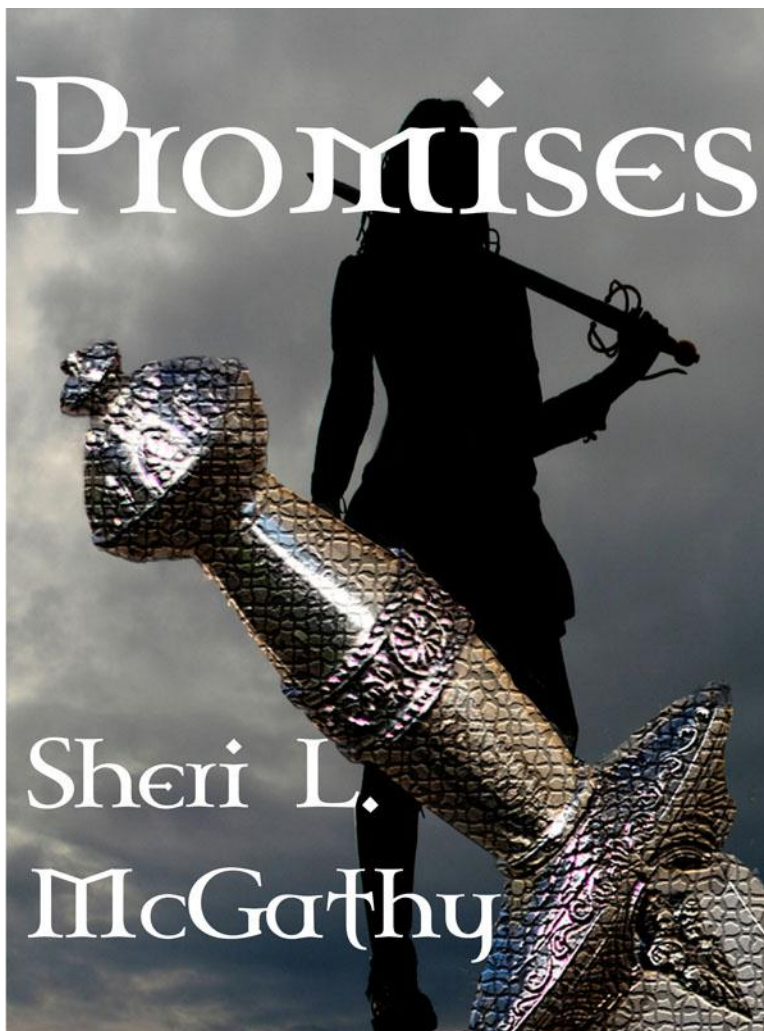


# Promises

Sheri L.  
McGathy



**Promises**

**By.**

**Sheri L. McGathy**

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Shay watched from the depths of her hood as the next player reached across the reed mat and tried his luck. The fine lace of his sleeves swayed as he rubbed the ivory sticks between his flawlessly smooth hands. Proof that she sparred with men who had not stood in the shadow of war but rather allowed others to do it for them.

Unable to stop herself, she leaned in toward the circle as the man flung the bones into the air. She watched the slender sticks twirl, over and over, end over end, in an impossibly slow ascent. When they tumbled to the mat and came to a halt, she tried to look away, tried to act as if the tally meant nothing to her, yet she found she could not.

"Two stripes, but no arrow showing!" the game master shouted above the din filtering through the rickety walls—walls intended to shelter the gamer but not to stop a prying eye.

"The game continues. Wagers?" the game master called out as he retrieved the gaming sticks from the floor. "Place 'em now, or kindly leave the game. High bidder holds the bones, losers moan."

The gamers tossed their wagers to the center of the mat to join the already impressive riches scattered there. Bejeweled daggers and pressed silver leaf mingled with rare gold droplets and even rarer flat coins—treasures from the time before the Mage Wars gave birth to the Divide and split the world in two.

Shay lifted her brow, the only reaction she allowed herself. If she had held any doubts to the seriousness of the game or the sanity of its players, the appearance of these rarities dismissed them. One did not easily part with such Old World wealth unless one had plenty to spare, or like her, harbored a need that went far beyond earthly gain.

Unlike the others gathered here, Shay did not crave the riches spread before her. The only prize she sought was a small silver dagger with a blood red ruby set high in its hilt lying unnoticed among the shine of gold. A Spirit Blade, an ancient weapon, imbued with a magic far older than any lingering in this world, its full power awakened by Tereece, a mage Shay had once sworn her allegiance. A mage she now vowed to destroy for his treachery. The blade was the key to her quest and her revenge—revenge long overdue—and the only reason she had ventured into this mudhole of a town.

It had taken her over a year to find the dagger, following lead after lead, trusting only to the reluctant murmurs and forgotten voices from countless blades, phantom

whispers only she could hear, until finally the dagger revealed itself to her. Now that she had found it, she intended to possess the blade—by whatever means it took.

When it came her turn to wager, she eased toward the mat and pulled her pouch free from her belt. Before she could show her ante, one of the New Worlders near the back of the room shouted, "Foul, Game Master. Bones is no sport for a woman."

"I have another sport in mind for her." A man beside her, a lord by the look of him, drew his finger along her dark braid that lay against her breast. "One I would gladly pay to play." A mix of raunchy laughter followed his remark.

Shay ignored him. She kept her gaze locked to the game master as she emptied her pouch of its contents. The soft, musical tinkling of fine Elven dracas tumbling through the air brought a hush to the smoke-filled room. All eyes now focused on the mat and the coveted coins.

The game master's eyes grew wide. He licked his lips as he stared at the dracas. Without taking his gaze from the mat, he said, "Beat the wager, or the wench gets her turn."

When no one countered with a higher ante, Shay leaned forward and scooped up the bones. As she rubbed them between her damp palms, she offered a silent prayer, *My Lady of the Blade, grant me skill, for my need is just.*

If she won the blade fairly, it would demand no blood debt from her. Yet, if she lost, she was prepared to take it from its new owner, whether he was willing or not. She had made a promise, and she was prepared to forfeit her life to see that promise fulfilled.

She opened her hand and let the ivory sticks tumble free and held her breath as they rolled across the mat to rest beside the glittering dracas.

"Seven arrows and nary a strike," the game master whispered as he lifted his shocked gaze to her. "Seven arrows," he repeated, though this time his words were stronger. "The wench wins!"

Shay let her breath out slowly.

Amidst the grumbling of the losers, she knelt to scoop her winnings into her pack. She would give it all to those far more deserving than these men of supposed nobility, all save for the dracas and the small silver dagger with the ruby embedded in its hilt. The dracas had been a gift from the man she loved, and the dagger would be her gift to him.

As she grasped the dagger's hilt, a hand clasped her wrist and stayed her hand.

"How does a common tavern wench come by such wealth?"

Shay's fingers played across the cold, inviting metal of the dagger as she said, "How I came by such wealth is of no concern of yours."

"Watch your tongue, *thief*." The stranger yanked her to her feet.

Before her hood could pool about her shoulders, Shay had the dagger pressed to the man's throat. "This blade has tasted blood before. It hungers for it now. Do you truly wish to insult the one person here skilled enough to keep it from feeding upon you?"

The color drained from the man's face. "I-I meant n-no insult," he stammered. Sweat beaded across his brow as he stared at the glowing mage mark seared into the side of her neck, just below her ear—a mark that proclaimed her skill with a blade. "If I had known you were a Blade Whisperer, I would—"

"You would have run from the room." Shay shoved him away and sheathed the dagger within the pouch of her boot.

"Gentlemen," she nodded toward the players where they huddled near the back of the room, "it has been a pleasure."

#

Without a word of explanation, Shay left her winnings with the Wilder Elders and made her way through the maze of hole-filled tents and fragile huts hastily assembled against the approaching winter. She was reluctant to remain in the company of the Wilders longer than she needed, choosing to stay within the concealing shadows cast by the ancient oaks surrounding their encampment.

This night, the camp was subdued; its Old World occupants wary, many refusing to meet her gaze, preferring to stare into the flickering flames of their fire pits as she passed. Like herself, these were the displaced, the homeless—the true casualties of the Mage Wars. Yet, unlike her, these few were all that were left of the once noble nations of Elf, Dwarf, and Fay—all betrayed by the very magic created to protect them, a magic that instead left these remnants of a once great peoples without a land to call their own.

Yet, she was the true outcast here, an Old World warrior who had served the mages who had waged the war. Though she carried the magic of their kind, she was still human, and they knew it. The Wilders did not care that she, too, had lost her home to the Divide that fateful day, they saw only that being human gave her acceptance in this strange new world while they had none.

Scared and alone in a world that feared Wilders perhaps more than the magic they bore, these once noble peoples huddled together out of necessity rather than any loyalty to one another, living shields against the hatred surrounding them. They had become little more than prisoners, held captive by a web of pulsating power gone awry, unable to pass through the Divide to learn whether any part of their world had survived the wave of destruction the mages had unleashed. To try would mean certain death.

Shay sighed. Yet, to do nothing could well mean the same end, only slower.

Eventually, the Divide would steal away what little magic still lingered in this world, leaching its holders dry to feed its need, and then these once great races would fade from memory, to be forgotten in myth.

Given time, the Divide would drain her of her own magic though she shielded it well. What would it feel like to be merely human? No more, no less. She frowned as she thought of the journey ahead. She wondered if she would survive to know.

"Yet, I hope to live long enough to keep my promise," she whispered as the weight of the dagger haunted her every step.

She hitched her pack higher as she ducked beneath a low-hanging limb. From the branches overhead she heard a familiar raspy voice say, "Shay, Shay, Shay, Shay, Shay." The words seemed more a reprimand than a greeting.

"I said no, Kyle," Shay replied without pausing.

The flap of wings echoed overhead, followed quickly by a deeper sigh from somewhere ahead of her. "Ah, I am afraid that is a problem," came Kyle's soothing baritone from the shadows near her left, "for it is no secret I have had trouble in the past with that word."

Shay smirked. "Apparently, you still do."

As she turned toward the River Walk district, her friend and former comrade-in-arms stepped free of the shadows and glided along beside her, his stride bold, with a swagger unusual for one of his kind.

Indeed, there was nothing usual about Kyle. Most Wind Riders preferred the shield of anonymity, seeking to blend in, remain unnoticed and unremarked when in their wingless forms. Most kept their coloring as bland as their surroundings, their actions as unthreatening as a mouse, most, but not Kyle. He seemed to revel in the light, to thrive in its glow. He was taller than most of his kind and imposing, with a presence that was hard to ignore. His eyes were as dark as midnight, yet his hair was as golden as the dawn. Worn long and unbound, it flowed down his back in rippling waves. The sight of that thick mane alone drew the eye, and once the eye beheld his unearthly gaze, it was hard to turn away. He mesmerized much like the fabled Wind Riders of old, and that was his greatest weapon and his greatest source of conflict with his people.

"You will need me, Shay of the Isle Mists."

Shay rolled her eyes, but kept walking. "How so?" she finally asked.

Kyle flashed her a smile. "Why, to guard your back. I cannot do so if I am forbidden to come along, little one."

"No." Shay shook her head. "You made no vow, nor took an oath. The war is over. You are free to grow old, my friend, take that freedom and go home."

"Ah, but it takes so long for my kind to grow old, and we bore so very easily." He shrugged. "And there is yet one battle left unfinished."

"And that battle is for me alone."

Kyle placed his hand on her shoulder and forced her to face him. "I loved him, too."

Shay met his gaze, unafraid of the allure of his eyes. He could not compel her. She had no right to deny him, though she knew it unlikely that either of them would survive.

She nodded. "If my fears are proven true, we leave at dawn."

Shay stared into the fire pit, hypnotized by the ebb and flow of the flame as it consumed the wood that fed it. She could hear the spirit of the dagger whispering to her and knew it would soon be time to call forth the soul it held trapped within. Yet, what truth would be revealed and what demands would be made of her? If she again looked upon his face, a face she had loved, and heard his voice, would her determination falter?

She was no longer sure how she would react.

As the moon inched toward its zenith, she pulled the blade free of her boot and allowed its edge to taste her skin. She would try. That was all she could promise.

She smeared her palm over the dagger's hilt and waited for the moon to bathe the now bloodied jewel in its light. She was not made to wait long. As the moonlight filtered through both blood and jewel, a form slowly took shape on the other side of the fire pit. More mist than man, yet she knew who stood across from her.

"Shay?" he whispered, his voice more a memory than any true sound. She could see the confusion in his soft brown gaze.

Her darkest fear was now confirmed. The blade had stolen the soul of the one person who had mattered more to her than life itself. The only man she had ever truly loved. Her heartbeat quickened. How she longed to touch him, feel his arms about her, hear his assured murmurs against her cheek. She took an involuntary step forward before she managed to halt her steps. There would be no warmth found in his embrace. He was nothing more than an echo of the past.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she held them from him. This was not the time for weakness. The Spirit Blade would only allow her this one reunion, one moment, and then he would be gone, returned to the limbo that was now his existence. She must not waste it on sorrow.

"Garrett," she managed to say without betraying the hopeless anguish she harbored for them both.

He looked to the dagger she held in her hand, his confusion quickly turned to anger. "So it was not a dream." It wasn't a question.

Before she could answer, Garrett added, "Do what you know you must. It is the only way to see me free."

"Garrett, I—"



"You will find what you seek to the north, within Castle Dray, hidden in the shadow of Mount Maracorn."

Shay shook her head. "There must be another way, something else..." Even as the words escaped her, she knew she had no other choice.

"No matter what happens, remember only this." Garrett's voice gently caressed her as memories of another time, and another moonlit night flooded her senses. She closed her eyes and let the tidal wave of emotions carry her back to that other life, one before their dreams were stolen away. The wind carried the faint hint of clover mingled with the scent of their spent passion even as it cooled their heated flesh. With moon and stars to bear witness, they spoke their promises in the silence born of a looming battle, neither knowing what the new day would bring, but assured that neither would leave the other to fate alone.

"Do not abandon me, Shay." Garrett's whispered plea brought her back to the here and now even as his ethereal form faded to the past.

"I never did." Her words hung heavily in the stillness of the night as she wiped the blood from the jewel and sheathed the blade in her boot.

#

Shay woke to the sound of footsteps and darkness. Before sleep could completely abandon her, she was on her feet, weapon in hand.

"Is this how you greet an old friend?" Kyle raised a brow toward the sword pointed at his heart.

Shay lowered her weapon and then wiped the dew from its smooth blade before sheathing it.

Kyle stared at the bandage wrapped about her hand. "Have you discovered the truth you sought?"

Shay nodded.

Kyle squatted before the fire pit, hands held close to the smoldering embers.

"Then I think we need to leave, now. We risk much if we wait for dawn."

"What do you mean?"

"The Divide grows stronger, its reach expanding. It has tasted the magic of this world and found it to its liking. It will now seek to possess it all." He stood and placed a finger against the mark on her neck. "Your mage mark glows. Do you not feel the theft? If we do not distance ourselves from the Divide's touch, we will soon become its victims."

"Then I have some worrisome news for you, my friend," Shay said as she strapped on her battle harness. The reassuring weight of her sword settled easily across her back. "We must journey north toward the Divide, to Castle Dray."

Kyle lifted one sleek brow and smiled. "Good thing I have trouble with the word worrisome."

"Aye, a good thing."

As she kicked dirt over the fire pit, she heard him say, "And a very good thing you have a Wind Rider as ally."

When she turned around, the man Kyle was gone. In his place stood a magnificent creature of both land and air with a beast's muscled body and an eagle's head. His golden wings shimmered as he spread them wide.

"I will carry you as close to the castle as I dare, but I must not stray too near the Divide. I am a magical being; it would mean my doom."

Shay bowed her head. "And I would not ask it of you."

His eyes were full of sadness as he said, "I worry for you, little one. He is strong if he dwells so near the Divide, yet you, I fear, may not be so kindly spared. Your magic will be consumed, and I will not be there to guard your back. You will be defenseless against one such as he."

Shay met his gaze. "My strength does not rely on magic; my strength comes from my heart." She hoped that would be enough.

Kyle lowered his shoulder to her. "Then climb aboard, little one. Destiny awaits us."

The chill wind brushed against her face, drying the tears she'd been unable to contain as Kyle silently carried her through the night. Toward the east, the blush of dawn stained the sky, stealing away the solitude cocooning her. She was reluctant to greet the new day for fear of what it held.

To the north, the sky was lit by a faint glow that grew brighter the closer they flew. The Divide. Shay hadn't seen it since that last battle that gave it birth. As Kyle had warned, it had grown.

Kyle veered west toward a dusky shape looming along the horizon. Shay's pulse quickened. Mount Maracorn. Castle Dray would soon be within reach. She fingered the dagger in her boot. Soon, she would discover whether she was as strong as Garrett trusted her to be.

"I will land near the top of the mount, where the pull of the Divide is less," Kyle called over his shoulder.

Shay nodded.

As soon as he was on the ground, she hopped from his back and waved him away. "Leave, Kyle, do not risk yourself further."

He nuzzled his great eagle's head against her chest as he folded his wings. "I will return for you, little one. Do not disappoint me."

"If I can, I will be here. That is all I can promise."

"And that is all I will ask." Kyle spread his wings and leaped into the air. "May you fare well in battle, Shay of the Isle Mists, and your blade strike true."

"May we both live to fight another day," she called to his fleeting form as she took the trail that would take her down to Castle Dray. "Or die this day with honor."

#

Shay crossed the drawbridge unchallenged and stepped into a deserted bailey. When last she had stood here, the castle was preparing for battle, the bailey filled with organized confusion as warriors made ready to defend. Her liege lord, the mage Tereece, had stood on the battlement, his trusted bodyguard Garrett at his side—the only one near the mage when the magical backlash came.

Her steps echoed loudly on the leaf-strewn cobblestones as she made her way toward the Keep. The wind howled through the abandoned arrow loops and blew fine ash across the tops of her boots—ash that had once been living, breathing warriors who had foolishly trusted a mage whose only purpose was to serve his own needs.

If not for Kyle whisking her above the blast, she too would have died that dawn and the mage's thievery would have gone uncontested.

The thought of Garrett made her heart ache. He had been everything to her, the reason she had sworn an allegiance to Tereece and allowed his mage mark to scar her skin.

*Garrett.* She could still hear his murmured words of passion as they had lain under the stars that long ago night, still feel his touch, his breath...his pleasure. A moan escaped her.

She closed her eyes, seeing again his proud form standing tall upon the battlement, his hair blowing free, his cape bellowing out behind him as he pointed to something only he and the mage could see. And then, he had spun about, his gaze finding hers and she knew true fear. Time slowed, and in that moment before fire rained down upon Castle Dray, the mage pulled his dagger and drove the blade into his own heart and disappeared, taking Garrett with him. The dagger had fallen to the wall-walk, and was lost to her in the chaos that followed.

The same dagger she now carried in her boot. Fairly won in a game of chance and freely taken with no barter given or oath sworn. She owed the blade no debt, and it would demand nothing of her. The only demands she faced would be those she made of herself.

She now stood where her quest had begun. Would she have the courage to see it to its end?

She entered the Keep. Her answer waited within.

#

Shay brushed away the cobwebs that hung like filmy curtains across the doorway. The grand hall was silent save for the crackling of flame in the great fireplace along the far wall. The fire neither dispelled the darkness of the room, nor chased away its chill.

She took a tentative step beyond the arch of the entryway, taking an odd comfort in the smoothness of the dagger's jeweled hilt against her palm where she held it hidden behind her back. Though this close to the Divide she should not have been able to, she could feel its eagerness, its desire for blood, hear its whispers.

As she made to move deeper into the room, a man stepped free of the shadows beyond the fire's glow. Shay faltered, sure he could hear the pounding of her heart in the stillness about them.

"Blade Whisperer." Garrett approached her with arms open in greeting. "You have returned."

She took a step back, unwilling to be touched though every fiber of her being wished to feel his arms about her one last time. This man before her only sought to confuse her.

"Aye," her voice did not betray the turmoil she felt, "I have returned. We have unfinished business, you and I."

He dropped his arms. "Have we?" His gaze searched her face, seemed to bore into her as if seeking knowledge he had no right to possess. And then he smiled.

"We were lovers." There was surprise, as well as amusement in his voice. "Our bond was strong, stronger than many knew, and strong still."

His voice caressed her, called to her, and she found herself responding despite her determination to stand firm. Her fickle heart wished only to believe what her mind told her could not be true.

"You searched for me in the chaos following the blast, but I was gone. You feared me lost to you forever, my beautiful Shay." Her name flowed smoothly from his lips as he moved closer.

Before she could step away, he drew his thumb along her jaw line, sending shivers down her spine and confusion to her mind and heart. Her mage mark glowed in the gloom, responding to his touch. "Yet, all the while I was here waiting for you."

"Garrett," she whispered, the man's nearness giving rise to a longing that threatened to defeat her. She leaned into him, breathing in his smell, responding to a touch she thought to never feel again. Reliving, if only for a moment, what might have

been. Tears came unbidden to her eyes. How often had she wished she had died in Garrett's arms that long ago dawn? She no longer knew the answer.

He placed his hand over the mark on her neck. His touch burned, yet she found she could not pull away, no longer sure she wanted to, even if she could.

"Surrender to me," he whispered against her cheek, the sound of his voice so compelling. "Give me what I need, and I shall give you what your heart desires."

She lifted her face to him. He lowered his lips to hers.

All that she knew to be true fled as his mouth covered hers. Her body grew weak, her thoughts scattered. The will to resist him slowly ebbed away. A chill swept through her as he sought to steal what she had not yet freely given. His kiss was hard and demanding as his fingers encircled her neck. Her mage mark seemed aflame, yet his theft remained unsatisfied as some part of her she barely sensed continued to resist his touch.

"Do not hold back, Blade Whisperer," he murmured against her lips. "Surrender your essence to me. If you do as I ask, you and your lover will be together, forever."

Shay moaned, her lips seeking his even as she ran a finger along the edge of the dagger, letting it taste of her, heightening its need. Her blood seeped down the blade to drip against the cobblestones. The solemn sound merged with his laughter, a laughter that claimed victory even before the battle had been ceded.

Garrett's laughter had never been so harsh or so cruel. Her heart realized the truth even though her mind seemed unwilling to accept it. A strength she did not realize she possessed shattered the spell fogging her thoughts and let her see the reality before her.

Shay tightened her hand on the dagger's hilt. "Aye, forever," she managed to say. "If not in this lifetime, then in another. I promised him that."

As if on its own accord, her arm swung forward and arched downward, burying the dagger in his heart.

He gasped, his expression more one of surprise than pain. His fingers tightened on her throat. His eyes flashed with anger even as the dagger sought to claim his soul. "You shall pay for this, Blade Whisperer," he growled as his hand closed over hers, still holding tight to the dagger's hilt.

"I already have, mage!" The anguished scream tore from her raw throat. She gave the dagger another twist, burying it to the hilt. Her tears stung her eyes. Pain pierced her

own heart as his blood, warm and thick, flowed across her hand. "The day you imprisoned Garrett's soul in the blade and stole his body was the day I died."

Shay managed to pry his fingers from her and stumble free. She gasped for what little air would pass her bruised and swollen throat as she watched him sink to his knees, his life fading. He clawed at the dagger, but it was no use. The blade possessed him now. The ruby gleamed a brilliant red. She could hear its whispered glee; feel its triumph and blood lust. With one last gasp, the mage fell to the floor and went still, surrendering Garrett's body to a death long denied.

Shay sank to her knees beside him, her forehead resting on his chest and gave free rein to her tears.

"Shay?"

She lifted her head. Perhaps whoever hid within the darkness would kill her now and spare her the pain of living.

"Shay, look at me."

The dagger in Garrett's chest burned bright, bathing his still form in golden light while a far softer glow took shape above his body. Within that gentle light, knelt her lover, her Garrett, as she remembered him before the mage had stolen his body and condemned his soul to an endless limbo within the Spirit Blade.

A calm acceptance had replaced the despair haunting his gaze as he stretched a hand toward her. His touch was a soothing balm to her burdened heart. "Go, live your life with no regrets, Shay. Do not allow the sadness that lingers here to destroy you. Instead, remember only how well we lived and loved. Promise me."

She could barely see him through her tears as she nodded. "I will try, that is all I can promise."

His fingers played across her lips. His smile was sad as he stood and stepped away from his earthly remains, his wispy form blending into the nothingness of darkness. "Your courage has freed me. If not for your strength, I would be trapped for all eternity with no hope of seeing you again. Do not waste such strength on sorrow. Live for us both." As the light dimmed and he faded from her view, she heard his whispered words proclaim, "I will be waiting for you when your time here is through. We shall be together then. It is my promise to you."

#

Shay dangled her legs over the rim of the cliff and watched in silence as Castle Dray burned far below her. Smoke billowed skyward, the flames dancing in greedy celebration as the twilight breezes wafted among them. The sun was setting to the west, and the north sky blazed with the spectral glow of the Divide though it was neither so bright nor so greedy without the mage to fuel it. In time, perhaps, it would fade and like the cleansing fires below, would offer the world another chance. She hoped so, anyway.

In time, perhaps her own pain would fade and she would come to accept that Garrett was gone. Perhaps she would even find the courage to forgive herself for the role she played in his demise. And perhaps, in time, she would offer herself another chance at love, another chance at happiness, but not now. For now, she would grieve.

She stared into the flames, letting her regrets burn with the remnants of her past. She had promised Garrett that much. The rest that he had asked, she would leave to time.

"I see you did not disappoint me, Shay of the Isle Mists." Kyle, once again in human form, took a seat beside her.

Without taking her gaze from the flames, she tucked his hand in hers and said, "I seem to have trouble with the word disappoint."

Kyle tossed his head back and laughed. "It is a good thing you do, little one, a very good thing indeed."

The End





### About Sheri L. McGathy

“Born in the Buckeye state, I was uprooted in 1971 and replanted amongst sunflowers, tornadoes, and college football. It’s a good life.” ~ Sheri L. McGathy

### Who am I?

During the weekdays, I’m a Graphic Arts Coordinator/Copy Editor in prepress. In the evenings and weekends, I’m a writer...or I try to be. Sometimes that is debatable.

I’m often asked why I write fantasy, and I usually answer that fantasy, to me, evokes the wonder of dreams and unfettered possibilities. It can be filled with fanciful pleasures or unimaginable fears—all the things we believed in without question when we were kids.

Fantasy is Santa and pixie dust, unicorns with long golden horns and white flowing manes. Fantasy is the monster that lurked in the shadows beneath your bed when you were little. Fantasy is fantastical and holds the promise that wishes just might come true if only we dare to believe.

I write fantasy because I believe in the magic.

~.:\*::~\*::~~May the magic always brighten your world~.:\*::~\*::~~

Books By Sheri L. McGathy

<http://sherimcgathy.com/sheri/books/>

### ~ THIEF OF DREAMS~

Nerys Devi has met the man she could love with all her heart, the one she would share her dreams with. Yet, fate has other plans. Instead of sharing her dreams, will he now be doomed to haunt them?

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forever. When the spirits showed her a future that would see her beloved trees destroyed, Talwyn vowed to protect them, even if it meant never returning to the mist again.

Within the swirling mists of time, fanciful whispers give birth to wonders beyond any known reality and shape a single moment into legend. This is one such tale.

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