and where they'll be stashed once we have them."



Rey smiled. "I have the spot. We should be able to keep them enclosed for a while, long enough to get them away from Malone."

Agnis couldn't keep the curiosity out of her voice. "Where, Rey?"

"Pretty isolated, lonely place, not far from the beach."

"Sounds good. Now, how are we going to pull this off?"

## Chapter Eighteen

Agnis rode back to Rey's home in his Aston Martin, leaving the Range Rover behind. "We don't need to leave your car here, Rey."

"Nonsense. Seamus and I will retrieve it later. You're too upset to drive."

She wasn't going to argue. The whole experience had shaken her. Now she had an opportunity to be alone with Rey. So much had happened since he'd left yesterday morning it felt as if they'd been apart months. "Did you get your business handled?"

"Yes. There's more to be done, now that the lives of those pups are in Daniel's hands. Why is your information so important, other than your thesis work?"

"It details the responses of the local farmers. Names, addresses, what their interests in reintroducing the wolves might be. He might use that information to wage a propaganda war against anyone considering supporting the reintroduction."

"Our first priority is getting the puppies away from the lake. Until I can secure the location I told you about, we'll put that bunch into the kennels. Tomorrow, we search for the rest on Malone's property. You pinpoint the supporters of reintroduction and put it on a map. Once we have those whelps, we can try to anticipate Malone's next move."

The agitation of his voice changed to one filled with tender concern. “When did you sleep last?”

“I napped a while yesterday afternoon.” He’d sounded worried. She wasn’t about to add that the sleep had been less than restful.

He pulled the car into the driveway. “You sleep while I check out that property. I’ll go to the pub, too, and see what the latest gossip is. Maybe someone has heard what Malone plans to do next.”

She laid a hand on his arm as Rey opened the passenger side door of the car. “See if you can find out what happened to that man.” Agnis stepped out of the vehicle. “The one the wolf had by the throat.”

Rey kept hold of her arm as they walked to the door of the house. As he held the door open, he stopped Agnis before she entered. “Promise me you’ll sleep. I don’t want anything happening to you or our son. A careless mistake because you’re tired could cost all of us dearly.”

Agnis sighed. She’d hoped that once Rey was gone, she could get to work on creating a supporters map to prevent Malone from causing further trouble.

“Agnis?” The tone of his voice was serious.

She looked into his face. The gravity of what they were about to undertake was there, as well. “I promise,” she agreed. “I’ll get as much sleep as I’m able.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Mist swirled about them in the candlelit dining hall. “Tis a beautiful ornament, my love,” she said, fingering the strings of pearls.*

*“Befitting you, Arluene.” He knelt at her knee and laid his head in her lap. “You carry my son in your womb.” A large hand rubbed her swollen belly. “You’ve sacrificed your honor and your family for my happiness. A pearl necklace pales in comparison to your gifts.”*

*“Truly the three strands are lovely, but it is you who have sacrificed for me. Not many would keep a murderess under their roof.”*

*“It was only a matter of time before Dacey’s vindictiveness destroyed her. You were the instrument of the Almighty’s hand in this matter.”*

*She frowned.*

*“What troubles you, woman?”*

*“The Almighty may have used me in ending Dacey’s life upon that rock a fortnight past, but His sense of justice escapes me. Our love has cost us everything.”*

*“Not everything, Arluene. We have one another. You have sacrificed your former life to be with me. All will be made right and complete when the priest comes to perform our marriage ceremony. You will see.”*

*“I... ahh...”*

*“What is it?”*

*She panted. “A pain, unlike anything I’ve known.”*

*“Is it time for your confinement?”*

*“No, ‘tis too early.” She inhaled deeply, before releasing another pain-filled moan. “I should go to my chambers.”*

*Trace lifted her into his arms as if she weighed no more than a feather. She closed her eyes against his strength. “Call Feyth, please.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Agnis, it’s time to wake up.”*

A gentle, soothing voice flowed about her. Slowly, she opened her eyes as she inhaled a subtle, masculine scent and smiled. “Rey. What time is it?”

*“Close to sunset.”*

She gasped. “I’ve been asleep that long?” She paused, her brows furrowing as she sat up. “I had another dream. About a man and a woman named Trace and Arluene.”

The bed gave a low creak as he sat down. “Really? What was this one about?”

“Arluene was pregnant, and living with Trace, waiting to get married. She killed a woman named Dacey. It’s not the first time I’ve dreamt of them, Rey.”

“Who are they?”

“The ancestors of Logan and Glenna.”

His voice was filled with curiosity. “What makes you think that?”

“They keep talking about a curse, and in my dream a pearl necklace was given to Arluene by Trace. I saw that necklace before, in another dream. The nightmare where the wolf ripped my throat out.”

Rey stood and paced the room from window to door and back again. “What is it, Rey? What’s wrong?”

He returned to her bedside, sat down, and grabbed her hand. “Your dreams, they’re not just random firings of your brain synapses. Every woman who’s joined the O’Brien family has had them at one time or another.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. “That’s impossible. A: Dreams don’t predict the future. B: They don’t accurately depict the past. C: I’m not joined to the O’Brien family. D: It’s not logical that dreams are inherited or passed on somehow. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Agnis, this is something that science can’t explain. Believe me, I’ve tried. My father tried, as did my great-grandfather. My mother had the dreams you’ve described, and so did my grandmother. There was a reason they had the dreams.”

She harrumphed. “What would that be, Rey O’Brien?”

“The dreams were warnings.”

“Warnings? Of what? Curses made by leprechauns?”

“No, of course not. They’re an admonition about the O’Brien men, about what will happen to you by being involved with one of us.”

“Are the lot of you mass murderers or something?”

“No, Agnis. The O’Brien’s are cursed -- have been for centuries.”

“I don’t believe in curses any more than I believe that the bogeyman sleeps under my bed or hides in my closet. And why me, anyway? I told you I’m not tied to this family.”

A sad smile crossed his face. “You don’t need a piece of paper to be united to this family. You ended up carrying my son. It’s all the connection you need. Like it or not, Agnis, you’re a part of this family.”

“And what if I told you no? I don’t chose to play a role in this...this...I don’t even know what to call it. It’s too crazy.”

He stood and began pacing again. Abruptly, he turned. “What if I could prove it to you, Agnis.”

“Prove what?”

“That your dreams can and have come true. That you need to pay special attention to the danger signals they’re giving you.”

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, put on her sneakers, and stood. “Let’s say you can prove this somehow. What am I supposed to do? Run away screaming like some gothic heroine?”

He strode to her purposefully and grabbed her by the upper arms. “No. Just leave. Keep as far away from this place as you can.”

With great strength of will, Agnis jerked free. Through clenched teeth, she ground out, “I can’t and won’t do that. Those animals are my future.”

“You’re my life, Agnis. You’re in mortal danger, and those animals have everything to do with it.” He enclosed her in his arms again, this time gently. “The dreams, our child, they bind us together. This is our fate.”

She sighed against the strong wall his chest made. “I don’t believe in fate. Each of us controls our own destiny. There is no god, no magic, and no cosmic force of the world that directs our path. Each of our decisions leads to the next, and so forth. Our present, right here and now, is based on what we’ve chosen.”

Nestled against him, she could hear the strong beating of his heart. There was warmth in his embrace. He smelled of the outdoors and soap and the wildness of western Ireland. The things he tried to convince her of just couldn't be true. Dreams might be a hint for solving problems. Agnis knew that. But they didn't predict the future. The future was here, right now, in Rey's protective arms.

She looked into his eyes, and wished he would kiss her. Make all this silly malarkey disappear so that there was only the two of them in this room, with nothing to worry about except how to bring each other pleasure and happiness. Her lips parted slightly in anticipation, and he didn't disappoint. Tenderly, he claimed her, and she succumbed to the heady sensation.

"You're such a spitfire," he whispered against her hair.

"You haven't seen me riled yet," she whispered back against the muscular column of his throat.

"But I know how you tempt. And much as I would love to possess you this very moment, there is something I must show you."

He led her by the hand to the library.

"What's in here, Rey?"

"Proof."

"About what?"

"The dreams."

"There's nothing you can do. They're figments of my mind, not something I collectively share with your ancestors."

She watched him swing aside a large painting on hinges. A wall safe had been hidden underneath, and he quickly spun the combination lock, then turned a silver handle, before he pulled out a leather jewelry box.

"Sit down, Agnis. Only those who have perpetuated the direct line of the O'Brien clan have worn the contents of this box."

She sat as he asked, and watched until he came to stand behind her. Anticipation coiled in her stomach.

“This is more than proof, Agnis. It’s a symbol of my love for you.”

“Love?”

His large hand caressed her shoulder. “How many ways do I need to tell you, babe, that you are my life?”

She closed her eyes to hold back hot tears of frustration and joy. He loved her? Could it truly be possible?

“Agnis, when I asked you to marry me, it wasn’t just because of our baby. Lord knows, that spurred me to action, but it was more. You’ve removed the loneliness I’ve lived with for the past twenty years.”

His sigh brushed her neck, and then his hands were putting something around her throat. She looked down at a three-tiered pearl necklace. Her head spun as she recalled words spoken in another dream. Rey quietly spoke. “My family heirloom is only as beautiful as the woman who bears my son.”

Fear clutched her completely and she jumped from her seat, staring at Rey. “This is impossible,” she gasped.

“You’ve dreamt of the necklace? All the O’Brien women have.”

“No, I mean yes. I mean, yes, I’ve dreamt of this necklace, but...but how could you know?”

He moved closer, then grasped her cold hands in his. “Agnis, what’s wrong? You’re trembling.”

“The words. They were in my dream, too.”

Dropping her hands, he stalked away, and then turned back to face her. “It’s the proof I talked about.”

Logic crept back into her mind. “Rey, it’s still just a dream.” She had to convince herself, as well. “They don’t have to be taken literally.” Even if he had recited word-for-word what her dream man had said before she began running for her life.



“Agnis, there’s more. The curse. It’s been in my family since the days of Trace. The nights before, of, and immediately after the full moon, every mature O’Brien male has suffered the same fate as his ancestors.”

The knowledge that the necklace existed was disturbing. The gravity of Rey’s voice as he talked to her made Agnis shiver. She wasn’t ready to hear what he was going to tell her. Not now. She straightened her spine. “We can sort this out later. Right now, we have some puppies to save.”

That seemed to galvanize him. He returned to her and took the necklace from her fingers, then stroked the pearls gently down her cheek. “This is yours, Agnis. The O’Brien line is tied to your fate. Wear this when you are sure you want to stay with me as my bride.”

Life was crashing about her, as furiously as the waves of the Atlantic beat upon the Cliffs of Moher. Her eyes widened. If her dreams were predictions of her future with Rey...she shivered. How could she atone for her great-grandfather’s ignominious deed if she were forced to flee for her life?

## Chapter Nineteen

A few hours later, Agnis let Rey lead her to the edge of an area she didn't recognize. "Where are we?"

"Just east of Malbay. Malone's place is a ways away. He's accrued a nice bit of land near Kilmaley."

"We're not far from water, are we, Rey?"

"The Mal bay is near."

"I wonder," Agnis continued. "Do you think he wants to raise the wolf pups, and then let them go so he won't have the possibility of his land being turned into a sanctuary? You know, scare the locals from even considering the possibility of reintroduction. He would have 'proven' to them how dangerous wolves could be... could he have been behind the attack at the Keanes?"

"An idea like that is far-fetched, but with his tirades, not unthinkable. Once he's proven there are wolves, he can hunt them down. There'd be no laws to stop him here."

"That might be what he thinks, but those animals are endangered. They're protected nearly everywhere."

Rey laid a hand on her arm. "They'll be dead before the international community reacts."

They crept toward an open clearing, similar to the one she'd seen the pups frolicking in near Doo Lake. It wouldn't be long until dark was upon them. "Did you secure the hiding site?"

"I did. The property will be legally mine. It'd been abandoned for quite a while, so there's additional paperwork."

"How far are we from Malone's?"

"Several kilometers. From the indications I saw near Doo Lake, it looked as if the puppies were headed west, in this direction. I doubt they'd travel too fast."

"I just hope Malone didn't come up with the idea."

In the quiet of evening, they sat and waited. A movement in the pasture, at odds with the swaying of the grasses, caught her attention. "Rey." She pointed. "There's something there."

"I see it. You stay here. I'll take a closer look. Keep your stungun on, just in case it's Malone or one of his ilk."

Agnis nodded. She watched Rey sneak away from her in a low crouch. Further west, the sun shot forth a bright burst of orange light over the horizon. The muted light faded and soft moonlight seeped over the clearing as the lunar orb rose in the night sky. She sat perfectly still, but her mind whirled. When she started on this thesis project, she'd never imagined the twists and turns her life would take. Didn't contemplate finding someone that would love her unconditionally. In no way at all fathomed carrying within her womb a child. Rey's child.

Near the area she'd pointed out to Rey, there was more movement. Two puppies rolled into the open, followed by four more, and the alpha she'd become acquainted with. Where was Rey? Shouldn't he be retrieving the animals and keeping them within the shelter of the grasses?

Her hesitation lasted just a moment. The exposure of the puppies was too risky. In a semi-squatting position, she made her way opposite the pups, making sure she was hidden in the grasses. If she could get to the dogs, she could either catch one or send them in the direction she'd seen Rey go.

She froze at the sound of a thrashing noise behind her. Goose bumps chilled her arms when she heard whispered voices. She was no longer alone. She recognized the voice of Daniel Malone. "Ah, there they are," he whispered to an unseen companion. "And look, that black wolf I've been telling ya about is here, too. Nearly killed Eddie Eevar."

Agnis maneuvered to try and get a look at the alpha. She couldn't locate him.

"Malone, it was a bullet that nearly done Eddie in."

"All the same, if that wolf hadn't been there, Eevar wouldn't have been shot."

"Aye. There'd have been no need for the guns to be out."

Her time was up. She had to keep Malone from those animals. Rushing through the grass as fast as she dared, she neared the puppies. Their heads jerked upright, their ears pointed. They'd heard her. She gave a soft whistle, and all six of the puppies began to playfully move in her direction.

Malone and his companion moved closer. "You do have a silver bullet in that gun of yours? He'd be dead if you'd one the first time."

Agnis stifled a gasp.

"Ready now. Aim."

The black wolf pushed a puppy toward her, then dashed right, to disappear into the grasses.

"Damn. We have to wait for him to come out again," a nasally voice said.

"He's protecting those pups," she heard Malone respond. "He'll come out again once he sees one in trouble."

"They ain't in trouble."

"Then ya have to get one, man, and the wolf will follow."

"You think I want him attacking me like he did Eevar? He nearly died!"

"Coward."

"I prefer to think of myself as strategically wise," Malone's partner countered.

“Whatever. Do you have silver bullets?”

“Aye.”

“Then don’t be missing.”

Nothing more was said. There were no sounds. Not even an insect rubbed its wings. From her location, Agnis could see Malone edge closer to the pups. She gave another low whistle and the puppies skipped closer. Suddenly, the alpha raced toward them, grabbing a pup by the scruff of his neck.

In her peripheral vision, Agnis could see Malone and his companion taking aim. Adrenaline coursed through her, and she shot from her hiding spot and pushed the wolf out of the way just as a loud explosion rent the air. The animal fell sideways, maintaining its hold on the puppy. A scream tore from her throat as the bullet burned into her side. She clamped a hand over the wound, blood seeping through her fingers. Her gaze landed on the wolf returning to its feet. *Get out of here*, she willed. *Get the puppies and be safe*. He looked at her, golden eyes seeming to register her request.

Agnis struggled to her knees, the effort forcing more blood from her body. She had to move, to keep Malone away. Where was Rey?

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ya done and shot someone, Malone.”

“She jumped in the way. It was an accident.”

“Damn, it’s O’Brien’s woman. You’re in deep now, Malone. What are you gonna say happened, Daniel?”

“Nothing, if I can help it.”

“You ain’t gonna tell ‘em you were shootin’ at a wolf, are ya?”

“I have no intention of telling anyone anything,” Malone retorted.

“She’ll rabbit on if she wakes.”

“Someone’s got to find her first. *If* she survives, we have each other for an alibi. We’re nowhere near here. We’re having drinks at my place, playing cards. She’s a foreigner; the guarda won’t believe her.”

From the grasses, Rey watched the men get into their vehicle and speed off. He couldn’t move. The horror of what he’d witnessed, the fatal injury of Agnis and their unborn son, crushed his spirit. He sat on his haunches and howled long and loud at the moon. It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. There was nothing he could do to stop his suffering, to stop the hand of fate from squeezing the life out of his heart. That bullet was meant for him.

He began to approach her just as he heard the loud chugging of a vehicle. At his paws, six young whelps played, oblivious to the sacrifice facing them. Agnis had paid for his life, for all of their lives. Now, they had to leave, despite his anguish, before he was spotted and his mission halted.

Her last wish was that the pups get to safety. He growled at the canines and captured their attention. Somberly, they headed to the sanctuary.

\* \* \* \* \*

The long, dark hours of the night passed in agonizing weariness. Plowing through the crisp, tall grasses, Rey had finally gotten the pups to their new asylum. Now, he was back in the grass, rushing through hill and valley to his Agnis.

With each kilometer he traveled, the more panic-driven became his velocity. The scent of her blood spilling onto the grass near the stand urged him onward. He hadn’t smelled death, only blood. She couldn’t die. She mustn’t die.

He returned to the field where Malone had shot Agnis. She was gone. Someone had retrieved her. A tiny tendril of hope grew in his heart. She could only be taken to one place for medical treatment. His unerring sense of smell and direction led him to Liam’s. Inside, several lights burned brightly, and the noise of metal dropping onto metal echoed in the night.

“Jayzuz,” a man exclaimed. “How much blood do you think she’s lost?”

The volume of the conversation dropped. Stunned, his fragile hope crushed, Rey stumbled to the rise behind the clinic, and howled his pain again. He cursed the providence that had held out the shard of hope, then ruthlessly stripped it away. There would be no happily-ever-after for Agnis, himself, and their son. Her sacrifice was just another senseless death in the long line of O'Brien women. Not only was she gone forever, her death had accomplished nothing. Glenna's cure hadn't worked. He was still a werewolf.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You shouldn't be up, young lady," the doctor reprimanded. "You've had too close of a call."

"I just want to look out the window, Doctor. I want to see the hills turn green again when the sun touches them. Then I'll believe I'm really here, and that my baby and I are alive. I promise I'll do whatever you want once I see another day kiss this land. I'll know that I'm not in some alternate reality where I only think I'm alive, but I'm really dead."

"You're alive, Agnis. A living, breathing miracle, the two of you. It would have been different if that farmer hadn't heard the gunshot and gotten to you as quickly as he did. But if you don't sit down, I'm going to sedate you. There is too much stress on your body to handle standing right now. You need to lie down."

"Can I sit here?"

"I'll bring you a wheelchair, and you can watch the sunrise from the back, with me as your watchdog." She watched the young doctor remove a chair from a closet. He unfolded it, set the brakes, and patted the green vinyl. "In you go, Agnis."

Leaning her head against the IV stand, she momentarily closed her eyes. Where was Rey? It was the question that ran through her mind over and over again like a mouse trying to find its way out of a maze. "Have you found Rey, Doctor?"

"I've tried all night, Agnis. Seamus will bring him here as soon as they locate him."

“You know that saying, the one about it being the darkest before the dawn? It’s true. Look. The stars have dimmed and there isn’t a hint of the light to come. It’s how it feels when your heart gives up.”

“Why are you spouting such nonsense? You’ve been given a second chance at life, at identifying what’s important. Don’t waste it.”

“He left me.”

“Who?”

“Rey. He left when I needed him the most.”

“He was there?”

“Yes,” she whispered into the darkness.

“Did he shoot you?”

Agnis gave the doctor a stern look. “No, he didn’t.”

“Who did, then?”

“Daniel Malone.”

He frowned. “You know I must call the guarda.”

“I know. I just wanted to talk to Rey first, before everything got really crazy. Could you wait to call, just a little longer?”

She glanced toward the dark horizon, where the full moon was finishing its descent. Her canine friend was there. Somehow she’d known she would see him, a sign of comfort in troubling times. Suddenly, as if he’d been struck, he jerked, as a ray of sunlight struck his shiny black coat. The wolf fell to the ground, writhing.

Agnis gasped, staring in horror at the spot, not daring to blink. How much more pain could her heart take? Just as rapidly, there was movement on the hill’s crest, and then she saw a man stand, tall against the lightening sky. He stretched, and then dashed down the far side of the hill.

“Go ahead, make your call, Doctor. Rey won’t be here any time soon,” she flatly replied.



## Chapter Twenty

“Liam, thank God you have her.” Rey couldn’t keep the exhilaration out of his voice as he pumped the doctor’s hand. “I’ve been worried sick since Seamus got hold of me. Will she be okay? Is the baby okay?”

“They are both very fortunate, Rey. The bullet went right straight through; didn’t hit anything major. A real miracle, even if she did lose a fair amount of blood.” He grabbed Rey’s elbow. “Man, I know you’ve been involved in some weird gick. What’s going on this time? Why was Malone shooting at her?”

“It’s touchy,” Rey sighed, “but Malone is up to something. Agnis has been encouraging some farmers to consider developing support businesses for eco-tourism, should a wolf refuge be developed in the region. Malone is opposed. Last night, we were looking for a litter of missing puppies when Malone jumped us.”

“So you’re trying to...?”

“We’re trying to save those animals from whatever he’s planning to use them for.”

“Look, the guarda will be here sometime this morning to investigate the attack. They interrogate all shooting victims. I can give you some time to get her home. Normally, I wouldn’t do this, except she’s pregnant with *your* child. Agnis needs to

recuperate. The guarda won't be good for her in that regard. Keep her safe, Rey. I'm putting the entire responsibility for her welfare on you."

"As you should, Liam."

"I'll stop by within the week and see how she's doing. Now, get her out of here before it's too late."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey carried her over the threshold. It should have been one of the most romantic moments of her life, but it wasn't. Her heart belonged to a wolf. Not just any wolf, but a werewolf, at that. It was Arluene and Trace, Logan and Glenna, all over again. And it couldn't be real!

No matter what that doctor had said, Agnis knew the only explanation for what she'd seen had to be that she was now living in some alternate universe. Maybe she had bled to death in that field and she'd stepped through to the other side of life to find all her notions of logic and normalcy had been turned upside down. "Am I still pregnant?" she wondered.

"Yes, Liam said that the baby was just fine, and you would be, too, if you got enough rest."

Lord, she'd said that aloud? She squeezed Rey's upper arm. He seemed real enough. If he was real, and she was still pregnant, that meant only one thing. She had to get away from here, go home, and be safe. She tried to make words flow like water from her mouth. Opening and shutting it like the handle for an old-fashioned water pump, trying to prime the words out. "I can't stay here."

"Why not?"

She looked into his golden brown eyes. Was it her imagination, or were those eyes filled with pain? "This place is making me hallucinate."

He put her on the bed in the guestroom that she'd commandeered, and tucked a blanket around her shoulders. "You're not imagining things, Agnis."

“I have to be. There is no such thing as druidic magic, no such thing as werewolves. My life has had nothing normal or rational in it since I arrived. I have to leave and find some sort of balance in my life again. No one here is what they’ve appeared to be. Especially you.”

He stood and paced the room, a blank expression on his face. Leaning against the window sash, he started talking in low soft tones. “What I’m going to tell you won’t be easy. I tried to tell you before, but you had such a hard time with the dreams.” He ran a hand through his loose hair. “The people of your dreams -- they were all a part of my family.

“Trace was betrothed to Dacey. Instead, he married Arluene because he fathered a child with her. Dacey cursed them, and they died early, unnatural deaths. Dacey also cursed their child. The firstborn of every generation has become a lycanthrope. It’s been passed down ever since. From all I’ve been able to discern, Logan and Glenna believed they found the remedy to the affliction. It gave Logan a false assurance, and he believed he’d been cured. Only he hadn’t.

“Each one of my forbears passed on the curse, each firstborn child a male. Every attempt to thwart it, whether by suicide, war, dangerous sport, has failed. Most of the time, miserably.”

She inhaled deeply, trying to make sense of his revelations, and the things she’d seen. “What you’re telling me is that you are a...” she swallowed hard, trying to force the word from her mouth, “...werewolf?”

With his back to her, all she could do was stare. She plowed forward. “You’re also telling me that our child, whom you’ve continually termed ‘our son,’ is also going to be a werewolf.”

This time he did turn around, and there were tears streaming down his face. “I couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t think of condemning your or him to a fate like this. I didn’t want to believe it at first, but then you found Glenna’s letter. I, like Logan, hoped we could beat the damn curse. I found Glenna’s family home, found out what we needed to do. I couldn’t do it. I love you too damn much.”

“You’re entirely serious? You’re the black wolf I followed?” Curiosity overwhelmed her logical disbelief, as his tormented tears softened her heart. The wolf she’d seen change into a man, was Rey. Last night was the second time she’d seen the phenomenon. She was trained to register facts, to notice the world around her. She had the evidence of her own eyes. “What do we have to do, Rey?”

He came and sat next to her on the bed, taking her hands in his. “It required you to die for me. I can’t lose you. I’d rather live with the curse and know that you’re safe.”

How did one answer a statement like that? If she died, he’d be well. “How do we control the curse?” she finally blurted.

“The day before, of, and after the full moon, I am transfigured into wolf form during the sunset hours. Seamus usually locks me away.”

Comprehension filled her. “Your shoulder. You were shot and I brought you here. You were the wolf. Seamus let you out in the morning to tend you. And then you had that horrible scar in your shoulder. The injury transferred to your shoulder.”

“It’s called ‘wound doubling.’ In the old days, when there was less tolerance for those who were different, wound doubling was used to find the touched elements of society.”

The quilt twisted in her hand. “Rey, how can we be safe?”

“Other than the fact that I love you? Seamus has lived with me nearly all my life. He’s known how to deal with me all his life. I’ve never hurt him, just as I’ll never hurt you or any of our children. This is how my life has been since my teens. It will never change.”

Love warred with logic. How could they possibly be safe if he changed into a wolf at every full moon? Out of the blue, clarity dawned. She’d been with him through some of those wolf manifestations. While she wasn’t one hundred percent sure it really was Rey as the black wolf, she did know she’d been safe with that animal. “I’ll stay,” she simply stated. “On a trial basis.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately. She responded in kind, placed several kisses along his neck, worked her way to his earlobe, where she nibbled. His hands ran down her back and over the curve of her hips. Shivers of anticipation ran through her. Other men would have run screaming to find out they'd impregnated the woman of their one-night stand.

Not Rey. He'd acknowledged the pregnancy, and asked her to spend her life with him. Still desired her, even when she was unable to completely accept the confession he'd made. His hands moved under her blouse, carefully skirting her injury, setting her skin on fire. She lifted her face to his lips as she pulled his head toward her and kissed him. Desire raced through her at the heated contact and she laced her fingers behind his head to keep kissing him.

"I want to make love to you properly," he whispered against her cheek when he pulled back. Little kisses trailed down her neck, to the hollow of her throat. Deft fingers unbuttoned her blouse, and his gentle kisses began again, halting where they neared the gauze and tape. "Damn Malone for hurting you. It'll never happen again."

The conviction in his tone left no doubt. Rey would keep her and their son secure while he was in human form. But when he changed, what would happen then?

"Agnis, I still have another night of the change to go through. No matter what you hear, you cannot come to me."

"You've never hurt me, Rey. Why would tonight be different?"

"I can't trust myself. How can I trust myself around you? The dream you had; remember, the necklace, and then you running for your life? You were running from me, Agnis."

\* \* \* \* \*

There, he'd finally spilled it. He could keep her safe from Malone, but not himself. "That dream showed you what I'm capable of."

There was a long silence, and he watched her hands clutch and release the coverlet of her bed. "Have you ever killed anyone, Rey?"

"Seamus and I have worked hard to prevent that. Until Malone slapped you, I'd never hurt a person while I was in lycanthrope form."

Her delicate hand stroked his cheek. "You were protecting me then, too. You're not a violent man, Rey. Malone brought this situation to a head, not you. You didn't smuggle those wolf pups into the country. You aren't trying to fan hatred."

"I can't blame Malone for what I am, for my family history."

"No. But you can't censure yourself for his actions, either. He's the one involved with illegal activities. He needs a scapegoat, and you, as the black wolf he's tracking, are his target. Don't take on his guilt, too."

Cupping his hands around her head, he kissed her again. All that wisdom in such a nice package. "Agnis, you never answered me."

"What question?"

"Will you marry me now that you know about the curse?"

She paused. In her eyes, he could see logic wage war with emotion.

"Once the sun sets, you'll be sure of it." He stood and looked out the window. "You'll have all the scientific proof you'll ever need."

"I have deep feelings for you, Rey."

"But?"

"I know there is unexplainable stuff happening within these walls. How would I know about a necklace I've never seen, or people I've never heard of?"

Returning to her bedside, he knelt. "Precisely, sweet Agnis, precisely. As unbelievable as those facts are, they are facts. You've experienced them yourself. If I need to wait for the scientist within to discover the truth, I'll content myself with the delay."

"This scientist knows the truth, as unbelievable as it is."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey left her a few hours later. They'd lain together in silence, and Agnis absorbed every moment like a sponge being saturated. With Rey's arms around her, she fell into a deep sleep, waking only when he'd left her side.

Between the heavy curtains, there was no longer any light. She got out of bed and stared into the darkness, the pain in her side considerably lessened. She would have been injured more severely if the bullet hadn't ricocheted off the metal detailing of her belt. As it was, the silver bullet had pierced her side. She'd needed the help of Rey's doctor friend, Liam, and his sutures to stop the blood flow.

Replaying his proposal in her mind, Agnis tried to comprehend Rey's confession and how it would translate into a permanent relationship between them. She'd had her fill of supernatural events since she'd moved to the region. To believe Rey turned into a werewolf defied all she knew and trusted. Yet, she trusted him, and she had the facts of her own sightings. He had no reason to tell her, less reason to lie. The nights of the full moon, when they'd been separated, the wolf showed up.

A loud howl cut through the silence. It reverberated throughout the house, sounding as if it had come from the structure's very bowels. The heavy dark outdoors was wearing on her soul. Is this what Arluene and Glenna experienced when their soul mates were condemned to live a life of pain-filled transformation? Did the night song of the wolf fill them with dread, or pity? Despite their feelings, both women had married their men, carried their children. Rey said their marriages were short-lived, but were they happy?

On the nightstand, the phone rang, bringing her back to reality. Seamus was gone with the pups, and Rey was locked away in some secretive place. She picked up the receiver. "Hello. O'Brien residence."

"Agnis. So, you're there."

The voice chilled her. "What do you want, Malone?"

“I’ve called to let you know your canine friends are in trouble.” In the background, she could hear the soft whines and cries of puppies. “I’m thinkin’ we should have a little chat.”

Her mind raced. What was Malone going to do with those animals? “Where?”

“Half hour. Let’s say at the crest of the Slieve? Remember, their fate is in your hands. Don’t be late.”

She’d not allow him to destroy those puppies. It was time to atone for her family’s past. She straightened as much as her stitches would allow. “I’ll be there.”



## Chapter Twenty-one

Meeting Daniel Malone on the Slieve was hazardous. Agnis couldn't meet him and not be prepared for some sort of ambush. He had plenty of reason to see her dead, especially since she could identify him as her attacker. She reassuringly patted the stungun in her front coat pocket. Within the windbreaker, the weapon wouldn't be blatantly obvious.

From the hallway, she dialed the guarda, asking them to call the inspector and meet her at the Slieve. She had to consider the child she now carried, as well as the penance she was paying for her great-grandfather. She hadn't been around to stop him from killing the last wolf in Yellowstone in 1926, but the shame she'd felt the day she discovered what he'd done burned her soul.

Hastily, she scribbled a note telling of her meeting with Malone, and left it on the oak letter table for Rey and Seamus. She tensed, then relaxed her fists. It was her responsibility to see that those wolf pups were safe and returned to the proper authorities. If she ever hoped for a return of the species, anywhere in the United Kingdom, Malone's plans had to be stopped. The repercussions throughout the countries of the Bern Convention would be destructive.

She was almost out the door when a niggling thought struck. What if she couldn't get to her stungun fast enough or it didn't work? She turned and went to

the kitchen in search of a large knife she could conceal in her other pocket. Silverware rattled as she jerked open drawers looking for a knife that would serve as a deterrent should Malone or one of his company get the jump on her.

Frustration built as the minutes slipped by. She'd not have long to get to the rendezvous point early if she didn't find something soon. Hurling by her rage, forks, spoons, butter knives clanged to the floor with an ominous echo, until at last she came to a carving knife, about twenty centimeters long. This she could conceal beneath her hand in the jacket pocket.

Agnis hurried back through the house and out into the night. Substantial in the night sky was the round moon, slightly covered by a thin cloud. There would be light, but not as much as she'd become accustomed to in the past.

Shadows slashed the ground in ominous patterns. Eyes wide, Agnis swept her head from side to side, looking for possible spots from which Malone could spring a trap. Crisp leaves crunched underneath her booted feet as a chill wind began to blow.

Exertion took its toll on her breathing, severely hampered by the injury Malone had previously given her. She'd be late. Clutching her ribs, she leaned against a lone tree to catch her breath, ease the pain building in her side.

She twisted her head at the sound of an animal scuttling through the dry leaves. How could she have been so naive? She wasn't supposed to reach the crest. Daniel needed her silent. She'd been blinded by trying to make amends for her own family's past. He wouldn't bring the puppies for any sort of bargain. They were only a lure that he'd used successfully. He would see that she never got to the top.

Sticking her hand into her pocket, she was terrified by the violence represented by the sharp blade of the knife and the prongs of the stungun. She turned to head back toward the house. Too much was at stake -- her life, and her baby's. With the guarda on the way, and Malone arrested for his threats, they'd be able to save the wolf-napped pups. Leaving the tree behind, she began moving again, toward the house, each sound of the night feeding her fears.

Behind her, she heard a whistle, not unlike the one she'd used to call the pups to her from the vale. Whirling, she cried out, "Who's there?" No one answered, and the night returned to its former eerie silence.

She looked to see how far she'd come. Rey's house was in the distance, his kennels closer. The crest of the Slieve was receding behind her. Turning once again, she continued her descent.

"Now!"

Noise erupted from all directions. Two men jumped from the dark, and as she wheeled to face them, she stumbled. Frantically, she tried to regain her feet.

"You said we were after the wolf, Malone," one of the men complained.

"I want no part of messing with this girl," the other continued. "I'm out of here."

In the dark, she heard the crisp leaves crushed by their feet begin to fade away. Daniel Malone stepped from the dark as she tried to stand and shoved her back onto the cold ground. He straddled her hips and stuffed a rag in her mouth. "Cowards, the lot of ya," he yelled after them.

Kneeling over her, Malone smiled. "I've wanted to be on top of you a good, long time now." His cold fingers found the fly button and zipper of her jeans. "What's this?" he asked as the stungun fell from her pocket.

Wide-eyed, she watched him examine the weapon, and then switch it on. "Planning on using this on me?" Suddenly, he zapped her thighs with it. Pain shot through her, as her legs jerked. "I bet this would make a nice sex toy. Use it instead of a cane to make that ass of yours all hot."

She struggled to reach her pocket for the knife, but Malone zapped her shoulder. Her movements turned into spastic twitches. "Let's take a look at what ol' Rey's been occupying himself with, shall we?"

Malone's icy fingers reached the top of her shirt and ripped. Her breasts were now exposed to the stare of the lecher. "I was right, you've got nice jabs; just the

right kind for fucking.” She heard a zipper, then saw Malone’s cock freed of its confines.

Shit! He was going to rape her, and she was helpless to fight back.

“Your mouth would feel so nice around my dick.” He held his tool in his hand and moved closer to her lips, before he jammed it back into his pants and muttered. “No fucking time. No fucking time!”

“Where’s those paws?” he said to himself. She watched him pull a large paw from a backpack near him. It was *her* backpack; the one Daniel had taken near Doo Lake when the wolf attacked his man. She swallowed the rising bile in her throat. This was what had been used before, when Malone tried to instill fear that a wolf had attacked the sheep at Keane’s farm.

He placed the paw on her chest. “Too bad I can’t be having you myself, lass.” He dragged it down, catching the wolf claws on her red bra, tearing it as he continued raking her body. Suddenly, he laughed. “Look at your tits, how hard those huge nips are. You’re aroused by this!”

It was the cold and sudden exposure that pebbled her nipples, not Malone’s actions, but he would never know otherwise. Only Rey knew how to make her body sing. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Malone could only make her cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rey paced the kennel office, waiting for the change. With Seamus occupied with the pups, he was unable to lock himself in the basement. But here, once the change came, he wouldn’t be able to turn the dead-bolt lock.

Memories flooded him. It was here he’d felt the tender ministrations of Agnis, experienced her concern for his well-being. He could well understand her refusal to accept his change. What thinking woman would? And her a scientist, to boot. No, she’d never accept something she’d not seen with her own two eyes, and he wasn’t about to let her witness the change.

Grasping the sash of the window, he looked upon the grounds of his estate. Even in the night, they managed a supernatural beauty that had brought him a degree of peace. But that was before Agnis came. Now his solitude wasn't permanent. She brought him energy and enthusiasm. With her carrying his child, he had a double reason to live. An opportunity to believe that his life would not be filled with endless, identical days.

A movement outside on the hill, well past the kennels, caught his attention. Agnis! What was she doing? Her movements were slow and labored, as if whatever she felt she had to do was causing her great pain. He pushed open the window and called to her, but she didn't hear him. Without thought, he rushed through the door and followed her into the night.

What was she doing out so late without an escort? The grasses slashed at him as he ran toward Agnis. Then he heard her scream. He prayed he'd reach her before anything else happened to her. From a distance, he saw her on the ground, Malone astride her. Fury filled him at the sight. He kept to the shadows, trying to get closer. He wouldn't let Malone hurt Agnis again.

Crouching, Rey felt the muscles of his thighs collect energy before he propelled himself onto Malone. The man went down with a hard thump and they tumbled away from Agnis. Rey raced back to her. "Are you okay?"

He watched tears course down her face. Of course she wasn't okay. "Can you move?"

"Malone." She shook her head. "Behind..."

Rey jumped to his feet and spun around.

"Damn, O'Brien, you're always spoiling my fun." Malone held the stungun in his hand like a knife and advanced toward Rey.

Why wouldn't Malone realize he was beaten? Rey had promised to never let him touch Agnis again. But, in order to do that, he had to disarm Malone. Rey couldn't let him fire the stungun or he'd be as helpless as Agnis. "Why are you doing this, Malone?"

“Your doxie can spoil it all for me. She’ll convince them to start this refuge before I’ve had a chance.”

“A chance to do what?”

Malone sneered. “You should know, O’Brien. You’ve been a bigger thorn in my flesh than your woman. Besides, I have a wolf to hunt.”

Rey’s mind raced. He’d tried to deal as little as possible with Daniel. Even the few land dealings they’d waged price wars on, he’d let his attorney handle.

“There are no wolves in Ireland, Daniel. You, of all people, should know that.”

“There’s not supposed to be, but I’ve changed that.”

Cautiously, Rey circled his opponent, forcing him to turn from Agnis. “Why?”

“There’ll be big money in them, once they succeed in the Scottish Highlands. But before we build a refuge for them, there will be plans to be made for improving the villages around here. Eventually, I’ll own the land. But I’m not ready yet.”

Behind Malone, Rey saw Agnis stir. The effects of the stungun appeared to be wearing off. Agnis had to stay still until he could drop Daniel. Without warning, Daniel lunged.

Rey easily jumped to the side, forcing Daniel to miss, then tackled the man. Agnis’s gun flew from Malone’s hand as the two men fought and rolled on the hillside. Their struggle lasted a small eternity. The first man to tire would be the loser. Rey was determined it wouldn’t be him. He was fighting for more than his life. He was fighting for Agnis and their son.

From the shadows, Rey saw someone move. Agnis had risen and was advancing on them. “Daniel Malone, stop.”

For a heartbeat, all the sound that could be heard on the Slieve was the rasping of air coming from their lungs. Agnis stood impossibly close, her stungun clutched in whitened fingers, a dark splotch spreading through the material of her torn shirt and jacket. It would be too easy for Malone to wrest the weapon from her and turn it against her as he had before.

Suddenly, his enemy struck out. Agnis twisted and then Malone screamed, his eyes rolling back in his head as he fell motionless onto the ground. Agnis continued to fire the stungun.

“It’s okay. He’s down.” Rey pried her fingers loose, took the weapon and wrapped her in his arms.

Down the hill, he heard shouts. They turned in tandem to see lights crisscrossing the hillside. An odd sparkle lingered a moment before winking out. “Who’s there?”

“The guarda. We had a call from the O’Brien residence. We’ve been looking for Agnis Fitzgerald and thought you might know her whereabouts.”

A hearty laugh rumbled from Rey. “Aye, Inspector. She’s right here, even as we speak.”

“Good, good,” Paddy wheezed as he joined Rey and Agnis. “He’s the one that killed Michael Keane’s sheep.”

The Inspector, hauling Malone to quaking legs, spoke up. “It took some time, Miss Fitzgerald, but I finally found out our man here had gone to the States, and brought back some interesting artifacts, including wolf paws. He’s also been buying up property in the area.”

“Did he throw the rock through my window?”

“He’s responsible, he is, although he didn’t do the deed himself,” Paddy replied. “He was afraid that once you came to interview him about the relocation study, you’d find out he’d smuggled the wolf pups in. He wanted to scare you off.”

“I don’t understand, Paddy, Inspector. What do the property purchases and wolf pups and paws have to do with one another?” Agnis asked.

The Inspector responded. “Malone was trying to scare off the farmers so he could buy up their land for future development.”

Paddy continued. “Although there isn’t hard proof yet, I believe he was planning on raising the pups if other scare tactics didn’t work. I’m sure we’ll find lads to testify against him.”

Agnis sighed and nestled closer to Rey. “Thank God, it’s over.”



## Chapter Twenty-two

The Inspector had asked a myriad of questions of Agnis while one of the guarda stanching the blood that flowed from the sutures she'd ripped. She'd answered each in a detached manner, as if she were trying to contain her emotions. Several throw pillows supported her back as she lay on the couch. There was something in this aftermath that chilled Rey, even as the fire danced in the fireplace of the austere library. Paddy stayed, uncharacteristically, quiet.

"Inspector, I still don't understand how you knew we needed your help."

"Initially, I didn't. I was on my way to chat with you, Seamus, and Miss Fitzgerald about the shooting incident, when the guarda told me the young lady had called." The Inspector rose, nodded at Agnis, and flashed her a smile.

Rey pumped the man's hand. "Thank you, Inspector Berke. Your follow-through made a difference in tonight's outcome."

"Coming, Paddy?"

"No, I think I may be of further assistance to the young couple here."

The Inspector gave Paddy an odd look, then shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish. Liam will be here soon to finish taking care of you, Agnis. Good night all."

"Rey, how did you find me?" Agnis queried, once the Inspector left. "When I got the phone call from Daniel, you were nowhere to be found."

He ran a hand through his long, dark hair. "I locked myself away, to keep you safe during the change, when I saw you head toward the Slieve. You shouldn't have been out, but you were. I knew something must have lured you."

"He said he had the pups. He implied they'd be hurt." Her voice was cold. There was more she wasn't telling.

He held out his arms for her, then dropped them when she didn't move to join him. "What is it, Agnis?"

"Now that Malone's duplicity has been uncovered, I'll be able to finish my evaluation and move back to the cottage, since my life isn't being threatened. Once I finish the last of the interviews, I can write the paper back at my apartment in Dublin."

"Is that what you want?" he asked, his voice cracking.

With effort, Agnis stood and paced to the window and back. "I want you well, Rey."

"I am well."

"Aye, lass," Paddy added. "He's a fine, strapping lad, in his prime."

She gave him a smile he could only describe as wistful. "No, you're not. You've been suffering some form of mental illness for a long time now."

He shook his head. Mental illness? "What are you talking about, woman?"

Tears fell freely down her cheeks. "The werewolf stuff," she hiccuped. "Look at you. We're in the wee hours of the morning, and you've barely a five o'clock shadow on your chin."

Could it be possible? Rey ran to the window. The full moon continued to fill the night sky. "Oh, my God!" he whispered. He ran to Agnis, and captured her between his arms. "It's over, Agnis. It's over." He turned his head to Paddy. "It worked, right?"

"What worked, Rey?"

“Glenna’s cure, the one I read about. The one that said you, Agnis, had to lose your life.”

Her hyacinth scent brought memories rushing back of how they’d made love on the Slieve. She pulled out of his arms. “What are you talking about, Rey O’Brien?”

“I found Glenna’s diary. The directions she’d been given by the druids to cure Logan. The sacrifice that Dacey cursed Arluene and Trace with was the key. She told them that the truth of their deeds needed to be known, and that love would have to be sacrificed.

“Glenna and I both mistakenly believed it meant losing the life of the one we loved! All that had to happen was sacrificing the love.”

Paddy spoke up. “Aye, lad. Trace and Arluene kept their assignation secret to avoid the death penalty for their love. Logan and Glenna were willing to make the sacrifice, but Logan didn’t understand he needed to share with Glenna the family’s ancient dirty laundry. When Glenna caught me in the woods, protecting her family and home were her only two wishes.”

Understanding lit Agnis’s eyes. “Of course. No matter what you choose, you’d be making a sacrifice, to either lose the one you love, or remain under the curse.” She shuddered. “Dacey was evil.”

Rey looked away, refusing to meet Angis’s gaze. “I’m afraid I’m not much better.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I couldn’t let you die for me. Daniel and the Slieve were a constant threat to you. Then you began to have the dreams. I knew you were in mortal danger from someone you trusted -- me.” He paused, trying to summon up the last of the ugly truths he needed to tell her. “I had to get you out of here, but failed miserably.” He paused and glanced at her. “I pulled some strings and had your grant canceled.”

“Oh, Rey.” Sorrow, disappointment, and regret seemed to saturate those two words. Agnis stayed quiet, her hands across her chest as if protecting her from further hurt.

"I was trying to keep you safe," he choked out. "I wasn't trying to ruin you or your career. I just needed you to be gone, to be safe."

Tears openly ran down his face. He'd told her his greatest fear. The ticking of the hall clock slowed. Pain filled each word. "I couldn't let you die."

She opened her arms to him, and he came to her. "You loved me even then? Even though your actions would hurt you?"

"God, Agnis, when you took that bullet for me. I thought you were dead and I had failed yet again. But that action was enough. You saved my life, and not just once."

"You saved mine, as well. Malone..." she shivered and then changed topics. "There's still something I don't get. Wouldn't the curse have been broken immediately?"

"The rest of Dacey's curse said that Trace and Arluene's deeds had to be made known. It took the combination of the two actions to remove the affliction," Paddy solemnly replied.

"Those deeds weren't fully known until I told you about my change and how the curse had been passed on. Don't you see? It took courage, honesty, and love combined to undo Dacey's magic. From both of us."

"You got it right, now, lad. You two, go on. Talk and do what young people in love do. I have an old friend and some pups to check on." Paddy shut the door to the library.

"Did Paddy say Glenna made 'wishes?'"

Rey laughed. "He did. Paddy's a leprechaun."

"A leprechaun? No way."

"It's no harder to believe than the fact that I turned into a wolf."

They stood near the window, looking out at the full moon, watching it descend in the west. There was peace and contentment in the silence. Rey whispered against her long hair. "I can't believe I almost lost you."

“Nor I, Rey. Maybe I shouldn’t always be the logical scientist. Maybe there is magic in this world, after all.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Agnis stood at the crest of the Slieve, her long, ivory gown flowing in the gentle breeze. Paddy’s wife had lovingly arranged her long, sable hair, and the three-tiered necklace Rey had given her graced her throat. Rey stood beside her, handsome and formal in his black suit. The leaves had all fallen from the tree overhead, but that didn’t diminish the beauty of the moment. “Do you, Agnis Fitzgerald, take Reynardine O’Brien to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Of course she did. What woman in her right mind would turn down a man that looked like Rey, fought like the Irish army, made love like a porn star, and accepted her just as she was, imperfections and all? “I do.”

“Do you, Reynardine O’Brien, take Agnis Fitzgerald to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Agnis held her breath. It had taken her far too long to give Rey an answer to his proposal, even after he’d asked her several times. Now that he was cured, he could have any woman he wanted. Making him a father, a fact that could frighten the strongest of men, was not a selling point, either.

The sun set, sending shafts of orange and pink hues hurtling toward the rising full moon. His timing was perfect. “I do.”

“Please, exchange your rings.”

Fingers trembling, she placed the simple gold band on Rey’s left hand. His hands had always fascinated her, gentle in lovemaking, harsh in battle. They were soothing now as he held her dainty hand in his and placed her wedding band on her finger.

“Then I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride, sir.”

Rey's lips melded with hers as he crushed her body against his. Despite the solemnity of the vows they were making, the bulge in his trousers left her hungry for the love he'd give her later, after their well-wishers were long gone. In memory of Logan and Glenna, and Arluene and Trace, when the moon was at its apex, they planned to consummate their marriage.

\* \* \* \* \*

Excruciating pain tore through her. She inhaled deeply, trying not to let the contractions frighten her. "Rey," she called too shrilly for her own ears. "Rey!"

He burst through the door of their bedroom, Seamus right behind. "What is it? Is it time?"

"I think so." She tried to remember all the pain-reducing techniques she'd learned from Liam. God, their son would be here soon. When she married Rey, she couldn't believe her life could get much better, but now there would another to love. Joy filled her.

"Shall I call your friend, sir?"

"Yes, tell Liam we are on the way."

Rey gathered her up and lovingly carried her to the Range Rover, tucking her in and fastening her seatbelt. "Think happy thoughts, babe."

Her mind responded to his suggestion. There were so many: the day she'd finished her economic impact study and sent it off to her advisor at the university; their marriage on Slieve Callan, where they had made lust-filled love; the return of the wolf pups to their family groups; the night Rey's curse had been broken.

"Ah," she panted, as fear for their child gripped her. "The pains, they're coming faster."

"Shit." Rey drove, faster than anything she'd ever experienced. "Gotta get you to Liam," he muttered under his breath.

Pants rapidly turned to shallow puffs. “Rey, pull over. The baby,” she gasped again, “it’s not waiting.”

“Hang on!” He yanked the car to the side of the road and pulled out his cell phone, frantically pushing the speed dial to Seamus. “We’re on the road, just west of Kilmaley. Send help!”

He cut the connection and punched in Liam’s stored number. “She says the baby’s coming. We aren’t going to make it.”

Rey nodded his head as Liam gave him instructions. “I can do this,” he whispered. Sweat poured from his forehead. Once he’d hung up, he helped Agnis into the back seat. “You’re going to be fine. Try to stay calm.”

“Rey!” she screamed as another contraction hit her. They couldn’t lose their son. He meant the world to them, represented their hopes for the future. Rey got her slacks past her hips, pushed them down and over her swollen feet. Panties followed. “Oh, god,” she yelled, and then her water broke. Everything was happening at lightning speed. It couldn’t be good.

She drew her feet up, letting her knees fall apart. “It’s too fast, Rey,” she weakly cried. “Don’t let anything happen to our baby.”

He mopped his brow. “I won’t. Our son is going to be perfect. Nothing bad is going to come to pass. I swear.”

Another shriek tore from her throat. The pain curled her up into a sitting position.

“He’s coming! I can see his head! Breathe! Push!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You did a fine job, man,” Liam said as he examined mother and baby at the side of the road. “She’s a beauty.” He finished his initial exam of the baby, then wrapped her, and handed the little girl to the proud, frightened da. “Get on, you. I

need to get this woman to a proper facility. You stay with both your women while I drive.”

Rey cradled his daughter to his chest, and climbed into the vehicle next to Agnis. The tiny girl represented total freedom from the curse his family had lived under for centuries. “She’s a wonder, babe.”

Agnis looked into his face and smiled. The intense love in her eyes was directed at him. “No, Rey. Glenna Arluene is proof positive that magic does exist.”

**The End**



## Lucynda Storey

For the first ten years of Lucynda's life, she went where her Air Force father was assigned. Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Lucynda also lived in Amarillo, Texas; Izmir, Turkey; and Limestone, Maine before "The Sergeant" retired in Denver, Colorado. Graduating from a south Denver high school, Lucynda went on to attend a small, four year college in Nebraska, before taking a teaching job in Michigan. She spent the next eighteen years in Michigan learning about humidity and lake effect snow before convincing her husband to move with their three children to sunny, Colorful Colorado.

ALways interested in story telling, she began writing in earnest in 1999. She writes contemporary, fantasy, and paranormal. While writing *Reynardine* she became acquainted with [wolftrust.org.uk](http://wolftrust.org.uk). Wolves have been reintroduced in Spain, and Scotland is currently working on a wolf preserve in the Highlands.

You can find out more about Lucynda and her other projects by joining her newsletter, [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Lucynda\\_Storey](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Lucynda_Storey) or visiting her website at:

[www.lucyndastorey.realmsoflove.com](http://www.lucyndastorey.realmsoflove.com)

