



ISABEL ROMAN

THE DARK DESIRES OF THE DRUIDS I

*Murder and
Magick*

ra^venous
romance

***The Dark Desires of the Druids #1:
Murder & Magick***

A Ravenous Romance™ Fantastica™ Original Publication

Isabel Roman

PAGEBREAK

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The Dark Desires of the Druids #1: Murder & Magick

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Chapter One

**Harrington Manor
Bramhope, England
August 1882**

If only her betrothed and her lover could be the same person.

Despite her wish, the painful fact remained otherwise. Raven Drake suppressed a shiver of need, tingling in anticipation to have her lover's hands on her body. This need for him had her mind wandering far too often away.

"They are cursed!" the nasally male voice jarred her.

Struggling to concentrate on the insipid speaker before her, Raven looked at the imposing figure of Sir John Corwin. She did her best to ignore the phantom memory of her lover's talented fingers as she listened to Corwin's abominable opinions.

When he spoke of his passion for hunting the impure, for the *Trials*, the conviction in his tone rang clear. As far as she could see, his way of twisting the truth had swayed others in this parlor as they nodded in righteous agreement.

It made her nauseous to look at them. Their thoughts blindly followed the popular trend in the vain hope this didn't affect them. Raven wanted to escape, but couldn't. Born to this life, it was her duty to prevent anymore of the terrifying purifications.

When it came to Corwin, she had to tread carefully. She couldn't afford to allow her thoughts to wander when he recruited. No matter how much she needed the release.

Raven glanced out the window; the garden beckoned. There, amid the old-fashioned plantings, she could find refuge from this vile man. Perhaps steal a few moments with Malcolm.

Stealing a glance at her lover, she quickly refocused on Corwin. It'd be unwise to draw attention to her affair.

They were in a small coterie by the tall, velvet-curtained windows. Too-strong perfume and the smell of gas from the lamps outside lay heavy in the room. Rich, jewel-toned fabric covered the furnishings, the satin finishes made all the more prominent by the electric lights.

"We cannot live in peace with these *vermin*," the preening upstart, the self-proclaimed prelate of the Witch Hunters said. He used his baronetcy to infiltrate peerage circles and garner support. "They have *proven* that time and again."

She narrowed her eyes at him. Corwin had an annoying habit of emphasizing random words. Raven wanted to shake his sentences out of him.

Basil, Lord Granville, hadn't yet completed the upgrades to his country house. Persistent chatter and soft music hummed in the background as the festivities carried on. Thankfully, most in attendance were oblivious to the conversation in this corner.

She hoped it would remain that way. Corwin was enough of a problem with this small crowd.

"They are unworthy," Corwin continued.

Raven snapped her attention back to the monologue and dearly wished for a glass of champagne—or something stronger. She hadn't thought to take one before, and now couldn't see through the crush of bodies to snare a footman's attention.

"They are not of this world." He spoke with all the flair one might expect from a theatrical performer.

"Are you implying—" Her faint Scottish tone reflected barely controlled incredulity. "—that magick practitioners arise from a divine curse or, or *plague*?"

"Miss Drake . . ." Corwin's tone patronized, but his eyes registered suspicion.

Drat. Her aim hadn't been to turn his attention on her, let alone his suspicion, but she couldn't keep quiet any longer.

“What *else* could it be? Before the purifications, Druids and other vile *magickers*—” He spat the word as if he'd swallowed a bug. “—littered the land with their temples. Their insidious and immoral ways corrupted the good people of this country. Their deviant sexual habits, bizarre rituals, and abnormal powers were demonic works. Do you doubt this?”

Corwin's ice blue eyes first bore into Raven, then, slowly and deliberately, he glanced about the assembled listeners. Blanking her features, she watched him. Corwin's authoritative tone didn't fool her. But she had to wonder how many here, beyond her small group of conspirators, had fallen prey to this charismatic orator with frayed cuffs.

“The purifications commenced over four hundred years ago,” she pointed out. She struggled to control her considerable temper, lest it expose just who she was to those gathered. “Are we really to believe that magickers' purported simple tricks are *dangerous*?”

She kept her steady gaze on Corwin, willing her face not to betray her. Next to her, she felt her lover's presence, strong and comforting.

“Could they,” Raven inched a step closer, “not be helpful in some way? Hadn't a magicker saved the queen herself a mere three months ago?”

Corwin's expression darkened at her words. She'd hit a very sensitive nerve and had to resist the laugh that threatened to bubble out of now pursed lips.

Corwin took a step in her direction, murder in his eyes. Raven smiled, wished she had a dimple, and tried to look her most beguiling. What a scene he would cause, threatening a young lady such as herself in front of all these spectators. Had she managed it already? With such little effort?

Malcolm, Earl of Preston, deliberately moved closer to her. His hand brushed her arm, sending another shiver through her. So close and yet she could do naught in public. Her eyes drifted to the gardens again. Oh, to follow him to the seclusion of their paths and lose herself in his embrace.

“Miss Drake makes a valid point, Sir John,” he said. “We are eradicating a resource which could, in time, be very useful to us.”

Corwin dropped his hands, seemingly unaware he’d raised them. Indeed, his entire demeanor changed. Now, he all but kowtowed to the earl.

“Your *resource*, Lord Preston, is much too *dangerous*. Controlling magickers is *simply* impossible.” He sounded distressed at this last statement, as if he hated to inform such an esteemed peer of foolishness beyond hope. “It is because of their very *instability*, Lord Preston, their dangerousness to the non-magickal people of this world that the spread and rise of their kind is *inevitable*.”

Her stomach twisted at Corwin’s sentiments. They poisoned so much that she and her council worked for, the tolerance and amity between those with magick and those without they’d built over the years. Corwin advocated death—murder—as the only way to eradicate the so-called menace.

“They are an infestation of the worse kind, Miss Drake,” Corwin replied. His nasal tone reminded her of nothing more than a scrapping rat, begging for attention. “Evil incarnate walking amongst *us*.”

He shook his head as if he’d decided to feel sorry for her poor deluded mind. “No, they do not wish to use their dark abilities for *good* works.” His eyes once more rested on her. He stood ramrod straight, using his height to his full advantage.

Not intimidated, Raven looked back.

“They use tricks to *fool* us into believing them, for they wish only to amass power. They want to infest us with their ungodly ways, murder us if we do not follow.”

Malcolm took hold of Raven’s hand and placed it into the crook of his arm. Relaxing at the touch, the warmth of his body easing the tension in hers, she *almost* let herself lean against his tall frame.

“They do not wish for our salvation, Miss Drake,” Corwin continued in his righteous way, “but our destruction. We must prevent them from gaining a hold before we are *enslaved* by their devilish powers. A mere four years ago they began their insidious invasion.”

Corwin swept his gaze around the growing crowd. “Do you not remember? The streets of London were *riddled* with the dark holes housing them. Traverse any back alley you’d find a magicker *luring* in innocents, *peddling* opium, sex, death. Using their *souls* as currency.”

A murmur arose at his choice of words among polite company, but that did not seem to stop Corwin. The glint in his eyes stayed bright, ravenous. “These . . . *individuals* aren’t human. Yes, they seem like our kind, can even pass themselves off as upstanding citizens, but I’ve seen them in their natural state.”

What does he think we are? Hell demons with claws, horns, and tails, come to rip human throats or devour their souls? Raven fought to contain her anger, fingers digging into Malcolm’s arm.

Unwilling to draw further attention to herself, she remained silent. After smoothing the dark red silk of her gown, she snapped open her fan to cool her temper. By her side, Malcolm’s features stayed a mask of civility. He didn’t flinch as her nails dug deeper into his arm.

For a heartbeat, her eyes met his. Returning her gaze to a still-ranting Corwin, Raven

wondered at that look. Malcolm's eyes burned with a fierceness she'd only seen when they were together.

One more piece to the puzzle of him. Relaxing her fierce grip on his arm, she glanced up at Malcolm again. His golden-green eyes warmed as he gazed down at her. She gave a soft, answering smile, a hint of what she felt.

Nevertheless, she could not help the fleeting thought . . . *resource*? Did Malcolm agree with any part of what Corwin spouted?

"Are you saying they don't appear human?" Baroness Harrogate, who'd recently joined the conversation, asked once the murmur died down.

Raven had enough. She didn't want to hear the answer, did not wish to know what Corwin thought they looked like, or what demonic features they possessed. Stepping back through the gathering crowd, Malcolm easily guided her toward Lucien, Viscount Harrington, their host and heir to the Granville title.

"I cannot agree with his assessment," she whispered, her voice harsh as Malcolm directed her through the main parlor.

Raven tried not to allow her vehement hatred of Corwin to show to Malcolm. He knew her body better than even she did, knew what made her climax and what made her beg and plead for more, but he didn't know her deepest secrets. One of the last Druids of a line Corwin believed to exterminated long ago, she possessed more power than all the magickers the baronet had ever encountered.

Considering the pain her lover no doubt felt from her nails, she doubted her success.

Lucien and his sister, Isadore, her dearest friends and fellow magickers, understood. Malcolm, a stranger to their world, would not. Lucien had known him for years. They'd traveled,

done business together, and developed a long-standing friendship, yet Lucien had never shared with Malcolm, or anyone outside their circle, his status as a magicker. No matter how any of them trusted non-magickers, the danger proved too great.

Although she wanted to tell Malcolm, she knew such a thing to be impossible. Other than the attraction and need she felt for him, Raven knew very little of his views on this political situation. Knew very little of him at all.

“Miss Drake,” Malcolm said in that low, deep voice that went straight through her, causing her insides to shiver in anticipation. “His views are extreme. Quite crass, if you ask me, to speak of such things in this setting.”

She swallowed, remembering their last encounter. Him deep within her body as she chanted his name while shattering in explosion of ecstasy.

“It is not his crassness which offends me, Lord Preston,” she said hotly, recalling herself in time and using his title. “But his views on those he seeks to destroy. He speaks o’ humans like rabid animals, beasts to be slaughtered because there is some danger t’ them.” Raven’s eyes flashed, as her Scottish intonations deepened with her anger. Her mother would be so disappointed to hear it.

“While he is, in fact, the real danger.”

“In my travels I have seen many things.” Malcolm stood between her and the crowd, as if trying to shield her from the malevolent energy spewing from Corwin’s direction. Appreciation over the gesture flooded through her. Raven felt a little more tension leave her. Amazed with him simply being there, this had the effect of easing her nerves. She felt a twisted tangle of emotion for him, one she didn’t wish to explore too deeply.

“In all that time, I’ve yet to see anyone, magicker or otherwise, rise up like a demon from

hell, tentacles waving or some such, to slaughter innocents. In fact,” Raven noted that Malcolm’s left hand flexed at his side, “the one time I’ve seen anything close to a magicker was in a healing capacity.”

“Don’t let Corwin hear you,” Lucien offered with a sly, knowing grin Raven wondered at, “he’ll think you’re in collusion with the devils.”

Raven chuckled, retook Malcolm’s arm, and forcibly led them all further away from that contemptible man. “Then let us whisk you off before he mistakes the dimple in your cheek for the mark of a beast.”

Malcolm smiled down at her as she held his arm, the deep rumble of laughter vibrating along her skin. Unabashed desire glimmered for a brief second in his golden-green eyes, causing her fingers to tighten on his arm in response.

“Let’s storm the dining room. With Corwin distracting the crowd with horror stories we’ll manage to abscond with some of Mrs. Dodley’s special pastries,” Lucien suggested, with a glance at the group surrounding the Witch Hunter.

“Aye, Lucien,” Raven nodded, “we must save a few for Isadore. She’ll need the sweets after being trapped into listening to Corwin at length.”

Lucien led them towards the dining room, voice low so as not to attract undue attention. “If it weren’t so unseemly to toss the man out with the rubbish, I’d have his carcass out of this house in a heartbeat. But I don’t want to offend Lady Harrogate, as he is her guest this evening.”

“One would think,” Mac quipped as he looked down at Raven, wondering how soon they could leave the ball, “the Baroness Harrogate would have better taste in guests.

Men like Corwin seriously tried Mac’s patience. Considering he wasn’t the most patient to begin with, it was difficult not throttling him.

“My impression was that Lady Harrogate is going to instruct her son to vote *against* Corwin’s directives at Parliament. Has that changed?”

His hand reached to the crook of his arm where Raven’s soft, warm one rested. To the casual observer it looked no more than a gentleman touching a lady’s hand.

They both knew better.

“Lady Harrogate insisted she hear the other side for herself, and therefore invited Corwin,” Lucien answered. “Father will be none too pleased when he hears Corwin was in his house.”

“It’s a good thing your father is still in London,” Mac offered. “I don’t think his health could stand such an evening.”

“Corwin is a blight,” Raven interjected. Her deep blue eyes looked behind him to where Corwin continued preaching. Mac caressed her skin through her long gloves. She bit her lip, eyes locking with his to keep from freeing a gasp of pleasure.

Mac caught himself leaning down. Tearing his eyes from her delectable lips, he turned to Lucien.

She’d worn gloves so sheer this eve it seemed she wore nothing at all. The feel of such sheer silk between them had his imagination running wild with what he wanted to do to her. He wanted to use those silk gloves to tie her to his bed, have her at his mercy, a very passionate, and oh so lovely prisoner.

Hot need speared through him, a reminder, not that he required one, of the passion between them. He wanted her from the first moment he’d seen her alighting from the carriage outside Harrington Manor six weeks ago. Her dark tresses, blue eyes, and alabaster skin against the dark traveling dress she wore combined to present a beautiful woman, to be sure.

Something else about her thoroughly captured his attention though. A spark of life in her

deep blue eyes, a bright and energetic laugh, an indefinable quality about her presence. He'd been instantly drawn despite the engagement ring on her finger. Some part of him his mother would be pleased to know had not disappeared, told him a gentleman never pursued the fiancée of another man. He hadn't listened. That would not have surprised his mother one bit. The ring that sparkled even in the dim yellow light from Harrington's electrical bulbs had not prevented her from succumbing to their shared desire, either.

She took it off whenever they made love.

To be sure, the gossipmongers would enjoy nothing more than ruining Raven's reputation should word of their affair leak. Their tryst would be the salacious tidbit they'd latch onto and, he feared, would be hard-pressed to let go anytime soon.

Mac didn't make a habit of deflowering young maidens, and he knew, going into this affair, that that was exactly what Raven was. Knew but did not care. He wanted her, more than anything else on this planet. A need of a woman such as he'd never experienced before.

It was an odd paradox: if she'd been free, he'd have asked for her hand in marriage. No doubt, they'd have had a very passionate honeymoon, at least two beautiful children, then would go their separate ways. He felt certain their passion would peter out soon enough, passion always did, and they'd still go their separate ways.

Minus the requisite heir.

He had no idea what her fiancé would think on his wedding night when he realized the less-than-chaste state of his new wife, but he didn't care about that either. Though he should care, most definitely. He shouldn't have begun this affair.

Raven was everything he desired. With her beside him, her warm hand atop his, Mac realized

he still didn't care. Not that he didn't care about Raven, for he most certainly did, more than he ought given their situation.

She was—

A shout broke his reverie.

The unmistakable sound of pistol fire followed.

Chapter Two

“No!” It echoed from the side lawns.

Mac took a step in the direction of the noise. Raven’s hand slipped from his arm and she rushed through the hall.

“Raven, wait,” he whispered, his hand grasped her waist, halting her flight.

Her waist was slim, the hard bone of her corset stiff under his fingers. Mac wanted to take the dress off as he tasted her soft, smooth skin. The imprudently timed thought had him hardening. Truly, he needed to reign in this passion for her. It was getting dangerously out of hand.

Quickly releasing her as other guests came into sight, he added, “Allow Lucien and me to investigate.”

“All right,” she agreed.

Corwin pushed his way through the gathering crowd, with nary a murmur of apology. He acted as if he was the owner of the Manor, rather than simply a begrudgingly invited guest.

Mac saw Raven’s eyes narrow at Corwin’s back. Sparks of . . . something, power, he thought, lighted her eyes.

“Stay here,” he reiterated with one last squeeze of her hands.

Raven nodded again, searching for Isadore in the crowd. Spotting her friend nearer the front, she pressed her way forward, murmuring apologies as she went.

Lucien and Malcolm were already on the lawn, alongside a dozen or so other men, Corwin included.

“Corwin! Sir John!”

Raven squeezed Isadore's hand. "No," she shook her head. "Do nothing. Say nothing. Damn," she cursed, earning a mild look from Isadore. "I should have foreseen this."

"How?" Isadore demanded. The rest of her questions lay unsaid. Raven, despite her promise to Malcolm, pushed to the door.

Men who were not already outside warned the women to stay in, but both Raven and Isadore ignored them. A few of the braver ladies in attendance did as well, Baroness Harrogate among them. She came to an abrupt stop at the sight of two men in traditional Witch Hunter attire: black pants and shirt, red vest and sash tied round the waist, and the badge that proclaimed for all who looked just who and what they were.

A third man she immediately knew to be the traitorous gypsy tracker responsible for this commotion stood in the background. The fourth man trembled on the ground.

"Oh, dear God, they've captured another . . ."

"Here?" Isadore hissed beside her. "What are they doing *here*? What's going on?"

"I don't know," Raven murmured back, anger tightening her voice. "Damn Corwin!"

She knew the gypsy. He wasn't completely against their cause, more a mercenary than anything else. "Chances are," she whispered, "he won't turn on us. Chances are rather slim, but it's possible." Isadore shot her a look she ignored.

"Corwin," she said. Gaze swinging to where the de facto leader stood, she watched him pander to the crowd, smug smile on his smarmy face. "He set this up!"

"Help." The whisper crawled across the air, lost in the crowd. Raven's attention snapped to the victim of Corwin's plot.

The unknown man's right arm bled from at least three open wounds. His face was beaten and swollen. His left hand—outstretched in a pleading gesture toward the group—was a malformed

tangle of skin and bone. It was a warm summer evening, with a slight breeze meandering over the land. Out here, Raven could smell the garden. Instead of perfuming the tryst she'd hoped for, its scent now lay heavy and cloying, turning her stomach.

"No! No! Help me!" he screamed. "Not wrong! Magicks, no! Not wrong, not bad!"

The man's eyes darted across the crowd, never meeting a gaze, but somehow settling on each of them. As if he held them in the same light he did the Hunters who beat him. And then that gaze, terrified, hunted, haunted, landed on her. A look of recognition, of pleading, crossed his petrified and ruined face.

Raven took a step forward, shaking off Isadore's hand. She had to help. Malcolm's strong hand curled around her arm. Where had he come from? He held onto her tightly, preventing her from getting closer to the tragedy unfolding before their eyes. She glanced at him, noted the set jaw, the hard eyes, the golden fire flashing in the green.

He, too, knew what the Hunters were doing, and he hated it. For reasons Raven didn't dare think of, that comforted her.

The man screamed again, drawing her attention back to the calamity before them. He struggled against the Hunters as Corwin turned and yelled to the crowd.

"This is what they look like!" he shouted. "This is not their true state, no, but their *weakened* human form. This man has not fed off human souls in *days*, from the look of him."

"He's sick," Isadore shouted, taking a step forward. "What have you done to him?"

Lucien was suddenly beside her, holding her back. "Sir John," he snapped, "I demand to know what you've planned on my property!"

Raven's eyes searched for the gypsy. Her hand touched her necklace, one-third of an ancient amulet broken centuries ago by the high priestess Birkita in the hopes of saving those Druids not

already killed. It was slightly warm to her touch as it protected her from magickal detection.

Ashton, the gypsy, barely looked at her. Maybe there was no need of protection after all. He hadn't yet turned them in, he probably wouldn't. For a heartbeat, his gaze met hers, too dark to read in the night. He shook his head once, then ignored her.

“... was wandering near the town in search of humans he could entice for their very lives.” Dimly she heard Corwin continue to spew his hate. Her eyes were drawn to the man.

He was not one of them, the gypsy seemed to think. Then why would Ashton lead the Hunters to him?

Oh, God. They suspected magickers in the area. Ashton hadn't turned on them, had helped shield them. The innocent man, sacrificed for their own lives, lay dying before them.

“Corwin, get your animals off my property! Now!” Lucien shouted. He was closer to Corwin, physically threatening the baronet. Lucien's warning was implicit in tone and words. Corwin barely glanced at the powerful heir.

His mistake.

“, , , corrupt your children, entice your wives from their duties, your sons into their opium dens . . .”

Isadore moved forward, every inch the lady of the manor. “Sheath your pistols,” she ordered in a hard voice, “this is a ball, not the back room of a dock tavern.”

Both Harrington siblings stood between Raven and the Hunters, defending her from risk. They'd vowed to protect their masters at any cost. Even the price of their own lives.

The pathetic man crouching on the ground before them was a sad and wrenching sight. But Raven sensed another, more commanding, force in the night. Power throbbed around the crowd. Not in the eyes of the gypsy, no, but in one of the Witch Hunters.

His gaze flashed a deep onyx as it rested on the murmuring crowd. A soft gust of breeze brushed over them, accompanied by the rotten stench of imminent death. Of blood and fear, and the knowledge the still screaming man possessed that he was not long for this earth. Not, but hungry. He wanted the power, wanted whatever he'd convinced himself he could obtain with Corwin.

And he wanted it badly enough to betray his own kind to a madman.

The Hunter restraining the wounded man suddenly released him, deliberately, Raven saw, and the man ran toward the crowd. Toward *her*.

Raven extended her free hand just as the man crumpled to the damp lawn. She was going to help him. Or stop him. She wasn't sure which, but she had to do something. Not betray herself in this crowd, not with lead Hunter himself in attendance, but she couldn't let the poor man live in fear, waiting for death.

A bright flash. The deafening sound of a gun discharging in a deathly and morbid quiet. Then he fell. The sound belatedly registered with her. The crowd stood stunned. For a long heartbeat, they stood there silently, shocked. Then the screams and shouts started, the panic. Malcolm swiftly pulled her back, his body shielding hers. Protecting her from the Hunters and the frenzied crowd.

Eyes on the dead man, her fingers dug into Malcolm's arm as he carried her away, her blood roaring in her ears. Only now did she hear the faint sound of men cursing Corwin. Of Lucien ordering the Hunters off his property in that commanding voice so many trembled at. Physically removing one to the long drive himself in case they hadn't understood his words. Demanding that Corwin leave; he was no longer welcome.

Still, Malcolm stayed between her and the world. Between her and the now-dead man who

lay several meters away. Eyes still open, staring directly at her. As if pleading, even now, for her to save him.

A testament to the hatred all around them.

Chapter Three

Raven could feel the unsettled air about the manor. Those who remained at the now-subdued ball spoke in whispers, commenting on every detail of the evening's happenings with surreptitious looks that bespoke their nervousness. They stayed as far from the windows as manageable. Every once in a while, a brave soul peeked through the panes, as if they feared a magicker lurked on Harrington grounds, ready to pounce.

Or worse—as if Corwin lurked, ready to denounce them.

Corwin and his Hunters had taken the body away some hours ago. They'd dragged the corpse across the manicured lawn with no care for the human they'd murdered.

Murdered in cold blood for the sake of those here tonight. To be their example.

Details of the incident floated around Raven. Their words weighed heavily on her, pressing against her chest until she thought she'd collapse from the strain. Or explode with anger.

Death did not bother her. No she'd seen it before, the cruelty man could inflict on his own. Corwin manipulated the situation and murdered the man.

She had to get out, find solace, even if just for a short time.

Knowing her lover watched her, Raven sought him across the ballroom. Malcolm smiled, a brief flash, then slipped outside. Away from the incessant gossip and speculations. Away from the heat of the room, the lingering stench of fear.

Making her way to the manor's disused parson's cottage, Raven opened her senses, searching for any followers. Nestled down the western path, the cottage was amid the copse marking the entrance to the hunting grounds.

Ancient oak and rowan trees bowed to form a canopy. A legacy of a long-forgotten parson,

hey were planted in remembrance of those who perished in the resurgence, the 1666 purifications and fires.

Slowing before the cottage door, which listed slightly on its ancient hinges, Raven caught her breath. Smoothing down her dress, she hesitated. A breeze swept through the trees, and caused her to look up at the bright full moon overhead. It filtered down, a deceptively soft glow of light and power, and reflected the brilliant facets of her ring.

Or maybe that was her guilty imagination.

The stone wall of the cottage was cool against her back. The recessed entrance hid her from the truth that lay outside this estate. From the fact she was betrothed.

The recess hid her from her fiancé, Gareth, too.

Yet, just over a fortnight ago, she'd thought nothing of giving her nineteen-year-old virginal body to Malcolm, Earl of Preston. Malcolm intrigued her, pursued her, wanted her. He made her laugh, challenged her intellect and opinions.

Made her scream his name until she was hoarse, until she passed out from his talented fingers and oh-so-clever tongue.

She wanted him with a passion that had been unknown to her. Intrigued by what went on between a man and woman, she wanted it. Knowledge was never hidden from her people, from magickers. Her ancestors, the ancient Druids, believed in sharing one's body with whomever one wished. It was a celebration of life.

Under her people's beliefs, if she wished to have consensual sex with Malcolm until her marriage to Gareth she could.

She was.

Gareth had never paid her the kind of attention Malcolm lavished on her. Never made her

feel like fire in his arms, never made her shirk her duties for a kiss, a caress. She'd never been tempted to sleep with Gareth before their wedding. With Malcolm, she craved his touch. Craved his large, work-calloused hands on her smooth skin, parting her legs so he could taste her. Holding her captive on the bed as he pounded into her. Craved his mouth as it explored, nipping her shoulder, down her body to her inner thighs.

Absently her hand came to rest on the top of her breast, to stroke the smooth skin. Though she could not toy with her nipple through the corset as she wanted, it was hard and aching, needy for his touch, the sharp tug of his fingers, the bite of his teeth.

Wetness pooled between her legs. Need sparked hot and violent through her. Knowing the danger of the night—Corwin and his Hunters, the remaining guests at the Manor—she wanted him. Wanted to ride him hard and furious, taking his thick length deep into her body. Or spread wide open for him as he thrust into her, his eyes gold-flecked with passion.

No, Gareth never made her feel like that. Raven was astonished he'd had time to place the ring on her finger.

He worked to exhaustion, heeding only magicks and Corwin in an attempt to free their people from their hiding, and to find the mysterious Repository of Knowledge. Gareth believed, as did she, that in discovering that Repository, they could discover where their missing masters now hid.

She worked just as hard, researching and tracking leads. Lying and bribing with those trustworthy enough to hide and rescue the accused, and to save the so-called heretical books Corwin and his ilk burned.

Or, she admitted with a twinge of guilt, she had, until Malcolm entered her life.

Raven banged her head against the stone wall, then winced at the impact. *Malcolm*. When

he'd entered her life, everything else seemed pointless.

“Oh, for the love of God.”

This wasn't her—not the simpering lost woman who didn't know her own mind. A soulless creature, according to some, not fit to rule her own life.

A Druid master, she was one of three most powerful people on the planet. Caught in a web of irresistible passion with one man while bound to another.

Her three-carat diamond had been handed down, not from master to master, but from Gareth's mother's family, a completely non-Druidic symbol. One Raven cherished. One she despised.

Engaged to Gareth, what she wanted lay behind the door to the cottage.

Malcolm.

Carefully, as if she removed more than a ring, Raven slipped the gold circle off her finger, bunching both glove and ring in her hand. She never wore it when she was with Malcolm; it was an unspoken agreement between them.

She loved Gareth. There was never any question of that.

He was her dearest friend and closest ally. A confidant. But not a lover.

They were heirs to the only two known master lines, and needed to keep their power strong. Keep it alive, at least. But to be a man's sole focus, even for the briefest of moments . . .

Malcolm gave her those moments and so much more.

The door to the cottage opened with a noiseless whoosh. Raven whirled from her place against the wall. Malcolm stood there staring at her, eyes eerily bright in the moonlit doorway. She could feel the heat of his body even with the small distance separating them. His own intense need for her.

“Come inside,” he whispered and offered his hand. Tilting his head, he patiently waited for her when she didn’t immediately move.

Though her breath was still short from her own erotic thoughts, her body tight with want of his, Raven smiled.

Taking his extended hand, she let her lover pull her into his arms. His mouth was instantly on hers, kissing away her fears of the night and the future. Filling the space with nothing save him.

She barely noticed the glove and ring fall to the floor. Her hands were full of him, his shoulders, bunching his shirt from his back so she could touch his bare skin.

Mac kissed Raven’s forehead and eyelids, felt the moisture just underneath of unspilled tears and wondered at the emotion. He closed the door with a bang, to shield them from unwanted eyes, and backed her against it. Pressed against her soft, pliant body, his hips thrust once against her skirt-covered form. With a delicious boldness she hadn’t possessed two weeks ago, Raven’s hands wandered down his body, brushing over his erection.

He groaned at the touch. By all he held holy, he wanted her. Wanted her tied to his bed for his sole pleasure, leaving only when he allowed it. Wanted her on his arm so the world knew this beautiful and passionate lady was his. Wanted to be able to take her whenever he wished, for however long he wished.

But she was not his.

She belonged to another.

The ring that graced her finger proclaimed her as such and jealousy burned hot through him. Though he’d never met Viscount Moore, Mac wanted to rip him apart with his bare hands for possessing Raven.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a soft tone, his hand a gentle brush on her cheek. The act belied his body’s reaction, and his desire to rip Moore to pieces. He refused to release his tight control on his emotions.

“Aye,” she nodded. Her eyes were still closed, her rapid breathing caused her breasts to strain against the bodice.

She was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, and he couldn’t get enough of her. Passionate and smart, funny and willing, she was everything he’d ever wanted in a woman. And more, so much more.

Alive. She was alive and unhurt and in his arms.

“Then tell me,” he demanded, the tiniest slip of control. But his fingers were still soft on her neck, the tops of her breasts. “What the *bloody hell* do you think you were doing? Following me onto the lawn like that with Corwin’s men there. It was dangerous! *Corwin’s* dangerous. Mad most definitely in his quest, and that makes him even more so.”

Stiffening in his arms, Raven struggled to pull away. His hands tightened around her, holding her captive between him and the door. He couldn’t let her go. His hands wanted to shake. His heart clenched in remembered fear at how near she had been to death. The bullet had come entirely too close to her for his liking. Too close for his sanity.

Fire in her eyes, she glared up at him. “I wasn’t going to stand indoors and wait for you to do whatever it was you planned. I didn’t follow you,” she added with a sneer worthy of the best sailors. And he’d seen more than a few. But he felt her pulse jump under his fingertips, saw her own fear, hidden in those fire-blue eyes.

“I followed Corwin to see what insanity he’d brought with him.”

“You could’ve been shot!”

His fingers convulsed on her shoulders, and he shook her once. His voice betrayed his own anger, his own panic. Hating that weakness, he stilled. Breathing heavily, Mac forced his fear-fuelled rage to calm as he forced images of Raven's bloody and broken body away. Deliberately relaxing his fingers, he smoothed his hands down her arms, twining their fingers together.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he opened them again to see Raven watching him. She was furious, but there was still that fear deep in her eyes. She nodded once, gaze holding his. Shutting her own, she breathed deeply.

"I know."

She was barely aware she'd said the words aloud as she rested her head against his chest. Allowing herself that single weakness, she squeezed his hands and looked back up at him. She knew what he felt, though she also knew he was unlikely to show it more than he had already.

She knew his anger arose from fear for her safety, but this knowledge didn't stop her temper from igniting. Something settled around her heart, compressing it tight. He cared far more than he ought, far more than she should wish him to. Swallowing, Raven dismissed those thoughts.

"I'm fine, Malcolm," she said in an even voice, a gentle smile on her face. Despite the stress of the evening, the smile was easy. For him.

In truth, she wasn't fine. Was very far from fine, and desperately wished to return to carefree days . . . not that she'd ever experienced those. Her life had been duty, rules, power from the beginning.

Learn to control your powers. Cultivate alliances with other magickal families. Nurture partnerships with sympathizers to the cause. Sit on the council. Rule your people. Find the remaining magickal artifacts.

Marry Gareth.

In Malcolm's arms, with his masculine presence around her, Raven had no trouble forgetting.

Forgetting she'd wanted to know what Corwin knew, terrified he knew entirely too much. Raven was frightened she and her family—the people she'd promised an end to terror and persecution—were in terrible danger. She wanted to go back in time and change what had happened, to help that man.

Wishing wasn't going to change anything. But by God, she wished she hadn't been such a coward, hiding behind her amulet.

Blinking the memories away, she looked into Malcolm's clear eyes and relaxed. The tension of the day would return soon enough, haunting her nightmares. Strange how she never dreamt when she slept in his arms. But that didn't bear thinking on.

Right now, with Malcolm holding her close, Raven willingly let him soothe her. Maybe she'd hate herself later. Maybe she'd find no solace beyond the physical.

For now, it was enough.

"They had no right," he stated through clenched teeth. His eyes flashed and fingers tensed around her arms. Raven wondered if his anger was at Corwin, or at her for her perceived foolishness? "He had no right. Corwin's a madman, worse than whatever evil he professes to hunt. That man fell mere *centimeters* from you, if the shot had missed . . ."

"Shush, darling." She touched his cheek in a tender caress and smiled up at him. He was a good head taller than she, strong, and commanded respect for both his size and his money. Yet all she wanted at this moment was his body in hers.

"Make me forget, Malcolm. I don't want to think of Corwin or that unfortunate—" She looked to the side for a moment. No, there was no sense in wishing. "Make me forget."

Malcolm jerked her up, crushing her against him as his mouth devoured her. He tasted her mouth with a thoroughness that had her toes curling and the wetness pooling further between her legs. Her head slammed against the door, but she felt nothing save his kiss, his body. His hands bunched her already wrinkled skirt, gliding over silk-clad thighs, teasing her unmercifully.

With a growl, he picked her up and carried her to the bed, *their* bed, setting her before it to undo her gown.

She'd always heard that sexual magick was the strongest and most enduring of magicks.

Until Malcolm, however, she'd never experienced magick such as this. The indescribable feeling that she was connected to him on such a deep level. Could she feel *his* emotions. That inexpressible connection, one which bonded her not only to him but to the world around her.

It was, without a doubt, the single most exhilarating feeling of her short nineteen years.

It took longer than she'd like to undo the gown, corset, and strip off her various undergarments. She was impatient to feel him within her. His skin, hot and sweaty, moving against her was an aphrodisiac in and of itself. Better than any oyster Cook could prepare.

Finally, she was bare before him. With a reverence she'd grown to expect—to accept—Malcolm drew his now-naked body against hers and laid her gently on the bed. Following her down, mouth on her breast, down her belly, his fingers drifted over hip and thigh until they found what they sought.

"Malcolm," she cried, arching off the bed.

His fingers were deep within her, but she wanted more. His mouth was on her, tasting her entirely too leisurely as his tongue lapped her nub. She needed him, the long hard length of him pounding into her until she thought she'd explode from the feel of him alone. She wanted that, that addicting explosion of sight and sound and all-encompassing everything when he pushed her

over the edge of reality. When he entered her, they moved together in a beautifully erotic dance of need.

“Open your eyes, Raven.” She heard him next to her ear, his voice as arousing as the gliding caress of his hands as they cupped her breast, pinched her nipples. Twisted hard, just as she liked.

Arching against him, feeling strangely empty without something of him in her, she silently pleaded for more, and did as he asked. Languidly, she opened her eyes to look into his, and found the normally hazel ones were now nearly gold with passion. For her. He wanted her above others and showed her.

Not just with words, though he’d all but bound them through his whispered words of passion.

In action.

A brief touch here, a longer one there. The way he looked at her when no one else paid attention to them. And even though she had no experience in the art of lovemaking before Lord Malcolm Wargrave, Raven knew. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, she knew he touched her differently than any other woman. When he looked at her, the beautiful color of his eyes, what lay hidden in those depths, told her more than words ever could.

When he entered her, cock buried deep inside her, their eyes locked in the dimness of the cabin, she felt it. The flame ignited between them, as it always did whenever they came together like this. It wasn’t just physically strong, this connection. It resonated deep within her, waking her in ways she wasn’t aware existed. Bringing her to life. Their connection made her think her soul could soar with the birds themselves, that her body would combust from the pleasure he and he alone gave.

He moved slowly within her. Arms, shoulders, back still dark from his time at sea, straining

with every motion. Finely muscled legs and buttocks pale, pale marble. Filling the emptiness, burying himself as far into her as he could. Her breath caught with each thrust, but he never took his heated gaze from hers.

Oh, yes he wanted her. And oh, God, she wanted him desperately.

Together they created something even Raven, with all her knowledge of this world's inherent magick, had never experienced.

Long, cool fingers found her again, brushing against her in short, fast strokes. He was close to falling off the same wonderful edge of orgasm as she, and wanted to experience the magick simultaneously. Wrapping her legs tighter around him, ankles locked, digging her nails into his back, she continued to move with him. Meeting each thrust of his hips with hers, building that glorious tension higher and higher.

“Malcolm!” she shouted in a raspy voice, as she climaxed hard around him.

Shuddering in her arms, Malcolm thrust into her once, twice. Grunting her name as he came, he collapsed onto her, breathing heavily against her neck. Raven held him close, still wrapped around him. Magick flowed through her in bright colors of light and sound. She didn't feel stronger, so much as more in tune with the world around her.

More in tune with Malcolm. Could he feel it? Could he feel what they created together? That wonderful completeness, as if she could hear everything he desired?

Body still quaking in the aftermath of climax, Raven vaguely wondered if this was what her ancestors once felt. Free from persecution, was this how they experienced life and love? Unfettered by convention, able to experience everything they could with the only one they wanted?

Chapter Four

Letting her legs drop from his waist, Raven kissed him as her fingers soothed the marks she'd made on his back. Her fingertips tingled with magick, and she vaguely wondered if sparks danced over them. There were a lot of things she could do with her powers. Fireworks had never been one of them before, but with the way her body reacted to Malcolm, anything seemed possible.

Tired, she refused to sleep away these precious last moments they had together, and held him close. Felt the strength of his arms wrap around her, and the solid muscle of him. With a sigh, she broke the kiss.

Her fingers traced the marks still visible on his arm. "I'm sorry about this," she whispered. She'd been angry, but hadn't realized how deep her nails dug.

"Don't worry about it," he smiled, and kissed her again.

"We need to leave." She made no move to extract herself from his arms.

"Yes." His mouth continued down her neck.

It was incredibly dangerous for them to be discovered. Even more so, should Corwin or one of his hated Hunters find them now, with Raven's magick so unsteady and powerful. But what were the odds of him returning to the estate tonight? She had a horrible feeling should that happen, Malcolm would defend her to the death. His death.

Unsure how he felt about her, she *was* sure it was enough to protect her. Warmth spread through her at the thought. He'd protect her from Corwin *now* . . . But would he if he discovered her secrets? Would he accept her once he learned what she hid?

To stop herself from thinking along those lines, Raven kissed down his neck. Tasting the

salty scent of him, she breathed in all that he was. It was intoxicating, addicting. Hers.

“Raven,” he began, but pulled back.

Expression unreadable, he remained silent for a long, long moment. Whatever he was going to say remained trapped behind those green eyes. Instead, Malcolm kissed her again, still buried deep within her. Slowly tasting her, drawing her into the tempestuous swirl of desire he evoked with something as simple as a kiss. He watched her for another moment before pulling out of her body, a movement that was as slow and precise as when he first entered her.

She missed the feeling of him immediately. Felt bereft at the loss and tried not to read too much into that, either.

He stood now, looking down at her from beside the bed. Watching her. With soft and lazy movements, one hand reached out to caress her cheek. Jagged lines snaked down the back of his left hand to wrap around his wrist. Raven had asked him about it, once, but Malcolm had shrugged off the question.

“A fight,” he had said dismissively, staring at the scars as if he’d never seen them before.

She hadn’t believed him then, that it was *simply* a fight, and didn’t now. She refused, however, to press. If Malcolm didn’t want to tell her, that was fine. They both had secrets.

Smiling now, Raven pushed all thoughts away but the here and now, and gracefully swung her legs over the side of the low, small cot. Not her ideal bed for an assignation.

Rising slowly, she tossed him a saucy grin. “Help me dress?”

“With pleasure, my lady.” His voice was a smooth cadence of sound, as he stood before her. Pitched low, not because he feared discovery, but because he knew what it did to her.

Raven shivered, and closed the last remaining step between them. Body pressed against his, she brought his head down to hers, kissing him deeply one last time. Just once more.

Her nipples hardened against his chest, ached for his mouth, his fingers. His teeth closed around the sensitive point to bite and tug. A spear of need shot through her. Raven moaned and pressed closer to him.

One hand traveled down his chest, combed through the light, wiry hair. Nails scraped over his nipples. He was her addiction. Even if for only the moment, Malcolm was hers. She wasn't letting him go.

Wrapping her hand around his hardening cock, she smiled when he growled her name, his hands clenched hard enough to bruise her hips. Possession was a powerful thing in her world, and his possession of her sent thrills of desire coiling through Raven.

To possess him, to fully possess him, was something she desperately desired.

"Raven, don't start something you can't finish," he warned. His fingers were already soothing the rounded redness on her skin.

His eyes, once more so golden and alluring, shone fierce with need. His cock jerked in her hand, hard and ready for her body. With her other hand, Raven caught one of Malcolm's and guided him to her center. Wet and aching for him, she no longer cared about her reasons for leaving.

"Yes," she gasped. He instantly plunged two fingers into her. Rolling her hips against his hand, she forced her eyes open, not even aware of having closed them. "We must be quick. They'll have noticed we're gone by now."

Which was a terrible understatement, and they both knew it.

Nodding once, Malcolm lifted her against him and slammed into her. Raven cried out at their joining. Utter completeness.

They fell back onto the bed, mouths biting, tongues licking. His hands gripped her thighs,

pushed back and opened her to him. For one beautiful moment, Raven thought he knew all her secrets. Knew everything about her when he looked at her like that. Knew and accepted and wanted her just as desperately as he did now.

But then he moved again, slamming into her with enough force to push her across the damp blankets, and the moment was lost. Changed. She didn't understand it any longer.

"Raven!" he chanted, pounding into her welcoming body.

Crying out, she climaxed again, tightened around him, ground against him. Trembling, she slowly opened heavy eyes and watched Malcolm's face contort, heard her name on his lips, felt his hot seed shoot into her.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. They truly needed to leave now. She would have to sneak in through the gardens and hope no one saw her. Malcolm was safer. Men usually were when it came to things like this; no questions would be asked as to his whereabouts.

Isadore would lie for her, of course, and thank the Heavens for her friend.

Others would never dare question her, though they knew not of her affair with Malcolm. An advantage of being master.

Reluctantly extracting herself once more from her lover's comforting embrace, Raven stood and silently began to dress. It hurt to leave like this, sneaking around as though they were criminals.

There was little choice in a dichotomy-strict society. Affairs were never approved of for unmarried women like her. Raven wondered why Malcolm pursued her with such rules in effect.

Glancing over her shoulder, Raven took in his long, muscular form. There were other scars marring the pale perfection of his body, a latticework of silver on his back—a whip; a long jagged one down his right leg—a knife; two small puckered ones on his left side—bullet holes.

And those were only the ones she could see.

Invisible scars, ones she could only feel when they were together, marred his soul.

“Do me up?” she asked, her back facing him. She shivered when his fingers brushed up her spine as he maneuvered the corset back into place. She sighed when he placed a small kiss on the back of her neck.

“Your hair’s a mess,” he whispered as she wrestled with the bustle as best she could. Settling it in place, Raven stepped into the dress he held out for her.

“Your fault,” she snapped, once more presenting her back so he could do enough buttons to prevent the dress from falling. Hands encircled her waist, glided up to caress her breasts atop the too-stiff bodice of her hopelessly wrinkled gown. Malcolm rested his chin on her shoulder, fingers dipping underneath the gown to further tease her.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, mouth on her neck. “You look the wild woman tonight, Raven. Alive and mysterious. Your eyes are so bright they nearly glow in the darkness, your hair a dark cloud around you.”

“I’ll plait it,” she replied, breathlessly, and rested her head on his clothed chest. “Malcolm,” she whimpered when he removed his hands. She was wet again, still, wanted him inside her, the only one able to sate this ache.

Raven closed her eyes, legs desperately rubbing together. What it would be like to have this all the time?

“I have to go.” She swallowed her regrets, tried to dismiss the need pulsing through her veins, and clenching her womb.

He nodded, and gently kissed her aching breasts where they swelled dangerously over the edge of her gown. His eyes were hooded and closed off; she could read nothing there. That

didn't stop the feeling of possessiveness flowing over her. Was that him? Was it Malcolm that felt these things and she simply picked up on them? Or was it her?

Capturing her face, Malcolm crushed her lips in a brutal, branding kiss. It was over as quickly as it began, but left Raven reeling.

"I'll come tonight?" she asked.

"Yes."

Without looking back, he opened the cabin door and exited. Taking a deep breath, Raven brushed unsuccessfully at the wrinkles on her dress and quickly plaited her hair. With a long look at them, she bent to pick up her ring and glove.

Want flowed through her. She wanted to lie back on their bed and breathe in their combined sensuous scents. Wanted to alleviate the ache between her legs. Wanted to feel his arms around her again, holding her close as they slept. But she couldn't afford to stay one moment longer and didn't look back at their musty hideaway

Mac watched her leave the cabin, so tempting in the moonlit night. Her hair was a dark thin swath against her gown as she slipped through the trees, taking care to be silent and cautious on the overgrown path.

He lost sight of her sooner than anticipated. The crimson of her gown vanished into the shadows, and he was hard pressed to find a hint of her movements as he walked towards the main house. Oh, she was good, silent and sleek in the night. He didn't know many who could boast the same.

Every so often, he heard the whisper of her dress along the foliage-covered ground. Impressed, he moved faster, eyes scanning the wood.

She was like nothing he'd ever come across. Not the mysterious ladies of the Orient, the coy women of India, or the brazen maidens of the Americas. None of them and all of them combined. The surprising passion that exploded between them had consumed him whole.

Barely a year ago he'd returned to England, having erased the stench of debt from his family name. Trading on the black market with the occasional foray into legitimate business when the mood struck, Mac dealt in everything from opium to gold to magickers.

Through promises, bribes, and the assistance of an old, dear friend of his father's, he'd bought a steamship and sailed the world. It was on one of his many trips to China that he'd met Lucien Harrington on a small island in the South China Sea. He never did discover what Lucien was doing there, but it didn't matter. Lucien had never asked him why he was there, either.

Out of necessity, they became one-time associates. Because their venture was profitable, and they got on well, they became business partners. It wasn't long before they were the closest of friends. If there was one man in the world Mac knew could be counted on, it was Lucien.

This affair with Lucien's young friend was not something he had planned.

As he made his way back toward the main house, Mac quickly found himself moving around the perimeter to where her rooms were. The gas lamp flared to life, revealing a shadow dance along the wall as she moved about, preparing for bed.

For a heartbeat, he contemplated scaling the walls, though he didn't know how he'd manage, and entering her room through the balcony.

With an angry growl, he turned away. No, he wasn't *allowed* to enter her rooms, though Raven managed to find her way easily enough to his. It didn't matter. Except it did. Sneaking through old passages to avoid the servants and other guests wandering the halls wasn't how he wanted her.

Restless, he watched her for another moment. He saw what appeared to be her maid's shadow join hers. With another growl, he turned sharply on his heel and stalked away.

Walking directly to the stables, he nodded to the eager lad who had fetched his horse for the better part of the last week.

Here, in the country in a house full of guests, Mac was hard-pressed to find an outlet for his agitation. Not against Raven. Mostly not against her. Against the situation.

“‘Ere ya go, sir,” the gap-toothed boy said.

Jack, his Andalusian, snorted at the handover.

Mac's younger brother had named the horse when Mac returned with the beautiful blood bay stallion. Since Mac had promised Evander he could do so, the name stuck.

“‘Tis a beautiful night for a ride, my lord.” The boy whistled through his gapped teeth. “Rain later.”

“Later, yes,” Mac agreed as he mounted the blood bay. “Maybe it'll clear some of the Leeds air.”

“Not likely.” The boy snorted. “Nothin'll do 'at.”

Tossing the lad a coin, Mac galloped into the night. He needed to work off angry energy. The full moon shone hazily down on him as he raced across the moor, the wind stronger now. The soot and smog of Leeds blew around him, and he grimaced in distaste. He much preferred the clean air of the sea, or even the heavier humidity of the South Pacific. The boy was right, a storm brewed just over the horizon. The morning would bring rain. It suited his mood, churning and cross.

The Earl of Granville employed a dozen or so guards to patrol the manor grounds at night. By now they knew him and Jack, if not the reason for his nightly rides.

Preferring to visit Lucien than listen to the same old arguments in Parliament, he'd been here over two months and had ridden these grounds every night since discovering the lovely and captivating Raven Drake.

Only to learn she belonged to another.

No, he wasn't going to think about that. He was no closer to answers about her, or his feelings on any matter related to her, than he was when they'd begun their affair.

His fury over Corwin's actions, however, couldn't be pushed to the back of his mind. Lucien was right, of course. The Witch Hunter was gaining a treacherous amount of power. He was also clearly mad. While his supporters were powerful, they were dwindling in number. This past March's assassination attempt on the queen saw to that. In what was surely a miracle worthy of Vatican consideration, both her highness and Prime Minister Gladstone agreed on something. With this new view on magickers as people rather than demons, past massacres were being reevaluated.

Gone were the days when the Witch Hunters held sway over everything from politics to church to the *ton*. Half the country saw them as a threat; the other half as salvation. They craved power in ways that only the subjugation of the entire empire could quench.

Why the hell had Lucien invited the little rodent?

Corwin held influence over much of the masses, true. He was revered among those who still believed in the old ways and the superstitions that began the purifications over four hundred years ago.

For violence and hatred, the French Revolution had nothing on Witch Hunter purifications.

Mac had seen others like Corwin—those who used fear and hatred and even jealousy to hunt and destroy magickers. Mac's hand clenched at his side as he halted his horse. Jack breathed

heavily, though he loved the exertion as much as his master.

Looking back over the estate, Mac absently rubbed his horse's side. Jack snorted and pranced along the moor.

"Showoff." He grinned.

Jack tossed his head in appreciation.

Mac hadn't lied when he told Raven his experience with a magicker was in a healing capacity. The two bullet wounds in his left side had been healed by the beautiful Jeanette, whose father he'd tried to save. The old man hadn't survived the ambush off the coast of Quebec, but with the help of magicker-sympathizers—and the mysterious leader of the American magickers—Jeanette, her husband, and their two children had.

That just wasn't his *only* experience.

"What do you think he'd say if she knew, Jack?" he murmured.

Knew, that is, he smuggled out magickers marked for death. His network of willing participants stretched worldwide and still weren't enough. Such a feat required England's entire fleet and more willing captains than conceivably existed.

Lucien was his most trusted confidant and fellow smuggler. He'd sworn an oath he took very seriously never to breathe a word of their activities. Considering that even Lucien's dear sister Isadore did not know, Mac never doubted his partner's trustworthiness.

On small islands in the Pacific, the smugglers were embraced and honored. Along western coastal America, up to Canada and even further north to the Aleutians, he'd witnessed people who accepted as well as those who harbored magickers so long as they worked for their livelihoods like everyone else.

The more civilized countries saw a resurgence of Hunter activity. The more remote areas

embraced magickers.

Mac was certain the man from tonight wasn't magickal, but someone the Hunters grabbed from the streets to serve as their example.

"Raven wanted to save that man," he said.

Jack snorted in agreement.

Inevitably, his thoughts circled to her. Tonight Mac saw a side of his lover that made him wonder what she hid.

Oh, he knew she kept secrets; they both did.

From what they'd discussed over the past weeks, Mac suspected she sided more with magickers than Hunters. He knew Lucien's true feelings on the subject, which confused him even more on why Corwin had been invited.

Corwin had the audacity to accept.

Did Raven side with the Hunters, in direct contrast to her actions? No, certainly not after the debacle this eve.

She didn't merely *side* with magickers, she actively sympathized with them. She'd wanted to race into the band of Hunters and rescue the man they'd caught, though he was beyond saving by the time they'd all arrived on the front lawn.

What did she hide? Was she a magicker? He'd never run across magickers, not from gypsy tribes or individual families in hiding, though he supposed it was possible.

Hiding in plain sight took daring.

Turning Jack toward the manor, he gave his beloved stallion his lead, racing across the land. Rain fell in uneven sheets. No closer to resolving the enigma that was Raven, at least his anger dissipated somewhat.

Not enough to let Corwin live, should he meet the rodent anytime soon. But enough to return to his rooms.

To return to the waiting arms and delectable body of his lover.

Chapter Five

“You’re playing a dangerous game, my friend.”

Damon Beckett followed Sir John Corwin into Mr. George Bradford’s country house. He’d marveled at how giving the absent Bradford family had been. He didn’t know how the baronet managed it, but it was damned effective.

Ever the slimy devil, Beckett thought with a glance around the gaudy interior.

He eyed the formal parlor done in bright purple damask wallpaper. He squinted at the color, as the pounding behind his eyes magnified. The Bradfords’ stoic butler lighted a few lamps as they followed him into the room. Considering how they flaunted their money, it was surprising that their country house was not yet lit by electricity.

“It was *necessary*,” Corwin replied nonchalantly, eyes on the butler as he left without a word. “I wanted them to *see* just how wild and dangerous magickers can be.”

“It could’ve backfired.”

He carefully sat on a tiny chair, covered in the same purple as the walls, afraid it might break. Staying as still as he could, he tried to ease the pain behind his eyes that using strong magick always caused. Though he hated to admit it—and wouldn’t to anyone, including Sir John—he wasn’t that powerful a magicker. He relied on props to help create the effects Corwin wanted.

“The shot might have missed,” he pointed out, opening his eyes, “and then you’d have a dead noble on your hands.”

Corwin went to the whisky decanter on the sideboard.

“I would’ve *blamed* the magickers, of course,” Corwin shrugged dispassionately, emphasizing random words.

An annoying habit, it drove Beckett mad. It reminded him of a traveling salesman talking down to the masses. Or, he amended as Corwin looked over his shoulder, lost in thought, a clergyman on the take.

“Had the bullet gone astray, that is,” Corwin added, gaze back on his. “Still, it did come *awfully* close to Lord Preston. I can’t *afford* to have anything happen to him. Not just yet.”

“What is it you’re so anxious to acquire? And how do you know Lord Preston is in possession of it?” he asked.

“It’s a box. A very important and *cursed* box.” Corwin grinned, the fanatical light in his eyes glowing in the lamplight. He sipped the whisky and took a seat across from Beckett on a high-backed chair.

“Why the hell would you want a cursed box?” Beckett leaned forward as he continued, fingers absently rubbing his temples. When he realized his actions, he stopped. “Your reasoning is oft times counterproductive, John. You pass up magickal treasure after magickal treasure and search for cursed items? This ring alone—” he indicated the dark steel ring he wore. “—Without it I couldn’t have caused the weather effect around your vagrant nearly as easily as I did.” Forcing his hands to relax on his knees, he ignored the pain.

“If you recall,” he drawled, “that, combined with his imperative to scurry into the crowd, convinced them tonight. And you tossed it aside to be destroyed.”

“I’m not *interested* in trinkets, Damon,” Corwin scoffed. “*Your* thirst might be satisfied by random magickal baubles. *Not* mine.”

Corwin drank the honey-hued liquid in one gulp and placed the empty glass on the table separating them. “There’s a *horde* out there, Damon. A horde of artifacts, texts, gold, and gems beyond *imagination*,” his voice trailed off in what appeared to be complete ecstasy.

It was a rather disturbing sight. Even for him.

“The wealth of the Druids *vanished* when the Trials began and has never been found. Not *even*, some say, by the Druids *themselves*.” His eyes snapped back to the present, or the conversation at least. “It had to go *somewhere*, yes?”

“And you believe this cursed box of yours holds the key to their long lost wealth?”

Beckett leaned back, relaxing as the Witch Hunter poured himself another drink. The man had many weaknesses, alcohol being only one of them. Easiest to exploit, it was one he made use of frequently.

There were other, darker weaknesses Corwin never spoke of. Ones he tried, and failed, to keep hidden. Blackmail was so much sweeter when it came as a complete shock. In these changing times, and as one of the magickers Corwin wanted to annihilate, Beckett needed all the information he could get.

“Let’s say it’s a step in the right direction. This box is *important*. I *want* it.” The words were simple, the statement of one who believed himself invincible. “*Now* what we have to do is figure a way to separate it from Lord Preston.”

“Do you know where it is? Can we steal it?” Damon stood to pour himself a drink.

He allowed himself one a night, and never while on duty as a Hunter. It wasn’t that he needed a clear head for the tricks he’d picked up over the years; alcohol played havoc with his magick.

“I am uncertain as to *where* he’s keeping it,” Corwin admitted. “Or even if it’s still *in* his possession.” He finished his drink and poured a third. “I *do* know it was in his possession as recently as *nine* months ago when he passed through customs. He accepted it in *trade* for passage on his ship.”

Corwin offered a cruel and pleasure-filled smile. “We arrested the gypsy he provided passage for.”

“Why not question him in regards to the gypsy?” Beckett intently studied Corwin as he asked this. He had no doubt the lead Hunter had the gypsy tortured for what little information he possessed, then murdered. Hell, he wouldn’t put it past Corwin to have done it himself. The question remained, why was he hearing of this only now? Had the carefully built trust he’d established with Corwin been compromised?

“He *is* Lord Preston, and his stance on Granville’s reform bill is still undecided.” Corwin looked at him with those fervent eyes. “I cannot simply *question* him about such things. No,” he mused, raising the glass to his lips but not drinking. “Those days are long gone. I must find a way to *search out* the information, and hopefully the box, without *aggravating* his *suspensions*.”

“If he’s a sympathizer,” Damon said, hard eyes watching Corwin’s sudden look of surprise.

Interesting. Corwin suspected everyone. *He* did. Not thinking of Preston as anything other than a magick sympathizer was unbelievably stupid. Unless he knew something Beckett did not.

Forming a plan to discover another of his boss’ secrets, Damon continued without missing a beat. “Then getting that information will be difficult.”

Strolling to the fireplace, he looked at the empty grate. Watching the other man out of the corner of his eye, Damon offered, “I can have him taken and detained. I’d be more than pleased to question him myself.”

Corwin wasn’t the only one with sadistic secrets. But then Damon didn’t try to hide his from society. Corwin flouted lies as truth—in his personal life as much as his professional one—before everyone from the Lord Chancellor of Parliament to his own Hunters. Well known and respected among the ranks, his own reputation was also feared.

“No, that won’t do *anything* but anger him.” Corwin shook his head and drank the whisky in one swallow. “And the box will *never* see the *light* of day.”

Pacing the room in quick angry strides, he kept grip on the glass as if it were his lifeline in a turbulent ocean. Wordlessly, Beckett offered Corwin more drink, suppressing the smirk at his ready acceptance. He hadn’t arranged for Corwin’s unique entertainment this eve, which in retrospect was a stroke of luck. Now he needed to sort through any papers Corwin had that he’d not yet read. Preston’s box unnerved Damon. Were there any more secrets he was not yet privy to?

“This problem will need more finesse,” Corwin said, slurring his words.

After Corwin’s fifth tumbler of whisky, Damon knew it wouldn’t take much to use his ring to project what magick he had and put his boss into a deep sleep. Using the ring again so soon would probably leave him bedridden for the next day, but he hated to waste more of the delicious whisky on a drunkard.

So be it.

Once Corwin sat back in the chair, Damon closed his eyes and concentrated. Tendrils of power wrapped around him, faint and weak even with the ring. Rage exploded at his weakness, magnifying his feeble powers tenfold. Only for a heartbeat. Then it was gone.

Desire came hard and fast on its heels. Papers or not, maybe he should’ve arranged for his *own* entertainment.

“We’ll have to think of something clever,” Corwin murmured.

Chapter Six

Lady Isadore Harrington sat on the recently re-covered chaise longue in Raven's room. She hadn't bothered to raise the flame on the gas lamp. The darkened space matched her mood.

A knot formed in the pit of her stomach during the evening's activities and refused to abate no matter how many glasses of champagne she drank. Which made her stomach ache from more than tonight's happenings. Raven's absence from the remainder of the gathering, and now from her room, did not help.

Closing her eyes, Isadore leaned on the plush, velvet cushion. Fingers restlessly pleating her dressing robe as she tried to calm her nerves. She could never take the risks Raven took.

They had too much to lose; it was certainly *not* the time to cavort with outsiders. Isadore sat up with an impatient sigh. She did admire Raven's audacity. And her taste in men.

The younger woman had a boldness Isadore lacked, and the will to use that boldness in a society that frowned on such things. Did her daring have to do with Raven's innate abilities as a master? Or was it simply her personality?

Irritated now, both with her thoughts and Raven's continued tardiness, Isadore stood and paced away from the window. She'd made excuses for her friend once she'd realized Raven wasn't at the ball. As she had for the last fortnight each time Raven slipped into her room to confess her latest escapade. Except this time it was more than stealing into the House of Commons or joining a meeting of the suffragettes.

It didn't take a master to figure out where she'd gone. Or with whom.

"Damn it, Raven," she muttered as her footfalls fell silently on the soft Persian rug.

"Don't damn me yet, darling." Raven entered quietly. "Why are you sitting in the dark?" She

didn't wait for an answer. So typical. "There's no worry with lights on in the bedchambers, silly."

Isadore scowled, foot tapping tetchily as Raven undressed, gaslights now burning brightly. "I've been worried to death," she snapped. "Worried Lucien would come looking for you before I had the chance to warn you. Some of the guests asked after you," she went on as her friend turned her back in silent enquiry. Isadore briefly thought to call her maid, but decided against it. The girl might be completely loyal, as her family had been for generations, but this conversation was for no one else.

"I told them the events of the eve were too much for you, and you retired early," Isadore went on, facing her friend. "Only about half the guests believed me, and Lucien's suspicions rose when he could not find Lord Preston."

Raven let the gown, corset, and bustle pool to the floor. Isadore noticed they were sloppily fastened. "I'm sorry to worry you," she stated in a soft voice.

Isadore approached her as she tugged her nightgown over her head. "It's of no import," she waved off, "that's not what I meant." She continued with the crux of her worries. "Tonight should have proven to you that it's time to end things with Lord Preston. There are too many other things happening."

Raven shot Isadore an indiscernible look and sat on the edge of her bed.

There was too much risk in exposure should society discover their affair. No doubt, she'd be forced to marry Lord Preston, thereby destroying her marriage to Gareth. In addition, with Sir John lurking in the shadows ready to pounce at the first sign of a magicker, rumors of spells were sure to circulate.

Neither of which were something they needed.

“End it?” she said in a soft voice.

Yes of course, end it, Isadore wanted to snap. Ending it was the only way. Yet Raven hadn’t thought of that. When she inevitably imagined some incredible idea for getting into trouble, it was Isadore who listed the pitfalls. It hadn’t stopped Raven. She’d been blessed as master with all the artless abilities that went with that title.

From earliest childhood, Isadore was charged with the insurmountable task of keeping her more-than-able master safe. She inevitably got into trouble for not stopping her. It was remarkable they’d remained friends as long as they had.

When not contemplating strangling her friend, Isadore truly loved her.

“Yes, end it,” she said as patiently as she could. Raven didn’t seem to notice the edge in her voice. “Did you imagine this would go on indefinitely?” Isadore looked down at her friend and the knot she’d been nursing in her stomach expanded into a fist.

She had an awful feeling about this. Not quite a seer, Isadore nonetheless sensed things others missed. Intuition some called it, but she knew it to be more. In this instance, she saw nothing but trouble for her friends. And Lucien’s most trusted friend as well.

“No, of course not, but . . .” she hesitated. Isadore didn’t believe her. Voice stronger, she continued, “I’m not going to live my life hiding in shadows because Corwin engages in theatrics,” she said firmly. “There’s always going to be a Corwin around.”

“That wasn’t theatrics.” Isadore sat next to Raven and took her friend’s hand. “A man lost his life, and it could have easily been one of us.”

“You’re far too cautious, Isadore.” Raven smiled, squeezing her hand. “Always have been.”

“I’m cautious because it’s me they’ll destroy should aught happen to you,” Isadore snapped. With a tired sigh, she added, “And I’d never forgive myself if something did.”

“My life is not in your hands but my own. I value your friendship above all else, but having you tasked to protect me is a waste on the council’s part. What could you do in my protection I am incapable of doing myself?”

“I think,” Isadore said dryly, “they wished for me to talk sense into you.”

Raven blinked for a moment then chuckled. “Oh. Didn’t work very well, did it?”

Isadore sighed again. She needed to think of another way to express her feelings. All this sighing was beginning to bother her. With a shake of her head, she continued their earlier conversation.

“Tonight you could’ve easily been the one shot, and then where would we be? Raven, you’re engaged to Gareth and you hold rank. You and he are of the two remaining master lines, leaders of our council. Your children are destined to be the most powerful in generations.” Isadore halted mid-thought.

“You’re using the scheptula I acquired, yes?” she demanded. She’d reluctantly acquired the ancient pregnancy-prevention herb and still didn’t approve.

“Of course,” Raven said. “It wouldn’t do to get pregnant now.”

Isadore nodded in relief. “You cannot continue to behave in this reckless manner. This is not just about your reputation, either,” she insisted. “This about your safety—about *all* our safety.”

“Gareth doesn’t abide by the conventions of this society.” Raven stood to wander to the window. “The old ways, when there was no shame going to your marriage bed having known another. ’Tis that he knows. He agrees with the old principles of our society. *Our* society.”

Isadore didn’t disagree, though she wasn’t entirely certain Gareth wouldn’t be angered over this affair. Neither was the point. Raven played a hazardous game, and Isadore was uncertain whether Lord Preston knew all the rules.

“This isn’t about Gareth,” she insisted. “This is about you. What *we* must live with. The old ways are of the past, and can no longer hold anything for us. We mock society for conforming to ancient morals and ideas, yet we’re no better. We only think we are because our ideas are different. And,” she added bitterly, “we’re being killed off as surely as our ancestors were.”

Glancing down, she rubbed a finger against her temple. “The simple fact is that Lord Preston is not a part of our world. I curse the day Lucien invited him.”

“Don’t.” Raven whirled to face her. She crossed the room in quick strides, her hands cool and firm as they clenched Isadore’s. “He’s brought me such happiness. Don’t ask me to give him up.” She closed her eyes and dropped her fingers. “Not yet.”

“You’re in love with him aren’t you?” Isadore swallowed hard. The fist within her stomach rose to clench her heart. The other woman didn’t turn around, didn’t show the least sign she’d heard anything. Foreboding shadowed the room, and Isadore saw darkness around her friend.

“This is more than curiosity?”

“It is more than curiosity,” Raven said slowly, quietly.

Only the wind singing through the trees, the near-silent flicker of the gas lamp broke the night. Then Raven smacked her palm against the windowpanes and spun, eyes blue fire, cheeks flushed with anger. Her plait tapped the window with a sharp *thwack*.

“And what if I *do* have feelings for Malcolm?” she demanded. “Is that such a crime? Where is it written I have to love my intended? Where? A few weeks with Malcolm are all I have to steel me against an eternity of cold nights in Gareth’s bed. Gareth, who refuses to see me as an equal. Gareth, who works long into the night and barely remembers he has a fiancée.”

She stopped, her eyes closed, breathing hard. When she opened her eyes again, they were distant, such a dark blue Isadore wondered what she saw.

“I don’t want to give him up yet,” she whispered. “And I won’t.”

She felt more deeply for Raven’s anguish than she could ever say. Isadore would’ve given anything to prevent her from feeling the hurt she knew would inevitably settle around her heart.

Isadore stood, stepped closer to her, and said in a voice that betrayed her, “Raven, you endanger us all.” And hated herself for it.

“I would never endanger you or anyone else,” Raven retorted, “and you know it. I shall live up to who I am and what I need to do.” Her haughty voice bespoke power, confidence, surety in the face of adversity.

“But,” she whispered, and turned back to the window, “for just a few weeks in my life, I need to be wanted the way only Malcolm wants me.”

Chapter Seven

He felt her the moment she entered the room.

Ignoring the view from his windows, Mac watched her reflection as she slowly approached him. Her hair was still disheveled, now hanging loose about her shoulders and back. The dressing gown she wore was summer-light and pale in the mirrored gas light.

“You’re always at the window,” she said in a low voice. “What do you look at?”

“The world,” he said, turning.

Cocking an eyebrow at his no doubt less-than-satisfactory answer, she closed the distance between them. Her hips swayed under the fabric, and his fingers itched to feel her. When she touched him, her hands were warm on his bare chest, her hair soft as it glided against his skin.

Pressing her head against him, she wrapped her arms around him to stroke his back. Her fingers traced the exact patterns the whip made. He didn’t know how she remembered such an intricate design, but she touched them every chance she had. The pads of her fingers smoothed over the silver welts of old scars.

“It’s raining,” she whispered, pulling back to look at him.

Mac nodded. The rain was only a faint sound behind him. Parting the fine silk of her dressing gown, he exposed creamy shoulders to his hungry gaze.

Restraint proved nonexistent around Raven. Exercising whatever control he retained, Mac cupped her face to kiss her. Her soft lips opened under his, and her nails scraped down the length of his scarred back.

“Malcolm,” she breathed, and broke the kiss.

A streak of lightning illuminated the room, highlighting the paleness of her skin, the richness

of her hair. Swallowing, he shook his head, tried to clear it, but it was no use.

Growling, Mac lifted her against him. Felt her legs wrap around his waist, arms wind around his neck. Her mouth on his, as hungry for him as he was for her.

“What have you done to me?” he demanded, his mouth crushing hers.

He crossed to the bed, hands shoving the voluminous garment off her shoulders, mouth following its path.

“I can’t resist you.” The taste of her skin made his head light.

Angry at the hold she had over him, he attacked her mouth, plundering its spicy depths. She didn’t resist, meeting his tongue thrust for thrust. He trapped her arms within the folds of her dressing gown, and she struggled to free herself.

“No.” Her breasts heaved with each breath. “No, I think I like you like this.”

Slowly, Mac took her wrists, thin and delicate in his large hands. His thumbs ran the length of the sensitive skin, finding each blue vein. Raven shivered at the touch, hips bucking against his. Bringing her wrists to his lips, he kissed along her veins, feeling the shift of muscle as she struggled not to pull away.

In a swift move, he stripped the robe from her arms, and held her wrists high above her head. Stretched naked before him, she quivered for his touch.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he ground out. His cock ached to be buried within her. He could feel her heat and wetness. Imagined it seeping from her. Craved the taste.

Tugging the dressing gown from beneath her, he almost lost control when her hips jerked against him. Gnashing his teeth in an effort to wait, to still his hips, to *not* thrust into her, Mac released her wrists to shred her covering.

Raven whimpered. When he wrapped one long strip around her wrist, tying it securely to the

bedpost, she reared up and caught his mouth.

“If you’re going to tie me up,” she breathed, voice hoarse, body pressing against his. “You could’ve said something. I would’ve brought my gloves.”

“Sweet,” he growled back, arms trembling from holding him off her delectable body. He could feel the sweat gather along his spine and back of his neck. Ached for her “I’m going to do more than simply tie you up.” Her eyes widened. Not from fear, from anticipation. “I’m going to fuck you until you pass out.”

Raven’s breath left her in a whoosh. Her ankles lock behind his legs.

Smirking down at her, he extricated himself from her grip. Briefly wished her ankles were tied to the bed, too, then took one plump breast into his mouth. The fingers of one hand drifted down her belly, skimmed her hips. She whimpered again, back arching. Her nipple, already hard against his tongue, swelled more, and Mac took his time laving it.

Just as he bit on the sensitive nub, he plunged two fingers into her. Hips moving against his hand, he set a slow pace despite her cries for more.

“Not just yet, my sweet.” He kissed his way to her other breast. “This is my show.”

“Malcolm, please. Don’t torture me.”

He chuckled against her areolea, fingers still working in and out of her. Lavishing the same attention to this breast, his teeth grazed the nipple.

“Harder,” she demanded. Then pleaded, “Please, harder.”

He was only too happy to comply.

He tasted his way down her body, teeth nipping along her sensitive skin. She’d have marks in the morning. He didn’t care. Raven didn’t either, if her body was any indication. She writhed under his hands and mouth, half-formed thoughts falling from parted lips.

“Please, Malcolm. More. Harder. God, *harder!*”

This was the only way he could claim her, tiny marks along her skin. Fingers deep within her, her moisture coating him. Withdrawing, he brought his hand to his mouth. He leaned on one elbow and watched her.

“Open your eyes, sweet.”

He waited as she slowly complied before licking her essence off. She sobbed at the action, and shuddered.

“Taste yourself,” he commanded, and kissed her again.

Instead of shying away as he half expected, she eagerly licked her own juices from his lips. Her arms strained against the bindings, making the wood groan with her efforts.

“Untie me,” she pleaded. “Let me taste you. Let me feel you.”

“Not just yet,” he said with pleasure. He felt only a dark sense of possession as his fingers danced their way down her body. “I’m not done with you.”

“Malcolm,” she cried, “please . . .”

“Yes,” he hissed, “beg me. Beg for my cock inside you. Beg to come. Beg me, Raven.”

Tension shone in her eyes, dilated with passion. Tendrils of hair lay plastered against her sweaty forehead. Her breath came in short gasps.

His fingers brushed her opening again, covered in thick moisture from her body. Raven cried out and shifted her hips, trying desperately to find his hand again.

His hips moved against her leg. He couldn’t hold out much longer.

Shifting between her thighs, he feasted on her, and felt the trembling begin deep within her body. Repositioning himself once more, he watched her. She nearly cried. Wrists strained against her bonds, muscles taut, legs trying to cross in a vain attempt to bring about her own orgasm.

Outside the rain thundered down, the storm violent in the summer heat. He didn't want to leave her side, but wanted to open the windows. Let in the fresh scent of rain, feel it sluice down her body. Make love to her in it.

"Not yet," he said again. Hands on her thighs, he spread them apart and opened her to his view. "Not yet." An admonishment for her, or for him?

She was gorgeous, all pink and wet, entreating his entrance.

"I need," she gasped. Hips lifted and fell as if he truly pounded into her, as if she could feel him thrusting in and out of her body.

"Yes?"

Fingers a light caress on her inner thighs. She moaned again. "Raven, sweet," he cajoled, lying atop her. One hand stroked the skin around her core, the other fisted into the bedding. A drop of sweat ran along the length of his nose and fell to her breasts, mingling with hers.

"Malcolm," she exploded on a breath. "I need you inside me. I need . . ." She swallowed. "I need you to let me come."

Triumphant with her admission, he kissed her hard. In one smooth drive, he buried within her. Groaning at the feel, his control snapped. Each thrust harder than the last, Mac moved within her, so slick and passionate. Her legs locked around his hips; this time he didn't remove them.

It brought her closer to his skin, closer to him.

Snaking a hand between their bodies, he pinched her nub. Immediately he felt her climax. With a shout of his name, one Mac was certain the servants could hear several floors away, she came. He felt her inner muscles clamp around his cock, fluttering as her release spread through her. Riding out her orgasm for long minutes, she continued to keep the rhythm between them.

Chest rising and falling rapidly, Raven finally stilled.

Several thrusts and he came as well, spilling his seed into her pliant body.

His arms gave out, and he collapsed atop her. She didn't seem to mind, and let out a long sigh of satisfaction, then kissed the top of his head.

Finally, she said, "Untie me, hmmm?"

Reluctant to move, he nonetheless did, working loose the knots that had tightened with her struggles. Rolling to one side, he draped an arm around her body.

"Christ, sweet," he mumbled into her hair, "you'll be the death of me yet."

Offering a weak chuckle she said, "Me? As I recall, 'twas you who tied me to the bed."

"Ah, but you didn't seem to mind."

"No," she admitted with a yawn, curling closer to him. "That was the most fantastic orgasm I've ever experienced, Malcolm."

Before the sun lightened a new day, Mac woke to the feel of Raven's mouth closing around his cock. The storm passed, as would the clouds before the sun rose. She teased the tip of him, fingers fondling his balls, before taking the length of him into the hot recess of her mouth.

"Ahh," he said in a strangled voice.

He could feel her smile around his cock.

Tangling his fingers into her hair, he tried to force her faster. She dug her nails into his thigh. It had the opposite effect of what she'd planned—his cock swelled. He got the message.

This was her way of tying him down. He could live with that. Especially if she continued to move her mouth and teeth over him as she currently did.

It didn't take him long to come. In the gray light of a cloudy predawn, he could see her head bobbing over him, could almost picture her swallowing, breath hot against him.

Rising to her knees, Raven looked down at him. It was only then he noticed her other hand was buried inside her.

“Good God, Raven,” he managed as lust speared through him. Rearing up, he captured her mouth, one hand joining hers.

Already so wet and wanting, he moved with her fingers. He could tell from the quivering of her limbs that she was close. He wanted to come inside her, but watching her . . . he couldn't pass up the chance.

At his insistence, once she'd made herself climax while he watched. Though she hadn't met his gaze the entire time, she had shouted his name when she came.

This time, she watched him as she moved up and down on their fingers. As the nail of the thumb on her other hand scratched lightly over her nub. Licking her lips, she threw her head back, moving faster, unsteady on the bedding.

Mac wanted to taste her as she came, couldn't tear his eyes from her. Her long black hair curled down her back, tickled the curve of her ass.

Lips a hairsbreadth from hers, he removed his hand and waited. “Come for me, Raven.”

With a cry she did, fingers working frantically in and out of her, twisting her nub.

“Bite my nipples,” she demanded, still in the grips of her pleasure. He did, and she cried out again.

Shaking, she fell against him, both still kneeling on the bed. Wrapping his arms around her, Mac slowly kissed her, letting her recover from her orgasm. Her skin slick, she wound her arms about his neck. Settling her atop him, he leaned against the rounded post of the bed.

“I have to leave.” She sighed.

She always did. But he said nothing. He never did, for what was there to say?

Hard for her again, he could feel the remnants of her orgasm sticky between them. Combing his fingers through her hair, he ignored her words and lifted her so he could slip into her one last time. She didn't protest, and immediately began moving over him.

When they made love this time, it was slow. Yet still oddly rushed, as all their encounters seemed to be.

Breathtaking, flushed with passion, she gazed down at him. He thought he could stare at her for hours and never tire of the sight. Her orgasm crashed over her in waves. He watched it build, then ebb, only to break over her all at once.

The room lightened with the dawn, and Mac knew the servants would soon stir for their morning duties. With a final, lingering kiss, Raven left his bed. Scooping the shreds of her dressing robe from the floor, she tried to maneuver it around enough to cover her.

"I'm certain it's ruined," Mac said with a straight face.

"Hmm, yes," she said, but then giggled. "Ah, well, 'tis a short walk to my own rooms. I doubt I'll run into a servant."

"You'd better not," he growled, arms snaking around her to drag her close for one last kiss. "I don't want them seeing you like this."

He didn't want anyone to see her like this. Servant, fiancé, best friend—only him.

"I'll be fine," she murmured against his lips.

She squeezed his hand, then turned and left. Mac rolled onto his back and looked at the ceiling. He thought before drifting off to sleep that he could easily get used to sleeping with Raven every night.

When his valet, Walter, entered shortly after Raven's departure, he ignored the disarray of the bedding. Nor did he note the strips of silk lying on the floor. With his usual equanimity, he

picked them up and disappeared.

Can't have the other servants noticing things like that. Mac smiled and forced himself to rise.

He had too much to do today to lounge in bed. *Lounge alone in bed*, he corrected himself.

Chapter Eight

Mist blanketed the lawn as Raven walked undisturbed through it. She stopped by the darkened patch of grass in the front of the estate. Pulling her dark blue skirt back, she crouched to observe the stain. Her fury from the night before had not lessened, though she controlled her temper much better this morning. Blood already seeped deep into the soil and unbalanced the area around and under it.

She could almost feel the earth pull on the color, wanting to disperse it, but unable to erase the taint of murder. Her hand sank among the blades of blood-flecked grass, and she closed her eyes to better feel the earth's power.

This disturbed magickal area did nothing to help her turbulent thoughts and emotions.

When she'd asked Malcolm to make her forget, she'd meant it. Forget more than the poor soul whose blood she currently touched. Forget her obligations, her duty. She wanted the fragmented images, the taste of blood choking her dreams to abate.

Malcolm's arms had provided that shield. She felt safe with him, comforted.

She wouldn't have that comfort much longer. Their time together rapidly slipped away. Slowly she moved her hand in a tight circle above the stain. Drawing the power from outside the fouled area, she voiced the ancient words of healing.

"Datibe, eponai Maponu tritios decametos equos." *From your energy, heal thyself and bring forth life again.*

With a final glance at the now-healed earth, Raven stood and turned to the tracks left by Corwin's Hunters. Crushed by booted feet, the marks they left when they'd dragged the man's body away lay deep in the grass. Uninfected, it would recover within a day or two.

She'd come to Harrington Manor with a purpose, and that purpose hadn't been an affair with Lord Preston. The tracks in front of her served as a reminder of her original intent. How had their emotions gotten so out of control?

Isadore was correct—she took risks with more than her own life.

“You shouldn't be here, Raven.” Malcolm crept up behind her. His hand ran soothingly down her back. “There was nothing you could've done.” Warm against her, she wanted that warmth to seep through her clothing, to chase away the chill that settled over her. “Come inside, sweet.”

She turned and looked up at him, touched by his concern. She wanted nothing more than to take comfort in his embrace. Just once more. Always once more.

He leaned down to touch his lips with hers, an all-too-brief touch.

Surprised and touched by the display, she smiled up at him.

“Yes, all right.” Raven slipped her hand into the crook of his arm and caressed him through his coat. Wants warred with duty, and she feared she'd go mad from the conflict.

“Lord and Lady Granville have arrived,” Malcolm stated as they strolled toward the manor. The warmth of the morning sun chased away the remnants of mist, and she could feel its healing rays wash over her.

At the mention of Isadore and Lucien's parents, however, Raven stiffened. They weren't expected for another week.

“I didn't think they'd return so soon,” she said, pleased her voice remained steady.

Malcolm nodded, and she could feel his eyes on her. “They're settling in as we speak and will join us for breakfast. I expect Lord Granville must know by now the events of last eve.”

“Malcolm . . .” Raven stopped and faced him. The fingers of her right hand twisted in her

skirt. Annoyed at her lack of control, she smoothed the material and stilled her fidgety fingers.

“If they’re here . . .” She trailed off and let go of his arm to pace away. “If they’re here,” she repeated, “then Gareth cannot be far behind, we—” Raven stopped and instantly scolded herself. Here she stood, the events of last evening still so fresh in the air, with more concern for Malcolm and their *illicit conversations* than Gareth’s status reports on the reform bill.

Or his arrival.

“We must—”

“Raven,” Malcolm interrupted as he stalked the few feet between them. His hand cupped her cheek, and his thumb ran slowly over her skin. “I’ll not stir the waters between you and Lord Moore. I am also unwilling to give you up just yet.”

Stunned into silence, Raven looked up at him. *Not give her up*. She’d said those words to Isadore last night. Unsure what to say, she opened her mouth to reply. Lucien’s voice rang across the yard, saving her.

“Come you two,” he called, “we’re dining under the columns.”

He waited on the steps, face as clear from emotion as she’d ever seen him. How long had he been there? Raven narrowed her eyes. Did he know of her inappropriate behavior? Had he seen the way Malcolm touched her?

She returned her gaze to Malcolm, who hadn’t taken his eyes off her. She slowly studied his face to gauge his reaction over Gareth’s imminent arrival. As usual, he showed nothing he didn’t want her to see. Only desire flamed in the golden-green depths.

With a sigh, she took his arm and walked toward Lucien.

“I warn you,” Lucien said when they reached the steps, “Father is none too pleased this morning. His temper is apt to get the better of him. Therefore I offer my apologies ahead of

time.”

He added this with a grin just as they heard Basil, Earl of Granville, bellow, “*The gall of that man!*”

“And breakfast begins . . .” Lucien murmured as he led Raven and Malcolm to the large stone columns along the eastern portico.

Lord Granville paced just behind the head of the table. Dark hair peppered with white, he was still a tall man of strong build. Mac often saw him in a rage, and his voice always carried across the floors of Parliament. It seemed his home life was no different. His wife, Georgiana, Lady Granville, sat to the left of her husband’s unoccupied seat. Her smile and demeanor illustrated a natural grace and amazing acceptance of her husband’s outbursts.

“He orchestrated that murder last night!” Granville thundered.

The Baroness Harrogate looked uncomfortable with Granville’s words, but her husband, a staunch supporter of Granville, didn’t comment. The baroness shared a look with Lady Granville. Mac didn’t pretend to understand, and sipped her tea.

He caught Harrogate’s eye over the baroness’s head. Far from weak-willed, after last night’s events they were nonetheless leaving. Mac wondered uncomfortably if Corwin’s display had changed Harrogate’s mind on siding with Granville.

“Father,” Lucien calmly said as he took his seat, “there’s no way to be certain of such an accusation.”

Mac held Raven’s chair then took his seat next to her. “Lucien is correct, Granville. How can you be sure he wasn’t protecting the household by stopping an unstable magicker?”

“I’m as sure of it as I am the sun illuminates the earth,” Granville bit out. “He invited himself

to a gathering *my children* held, and arranged to *protect* them from some poor soul who probably hadn't ever seen magicks, must less perform a spell."

"He put on a most convincing show, Father," Lady Isadore chimed in. Mac noticed her sly smile, though her words were serious, her voice smooth. "There was a stench that filled the air and washed over the crowd in a foul wind."

"I assure you, child, the only stench on these grounds last night was produced by Corwin himself."

"While I tend to agree with you, Granville," Harrogate said, "everything Corwin does is a show intended to derail our bill and impress upon the masses the danger of magickers. Nevertheless," he added with a sad shake of his head, "he puts on a very *well-attended* spectacle."

Granville snorted as he took his seat. Lady Granville filled his cup with coffee and placed a plate of eggs before him.

"Be that as it may," he continued, "he's effectively told all of Parliament he rescued my children from a vile magicker out to do them and my guests harm."

"How will this affect your argument for magicker reform?" Mac inquired and drank his own coffee.

"Corwin sees this as a blow to my bid," Granville stated. Mac didn't miss the calculated look in the earl's eyes. Another discourse on the merits of joining Granville's reformers was sure to come later today.

"But I tell you, I will not allow it to be!" His voice rang over the table as if he were on the floor of Parliament.

Mac sighed and wished he hadn't brought it up. While he believed in Granville's reform,

though he'd yet to tell him as much, he'd already listened to all the argument he could stomach during this last session. He didn't want to spoil his breakfast with more pontificating.

"We cannot," Granville was saying, "continue to murder innocent people on a mere breath of suspicion. And the damnable Witch Hunters can no longer be allowed to terrorize this empire. We have an arcane policing force with the legal authority to skulk into people's homes and abduct or murder them where they stand!"

"After four hundred years of murdering innocents," Raven commented with a hint of sarcasm, "it was finally out of mode to hunt magickers. That is, until Sir John found his path to power."

Mac made a mental note to track down Corwin's path and how he received the authority to reassemble and reenact the Witch Hunters. In all Granville's speeches, he'd never once heard the reason. Of course, his attention might've wandered during that part, but he doubted it.

"That my dear," Granville nodded, and pointed at Raven, "is exactly what's happening. Ten years ago the Witch Hunters themselves eased from the hunt. They stated no significant number of magickers left. For four years," he continued, voice rising, "Corwin created a power base through trickery and fear to revive this cruel cause."

Lady Granville placed a hand on her husband's arm. The movement successfully silenced him. "Dear, the doctor said you must watch your health. And I'm certain our guests would rather eat their breakfast in peace, than listen to all this talk of that despicable man."

Granville nodded and patted the hand on his arm. "Quite so, my dear, quite so. Still, I shall visit and write the other peers. Isadore, you shall accompany me on these visits, as a witness to Corwin's chicanery. We shall defuse this situation before it affects broad sentiment."

Mac sipped his coffee but silently wondered if the time had already passed.

Beckett's head pounded as if the First, Second, *and* Third Divisional Royal Marine Bands played within his skull. Every part of his body, the tips of his hair included, felt the weight of their drumming. He didn't open his eyes, as his hand automatically landed on the bedside floor to pick up the wet cloth Mary left for him every morn.

Placing the lukewarm material over his eyes, he forced himself to rise, though it was an effort to do so. Lifting the cloth, he noted the thin strip of sun that slipped into the room. Well past daybreak, then. Damn, he detested sleeping the day away like a whore.

No help for it—he'd used the ring on Corwin. He needed to, to channel his magick in order to will the baronet into a deep sleep. It hadn't taken him long afterwards to rifle through Sir John's papers, despite the hammering in his head. He searched for information on Lord Preston, his mysterious box, or anything else the baronet hadn't shared.

As he'd believed, it took what little strength he'd had left to complete his search and leave the Bradford house. The knot of Hunters who waited outside escorted him back to the inn. They assumed him to have imbibed too much brandy with Sir John, as they always did.

The knock on the door jarred the Marine bands' pounding with its discordant banging. Snarling, he pushed himself off the bed and unlatched the warped wood.

"What?"

"Sir John left a message for you," one of the young Hunters said. He tried to look around, no doubt for the source of his irritability—and for information to use on him.

Snatching the paper from the Hunter's hand, Beckett slammed the door in his face. And immediately regretted such a loud action.

Hard drinking and whoring, that's what the other Hunters believed him to indulge in after

hours. As well they should—he paid Mary, the bar wench, handsomely to propagate that belief. She was very good and extremely talented. Knew all the moves, knew when to keep her mouth shut and when to open it wide.

In spite of her talents, she had spent no more than a few hours in his rooms. Of all her gifts, but he truly desired her gift for gossip. She was just as good at that as she was sucking him off.

Have gone to London. See Preston is trailed. Report to me on Granville's moves.

Beckett smiled as he relieved himself in the chamber pot. His head ached mercilessly, his eyes barely opened against the dim light of the room despite the cloth's faint mint scent, and he swayed. The short note made him feel immeasurably better. With Corwin gone, he could pursue both Preston and the mysterious box, and wield his power as a Hunter to its fullest.

What possessed Corwin to leave now, when he desperately wanted to cater to Preston, eluded Beckett. He didn't care. If this box was as important as Corwin claimed, and Beckett discovered it first, he could use it to his own advantage.

And to think, he hadn't even had to suggest it.

Dressed in her riding habit, Raven forwent a ride and instead walked tiredly through the wood. Lord and Lady Harrogate left hours ago, with Granville and Isadore not far behind. They were headed for Lord Harewood's estate in an attempt to nullify Sir John's reprehensible use and murder of that poor man.

Exhausted, she'd decided on a walk to clear her head. She needed to think: on Corwin's actions and the ramifications from those actions, Gareth's imminent arrival, and Malcolm.

Always Malcolm.

What she really wanted was a lie down, a reprieve from the heat. With Lady Granville in the

house, Raven hadn't wanted to chance an encounter with the countess in case she wanted to discuss either parliamentary matters or council matters.

Her original intent had been to go along the stream that ran through the woods, perhaps allow the cool water to run over her bare legs. Unsurprisingly, she soon found herself at their cottage.

Last night she hadn't been prepared to let go of Malcolm. In the harsh light of day, she realized she had to rid herself of her girlish longings and deal with the reality of her existence. The events transpiring around her signaled nothing less than a prelude to war. She knew full well Gareth's opinions on remaining silent. Should the Witch Hunters demand a further escalation in power, she feared what he might push them all to do.

Raven entered the cottage, desperate to escape the tension building in her. Perhaps the scent of Malcolm left on the bedding they'd once shared would soothe her.

"I knew you would eventually find your way here, sweet."

The voice rose to meet her from the cool, darkened interior. She instantly recognized Malcolm's deep, rumbling tone, though it still took her sight a moment to adjust. He sat in the lone chair, sprawled there as if he held court, not alone in a rundown cottage in the middle of the woods.

A flutter low within her told her what she knew despite her rationale. She wanted Malcolm as much as she ever had. His mere presence pulled her unerringly to him and she was helpless to resist.

She would resist, she had to. But not today. Not now.

"You and Lucien were to go to Leeds today, were you not?" Raven asked as she approached her lover. Her steps measured, she could feel more than see his gaze, hot and needy on her. Shivering despite the lingering warmth, Raven stopped several steps from him.

“Lucien went on without me.” His voice was low and laden with emotions she could not decipher. “I thought it was better to see you.” He rose, then, and moved closer.

Raven hesitated. “Yes,” she whispered and paced away from Malcolm, “this is better.”

In the dim light she could see only the gold in his eyes. “I didn’t come here so you could say the words I have no interest in, Raven. I came here to spend time with you.”

How had he known? Did he know her so well, so intimately? Watching him, she realized he did. The panic she was sure should seize her never surfaced. Instead, a sense of contentment settled over her.

No one had ever known her to such a degree before. Not Gareth, not Isadore, no one. Yet in the few weeks since meeting him, Malcolm had come to know her on a level even Raven herself had never known before.

It terrified her.

Unhurriedly, she unbuttoned her jacket, and uttered the words she needed to say. “And this will be the very last time, Malcolm.” She slipped the jacket from her shoulders and tossed it on a side chair. Covering the distance between them, she said, “We both have positions we must live up to, and this arrangement of ours does not fit any longer.”

“Fit, hmm.” He made no move to touch her. “Raven, your betrothed has not arrived. We need not speak of such unpleasantness. We have today and most likely tomorrow. And very possibly,” he said, the fingers of one hand caressing her jaw, “many days yet.”

“What we share is simply pleasure,” she insisted. Her skin tingled where his fingers stroked, and she very much wanted his touch on the rest of her body. “I have obligations, as do you. We cannot allow pleasure to interfere any longer.”

Mac nodded. She was right and he knew it. He’d accepted the end long before there was a

beginning to their relationship. No, not relationship, affair. What lay between them was only an affair. Perhaps if they'd met under different circumstances, or if . . . No. The barrier between them was insurmountable.

This was harder to walk away from than he'd thought it would be.

He could do naught about it.

"True," he agreed, "our obligations will soon take us away from each other." He stepped closer, gratified to see her reaction had not diminished. She did not step back, and her breath came in short gasps, her blue eyes darkened with want.

He moved his hand up, along her cheek, fingers tangling in her hair. "But not yet."

"Better now," she whispered, "than too late."

Lowering his head, he brushed his lips along her jaw, fingers loosening her bound hair. The weight of it resisted for a moment, and he used that to pull her closer. "It's not too late yet, Raven."

"Malcolm." The word was a breath against his skin.

He waited, gaze locked on hers. Her eyes flashed, something he couldn't identify. Then she pulled his mouth to hers, kissing him.

He could drown in her kisses.

Her hands slid down his chest, fingers quickly undoing the buttons. Unable to get enough of her, Mac explored her mouth, rapidly attacking the fastenings that kept her delicious skin from him. The fabric parted to reveal her creamy breasts, pushed high over her lacy bodice. Kissing down her throat and the length of her collarbone, he slipped his hands along the open edges of the lace.

Not enough. Never enough. He wanted more, so much more.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said against her skin.

He could taste her all day, worship her body for hours. Feel her clench around him as she came, taste her spicy juices as he gave her pleasure with his mouth and fingers. Given their conversation, Mac didn’t think this sentiment wise to say, no matter how true.

Quickly stripping the rest of her clothes, he lifted her against him and sank to their bed. His mouth closed over one hardened nipple; he pinched the other between his fingers. Raven gasped his name and arched against him, nails digging into his bare shoulders.

Untucking his shirt, he hurriedly stripped. Struggling with his riding boots, his concentration was not helped when Raven draped herself across his back, the soft pads of her fingertips a light caress on his chest. Her lips did erotic things to his neck.

Her fingers brushed lower, teasing the top of his rapidly hardening cock. They wrapped around him, stroking entirely too gently for his liking. He growled and jerked his hips against her. Still she teased. Mac thought he would explode.

With another growl, he pulled her across him, boots forgotten, to attack her mouth. “Minx.”

She merely offered a smug smile and drew him closer.

Silken under his mouth, her skin heated from his touches. The cottage lay in darkness. Though he’d have preferred to see his lover in the full light of the sun, he knew her body well enough to bring her to pleasure every time.

She was right of course; things could no longer go on as they had been. Mac didn’t care as he entered her, and that bone-deep satisfaction settled over him, sheathed in her wet warmth.

God, this was heaven. Nothing in this world or, he was certain, the next could compare to being inside Raven. He couldn’t give this up, wasn’t sure how to give *her* up.

Savoring each thrust, the way she moved against him, Mac let the moment play out, let it

stretch into the heated air around them, each of holding the other's gaze.

And then it snapped. Raven cried his name and rode her orgasm out beneath him, hips grinding against his, a picture of wild and wanton beauty.

His to hold, his to delight in. As his own climax overtook him, Mac's last coherent thought echoed through him.

Raven was his.

Need won over duty.

Chapter Nine

Gareth, Viscount Moore, exceedingly pleased with himself, watched the landscape bump by. He swore his carriage collided with every pothole on the blasted road.

In the scant two days since the incident at Harrington Manor, he'd managed to avert any great loss of support over magicker reform. With the help of Granville and his supporters he'd managed to quash most of the potentially devastating rumors of the murder. In fact, with Granville's furious telephone call first thing yesterday morning, they'd managed to turn events to their advantage.

He'd placed doubt in the minds of many a peer. Insinuations that Corwin acted in haste to murder a poor, daft soul rather than a dangerous magicker caught on quickly. Support in place, Corwin was held at bay for the moment.

As the manor came into view, his first order of business was to find Raven.

He wanted to see her, touch her hand, and feel the strength and power flow through the both of them. Sitting straighter, he itched to step outside the carriage.

"Good day, my lord." Percival took his hat and walking stick.

"Is Miss Drake about the manor?"

"Miss Drake is strolling by the stream with Lady Isadore, sir," Percival responded with a slight bow as he led the way to the drawing room. "I shall inform Lord Granville of your arrival. Please wait here."

Gareth strode the length of the room, ignoring the décor, to look out the opened French doors. Now that his most pressing work was finished, he breathed in the floral-scented air, appreciating the fineness of the day.

Granville barreled into the room. “What news of London, Moore?”

“Favorable. I believe we have Corwin cornered, if he resorts to such measures as you’ve reported.” Gareth sipped a glass of lemonade brought by a servant. He waited until they were alone again before continuing. “We’ve managed to spread our own version of the events, preempting that blasted Hunter and his sudden appearance in London. Peers’ departure could not have been better timed; it has removed all credence from his arrival.”

“Favorable news indeed!” Granville nodded. “Favorable news indeed. That snake and his henchmen aren’t going to make any headway in parliament using this family!”

Gareth smiled. “I can imagine your face upon hearing the news.”

“Distressed does not begin to cover my reaction. However, turning the tables on that murderer does slap a grin back on these cheeks.” Granville let out a rumbling belly laugh before he took his own lemonade from the tray.

“I’d like to see my lovely fiancée,” he started. “Would you mind terribly if we continue this later?”

“Not in the least,” Granville said with a knowing smile. “Miss Drake should be present for our strategy planning.”

“Raven.” Gareth placed a hand on her arm.

His fiancée jumped and whirled, her reverie obviously broken. “I didn’t mean to startle you, dearest,” he said, smiling. “I’m surprised you didn’t hear my approach.”

“I was lost in thought,” Raven admitted, her scowl softening into a beautiful smile. “Forgive me.”

Gareth bent and kissed the velvety skin of her cheek, lingering longer than he usually did.

She jerked back, eyes wide with surprise. Her smile didn't waver. A good sign, he thought, until she returned to watching the small stream.

Underneath the trees, it was considerably cooler. The scent of fresh water imbued the air with memories of his ancestral home in the Highlands.

"What damage has Sir John wreaked in London?"

He stared pensively at her. She seemed distant. Despite his hope of a moment ago, nothing had changed between them. With a resigned shrug, his usual thought flashed through his mind—she'd come around soon enough.

"Not as much as we feared," he told her. "Given the time frame, and the fact so many peers were still in London, we managed to turn things around significantly. Our bill has not been as affected as Corwin would've liked. We'll review our status this evening with Granville."

Pulling a small box from his jacket pocket, he changed subjects. "I found this in a Knightsbridge shop."

Raven took the small burgundy velvet box, glancing at him in question. "What is this?" she asked even as she opened it. One half of a tarnished silver bracelet, broken at both ends, lay nestled inside. Lifting the bracelet to the light she studied it intently.

"Runes," she breathed excitedly. "Have you translated them?"

"No," Gareth shook his head in regret. "There wasn't time. When we return to Scotland, we'll work on identifying what this was to accomplish."

He moved to her side, slipping the bracelet from her fingers back into the box. His next words were difficult for him to admit, but true. "I worried about you."

Raven turned to him, frowning. "Worried? Why?"

"I know your emotions get the better of you at times," he said, and wondered why he brought

it up now. He *was* worried, as much for her safety as for all their carefully hidden secrets. Despite all his eloquence, his concern and feelings for her never quite came out the way he intended.

“After hearing of the incident here, I worried you’d done something foolish to reveal yourself. And in front of the Hunters no less.”

“Gareth,” she said, voice seething with emotion. He wasn’t surprised, given the incident. “My judgment is not as *lacking* as you believe it to be. Aren’t you the great supporter of magick?” she added, with a quizzically raised eyebrow. She was one of only a few people he knew who could express themselves more with a look than a dozen words. “When its use is necessary? I would imagine saving a soul is a *necessary use*.”

“I don’t want you in harm’s way,” he insisted. “You are much too precious . . . to us all.”

Gareth offered his arm to her. He didn’t want to argue with her; rather, he wanted to spend time with her, just the two of them. They never seemed to get enough. “Come, let’s return to the manor. We have much to discuss. I need to bring you up to date before our meeting with Granville.”

Instead of taking his proffered arm, she walked closer to the stream. Stones crunched underfoot, and the water lapped at her boots.

“I’m tired, Gareth.” Gone were the anger and indignation of a moment ago, and in its place an exhaustion he’d never heard from her. Raven was normally indefatigable, pushing them both to learn more, do more. This weariness worried him.

“Perhaps we can meet with Lord Granville later in the evening, after I’ve had a chance to rest.” She didn’t look back at him as she started toward the manor.

“I’m also not as lacking as you may believe me to be, dearest.” Gareth placed his closed hand

in front of her. He waited until she raised her gaze to his before opening his palm. Raven gasped in surprise at the pair of teardrop sapphire earrings.

“Oh, Gareth, they’re beautiful.” She took the delicate jewels and his arm. “Walk me back, hmmm?”

He wondered what bothered her. It couldn’t merely be Corwin, yet had no other idea as to what could have caused her discomfort.

Eight, turn and back across the room. One, two, three . . .

Tapping her fingers against her stiffly corseted abdomen, Isadore paced the study. Eight across, turn, eight back. Repeat. The monotony helped organize her thoughts, to weigh the consequences and figure any loopholes in her promises to Raven.

Isadore saw none.

Well, one. One measly loophole in a promise she’d vowed to her dearest friend upon reaching puberty and sealed with a drop of blood. The blood, placed on the rune for loyalty, had seeped into the stone once the words were said. They’d then buried the rune deep underground so as not to disturb the magick.

I swear on all I hold dear, on the honor of the Harrington family and all who came before us, to protect Raven Brigit Alexandria Drake, Druid master, from all harm, from all scrutiny. To keep her words secret from all, and to serve her in any way she deems necessary.

Ppft.

It was the drop of blood that did it, those few drops irrefutability mingled to form their bond. Blood-magick wasn’t entered into lightly, nor was it broken. Ever.

Isadore turned again. Technically, there was no way she could betray Raven’s confidence.

Both the vow and their friendship stopped her.

In fact, until now, Isadore never had a desire to. Serious desire to. Well, once when she'd threatened to tattle to Lord and Lady Drake when they were five, but that was an extenuating circumstance. Very extenuating.

Not extenuating enough, however, to break her promise. Not *unless doing so saved both the master and council from exposure*.

Isadore wasn't completely confident this qualified as such. She didn't wish to risk Raven's inevitable wrath and possible persecution from the council. With Gareth here, Raven more stubborn than ever—she still refused to break things off with Lord Preston—and Lord Preston making his amorous intentions towards Raven unmistakably known, it wasn't that Isadore couldn't juggle everything. It was that she didn't trust Lord Preston not to turn on them when Raven broke off with him.

Which didn't look to be anytime soon.

Isadore rubbed her temples. The near-constant headache thumped behind her eyes with the intensity of a parade. Despite Lord Preston's less-than-firm convictions on magickers and his neutral stance in parliament, Isadore would have been perfectly happy to continue hiding Raven's affair. It was possible, though not likely, that she had overreacted, and Preston's attentions were obvious only to her. She could've dealt with all that if not for the fact she knew, beyond all normal reason, he hid something, too.

What, Isadore couldn't even begin to say. Certain it was dangerous, she knew it could destroy them all.

"Isadore."

Isadore faltered at the voice and spun so fast she nearly crashed into the wall. Only her bustle

hit, causing more than a little discomfort. Righting herself, she crossed to her brother.

“What’s so urgent you needed to speak with me now?”

“I need to know if Lord Preston is any danger to us.”

Lucien blinked down at her rather stupidly for a moment before becoming more guarded than normal.

“Why would you ask something like that?” he inquired. “And at this late date?”

Drat. That did not bode well for her. Isadore narrowed her eyes at his less than helpful response.

“Politics aside,” Isadore began, then discarded her well-rehearsed speech. “You’re his closest friend, Lucien. You’ve traveled with him for years and tell only the barest stories of your adventures. You’re hiding something—fine. I can accept that. *Unless* it harms Raven or our secrets.”

“It doesn’t.”

Lucien said those two words with such conviction, Isadore was nearly willing to let it go. Except it wasn’t in her nature to do so until she’d exhausted all avenues. This one was barely begun.

“Answer me this, then,” she changed tactics yet again.

“I made a vow, Isadore,” Lucien cut in before she could question him further. “I won’t break it.”

Flummoxed, Isadore gasped. “A vow? Damn.”

Well, this put a crimp in a great many things. And did nothing to settle her unease. Nodding once, she took a moment to formulate her thoughts. One did not scoff at a vow. Promises were given and broken with great regularity, even amongst magickers. Gypsies sold out their own for

promises of protection and profit. However, a *vow* was an unbreakable contract.

"In blood?" She took a menacing step forward, not the least hopeful of a negative answer.

This entire endeavor—Lucien and Lord Preston's friendship, Raven and Preston, all of it—was a bad omen. Isadore didn't even believe in omens. Until recently. It didn't escape her notice it all revolved around Lord Preston. She could be reading too much into it. She doubted it.

"Yes."

"Damn," she cursed again, and reflexively looked toward the door for her mother who was, of course, nowhere in sight. With a sigh of relief, she turned back to her brother. He raised an eyebrow at her curse.

"All right, Lucien," she nodded. "Lord Preston—is he a danger to us?"

Lucien, no fool, picked up on her real question. "No, Isadore," he smiled. She relaxed marginally. Preston wasn't going to turn on magickers despite his stance in parliament.

"To Raven?"

That eyebrow raised again, and Lucien's expression took on a strange combination of amusement and cautiousness. Isadore's eyes narrowed further. Any further, and she wouldn't be able to see her brother.

"No."

"You're being deliberately evasive," she accused with a short-lived scowl. "It can't have escaped your notice," she smoothed her expression though she still glared at her brother; no need to get wrinkles over this. "That Lord Preston is romantically interested in Raven."

Lucien was silent for a long while, staring down at her. His eyes didn't blink, his expression didn't change. "I know."

"Yet you've done nothing to stop it."

“What would you have me do, Isadore?” he asked with that mocking half-smirk he was so good at. She wanted to smack it off him. “What would you have me say? I’m under the same vow as you.”

It all clicked. Divided loyalties. Lucien made two vows. One to Raven, Gareth, and the council. One to Malcolm, Earl of Preston. In order to keep both, he had to lie constantly and had to juggle secrets and commitments as skillfully as an acrobat.

Speechless, Isadore’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. Unable to figure what to say, she continued to glare at him.

“If you think I haven’t seen how they look at each other, you are quite mistaken,” he added. “However, it cannot continue and we both know it.”

“Agreed.” She nodded. “But I’m uncertain Raven knows it.”

“Nonsense,” he derided. “Raven will marry Gareth, have beautiful and talented children, and their first born will continue the master line. Mac will return to the *ton* and marry a nice, quiet girl and forget all about Raven.”

“Will he?” Isadore wondered. “Are you quite convinced of that?”

Lucien didn’t answer.

Chapter Ten

Mac watched the tip of his cigar glow in the faint moonlight. The garden lay before him in a riot of color, though he saw none of it, too engrossed in his own thoughts. Some type of pine tree stood sentry along one wall, six in a row. Ash fell from his cigar, scattering on the stone wall that valiantly kept the gardens encased.

The day had not cooled, and another evening storm brewed on the horizon. During the storm two nights' past, he'd been buried deep inside Raven's wetness. While the summer rain pounded the earth, he'd pounded into her very willing body. He could still taste her, the sweetness of her kisses, the sweat-slicked salt of her skin.

The same scenario would not play out this eve. Not with their conversation from yesterday still heavy between them. She was right. He knew it. Unwilling to let her go, his reasons puzzled him.

She was engaged to another. Mac wasn't going to come between them when Raven evidently didn't want that. He supposed he could pursue the issue. She didn't seem too worried about Moore discovering them. In fact, she'd outright dismissed his questions on the matter.

"What's between Lord Moore and I needn't concern you. This won't matter."

He'd accepted it then because he'd wanted Raven. Pushing it now would only ruin her.

"I thought I'd find you out here."

Jerking his head, Mac watched his longtime friend stroll along the flagstones. In the lamplight lining the walkway, Lucien looked relaxed. Tension bracketed his mouth and stiffened his shoulders, however. He'd seen this several times over their friendship. Whatever had him worried, it was no trivial matter.

“You missed dinner, Mac,” he said casually. “Everything all right?”

“Fine, Lucien,” he lied. “I had several business matters to attend to. Though I understand the pheasant was to die for.”

“Indeed,” Lucien agreed, eyebrow raised.

He hadn’t fooled his friend one bit. Really, he hadn’t imagined he would.

“I’m not blind you know,” Lucien said, leaning against the waist-high wall, sweeping the ashes onto the other side where they disappeared into the plants.

“I seem to recall you having excellent eyesight.”

“*I see*,” he continued unperturbed, “what’s between you and Raven.”

“Do you now?”

“What did you expect to happen, Mac?”

Expect? What *had* he expected? Exactly what happened. The time had come to end things between them. Apparently, he amended, things *were* ended between them.

“It doesn’t bother you?” Mac asked instead.

“What? You and Raven?” Mac nodded and Lucien shrugged. “I care for Raven, Mac. She’s not only Isadore’s closest friend, but a very good friend of mine. I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“Things between us never progressed that far.”

Another lie. He paused in raising the cigar to his mouth. Since when had his feelings progressed beyond an affair? Had they? Or was he simply annoyed a woman he still wanted was no longer accessible to him?

No. So she’d been the one to break things off. It had never mattered in the past; it shouldn’t matter now. This strange feeling had to be more. It settled in his gut and refused to shake.

“No?” Lucien asked. “Then you’ve not been avoiding Moore?”

Mac snorted. “Avoiding? You know me better than that. When have I ever avoided anyone or anything?”

“Hmm,” his friend replied. It didn’t bode well for his belief in Mac’s words. “Gareth is an important ally to my father’s magicker bill. He’s also a close friend. His marriage to Raven will bring two old families into a more permanent alliance.”

“And you think I’ll get in the way of this.” He laughed, a short bark of sound that echoed in the night. It sounded hollow to him. “Lucien, no. I won’t get in the way of Miss Drake’s marriage to Moore.”

The wind picked up and rain scented the air. Every once in a while an owl hooted or a bat flew out of the inky sky to swoop down. Calm in the face of a storm.

“Do you want to?”

Mac glanced sharply at his friend, under no delusion as to his meaning.

“No.”

He was pretty damned certain that was also a lie.

The day dawned bright and hot, the previous evening’s storm spent with the sun. Lingering drops of dew dotted the lawn, but not enough to deter them from picnicking on the grounds.

“My dear Raven,” Lord Granville said as he kissed the back of her hand.

She smiled at the earl. She took his extended arm as they crossed the lawn, and they walked from the small group situated near a cluster of monkey puzzle trees. The sun shone warm on her back, and the day smelled of fresh grass and the ever-present scent of soot. Raven wondered what the air smelled like in lands not as industrialized as her beloved Britain.

It’d been two days since she and Malcolm went their separate ways. She hadn’t realized how

hard it would be to stop seeing him. Gareth took a great deal of her time, they had much to discuss regarding his progress in parliament, yet she often thought of Malcolm.

And wanted him. Wanted his body in hers, wanted to taste the spice of his skin, the coolness of his lips. At the oddest times she imagined his hands on her, caressing her through the material of her gown. Or she'd catch a glimpse of him across the party, laughing with Lucien or Granville, flirting with Lady Granville.

Each time she saw him and held herself from joining his company, something twisted deep inside her.

Today's picnic did not help matters.

Always scrupulously polite, Malcolm laughed and smiled and kept conversing with her whenever the need arose.

She hated that.

Raven privately acknowledged that she wanted an outward sign of his displeasure on ending things between them. She had seen nothing of the sort. He was courteous, charming, humorous, and his eyes never held hers for longer than a moment. Prudent, perhaps, but she wanted more.

Despite her duty to the contrary, she wanted him back.

"I believe we're making headway with Lord Preston," Granville said as he led her around the yard. "He seems more open to our cause than he expressed in this session."

"Aye," she agreed, sure to keep her voice level. "He does seem more open, doesn't he? I imagine it's a combination of innate good sense and his intense dislike of Sir John."

Granville laughed, a deep rumble that carried across the fine summer day. The sound raised her spirits. Often simply being in Granville's larger-than-life presence did that to her.

"My dear, I fear you're right. Sir John is as dangerous as he is shortsighted. Preston,

however,” he continued before she could comment, “I sense a reserve to him that all my articulate arguments can’t break.”

“Nonsense, my lord,” she countered. “Your arguments can break anyone. I’ve heard you speak, Granville, and you are well worth listening to.”

They’d stopped at the edge of the wood and turned to survey the group, a goodly distance away. Isadore had persuaded Malcolm to join them this day. For several days now he’d sequestered himself in his rooms with business. Raven noticed couriers arriving and leaving with heavy bundles for and from him, and she speculated as to what business suddenly required so much time and paper.

Many secrets still lay between them. She no longer had the right to ask him, if she ever had.

He and Gareth were civil to each other. Gareth’s civility was to be expected, as he knew naught of her affair. Whatever he may have felt, Malcolm showed no sign of ill feelings.

Part of Raven was relieved. She didn’t need that kind of tension following her, or simmering between the two men. Part of her boiled with fury . . . and hurt. How dare he be able to . . . to simply *forget* what they shared?

Not, she hurriedly reminded herself as she averted her gaze from her former lover, that they shared more than physical intimacy. Wonderful, tingling physical intimacy that made her brain stop and her heart pound.

In the end that was all it was.

She didn’t believe that as well as she thought she would have when she first slept with Malcolm.

Suddenly, Raven felt like running. Hiking her heavy skirts and racing across the field, letting the wind blow off her hat and through her hair, all sense of propriety and decorum gone. She

needed to get away, to expend her energy, her anger.

It wasn't possible, of course. Discounting the group on the lawn, her damnable bustle would never move that way. Her blasted corset wouldn't give enough to allow her to breathe. Logistics aside, the temptation beckoned.

Granville smiled, a contented look on his face as he surveyed his property. "Ah, Raven. If only peers agreed with you. Still, Preston bears cultivating."

If Raven wasn't absolutely certain her now-over affair with Malcolm was still secret, she'd suspect Granville of wanting her to spy on him. Shooting him a sharp look, she studied him. While the earl guarded his speech, his expression showed none of the evasiveness she searched for. None of the shrewdness she anticipated.

"He strikes me as a man who does not show others his thoughts." Her eyes roamed the grounds. Restless, she moved a few steps away, trying to reign in her tension. "Lucien knows him best. What does he think of Lord Preston?"

The wind shifted again. The skin on the back of her neck prickled. Scanning the grounds, she searched for the source of her unease.

Her gaze settled on Malcolm. He looked up in that instant to catch her eye.

Granville harrumphed, drawing her attention back to him. "Lucien says precious little of his friend," he grouched. "As I'm sure you know. Whatever that boy and Preston are hi—"

Granville doubled over.

Chapter Eleven

“My lord?” Raven grabbed his arm, trying to hold him upright. It was no use. “Granville!” she shouted. He sputtered in response.

Granville continued to fall. It seemed slow to Raven who frantically tried to elicit a reply or determine what was wrong.

Distantly, she heard shouts, calls of concern, and cries for help.

“Basil,” she called anxiously. “Basil what’s wrong? What happened?”

Struggling to lay the robust man on the ground, she scanned the wood behind her. No one. Granville didn’t seem to be shot—there was no gunshot, arrow, dart, or knife.

He’d simply collapsed.

The air spiked with unease, and her eyes briefly flashed silver as she detected the magick heavy around Basil.

Unable to hold onto him, she staggered to the ground. His heavy, heaving frame thumped beside her. Dragging his head onto her lap, she called on all her magicks and erected a barrier around them.

It was too late. Whatever happened, whatever magicks infected him, it was too late.

“Basil, what happened?”

He was dying, all right. There wasn’t anything she could do. Despite all her powers, she was powerless.

“Basil,” she repeated, desperate. “Basil!”

“Don’t let them win,” he whispered. The rest was a garble.

A tumble of emotions flooded through her, anger foremost among them. Raven looked up.

Where the hell was everyone? They'd shouted and made enough commotion moments ago when Basil first staggered.

They clustered over the picnic rug. Even from this distance she saw the confusion and panic engulfing them. Isadore's cries for help echoed to Raven and she saw a footman race for the house.

Dread settled in her belly and froze the blood in her veins. Basil's body heaved beside her. Something equally awful had happened across the grounds.

"I'm sorry, Basil." She kissed his forehead. "I'm so sorry. It's my job to protect you, all of you. I failed."

Mac looked up, searching for Raven. She'd been with Granville when Lady Granville unexpectedly collapsed. In those few seconds of confusion, he'd lost sight of her. Isadore frantically tried to revive her mother and a footman had been dispatched to retrieve the family doctor.

It was no use.

Where were Lord Granville and Raven?

Alarm settling in his gut, Mac finally spotted her. Shoulders shaking, her dark head bent over the fallen form of Lord Granville.

"Lucien," he said, standing.

In seconds, he ran to Raven's side, with Lucien close behind. Despite the situation, Mac desperately wanted to take her in his arms.

He missed her. Oh, he missed the feel of her, of tasting her, touching her. More than that. He missed her laugh, how she smiled up at him. Missed her opinions and how they'd discuss the

discoveries of the day.

Gently disentangling her arms from Granville's upper body, he tilted her chin to look at her. Cold fury leapt out at him, the blue of her eyes iced with hatred. She shook with the force of her tears, but the ferocity in her gaze startled him.

"Raven? What happened?" Though he pitched his voice low, it sounded like a shout.

"Where were you?" she demanded. The question was not directed at Lucien. "*Where were you?*"

"Mum," he stopped and took a deep breath. Mac watched his friend compose himself. His hands trembled as they slid Granville's body from Raven's lap.

"Whatever poison killed him," Mac said quietly, eyes drawn to the body, "killed Lady Granville, too."

Raven's gaze swung to meet his. "Poison?" she asked faintly.

"I heard nothing; only poison could've killed them both at the same time." The words sounded harsh, foreign on his tongue. *Poison. Killed.*

Gripping her bare hands, he caressed the backs of them, slowly running his thumbs along her knuckles. Her fingers clenched around his, and he saw warmth and acceptance in her eyes. Then she gathered herself and pulled away.

"I'm so sorry, Lucien," she said, hand on the new earl's shoulder. "I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do. He just . . ."

Lucien nodded and stood, offering a hand to Raven. Mac stood as well, took another step toward her. Moore arrived just then.

Jealousy slammed into him when Moore gathered Raven into his arms.

Keenly aware of Malcolm's watchful gaze, Raven felt no comfort from Gareth and slipped

from his embrace. Gathering her skirts, she ran to Isadore. Her friend sat alone on the rug, the dead body of her mother clasped in her arms. Rocking back and forth, sobs shaking her shoulders.

Dead. Both dead. God, how? Why?

The questions could wait. Isadore could not.

“Darling,” Raven said, collecting her friend in her arms.

Shock and grief wound around them. Finally, Isadore pulled away, wiping her face with a linen napkin. Holding onto each other, the friends managed to rise unsteadily.

“Papa?” she asked, voice cracking.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Raven shook her head. Tears splashed on her cheeks. She angrily wiped them away. They headed toward the body of Lord Granville, Isadore seemingly drawn to her father. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“They’re murdering us again,” she whispered.

Raven could only nod. Looking around the yard, she watched Gareth and Lucien talk over the body of Lady Granville. Malcolm walked to investigate the thicket of trees just beyond the line of the lawn.

What could he be looking for? Frowning, she squeezed Isadore’s hand. “Wait with Lucien,” she instructed and followed her former lover.

Every step she took seemed heavy, and it hurt to breathe. The closer she moved to Malcolm’s position, the more it felt as if she moved through treacle on a cold day. Her skin stung as if an army of ants gnawed at it. The air she breathed was clearly laced with the remnants of whatever dark forces killed the Granvilles.

She wondered why Gareth hadn’t said anything. He had to have sensed it. She’d ask him

later.

“Malcolm,” Raven stepped into the thicket. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“Careful.” He stepped from behind a clump of trees and around a small clearing. “There are tracks here.”

“Tracks?” She stared at the ground he’d avoided. “Have you found anything else?” She pulled her skirt back and stood at the edge of the clearing.

Malcolm approached her, his hand outstretched to show her a black and white bracelet. “This. Here, take it, I’m going to follow the tracks.”

Raven took the bracelet and followed him, carefully sidestepping the tracks. She didn’t want to disturb them in case Gareth or Lucien needed to see them.

“Stay here, sweet.” Malcolm squeezed her empty hand.

With that considerate gesture, he rushed ahead, following the ground and weaving through the trees. Raven followed and emerged onto a small path that led off the estate.

“Hoof tracks,” Malcolm stated. He frowned, looking into the distance as if he could see whoever had left. “Whoever it was rode off on horseback just a few moments ago.”

Nodding, Raven glanced down at the bracelet and inspected it closely. The beads were crudely cut, with strange marks scratched into them. She studied the markings but could make no sense of them. Rubbing a finger over one, she cleaned it off, but no. They still were indecipherable.

“Magickers.” Malcolm touched the hand that held the bracelet.

She looked up at him, startled.

“They must’ve done this.”

Chapter Twelve

“No!” Raven yanked her hand from his.

“This is *not* the work of magickers, Malcolm. It cannot be. It was . . .” she groped for a reason, an explanation. Her mind was hazy with grief and now this. “Poison,” she said, remembering his previous observation, grasping desperately at it.

“That’s the only explanation,” she insisted. “You cannot tell the others of this bracelet. We can’t undermine the work Lord Granville has done by accusing magickers of his murder. Malcolm,” she grabbed his hand, shaking it once. The movement pulled him closer; she needed to make sure he understood.

“You must promise me. *Promise me*. The existence of this bracelet cannot be revealed to the constable.”

“Raven, sweet.” His fingers still wrapped around hers. The thumb of his other hand grazed her cheek. The tender gesture brought fresh tears to her eyes. “I know you want to protect Granville’s work, but we can’t allow his murderer to go unpunished. This is a clue that may help the constables track down the culprit.”

“We will deal with the investigation in our own way. I swear,” she shook with the force of her conviction. “Lord and Lady Granville’s murderer will not go unpunished.”

She clutched the bracelet tightly, white knuckles physically showing her anger. The beads cut into her skin. Malcolm’s hand around hers grounded her. She needed him to understand, needed him on her—on *their*—side.

“Raven!” Mac said, his usual calm façade gone.

She blinked at him, startled. Whoever had done this to the earl and countess, Mac intended to

see them brought to justice. Raven's suggestion, while politically sound, was potentially devastating.

"You and the others cannot conduct an investigation of this magnitude," he growled. "What kind of justice do you intend to mete out?"

"Whatever is appropriate."

He noticed no hint of the feminine charm and grace she usually held in her tone. This time her voice was . . . hard. She had a serious look about her; the fire in her eyes was not tempered, but banked for the time. Regal in the way she carried this burden, she showed no signs of the weeping woman of mere moments ago.

A surge of arousal coursed through him. She was magnificent.

"Very well. I will keep the secret, but I have a condition of my own." Mac hovered over her. His eyes bored into her intently, unwavering in their resolve. "I will assist in this investigation and be a part of whatever resolution you see fit."

Shaking her head she said, "Malcolm, no. You needn't be involved. Lord and Lady Granville are family. Isadore and Lucien are my dearest and oldest friends. We shall deal with this; you needn't bother with our investigation."

"Lucien is my closest friend." Mac snapped, perturbed over her attempt to dismiss him from the investigation, suspicious of her intent.

What did she hide? She clasped the bracelet as if it held answers he could only guess at.

"I shall be part of finding the responsible party and will not hesitate to take action should a magicker prove guilty."

"Mac." Lucien's voice greeted them as he and Raven returned to the group. "Have you found

anything?”

He walked toward them, and Raven continued on, back to Lady Isadore. Lucien ordered one of the footmen to fetch blankets to cover his parents and guard the bodies until the constable arrived.

“Tracks, Lucien.” Mac watched Raven rejoin the others.

Lucien glanced over his shoulder, following his friend’s gaze. Gareth assisted Isadore up the few steps to the house, Raven several steps behind them. He worried about his sister. Wished he could be with her now. But he needed to give Raven time to talk with the others. They needed a plan and Isadore was, of necessity, an integral part of it. They’d have to steel themselves for the days to come.

The glass-paned doors closed behind them.

“There was,” Mac continued once the others were out of sight, “without doubt, someone in the copse. He escaped on horseback.”

Lucien turned to face him, thinking this entire situation unreal. Nothing felt right. He couldn’t imagine how he still stood when his parents lay dead behind him.

“Our first order of business will be to question the locals between here and town.”

“Mac . . . Mac,” Lucien stuttered. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Rubbing a hand over his face, he turned to the now-covered bodies. Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he returned his attention, but not his gaze, to his friend.

“It isn’t an easy sight. We’re all in a state of shock.”

Lucien appreciated Mac’s words and the comforting hand on his shoulder.

“I’m here for you and your family,” Mac continued, “in whatever capacity you need me.”

“Thank you.”

Raven summoned the two heads of the staff, and saw Isadore comfortably seated. Shaky but determined, she turned to Gareth. “We have to move quickly.”

“What have you found?” he asked. His hands opened and closed into fists, the only outward sign of his emotions.

“Lord Preston found this in the clearing.” Raven pulled the bracelet from its hiding place among the folds of her skirt. Gareth crossed the room and took it from her, holding it to the light to better study it.

“It’s gibberish.” He shook his head. “These runes don’t mean anything.”

“It was found among the tracks. It’s obvious whoever left it meant to blame these . . .” she swallowed the tears that threatened, and when she spoke her voice felt thick and slow. “These deaths on magickers.”

“Why do you say that, Raven?” Isadore inquired as she sat straighter. Her trembling had stopped though she occasionally sniffled into the napkin commandeered as her handkerchief. “What is it?”

“A crudely made magickal conduit,” she said. “A poor attempt at harnessing the power of other artifacts. I am absolutely certain this article was not utilized in your parents’ murder. The magickal energies surrounding it are insufficient to have performed such a Herculean task.”

Energized, she paced away, though she still felt unstable. The room threatened to shift from under her. “No, whoever is responsible used this to undermine Lord Granville. To undermine us all. We must shift the focus of their deaths before the chief constable arrives.”

“Agreed.” Gareth stuffed the bracelet in his pocket.

“How do we do this?” Isadore asked. She’d wrung the cloth between her fingers, twisting the

white material. Just then, Percival the butler and the head of housekeeping, Mrs. Prim, entered the library.

“My lady.” Mrs. Prim sniffed and affected a sloppy curtsy, clearly upset. Raven frowned and the woman snapped back to herself, hastily pushing her sodden handkerchief into her apron pocket with an apologetic look at Isadore. “What can we do?”

Raven turned to the servants, taking charge from poor Isadore. The time would come for her friend’s role, out of etiquette requirements and her own nature. But this, she could do.

“We must lay the blame of Lord and Lady Granville’s deaths on a wholly different cause. Lord Preston proposed poison, and I believe it the most reasonable argument at this time.” She glanced about the room and saw no opposition.

“Percival, Mrs. Prim, you must instruct the rest of the staff. We need to invent a new servant whose sole purpose was to infiltrate this household and find opportunity to poison the earl and countess.”

Raven paced as she spoke, the thoughts presenting themselves to her in rapid succession. She needed to do this quickly; Lucien could return with Malcolm at any moment. She stopped, both the thought and her walking. Malcolm needed to be brought into this. His finding the bracelet required it.

“Percival,” Isadore interjected, “add a name to the household account book.”

“Yes, my lady. What name?”

Raven’s heart went out to him. The man had been part of the household long before Lord Granville married. Their deaths no doubt hit him hard.

“It makes no difference,” Gareth said. “Jane, Mary, Henry. We’ll falsify their existence.”

She nodded, scanning the spines of the books lining the shelves, looking for inspiration. “Jane

Redding. She joined the staff no more than a week or so ago. Before the incident with Sir John.”

“Instruct one of the servants,” Gareth rested a hand on the back of Isadore’s chair. “They met her on a shopping excursion to town and she inquired over a position. Find extra uniform pieces and strew them in the servant’s quarters. Make it look like Jane Redding left in haste.”

“What of the hoof tracks?” Raven continued to pace, arms crossed, tapping the fingers of one hand against her other arm. She shivered, but couldn’t stop no matter how she rubbed her arms.

“An accomplice?” Gareth nodded. “Yes, that would stand to reason,”

“Yes,” Mrs. Prim wiped her hands nervously on her apron, “it would. Very often those cheeky scrubber women have some bloke waiting on them.”

“The tracks . . .” Raven considered, glaring at the carpet pattern as she crossed and recrossed it as if it held the answers she desperately sought. An image of the Granvilles appeared in the pattern. She shut her eyes against the sight.

“Mrs. Prim, quickly,” her head snapped up to look at the housekeeper and she stumbled to an inelegant halt. “Have one of the maids cut through the trees to the rear pathway as though she’s running, escaping. Make sure she carefully retraces her steps back through the trees. We only want one path. Once done, destroy her shoes. I’ll buy her another pair myself.”

“The story is,” Gareth recapped, “Jane Redding inquired after work at the Harrington estate, was hired some ten days ago as a scullery maid, and on the day of Lord and Lady Granville’s murders, vanished.”

“Yes,” Raven said. Turning to the servants, she added, “Mrs. Prim have the girl mingle her steps with the other tracks, Lord Har— ah,” she faltered. Swallowing hard, she said carefully, slowly, every word painful. “Lord *Granville* can show you where they are.”

Isadore sniffled at the change in names. Mrs. Prim hastily wiped her cheeks. Percival showed

no noticeable sign at the change, but stood straighter. Gareth's hand lay on Isadore's shoulder, offering whatever comfort he could. Raven watched and longed for comfort, too. Longed for Malcolm's arms.

"Set a servant's room up as Jane Redding's," Raven resumed, stronger. "Percival, tend to the household account book. Go quickly. Make sure all tabletop items are clean and put away. Report back once you're finished."

"Yes, Miss Drake." Percival and Mrs. Prim bowed and rushed to attend to their duties.

Raven sat on a chair, all her strength gone. Gareth knelt before Isadore, talking softly to her. She nodded once, and rang for tea.

"This imaginary girl," he said, standing to face her, "would've taken whatever poison she used with her. With the absence of any magickal conduit," his hand smoothed the pocket that hid the bracelet, "the only conclusion a physician could possibly make is poison."

"Agreed," she nodded, and stood to move closer to him. They were the closest of friends, allies as well. A month ago she'd have gladly taken solace in his arms. Now she wanted Malcolm.

"The footman was sent just under an hour ago," he commented as he checked the mantel timepiece.

Raven followed his gaze and sighed. It would have to be stopped at the time of death. She crossed to it and tried to count back. It was the first of many things that would change over the next hours. Mrs. Prim, despite her new orders, would no doubt be on top of the mourning protocol.

"It should comfortably leave us just over an hour to accomplish all we must." He went on. "However, there is one wrinkle in this scenario, dearest."

She couldn't remember how long it'd been, how much time passed. Couldn't think at all. With the plan in motion, her brain refused to work. "What?" She turned from her position by the mantle.

"Lord Preston," Gareth said. "He will undoubtedly be questioned by the constable."

"Lord Preston couldn't have noticed all the servants." Isadore moved to the glass-paned doors. "And he is Lucien's friend. I'm sure he'll abide by what we ask him."

"He won't betray us," Raven added as she turned back to the clock.

The footman left an hour ago—everything happened, what? How long before?

"How can you be certain? The man is as unclear as his politics."

"They're headed back." Isadore gestured outside.

"If you're uneasy about Lord Preston, Gareth, perhaps we should bring him into our confidence?" Raven stared at him intently.

The question caught Gareth off guard. First Isadore, then Raven expressed their trust in Preston. Friend of Lucien's or not, did they really know him that well? He watched his fiancée closely. He hadn't expected her brazen request to trust an outsider with something of this magnitude.

"Do you truly place such confidence in Lord Preston?"

"I do."

He wasn't reassured. In fact, his suspicions rose. Her gaze didn't falter, and she watched him back placidly. He glanced at Isadore, who leaned against the glass doors, eyes closed.

"I suppose we don't have much choice. Preston must know how important it is we maintain Granville's reform stance."

Isadore opened the doors and stepped outside, motioning for them to join Lucien and Preston.

Gareth kept his gaze trained on his intended as she turned to the rest of their small party.

Preston smiled warmly at Isadore and helped her retake a seat. “Lady Isadore, is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, Lord Preston, there is.” A maid interrupted with the tea tray. The servant placed the silver service on the center table and took her leave. “Raven has told us of your find by the trees.”

He looked at Raven, watching her a little too intently for Gareth’s liking before returning his attention to Isadore.

“As a courtesy to both my brother and me, we ask a significant favor.” Preston nodded. “We cannot allow the blame of my parent’s deaths . . .” her voice cracked and Raven poured her a cup of tea, quickly handing it to her.

“Lord Preston,” Raven said, pouring the rest of them tea. “As I mentioned before, Lord Granville’s life’s work cannot be tainted by this obvious attempt to lay blame at the feet of magickers.”

“Obvious?” Preston glanced about the room. “I see.”

“This clump of beads,” Raven gestured to Gareth. Reluctantly, he removed the bracelet from his pocket at her hard gaze. “It couldn’t have created a magickal effect as powerful as what we witnessed not an hour ago—”

“Miss Drake,” Preston cut her off, with a slight bow. Out of respect? Gareth didn’t like it. “I shall assist in any way I can. What are we to tell the constable?”

Beckett’s dispassionate gaze tracked the comings and goings of the house later that day. Two miserable wretches down. Careful to keep his rage in check, he’d not worn any artifacts today,

unwilling to chance their accidental channeling of his magicks.

Poisoned. The entire village was abuzz with the *poison* of Lord and Lady Granville. A random maid held the blame. He'd heard the gossip that wondered if Sir John had any culpability in the act.

He didn't want to face Corwin's wrath, but the lead Hunter wanted Granville's hold over Leeds broken. So far as Beckett could tell, the new earl held as much sway as the dead one. Now he needed another strategy.

Poison.

This wasn't going according to plan.

Chapter Thirteen

Somber music filled the air as Mac walked down the long hallway. He'd searched the manor for Raven until he heard the tune. Despite the rules of mourning descending upon the house in the wake of the Granvilles' deaths, the piano had not yet been draped. Following the haunting music, he entered the conservatory, unwilling to disturb her.

With the sun setting low on the horizon, only a few last rays illuminated the room. Neither Raven nor any of the servants had bothered to raise the electric lights. The scene cast her in shadows, highlighting her pale skin and shooting fire through her black hair. Studying her, he watched her fingers dance over the ivory keys, sure and composed.

The piece was anything but.

Solemn, it was imbued with a restrained passion, much like the player. She performed as freely there as when she made love with him. Her entire being possessed by the action—nothing held back. Selfishly taking the time, he breathed in her beauty.

The final chord echoed around the room, lingering in its melancholy. Still he watched her, her fingers now resting silently on the keys, shoulders bent.

"Raven," he called once it faded. She startled and jerked her head to the side. "I'd wondered where you disappeared to."

"There isn't much left for me to do." Twisting her lithe body on the piano stool, she fully faced him. While her eyes were dry, they held a depth of unfathomable grief. Squaring her shoulders, she took a deep breath and composed herself.

He wanted to tell her he understood her pain, she didn't need to hide it from him. Instead he

crossed the few feet separating them.

“Constable Peterson is interviewing Lucien,” she told him. “Isadore is resting upstairs. Gareth is with Dr. Hanley tending to Lord and Lady Granville. Their bodies are to be moved into the east wing parlor until the county’s chief physician arrives to make his determination.” She swallowed and clenched her hands, but her voice never quavered. “The seamstress has been sent for, and I dispatched a footman to purchase the appropriate stationary. Those who need to be alerted have been and should be arriving within the day. I’ve rung the Lord Chancellor informing him of Lord Granville’s death.”

“Sweet.” He crouched by her stool, unbuttoning his jacket as he did so. “You don’t have to tend to all of this on your own.” He took her small hands and held them in his. They trembled for the briefest of seconds, her skin like ice despite the heat of the day. “Rely on me, if just for a short while.”

“Malcolm.” Her smile was wistful, eyes longing. She leaned closer, as if to lean against his shoulder. Then she shook her head and withdrew from his grasp. “No, that’s not wise.” Standing, she walked around the piano and stopped just shy of the windows.

Letting it go, Mac stood as well, leaning against the instrument, arms folded. The sun had fully set, and only the murky shadows of twilight remained.

“Why did you tell the others of the bracelet when you specifically asked me to not mention it?”

“The others had to know,” she said. He could only see her profile, and it told him nothing *he* wanted to know. “We needed to devise this scheme to protect the cause.”

He frowned at her wording. *The Cause?* An odd terminology for Granville’s proposal. “They would never have known.” He paused, a suspicion forming. Doubt cut through him, a pain like

nothing he'd ever experienced. "Or did you not trust me to keep the secret?"

Raven swung around, and he could clearly see her anger. "I trusted you enough to reveal that you knew of the bracelet and could, in fact, be relied upon."

"After everything we've shared," he drawled, not moving, "being *relied upon* is not enough."

"What more do you want of me?" She faced the grounds again, forehead resting on the glass. Her weariness tugged at him, warred with the anger that swelled within. "I'm doing my best under very trying conditions."

Stepping up behind her, he caught a whiff of her unique scent. The fragrance teased him, making him hard for her. He couldn't quite identify it, heather and wild rose perhaps, though it was so much more. Spicy and alluring, addicting.

"I want you to trust me. Unconditionally."

It was selfish of him to say. Yet the word slipped out though he was no longer in a position to demand such things.

His hands cupped her shoulders, turning her around. Mac meant to step away, drop his hands and put distance between them. He framed her face instead. Absently his thumbs circled gently along her cheekbones. She sighed and closed her eyes, fingers curling into his vest. She didn't push him away as he expected.

Every time they touched, a charge arced between them. It seemed almost magickal. He'd felt it the first day they'd met. Each time since, it'd only grown in intensity. Without a doubt, he knew this reaction to be mutual, and had led, in fact, to their unexpected first encounter.

"I miss you."

The words were so soft he almost didn't hear them. For an instant, he thought they'd somehow escaped *his* mouth. No, they came from her. She'd whispered them, one of the rare

times he heard her Scottish intonations.

Her eyes opened, the blue so dark as to be almost black in the gloom. Her cold fingers wrapped around his and removed them from her face. Her eyes damp as they met his, she sidestepped him, striding back to the piano. Their thrilling connection went with her.

“Don’t shut me out,” he said, watching her progress. “Not today.”

Her body expanded with her breath, and one hand briefly drifted to her waist as if her corset bit into her. Palms flat on the piano’s shiny surface, she shook her head. The faint sound of a sob reverberated in the room. In an instant, he stood behind her, pulling her into his arms. Kissing her temple as she shuddered.

Pent-up emotion snapped and overflowed. Raven wrapped her arms around him, but did not cry. She couldn’t allow herself the luxury of it. His breath hot against her face, her skin prickled with sensation where his lips touched her.

Moisture pooled between her thighs, an instinctual, involuntary, reaction to his presence. For an instant, all Raven could think of was climbing atop him and sating this insatiable need. More than that, she wanted comfort from him, of the most intimate kind.

Mouth suddenly dry, she swallowed. The images refused to fade. The harder she tried to chase them away, the more vivid they were.

Leaning back, she started to say something, to protest their position, their intimacy. No words came. All she could see was Malcolm under her, feel his body holding hers, taking comfort from him.

In an instant, she was kissing him. Letting the passion she always felt for him crash through her. Heaven, pure heaven.

He backed her against the rounded edges of the piano, warm fingers impatient through the

mesh of her bodice. She heard fabric rend, and arched against him when his hand finally, touched her bare flesh. Keen to touch him, Raven fumbled with the buttons on his vest and shirt, and heard one or two ping along the hardwood floor. She didn't care.

"Damn women's clothing," she heard him mutter. The sound sent shocks of delicious sensation along her neck. Agreeing, Raven couldn't stifle a small giggle.

It cut through her mind like a knife, dispelling the mood.

"Malcolm." She extricated herself from his arms. She couldn't look at him, tried to steady her breathing. Her next words were as hard now as they'd been when she'd first broke things off with him.

"As much as we may both want this, we cannot."

So saying, she turned and fled out of the room, passing the downstairs maid and two footmen, arms full of black crepe, on their way to close up the piano and drape the conservatory for mourning.

It was a strange sight, Lord and Lady Granville lying in their coffins in the confines of the east wing parlor. Lucien consoled Isadore. Her shock had abated and grief settled over Raven's dear friend. Three days had passed since the murders, and now the room was crowded with guests come to pay their respects. The death of a peer was no small matter.

Raven glanced at her parents, who had traveled by rail two nights ago. Augustus Drake, lord of parliament, and Lady Alexandria, sat near the front. Soon, her father would offer a dignified eulogy to his lifelong friend. Gareth's mother was too unwell to make the journey. As she often did, the dowager viscountess sent an elaborate floral display in condolence.

Their small, secret community was hit hard by these deaths. They'd rally and find ways to continue the work, as they always did. Yet these events were too reminiscent of the purifications,

and Raven worried for many of their less dedicated members.

The air lay heavy, scented with flowers, and she felt stifled, almost trapped among the throng of people. Carefully weaving through them, she made her way out of the room. As she wandered down the long hall she removed her veil. It, along with her black crepe gown, added to her feeling of confinement. Was it the mourning clothes and crowded room that made her feel trapped? Or more?

Finding herself in the library, she opened one of the many doors leading to the grounds. As she rushed from the others, she wondered about the answer.

A cool summer breeze blew around her, a welcome relief. Calling on her momentarily forgotten decorum, she took small, slow steps, crossing the flagstone expanse to the stairs leading to the lawn.

Gareth stood by the tree line, near the spot where Lord Granville had died.

She started to cross the lawn when she felt it. He used magick. Damnation, what was he up to?

“Gareth?” she increased her pace. She glanced back to the house, once, before reaching him. The patio empty, she knew no one saw.

He looked at her with eyes that pulsed silver energy as he retraced Granville’s steps.

“This is too dangerous,” she scolded, “you must stop.” Then she touched his arm and power surged between them. She saw what he saw.

The faintest remnants of a slithering, harsh, most unnatural magick lay heavy in the still summer air.

“It still lingers,” he said needlessly. Her fingers convulsed on his arm as the magicks crawled over her skin. “It will for days yet. Do you see the trail?” Gareth walked closer to the line of

trees.

“Yes, of course.” It was as clear now as it was thick in the air the day she’d held Granville. “Gareth, we cannot do this now, not with a household full of *nonputos*, of outsiders, mere yards away.”

Her eyes followed the path he spoke of, watching the discolored air eddy around the untouched currents. Letting go of his arm, she detached herself from the trail. Everything returned to normal.

Gareth, too, released his link, his eyes now a calm brown. “I saw it last night from my room,” he told her, “but could do nothing about it. I had to see if it still infested the area. Dearest, whatever the murderer used to kill Granville was at our own level. Master quality.”

“That’s not possible,” Raven instantly rebuffed. “Aside from my father, who was in Scotland at the time, we’re the only ones capable of such power.”

“The evidence is in front of us, dearest,” he insisted. Truly, she could not refute his claim, but what he suggested was unheard of. “We may not be able to explain it, but there is no doubt. We must puzzle this out before it’s too late for us all.”

“Do you think the Blackthornes are back in Europe?” she posed, frantically thinking of possibilities. “The last we knew of them, they were in the Americas.”

She watched her veil flutter in the breeze. It seemed oddly captivating, though in no way helped her to understand this new wrinkle.

“Possibly.” He inattentively nodded and circled Raven as he thought out loud. “I cannot fathom who else would have such power. But why murder one of our own?”

“We don’t know if they managed more masters in their line than we,” she admitted, chewing her lip in thought. “Why would *any* master do this? It makes no sense.”

“We’ll have to confer with the others,” he said. “Perhaps Drake knows something we do not.”

“Doubtful.” She shook her head. “Papa wouldn’t keep something like this a secret.”

“Agreed, but what other explanation is there?”

“I don’t know. We won’t be able to gather the group until late this evening,” she reminded him. “Not until after the rites for Lord and Lady Granville. And even then,” she said tiredly, “I’m not certain either Isadore or Lucien will be in any state to deal with much.”

Raven glanced at the house with her final words, and noticed Malcolm by the stone railing. The tip of his cigar glowed in the evening light. He hadn’t been there when she’d left the house. Had he seen Gareth’s magick?

“Lord Preston again,” Gareth commented testily. “I certainly hope he sees fit to return to his own estate.”

“He’s been a help, Gareth.” She smiled, took his hand and squeezed it. Her eyes strayed to Malcolm. She couldn’t have him suspicious now! Good heavens, she didn’t need that.

A tiny part of her remembered she needn’t be concerned—within their Druid society her behavior was perfectly acceptable. The larger and saner part of her held back. Gareth would find out soon enough; she couldn’t hide something like this from him. Part of her warned that if he discovered her secret now, he might suspect her feelings ran deeper than a simple affair.

Not that they did. Certainly not.

She resisted looking at Malcolm.

“I doubt he’d abandon Lucien at such a time.” With those words, she started from Gareth and to the house. Toward Malcolm. She noticed a grin, even from this distance, form on his face. An answering one twitched the corners of her lips. Then she felt Gareth’s hand on her arm.

Stopping, she turned to look at him. Her fiancé. The smile died before it fully formed. Swallowing disappointment she shouldn't feel, she forced a smile at her betrothed.

"Let's return to the parlor, dearest. Together."

"Percival," Isadore whispered as the butler closed and secured the parlor doors. "Please see everyone is given one of the pouches." She nodded at the black packets atop a side table.

"Yes, my lady." The efficient butler already moved toward the table.

Lucien, now the earl of Granville, took his position at the head of the coffins, Isadore at the foot. Gareth, Raven, Augustus, Alexandria, and Percival and Mrs. Prim formed a circle around the deceased. The servants stood as sign of respect for their years of service and loyalty to the Granvilles.

"Our ancestors shall always stand with us," Lucien began, *"and we honor them with the symbols and rites of our history. We are the Druids, the ancient guardians and defenders of the purest form of nature, magick."*

Raven, Gareth, and Augustus linked hands and began a flow of energy that passed to each member within the circle. They retained the ring around them for the duration of the rite. At the closing of the ritual, each member placed a handful of earth and salt in each casket.

"The soil symbolizes their journey back to the earth which bore them," Lucien said. *"The salt stands for the constancy of the soul, as it does not decay."*

Chapter Fourteen

Money was a good motivating factor. Money and the threat of imminent harm.

Mac could mete out both. He hovered over the scrawny body of Cid Hollister, scowling.

Cid was a handy contact to have; he kept his mouth shut and did as he was told. He did it for the money, but then again, most people did. If the promise of coin was lucrative, Cid could almost be trusted. Not one of the turncoat gypsies, he knew how to navigate those waters well enough.

Right now, he needed an informant not readily traced back to him or anyone else at Harrington Manor.

“Get me a list,” he told the other man. “I want to know who works with those types of beads and has the knowledge of magick, limited as it may be, to create a conduit.”

“’Ear me now, gov’na, I’ll do ya right I will.” Cid nodded his head fervently.

Mac wondered if his head could fall off from such frantic movements.

“I won’t leave no bloke unturned, ya’ll see. I’ll find the right bugger what can do dem dere magicks, I will.”

“When you have something to report, inform Mr. Tisdale the tailor. He’ll get word to me. Understand?”

“Got ya right, gov’na. Don’t ya fret, good ol’Cid’ll finedem right quick.”

Mac nodded to the still nodding Cid, and slipped out of the alleyway, undetected. Confident Cid would dig “something” up, it wasn’t enough.

Raven had made a very astute point, one which left him questioning how much she knew about magicks. She was right. The bracelet they’d found didn’t have that kind of power

associated with it. It couldn't be what killed the Granvilles.

But how did she know?

The entire incident had been suspect. The tracks, the murders, the conveniently planted bracelet. She hid something, but more, someone intended to set up the very magickers Granville sought to equalize.

He understood that the Granvilles, Drakes, and Moores were joined in their beliefs and push for reform. They were closer, there was more to their alliance.

It had nothing to do with Raven breaking things off between them or Moore's appearance at the manor. Nothing.

Gareth watched her walk along the stream. It was another hot day, and the heaviness in the air bore down on them all, more so now with the deaths of the Granvilles. He'd suggested this walk in the hopes it would lift Raven's spirits, ease some of the pain engulfing her with Basil and Georgiana's deaths.

His day had begun entirely too early, but Gareth needed to write letters and set up appointments with the peers backing their proposal. Politics. Always politics. Yet he'd spent long hours discussing this with Raven, and had insisted it was more than that.

Liar.

"Raven." He pushed away from the tree he leaned against. "What's bothering you, dearest?"

She shook her head, but the wistful look in her eyes did not escape his notice. He'd seen that look more in the days since his arrival at Harrington Manor than in the nineteen years he'd known her.

"Wasn't it you," he teased, "who insisted on no secrets between us?"

That brought the smile he'd waited for. Her nervous chuckle drifted the few paces between them and washed over him, lifting his own burden. If only he knew how to do the same for her.

"Tell me, Gareth," she began, but her smile never subsided, "what of your insistence that this isn't all about peers?"

The laugh that escaped surprised him. Caught. He should've expected it. An extremely intelligent woman, she had the capacity to debate him on every subject. Eerie how her words echoed his own thoughts.

"That's not what's bothering you."

She looked at him for a heartbeat. Reluctantly shaking her head, she stared down at the water rushing by them.

"Tell me what is."

"I'm not ready to speak of it," she said. "I—"

Twining his fingers with hers, he tugged her further into the shade. She landed against him with an *oomph* and another laugh, her free hand splayed against his chest.

"Talk to me, dearest," he murmured, lips brushing over hers.

She shivered. "Gareth."

He didn't give her a chance to say more. Her lips opened cool and spicy under his. He'd kissed her before, but it'd been nearly half a year since their last meeting. Taking his time, Gareth explored her mouth, hands about her waist and pulled her closer. He wanted to devour her, to show her what she meant to him.

Unable to say the words, he used action to convey the depth of his emotion.

Her moan went straight through him, and had him hardening for her faster than he thought possible. Her fingers wormed between the buttons of his shirt, cool against his hot skin. He

wanted more, wanted to feel her underneath him, hear her moan his name.

So much he'd yet to discover of her—what she tasted like when aroused, what she looked like when she came, how her mouth felt when it engulfed his aching cock. There were more things he wished to teach her.

Breathing hard, her chest rose and fell. Moving his lips to her neck, Gareth cursed women's clothing.

"How am I supposed to seduce you, dearest," he asked, fingers dancing along the tops of her breast, "with all this clothing between us?"

Raven jerked back.

Not the reaction he expected.

"Raven?"

"I'm sorry, Gareth," she gasped, backing away. Stumbling over the folds of her gown, she cursed and grabbed handfuls of material.

Reaching to steady her, he drew her close again, but made no move to resume their previous activities. "What is it?"

To his everlasting shock and dismay, tears welled in her blue eyes. He'd seen Raven cry twice in all the time he'd known her—the second time with the deaths of the Granvilles.

"Dearest, you can tell me anything."

Backing out of his grasp, she shook her head. A tear spilled over, dropping down her cheek. "No, Gareth, I'm sorry."

She ran out of the clearing, leaving him stunned at her actions, and rock hard.

She couldn't go to Isadore.

Talk about bad form! Burdening her closest friend with her romantic troubles not even a week after her parents' deaths.

Slowing as she neared the manor, Raven desperately tried to compose herself. No one could find her in this state. They'd ask questions she couldn't answer. Seeing Malcolm was not an option.

Not after she'd responded to Gareth.

Naught more than a kiss; she'd kissed him before. His kisses never stirred her as Malcolm's did, and forcing a passion not there was foolhardy at best.

Why did she care so? They'd an agreement, she and Malcolm. Whatever he felt should be no concern of hers. Nevertheless, his feelings were foremost in her mind. Her own feelings were too jumbled to even begin to sort out.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered to herself. "I'm *supposed* to want my fiancé. I've got nothing to feel guilty about."

Except she did. Terribly so. She felt guilty over kissing Gareth when she was with Malcolm. No, not *with* Malcolm. Engaged to Gareth, Malcolm had to be relegated to the past. She paused; the thought left her cold.

What hold did Malcolm's have over her? More than desire, more than mere passion.

And Gareth—what must he think? She'd kissed him back, she couldn't deny it. Had wanted to, if only to prove she could respond to him. She knew how to deepen the kiss, but her soul didn't respond. No matter how she colored it, she couldn't change it. Gareth would understand. Malcolm, well they had an understanding.

What of her feelings?

Skirting the opened French doors, Raven walked around the manor, gasping for air. Her

corset dug into her, making breathing difficult. She shouldn't have run. Wandering into the gardens, she walked until she found one of the many stone benches dotting the walkways.

With a sigh, she inelegantly collapsed onto the seat.

Six weeks ago this wasn't how she'd planned her life. Hell, three weeks ago she still believed she could safely have an affair with Malcolm, break it off, marry Gareth, and forget she'd ever heard the name Lord Preston.

How foolish to think life abided by her rules.

"You're delusional, Raven," she said.

"Talking to yourself, darling?"

Yelping at the intrusion, she jumped to see her father looking at her with a bemused smile. "Don't let your mother see you like this, she'll have her first case of vapors since deciding she couldn't listen to Lady Chinceworthy a moment longer."

"You startled me." She really needed to pay better attention to her surroundings. People crept up on her entirely too often. "Ah, what are you doing out here? I thought you were busy scheduling appointments with your supporters."

"Eh," Augustus shrugged, "Gareth had the right idea. We've been at it since before dawn. I needed the break."

At a loss for words, she sat back on the bench, her father joining her. Restlessly pleating her skirt, she missed Augustus' next words.

"What did you say, Father?"

"I asked," he repeated patiently, "what has you in such a dither."

"Nothing." She sighed, realized it sounded overly dramatic, and offered a smile. "A lot's happened in the past week."

“Indeed it has.” His words were laced with sorrow, his eyes distant. Her heart went out to him. He and Granville had been friends since boyhood. She couldn’t even imagine losing Isadore.

“Have you and Gareth quarreled?”

The question was so abrupt, it took her a moment to answer. “What? No, Father.”

He studied her for several moments before standing. “I’d best get back to work. Whatever it is, Raven, just remember we three are all that is left to carry on now. You should find Gareth; he needs to learn to console his soon-to-be bride.” He brushed his hand along her cheek. “I adore you, my princess.”

Raven watched him leave. She didn’t want to see Gareth.

She wanted Malcolm.

Chapter Fifteen

Several hours later, Augustus watched his daughter lean against the desk, the picture of poise and gracefulness. She didn't look well, and he feared whatever worried her earlier still did. She was composed as ever; however, a slight pallor to her cheeks concerned him.

"Are you certain?" he asked, though he didn't doubt either of their stories. "This doesn't bode well for us. We need a clear understanding of what this is. If it is indeed *another* master." He paced to the liquor cart and poured himself a tumbler of whisky.

"It can't possibly be from one of our lines, Father," Raven agreed. "But what else is there? The Blackthornes'?"

"Besides these artifacts, they're our other alternative." Gareth accepted a tumbler for himself. "We haven't heard from them since 1746. Anything could've happened between then and now."

She shook her head, and smiled up at him as he handed her the whisky. "I can't imagine how they're responsible. Or why they'd do something like this. How could they know about the Granvilles? And why kill them off for no apparent reason?"

"You still think it's Corwin?" Augustus asked, and she nodded. "I tend to agree with you, Raven," he continued, "but all avenues should be explored."

"In that case, and despite the drawbacks of his new position," Gareth sipped his whisky, "Lucien is the best choice."

"Lucien? No," Raven shook her head. "Gareth, no."

He kept glancing at Raven when he thought Augustus didn't watch. His daughter ignored it. What happened between them to cause such tension? The distance Gareth's place in peers caused? Or the Granvilles' sudden deaths?

Either way, it seemed almost moot to him. Raven and Gareth would marry soon enough and start another line of masters. And give him grandchildren.

“. . . my place in peers,” Gareth was saying. “If you want Lucien to garner the experience, I can go in his stead—though I think that unwise.”

“No, no.” Raven shook her head, tears in her voice and her eyes. She glared at them both. “Lucien is the best choice.”

“Parliament doesn’t begin again for a couple of months,” Augustus added. “It’ll take us at least that long to maintain our present support in the face of all this.”

“As for Sir John,” Gareth snarled, “it’s his probable connection to the death of the Granvilles I’d like to explore further.”

Raven sent a footman to find Lucien. Moments later, he entered the study, now his study. With a suddenness that seemed silly all things considered, she realized it was all his. A fresh wave of sadness washed over her. Without Granville in the room, things seemed quieter, smaller. Less . . . full of life.

“Lucien,” she smiled, squeezing his hand in support. He nodded to her, but his eyes swept the room. She didn’t miss the changes in him, either.

“How do you feel about a trip to the Americas?” Augustus asked quietly.

Lucien merely raised an eyebrow.

“We’ve reason to suspect the Blackthornes have an agent in Europe. However, there’s no proof. We don’t know anything for a fact. Hell,” he grimaced, “we don’t even know if they’re involved.”

“A master-quality spell,” Gareth took up, “was used to . . . on your parents.”

“Obviously no one in this room had motive,” Raven said. She rose to stand near him,

hovering at his side.

He nodded once, a jerky movement not at all like his normal self.

“However,” she continued, “it does lend credence to the existence of master-quality artifacts.”

“*Master-quality?*” Lucien questioned, disbelief clear in his voice.

“It’s been hearsay for the last four-hundred years,” Augustus admitted. “Most likely longer. But with so little to go on, this is the only working theory we have.”

“If you require more time,” Raven began, “days, weeks—”

“I’ll leave as soon as I’m able,” he interrupted. “While I’m gone, you’re going to need someone with the underworld contacts to ferret this out. I vouch for Lord Preston. You can trust him.”

“*Preston?*” Gareth scoffed. “I doubt very much he has contacts we cannot also tap. He’ll only get in the way.”

“No, Gareth,” Lucien said.

Raven never heard such steel in his voice. She looked at him in a new light. What *had* he and Malcolm done while they sailed the world together?

“You’re incorrect. Lord Preston has contacts that will astound you. If you’re truly going to conduct a serious investigation into my parents’ death,” his gaze swept the room again, “you need him.”

Raven blinked at the two men. Why did Lucien provoke Gareth? Then again, why was Gareth so adamant against Malcolm?

“Preston doesn’t impress me as the type of man with those contacts,” Gareth sneered. “And I don’t want to tip our hand unnecessarily.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, Gareth,” Lucien said evenly. “I’m telling you. You can trust Preston. If I’m to leave for the Americas before this investigation is finished, you’ll need someone with underworld contacts. He has them. Because of our friendship, he’ll use them to explore every conceivable avenue to flush out the murderers.”

“If Lucien vouches for Lord Preston,” Raven concurred, “then I don’t see how we’re in any position to doubt his word. If he’s willing, then we’ve no choice but to avail ourselves of his help.”

“I’m uneasy,” Gareth interrupted, “granting Lord Preston—a *nonp* . . . a non-*magicker* in every sense of the word—any privilege when it comes to our secrets.”

“I would trust Lord Preston with my life.” Lucien’s voice brooked no argument. “I’ve vouched for him and have given you my word. That should be enough.”

“I agree with Lucien,” she offered, carefully blanking her features. She couldn’t let anyone figure out her feelings for Malcolm.

“I agree as well,” Augustus added. Raven looked at her father, but he seemed completely focused on the discussion at hand, not her. Paranoid over this, it clouded her judgment.

“Very well, Lucien,” Gareth capitulated with a nod. “I do trust you. But I’ll keep an eye on Preston.”

“Actually,” Raven cut in, “I will be.”

Gareth’s stormy gaze swung to her.

Calmly, she reminded him, “You’ll be in London with Father. And Lucien will soon be on his way to the Americas. That leaves me in charge.”

She could feel the weight of Lucien’s stare burn into her, but dared not meet his eyes. She didn’t know if he knew of her affair with Malcolm or not, but didn’t want to chance it.

“How do you feel about working with Lord Preston?” Augustus asked.

“Lucien trusts him,” she said the words she felt deep within her. “Therefore I shall.”

Lady Alexandria Drake purposely waited for her only daughter to finish her meeting before . . . accosting her. Ambush was such a nasty word, she mused as the maid left the tea tray on the outside table. The day finally cooled with the descent of the sun, and a nice breeze drifted through the grounds.

“Mother?” Raven sat at the table.

Alexandria poured them each a cup of tea, watching her daughter as she stirred in one lump of sugar. She seemed distracted, more so than the circumstances required.

“Your father leaves for London in two days,” she began, “and Gareth shortly thereafter.”

“He’s postponing his return,” Raven interjected, none too happily to her mother’s ears, “for a couple of days. We’ve much to discuss about the Granvilles’ . . . deaths.” She whispered the last word. Alexandria felt her heart constrict. She and Georgiana were second cousins as well as close friends. Her loss cut deeply.

“I see,” Alexandria managed. She wasn’t privy to many of the masters’ discussions, despite being married to one and birthing the first female master in several generations. That garnered her accolades and a dozen Druidic titles not used in centuries, but very little actual information. Normally, she didn’t pry. Not so today.

“And what has been decided?” she wondered, sipping her tea.

“Lucien is going to the Americas,” her daughter said, looking up from her contemplation of the china for the first time since sitting down. “He leaves as soon as he’s able.”

“This is hardly the best time for him to traipse off to the Colonies,” she scolded. “It’s been

barely a week!”

“I know, Mother,” she bit out. “We all do.”

Alexandria relaxed, closing her eyes to fight both tears and to regain her composure. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I know you do. With your father so immersed in council affairs and with parliament, it’s up to me to maintain the balance between Druid and English society. It’s never an easy task.”

Raven’s hand clasped hers, and she smiled. “You’re such a wonder to me, darling. So strong, so intelligent. You’ve taken the council by storm, and both your father and I couldn’t be prouder. It’s been too long since they’ve had a woman in their midst.”

“Thank you, Mama,” she said.

Surprised at the endearment, for Raven rarely used anything other than “mother” anymore, she wondered if it was due to her position in their world. Or her insistence on teaching both her children proper English societal values.

“So, darling . . .” she smiled, and watched the suspicion in Raven’s eyes. Her smile widened. She hadn’t raised idiot children. “When are you and Gareth finally marrying?”

To her credit, and Alexandria’s delight, she merely set her teacup down with a delicate click. Bright blue eyes, full of wariness, met their amused match.

“I don’t believe we’ve set a date.” Raven never missed a beat. A smile formed on her clear face, as calculating as her mother’s.

Ah, but she did love her daughter.

“Don’t you think you ought?” she prodded. “We must solidify our alliance sooner now, with,” she swallowed, “with these unfortunate circumstances. Not only in parliament and Britain, but in our own culture.”

“Sneaky,” Raven muttered. “You want grandchildren.”

“Of course!” She laughed, enjoyment in her voice despite her lingering sadness. “Darling, why do you think people have children? For the pleasure,” she went on while Raven’s smile turned more to a grimace, “of spoiling our grandchildren.”

“Mother,” came the calm voice, but then she stopped. Alexandria frowned. No witty rejoinder? No sly comment?

“What’s wrong, darling?” Alexandria covered her hand and squeezed gently. “Talk to me. Is it Gareth?”

“No,” the whispered word barely carried over the table. “No,” she said more strongly, “it’s not Gareth.”

“Then what?”

Shaking her head, Raven eventually said, “It’s nothing, Mama. Father leaves soon, Lucien within the week. Gareth is staying on for a couple days to discuss things, and . . .”

“And?” she prodded. “Raven, what are *you* going to do?”

“I’m going to investigate Lord and Lady Granville’s murders.”

Shock had her speechless, but that never stopped Lady Alexandria Drake before. “*Alone?*”

“No,” Raven slowly answered. “Lucien believes Lord Preston will make an excellent ally. I’ll speak to him today.”

Something in the way she said the words *Lord* and *Preston* had Alexandria’s brain churning with reservations. Nothing other than instinct. Instinct, however, served her well in the past. She did marry a master.

“I see,” Alexandria nodded. Raven raised an eyebrow, a gesture she recognized as Lucien’s. “Before Gareth leaves for London,” she said, topping off her tea, “talk to him about the wedding.

Plans need to be set before too long.”

She had sinking feeling and wondered if there was to be a wedding.

Chapter Sixteen

Tisdale the tailor provided Mac with a back room in his shop to use at his leisure. An old contact, Mac supplied him, among other merchants in Britain, with rare silks and fine wools from the Far East. Having this space was necessary to his investigation.

Cid proved more resourceful than most. Mac didn't even have to resort to physical violence—the mere threat of it worked wonders. It might be in his best interests to keep the lines of communication open with Cid after his time in Leeds concluded.

His time in Leeds concluded.

What would that be like? Not seeing Raven on a daily basis. Not holding her or hearing the soft lilt in her voice. The accent only showed when she was angry or impassioned. It mesmerized him. Everything about her did.

He should never have agreed to their affair. Once he'd had her, he should have realized how impossible it would be to give her up.

"Gov'na," Cid's eye twitched as he walked in front of Mac, facing him nervously. "As I just done telling ya, the first sniff of dem trail was a deadlurk. Der weren't nary a rat's hair to be founs. Then I go askin' some magicks-type peoples I does know and they go on and tell me some big bloke does come and pinch old lady Domrotty's bags. Up and vanished tey did. 'Er niece, if yas ask me t'e tart was a lurker lookin' for some booty," his voice went down a few octaves, "did go on and tell me of a beadwork that sounds like wot ya be askin about."

Mac nodded, urging him to go on. Impressed with the amount of information Cid managed to gather in the few days since he'd sought out the sneak, he wondered how Raven and Moore fit into it.

“She don say it was t’at Hunter, said ’e be wearin the colors.” Cid nodded at his own words, and smoothed back his greased hair. “Mind ya gov’na, she be the only one ta lay eye on the blooming fella.”

Mac thumbed the gold head of his walking stick thoughtfully. Reaching into his inner vest pocket, he retrieved a black billfold. Eyeing the nervous Cid, he pulled out several notes and handed them over. He was marginally amused at Cid’s reaction to his generosity.

Cid quickly pocketed the notes and stood up a bit straighter. “Gov’na, dere be anythin’ other I can do for ye?”

“Keep your ears open for anything suspicious regarding the Granvilles’ or any new Hunter activity in town.” He put away his billfold and adjusted his gloves and hat. “Report to Tisdale if you find anything new.” Mac started to leave, but stopped before taking three steps. “And ask around for information on Sir John Corwin, baronet.”

“T’at man.” Cid shivered. “He’s da devil I tells ya. I had pallys in London town who turned up drownt in the T’ames.” He rubbed his twitchy eye, apprehensively looking around their deserted backroom. “Peoples say dey was robbed but I don’ts believe ’em.”

“See if there’s anything you can dig up on him, Cid.”

The sneak nodded and backed out of the room.

Mac thanked Tisdale, and walked out the front of the tailor’s shop, his walking stick tapping the ground with every movement. He worried over the information Cid had given him. A Hunter. He’d seen three or four with Corwin the night of the ball. One particularly tall fellow, closest in proximity to Corwin that night, he remembered.

He was as good a starting point as any.

Gareth closed the doors to the drawing room before turning to her. He was scheduled to leave in a couple of days, and Raven hated that she wasn't going to miss him as much as she should. As much as she would've even three months ago.

So much changed, and she'd yet to confess even the tiniest bit of it to Gareth. How to bring it up? Nothing seemed right, no words appropriate.

Four weeks ago it hadn't mattered. Now it did.

"Have you managed a meeting with the gypsy yet?"

Raven crossed the room and stopped at the sideboard, which held a variety of drinks and finger sandwiches. Not hungry in the least, she felt the uncharacteristic need to keep busy. "Aye," she nodded. "I managed to speak with him just outside the village early this morning."

"I am troubled with your exposure," he said, displeasure clear in his voice. "That gypsy is still a relative unknown, and directly conversing with him leaves you vulnerable." He glanced back at the doors before returning his gaze to her.

"He didn't reveal us the night of the ball. In fact, he warned me the man wasn't a magicker, but Corwin suspected us of being here."

"Did you speak with him?" he demanded. "Did he tell you all this?"

"No, of course not," she snapped. "How was he to? He hasn't betrayed us. At some point we must trust in those who are part of this. Ashton is one of them. It's not merely about us, Gareth. Sooner or later you must realize that."

"Ashton is a mercenary by your own admission," he snapped back. "Speaking to him in the open is foolish."

"What would you have me do? Send Isadore to meet with him? At a time like this? Hardly."

"I should have done this myself," he stated, half to himself.

Raven wanted to throw her uneaten sandwich at him. As that seemed a tad juvenile, she poured a glass of lemonade in an attempt to cool her temper.

“Or perhaps sent one of the servants.”

At that, she nearly did throw the glass. “Have you no faith in my abilities, Gareth?” she bit out. “Or are you just a pompous ass today?” The words came out harsher than she’d intended, but the sentiment stayed the same. Her calm, logical fiancé disappeared; in his place stood someone she didn’t know.

“You’re in quite the rare mood aren’t you, dearest,” he drawled.

“You’ve just assisted in this *rare mood* of mine, darling,” she retorted and increased the distance between them.

The day had dawned cooler than the last week, but she still felt stifled. “However,” she went on, with forced calm, “should the results of my meeting interest you, perhaps you could table your concerns and listen to the delicate woman with the information.”

“Raven, I shall always concern myself with your welfare. We are undoubtedly a dying breed.”

Gareth attempted to approach her but she sidestepped him and stood behind one of the tapestry-covered chairs. She didn’t want his touch. Part of her was ashamed to feel that way, part of her longed for Malcolm’s body against hers.

“Please, do continue.”

She hid a quick roll of her eyes before facing him. Strangling one’s fiancé didn’t seem right, no matter her feelings.

“Ashton informed me of Corwin’s Hunter, Beckett, and his ever-growing jewelry collection, which lends validity to our theory regarding artifacts.”

“Jewelry?” he wondered. “Would Ashton know a magickal artifact if it bit him in the,” he broke off and looked at her, “foot?”

Always the gentleman. Never cursed before her no matter what she did or what she called him. With a sigh, all the anger left her. It wasn't Gareth's fault she felt this way. Gareth was Gareth and would never change. No, this was her own fault and she bloody well knew it.

“Of course he would,” she said coolly. “'Tis the gypsies who make them for the market.”

Gareth looked skeptical. “If this all is true,” he said, “then it means this Beckett fellow is a magicker in his own right.”

“Not a very powerful one,” she pointed out, “if he needs all these gypsy pieces.”

“Unless he's a collector.” He shrugged. “But I don't believe that, either.”

She smiled in relief. No matter how they quarreled, she and Gareth still thought on the same level. It was good to know, reassuring in the face of her confusion over Malcolm.

Relief and assurance—that was all she felt over Gareth's words. All she felt *for* him. Gareth made her angry; Malcolm made her passionately so. For the briefest of moments, she studied Gareth. He looked the same as he had the last time they saw each other. Nothing in him had changed.

Her feelings certainly had not. She still loved him, as her closest friend. She still cared for him, and even though he made her screaming mad when he dismissed her discoveries just because she was a woman, he was her ally as well. She needed him. Needed his support, friendship, and trust.

She needed Malcolm more. Needed his passion and presence. Needed his body and his support. He didn't know the power she possessed, yet he trusted her on a level Gareth never had. Never would.

Her lover trusted her more than her fiancé. Her fiancé knew her better than anyone, and yet lived by the old adage of “if you want something done right, do it yourself.” She found it odd Gareth thought that only about her. Yet he trusted her when it came to their sacred texts.

“Raven?” he asked. She’d let the silence lapse between them for too long.

“I’ve yet to speak with Lord Preston on this.”

“Ah, yes, Lord Preston. I know Lucien vouched for his trustworthiness, but I’m still wading through murky waters when it comes to him.”

“Why?” she wondered in genuine curiosity. “Lucien trusts him.”

“Lucien, yes,” he nodded. “But what has he done to earn such devotion from you?”

“He’s Lucien’s friend and has done as we’ve asked,” she told him, her earlier anger coming back. “He’s been incredibly discreet, and did not offer any resistance to our conspiracy.”

“Thus far,” Gareth agreed. “But who knows what the future will bring.”

Throwing up her hands, Raven exploded. “You were never like this. Suddenly you return from London and distrust Lucien’s friends? You don’t trust the gypsies, fine—I don’t very much either. But Lord Preston is no gypsy.”

“Agreed,” he said stiffly. “That does not automatically make him honorable.”

“Honorable? Gareth, you don’t even know him!”

“And you do?” He stepped forward again, determination in his eyes.

Raven froze. This was it then. One way or another, she had to confess her affair with Malcolm, and her agitation with Gareth got the better of her.

“Yes.” Swallowing, she smoothed her hands down the front of her dress. Gareth noticed the movement and frowned. She instantly stilled the telltale sign.

“Lord Preston and I have been intimate.”

Chapter Seventeen

Gareth felt the blood drain from his face. Shocked, he blinked at her, trying to understand what she'd just said. *Intimate?* She couldn't mean . . . well of course she did, what other meaning could her words have?

"You've betrayed me?"

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Anger blinded him. Hot, red anger that boiled over and made him want to rip the earl in half.

Raven seemed taken aback by his choice of words, her eyes opening wider as she took a step closer to Gareth. "This was not a betrayal, Gareth."

"You've degraded yourself with Lord Preston."

"*What?*" she stepped back and stood straighter. "I am a Druid master, and I live my life with the freedom of the ancestors. This was as natural to me as your first sexual encounter was to you."

"We do not live in the time of the ancestors, Raven!" His tone was deep, powerful, harsh. "You are mine! Have always been." He stalked toward her and took hold of her waist. "And I love you. How could you dishonor me, *us*, in such a fashion?"

Her hand hesitated, momentarily, before covering his, motionless on her waist. For an instant, their fingers entwined. "I dishonored no one." Then she gently lifted his hand and moving away.

"I wanted him," she said, a note of regret in her voice. "I wanted to know what it . . ." she offered a small shrug of her shoulders. "I wanted him and he wanted me in return. Nothing more than that."

“Nothing more,” he repeated. “You cannot claim such a thing, Raven.” He was losing her. Suddenly, desperately he wanted to hold onto her with everything in him. “You were enthralled enough by Preston to not only offer up your body, but entrust in him our secrets.”

“I have said nothing to him.” She spoke through clenched teeth. “And with your faithless comments, do you truly wonder why I sought the affection of another?”

He moved swiftly to stand before her. “I have always had faith in you, entrusted you with more than anyone knows of me. It is you who has not trusted in me.”

The shock at his statement was evident on her face. “Gareth, that is a blatant lie.”

“You wanted to experience sexual pleasure, and you chose another. Is that not the ultimate form of trust?” He stared down into her deep blue eyes, angry even with the faint hint of sorrow shadowing them. “You pulled out of my arms the other day, why? Because of your remembered tryst in his?”

“No, Gareth,” she breathed. “My feelings for you are unchanged. I will always love and respect you. Please offer the same to me.” She turned and walked to the doors. “There are things I must accomplish today. We shall continue this another time.”

The task had been simpler than Mac anticipated.

The Hunters operated their force with the same impunity in Leeds as in London. Additional sources confirmed Cid’s report of a Witch Hunter with stolen property belonging to a deceased gypsy.

Mac assumed, and he believed rightly, that had the bracelet been tracked by the local authorities, no gypsy or reputed magicker would’ve come forward to implicate Corwin’s lieutenant in the theft.

He checked the time on his pocket watch. Half three. He'd been tailing Damon Beckett through Leeds a good portion of the day, from varied back alleys to strolls through the local stores. At the moment, Beckett haggled with the proprietor of a gem shop over a trinket. Leaning against a brick wall across the street and several buildings down, he waited on him to continue his shopping.

Bored with the Hunter's day, Mac's mind wandered.

Moore left for London at the end of the week, and Lucien boarded a steamship bound for the Americas even as Mac followed the Hunter. What "pressing matters" his old friend suddenly recollected, he had no idea, but assumed it had something to do with this investigation.

Raven stayed on at Harrington Manor with Isadore.

Perverse though it seemed, Mac wasn't leaving, either.

Thoughts of her inevitably led to thoughts of her body under his, and he was suddenly grateful for men's fashions. His cock was hard, throbbing with the desire to be buried within her. He hadn't been able to get enough of her before she'd broken things off.

Now, he could only fantasize.

He suspected there to be more between them than he'd originally believed. He longed for her presence even if they couldn't touch. Not opposed to touching her, tasting her, taking her against the wall of their cottage again, he just wanted her.

More than a good tumble, she was . . .

Hell, he frowned, scrubbing a hand over his face. This was out of hand. She was engaged, unavailable. Despite his wanting her, he couldn't have her.

The best thing to happen to him, Raven couldn't be his

Mac's head snapped up, heart pounding. Oh, God. Grateful for the wall at his back, he took a

moment to regain control of himself.

He loved her.

Having never been in love before, he hadn't recognized the feeling. He'd scoffed at the poets' words, sneered at lovesick swains. He was now one of them. He loved a woman who did not return his feelings. Who planned to marry another.

Just then, Beckett calmly walked out of the shop, a smug smile on his face, completely oblivious to Mac's epiphany.

Bloody hell.

Urging Jack to steady, Mac steered the Andalusian through the trees. He didn't care to be spotted by the Witch Hunter as Beckett handed off his own horse to the Bramhope Inn's stable boy. Beckett didn't enter the inn straight away. The Hunter skirted the front steps and rounded the building.

Quickly dismounting, Mac hitched Jack to one of the low dangling tree limbs. Moving swiftly and quietly behind Beckett, he escaped notice from the meandering guests in the yard. Beckett stopped on the far side of the building and glanced about. Once he seemed sure no one followed him, he strolled down the path leading into the thicket of trees.

Pushing thoughts of Raven and his newly-acknowledged feelings toward her aside, Mac maintained his silent pursuit.

He remained a minimum of thirty paces away at all times, but still managed to keep step. Beckett tapped a gnarled tree, its half-split branch drooping to the ground. Veering off the path about a hundred yards into the trail, he looked around with the paranoid air of one on the wrong side of the law. Mac slowed his movement considerably.

The Hunter pulled out a thick gold necklace, which sparkled in the dappled light. It seemed to be the trinket he'd haggled over. Why would he bring it out here, of all places? Was he to rendezvous with a woman? What did this have to do with the murders?

Just as he thought his entire day of trailing the bastard wasted, Beckett stopped all movement and seemed to listen to his surroundings. Poorly positioned between the trees, Mac didn't want to chance a move to better cover and be heard.

Beckett suddenly turned. Mac was spotted. His mind raced for an excuse. Before he finished formulating the myriad of answers he knew wouldn't work, a gust of wind enveloped him.

Shocking him to his very core, Raven stood before him.

He faced her, could clearly see her image. Something moved behind her, shadows of some kind, nearly blending her into the surroundings. She smiled up at him and gently touched her fingers to his mouth.

Despite the danger of discovery, Mac wanted to pull her closer and kiss her, feel the fingers lightly caressing his mouth wrap around his cock.

He needed to focus. With Raven so close it was impossible.

Blinking away those images, Mac looked beyond her to where Beckett stood, scowling. He could swear the other man looked straight at him, yet he said nothing, did nothing.

What the hell?

Looking back at Raven, he tried to make sense of this. He couldn't.

"Don't say anything," she whispered, mouth barely moving to form the words.

Not knowing what to say, anyway, Mac nodded in awe. Returning his gaze to Beckett, he saw the Hunter on his hands and knees, shoving a small boulder to one side and digging into the earth.

The trinket disappeared into a bag, and Mac realized what it was. Magickal.

Minutes passed before he stood, boulder back in place wiping his hands on his black pants.

With a final glance around the area, he moved back the way he'd come.

Never once did he see Mac and Raven standing in plain line of sight.

Chapter Eighteen

Raven waited until Beckett left for the inn. She recognized his magickal signature immediately. The heavy black oppressiveness of it felt perverse creeping along her skin.

He killed Basil and Georgiana. Her stomach roiled with nausea, her anger threatened to boil over and strike him down.

He was there the night of the ball, the Hunter with the faint power. Mostly likely, he'd been the one to create the wind and stench just before that poor nameless man died. She hadn't noticed a signature then, but she supposed certain artifacts could cover it.

Watching Beckett, she wondered if he'd orchestrated the death as a simple means to an end, or if the man's death had meaning. The conqueror, Beckett and Corwin, to the conquered, magickers? Or merely what she thought then and Ashton confirmed? The vagrant happened to be the wrong place at the wrong time.

Letting her magick dissipate into the wood, she shook her head free of those thoughts. She'd probably never get an answer, and doubted very much either Beckett's or Corwin's thinking delved so deeply. The shadows dropped, lightening as they retreated from around them.

Malcolm blinked at the relative brightness but continued to stare at her. Dropping her hand from his lips, she tried to put some distance between them. He caught her fingers, stopping her midstride.

"What," he demanded, "was that all about?"

"I'll explain later," she promised, amazed her voice was even.

Explain. She had to explain what she'd done, for Malcolm would never let it go. Explain who she was. Fear clenched her belly, tight and unrelenting. Would he understand? Would he care?

Raven owed him this, the truth. Oh how she wished it'd been another way. Would that he'd never discovered her deepest secret. Their affair finished, he need never know. And now, to save him she revealed all she was.

For his life, it was worth it.

"First," she said, "we have to gather the artifacts Beckett's hiding."

"You know of his magickal jewelry obsession?" He hadn't moved. His hand held firm to hers. Her skin quivered where they touched, even through her riding glove.

Then his thumb moved under her glove, circling her wrist. Swallowing, Raven stood transfixed. Breaking off their affair hadn't stopped what she felt. Her body responded to Malcolm, his touch, his nearness, just as it always had.

Always would.

"Yes," she said calmly. Her heart raced with his nearness, her breath was short. "Malcolm, please let me go—" Her voice broke. "I don't want that murderer returning to find us."

His fingers tightened and suddenly she found herself closer. His eyes turned a stormy gold-green. All in all, she supposed he was taking this situation rather well. He hadn't denounced her as a witch or called Beckett back to burn her at the stake.

Something about his lack of reaction niggled at the back of her mind, but with him so close, she couldn't think clearly.

Tugging, she tried to free herself. He didn't let go. Huffing, she said, "Malcolm, this isn't the place. Help me gather his collection, and we'll talk."

"Talk." He nodded, reminding her of past "talks" and where his mouth had inevitably wandered. Her spine tingled with the memories, and she berated herself for her inappropriateness.

“Yes, talk. But not here.”

With another slow nod, he dropped her hand.

Kneeling beside the rock where Beckett had stood, Raven touched the ground, and used the magick inherent there to move it aside. The dirt shifted, rising and falling as the small boulder rolled out of the way.

Malcolm continued to silently watch her.

Her explanations were going to take a long time. Damnation, Gareth wasn't going to be pleased. That stopped her cold. Her earlier anger toward him returned. The hell with him and his sudden about-face, the words he'd never uttered.

If he had, she wondered as the earth continued to shift, would she have looked twice at Malcolm? Would it have made a difference?

“Damn,” Malcolm murmured once the rock was clear and the dirt gone from the hole.

Twisting to face him, she realized that, no, she'd always look at Malcolm. He drew her attention wherever he was.

“Impressive.” She returned her attention to the large bag opening it. “This is more than I've ever seen one person hold.”

“You've seen more?” Malcolm shook his head. “Of course you have. It's so obvious now.”

She had a sinking sensation it was.

He tied the bag, which contained loose stones, necklaces, rings, and bracelets to the pommel of his blood bay's saddle. Senses opened for Beckett's return, she hurriedly grabbed the few loose items still in the hole before returning the dirt and boulder to their proper place.

Regardless of her anger toward Gareth, she couldn't wait to show him this horde. Sadness settled over her at the thought of her fiancé. They hadn't resolved anything between them. She

didn't want to lose him, especially not his friendship. She relied on that more than she did even Isadore's.

"Raven?"

Malcolm's voice startled her. Hand outstretched, he waited to help her stand. How long had she been looking at the ground, lost in thought?

Taking his hand, she swallowed against a wholly different set of sensations.

"We can't talk here." He still held her hand as they walked out of the wood. "I'll meet you back at our cottage."

So saying, he gave her one final look and turned to ride back to the manor. Raven headed back to the village and her own horse.

"We're only talking," she murmured to herself. "Only talking."

Mac arrived at the parson's cottage first. In short order, he tied Jack behind the building and inspected the grounds. He needed to be certain no one disturbed their refuge. Gripping the dirt-covered cloth sack as he made his inspections, he was surprised at the weight.

Just how many trinkets did Beckett have? And where had he found them?

Entering the cottage, Mac set the sack on a small table and went about checking each that window remained shuttered or curtained. Satisfied, he lit a handful of candles he and Raven had left.

Once he'd had a chance to sit, his mind fully registered the gravity of what he'd witnessed.

Raven was a magicker.

Raven was the most powerful magicker he'd ever seen or heard of.

His lover was a witch.

Her life was in danger.

Was this why the Granvilles were killed? Had the insidious magick that took their lives been meant for them or for Raven? How did Moore fit into this?

The questions came fast, with no answers. Standing, he crossed to the room and listened for Raven. She stepped through when he pulled open the door.

He wanted to be angry with her. Wanted to curse and shake her until she told him everything, but couldn't. Why did love make one soft? He worried for her, a feeling he was unfamiliar with, especially with Beckett roaming around under Corwin's orders.

He had secrets, but hers were of an unimaginable scale.

"I tied my horse with yours," she stated as she entered. "They should go unnoticed should anyone stroll by the front path."

"Agreed," he answered, obviously stalling.

He scrutinized her in the faint light coming from the still opened door. Her dark riding habit's skirt was looped through her right arm, the scarf of her hat draped down her shoulder. Other than the faint flush to her cheeks, and the way her eyes warily watched his, she looked the same.

Any other day he'd have already started undressing her, nibbling along her neck, playing with her nipples. As the dress revealed her beautiful body, he'd taste the moisture seeping from her center until she screamed his name.

Instead of touching her as he wanted, he folded his arms across his chest.

"I've laid the items out." He closed the door. His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears. "And I've attempted to curb my astonishment, sweet."

Leaning against the cool wall beside the door, he waited. The endearment slipped out

naturally, though he remembered to curb the impulse in the company of others. Strange how his mind knew to do it then, but with only the two of them, the word came as naturally as he slipped into her body.

Raven couldn't help her smile. Malcolm didn't seem angry, not like Gareth had been when he learned of her affair. In fact, he seemed almost amused.

"I did what I had to do," she said.

"And what was that? I've never seen anything like it before," he admitted. "It was," he broke off and shook his head, "amazing."

What could she tell him? Of her talents as a Druid master? That she used nature's innate magick to hide herself in the shadows? She'd sworn a vow never to reveal herself to an outsider. No matter her feelings for Malcolm, she couldn't say anything to further expose herself.

"I couldn't allow that murdering blaggard to spot you, Malcolm. I had no choice but to shield you." Raven stood her ground, a few feet from him, gauging his every expression, to no avail. Out of bed, he was as unreadable as ever. "In doing so, I've revealed a secret I and my people have kept hidden for generations."

"I understand, Raven. I'm not as ill-versed in the world of magicks as you may believe." His voice was short, the words clipped and impatient. Then he exhaled and relaxed, dropping his arms to his sides, the fingers of his scarred left hand flexing.

Extending his hand toward her, he helped her sit on the room's sole chair. The bed loomed large, but she forced her eyes to stay on Malcolm's. Keep the memories at bay. Swallowing, she tried to even her breathing, to will the afternoons and evenings they'd spent here to disappear as the mist disappeared under the sun's burning heat.

Oh, how she wanted to forget the past days and kiss him. Feel his skin under her fingertips,

taste him as she explored his beloved body. She and Gareth had resolved nothing, but now that he knew, she couldn't allow anything further between her and Malcolm. Furious at her betrothed, it just wouldn't be right.

"In my journeys," he said, hands now clasped behind his back. "I've come across several magickers." He offered a crooked half-smile as mocking as it was amused. "And I've been known to smuggle a few to safety."

Raven blinked. "*Smuggle?*" Shaking her head to clear it, she said, "Yes, of course. Lucien's mysterious contact. It all makes sense now." Including Lucien's abnormal behavior and bizarre remarks.

"I see we've both told our share of half-truths," she commented, afraid of her instinct to stand and cross to Malcolm, to touch him. What she needed was to regain control—she'd always had it, had prided herself in it. Until Malcolm.

"Half-truths . . ." he mused with a dry chuckle. "An interesting turn of phrase." He crossed to the unlit stone fireplace, looking into the grate. "I've told more than my share of half-truths, sweet."

"More than your share?" What further secrets did he hold?

"I told you I could give you up," he said quietly, more than a hint of self-deprecation in his voice. Shaking his head, he snorted. "That I could walk away from what we've shared without remorse or sentiment."

He paused. Raven held her breath. Butterflies whirled in her stomach, and she both dreaded and hoped for his next words.

"I cannot."

Words she wanted to hear. The look in his eyes. What she wanted directed at her once more.

Raven rose from her seat and she stood to face Malcolm. He stood only a few feet away. Everything inside her longed to go to him, embrace him, kiss him. Never let go. Duty kept her rooted to the spot. A weight tightened her heart, intangible yet very real.

It tore her apart.

The life she could so clearly envision with Malcolm. The duty she could not leave behind.

“I’m sorry,” she heard herself say, surprised her tone remained even. She felt sick. “I revealed myself because you were in danger of discovery by that scum Beckett. You’re too good a man to be compromised by his sort. I trust you not to reveal my secret. As for,” Raven lowered her head slightly, “for sentiment . . . no. The world we live in—the world *I* live in—has no room for it. Things cannot go on as they have been. I’m engaged to Lord Moore. We,” she swallowed but didn’t waver, “were nothing more than a pleasurable diversion.”

Raven winced at her words. Malcolm didn’t so much as flinch. His lack of reaction made her unreasonably angry.

“Pleasurable, eh?” He straightened from the mantle, stalking closer with precise, graceful movements. Watching him warily, she dreaded what he’d say.

“Yes,” he mused, “I seem to remember the pleasure we shared. I remember you screaming my name. Panting for me. And I remember taking your virginity. Tell me,” he asked, voice smooth, eyes sardonic, “how will Lord Moore react on your wedding night when he discovers *your* deception?”

“Gareth will accept it,” she responded coolly. “It’s our way; the way of those you call Druids.”

Damnation. She hadn’t meant to tell him that. He looked taken aback, though only for a moment.

“I see,” Malcolm continued, composure back in place.

Raven turned away, unable to look at him. She walked to one of the side windows and opened the shutter. A faint breeze wafted gently on her face. The scent of grass and wildflowers floated over her. The sound of birds and their horses, just out of sight, were soft through the ache filling her.

She did all she could to maintain her indifferent demeanor. It crumbled around her in broken bits of memory and longing.

“With Lucien’s departure, there’s little reason for me to stay on.” Malcolm maintained a polite tone but she heard a note of bitterness. “I’ll depart for my own estate in the morning. Beckett’s items are on the table. You must tread carefully with him, Miss Drake. Murderers don’t stop.”

His shoes scuffed the floor as they moved away. No floorboards squeaked, and the air lay undisturbed. Some part of her was impressed with that, and wondered how she’d never noticed it before.

“You may inform Lucien and Lady Isadore . . . *and Moore* that my vote will be in favor of Granville’s reform.”

The door creaked as it opened, too long between oilings. It’d been over a week since they’d last met here. She supposed he hadn’t bothered and why should he? She’d broken it off, he’d agreed. End of it. Until today.

I’m a hypocrite.

“Good day, Miss Drake.”

The door closed with a faint click of its latch.

Raven continued to stare out the window, eyes blurred from tears. The sun slowly retreated

from the sky, highlighting the few clouds she could see through the wood in scarlets and pinks. She knew the moon rose in a faint outline to the east, waiting to take dominion over the night.

Her hand shook, and though reluctant to tear her gaze from the tree line, she stared at it, a puzzle to figure out. A tear escaped her control, another, and another. She made no sound. Raising a hand to touch the wetness on her face, she saw it shook. She'd done the right thing, the only thing she could do.

Let him go.

Let him go.

Her heart wrenched, and her shaking hands gripped the windowsill. Only her grip held her up.

I let him go! Oh no, no.

She loved him.

Had done so for a long time despite the impossibility of them. Impossible. Foolish to allow the affair to start. She was an idiot love-struck girl endangering her people, herself. Breathing heavy, a sharp pain tore through her chest.

"Malcolm." Her voice trembled, the barest of whispers. "I'm sorry . . . I do love you so."

She'd let him go, the only thing to do, the only thing possible. Shaking, she backed from the window, legs unsteady.

And into his chest.

Chapter Nineteen

His strong arms enveloped her. Gasping, Raven stilled. His arms tightened around her, holding her close. She felt his lips brush just below her ear, his breath hot against her skin.

Stunned, she couldn't think. He hadn't left.

"Did you think I could leave you without a fight? The one woman I've found in this world I love?"

Shocked, Raven turned in his embrace. Overcome with emotion, she wrapped her arms around him, letting her sobs break free. He held her as they sank to the floor, murmuring his love.

"I love you, Malcolm." She cried, unable to hide her feelings behind an insensitive façade any longer. "I do, I can't help it. I can't stop myself."

"I don't ever want you to stop, Raven." Malcolm kissed her temple. "I never can."

"This can't be, this cannot ever be!" She tried to pull away, but he held her firm. Looking up at him, tears still in her eyes, she said, "'Tis impossible, don't you understand?"

"I'm not leaving you."

"There is so much you don't know. There's so much I must protect. You're a *nonputos*, an outsider, Malcolm." She tried to reason with him, her Scots coming out thick. Emotion always made it prominent, but this time she didn't care. She held all she cared for.

"They would never accept you. I could never leave them."

"There is always a way, my love. I'll learn. Whatever it takes." He held her arm, eyes boring into hers with all the resolve he felt.

"No!" Raven pushed him away with all her physical force and scrambled to her feet. He

quickly rose, graceful even now. “You cannot learn. You cannot *ever* be involved. This would more than ruin you and your entire family. If you were caught, they’d kill you!”

“My love,” he said calmly, “I already live my life on the edge. I could be hung for any number of things. I harbor your kind with no remorse, and I will forever be in your world.”

“No, you won’t.” Her vision blurred, and she blinked away tears that would do no good. Taking a deep breath, she held firm to her own resolve.

Love could not change duty.

“I *will* marry Gareth,” she said resolutely, though it made her ill. “I will bed him. I’ll bed others, too, and you’ll grow to hate me. You’ll detest me for being with him or anyone else. I will not be your property, your wife. I am a priestess and a magicker. As you said, like none you’ve ever seen. I am more than those gypsies and my power will only grow. I’ll fight for our people with Gareth, and we’ll have the most powerful children in centuries. And it’ll be without you.”

He grabbed her, shook her once. His mouth was hot and angry on hers, and yet she responded. His fingers tangled in her hair, trapping her against him.

“I love you.”

Eyes hot with anger and desire, his gaze paralyzed her. Her skin tingled for his touch, her body yearned for his. He shook her again, breaking the trance.

“I love you. That won’t change. A way will be found. You *will* be mine.” He crossed the few steps to the front door, and wrenched it open.

“Of that I am certain.”

“I won’t be leaving tomorrow,” Gareth quietly informed Isadore. “And beg your indulgence

of my presence a little while longer.”

She didn’t look well; her hazel eyes were greener now and too large against the paleness of her face. He felt a pang of remorse for sending Lucien away at such a time. The siblings needed each other more than they did outsiders, even ones as close as he and Raven.

If he’d gone instead, would Raven have continued her affair with Preston? Rage shook him to the core, and he wanted to ask Isadore if she knew of it. Manners and his own control prevented him from doing so. His hands clenched behind his back, but his face disclosed none of the betrayal he felt.

“Of course.” She smiled, motioning to the chair opposite. He refused with a slight shake of his head. “You know you’re welcome as long as you wish. Lady Alexandria graciously agreed to stay on as chaperone until Raven finishes her investigation and we go to Scotland.”

“Thank you.” He nodded, a genuine smile on his face. Whatever anger he felt wasn’t directed at Isadore—even if she did know of Raven’s affair. “I shan’t be longer than necessary.”

Whistling as he emerged from the cover of trees, Mac tried not to look as happy as he felt. Love was a strange thing. Enough to send him whistling, for God’s sake.

“Preston!”

He looked up to see Lord Moore crossing the lawn, and the setting sun momentarily blinded him. Stopping, he waited for the viscount to reach him. Now that he knew Raven loved him in return, despite her protests to the contrary, he wasn’t letting her go without a fight.

Maybe now was the time to discuss this. He’d have liked to sort things out with Raven first, but with Moore’s sudden presence, that didn’t look to be happening. Still, he understood the viscount to be a reasonable man. From what Raven hinted, things between her and Moore were

not so deep as to be a love match.

They could find a reasonable solution.

The fist took him by surprise.

Stumbling backwards, Mac quickly recovered and barely dodged the next punch. “What the hell?”

The third hit landed him on his ass. Leaning on an elbow, he looked up at Moore.

“I take it you know,” he drawled. The other man’s eyes flashed with fury.

“Get up, you smug bastard,” he spit out.

“Moore,” he said rising, careful to keep more than an arm’s length between the two of them. “You don’t want to do this.” The viscount snorted. Mac raised his hands in a placating gesture, one last move to talk about this reasonably. Raven loved him—he could be reasonable.

“You’re a proper peer,” he continued, a hard edge in his voice, “I am not.”

“Proper, eh?” Moore laughed. Not a pleasant sound. Mac reevaluated his opponent. “Preston, you’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Moore’s eyes narrowed, clearly understanding the double entendre, and snarled. “Stay away from my fiancée.”

“And if I don’t?” Mac demanded, circling his rival.

“You know nothing of her or our lives together. You are nothing but a mere diversion.”

Mac scowled, eyes never leaving Moore’s. He waited for him to strike first. “Diversion?” he laughed. “Then *you* know nothing of the situation.”

“I know it all,” he snapped. “And we’d both appreciate it if you stayed away.”

“I have no intention of staying away. In fact will do all within my power to ensure *you* stay

away from *us*. Consider your engagement over.”

Moore laughed, a hard sound that once again had Mac reevaluating him.

“You’re a delusional man, Preston. Our engagement will not end because of this dalliance. We will marry.” He stepped closer, fists clenched tightly at his side. “That is the most important thing. Whether you understand it or not, whether you agree with and accept it or not, that is how it will be.”

Mac moved closer, anger coloring his judgment. “She does not,” he said through clenched teeth, “have any passion for you.” He took another step closer, and his voice dropped. “You aren’t the one to make her cry out in pleasure. You aren’t the one whose legs she wraps around. I am. She takes *me* deep into her tight body. Have you ever felt her passion? Have you ever felt her need? No.”

“I will feel her passion,” Moore retorted without flinching. “I will fulfill her needs. What was between you is naught more than girlish curiosity. I’m man enough to deal with her brief infatuation and teach her. Are you man enough to let this craze go? Let her go.”

Mac couldn’t say who threw the next punch. Unmistakably, they’d both been expecting it, ready for it, anticipating it even. When it came, there was no surprise, only anger.

“It’s not a craze,” Mac said, fist connecting with Moore’s face. “I’m in love with her and she with me. And I intend to make her my wife.”

“It’s not,” he rejoined, “going to happen. She’s mine. She’ll never be yours. Raven belongs with me and always will. I’ll not allow an interloper to destroy all we’ve worked for.”

Words were unnecessary then. The brawl turned vicious. Mac delivered several jarring blows to Moore’s torso, knocking the viscount back. Quickly regaining his footing, he lashed out. The fist barely missed Mac’s face. Dodging to one side, he used his years steadying himself on the

deck of his ship to maneuver around Moore.

The viscount was good. Fast, he obviously knew how to brawl. Mac was better.

Moore whipped around, caught him off guard and landed a solid punch to his jaw. For a moment the landscape spun, while Mac balanced himself and instinctively ducked the follow-up.

Coming up, he clipped Moore's chin, a move that sent him flying backwards. He launched himself at his opponent, tackled him about the waist, and slammed him onto the ground.

"I've no desire to destroy anything." Mac panted. "But I'm not going to give her up."

The viscount stood, and Mac realized the sheer power flowing through him. What Raven showed him hours ago was a fraction of what he suspected she could do. Lord Moore now showed him considerably more, a move he was shocked the man resorted to. He'd shown his hand to an outsider.

Surprised he lost control this way, Mac could do nothing except take the brunt of his anger. The magicks slammed into him with the force of a typhoon. Raising his eyes was difficult, almost impossible given the sudden agony rushing through him. He did it through sheer force of will, to see Moore's eyes change to silver, glowing in the fading sunlight.

The ground under his feet shook slightly, a rolling motion that would've unbalanced him had he been able to move. The air around him grew heavier, thicker, as he struggled to breathe. Moore stalked closer, hands clenched before him, eyes piercing through their silver cover, hatred clear behind his power.

"Never think I have no passion for her," he spat.

He struggled to breathe, to get enough air into his lungs to sneer at him. "I'll never give . . . her up. I'll fight you . . . with . . . whatever I can," Mac gasped. "But I'll . . . never give up."

Rage sparked in the other man's eyes such as Mac had rarely seen. He'd underestimated

Moore and his feelings for Raven. He'd underestimated their relationship. He wondered if Raven had as well, if she was truly ignorant of what Moore felt for her.

If she knew, would that change her feelings? If she witnessed this attack, how would she react? No matter his feelings for her, or hers for him, he couldn't honestly say.

"Gareth, no!"

Chapter Twenty

Suddenly Mac was released from whatever gripped him, whatever Moore had done. The power was gone and with it the rush of pain. Mac fell to his knees, gasping for air. Polluted though it smelled, it never tasted so sweet.

Lady Isadore ran from the house, shouting at them. He couldn't understand everything she said, but her very presence had possibly saved his life. He'd forever be in her debt.

"Have you lost your senses?" she demanded as Mac rose on unsteady legs. "Where do you think you are? The back alley of a whorehouse?"

"Isadore!" Moore snapped. "Get back in the house!"

Lady Isadore stood her ground. Mac's admiration for her rose even higher.

"No, I will not," she snapped back. "Control yourself." She took a visible breath and shot Mac an apologetic look. "Gareth, please come inside. Lord Preston, I'm sorry for this. I believe it's best if you retire for the evening. I'll send a maid round with iodine and whisky."

"Thank you, Lady Isadore." He bowed slightly, still unsteady. Shooting Moore a look, he made sure the peer knew they weren't yet finished. Like a pair of recalcitrant boys, they followed Lady Isadore into the house.

Calling for a maid, she whispered her instructions. Through it all, she never let her grip on Moore's arm slacken or let Mac out of her sight.

"You'll be all right?" she asked him.

He nodded slowly, so as not to aggravate his already pounding head. With a last look, she pulled Moore into the sitting room, and firmly closed the door behind them.

Mac eased up the stairs. Just as he reached the landing, the maid scurried by. Without

looking at him, she handed his waiting valet the supplies, bowed, and scurried back down.

“What happened?” Raven’s voice drifted down the long hall. She rushed up to him, fingers already probing his cuts and bruises.

She hadn’t taken the time to right herself, and looked as disheveled as he’d left her. More beautiful to him than ever.

“Ow,” he mumbled, grabbing her wrists. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing?” she raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “You just happened to run into a tavern brawl between the cottage and here? Pure happenstance?”

“Something like that.” Mac grinned.

Walter cleared his throat, and Mac glanced at his valet. The old man was as stoic as ever, holding bandages, whisky, and iodine as if he held the latest Henry Poole suit. He jerked his head, and Mac realized what he didn’t say. They still stood in the hallway, visible to anyone who happened to look.

Ushering Raven into his rooms, he leaned his tired body against the now-closed door. He could hear Walter in the background, setting out the supplies and busying himself. When he opened his eyes again, it was to see her tapping her booted foot impatiently.

“I had a run-in with Moore,” he said, then added unnecessarily, “he knows of us.”

She only nodded. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, he waited a beat for her to say something.

“You lost?”

Not what he’d expected.

“I had the upper hand,” he defended, indignant. Then, “Until he used magick on me.”

The tapping foot stopped. She straightened, eyes wide with surprise, hands curled into her already wrinkled riding habit.

“I don’t believe it,” she whispered, and glanced behind her to where Walter stood.

“He already knows of magickers and my role in smuggling them,” Mac dismissed. It didn’t mean he knew of her, and what probably worried Raven. Nodding to his man, Mac waited until they were alone.

“I *can’t* believe it,” she murmured. “It’s such a complete loss of control for him. I’ve never known him to be this way.” She looked back up at him, her tone almost accusatory as she asked, “What did you do to him?”

“I defended myself,” Mac snapped. “He attacked, I defended myself, and made it clear to him where we stand.”

She didn’t look happy. “What do you mean, Malcolm? *We’re* not even clear where we stand.”

“I know where *I* stand.”

Shaking her head, she took a step back. “Malcolm, this is not the time for such a conversation or decision.” She let out a breath, rubbing her head with fingers stained from his blood. “Things are now immeasurably worse.”

Probably, he thought, but he said, “Or immeasurably better.”

“No, Malcolm, you can’t look at it that way. This is a sensitive situation and you are not yet privy to all the nuances.”

That just angered him.

He hated being in the dark, and the more he learned of Raven, the more he found he didn’t know. She held more secrets than he could’ve dreamed, and her secrets were tearing them apart.

“Then enlighten me, my love,” he offered testily.

His side ached, his face throbbed, and he could feel the bruises spreading. It still hurt to

breathe. Mac let on none of his pain. Raven made a passing comment of Moore's loss of control. Mac wondered if control was the second thing they held in common.

"What could possibly prevent us from marrying?"

Raven's eyes widened, and he suspected he saw a hint of panic within the blue depths. "Leave Gareth? Become your wife?" She shook her head and took another step back. Again, not the response he expected. "No, Malcolm, I cannot. I can make Gareth understand, we can be lovers. But . . ." She shook her head again. "But no. I must stand by his side. We must marry."

The statement took him by surprise, as much had lately. This didn't help his temper.

"Being your lover, sweet, delicious though that may be, is not enough."

He stalked the few steps separating them and gripped her upper arms. "I refuse to share you with Moore. Or anyone else." His anger was visible and he spoke with more harshness than he intended. "I want all of you in the light of day, not bits of you under the cover of night."

"Malcolm," she whispered, soft warm fingers twisting around his. "You cannot ask that of me. 'Tis impossible. Aside from my duty to Gareth and my people, I'm not an ordinary woman who can choose whom she marries. I have responsibilities I can't shirk. Duties. Gareth, marrying him, is part of that duty. I love you," she said, voice dropping even lower. He saw a glimmer of tears now, and hated that. "I do. I love you more than you realized, I think. I don't want to give you up. But the realities of my life, of my position, demand compromise."

"I was and am willing to face down Moore and whatever magickal power he possess. But I want you for myself. I can't share you. I won't. Don't ask that of me."

"Then we have reached an impasse."

Slowly she extricated herself from his grasp, a lone tear trailing down her cheek. He wanted to wipe it away, to banish all her tears. Words seemed inadequate. He couldn't even find the

words to refute her argument.

Panic gripped him as she stepped away. He was losing her and had no idea how to get her back.

“If your duty must prevail, then so be it.”

Isadore simply could not find the strength to enter Raven’s rooms.

She skirted the doorway and went to sit in a small alcove to enjoy the view of the eastern garden. These grounds, this manor had been her home all her life. Hard, now, to accept how it had fallen apart when everything looked the same as always. The same gardens, same flowers and trees, same view. Even the same scents.

What most people didn’t know about the boisterous Basil Harrington was how well he listened. His attentiveness to her, no matter how trivial her questions. He would know what to do with Raven and the two lords who loved her.

And Mother. Georgiana would serve a perfect cup of tea. Her voice would soothe, allowing Father to work his diplomatic magic. How strange not to have them here. How sad. She missed them so desperately, their presence, their laughter. Sometimes she thought she could hear her father’s voice reverberate through the rooms.

But no.

And with this, with Gareth and Lord Preston, with Raven in the middle, the situation was beyond volatile. On the verge of an eruption akin to Pompeii. Gareth lost his control, something Isadore had never seen. Lord Preston didn’t seem the type to abandon his desires.

It hinged on Raven.

Isadore had warned her. Hadn’t she said nothing good could come of their affair? Too much

lay at risk. She was furious with Raven. The distraction of Lord Preston had to come to this, two masters mere inches away when her parents were murdered and could do nothing. But her grief over her parents' death and her anger at Raven collided with her sadness for the carefree young Raven she knew and loved. That girl was gone.

Having known Raven and Gareth together, and now having seen Raven and Lord Preston, she could admit the joy Preston brought into Raven's life.

What must it be like? To fall in love and have to hide from prying eyes. To abandon love for duty and responsibility. To love so deeply. Nevertheless, Raven would marry Gareth; she had no choice.

Isadore leaned back in her chair and glanced at Raven's door.

No, no choice.

Chapter Twenty-One

Raven stalked out of the house and through the gardens. She didn't want to see anyone, let alone talk to them. She was furious with Gareth, that and more with Malcolm. He could've been killed. God, what would she have done if Gareth killed Malcolm? Raven couldn't even imagine.

And Isadore . . . She really didn't want to talk to her friend. Isadore wasn't the smug type to rub her rightness in, but Raven didn't want to hear it, either.

She was wrong, Isadore was right, and some part of her knew that all along.

Slowing her gait, she wandered around the trees, instinctively keeping to this side of the wood. She should never have started this affair with Malcolm. Yet she couldn't envision live without him, either.

"Miss Drake."

Startled, she looked up at the murky shadow before her. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Ass'ton," the shape whispered. He didn't move closer.

The moon hid behind the trees, so she couldn't use its light to discern who spoke. Cursing herself for failing to bring a lantern, fag, or weapon, she mentally gathered her magick. Just in case.

"Where's Ashton?"

"Dead. I'm ne'r sure o' it."

"What makes you think so?" A cold feeling of dread slithered up her spine, making the hot summer night foreboding. Ashton was dead. Fingers tingling with power, numb with the certainty of his death, she waited for the man to continue.

"'E was suppo'ed to meet me at sunset. Said 'e 'ad information on t'at 'Unter wot t'inks 'e's

God.”

She had difficulty understanding him, but gathered enough. “And he didn’t meet you?”

“Ass’ton, e’s a good man, tries to keep ’is family and clan safe. I know’d ’e was trying to ’elp you wit’ somet’ing.”

“Yes, yes he is a good man.” Was, he was a good man. “Do you know what information he had?”

“No,” he said, and she could see the shadow of his head move in the dim light. “I knowed ’e wanted to see you.”

“Thank you. But you’d best leave,” Raven said. “It’s not safe for you or your family. Ashton’s dead, and the Hunters are no doubt planning something big.”

“Yes, miss,” he said, but didn’t move.

“Was there something else?”

“Ass’ton, ’e respected you . . . if anyt’ing ’appened to ’im, I was to make sure you knowed ’e dinn’t betray you. ’E was afraid t’at ’Unter would go after you next.”

The cold fingers of dread turned to ice. *What did Beckett know?*

“Thank you.” It was hard to talk around the lump of fear in her throat, but this confirmation eased her fears about many things. “I know Ashton didn’t betray me.”

For several heartbeats, she stayed rooted to the spot, until she was certain the messenger had left. Events spiraled out of control on too many fronts. Shaking off the chill that went straight to her bones, she turned and rushed to the manor.

Once she reached the gardens, however, she stopped.

Gareth was still angry at her. Her affair with Malcolm aside, he didn’t like that she’d spoken with Ashton in the first place. An issue of trust lay between them that they first needed to sort

through. Isadore? No. Her father would be ideal if he weren't already in London.

Malcolm.

Sitting on one of the many benches that dotted the gardens, Raven tried to calm her racing heart and mind. She desperately wanted to share this with him. She could tell him of this, but it would do no good.

It would drive a wedge further between her and Gareth. In telling Malcolm, she'd prolong the . . . suffering seemed such an overdramatic word, but oddly appropriate.

It'd prolong things between them when they should never speak to each other again.

She couldn't let anyone else get hurt.

She'd failed Lord and Lady Granville, had allowed their deaths to happen. Among the three strongest magickers on the planet, she should've been able to stop whoever killed them.

Lucien was sent to the Americas not long after the funerals, and Isadore hadn't said anything, but she knew. Her oldest friend blamed her for her parent's deaths. Raven couldn't reproach her. As master, it was her responsibility to protect them.

Failure settled heavily on her already overburdened shoulders and closed in a tight fist around her heart.

She had to tell Gareth. He deserved to know. More, he needed to know. She couldn't keep this from him.

"Are you quite all right, sir?"

Mac looked at his valet, wondering why he repeated himself for the fifth time. He couldn't be so obvious, could he? Walter knew of his affair with Raven, but, discreet as always, would never say anything. He couldn't fail to realize it was over.

“Quite, Walter.” He returned his concentration to the papers. “Is this the most recent report on the area?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, bending to point out the various spots on the map. “According to Mr. Cid, most of the back-alley magickers and charlatans in the area vanished or left Leeds in the recent weeks.”

“That’s unusual,” he murmured, his gaze once more drifting out the window.

Raven was still out there. He’d seen her hurry from the wood to the gardens, then lost her in them. He’d wanted to see her, to hold her, to listen to her troubles.

No longer was his first thought of having her. Mac wanted all of her. Body, mind, soul, anger, and troubles.

He’d stayed put. Instead he’d gone over ship manifests and smuggling plans with Walter. No wonder his valet thought his mind not on their work. It unquestionably wasn’t.

“Cid, he’s become a useful spy. Why didn’t we know of him before?”

“I believe he’s only been in Leeds a few weeks. From what I’ve learned, my lord, he travels.”

Mac raised his head. “Travels? Away from the law?”

“Precisely so, my lord.” Walter nodded.

“As long as he doesn’t spill our secrets, I’ll be willing to protect him.”

“I suspected as much, sir, and have passed it along to the rest of our informants.”

“Excellent, Walter. Now—” He broke off at the knock at the door. “Yes?”

Walter opened it to reveal the butler. Percival bowed slightly, and said, “You’ve a messenger, my lord.”

“I’ll be right down.” He shot Walter a look, but he already had a stack of papers in hand, efficiently clearing off the desk.

Cid stood awkwardly in the center of the drawing room, holding his hat and looking around nervously as if the furniture and paintings surrounded him at gunpoint.

“Cid?” Mac asked the moment the door closed behind him. “What the hell are you doing here? This better be important.”

“’Tis, my lord.” Cid nodded frantically. “’Tis. I’ve news on Beckett’s gypsy. Beckett done stabbed him. Murdered in the man’s room. Bloody mess ’twas, too. His lackeys, Dalton ’n Grimsby, dumped his body in the ravine at the edge of town.”

Unsurprised, Mac waited, but Cid offered nothing more. Murder amongst Hunters was fairly common, if always unexplained.

“Not that I’m uninterested in the internal workings of Hunter politics, but what did this gypsy have on Beckett to warrant such drastic measures?”

“Not sure, sir,” Cid nodded again, a habit that was sure to cause him pain one day. “But I do know the gypsies, them t’at weren’t killed. Friends of the tracker. Looked high and low searching for something Beckett wanted.”

“Something? What something?”

“Ingredients.” Cid shrugged. His gaze continued to dart around the room.

“For . . . ?”

“Magicker stuff,” Cid said shrugging again. “Not clear on t’at. Hard ta find stuff. Beckett, he wanted a lot of it.”

“What the hell is Beckett up to?” Mac demanded. He didn’t expect Cid to answer, but the man did anyway.

“Nothing good. That man, he’s evil to the core, more’s than I’ve seen in me life. And let me tell you, gov’na, I seen it all.”

Mac shot his informant an amused smile. “Yes, I’m sure you have.”

He paced a few steps away, then back again. Reaching into his pocket, he dumped the notes into Cid’s greedy hand. The money disappeared faster than it had appeared.

“Find out what you can. I don’t care who you talk to, but be careful. I don’t want you caught, and I sure as hell don’t want this traced to me. Buy off the Hunters, whatever it takes.”

“You got it, gov’na. You can count on Cid.”

Mac watched as Cid scampered out of the room faster than he’d pocketed the pounds.

One gypsy traitor down, one magickal pouch in hand. Walking through the dark woods, Beckett felt giddy. With Ashton’s delivery of his ingredients, things were finally turning in his favor.

He veered off the trail toward the tree hiding his property. With the number of artifacts he owned, he could make a considerable fortune. Not doing tricks in some third-rate show, but by coercion.

He wanted more. Corwin promised him unimaginable power. While Beckett didn’t trust the baronet, Corwin needed him more than he needed Corwin.

Crouching on the ground in the pitch-black night, he reached into the hole for his bag. The hole was empty. Frowning, he mentally retraced his steps. The moon filtered through the trees in dapples of light, making it practically impossible to discern anything. But he knew his tree, had walked this path so many times in so many lights, he could’ve found it blindfolded.

His bag wasn’t here.

Howling in anger, he jumped up and raced for the inn. Someone would pay for this theft!

In blood.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gareth faced away from her, staring out the French doors. Raven watched him swallow the last of his drink, seemingly oblivious to her presence. But she knew he'd seen her, his gaze followed her when she entered.

"Preston deserved what he got," he snarled. He turned his head halfway toward her, eyes cutting along the room to watch her progress but she halted midway. "The man is a pariah."

"Gareth." She shook her head. This wasn't what she came for and had no desire to listen to a rehash of his anger.

Raven placed her hands on the back of one of the tapestry-covered chairs to steady herself. Furious at the both of them, more so herself, this was too important to leave another moment.

"I'm not here to discuss Lord Preston. There are more urgent matters than who I bed."

He turned slowly to face her. She stood straighter and walked around the chair. She would not hide. "I've had a visit—"

"*Who you bed* is of great importance to *me*," he interjected.

"This is not the time, Gareth."

She should've gone to Malcolm. But she had to share this with Gareth.

"Then when is the time?" He walked across to her, stalked, actually, and scathingly added, "*My love*."

She shook her head, but had no words. This was her fiancé, the man she'd promised her life to. Despite her affair with Malcolm, and her feelings for him, that hadn't changed.

Her heart broke a little more.

She'd made this mess, she had to fix it. Oh, if only it were that easy!

“You are my love, Raven. That’s why this wounded me so deeply. We may be masters of a nearly extinct culture, and one that celebrates the joys of the flesh, but I am a man who is desperately in love with one woman.”

“No,” she whispered, shocked. A cold fist tightened around her heart as the chaos that gripped her world made her sink a little further. “This is not the time.”

She backed away, distancing herself from him in a way she couldn’t from her emotions. He cared for her, but *desperately in love* with her? She hadn’t known, hadn’t realized.

She had never felt such passion for him.

“We have more pressing matters than our emotions,” she said but her voice cracked. “We must deal with Corwin’s man, Beckett. He’s planning something at Corwin’s behest.”

“Raven.”

The air thickened, closing in around her, and she wanted to scream. He’d only said her name, but it questioned and accused at the same time. She was suddenly nervous, unsure of herself, and hated that his lack of faith in her could do that.

Malcolm respected and trusted her. Why could her fiancé not do the same?

“Corwin,” she continued, and cursed her voice when it broke again, “went to great lengths to see Basil dead. Perhaps—”

“I will not give you up!” he shouted. She wondered if he was drunk; Gareth never lost the control he prided himself in. “That degenerate Preston can rot in hell!”

Gareth threw the glass against the wall, the crash reverberating around the room. Maybe not drunk, but his control was gone. She’d never seen him like this, and though she wasn’t frightened, it unnerved her.

“Our connection is stronger than a few weeks sharing a bed.” He stalked to her, eyes flashing

silver in the lamplight. “You will not see him again.”

“Gareth, stop this irrationality,” she snapped. “I do not want to discuss Lord Preston.”

“I do. What better time than now to discuss your affair with him?”

“What do you want from me?” she screamed.

“Everything.” His hand was a gentle touch over her hair that unsettled her. “I want you, Raven. Your body, your mind, your love, and your devotion.”

“You have my devotion, Gareth. You always have,” she whispered, but pushed him away. Scared? No. Afraid of the emotions he had for her that she couldn’t return.

“I’m devoted to our ways, to our beliefs. We’ll marry and have children. This doesn’t preclude me from wanting something . . . more.”

Her words cut him deeply, and she was sorry. But she refused to allow one more moment of lies between them. Raven couldn’t deny her love for Malcolm.

After a beat, he said softly, “I’ve taken you for granted, I know. Taken for granted you’d always be by my side, our hearts would be the same.”

“We’ll marry.” She nodded, exasperated. “The reasons are too innumerable for us not to do so. Our children will have a power that hasn’t been seen in centuries. We’ll work side by side restoring what was lost to us. We’ll change things.”

They were the right words, the ones that had to be said, and they were true. They sounded so hollow. Empty. She did love Gareth. She couldn’t leave him.

Yet she *needed* Malcolm.

“If it hadn’t been for Preston’s interference, you wouldn’t be speaking of us in terms of *duty*.”

“Gareth,” she whispered, “it’s not like that.”

“Isn’t it?” he demanded, dropping his hand from her hair. “Preston couldn’t possibly know you as I do.”

She watched his eyes darken further, and felt the shift in the air. Magicks gathered between them, the power they’d always shared. Raven wanted to step forward, to bask in it. But she remained rooted to the spot, torn between Gareth and Malcolm.

“I know how the colors of your eyes change in sunlight and darken when you’re sad. I’ve gazed in wonder at how your delicate fingers bring to life such rapturous melodies on the piano.”

He took and kissed the palm of her hand. She shivered, but it was not the spark Malcolm’s touch evoked, merely the power flowing between two masters.

“I’ve marveled at your power.” With those words, his hand charged with magicks, and hers immediately responded in kind. “Tell me that’s duty. Tell me that’s naught more than obligation.”

“I wish I’d known of your feelings sooner. I wish . . .” She shook her head. The magick still surrounded them, and she loved the excitement of that. It changed nothing of what she felt. “I wish you had revealed more of yourself to me over the years.”

“I’m at fault, yes. But it’s not too late for us.”

“No.” The lie rolled easily off her tongue, and forced her eyes to meet his. “Not too late.”

“And Preston? What of him?”

Raven broke contact, and felt the magick slowly dissipate back to the earth. She swallowed and wished she had an answer for him. So she lied again.

“How many more assurances can I give you?” she asked, and heard the bite in her voice. Gareth picked up on it, too, she saw. “I promised to marry you, and I shall.”

“You didn’t answer me, Raven,” he said, voice even and controlled once more. This Gareth

she knew. “How do you feel about him?”

“I . . .” She shook her head again, and couldn’t find the answer he sought. Couldn’t lie about this.

“What you had was nothing more than a passing fancy. He was your first.”

He closed the few feet between them and leaned down to kiss her. His lips were cool on hers, talented. She opened her mouth, kissed him back, desperate for the fire she had with Malcolm. His hands cupped her face, and she rested hers atop them. But she pulled back to look at him.

“What we shall have will be lasting and deep and committed.”

Raven heard his words but couldn’t feel them. He meant everything; he truly loved her. She didn’t, and couldn’t, feel the same for him. She cared for Gareth, adored him. Loved him. She did love him.

But Malcolm made her feel things she’d never experienced. Fire and passion she never had with Gareth. He made her wild with longing, desperate to be near him, yet also made her feel safe and contented. At times she wished to ask his opinion on something, thinking of him before her fiancé.

It wasn’t as Gareth claimed, and she tempered the flare of anger at his words. Malcolm may have been her first, but that wasn’t why she loved him. And she knew it wasn’t a maiden’s fancy. He made her heart race, her blood sing. Her skin tingled for his touch, and so much more.

“Yes, I understand,” she said softly, and then another lie. One partly to get past this argument, partly because she couldn’t bear to speak of Malcolm anymore. “And yes, you’re right. But we must move past this. We . . .” She swallowed against the emotional pain of this conversation. “Lord Preston is the past. We’ve responsibilities to attend to, not the least of which is Ashton’s murder.”

“Ashton was murdered?” Gareth asked, shocked, all earlier passion once again hidden behind his restraint. “What happened?”

Raven strangled the urge to hit him.

“I took a walk along the grounds and one of his gypsy family stopped me.”

“Gypsies? Raven, that’s unsafe. You know they’re in the wood, lurking.”

“Gareth,” she cut him off, in no mood for another lecture. “It was a relation of Ashton’s who came to tell me of his death. Ashton trusted him to do so should anything happen to him. Beckett murdered him, had his body dumped at the edge of town. The last thing he did was deliver ingredients to Beckett. All this man knew was that they were rare, and Beckett badly wanted them.”

“This makes Beckett more treacherous than we’d anticipated.” He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Slightly amazed by how quickly he went from impassioned would-be lover to the business partner she expected, she knew then why she’d never known of his love.

“Our first order of business is to find out what these ingredients are. I can’t believe Ashton would procure them for him.”

“What choice did he have? If he hadn’t, it would’ve tipped Beckett off that he worked for us.”

“Apparently,” he pointed out, “Beckett *was* tipped off.”

“Yes,” she conceded. “We can’t let him get the upper hand; there’s no telling what damage he can inflict. Especially since we don’t know what he has.”

Gareth watched her, and she hated that she felt uncomfortable. She brushed it off, and suddenly remembered the artifacts she and Malcolm found. Was it only this afternoon? Only hours earlier when she’d told him she loved him, and learned he loved her in return?

It seemed so long ago.

The very thought exhausted her. Shaking it off, she returned her attention to Gareth.

“I found,” she said slowly, hating that she once again she did not tell the whole truth, “a stash of Beckett’s things. He hid them in the wood by the Bramhope Inn.”

“What,” he demanded, “were you doing following him?”

“You’re as aware as I we’ve an investigation to conduct. Before he left, we promised Lucien that Isadore would be safe and we’d find who murdered his parents. Beckett is the lead Hunter with Corwin no longer in the area.”

Her voice stayed even, but the point was made. Gareth nodded and offered a small grin. One small victory for her.

“What sorts of things?”

“Magickal artifacts.”

“So,” he nodded and backed away slightly. She couldn’t believe her relief over the space; she desperately feared his feelings. “Beckett does indeed have artifacts. This changes things.”

“Ah, no.” He looked at her in disbelief, and she smiled. “I took them. And if he has more than one on him now, I’ll be shocked.”

He nodded again with a far-off smile that conveyed pride and anticipation. Looking as he always had—more interested in their work than in her personally. Was it any wonder she’d missed his true feelings?

“I’ll fetch them,” she said quickly. “I’ve hidden them in my rooms.”

Isadore sat on the terrace and watched the smog move with the wind. It choked everything, but today she didn’t feel it; she was too numbed. She raised her teacup to her lips but didn’t taste

the sweet brew.

She couldn't sleep, had tried reading, walking, and meditating. She'd gone in search of Raven, but had heard her and Gareth arguing, and left before they lured her into whatever they fought over. Did he know of her affair with Lord Preston? More, did he know of Raven's attachment to Preston? From the tone of their raised voices, Isadore would say yes.

Though her heart ached for her friend, what could she do? Raven knew the consequences of sleeping with the earl. Gareth probably didn't care, or she would have thought so had she not witnessed their fight on the lawn.

Rising, she paced the length of the patio and back. The release of energy was nice, though she found herself crossing the length of a room more and more these days. She hoped it helped her thinking, but thus far, all she managed was the exercise. Slamming her hands on the low wall, she let out a frustrated scream.

"I know exactly how you feel."

Yelping, she whirled. Seeing Lord Preston in the shadows, she let out a sigh of relief. "I'm certain you do, Lord Preston." She returned to the table, but couldn't offer him a cup of tea without a second cup. Absurdly guilty over such a small thing, she asked, "How are you faring, my lord?"

"Fine, fine," Mac waved the question away with a smile. He studied her for a moment, pondering how much to say. "A few scrapes and bruises, nothing of consequence. However," he approaching her slowly, "there is something of which I am certain."

"Yes?"

"During our altercation this afternoon, you must have noticed something . . . unusual?"

She quickly hid it, but he caught her look. "Unusual?" she asked, clearly floundering for the

right words. “What, ah, in what way? It was an altercation, Lord Preston,” she finally and firmly said. “That in itself is unusual on these grounds.”

“Come now, Lady Isadore. We both know it was more than a simple bout of fisticuffs. You know of what I speak. You were shocked that Lord Moore channeled magick. Is it because you didn’t know, I wonder?” he asked, carefully watching her in the faint gaslight. “Or because he used it in such an open area?”

She remained silent, but then Mac expected her to. Nodding, he answered his own question. “I gather it’s the latter. You know what Moore’s capable of, so weren’t surprised. It was the fact that he blatantly used it on me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lord Preston. Magick? You’re beginning to sound like Sir John.” She offered a laugh, but it was not her customary hearty one. Plus, she looked ill.

“I’ve seen such things before, Lady Isadore. Your brother could attest to that were he here. In fact, I was involved in a rather powerful display this afternoon.”

She shot him a questioning look, but again said nothing. Mac gently smiled at her.

“It is my understanding that you, Miss Drake, and Lord Moore have been friends since childhood. Therefore, I can only conclude that you’re fully aware of their special abilities. And, in fact, I suspect you possess *abilities* of your own.”

Still no answer, but she looked less green, so he continued ruefully. “I don’t intend to place you in an awkward position. I’m not asking you to reveal yourself or anyone in your confidence to me. But I would ask that you allow me to disclose my secrets to you.”

“Lord Preston,” she said hurriedly, “it’s not necessary. My brother placed a great deal of faith in you. I’m certain you can be trusted without having to reveal your own confidences.”

“Those confidences have gotten in the way of the trust we should have established long

before now.” He glanced at the manor. He hadn’t seen Raven since her return from the wood, and no matter how he wanted to seek her out, refrained. He wasn’t going to pursue her. She wanted to be his mistress, for God’s sake!

He wanted all or nothing. And he intended to have all.

“We’re all after the same thing, my lady. Magicker reform and to have Sir John . . . out of the way, shall we say?”

“That’s surprising,” she said, “as you’ve yet to throw your support behind my father’s proposal.”

“It’s always been my intention,” he said, “and now I regret Lord Granville will never know of my support. I’ve publicly remained neutral in order to learn more of Sir John’s cause. The parts he keeps hidden even from parliament. He’s been powermongering this issue for far too long. Dangerous is too hollow a word to associate with him.”

Nodding in agreement, she offered with a slight smile, “There are more than magickers and Sir John, Lord Preston. I know my friend quite well, and she’s confided in me what’s happened between you. I don’t intend to be forward.” Crossing the terrace to the surrounding wall, she leaned against it, and her smile disappeared. “But I believe you’re right. The time for discretion has past. The turmoil wrought by your relationship with Raven could have—no, it *will have*—a cascading effect throughout the close-knit community we’ve managed to preserve through the centuries.”

“My intention,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “was never to bring harm, to either Lord Moore or Miss Drake. She and I had an understanding at the onset. I’m afraid,” he added apologetically, “emotions don’t always follow the tenets of logical agreements.”

She stepped closer to him, and studied him for a moment before nodding. “You fell in love

with her.”

He shrugged indolently. “Lady Isadore, you’ve got it exactly.”

“My apologies, Lord Preston,” she said softly, and he believed she apologized for more than her next words implied. “You had no idea what you were getting into. ’Tis an unfair situation, and very little of it can be permanently altered. I love Raven as a sister, but I will be the first to admit she had no right. Her position in life—our lives, the lives of magickers—was determined long before you met.”

“I believe in destiny, Lady Isadore.” He smiled and glanced up at the manor’s windows again. “I also believe we ourselves can form it in some fashion. We can take an action that will lead us down a desired path. But there are also predetermined paths laid out by someone else—someone higher than we, and we’ve no choice but to follow.”

“Dammit.” She sighed, and sat in the chair. He wasn’t taken aback at her profanity, and she barely seemed to notice it herself. She stared blankly at the tea set and he wondered if, for a bit, she’d forgotten him.

“If there was a way,” she whispered eventually, “I would help you.”

“My lady, were that it was so. I love her.”

“But you must admit—” She looked at him as if she hadn’t heard him. “—there isn’t. You must let it go, let her go.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Ah, there you are,” Isadore said to Gareth the next morning. She pulled her horse to a stop next to his. He turned to nod at her, but didn’t speak.

The day dawned clear and hot, as every day had this last month. She’d be happy when fall arrived, and the trees changed color. It was her favorite time of year, the scents, the crisp nights, especially All Hallows Eve.

This year there’d be no party at Harrington Manor. Her parents loved throwing one, shoving their beliefs in the face of a society that didn’t quite understand what the Granvilles did.

Shaking her reverie away, she patted the side of her horse, Diana, comforted to feel the spirited mare’s smoothness under her gloved hand. Absently she wondered if any sense of propriety she retained would be lost by the simple act of removing her glove to feel her horse’s side.

She acted scatterbrained and couldn’t postpone it any further. This conversation needed to be had, needed to be done now.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Isadore,” he said tiredly, “I came out here to be alone.”

“I understand and am sorry, Gareth,” she said, “but at times like this, that’s a luxury none of us can afford.”

He turned sharply to look at her. “What is it, then?”

“In Lucien’s absence,” she began, “I am responsible for the Harrington household. Therefore we must discuss recent occurrences.”

“I’m in no mood to listen to another champion of Preston’s.”

Piqued, she said haughtily, “I’m not here to discuss him, not directly, at least. There are greater issues here than the loves of you three. Greater—” And her voice rose, all her anger and pain forcing themselves to be known. “—than you invoking magicks against Lord Preston on the *lawn of the manor*! You tipped your hand, Gareth. How can we expect you to make correct decisions at this most crucial time when you allow your temper to get the better of you?”

She collected herself, but her breath was ragged and her heart raced. When she spoke again, anger and bitterness laced her words. “My parents have been murdered. Lucien, who should be here with me and at parliament continuing the fight for reform is off to the Americas on a slim chance of hunting down our long-missing third line. A job, I might add, that should have been taken care of decades ago.”

Pointing an accusatory finger at him she added, “He went at your behest when he should be here instead. Raven, in spite of the situation with Lord Preston, still conducts her investigation into my parents’ death. And we all know Sir John will make a move against us sooner rather than later. This is not the time for one of the leaders of our Council to sulk in the woods.”

“I’m not sulking.”

Staring at him incredulously, she snorted.

“Isadore,” he said wearily, “I’m just as concerned as you. We shall deal with those who murdered Lord and Lady Granville, I promise you. I shan’t shirk my duties—to the council, to parliament, to your father’s reform bill, *or* to Raven.”

“Gareth,” she said more softly, “I know your feelings for Raven run deep. Deeper than I suspect she realizes. I know what’s happened with Lord Preston injured you. But this is not the time to wallow in self-doubt.”

“What makes you think I doubt myself?”

“Your uncharacteristic anger. There can be no other conclusion. And while I’m not necessarily here to champion Lord Preston’s cause, I am and forever will be a champion for Raven.”

She stopped speaking, steadying Diana as she kept pace with Gareth’s mount.

“What would make you assume Raven requires your ardent support in this matter?” he demanded.

She tried to think of an answer, but he continued without waiting for one.

“Her affair with Preston is over. We shall be married, and shall return to the way we once were.”

“Perhaps that is something you should take a deeper look at,” she suggested.

His head whipped around and he jerked his horse to a stop. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve fought for centuries to preserve our very unique way of life. Have we grown so far from our core beliefs, have we adapted so very much to the ways of the *nonputos*,” she asked, “we cannot see that in this situation duty and responsibility are commandeering what our lives should truly mean?”

“Are you speaking of Raven and Preston?” he spat. “Or of Corwin’s crusade to rid the planet of us completely?”

“I’m speaking of both,” she admitted. “But mainly I’m speaking of Raven and Lord Preston.”

“Enough of this, Isadore,” he snarled. “I told you when you rode up that I have no wish to speak of him. If that’s all you have to say, good day.”

“Gareth, wait.” She spurred Diana to catch up with him. “Our people have always believed that above everything you had to be true to your self and your ideals. It’s the foundation of our connection to the earth. What makes us different from those we now live with.”

“I know this,” he said, but continued to walk his horse next to hers. “It’s what we fight for, what your father and I fought for.”

“Yes, yes it was . . . however, I don’t think you understand. It’s that freedom which has enabled us to further evolve into the magickal beings we currently are.”

“Isadore,” he smiled, “I think you’re reading too many papers by that Darwin fellow.”

“Don’t make light of this, Gareth,” she snapped, seeing what he tried to do. She’d not be dissuaded. “You’re denying a truth staring you in the face.”

“And what truth is that?”

“By holding Raven to the promises and duty you deem necessary, you rob her of the happiness she could have with Lord Preston.”

“Rob her?” he challenged. “I love her. She’s promised to me, and I intend to have her.”

“Gareth,” she ignored his outburst, though it shocked her. “They share a love we all wish for.”

“Raven is a young woman. Neither she nor you fully know the realities of life. Her infatuation with Preston aside, *we are at war*. You know this; your parents are but the first casualties. There may not be the charred remains of magickers strewn in the streets as there once were, but never doubt we fight for our very existence.”

“And does this war,” she asked, swallowing her pain, “mean we deny what happiness we can attain in life?”

“Some of us, yes,” he said quietly. “Some of us must in order to lead. Have the staff begin packing. We’re leaving the manor and heading back to Scotland. Tell Preston he must vacate as well.”

With that, and before she could question or protest, he spurred his horse and she watched him

ride off.

“No sign of your valuables, sir,” Dalton said as he and Grimsby entered Beckett’s room.

Furious, Beckett turned on them. He’d sent them out the moment he’d returned from the wood, had gone to the Harrington place himself. Even for the rich, it was unusually secure, and he swore there was a spell of some sort surrounding it.

“But,” Grimsby hastened, “we did hear as how the Granville household is leaving on the afternoon train tomorrow.”

Beckett stopped and stared at the unexpected news. “Go on.”

“They’re leaving for Scotland,” Grimsby continued.

He noted with amusement the pair edged toward the closed door. He loved that they were terrified of him.

“Scotland, eh?” he wondered aloud. “And is Lord Preston going there as well?”

“Preston?” Dalton repeated. “Don’t know.”

“Find out what Preston’s travel plans are,” he instructed Grimsby. As soon as he was out the door, he turned to his other Hunter. “Dalton, I want you, no, no.” He stopped and shook his head. “Their departure messes up my plans. We’ll have to think fast.”

“Sir,” Dalton said, “wot’s gonna happen now? We gonna move our plans to tonight?”

Pacing before the window, he barely heard his lackey’s question. He needed a new approach, needed something to take them all out.

“Sir,” Dalton asked again, stupid yet tenacious. “Wot’s gonna happen?”

“Shut up,” he snarled.

Moving to the table where the pouch lay, he fingered the ties keeping it closed. “We don’t

need Corwin displeased with us.”

“No, no, no need to have Sir John displeased,” Dalton agreed. “We’ll have to get them somehow. But how? Should I get some others onboard?”

“You said rail tickets to Scotland?” he asked. “Hmm, yes, yes. Now that would definitely be a show to remember.”

“Worthless,” she muttered as she gazed at a small loose gem before tossing the item into a small pile.

The sun continued its descent behind her as she sat under the terrace and went through Beckett’s jewelry. She didn’t think about Gareth and his declaration of love. She didn’t think about Lucien on his way to America when he should’ve been here.

She certainly didn’t think about Malcolm.

Her hand shook at the very thought, passing though she tried for it to be. No, she couldn’t think about him. Nothing changed and nothing could change.

“I hate that.”

“It’s rather gaudy,” a voice said behind her, “but hate? I don’t think it’s worth it.”

“Isadore,” she smiled softly, and gestured to the seat opposite her. Raven knew her worry should not be centered on herself, Malcolm or Gareth, but on Isadore.

“When did you acquire such an—” She picked up a large metal ring that was half the size of her palm. “—eclectic selection of jewelry?”

“They’re not mine,” Raven admitted and took the ring. “They’re Beckett’s.”

“And you have them?”

“I couldn’t very well leave them in his hands,” she scoffed. “I’m sorting them into *useful*,

garbage, and should never see the light of day."

"And that last is because they're too powerful?"

"Because they're too ugly," Raven grinned.

Isadore grinned as well, but Raven could tell her small attempt at humor did little to disperse the grief which had settled around Isadore's shoulders. It was an old saying, and not very useful, but too true—only time would heal her wounds.

"What brings you out here? And why is the household in such a frenzy?"

Too much happened too quickly, and none of them had the chance to grieve. Now, it seemed as if that would once more have to wait. She wondered if this would destroy Isadore, and if maybe she should've sent her with Lucien. At least then they'd be together in their grief.

"Gareth has decreed we're to leave the manor. He wants us back in Scotland."

Raven stilled her sorting. "He made such a decision without me? Typical. He cannot make such a unilateral decision without consulting each of us. There's too much in Leeds we need to attend to, not the least of which is Lord and Lady Granville's murders."

She drummed her fingers on the table, furious with Gareth—and herself for not seeing this coming. So jealous of her affair with Malcolm he couldn't see past it.

"Beckett is responsible; he's the only viable suspect."

"While I concur," Isadore agreed, "we have no definite proof, and can take no action against him."

Livid, she grabbed a piece of jewelry that was in a pile of its own. "This," she said in a low, angry voice, "is it. It's what he used on your parents. What he used to murder them."

She watched her friend's eyes focus on the item, stunned into silence. "That's it?" Her voice barely above a whisper, she didn't move.

“Yes.”

The ring was tiny, scarcely a half-dozen millimeters wide, maybe that around. Inside lay a polished onyx stone, equally small, and as powerful as anything she’d ever seen.

“I’m sorry,” she said, putting the ring on her lap. She didn’t want Isadore touching it. “I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that. Could I change any of what happened, I would.”

She reached across the table and grasped her friend’s hand. “Beckett will pay. I’ll see to it myself.” She squeezed her hand, and scooped the items into the bag. She kept the ring separate. “I must speak with Gareth; we can’t leave yet.”

She couldn’t leave with so much to do. Stop Beckett and find a way to be with Malcolm. Selfishness reared again, and she fought against her desires.

Duty came first. Duty always did.

“Raven,” Isadore called, then stronger, “Raven, wait.”

She turned, urgency thrumming in her veins. Waiting for Isadore to speak, she thought she heard Malcolm’s voice near the stables.

“Perhaps Gareth is correct in moving us to Scotland,” she said. Her words jerked Raven’s attention back to the matter at hand. “Beckett can be dealt with at any time. We must see that *we’re* secure.”

Raven stared at her friend for a long moment. Distantly she heard the neighing of a horse, the call of a bird. She felt her heart beating in her chest, as the last weeks crashed around her. Isadore was right. This wasn’t about anything other than Malcolm.

Dropping the bag to the chair she’d just vacated, she walked to the wall circling the area. Pressing her palms hard against the rough surface, she breathed deeply.

More heartbreak to hear his voice, to be near him. She wondered how he occupied himself

these last days, even as she longed to touch him.

“I understand. I’ll say good-bye to him this evening.”

He stood in the darkness and waited. His eyes were accustomed to the dim light now, and he looked around the room. It lay in disarray, with everyone getting ready to leave the manor the next morning. A few of the staff were staying to close down and send the rest of the luggage on.

Mac had been told, in no uncertain terms but with a fair amount of sympathy from Lady Isadore, that the family left the following day. He was to be gone before then.

He’d never taken orders well, and wasn’t about to do so from Lady Isadore, no matter how he respected her. One, he’d promised Lucien he’d look out for her. Two, there was Raven.

An impasse. She’d marry Moore, but would be his mistress. Unacceptable. Completely unacceptable when she’d proposed it, the idea was even more so now. He wouldn’t let her marry Moore. And he wouldn’t leave the manor with things between them as they were.

Raven entered her rooms, alone and already in her nightshift. He stamped down on the jealousy that threatened to consume him. Had she been with Moore? Was he who she dressed for? Whose rooms she came from?

In the light flaring from the gas lamp, she looked tired, worn, and drawn.

“This is good-bye.”

She spun on her slippers, a silent gasp dying on her lips. Her hands hung at her sides, but the tension in her body remained visible.

“Malcolm,” she whispered.

Hatred of the way she said his name coiled tightly around him. Invested now, emotionally and sexually, he couldn’t leave. No turning back no matter what she may have said or what she

had to do.

He leaned a shoulder against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest, and watched her. Just watched her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know how to tell you, and I was afraid to come to you.”

“Afraid? Sweet, you need never fear me in any way.”

He dropped his arms, intent on going to her. She stiffened further, if such a thing was possible. He stayed against the wall. Annoyance turned to anger.

Physical distance could easily be traversed. Even, he supposed, the sexual distance could be temporarily overcome. Despite his thinking of mere weeks ago, he knew then as now—he’d never tire of her sexually. The emotional distance, the one that mattered most, he didn’t know.

“I do fear you greatly, Malcolm,” she whispered. “I fear the emotions we share. I cannot control them. I can’t control what I feel for you, and fear, if freed, the destruction they would bring would be immeasurable.”

“How can love be destructive, Raven?” he challenged. “I understand what your duty is to your people. I don’t want to stand in your way; I never would. Does that mean you have to sacrifice yourself to Moore? Our emotions aren’t evil or destructive. They are what they are.”

She stepped forward, a small step only noticeable because he watched her so intently.

“Emotions can be destructive, Malcolm,” she insisted. He heard the faint quiver in her voice. “I made my decision years ago and must now stand by it. Neither of us expected anything more from this affair than sex. We went into this with that clear understanding.”

“We discussed this already.” He dismissed with an impatient flick of a wrist. “It’s more and you know it. Fantastic though our lovemaking has been, what’s between us is more than sex, more than lust. Nothing can change that now. There has to be a way to convince you to leave

Moore.”

She said nothing, merely stood there and watched him in the flickering light of the lamp. Eventually she let out a long breath and seemed to deflate.

“You don’t understand; it’s not just about him.” Her voice broke, but her gaze remained steady.

“I understand full well, Raven. What you don’t seem to understand,” he said, lazily recrossing his arms in a show of nonchalance, “is that I will support you in everything. I will risk my life, and *have*. I believe in everything you’re trying to do, and have spent the last several years of my life supporting your cause. What more do I have to say, what more do I have to do to prove this to you?”

“Please leave, Malcolm,” she said. He could hear the tears in her voice. “Just leave. That’s how you can prove yourself. By leaving me to—”

“Your duty?” he demanded. “Yes, that’s what you keep saying. Your duty. What of your duty to yourself?”

“You won’t survive in my world!” Now he could hear the pleading in her shouted words. “There are deeper commitments than you could ever know.”

Growling in frustration, he crossed the room in three quick strides and kissed her. Her hair flowed wild and soft under his fingers, her lips eager under his own.

“This is the deepest commitment I’ve ever known. I love you.”

A lone tear spilled down her cheek, but she didn’t repeat the words back to him. Instead, she kissed him again, winding her arms around his neck as if she’d never let him go.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Malcolm lifted her against him and moved to the bed. He needed her. Raven against him, the wild creature who so captivated him. He'd been honest when he said there was more than sex between them. But their passion threatened to consume him whole. He'd willingly let it.

"Malcolm," she whispered. Her fingers moved frantically against the buttons of his shirt.

Setting her on the bed, he lifted her nightshift over her perfect body, pale and smooth, muscular, and his. No other had ever seen her as such, and no other ever would. His hands reacquainted themselves with her curves, the flare of hip, the roundness of her breasts.

Tasting her, slick and hot, ready for him in a way no one else ever had been. She responded to him in ways he'd never thought possible, never imagined. It was incredible.

Honey and heat, she was delicious. Beautiful.

She arched against him. "Malcolm, please."

He loved to hear her beg. But not this time. He wanted to feel her clenching around him before the night ended.

Slipping a finger into her already wet core, he closed his mouth over her breast, felt her move against him. Her low moan elicited a visceral reaction. He removed his finger and ran his hand along the curve of her side before positioning himself at her entrance.

They joined in one smooth thrust.

He felt her shudder, saw the tears but still moved within her, kissed her. He knew they were being selfish . . . he most definitely. Nothing in his life prepared him for the emotions he experienced when with Raven. Nothing had ever or could ever compare to this ecstasy.

"I love you," he said against her neck.

They moved faster now, one smooth rhythm.

“Malcolm,” she cried over and over in a whispered litany. Each time she did he pushed himself in harder, faster, not wanting to know if more than passion echoed in her cry, he didn't want to hear regret.

Her hands touched his face as they shuddered together in completion.

Malcolm slowly moved to one side and pulled her close. He held her, wordlessly, for a long while.

She'd fallen asleep not long after she'd climaxed. Mac watched her in the fading light as shadows shifted over the bed. Tears stained her cheeks. He brushed a gentle finger over the soft skin, feeling the dried evidence of her sorrow.

Kissing her gently on that cheek, he murmured, “I can't let you go, darling. I'm sorry. I love you too much.”

Climbing out of her bed, he quickly dressed and left. He'd find a way. He didn't care what or who he had to sacrifice. Raven was his.

“Walter,” he said, the second he entered his rooms.

His valet sat at the writing desk, going over a stack of papers. “Sir.” He rose. “Your package from Preston Hall arrived.”

“Good, yes.” Mac dismissed it with a glance. “I want you to purchase two tickets on the afternoon train to Edinburgh. We're leaving with the rest of the party.”

“Our arrangements for London, sir?” Walker asked, but already moved to dress.

“Cancel them. And find accommodations in Edinburgh.”

Raven couldn't look at Gareth. She remembered last night all too clearly. She wouldn't regret what happened, and she wouldn't change it for the world. Malcolm hadn't been at breakfast, and she'd searched the grounds for him before they left. His man was nowhere to be found, either.

The carriage pulled into the train station, and she waited while the footman opened the door. Stepping into the bright afternoon, she automatically scanned the area. Ostensibly, it was to make sure everything was clear, but she knew the real reason. Malcolm was still nowhere in sight. Why hadn't she seen him? Why had he left her in bed?

Last night had been their good-bye.

The battle raging in her stomach didn't abate as she made her way through the crowds to the platform. Gareth, Isadore, her mother, and the servants accompanying them surrounded her, but she barely noticed them.

She missed Malcolm.

A hand slipped into hers. Glancing up, she smiled at her mother, who seemed to be lending whatever support she could.

She'd woken alone. The morning sun had made her bed seem larger and emptier than she remembered it.

Slanting her gaze across the crowd, she finally looked at Gareth. Had he somehow prevented Malcolm from appearing this morning? With the four of them crowding the carriage, she couldn't ask Isadore about it. At the first opportunity, however, she planned on doing just that.

"This way, ma'am," the conductor said, and ushered them to their compartment.

"It's stifling in here," she heard her mother complain.

Looking up to reply, she gasped. Malcolm stood there, just taking his hat off and bowing over Lady Alexandria's hand. Stunned, she could only gape at him, and missed what he'd said.

“You’ve no business being here,” Gareth snapped, standing between them and Malcolm.

“On a public train?” he asked, clearly mocking. “I’ve unfinished business, as it turns out, and will be joining you in Edinburgh.”

“You’re going to Scotland?” Raven demanded. Shocked, suspicious, pleased, she continued to stare at him.

“Yes, Miss Drake.”

Then she noticed he carried a box under his arm. She wanted to get a closer look; some of the writing appeared familiar. But the conductor called down the aisle, signaling their readiness to leave. Numbly, she nodded.

He headed to Scotland. She knew it was because of her. He followed her, not giving up. The very thought of it warmed her.

“—out of here, Preston,” Gareth was saying.

“Moore—”

The noise pierced the air, the deafening sound of screeching metal. The train rocked violently on its side.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The car rose up and intense heat flooded the compartment. Mac crashed against the door into the room.

Suddenly he felt coolness cover him, and looked up to see Moore's eyes glow silver. Moore only held his attention for a moment. He fought the oppressive weight of his magicks to stand. He had to get to Raven.

The train lurched again. Crashing onto solid ground, he slid forward. Arms, legs, luggage tumbled in a brutal heap in the small room. He couldn't tell up from down, could barely move. More important, he couldn't find Raven.

Glass cut into his skin and crunched beneath him. Trying to stand, he only then noticed he still retained his grip on the box. Tossing it was out of the question; there were too many people on the floor.

He had to find her. Crawling along the seats, he let go of the box and tried to call her name, but thick acrid smoke filled the car.

"Raven!" he coughed. "Raven!"

He heard a groan, reached through the smoke to pull the woman up. "Lady Isadore, are you all right?"

She coughed in response, but nodded.

"Lady Drake," he heard Moore say, and saw him push Raven's mother across the floor.

Their eyes locked, and for one moment, probably the only moment they'd ever see eye to eye, they were in accord. Moore jumped up through the doors, and braced himself against the opening. He pulled Lady Drake through it, steadying her to crawl up the aisle. Mac helped Lady

Isadore do the same, handing her off to Moore as fast as he could.

He smelled fire now, heard the screams of others in the train. What the hell had happened?

“Raven!” he called again. Couldn’t understand how he hadn’t found her already. The cabin wasn’t big.

“Malcolm,” he heard faintly.

Crouching on the floor, he found her beneath a thin layer of glass, half buried under several pieces of luggage.

“Raven?” He heard Moore call, gratified the other man seemed to struggle to breathe as well.

“I’ve got her!” he shouted back.

Gingerly taking the luggage off her, he noticed a large piece of glass protruding from her left arm. The smoke caused his eyes to tear and distorted his vision. Wrapping his jacket around his hand, he pulled the thick shard from her.

“Ah!” she cried, and weakly moved her other hand to cover the gash.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, voice choked with smoke. “I’ve got you.”

Pulling her hands away, his heart clenched at the sight of so much blood on her. Fear gripped him, taking what breath the heavy smoke did not. He’d seen people injured far worse than this, but never anyone he loved.

“It’s out.” He coughed, struggling to breathe. “Hold on, my love.”

He ripped a piece of his jacket and folded it over the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. How he was going to move her up and out of the train without injuring her further?

She smiled at him. “I trust you, Malcolm.”

Picking her up, he held her close against the side of his body, terrified of letting her go. “Hold tight, as tightly as you can, sweet,” he instructed.

Careful to keep pressure on her arm, he climbed on top of the fallen luggage, reluctant to hand her to Moore. Quickly lifting himself out into the aisle, he waited for Moore to return Raven to his arms. Mac saw his reluctance, but there was no choice; Moore had to get out, too.

Holding her tightly to him once more, Mac climbed out of the train. Chaos greeted him. Screams of terrified people, thick black smoke over the platform. He could barely see a foot in front of him. He turned to look for Moore, and saw him emerge from the mangled car.

“I’ll take her,” Lady Alexandria said, already doing so.

“There was shard of glass,” he said, still coughing. “Caught in her arm. Keep pressure on it.”

“We’ll take care of her, Lord Preston,” she said reassuringly.

Mac nodded. He wanted to stay with her, but knew he couldn’t. The screams from those trapped within the train echoed around him. With one last look at Raven, he went to help Moore get the rest of the passengers out.

Raven gasped for breath and tried to sit up, but gentle hands kept her flat on the ground.

“Malcolm.” It hurt to speak. “Where’s Malcolm?”

“It’s okay,” she heard her mother say. “Lord Preston and Gareth got you out and went to help the others.”

“He’s safe?” she gasped. “Malcolm’s safe?”

“Yes,” her mother said. “He’s safe.”

“Help me sit up,” she insisted.

“Raven,” her mother said, “you must stay still.”

“Help me up,” she gasped, and saw the look pass between Isadore and her mother. Nonetheless, they did so, leaning her against a pile of luggage. Where they’d found that, she had

no idea, but gratefully rested against it.

“Do you sense that?” she asked. “Do you feel it?”

She scanned the wreckage: blood-splattered windows, twisted metal, groaning bodies scattered across the platform and ground. Horrible destruction laid out before her. Yet all she could think of was Malcolm.

Then she saw him.

He supported a man who limped as quickly as he could from the train. Malcolm nodded at whatever the man said before disappearing back into the heavy smoke. Alive.

And Gareth? Where was he? She scanned the area again, her eyes refusing to register the horror, unable to look away.

“Gareth,” she whispered when she saw him. He looked up as if he’d heard her and nodded. Then he, too, disappeared back into the train.

“... back to the manor,” she heard Isadore say.

Hard to hear, she felt as if her friend’s words were muffled through cloth.

“Yes,” her mother agreed. “Can you see anything through the smoke?”

“No, I’ll look for Mary or a footman.”

She felt someone, Isadore she assumed, stand.

“Darling?” her mother asked. “Darling look at me.” Raven laboriously turned her head to look at her mother. “What happened?”

“I tried to shield you,” she whispered. It hurt to breathe, to speak, and she was so tired she wanted to sleep for a month. “It all happened so fast. I encircled you, but then the train rocked and threw me off balance,” she gasped, hand holding her arm.

“You should’ve protected yourself,” Alexandria scolded.

Raven shrugged. She'd protected her mother and Malcolm as best she could.

"Darling," she shook her again, "Raven, focus. I need you to open the ground."

Blinking slowly, she tried to understand what her mother meant.

"The fire, Raven. It's consuming everything. Gareth's helping the others, and I'm not strong enough on my own to do it. A nice rainstorm would be ideal," she sighed, with a quick look over her shoulder, "but dirt will have to do."

Groping for her mother's hand, she nodded. "You'll have to channel," she muttered, her eyes closing. "My head swims."

Alexandria chanted softly and held her daughter's hand.

Raven felt the magicks jump between them, felt her power flowing from ground to her then outward. Struggling to open her eyes, she saw the engine and coal car sink down through the track remnants into the soil. Not a lot, probably not enough, but it put out some of the flames.

Later, she'd hear about how the fire burned so intensely it melted the ground. No one would be quite sure how it happened, only that it had. Magickers were never suspected.

"Well done, darling," she heard. Then felt the cool hand of her mother's touch on her forehead. "Rest now, child."

The last thing she saw before her eyes slid closed was Malcolm helping people from the wreckage.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I've spoken to Constable Peterson," Isadore said.

They gathered in the parlor, the four of them for the first time since the explosion two days ago. Raven leaned back on the chaise longue, keenly aware of not wearing a corset and feeling

naked without it. Still unsteady, the herbs packed around her arm helped, as did the strict herbal tea diet her mother dictated. Well, herbal tea and honey scones.

However, she refused to miss this meeting. Much to Gareth's chagrin, Malcolm stayed near since she'd woken in the carriage.

He wasn't at this meeting, and she didn't know where he'd gone off to.

Raven looked at Gareth, who barely spoke a dozen words to her since the accident. He held himself stiffly, jaw clenched. She wondered what passed between him and Malcolm. This was so unlike the new Gareth she'd come to know. To stand idly by and let her lover be anywhere near her when she knew he'd rather attend to her.

"He was kind enough to show me this." Isadore held up a distorted object.

"What is it?" she asked, holding out her right hand for it. Examining it, she frowned, "It's gray? Are these markings from the explosion?"

"Looks like, yes," Gareth agreed. "I'd have to inspect it further, but it's possible. Constable Peterson," he added, "also explained that several sticks of dynamite were used to destroy the train."

"He went into great detail," Isadore corrected. She wrinkled her nose at the memory. "*Great detail* on the supposed number of sticks used, the death count, the mess left behind."

"Is he a sympathizer?" her mother asked, sipping her tea. "Or is he trying to trick us into revealing information about what happened?"

"He's never indicated his feelings on the matter one way or another," Isadore admitted. "However, he alleged that anti-monarchists were involved, and they suspect them to be in collusion with our Jane Redding. They were going to round up suspicious locals."

"Was *he* suspicious when he gave you the stone?" Gareth asked.

“No,” she said slowly. “Then he didn’t exactly give it to me. It vanished from his office about the same time I left. I replaced it with an ordinary stone from the front of the building.”

“You stole it?” Alexandria asked, clearly impressed. “How did you replace it?”

“The interview ended, and I went outside. But then I conveniently remembered one small item I thought the Constable should know; a rumor one of the servants heard about our Miss Redding. When I went back into his office, I added the stone to his collection.”

“Bravo,” Alexandria applauded. “I’m impressed, dear.” She leaned forward then, holding her hand for the stone. “May I see it?”

Gareth obligingly passed it along. Raven sipped her herbal tea while her mother studied the stone. She looked at it for such a long time, she grew concerned.

“Mother?”

“This is an *ignis stone*, Darling.” She looked up, smiling faintly she added, “Your father and I used them in our youth. For what, you don’t want to know.”

She most certainly did. Raven swallowed her questions about her parents’ activities. “*Ignis stone*? What does it do?”

“It causes a small fire. Definitely strong enough to ignite dynamite.” She continued to turn it over with her fingers. “This Beckett, he could’ve cast the spell from anywhere. The spell cleaves the stone in half; one for the actual fire, one for the igniter. Once attuned to the stone, only the owner’s touch can set off the effect. He still has the other half, I’d wager. You need both to properly cast it.”

“He wasn’t just anywhere in the Empire,” Gareth said. “He was nearby.”

“Agreed,” Raven nodded. “We were the target.”

“This isn’t playing chess with Corwin,” he added. “We aren’t playing against the clever head

Hunter, but against an incompetent.”

“And that,” Alexandria agreed, “is far more dangerous.”

“Beckett is unpredictable,” Raven said. “But I’m positive he’s following Sir John’s orders. We must stop the randomness of his homicidal notions.”

“What are you thinking, dearest?” Gareth asked.

Raven’s head shot up. The direct question, the first in days, and the endearment took her by surprise. She really hated that endearment.

“Dangle a lure to trap him.”

Malcolm stood in the doorway, holding some sort of box under his arm, a smug grin on his face. He’d never looked so handsome to her, and took her breath away. She wanted to go to him, moved to rise before remembering Gareth. When Malcolm was in the room, no one else mattered.

Pulling her gaze from him, she looked at her fiancé.

“Trap him?” she asked, gaze back on his.

“With what lure?” Isadore inquired. “We, ourselves, seem to be the only enticement he’s interested in.”

“We’ve his bag of magickal baubles,” she said. She hadn’t told anyone Malcolm was with her when she discovered Beckett’s stash, and now didn’t seem to be the most opportune moment.

“For a man like Beckett, that’s a carrot he can’t resist.” Malcolm nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s greedy, but he’d want us more.”

“What’s in the box?” Alexandria interrupted.

“Ah,” he smiled, still looking directly at her. “This is for you. It was given to me by a London magicker I helped escape. He said it was a magickal item that had been in his family for

several generations.”

“And he willingly parted with it?” her mother wondered.

Malcolm smiled at her, showing the warmth and charm that first drew Raven to him. “Yes, my lady. His words were, that his family had been entrusted with its safekeeping, but he felt their lives more important.”

“You take payment for saving people?” Gareth demanded. Raven flinched at the direct attack.

“If they can pay,” Malcolm shrugged, the coldness back in his voice. “This particular man had only this. Refusing to take it would have wounded his pride.”

“Did he say what it was for?” Isadore asked.

“No,” he shook his head, and leaned down to hand her the box. She took it from him, jerking at the feel of power the wood emitted. *Oh, my . . .*

“Elements of whatever plan you devise will leave all of you directly exposed.” Malcolm straightened to look at the rest of the room. “Beckett is unpredictable.”

“This is no longer your concern, Preston,” Gareth snapped. “Why don’t you take yourself out of harm’s way, pack your bags, and return to your own estate?”

“Moore,” he took a step forward, “I will not abandon the woman I love. If you’d break your engagement and allow her to go with me, then I’d have no issue with leaving.”

Raven closed her eyes, wishing this confrontation wasn’t in front of witnesses. She couldn’t look at her mother and refused to look at Isadore. Setting the box aside, she rose.

“Gentlemen,” she said, “this isn’t the time. Gareth, I’m sure Mal— Lord Preston will be a great help to us in this matter. And let us not forget Lucien’s confidence in him.”

“Or your apparent continued confidence, dearest.”

She could feel his anger. How he wanted to argue the point. More than anything, he didn't want Malcolm involved. Her heart broke for Gareth, for it was far too late to take Malcolm out of the plan. As she watched him, torn, she saw his eyes briefly flash silver.

"Very well then," he nodded. "Let's decide how we're to use this lure."

Lady Alexandria smiled at the proprietor. She didn't know if he was really Alistair of *Alistair's Fine Imports*, but it didn't matter. The small shop in Bramhope suited her purposes just fine. Lord Preston assured her Beckett had been seen in the village only hours earlier.

Since her daughter trusted him, loved him, she did as well.

Her black mourning clothes were heavy and hot in the tight shop. Her back itched as if avaricious eyes watched her. Too the truth that, but she didn't turn to look.

"I don't know why Lady Granville kept this," she admitted, "and in such an obvious place. Her poor daughter—" She shook her head sympathetically. "—couldn't bear to look at the hideous thing a moment longer. I promised to get rid of it for her."

"I'm not sure it's worth much," the man admitted, squinting at the large bracelet.

It was five centimeters thick, huge and gaudy. Whatever that vile Beckett needed it for, Alexandria didn't want to know.

The weak often needed showy bits to increase their self-worth.

"As you've recently had tragic—" He sighed. "—deaths in the family, I want you to know how much I respected Lord and Lady Granville. Fine people, always helping the village, never a nasty word."

"Yes," she murmured, blinking away real tears. "Yes, they were."

"I'll offer you half a crown," he said.

She could tell he wondered why the Granvilles needed the money, but wasn't about to enlighten him. "Thank you," she smiled. She could still feel those eyes watching her.

It wasn't her imagination; she wasn't that fanciful. How Beckett discovered her so quickly, she couldn't have said. At least the plan worked.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It'd been nearly a day since her mother went to town to set the bait for their trap. Waiting was interminable, and no matter how she tried to keep her mind occupied, she continually turned the situation over.

She wished Lucien were here to confide in, not necessarily about her affair with Malcolm, but about everything. Though closest to her, Isadore had been adamantly against her affair from the start.

So she spent her time chasing her thoughts in dizzying circles. Duty or love. Gareth or Malcolm. Her heart screamed "Malcolm!" Her head, well, her head continued to chase those dizzying thoughts, no closer to an answer.

The three of them—she, her mother, and Isadore—were on the patio as if it were any other morning. The servants had been brought into the plan and continued to act as if nothing was amiss. She and Isadore played Bezique, while her mother read.

"Raven," Isadore said, "it's your turn."

Absently, she placed a card in the pile.

"Are you certain you wish to play that?"

Raven looked at the nine of hearts, and gave a small laugh. She'd almost given Isadore a trick. "No, of course not. I'm afraid my mind isn't on the game."

"Hmm," she agreed.

In addition to her thoughts about Malcolm and Gareth, she wondered when Beckett would make his move. She couldn't understand him, couldn't pin him down.

Malcolm and Gareth were to stay close, yet she knew their mutual animosity would have

them either at each other's throats or as far apart as possible.

"I'm uncomfortable," Isadore whispered, no longer staring at her cards, "with forswearing magick. Beckett's too dangerous."

"I agree." Raven folded her own cards on the table. "But we need to trap Beckett, to incriminate him for murdering innocents to frame them as magickers. We need to hold him responsible for the death of your parents without revealing ourselves to him. We'll only use magick as a last possible resort."

They resumed their game, playing two more hands before Percival bowed before them.

"There is a Mr. Beckett at the door," he said.

Raven stood in front of Isadore, her mother near them. Beckett barged onto the patio as if he had the right.

"What's the meaning of this?" Isadore demanded.

"Excuse me." Percival said with indignation at the affront to his authority, even as he blocked the path between Beckett and them. "You were asked to wait in the drawing room."

Beckett stepped forward, shoving the elderly butler to one side. "My business is too important to wait."

Behind him, two more men emerged. The other Hunters in the area came to back him up.

"How dare you barge back here unannounced," Isadore bit out. "This is a house in mourning; we aren't receiving visitors."

"Percival," Alexandria said, eyes on Beckett, "please bring Lords Moore and Preston, and have the guards come round back."

"Yes, yes," Beckett sneered, as Percival went to do just that, "get them. My men wish to question them as well."

“I repeat,” Isadore snapped, “what is the meaning of this? Why are you here?”

In answer, he removed the bracelet from his pocket, showing it to them as if it were a gun. “This is known to have been in the possession of members of this household.”

“What of it?” Raven questioned, gathering the earth’s magick to her like a shield. She didn’t want to tip her hand, but she needed to be prepared. Plan or not, she had a feeling Beckett was more dangerous than they believed. “’Tis but a bracelet.”

“It is—” He took another step forward, eyes black and small in his pale face. “—a known magickal item, Miss Drake. Possession of which is an offense against the Crown. But I’m sure you know that. Under Magicker Act article two, paragraphs four through fifteen, I am within my rights to question you, to question all within this household, in regards to it.”

“I see merely a hunk of silver,” Raven challenged. “Are you going through all our jewelry now for contraband? What makes you believe it is magickal?”

“I believe, Miss Drake,” he scoffed, “you know exactly what this does.”

“How dare you,” Isadore seethed. “How dare you enter my home and spew such preposterous accusations.”

“Parliament.” He laughed, a low, ugly sound. “They gave me the right to do this and more as a sworn Witch Hunter. It’s my duty to be aware of such illicit items as these.”

Malcolm and Gareth stormed onto the porch. They split up, each going to one side of the group, Gareth closest to her. He needed to be, despite Malcolm’s vehement arguments, in case they had to pool their magicks.

“What are you doing here?” Gareth demanded.

“Ah, the rest of the household, I see.” Beckett offered an oily smile. “Dalton,” he instructed to the taller man, “watch them while Grimsby and I search the house for more contraband.”

“You mean items such as these?” Raven asked as innocently as she could manage.

She held up the bag of trinkets she and Malcolm stole from Beckett’s hiding place. She waited a beat, then two, as he turned to stare. His eyes were glued to the bag, face flushed with anger. With a theatrical flare she spilled the items onto the table. The morning sunlight sparkled off the stones and metals.

“Where did you get those?” he accused.

“I believe they were discovered by the woods near the Bramhope Inn,” she said.

“Coincidentally, you happen to be staying there,” Malcolm added. “If this is indeed magickal contraband, then we’ve merely secured them for the constable and Her Majesty’s courts.”

“You stole them!” Beckett shouted, face nearly purple with rage.

“Stole them?” Gareth inquired. “From whom? You seem to be familiar with these things, as defensive as a victim who’s had his purse cut. Are these, perchance, yours?”

Raven watched as Beckett’s eyes landed on each of them, the fury almost palpable. Then he glanced at his men, and she almost could see his thoughts.

“They were evidence collected,” he choked. Stepping forward, he fondled a few. “I hid them from thieving gypsies until it was time to return to London.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” her mother murmured. Raven, not fooled by the comment, knew Alexandria was as ready as the rest of them.

With a swipe of his hand, he scooped up a couple things and quickly backed away. This was what they waited for, for Beckett to show his hand.

“I’m sick of the lot of you,” he shouted, spittle flying from his lips. “You should’ve died on that damned train. You’re liars and constant thorns in Corwin’s side and mine. Sympathizers to those foul magickers who need to die.”

“You seem,” Gareth pointed out, “to be one of the *foul magickers* yourself.”

“How do you plan to explain these deaths?” Malcolm wondered. “We’re no ordinary citizens, but peers of the Realm.”

“Easy enough, sympathizer bastard. My men and I will attest to your deaths at the hand of some magicker you were trying to hide.”

With that, Beckett lifted his hand, a signal to the two men beside him to raise their weapons. “Perhaps your fictitious Jane Redding returned? Your convenient scapegoat.”

With a flash, magick leapt from Beckett’s be-ringed hand and encircled Gareth. Malcolm jumped across the patio and attacked the taller of the two Hunters, tackling him to the ground.

Raven quickly squeezed Isadore’s hand before moving forward to use her own magick in defense of Gareth. He seemed to be suffocating. His eyes blazed with fury, but she could see his gasp for breath. The bubble engulfing him rippled and she could feel his power try to break through the weaker spell. Gathering the might of the wind, she pushed Beckett back, breaking his concentration.

Gareth dropped to the flagstones, eyes silver as he, too, collected his magick around him. She could feel it dance along the air, and moved closer to him though it probably wouldn’t take the two of them to incapacitate Beckett.

Just then, the second Hunter fired his gun. The bullet struck Gareth in the shoulder. With a cry, he fell once more to the ground, clutching his wounded arm.

“Gareth!” she shouted even as she heard him curse.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Alexandria pick up the tea tray and throw it at the shorter Hunter who brandished the gun. With all her mother’s magick behind it, the tray struck him square in the chest. He went down with a weak *oomph*.

Isadore skirted the table to Lord Preston's side, and watched him struggle with the Hunter. She scanned the area for something with which to help him, and spotted the wrought iron chairs they'd sat in mere moments before. Using the magicks inherent in her, she summoned all her strength. A chair swiftly screeched along the patio and rammed into the Hunter.

Lord Preston immediately took advantage of the situation. He lifted the Hunter to his knees, and wrapped his hands around his opponent's head. With his greater leverage, he twisted the man's neck.

Isadore winced at the crack the Hunter's death made.

"This is not going according to plan," she offered weakly.

"Best laid plans and all," he said.

Then he offered her a hand, and she gratefully took it. Nothing in her experience prepared her for this kind of scenario. Maybe she'd been naive in thinking their plan would work and there'd be no deaths this day. Clutching Lord Preston's arm, she looked back at the rest of her group.

Standing beside Gareth, Raven turned to face Beckett as he slowly rose. Good, she'd hit him hard enough to injure. She wanted to do more. Rage such as she'd never known boiled within her. He'd tried to kill Gareth. He'd killed Basil and Georgiana. Wanted to murder them all.

Beckett stood, shaking his head as if disoriented. She took a step closer, her fury threatening to boil over.

"So you're the power here," he said. "I'd never have imagined. Ashton denied it, and that alone should've tipped me off."

"Ashton was a good man," she bit out. "But you don't see goodness. You use your position as a Hunter to inflict fear and terror. Not for what you believe is right. Not to protect anyone. All for your own despicable gain."

Her anger erupted then, and with more power than she expected, the wind whipped around her and slammed into Beckett. She held him hostage within a small funnel of air, inches off the ground. Walking confidently towards him, she saw the faint glow of his ring. Closing the funnel tighter, she concentrated on that.

Rage fueling her will, she imagined a vice clamping around the ring, the source of his dark magick. Though she couldn't hear it, she saw his hand shatter.

He silently cried out, holding his mangled hand with the other.

She released the air, using only enough to hold him still. She wanted him to clearly hear her.

"We won't be massacred any longer. This is where we make our stand. Where we begin to reclaim what is ours."

"This is where you die," he snarled. His good hand disappeared into his jacket and withdrew a knife. He spat at her as he threw it.

"You have no idea the power real magickers wield."

The knife flew towards her, but she easily turned it in midflight. Redirecting it, she called up another gust of wind and aimed for Beckett's heart. The hilt quivered as the blade sunk quickly through bone and flesh into the pumping muscle.

Mac watched Raven hold Beckett in the grasp of air. A surge of need rushed through him at the sight of her confidence and power. She was magnificent. Raven released Beckett's body. With a loud thud it crashed onto the stone floor.

Lady Isadore went to collect the staff and explain the rapid and dangerous change of plans. Lady Alexandria knelt beside Gareth, holding a linen napkin over the bullet hole in his shoulder and murmuring words he couldn't hear. He wondered if the words were to heal him or to protect him from further attacks. Raven stared silently down at Beckett's body, and Gareth took a step in

her direction. The last thing he wanted was for her to live with the knowledge she'd killed a man.

The Hunter who'd shot Gareth stirred, clutching his gun.

"Look out!" Mac shouted. He dove across to knock the gun out of the Hunter's hand.

Scrambling with the Hunter for the weapon, Mac punched the man, simultaneously grabbing for the gun. It discharged, and he jerked his head around to check on Raven. The bullet seemed to have gone wild. He started to turn back when the Hunter leapt on his back. With a grunt, he tried to dislodge him. Knocking his head back, he heard, as well as felt, the crunch of bone. Turning, he saw the Hunter clutch his nose with one hand, the other hand wielding a second gun.

Wily little bastard.

Mac rolled out onto the lawn and out of the way of the Hunter's aim. Just as Mac turned back, he saw Raven walk forward, hand outstretched. The Hunter was swallowed whole by the ground and vanished under the neatly trimmed grass by the stone steps.

Shocked, he stared at Raven, who was pale and tense. He noted her trembling and moved toward her. Her eyes locked with his, and he could see the pain in them. Her hand reached for him, but she didn't move. He took another step closer.

Without a word, she turned and went to Moore.

Stunned, he watched her leave him. Moore was her friend as well as fiancé, and he was injured at that. It didn't stop the pang of jealousy and sadness that spread through him.

She'd made her choice then. It wasn't him.

Standing, he made his wobbly way into the Manor.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Unwilling to call Constable Peterson over their failed plan, Alexandria suggested, and the rest agreed, the best way to dispose of the Hunters was to burn their corpses. They burned two of the bodies, leaving the other where he lay under the ground. It was quick, neat, and left absolutely no trace. The ground looked barely disturbed afterwards.

“No one’s asked after them,” Isadore commented early the next morning.

“Do you really think anyone will?” Alexandria asked. They were in her rooms, still in their dressing gowns, too exhausted to formally dress for breakfast. “Do you think Sir John will have the audacity to question *us*?”

“No,” Isadore shook her head. “But the real concern will be who he has in the wings as a replacement.”

“Perhaps we’ll be able to work on neutralizing Sir John’s efforts,” she commented. “And finally having the peace we need to continue our work.”

Isadore leaned against the back of the chair, curling her legs under her. “Do you really think there are other masters out there?”

“’Tis a lovely notion.”

“You’re awake,” she whispered.

Raven smiled at him as she walked through the door and leaned over the bed. Seeing the poultice still in place, she asked, “How’s your shoulder?”

“Stiff,” Gareth grimaced. “Did you take care of the bonfire?”

“Of course,” she scoffed, annoyed that he always questioned her. “I told you I would, that

you shouldn't worry."

"I knew you could."

"And yet I know you watched from the window when I specifically told you not to get out of this bed."

He offered a sheepish grin. "I love watching you work."

She snorted in disbelief. Letting the silence spiral between them, she contemplated her situation. She couldn't go on like this, torn between love and duty, Malcolm and Gareth. Blanking her mind, she let her emotions take control. Climbing into bed, she smoothed the light hair from his forehead.

He looked at her, clearly puzzled. "Raven—"

"Shh," she whispered, letting her heart speak the words. "I've always cared for you, Gareth. I hope you believe this. Having a life with you would've been special, and I know we'd do so many wonderful things for us and our people."

He closed himself off. She could see him retreat behind his façade, the one she knew so well, the one that wasn't the true man. She wished she had known the real him sooner, yet even now she knew she'd barely graced the tip of his depths. He took her hand, thumb rubbing along her knuckles.

"I can feel you slipping away. You may be here in my bed, as close to me as can be, but I'm losing you, aren't I?"

It wasn't a question and she knew it.

"Gareth, I love you and always will." She rapidly blinked back tears, hating that she hurt him, knowing this was right. "You will always be one of the most important people on this earth to me and in my heart. But my heart is no longer free. It wasn't something I expected, nor could I

ever have imagined it. But I can no longer deny it.”

“With you, Raven,” he whispered, “I want to be a very selfish man. I want to hold you to me and not lose you.”

His gaze held hers, and she could see the sorrow there. The realization this was the end.

“But I know I already have.”

She squeezed his hand, unable to stop the tears. She pressed her lips to his. “I’m sorry.”

With that, she slipped out of the bed and didn’t look back as she left the room.

She furiously wiped her cheeks, and raced down the hall to Malcolm’s room. Mrs. Prim said he packed to leave. She couldn’t let him, not until she told him. Barging through the door without knocking, she scanned the room.

He spoke to Walter; she could hear them in the other room. She started for the connecting door when she noticed a note addressed to her on the writing desk. Hesitating for a fraction of a heartbeat, she left it, and went through the door.

“Malcolm.”

He glanced up, looked her over once, the wrinkled dressing gown, the no doubt wild disarray of her hair.

“Don’t you need to attend to Moore?” He turned back to his packing.

“There are others to attend to him,” she said, stepping further into the room. “I need not be there.”

His head jerked up, hands stilled. Now she had his attention. Walter took that moment to discreetly slip past her, murmuring apologies as he went.

“Are you running away, Lord Preston?”

“There’s nothing here for me anymore,” he said diffidently. She started to reply, but he cut

her off. "I've left you a letter, I'm sure you passed it on the way in."

"I saw it. But 'tis not a letter I want from you."

"I won't compromise when it comes to you." He dropped the things in his hand, and stalked toward her. "I cannot rest knowing the woman I love shares another's bed."

She smiled at him. He stopped several paces from her. He studied her with inquisitive eyes. She hated that she caused his puzzlement, that he didn't trust her any more.

"I'm pleased you can so easily dismiss what we had, Raven." His voice was as stiff as his shoulders. "It seems to amuse you."

She looked at him, letting her eyes devour every inch of his delicious body. She brought her gaze back to his, and saw the spark of interest there. He hadn't moved, neither toward her nor away.

"I ask for no compromise, Lord Preston," she said.

He didn't reply, silent and still. She was afraid he didn't understand her, that her words meant too little now, far too late. Then, he moved toward her again, but still didn't touch her. Out of the bottom of her eye she saw his hands clench.

"What's happened," he asked, "to make you change your mind?"

She opened herself then, allowing him to see everything she had to offer. This wasn't the time for coyness or mincing of words. It was far too important.

"I made the decision," she admitted. "Not for duty or friendship, not because of Gareth or the council. I made it because it's what I want."

"And what is that?"

"You."

He cupped her face then, his hands warm and large as he cradled her to him. His mouth

touched hers, and she eagerly opened for him. Moving her lips under his, she wondered why she'd ever thought of giving this feeling up. That she ever could. Pulling away, she watched him.

"This is not going to be an easy life, Malcolm. I love you very much and I want to be with you. But I'm still going to fulfill my obligations. I need that clear before anything else."

"I understand. And I agree, my love. I believe in everything you stand for, and I shall help you with what must be done."

The last piece of her heart, the piece she'd held closed from him because of who she was and who he wasn't, unlocked. Twining her arms about his neck, she kissed him again.

"Marry me," he murmured against her lips.

She nodded, and finally said, "Yes!"

Crushing her to him, he backed her out of the room and toward the bed. Eager to feel him, Raven impatiently tugged at his shirt and waistcoat. His warm skin beckoned, scars and all. Slipping her fingers along his spine, she felt the welts a long ago whip had made. One day she was going to explore his back, each and every scar. Not today.

She felt the edge of the bed against her thighs, but pushed away from Malcolm for a moment. Struggling for breath, she slid her peignoir over her shoulders, and teasingly unbuttoned the top of her nightgown. Malcolm's eyes turned golden as he watched her. Her lover, as impatient as she today, didn't wait for her to finish stripping.

With a sharp tug, he tore the fabric. It pooled at her feet and she stood naked before him.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said, voice harsh. "I'll never be able to get enough of you."

"Good," Raven smiled, stepping out of her clothing to press against him. "Now you're stuck with me."

He picked her up, mouth crushing hers as he gently laid her on the bed. His scent enveloped her, the masculine tang she so loved. With surprisingly steady fingers, she undid his pants, shoving them over hips and legs. Her fingers caressed his skin, and she shivered at the feel of him.

To think, she'd almost lost him.

As his mouth trailed up her belly, she wrapped her fingers around his cock, stroking the hard length of him. She wanted to taste him, to feel him once more fill her mouth. Shivering at the memory, she pushed at his shoulders with the intent to fulfill her desire.

"Oh!" she gasped when his teeth tugged on her nipple. The feeling shot straight to her center, and her hips jerked against his.

Abandoning her quest, she grabbed fistfuls of hair and redirected his mouth to hers. Deepening the kiss, she felt his hands on her thighs, lifting her against him. Her fingers danced along his back, feeling the scars of his body and making them hers. There wasn't anything about him she didn't want. Didn't love.

One of Malcolm's hands teased her opening. He slid one, two fingers into her, setting too slow a pace. She wrapped her legs around his waist, unwilling to let him go, and took control. Faster and harder she moved until he laughed and obeyed.

"I love you," Raven vowed, breaking the kiss.

He smiled down at her, hands combing her hair to fan onto the pillow. "And I you."

Pure joy shot through her. Things were finally right. She was meant to do this, meant to have him.

Malcolm took his time, careful to taste every inch of her. He worshiped her with touches and words, feather light kisses and soft caresses. The sensitive spot where her thigh ended and hip

began, her flat belly, the insides of her legs.

Slipping his fingers into her, she hissed with pleasure and felt his satisfied smile on her hip. He moved in and out of her, slow then fast, and the tension coiled higher and higher within her. His mouth suckled her breast, teeth scraping aching nipples, lightly at first.

“Harder,” she moaned, body moving to his forced pace. She wanted him now, wanted to feel her orgasm crash over her, feel him inside her as she climaxed.

He chuckled, and Raven wanted to say something more, but she was caught in passion’s grip. Could do naught more than cry in pleasure.

“More,” she whispered, head against the pillow, body straining to reach that peak. “Malcolm, I need more . . .”

“I know.” Malcolm nipped her lips.

Withdrawing his fingers, he kissed his way back down her body, and ignored her pleas, her frustration. She cried out, a breathy pant of need as her body strained. So close. Moving her hands from where they curled into the sheets, Raven pinched and rolled her nipples. Shaking, her hips moved against his mouth, desperate.

He bit down on her nub. She cried his name as she fell over the edge.

“Need you,” he said an instant before thrusting into her.

Her eyes shot open, hands still on her breasts, hard nipples straining through her fingers. Fully seated within her welcoming body, he moved. Holding onto each other, they moved together wrapped tightly around each other.

“Malcolm,” she gasped.

Wrapping arms and legs around him, she held him close. Perfection. More than perfect, and she felt her orgasm build once again.

“Raven,” he said, the word muffled against her shoulder, breath hot on her skin.

She felt herself let go then, let the glorious sensations rush through her in an explosion. She felt him tighten above her. When she lazily opened her eyes, she saw him watching her.

“You’re still going to marry me, right?” he demanded, chest heaving.

“Of course,” she chuckled, and drew him down for a kiss. “You’re not getting rid of me. Not any more.”

THE END