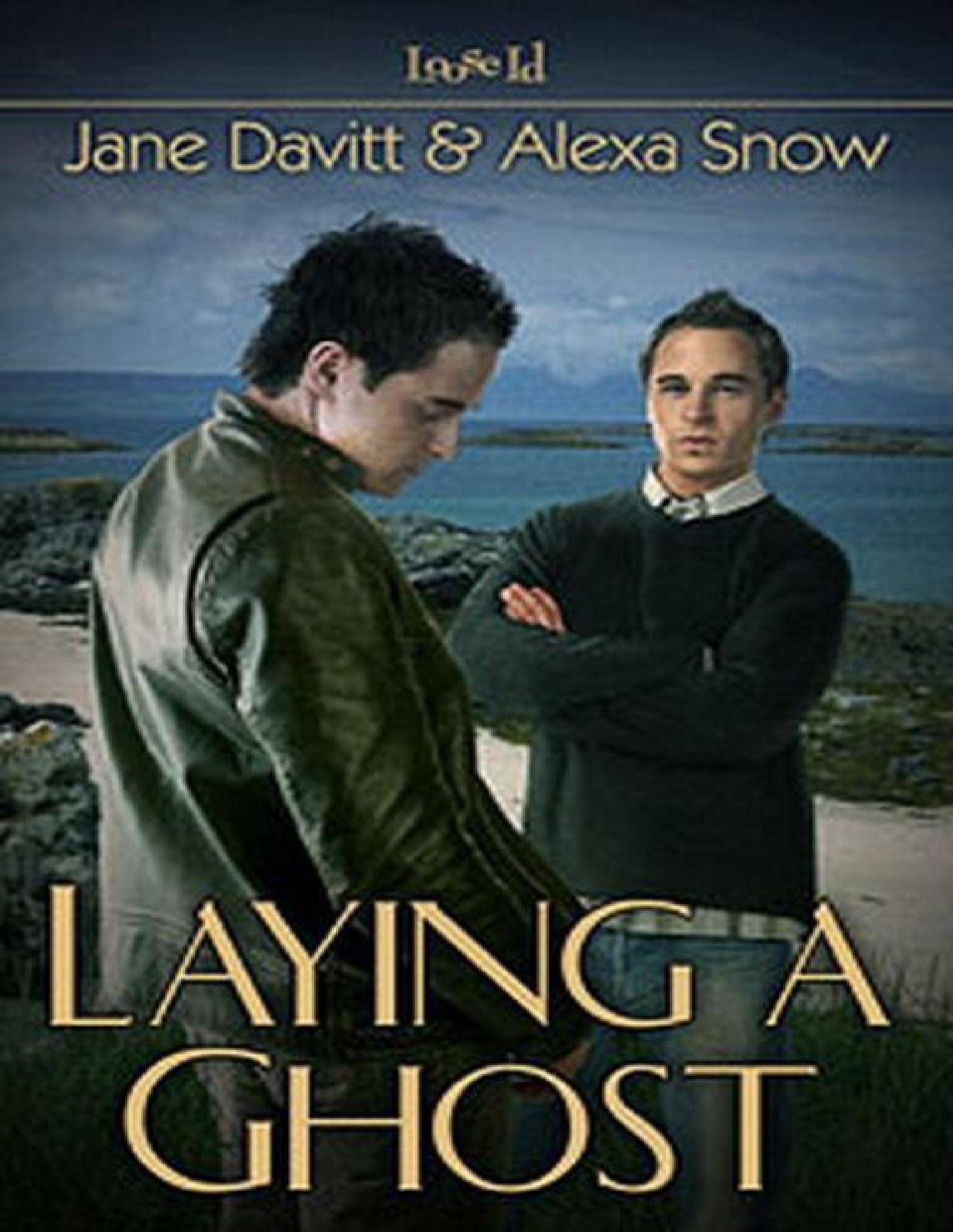


Loose Id

Jane Davitt & Alexa Snow



LAYING A
GHOST

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Chapter One

"It's starting to look promising out there; will you be fishing this afternoon, then, John?"

John smiled up at the waitress who'd just brought him his lunch. Katy was a sweet girl, but for all that she'd been born and brought up on the island, she didn't have an eye for the weather. The clouds scudding across a deep-blue sky were bringing more rain, and although that wouldn't stop him from fishing, the wind carrying them would make putting out to sea difficult.

"Not today, no." He picked up his knife and fork and prodded at three miniature carrots on the edge of his plate, looking even smaller next to the pile of chips and the generous piece of homemade chicken and vegetable pie. "Did these shrink when you cooked them, lassie?"

Katy giggled, tossing her head so that her long ponytail of dark-brown hair swung jauntily. "It's *her* idea, is that. Thinks the tourists appreciate a bit of style. It's that nouvelle cuisine."

John sighed. Stella Duncan was a fine woman, and she'd done wonders turning a small, dingy shop selling ice cream and postcards into a well-lit, airy tourist trap with a thriving restaurant attached, but sometimes she got just a little too ambitious. John recalled the night he'd strolled into the Eilean Bay Restaurant and Bar, wanting nothing more than a ham sandwich and a pint of bitter, only to find that it was Caribbean Night and the menu consisted of searingly spicy food with sticky fruit cocktails made from -- as far as he could gather from one cautious -- tinned pineapple juice and one hell of a lot of rum in place of a decent ale. He pushed the carrots aside in mute protest and reached for the bottle of ketchup before Stella came out of the kitchen and whisked it away for being too common.

"The ferry's coming in," Katy remarked, hitching her hip onto the table and staring out the large window with the air of one who has nothing to do. John started to count silently. He'd reached four when Stella appeared in the doorway and gave the back of Katy's head a fierce glare which fifty years had honed to a weapon.

"And is it a holiday you're wanting, Katy? A long holiday with nothing to do but twiddle your thumbs because you're out of work?"

Katy jerked upright, green eyes wide with appeal, and turned to face her employer. "A holiday? No, Mrs. Duncan! And I wasn't -- I was just making sure John -- Mr. McIntyre, I mean, had everything he needed."

Stella studied her in grim silence and then sniffed disbelievingly. Katy hurried past her, head down, and Stella winked at John, her thin face lightening, before following Katy back into the spotless kitchen.

John chuckled, shook his head, and applied himself to his food, staring out at the choppy sea as he ate it. The ferry was making its ponderous way across the wide channel separating Traighshee from the mainland, skirting around the smaller island of Iona to the west and stopping there to drop off passengers before reappearing and heading for the dock at EileanBay. John, who amongst other things ran an informal taxi service, timed the last mouthful to coincide with the first passenger off the ferry, and stood, leaving a generous tip for poor Katy, and a plate empty of all but the carrots.

He made his way into the gift shop, which had a small sign in the window saying "McIntyre's Taxi. Enquire Within" -- Stella was his auntie's cousin, and family helped family. So far all the passengers had been locals. There was young Jim Cameron, back from visiting his gran in Oban; and the Holloways, laden with art supplies to be transformed into paintings; and pots for Stella to sell as authentic island crafts, although the pair of them were English, with strong Midland accents even an American tourist couldn't mistake for a Highland lilt.

As he watched, the final passenger disembarked, and John smiled, scenting a fare. Hadn't seen that one before. Even from a distance of a few hundred yards, the man stood out, the battered brown leather jacket and jeans he wore doing nothing to disguise the fact that he was clearly a visitor. In fact, they emphasized it. John was wearing jeans himself, but they were stained white with salt-water and decorated with the odd splotch of oil as he'd spent the morning tinkering with the engine of his boat. This man's jeans were clean, dark and well-fitting, and his leather jacket, no matter how worn, marked him as a visitor. John, like most men his age on the island, owned a suit for funerals, an oilskin for bad weather, and spent the rest of the time in a shirt and a thick sweater, shedding or adding layers as the seasons changed.

The newcomer was carrying a large suitcase and had a heavy bag slung across his shoulders. From here, John could see something wrapped around the man's left wrist, and he frowned. If the man had hurt himself, he'd not be here for the fishing or the climbing -- not that Traighshee had anything like the Cuillins, but there were some challenging climbs on the single mountain, Ben Dearg, that reared up, heather-clad at its base, from the centre of the island. Ben Dearg had been mist-shrouded at sunrise when John had woken, and that, more than anything, had told

him that the weather would be chancy.

The man got closer, and John's eyes narrowed with an interest he hoped he could keep from showing on his face. It wasn't curiosity that drove John now, but a strong, visceral attraction, the kind of reaction that bypassed sense, because it really wasn't sensible to be standing there with his cock half-hard and his heart pounding. Not when he knew nothing more about the man than what he'd gleaned from a glance or two.

John took a breath that was supposed to calm him down and didn't do much because he couldn't drag his eyes away from the stranger. The longer he looked, the more his mind had to work with. The man walked toward him, his head tilting back to follow the swoop of a seagull diving down to snatch at a scrap of food on the road, exposing the strong, clean line of his profile.

It had been too long and lonely a winter, that was all, but John didn't think he'd be the only one viewing him with approval. The visitor was good-looking by anyone's standards, with dark, straight hair. He was taller than John by an inch or two, and with a runner's build to him. He looked tired though, and as the clouds split and the warm May sunshine poured through the gap, illuminating him, John saw that his first impression, of a man in his mid-twenties, had been a little off. The man looked to be about thirty, like John, and the green eyes squinting against the sun were shadowed with fatigue.

The shop door opened and John abandoned his pretended study of a dubious oil painting of Segrith Bay at sunset, awash with lurid red, and watched the man walk in and go to the counter. Stella's arrival, as she came bustling out to greet him, allowed John the chance to get himself under control, for which he was grateful. He was going to have to speak to the man in a moment and he had no wish to make a fool of himself tripping over his tongue.

The stranger exchanged a few words with Stella, his voice low enough that John was unable to tell where he was from. Stella studied his face with a mixture of curiosity and concern that John wasn't used to seeing -- fine a woman as she was, and people on the island tended to add that phrase whenever she was spoken of, Stella wasn't known for being soft-hearted.

She was nodding now, and a moment later her eyes moved over and met John's as the man turned to look in his direction as well. "Fare for you, John," Stella said, raising her voice enough so that it carried across the room to where John was standing. "This fella's going to Rossneath House and needs a ride."

John walked over to greet the man, extending his hand automatically. It was taken briefly in a strong clasp and his smile was returned just as fleetingly, dropping off the man's face as though it was too much effort to keep it there. John had seen men look like that before, coming back from three days and nights fishing on the trawlers with sleep a fond memory by the time their feet were back on land.

"You'll be kin to old Ian then, will you?" John asked, barely troubling to make it a question.

Rossneath House had stood empty for two years now, its owner dying slowly in a nursing home on the mainland. His choice -- there were plenty who would've taken care of him, but the old man was stubborn and preferred, he said, the charity of strangers to the pity of friends. John hadn't known Ian Kelley well; he'd kept himself to himself, as much as was possible on an island where gossip was less a character flaw than a hobby, but he'd liked him well enough. Ian had had a sister, two decades younger than him, born late enough to have been spoiled by parents who'd never thought they'd be blessed with children again. A bonnie girl, with just this man's dark hair and green eyes, she'd left the island as soon as she could, and broken her parents' hearts doing it.

Not that John blamed her. Fiona Kelley had left before he was born, but she wasn't the first teenager to go, and she hadn't been the last. There wasn't a lot to keep a youngster on the island, and from the odd photograph of her that he'd seen in his mother's album, her skirts flying as she danced at a ceilidh, she'd been one of the restless ones. Her feet had danced her all the way to America, there to die of cancer four years before her older brother was laid to rest in the churchyard he'd been able to see from his bedroom window, green graves and white stones marking the places where the peaty soil had been disturbed for the dead to sleep comfortably.

And now it looked like Fiona's son, Ian's nephew, had come to the island to look over his inheritance. John shrugged to himself. He'd see the place, be on the next ferry out, and it'd be put up for sale within the week most probably. Not that anyone would buy it, with the state the housing market on Traighshee was in. Philosophically resigned to yet another building on the island being abandoned for the gales to tear down, the rain to wash clean, and the sheep to wander through what remained, John waited for the man to speak and confirm what was less a guess than a certainty.

"He was my uncle," the man said. His eyes, John decided, were unsettling; not because of anything in particular about them, but because of the way they didn't stay still. They flitted from one thing to another as if the man were nervous. Not that it was any of John's business if he was.

"I don't want to delay you, but I was hoping for a few minutes to sit down." The dark haired man straightened, the creak of his leather jacket making it clear that it had been in his possession for some time. Turning to Stella, he

asked, "I don't suppose there's any chance I could get an espresso?"

The look of disdain that swept across Stella's features was there and gone quickly enough that John doubted the newcomer had seen it. She didn't make any attempt to hide it from her voice, though. "You'd be not supposing right," she said. "We've got coffee and tea. Even some of that herbal stuff without caffeine, although I can't see why anyone would bother. It's not a proper cup of tea when it's made with grass clippings."

The man lifted his right hand and shifted the strap of the bag across his shoulder as if it were too heavy. His left hand, the one that was wrapped up, was braced at his hip. "Coffee would be fine, thank you," he said. To John, "Can I buy you a cup? If you don't mind waiting, that is?"

John shook his head. "No hurry -- I've nowhere else to be this afternoon. Thanks," he added, nodding at Stella.

The man looked as if he'd be the better for something warming him, and although it wasn't too early for whiskey -- it was *never* too early for that -- coffee would probably do the job of keeping him awake a little better. And he'd be lucky to find anything in the cupboards at Rossneath House. When Ian Kelley had left, a deputation of women had gone in, stripping it of perishables and cleaning it, sighing sadly as they worked. They hadn't gone back since, though, and even if respect had kept the windows from being smashed, two years of dust would be lying thickly over the rooms of the rambling stone house.

Stella gave him a glare that he unerringly traced back to the disdained carrots, but waved at a table by the window. "Sit down then and I'll bring them over."

The man bent to pick up his case, but John stopped him. "Och, it'll be in no one's way there. Sit down, man; you look all in."

"Thanks," the man said, his American accent briefly fading as his shoulders slumped. He followed John to the table Stella had indicated and pulled out a chair, sinking down onto it with his bandaged wrist in his lap. He glanced up at John. "Do you know the house?"

"I know all the houses on the island," John said simply. "You'll be wanting to see it, but I'm thinking once seen you won't want to stop there, so I don't mind waiting until you've looked your fill and then bringing you back here. This early in the season, it's easy enough to get rooms. There's a hotel and half-a-dozen boarding houses; take your pick." The man opened his mouth to speak, but before he could reply John clucked his tongue. "I'm sitting here talking and I never told you my name. John McIntyre. Pleased to make your acquaintance." He waited expectantly for the man to introduce himself, sternly quelling the impulse to reach out and offer his hand again. He could still feel, though it had surely to be his imagination, the faint warmth of that fleeting handclasp against his palm.

"Nick Kelley," the man said, not offering his hand either. There were little lines around his eyes that seemed to indicate that he hadn't been sleeping for a lot longer than it had taken for him to travel here from the states.

"Sorry -- you're the first person I've really talked to for a couple of days. I'm probably kind of disjointed." He frowned. "Is it really that bad? I mean, I know it's been basically abandoned for a couple of years, since Uncle Ian went into the nursing home, but ..."

He stopped as Stella came over to the table with a tray holding two cups of coffee and a plate of biscuits. "Here you are," she said, setting the things out. Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Hurt your arm, did you?"

Nick looked startled, as if he'd forgotten. "Yes." He pulled his cup toward him, curling his hand around it. "But it's almost healed now."

Stella seemed about to ask for more details, but Nick lifted his cup and began to take careful sips from it, his gaze focused on the table. John didn't get the impression that he was being deliberately rude; the man was just too tired to think about more than one thing at a time. He tried to catch Stella's eye to give her a casual yet meaningful look, signaling her to leave the man be, but it wasn't needed. The jangle of the door bell heralded new customers -- a father and his young son from Edinburgh who'd been on the island fishing for the past week -- and Stella turned and walked toward them, her hand poised to ruffle the boy's bright-red curls as she did every time she saw the poor wee lad.

"It's furnished," John said, finally answering Nick's question. "And you'll still have water and power, but there's not a crumb of edible food in the place, the sheets will be damp, and you'll be fair choking on the dust." He took a sip of his own drink and then reached for a biscuit, dunking the ginger nut into his coffee before popping it into his mouth. "Are you that set on staying there then?" Which was a tactful way of asking the man his plans, if ever there was one, John reflected.

"Yes," Nick said, drinking more of his coffee with his eyes closed. "I'll get the place cleaned up. I don't suppose you know if there's a phone?" Something in his voice had changed, making it colder, more distant.

John shrugged off the small rebuff, settling back in his chair and reminding himself that the man was tired. "Aye, there is. Of course there is." He took another biscuit and bit into it hard after adding dryly, "Or did you think we used smoke signals up here?"

"I thought that was Native Americans," Nick murmured, bringing his other hand up and wrapping it around the

cup too, as if for warmth. With his elbow propped on the table, John could see that it was Nick's wrist, and not his hand, that had been injured. He couldn't help but wonder how it had happened, but he didn't see that there was much point in prying. It wasn't likely the man would stay on Traighshee, after all. "I haven't slept for ... well ... Let's just say it won't matter what condition the house is in, because I won't be noticing."

"There's a food shop over the way. Want to stop in there before we leave and get some supplies?"

"Actually, yeah, if you wouldn't mind." Nick drank some more coffee and sighed. He stared down into the cup. "I've only seen pictures of the house. My mother kept them in an album that I wasn't allowed to look at unless she was sitting with me. She and my uncle ... they didn't get along. She used to say ..." He blinked. "Is there anyone who'd be willing to help me with the house, do you think? I can do some of it myself, but I'm not all that handy at anything more than the basics, and if I can stay --" Nick stopped, cleared his throat, and started again. "If I decide to stay, I'll probably need to hire someone to give me a hand."

The leisurely pace of the island life, where there was always tomorrow to start a job, meant that Nick's request had John blinking at him in surprise. The man hadn't even seen the house properly and he was after changing it? Well, now. But it sounded as if he was planning to be around for a while. John linked his hands under the table, rubbing his thumb across the palm of his right hand as he thought about spending time with this man, working with him. It'd mean staying off the sea, but the money would probably be better and more reliable.

Nick looked at him, and John gave up trying to find reasons to convince himself that what he'd decided to do the moment Nick had finished speaking was the sensible course of action. It wasn't. It wasn't sensible at all to put himself in a situation where the attraction he was feeling might increase, but he had to trust that he could keep Nick from guessing how he felt about him. At the moment he was feeling a combination of protectiveness, because the man looked exhausted, and a slightly less noble desire to hear that cool, drawling voice say his name for the first time. John was starting to feel split in two; he sounded calm and businesslike as far as he could tell, but he felt anything but calm inside.

There wasn't any way that this could work. It was a huge risk and he really should just back off now. Take the man to Rossneath and drive away.

Nick raised his eyebrows, a faint, polite smile on his face, and John stopped pretending that walking away was an option. Not until he'd seen what the man looked like smiling properly, the wariness gone from his face.

"Not much I haven't turned my hand to," John replied. He jerked his head at their surroundings. "Helped Stella to convert this place, if you want a reference."

"Aye," Stella nodded. It didn't surprise John at all that she'd been listening in on their conversation -- any hint of an outsider trying to settle on the island piqued curiosity like little else could. "Trustworthy, and as you can see, he does a fine job."

"It's very nice." It sounded as if Nick were answering automatically. Then, to John, "I'm sure we can work something out. I'm not in a hurry to do anything more than get the place livable again, so I can work around whatever ... schedule, you have." There was what seemed to be a hint of condescension in his voice.

John laughed, refusing to be ruffled. Or hurt. Off-islanders, they were all the same. "Schedule? No. There may be disadvantages to living up here, but that's not one of them. The tides are all that stop me from doing what I want, when I want. But don't be too fast to spend your money; for all you know the place will need no more than a scrubbing brush." He stood up, snagging a final biscuit. "And in that case, I'll be after introducing you to my sister, Janet."

Nick stood up as well, adjusting the strap on the bag that was still slung over his shoulder and had been resting on the chair beside him while they'd been sitting. "You're very optimistic." Which was, John thought, less rude than telling him he was mad, although it seemed fairly clear that that was what Nick was thinking.

"Don't forget your case," Stella said, as they stopped at the counter so that Nick could pay. "John, you take it for him, that's a good lad."

"No, it's fine." Nick picked up his suitcase. "I've carried it all this way. I can take it a little further."

John hesitated, but not for long. Nick was clinging onto the suitcase as if it was holding him up, not the other way around. "My car's just outside anyway," he said, more to placate Stella, who was frowning at him, than to reassure Nick. "We'll just put your gear in there, and then I'll walk with you to the shop." There was no way that Nick would be able to carry everything he'd need with an injured wrist, but to stave off the refusal of help that he was sure was hovering on the man's lips, John added, "I'm fresh out of tea bags myself, as it happens."

Nick nodded and gave Stella a polite smile before heading towards the door, reaching out with his left hand and giving the brightly polished brass doorknob a sharp twist before hissing under his breath in pain and cradling his wrist to him, dropping the suitcase to the floor.

Stella had already disappeared into the restaurant area to deal with the order from the Edinburgh man, but John was still careful not to sound too concerned as he joined Nick at the door. "Always been a wee bit stiff, has that door. There's a knack to it." He gave Nick a sidelong glance, noting his pallor. "If you want, I can maybe get what you'll need while you wait in the car? Bread, milk and the like?"

"I'm fine," Nick snapped "It's just ... I'm fine." He did, however, let John open the door for him before he picked up the suitcase again.

Fortunately, the car really was just outside, and Nick seemed willing to accept John's help in putting both bags into the trunk. He still seemed pale as they started toward the food shop, his wrist still held carefully against his chest as if he was protecting it from being jarred further.

After a moment, Nick glanced sideways at John, seeming to understand that an explanation of some sort would be polite. "I broke it about three months ago. There was a plate and screws in there. They had a hell of a time putting it back together." His smile was strained. "The bandage is more to remind me to be careful with it than anything else. Although you can see how well that works."

"It's not surprising you don't like being reminded to be careful. I'd be the same myself, I shouldn't wonder." They reached the village shop and John made sure he got to the door first, without making it obvious, lengthening his stride a little.

The shop wasn't too busy; the children were still in school, which meant that the narrow aisle in front of the comics section was easier to navigate than it was at the weekend. John gave the shopkeeper a pleasant smile and murmured, "How are you, George?" He didn't like the man; George Dunn would sell you the air you breathed if he could, the tight-fisted old sod, but John preferred to keep his feelings to himself. He'd had a lot of practice at that.

The shop was -- just -- big enough to mean that there was a choice of cart or basket. John pulled out a cart and murmured casually, "I'll push it, you throw stuff in. Well, maybe not the eggs. And don't let me forget my tea bags. My mother comes visiting on Wednesdays, and if I can't give her a cup of tea after her walk up the hill, I'll never hear the last of it."

"Your family all lives on the island?" Nick asked, putting a tin of soup into the cart.

"I've two sisters." John was willing to talk in the hopes that it would encourage Nick to open up a little. "Both married. Andrea's the youngest; she had her second baby not two weeks ago. She lives at the top end of the island. Janet lives here in town; she's got two kids too, one of each." He smiled, because it was hard not to when he thought about his nieces and nephews. His mother adored them all but was determined not to spoil them. John, with a cheerful indifference to the consequences, indulged them as much as his sisters would allow.

"What does your father do?"

"Passed away last year," John felt the sheer unreality of it, as he always did. "They went out on the boat, he and my uncle Collum, and a storm came up. They were in sight of land when a wave took the boat and capsized it. Dad had hold of Uncle Collum by the scruff of his neck, keeping his head out of the water because Collum'd broken his collarbone, the clumsy devil."

They'd come to a halt now, side-by-side in the aisle, with Nick looking a little awkward, if sympathetic.

John sighed and reached for a tin of baked beans. "Dad got thrown against a rock. Knocked a hole in his head you could put your fist through. And then it was Collum's turn to do the hard work and get them both home the best he could." He studied the picture on the tin and then put it back on the shelf, giving Nick an apologetic smile "Sorry. You've losses of your own to bear without hearing about mine."

Nick looked shaken, but he swallowed and nodded, his good hand tightening on the edge of the cart before he moved it to touch John's hand briefly. "I --" His voice broke a bit, and he cleared his throat before trying again. "I'm sorry. It's good for me to be reminded that it's not just me. I ... I didn't know my uncle Ian. He and my mother didn't get along. I don't even know why he left the house to her, unless it was just because he didn't have anyone else to leave it to." The man seemed to be making an effort, at least, which was good. He wouldn't last long on the island if he had everyone convinced that he was just a typical American, rude and thoughtless.

John couldn't fault him for not mourning the death of a man he'd never met, but it was clear from his reaction that some bereavement was still troubling him. His mother's death, maybe? Although that was four years ago, and you'd have thought by now --

Chiding himself for being overly inquisitive, even though it was motivated by concern, John carried on walking. "He spoke of you. Not often, no, but there's a picture of you on the table in the hall that your mother must've sent him, so maybe they weren't always at odds." He gave Nick a small grin. "You're older and wearing more clothes now, which is why I didn't recognize you. You'd have been about three, and having a fine time in your bath by the looks of it."

"My mother had a tendency to take pictures like that. I think the last one she took was when I was about eight.

After that, I learned to lock the bathroom door.” Nick smiled a little bit, as if remembering. He stopped and looked at the shelf in front of him. “Tea bags,” he said, gesturing “Which ones did you want?”

“The cheapest, but as my mother would notice, we’d better make it PG Tips instead.” He took the box from Nick and put it in a separate section of the cart.

“Hello, John!”

They both turned, and John attached a polite smile to his face. Moira. Hadn’t taken her long to spot a new face, he thought uncharitably. They’d grown up together and she hadn’t improved with age.

“Well, now, someone’s stocking up.” Her gaze flickered inquisitively from the shopping cart to Nick’s face.

Giving in to the inevitable, John introduced them, and Moira’s pale-blue eyes widened with pleasure. “You’ve come to live here then, Mr. Kelley?”

“That’s the plan,” Nick agreed.

“Well, now.” Moira beamed at him, getting a strained smile in return. “We’ll just have to make you feel at home then, won’t we?” She edged a little closer and rested her hand on Nick’s arm. John rolled his eyes without troubling to hide his feelings because Moira had forgotten he existed -- something he wished she’d done a good ten years earlier -- and then frowned as Nick’s hand curled into a fist and he stepped back.

“I’m sure I’ll like it here. But I’m really tired, and I don’t want to infringe on any more of Mr. McIntyre’s time than I have to, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll finish up here so he can drive me out to the house.”

Moira giggled. “Oh, he’s got nothing better to do,” she said dismissively. “Not when he can’t go fishing, anyway. Isn’t that right, John?”

John took a tight hold on his temper. “I was brought up never to contradict a lady, Moira.”

She smirked, and then, as Nick moved away abruptly to study a display of homemade jam, bit her lip, turned on her heel and left with a brisk nod to John and a final, lingering look at Nick.

“And that being so, you’re wrong, Moira, like always,” John muttered under his breath.

“Why didn’t you tell her that to her face?” Nick asked, coming back to stand at John’s side.

John shook his head. “Quickest way to get rid of her. I’m not one for arguing. And I got the impression you’d be happier with her gone.”

Nick stared at him for a moment and then shrugged. “She wasn’t all that polite, but she seemed, I don’t know ... honest, I guess.”

The wheels on the cart squeaked as John gave it a shove and got it moving again. “Aye, I’ll give her that,” he said dryly, not bothering to share his opinion that in Moira’s case honesty wasn’t a virtue. Not when it was fuelled by spite.

“I’m sorry,” Nick murmured. “I didn’t mean to --” He gave John a look that wavered and fell, as if the effort of focusing on John’s face was too much.

“It’s not of any consequence at all,” John said firmly. “Now, will you be wanting some of that jam for your toast or not?”

They finished the shopping in a silence that was friendly enough, broken by the odd question from Nick, who seemed more surprised to find brand names he recognized than by oddities like oatcakes, which usually had the tourists exclaiming in delight or distaste. By the time they got to the checkout, where George Dunn’s eyes traveled between the two of them, alight with speculation as his bony hands dealt deftly with the groceries, Nick was a shade paler and his signature on the credit card slip was a wavering scrawl.

John would’ve bet his boat that they wouldn’t get out of the shop without George satisfying what with him was pure nosiness, and he was right.

“I didn’t know you had a friend visiting, John.” A winter-cold smile creased George’s thin lips as he placed John’s box of tea bags inside a plastic carrier bag. “Your mother never mentioned it when she was in here earlier.”

John threaded his fingers through most of the plastic bags stacked neatly on the counter, leaving Nick to take the last two in his good hand. Nick was staring at the shopkeeper, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Is that so?” John murmured noncommittally. A soft answer might turn away wrath, but in his experience it was the one thing guaranteed to drive George mad with frustration.

“Aye. I would have thought that’d be the sort of thing she’d mention. Assuming she knew about it.” George was looking at Nick with shrewd interest, his eyes flickering over to John as if gauging his reaction.

“There’s nothing for her to know,” Nick said smoothly, with more aplomb than John would have anticipated. “I’m new to the island. I’ve hired Mr. McIntyre to drive me out to my late uncle’s home, and he’s been gracious enough to help me with my shopping. Did you know my Uncle Ian? Ian Kelley?” Nick dropped his voice, conjuring up something reminiscent of deep sorrow. “We were very close. I ... I can’t believe he’s gone.”

While George was still sputtering out an awkward apology, Nick and John made their exit. It wasn’t until they were outside and a good dozen yards from the shop that Nick glanced sideways at John and grinned.

“The last time I saw him that flustered, a sheep had wandered down from the moor, gone into his shop, and was eating his cabbages,” John observed, an answering smile spreading across his face. “If you find yourself in the Castle Arms one night, I’ll buy you a pint by way of a thank you.”

“He deserved it. People like him ...” Nick shook his head, something dark crossing his face. “No. It’s not my job to mete out justice, not even to people like him.”

“No,” John agreed quietly, losing the smile from his face as they neared the car. “It isn’t. And you’re right; he does more harm than I think he realizes. There’s a difference between those of us who ask questions out of interest, and, aye, curiosity, because there’s precious little else to amuse ourselves with, and those who ask to find ways of hurting folk.” He changed the subject abruptly, not wanting to dwell on the malice behind George’s behaviour. “Will you open the trunk, please, and save me setting these bags down? It isn’t locked.”

“Sure.” John watched as Nick very carefully opened the trunk with his bad hand, moving slowly so as not to hurt himself. The little flash of triumph on Nick’s face as he managed it was worth the risk John thought he’d taken in asking.

They put the bags into the back and got into the car. Nick immediately fastened his seatbelt before John had even had a chance to start the car.

John started to tell him that he didn’t have to wear his seatbelt if he didn’t want to; Tom Stewart, the local bobby, had started out easygoing, and ten years on the island had done nothing to change that. But something made John swallow the words and pull his own belt across his body.

“It isn’t far.” John started the engine, pulling away. “Maybe five miles or so. You could walk it if you’d a mind to; your uncle did, in fair weather, anyway. Come to think of it, he’d a wee car that should still be at the house. It’ll need some work after sitting all this time, but if you like, I’ll take a look at it for you.”

“I don’t drive,” Nick said tightly.

John let the words hang between them, expecting more, but when Nick turned his head to stare out of the side window at nothing more interesting than the garage on the edge of town, he realized that was all he was getting. John had been driving since he was tall enough -- not old enough -- to see over the steering wheel. He’d never had an accident, and the one time he’d driven drunk, on his fourteenth birthday, his father had taken the skin off his arse with a belt and that’d been that. Driving was as natural as walking, as sending a line hissing out across the wind-ruffled water of the loch, as gutting a fish with a slice, a scrape and two swift chops of his knife. Didn’t take much to connect a broken wrist with a car accident though, so he kept quiet as they left the village and headed along the narrow road.

“That’s my place,” John offered a few minutes later, by way of breaking a silence which was verging on uncomfortable. Lord knew he wasn’t much of a talker himself, but Nick wrapped himself in silence as if it was all that was keeping him warm. He took his hand off the wheel and touched Nick’s arm, bringing Nick’s head around sharply. “See? On the hill? It was my grandparents’ house, and when they’d gone, my mother decided that sooner than sell it, she’d rent it out, expecting to make a penny or two from the tourists. But I’d been wanting a place of my own, and I convinced her that tourists were chancy customers, and a weekly rent from someone she trusted was better by far.”

Nick didn’t say anything, but John knew that he was looking as they went past. The long drive that led up the hill to the house was winding, and John was well aware that it made the place look rather like something in a storybook -- idyllic, pastoral.

He kept a careful eye on the road, driving more slowly than he normally would have. For some reason John couldn’t quite put his finger on, something that went deeper than his instant attraction to Nick, he found himself fascinated by this man, wanting to know his story and unconvinced that he ever would.

Their houses lay maybe fifteen minutes apart, if one was willing to walk over heather and knew where the boggy parts were, where the ground turned soft beneath your feet, water oozing up, brown and rich, between the bright green grass, but by road it was a good two miles. When the gray stone walls of Rossneath House came into sight, John found himself sighing with relief. The man would surely have to open his mouth now. He sent the car bumping along the rough track that was all that was left of a driveway and pulled up by the front porch, although to get that little-used door open, they’d need a stick of dynamite rather than a key.

“Well, here you are,” he said, turning his head to look at his passenger, mildly exasperated that not even the sight of his house had coaxed a word from Nick. His next words died on his lips.

Nick was asleep, his shoulder hunched up defensively, as if even sleep offered no refuge, his head half-turned so that John could see the clean line of his jaw through the prickle of stubble and the hollowed curve of his cheek up to the slash of a dark eyebrow.

Caught off-guard, John swallowed, close enough in the stillness that had descended when the engine had shuddered its way to rest that he could see a dozen details Nick’s restlessness had hidden from him before. He’d had

his ear pierced at some point; the tender flesh of the lobe was healed over, but the indentation was still there. And under the tan, his face was pale with fatigue.

John bit his lip and glanced away. He'd have liked to have looked his fill, but it didn't seem right. Not while the man was sleeping. Without undue noise, he left the car, pushing the door to without slamming it, and went around to the back door. He knew where the key was, and if it'd gone, there were plenty of ways to get in. Let the man sleep.

Chapter Two

There was a sharp smell, something acrid like a chemical. It felt like it was pounding at Nick's temples, trying to get into his head, and he gasped and twitched. As soon as he did that, the ache that had been un-ignorable in his arm flared to life, white-hot and stabbing, his nerves screaming from fingertips up past his elbow. Nick whimpered and tried to curl up around the pain, but he couldn't move.

He opened his eyes. It was dark, and his chest hurt, too, but not half as much as his arm. Where the hell was he?

Memory came flooding back, leaving him gasping. In the road ... and he'd swerved, he had to have. He couldn't remember that part, but he did remember the screech of tires on the road, the way the wheel had felt in his hands, stuttering as the car spun out of control, and then there'd been ... nothing. He couldn't remember anything else.

No, that wasn't true.

He remembered Matthew's muttered curse.

"Matthew?"

Nick turned slowly, rolling his head toward the passenger seat because there was no way he could try to move the rest of his body, and ...

Nick woke up with a gasp and a start, his heart racing, the light pressure of the seatbelt across his chest immediately sending him into a panic. He was on the left-hand side of the car and that was just wrong; he didn't sit there anymore. Even thinking about it was enough to make his breathing shallow and his heart pound. At least the latch for the seatbelt was on the right and he could get to it with his good hand, which he did, fumbling at the unfamiliar button in his haze of dream-memory until it clicked and he was free.

Too late, though. The panic had already taken over, and there was nothing to do but ride it out. The appropriateness of that phrasing made Nick give a gasp of laughter as he reached across his body with his good hand and opened the car door, wondering where the hell the guy driving the car had gone as he tumbled out onto the hard packed earth, luckily managing not to catch his weight on his left hand as he fell. He was making little scared sounds with each breath, trying not to lose it completely, reminding himself that this was just adrenaline and it would pass. It had been a while since it had been this bad, but it would pass.

On the springy turf that seemed to lap at the walls of the house a man could walk quietly, and it wasn't until John's boots struck the hard-packed earth of the driveway that Nick heard him coming. He'd regained just enough self-control to guess at once who was coming, but as he tried to stand up and stammer out some excuse about falling, the green of the grass and the gray of the house spun around him wildly and he sank back.

John squatted beside him, and he felt a warm, callused hand take his, strong fingers wrapping around his and holding on.

"You fell asleep," John murmured, in that lilting voice that reminded him of his mother's when she was excited or angry. "It'll be that jet lag, isn't that right? Your body's here and your head's still thousands of miles away."

He sounded matter-of-fact and completely undisturbed by Nick's inability to do more than stare at him, but the hand holding Nick's tightened a little as he carried on talking, not stopping long enough that Nick had to answer him, which was just as well.

"Want to try standing up again? I've opened the door and a few of the windows. It's not so bad. The beds were stripped, but I've found the sheets and put them out on the line to air. We've a few hours before the rain comes in and this wind will have them fresh by then."

"Just give me a minute," Nick said roughly, not letting go of John's hand even though he probably should have. The world was feeling a little bit too bright and sharp just then, making him slouch in on himself, keeping himself small, protected. John's presence, undeniably solid and real, was a comfort that he couldn't quite bring himself to surrender.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The air was salt-tinged and crisp, and Nick blinked at John, still squatting across from him, watching him with a concern that did more to warm him than the sunshine. John's eyes were blue, and his lips were thin and curled up a little bit on one side like they were used to smiling. They made Nick want to do things to make John smile, to make John smile at him. He was more drawn to John than he could have explained.

“Okay.” Nick got up with John’s help, although the other man released his hand once it was clear that he was steady on his feet now. “Sorry,” Nick offered. “It was ...” No, there was no way he was ready to describe what it really was. He might never be. “Like you said, jet lag, I think.”

“Aye.” John gestured towards the house, seeming happy to accept that as an explanation. And it wasn’t a complete lie. Getting from New York to a remote Hebridean island involved a complex coordination of planes, trains and ferries that had left Nick either racing along corridors to make connections with minutes to spare, or spending hours sitting waiting for the next stage of his journey to begin; he’d been traveling for so long that it was no wonder the earth felt as if it was spinning too fast. “Well, there it is. Rossneath House. If you want to go in, I’ll get the shopping from the car. I started a kettle boiling, so you’ll be able to have a drink, if you’d like.”

“Thank you.” Nick absently took a look at the house for the first time, as the wind ruffled his hair.

It was bigger than he’d expected it to be -- not a huge house by any means, but still larger than what he’d been picturing. The exterior paint on the trim, a medium gray, was peeling in some places, no doubt from the wind that came up off the sea. Nick was turned around and unsure where they’d come from, but he’d seen maps of the island and knew that wherever they were, the sea wasn’t far off.

There were white shutters that looked functional rather than decorative, and he noted that one of the windows on the second floor was cracked. He hoped the glass wouldn’t need to be replaced right away -- actually, he was hoping that there wouldn’t be too much he’d need to do to the place right off the bat. He was so tired that all he wanted to do was sleep and get settled in. Then he’d deal with whatever needed to be dealt with.

John walked past him with two handfuls of shopping bags, and Nick went back to the car and took out the last few bags with his good hand, leaving the one that contained John’s groceries, and following him into the house. As they walked, he let himself study John from behind, noting the way the man’s clothes fit. It wasn’t, Nick told himself firmly, anything more than curiosity.

Inside his new home, Nick paused on the threshold, letting the dusty smell of the place wash over him, and waiting.

There was nothing, and he sighed with relief and walked over to John, glancing around the kitchen, which looked pretty much as if it had been abandoned for a couple of years, a thick layer of dust and grime on top of the stove. “This is so weird.”

John finished rinsing out a mug and shook it free of water before setting it aside to dry. “Seeing it for real, you mean? Is it not what you were expecting then?” John glanced around the kitchen, at wooden cabinets and a solid, functional table and chairs, and didn’t seem to find it bare, or ill-equipped. Nick tried to picture his mother in this house, in this kitchen, and failed.

“I guess.” Nick set the bags down on the table and just stood there. He felt like a stranger; the house felt more like John’s than his. There were things in those cabinets that had belonged to his uncle, sometimes talked about but never seen. Some of those things had probably been his grandparents’, things that his mother had used when she was growing up here, anxious to leave school by the time she was fourteen. She’d talked about it a lot; about how she’d hated living here. She’d always encouraged Nick to live a casual existence, teaching him that setting down roots just meant stagnation, leaving him stuck to the earth instead of free to roam, to do whatever interested him.

They’d been lessons he’d taken to heart, words he’d lived by until ...

Nick cleared his throat. “No.” John was putting the eggs into the small refrigerator and fiddling with the temperature dial. “It’s not what I was expecting. I think I’d been picturing it empty. Furniture, sure, but not ... his whole life is here.”

“He left knowing that he wouldn’t be coming back.” John slammed the fridge door. “I’m sure of it. But even so, he insisted nothing be changed and the house be locked up and left alone. My mother went to visit him now and then, and she says the first thing he asked was always if the house was safe, and she’d tell him it was. It was all he had left, you see. While it was waiting for him, just as it’d always been, he could picture it and know what he saw in his head was true.” John rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, flushing slightly. “Och, listen to me run on. Sit down and I’ll make you a drink and then leave you in peace.”

To his mild surprise, Nick found himself obeying, sitting down at the table. He knew from previous experience that peaceful wasn’t a state that he was likely to achieve when John left. Matthew had understood and hadn’t left him on his own for the most part, which was something Nick had always been grateful for, although maybe not quite as grateful as Matthew would have liked; Nick knew that his friend had wanted more from him.

“That’s nice -- that your mother went to visit him, I mean. Were they friends?” Nick was struck with a sudden desire to know more about the man who had lived in this house.

“Friends?” John frowned. “Not as such, no.” He walked over to the kettle and with a minimum of fuss produced a cup of instant coffee, bringing it over to the table and setting it down in front of Nick before dragging out a chair for himself. “He was just -- he was from here, d’ye see? And she knew fine that he’d be missing the place.

She'd take him the local paper, tell him what'd been going on, smuggle in a drop of whiskey too, if I know her." He smiled. "She's not one for following rules when they don't suit her."

Nick smiled at the thought, and then realized that he was looking into John's eyes a little too warmly and dropped his gaze. If he was going to stay here, the last thing he needed to be doing was making anyone uncomfortable with unwanted attraction, even if it wasn't Nick's fault that John was warm and charming and much, much sexier than he seemed to realize. A small community like this, one made up of families that had been here for generations ... it would be asking for trouble to open up. "Did he have any friends? Anyone I could talk to?"

"Start with my mother," John told him. "She'll know. But I think you'll not find many he was close to. He wasn't unhappy, not exactly, but he was a lonely man." John pushed back his chair and stood up. "I'll bring in your cases, shall I? And it's a little chilly in here; when it's aired out a little, you'd best light a fire or two. There's peat stacked behind the house ..." John paused and chuckled at himself. "Imp. You'll not be knowing how to build a peat fire, now will you?" He pursed his lips in thought. "Look; if you're wishing me long gone, say the word, but I've nothing I was planning to do this afternoon and I can help you get settled in if you'd like."

Almost pathetically thankful, Nick nodded. "If you don't mind, that'd be great. I don't even know where to start." He drank a good third of his coffee in one swig and stood up. "But I can help with the bags. And if you could show me where the peat is?"

They went outside into the fresh air. Some clouds were threatening, but not enough that rain seemed imminent. Nick realized that he really needed to go through the house and find out where everything was. If they lost power, he'd need candles, or a flashlight at least. He'd need to know how to work the chimney -- he knew vaguely that there was something called a flue, but he wasn't sure what it did -- and if there was a washing machine. He hadn't planned this properly. All he'd thought about was getting as far away as possible, and Traighshee had seemed to fit the bill.

"If you plan on staying, and you've got the money, you might want to think about installing radiators," John told him as they walked back to the car and got out Nick's luggage. "The smell of a peat fire doesn't make up for the dust they make, and if the peat's damp, you'll be choking on the smoke." Nick's face must've been more expressive than he'd intended, because John grinned again. "There's a water heater, and that's electric, so you'll be able to have a hot bath tonight -- oh, and the water will likely be brown, but that's the way it comes up here, so don't panic."

"Is that why you drink so much tea here?" Nick hitched the strap of his bag over his shoulder -- God, it was heavy; he should have had all of the books shipped, instead of trying to bring some of them with him -- and watching as John closed the trunk of the car again. "To hide the color of the water?"

John's mouth twisted in a smile as he picked up Nick's suitcase. "Maybe," he agreed, beginning to walk back to the house. "But the best way to do that is to put it inside a dram."

Nick had been doing a fair amount of drinking himself in the past month, once he wasn't taking what felt like a small arsenal of pills every day -- painkillers, anti-inflammatories, antibiotics -- so he was no stranger to a good glass of whiskey. The thought that the water in said glass of whiskey might be brown, though, noticeable or not, wasn't all that appealing. Maybe he'd switch to vodka.

Inside again, Nick considered putting the bag down, but realized he'd just have to move it upstairs anyway. Might as well do it now. "Have you been upstairs?" He gestured toward the staircase that he could see through the doorway between the front hall and what seemed to be a sitting room.

"The first time was when I helped carry your uncle down them," John replied. "But, aye, I went up there when I brought down the bed linen, remember? There's a bathroom and three bedrooms. Only two beds though; your uncle wasn't much for visitors and I know he had one room shelved for his books, for it was my father who put them up for him." John stepped back, allowing Nick passage. "After you," he said with a courteous inclination of his head. "And while we're up there, I'll take a look at the water heater."

The thought of having a room just for books was appealing; the discovery that his uncle had cared for books, something that Nick had never known, made him smile. He started up the stairs carefully, feeling the creak of solid old wood underneath his feet, noting the scars and scratches in the finish.

He kept going when he reached the top of the stairs, making room behind him for John with the heavier suitcase and glancing into the room that overlooked the front yard, which had only a single bed in it along with a bureau and a small bookshelf.

At the top of the staircase to the left was the bathroom, painted a pale shade of gray and containing an old-fashioned claw foot tub as well as shower fixtures. The hallway was larger than Nick would have expected, with another, taller bookcase full of books and a bench with a padded seat that appeared to open for storage. At the back of the house were the other two bedrooms -- the makeshift library on the left behind the bathroom and the master bedroom to the right.

Nick moved into the master bedroom and set his bag down onto the mattress, which was covered with a thin

mattress pad but otherwise stripped. There was a phone on the bedside table, he noted.

John appeared in the doorway but didn't cross the threshold. His gaze went around the room, and then came to rest on Nick for a long moment before he looked away. He put the suitcase down just inside the room and left without speaking, heading toward the bathroom.

Nick frowned, but assumed that John would be back in a few minutes. He moved about the room slowly, picking things up and setting them down where they'd been. A watch, of the wind-daily variety, which he was pretty sure was real gold. A handful of coins, still foreign-looking to him. He wondered how long it would take living in another country before the money looked like actual money and not Monopoly money.

The wallpaper was dark; navy blue stripes with cream and, when he ran his fingers down along it, thinly coated with the same dust that lay thick everywhere else. An asthmatic would have a hell of a time getting settled here, Nick thought. He opened a dresser drawer and looked inside at the neatly folded sweaters.

Wandering over to the bookshelf against the wall near the window, Nick crouched down and looked at the books. A few titles that he recognized, but for the most part none of them were ones he was familiar with.

When he stood up and glanced out the window, the first thing he saw was a small white church.

The second was the graveyard that lay between the church and the house -- his house. Nick froze, staring at it without blinking, his eyes tracing over each headstone, most of them old and rounded with time and weather, only a few of them appearing to be more recent. Possibly a hundred in total.

"My father's buried there."

The voice behind him was quiet, but in the silent house a whisper would sound loud, Nick thought. Unwilling to make a fool of himself in front of John twice, he forced himself to look away from the graves, dropping his gaze to the wide windowsill, bare of ornaments, like the rest of the house, and staring blindly at the cracked, peeling paint.

"Does it bother you, then? The graveyard?" John crossed the room, coming to stand behind Nick. "I can see it from my house too."

A hand came to rest on Nick's shoulder, turning him slightly so that he was looking beyond the cemetery to a small gray house in the distance. The warmth of the touch was a welcome distraction. "Over there, see? On top of the hill. If you don't count the sheep and the rabbits, I'm your closest neighbor, now I come to think of it."

There was a faint whisper in the back of Nick's head, but he didn't want to listen to it. "I remember. I must have still been awake when we drove past it." Nick didn't comment on the graveyard because there was nothing he could say that would change anything, and anything he did say was likely to make him sound even stranger than he probably already did, an outsider and an American. The graveyard was there. Sooner or later, he'd have to deal with it.

"I didn't know there was a church so close by. Does everyone on the island go?" He hoped that might be an indirect way of asking if John went.

"Most do, aye." John's hand dropped away, leaving Nick standing alone. "I go myself once in a while, but I can't say that it's for more than the chance to make my mother smile. I'm not much for being told what to do and I can't be doing with the notion that something's sinful on Sunday and not on Monday." He sighed. "There's people on the island won't watch television on the Sabbath, let alone fish. Pure foolishness to my mind." He paused, and then added diffidently, "I've not offended you? Are you a churchgoer yourself then?"

Nick looked out across the fields between the house and the church, the blue sky and clouds, the rays of sunshine, then shook his head. "No. I'm not ... no." He turned again to John, who was watching him with what might have been relief. "My mother always said that she thought God could hear her better when she wasn't in a building full of other people all trying to talk to him, too."

"She sounds like she was a sensible woman. Although I've sat in the church as a boy, when every soul in it was praying for one thing and felt the comfort of it." John's eyes clouded. "I can't seem to recall a time when the prayers were answered, mind you." He shook himself and gave Nick a small smile. "Not even when it was for Scotland to do well in the World Cup, and you'd think the Lord would've been merciful then, if only to prove that he could still pull off a miracle or two."

There was something there, hovering at the edges of Nick's vision, but he couldn't quite see it, and more importantly he didn't want to. He didn't want whatever memories -- memories that didn't belong to him -- waiting for him; and he didn't know John well enough to say anything. Nick thought that if he wanted to get to know John better, which he did, this wasn't the time.

Nick realized he'd been staring at John for several very long seconds, memorizing the lines of his face, the shape of his lips. "I'm sorry," he said, which was the wrong thing to say.

"For what?" John gave him a quizzical smile and then shook his head. "We keep chatting like this and we'll never get you settled. If you've the energy, unpack what you'll need and go and take a shower; the heater's working

fine. I'll start a fire and bring in the bedding so that you can get some rest. I'm thinking it's what you need more than anything, although if you're hungry?"

"No, you're right -- sleep's probably top of the list." Nick looked over at his suitcase, feeling weariness wash through him now that it had been acknowledged, leaving him warm and weak. "That'd be great. If you're sure you don't mind."

John had disappeared downstairs before Nick had finished unlatching his suitcase. He found a pair of flannel pants and a sweatshirt, thinking that he'd definitely need to buy some new clothes once he'd figured out what the weather was going to be like long term.

He struggled briefly with the shower, trying to get the water to the right temperature, but once he had, he was able to wash away the worst of the travel grime. There were towels on a small shelf, and he pulled out the bottom one, shaking it out and sniffing it tentatively to check for mildew, but it seemed okay. He quickly scrubbed himself dry, pulled on the clothes, and went back to the bedroom, where John had moved his suitcase to the floor underneath the window and was just starting to put the sheets onto the bed.

"I can do that," Nick protested, putting the clothes he'd been wearing and the ace bandage from his wrist down on the chair near the wall.

"You can help me do it." John sounded as if that was as much of a compromise as he was willing to make.

Nick moved to the opposite side of the bed and caught hold of the edge of the sheet, pulling it taut and tucking it under, using his good hand to lift up the edge of the mattress. There was an unfamiliar smell drifting through the house that had to be the fire; smoky, yes, but oddly homey.

John must've noticed him sniffing at the air, because he said, "I've banked the fire up well and the chimney's drawing nicely; it should burn for a good few hours and just take the chill off. There's rain coming in, and you'll be glad of the warmth when you wake." He shook out a thick blanket, letting it settle on top of the sheet, and then added another and a feather quilt, thick and soft.

"There. That'll do." He gave Nick one of the nods that seemed to say more than his words sometimes and stepped back from the bed, heading towards the door. "I've left you my number on the kitchen table if you're wanting anything. I'll drop by tomorrow and see how you're faring, though."

The urge to ask John not to go was there, but Nick bit back the words. "Thank you. For everything. You've been great. I really appreciate it."

John paused in the doorway and glanced back at him. "You're welcome." Words that would usually have been an automatic response regained their meaning in his soft voice. "Sleep well." His unhurried footsteps sounded loud on the thin, worn stair carpet as he left.

Nick crawled between the sheets, laid his head on the pillow, and was instantly asleep.

Chapter Three

He didn't know if it was the jet lag, sheer exhaustion, or a combination of the two, but Nick slept the rest of the afternoon and through the night, not waking until the first rays of morning light came in through the window. Yawning, he blinked and rolled over onto his back, keeping his arms underneath the covers, gathering his thoughts.

Scotland. He was in Scotland. Where he owned a house.

As someone who'd grown up in apartments and hadn't owned anything bigger than a car ever, the idea was more than a little bit alarming. Nick knew that his mother would have been disappointed in his decision to come to Traighshee and settle down, and that her attempts to hide her disappointment would have fallen short of the mark.

Eventually, hunger and the need for caffeine drove Nick out of bed. He changed into a pair of jeans and put on his socks and shoes, then rummaged around in his suitcase until he found his toothbrush. He went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth with the unfamiliar brand of toothpaste that was sitting on the back edge of the sink, and went downstairs.

The windows were closed; John must have done that before he left. Nick felt a surge of gratitude toward the man. Sighing, Nick turned. He'd hoped that there'd be enough of a spark left in the fireplace that he wouldn't have to start from scratch, but there wasn't, and it was just warm enough that he decided not to bother. Instead, he went into the kitchen and put the kettle on, then went through the cupboards until he found a frying pan. There wasn't a toaster, so he fried a couple of eggs and put them between two slices of bread as a sandwich, which he then ate in about four bites. Licking his fingers, he sat at the kitchen table and drank his coffee, looking out the window that faced the sea.

Because he didn't know where to start, Nick chose the kitchen. He found that John had been right; the women who'd come in had made sure that there wasn't anything left that might spoil or attract mice. The cupboards were close to bare, although there were a few cans of soup and beans on the shelves. He couldn't make a decision about the canned goods, which had apparently been judged worthy of keeping, so he left them for the time being and focused on cleaning.

Two hours spent scrubbing down every flat surface in the kitchen went by quickly. When his hands were so wrinkled from being wet that it was kind of disturbing, Nick moved to the living room and sat down at the small desk, opening up the main drawer and after a moment, taking everything out of it. There was a small trash can just beside the desk, so he began to sort through papers and letters, scraps of newspaper, tossing anything that was obviously trash and making a crooked pile of the things he knew he'd want to read through later. It wasn't until he found a letter in his mother's handwriting that he got off track.

It was a short letter, direct and lacking any conventional opening or closure, and the words were familiar because they were the same she'd used when she'd told him that she was dying. He wondered how long she'd taken to reduce the news down to a bare few lines, or, for him, thirty seconds that brought every vague concern into sharply focused certainty. He wondered what emotions of regret or grief had stirred in Ian Kelley when he learned that his young sister was dying.

The letter had been inside an envelope, neatly slit open; the letter opener, a slender silver blade, tarnished now, lay on the desk before him. Nick studied the postmark and realized that by the time his uncle read the letter Fiona would already have been dead. She'd sent it from the hospital, and she'd only spent a few days in there, with the impersonal, inflexible routine doing more to drain her than the treatment she'd endured.

He folded the letter, replaced it inside the envelope, and slipped it back inside the drawer, feeling his mother's desolation and despair strike at him, carried across an ocean by paper and ink.

Standing abruptly, he left the room and grabbed his jacket from the chair in the kitchen before heading outside. He'd had enough of dust and memories for one morning.

The rain that John had predicted must have arrived, although he'd slept too soundly to have heard it fall softly on the slate roof, and the ground was damp, small tendrils of mist curling up in the warm sunlight. He set off confidently down the driveway, but when he got to the road, such as it was, he hesitated. He wanted to go down to the sea, but although the glitter of blue water was directly ahead of him, about a quarter of a mile away, there was no discernable path, and the rough grass, dotted with rock outcroppings, was home to several dozen sheep, their dirty fleeces daubed with a blue splotch. Was it private land, then?

Deciding to stay on the road for the time being, Nick turned to the right. If his fatigue-blurred recollections of the night before were correct, this road led straight to the town, with no crossroads, so he couldn't get lost, although

he didn't intend to walk quite that far.

He'd covered enough ground to have his legs aching pleasantly from the exercise and his head full of the thin, salt-clean air when the sound of an approaching car broke the peace.

He'd drifted to almost the center of the narrow road, and for a moment he froze, unsure which way to move, a bend in the road hiding the oncoming vehicle. Shaking off his momentary paralysis, he stepped to his left, onto the grassy verge, and waited for it to pass. Instead it slowed and stopped.

"Good morning to you," John said through the open window of his car.

"Is it still? Morning, I mean?" Nick realized that he had no idea what time it was.

John turned his head, presumably to look at the dashboard clock. "If you'd walked a few more yards, I'd have had to say 'good afternoon' if I was wanting to be accurate," which more or less answered Nick's question. "Are you heading anywhere in particular?"

"Not really. I spent the morning cleaning and I thought I'd get some fresh air." Nick looked at John thoughtfully and decided to take a chance; no matter how nervous it made him to think about all the things that might go wrong, the urge to get to know John better was strong enough to outweigh the nerves. "Are you busy? I could buy you lunch. You know, to say thank you for yesterday. If it wasn't for you I probably would have ended up sleeping on the couch with my shoes on and half freezing to death during the night."

"You'd have managed better than that. And there's no need to thank me for doing no more than anyone would, seeing you were ready to drop where you stood with the tiredness." John smiled. "No, I'm not busy. I was on my way to see you, and that's all I had planned for today." He squinted up at the sky where a few clouds were gathering, although they were too high and wispy to look threatening. "Might do some fishing later on ... d'you want to come out on the boat with me and catch yourself some supper?"

Nick frowned, not sure if that was John's way of saying no to lunch without actually saying it. Maybe it felt a little too much like Nick was asking him out on a date, which was definitely something Nick could understand John wanting to avoid. But on the other hand, John wasn't saying no to spending time with him ...

Confused, Nick answered as honestly as he could. "Fishing sounds good, if you don't mind that my total sum of knowledge as far as that goes is that I can tell the difference between a fish and a fishing pole."

John gave the soft chuckle that Nick was starting to like hearing. "You'll soon pick it up with a head start like that. Now will you be getting in and letting me take us into town so you can buy me food and I can buy you a pint?"

"Okay." Nick felt himself smiling despite the cold fear that woke and stirred in his belly at the thought of the car ride. He'd had dozens of therapy appointments since the accident and been driven back and forth to all of them, but it had always been in cabs and he'd been in the back seat.

Getting into the car, he noted that John gave him time to fasten his seatbelt before starting up. "Thanks." Nick tried not to tense up too much as John put the car into gear. He found himself wanting to explain, at least a little bit. "I was in a car accident -- that's how I broke my wrist."

John nodded as if it wasn't news to him, driving along the road until he got to a place where he could turn safely. "There's some would say you were lucky it was no worse, but I'm thinking you wouldn't agree?"

Nick didn't know how to answer that. He couldn't answer that. All he could manage was a quick nod when John glanced in his direction, his throat too closed up to say anything.

John tapped his fingers against the wheel, clearly wanting to say something, his gaze flicking between the road and Nick a few times before he sighed. "I'm sorry it was like that. You're living on a place you could walk across in an afternoon and around in a day, so you'll get by on foot easily enough until you mend."

Nick didn't think for a moment that John meant his wrist, but he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get behind the wheel of a car again. Just sitting beside John without showing his feelings now that he didn't have the shield of fatigue was difficult enough.

"That was one of the points in its favor," Nick managed. "The island, I mean. Knowing that I wouldn't need a car."

"Well, I don't know about that. Five miles is a long way to walk with your shopping in the winter, with the sleet and the wind scouring the skin off your face." John shrugged. "But it won't hurt you to walk in this weather, and if you get blisters or you're in a hurry, just stick out your thumb; any islander will stop for you." He smiled without taking his eyes off the road. "Or you can call a taxi."

"I thought that's what this was -- what you were. Oh God, I still owe you for yesterday's ride, don't I?" Nick flushed, momentarily distracted by the quiet hum of the car's engine as he chastised himself for what would probably be viewed as typical self-centered American behavior.

John snorted. "You do not, then." He sounded emphatic, "I was on my way home, anyway. If you decide you do want work doing to the house, we'll come to an arrangement about that, but when I said you could call a taxi, I

didn't mean -- I --" He slowed down to allow some sheep to amble across the road, giving the horn an irritable thump with his fist when they turned and began to walk along the middle of the road, causing them to bleat and scramble off to the side. "Do you Americans not recognize a joke, then?" He sounded more put out than the occasion called for.

Nick swallowed, watching the sheep warily, waiting to see if any of them ran back out into the road in front of them. "I have a sense of humor." It didn't sound as much like a protest as he'd meant it to. He found himself looking at John's hand on the wheel. "I might also be a little paranoid. About being an outsider. I don't want to do the wrong thing."

"You're half-Scottish." John still sounded snappy. "Your family's lived on this island for centuries. You're not an outsider. You've just been away." The corner of his mouth lifted in a reluctant smile and he relaxed. "For thirty years or so, but I'll not hold that against you."

"Thanks." Nick grinned weakly, trying to find the sense of humor he'd just been insisting he had. "I always wanted to come here when I was a kid, but my mother wouldn't let me. She wouldn't even talk about it."

John shook his head. "That's a shame, but I suppose I can see why she didn't like to speak of it. She'll have been missing it though, from time to time, do you suppose?"

"I think so. She didn't talk about it a lot, but she kept all those pictures ..." Nick could remember the album they'd been in, the way the color in the photos had faded with time, the way his mother's hands had turned the pages, carefully, almost reverently. He'd known even when he was only six or seven that the album wasn't something to touch on his own. "I found a letter she wrote in my uncle's desk," he said, as John steered the car around a curve. "I didn't know she'd written to him. I guess she thought she had to let him know that she was sick. Dying. It was weird, seeing her handwriting like that."

"I can imagine." John sounded sympathetic. He shook his head. "When my father died there was this wee note from him stuck on the fridge; a list of groceries we needed, you know? It stayed there for weeks because my mother couldn't bear to destroy it, and every time I saw it, I got this shiver along the back of my neck ..." They'd reached the village now and John slowed down as he drove along the main street. "I took it down in the end, when I couldn't bear the sight of it, and I thought for sure that she'd never forgive me, but she didn't say a word."

He pulled up in a car park at the side of a pub close to the sea front and switched off the engine. Nick reached down to free his seatbelt just as John did the same and felt the back of his hand brush against John's, the contact too light and fleeting to warrant more than a murmured apology, if that.

Instead he jerked his hand back sharply, trying to make that his only visible reaction to the shock he'd felt as they'd touched.

John glanced down and then raised his eyes to meet Nick's, a faintly puzzled look on his face. "Sorry," he said briefly. "Well, and no offense to Stella, this is the place if you want a decent pint with your food, but if you want to go somewhere else, just say."

"It's fine," Nick told him, meaning both the pub they were parked next to and what had just happened.

They got out of the car and went inside. The lighting was on the dim side, and the place seemed crowded considering it was only just after noon, but maybe that was the normal lunch hour here. It wasn't like Nick would know the difference. There was a large chalkboard to one side of the bar with scrawled but readable specials written on it, and Nick could see that the bartender was taking someone's order over the bar, leaning in a bit so he could hear him over the noise of people talking.

Nick read the makeshift menu, frowning. "Any suggestions?" He gestured at the board.

"I don't know what you like," John said, reasonably enough. "Or how hungry you are." He stepped closer and scanned the board, "The beef stew is tasty."

"That's boeuf bourguignon." The barman appeared at their end of the bar, scowling at John. "It's got half a bottle of red wine in it, and you can't tell me it's stew after that."

"I can call it what I want, seeing as it's fifty pence dearer than it was last Tuesday," John retorted. "Christ, Geordie, could you not wait until June to hike up your prices? We'll take two, and a couple of pints of bitter to wash it down with." His voice was rougher, with more of an accent, Nick noticed. The barman's gaze traveled to him and Nick met it with a cautious smile.

"I'll be introducing you to Nick Kelley, Ian's nephew from the States, come here to live." John turned to Nick, "This is the man who pulls the best pint on the island, but never let him know I said it."

"Said what?" Nick relaxed, grinning at John as Geordie set one pint down on the bar and reached for another glass. "It's nice to meet you," he continued. "Now I know where I'll be spending my time when I don't want to drink alone."

"Glad to hear Rossneath won't be empty no more," Geordie said. "House has been empty too long. It's bad luck."

Interested, Nick raised his eyebrows as he took his wallet out. "Bad luck?"

"Aye. Perfectly good space not being used ... goes against the laws of God and man." Geordie set the second pint down beside the first and Nick offered him a note. "Thank ye kindly, young Mister Kelley. Have a wife, do ye? It's a grand house for raising a family. Your grandmother had three children in that house."

"Three?" Startled, Nick let the man put his change in his open hand as John picked up one of the pints.

"Did ye not know, then? The little boy that would have been your eldest uncle died when he was a baby. Terrible tragedy, terrible." Geordie shook his head, sounding as if he wouldn't mind answering more questions, but Nick thought he'd heard enough for now.

"You're wanted, Geordie." John nodded down the bar to where a group of lads in oil-stained overalls were leaning over the counter.

Geordie swelled up with indignation. "I've *told* them I'll not have them in here with their clothes in that state." He moved away to deal with the miscreants and, Nick noted, made sure they'd all bought pints before he banished them to the beer garden.

John handed Nick his pint. "I was supposed to be buying you this, but I suppose you'll let me get the next round in?" He led the way to a table with a view over the bay and sat down. "Cheers." He raised his glass. "Now you be saying it back to me properly. Slainte Mhath."

Nick blinked and tried. "Slannshvah. God, that was terrible. Say it again?" John did, and Nick repeated it, doing a slightly better job than he had the first time, and then taking a sip of the beer. He could get used to a life that didn't consist of much more than this, he thought.

"About what Geordie was asking --" Nick froze, *really* not wanting to discuss tragic deaths in the house he had to sleep in alone, miles from anyone, but John went on as if he hadn't noticed, "Is there going to be anyone joining you here?"

John's habit of asking what anyone else would've tactfully tiptoed around would take some getting used to, Nick reflected, but it certainly saved time, and it wasn't like he was pushy, exactly. Just direct.

Taking another sip of beer to give himself time to think of how to word it, Nick raised his left hand up to illustrate his lack of a wedding ring. "No. No wife, no girlfriend. I haven't ... it's been a long time since I've dated." There. True, and hopefully enough to forestall further questions. "What about you? You didn't mention anyone before, so I guess you're not married ..."

John's mouth twisted in a smile. "You'd guess right." He jerked his head toward the bar. "And if you were to catch Geordie with time to chat, he'd tell you why."

"Really?" Nick knew he shouldn't ask, because the more questions he asked the more he was opening himself up to more questions, but he couldn't help it. "What would he say?"

John looked at him solemnly, but Nick could see the amusement in his eyes. "He'd tell you that I'm carrying a torch for the lassie who chose to marry my best friend; young Sheila Brown as was, now Mrs. Michael Stewart, mother of a fine pair of twin boys. Heartbreaking, no? Try not to sob into your beer though; it'll not improve the taste of it."

"But that's not the case?" Nick smiled with only a little bit of uncertainty.

A single eyebrow arched up. "Well, no." John turned his head to watch an approaching waitress, carrying a large tray laden with their food and a basket of rolls. "But it's convenient."

The interruption gave Nick a chance to mull that over, and by the time the waitress had set down their plates and the basket, he'd realized how hungry he was. He probably hadn't eaten enough the day before. The smell of the beef was rich, the gravy thick and steaming, and he grabbed a roll from the basket and tore it in half, dipping it in the gravy and taking a bite. "Sorry." He glanced up at John, who was watching him with a bemused expression. "This is really good."

"Don't mind me," John murmured politely, stretching out a hand and taking a roll himself and copying Nick, although with a more moderate enjoyment showing on his face as he bit into the bread. "So." John produced another of those gently remorseless questions Nick was having so much trouble dealing with. "What is it that you do for a living? Because I'll be honest with you, there's not much work here on the island, and somehow I don't see you turning your hand to farming."

Nick had known that this was the kind of question he'd need an answer to, but he'd never managed to come up with anything he thought he could pull off. "I'm retired," he answered, closing his eyes at how rude that had sounded. Fuck. Why hadn't he thought of something? Anything? "Sorry." He wondered how many times he'd apologize before John wised up and steered clear of him. "I was ... I had this business partner." And then what was he supposed to say? *I drove our car into a tree and killed him.* He could hardly bear to think it, let alone say the words out loud. He looked up at John, expecting to see confusion and possibly condemnation in the other man's eyes.

"You can tell me to mind my own business, you know." John's eyes were kind. "And it's me who owes you an apology. If I speak out of turn again, there's no need to say more than that, and I won't take offense." He was so nice about it that Nick was relieved that he hadn't lied.

"You didn't; speak out of turn, I mean. It's not like it was an unreasonable question; it's just ... complicated."

"Then tell me when it's simple." John sounded as if he didn't mind waiting.

"It's not anything, you know, illegal," Nick added, because John's easy acceptance made him want to explain; because he wanted John to like him. "I wouldn't want you to think that."

John had raised his glass to his lips as Nick was speaking and taken a mouthful of beer. Nick watched him make an effort and just about manage to swallow it without choking, but as soon as he had, John started to laugh helplessly. "I wasn't," he managed to say. "It never crossed my mind, honest. Fine. I'll cross off bank robber and the like then, shall I?" He shook his head, still grinning in the way that made Nick want to smile back, and took another drink. "You'd do well to think of something to tell folk though." He narrowed his eyes speculatively. "Tell them you're a writer. We get them up here for the peace and quiet all the time."

Chewing, Nick nodded, washing the bite down with a long sip of beer. "That's a good idea. I've thought about it. Writing. I actually have written a couple of articles for magazines, but nothing big." One historical magazine and three that catered to people who were interested in the unexplainable. If Nick was lucky, they weren't the kind of magazines people on the island would have heard of, let alone read. "So, be honest ... what are my chances of being accepted here? I've always gotten the impression that small communities like this aren't all that welcoming of newcomers, but then you sort of said that I don't count because my family was from here."

"Oh, people will be welcoming enough. As you say, you're connected. And a new face in a place this small, well, it gives folk something to talk about. It's not as if you're the only one either; we get a lot of people coming up here when they retire. There's a Canadian staying in the north of the island and a German couple living in the cottage beside my mother." He raised his hand and scratched meditatively at his neck. "Nice enough people, too, but they *will* bring along their guitars and sing these folk songs at the gatherings, and people are too polite to tell them to stop." He sighed. "They mean well. They just think we're quaint, and Lord knows it's a strange word to use for someone like Jock McGovern when he's the best part of a bottle inside him and shooting rabbits at three in the morning."

"I can promise not to play the guitar and sing folk songs." Nick speared another chunk of beef with his fork and moved it around in the gravy. "Although I can't say I'm crazy about the thought of people talking about me. Not that I don't expect them to."

"Well, they will." John tore off another chunk of the soft, white roll. "There's no way to stop them. Or if there is, I haven't found it."

There was something that struck Nick as odd about that sentence, and it took him a moment to realize that John sounded as if he was as much of an outsider as Nick felt, which was ridiculous, given the fact that he'd lived here all his life and seemed to know everyone.

"So it's true what they say about small communities. I'm not sure how I feel about that." Nick ate another bite of stew and washed it down with the last of his beer. "How do your best friend and his wife feel about it? I take it they'd put a stop to people thinking that if it made them uncomfortable."

John stirred what was left of his food with his fork, staring down at his plate. "It's not like it's talked of much; they've been married seven or eight years now after all. And none of us ever came out and said it was true, not really. People just have it in their heads that it's why I'm not fixed up with someone -- not that there's a lot of choice here -- and like I said, it's ... convenient to let them think that." He raised his eyes and stared at Nick. "Michael's a good man and a better friend. There's not a lot he wouldn't do for me." John glanced across the room and raised his hand in response to a nod from an older man who was playing darts. "Friend of my mother's." He sounded a little amused. "Don't tell her I said so, but I think he's got a notion of courting her."

Nick watched the man throw his darts carefully but, judging from his pleased smile as he walked over and tugged them free of the pocked dartboard, with some accuracy. "You don't mind?"

John shook his head slowly. "Carson's a good man. He couldn't replace my father, mind, but to give him credit, he isn't trying to. She needs someone to fuss over and keep her company now we've all moved out, and he's perfect for that, even if he's not the fisherman Dad was." There was an unconscious condescension in his voice, and Nick glanced down at the table to hide his smile, wondering if John's tolerance was down to Carson's failings rather than his good points.

John stood up and picked up their empty glasses. "Same again, is it?"

"Sure, that'd be great." Nick told himself sternly that two glasses of beer was his limit. Otherwise, there was no telling what he might say, and he'd probably said too much already.

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John tilted his head back and pointed up at the roof. "There, see? You've a few tiles missing." He turned his head, calculating where they would have landed, and then walked over and scuffed his boot across the long, wiry grass, exposing fragments of dark slate. "Can't have been here too long, but it probably explains that damp patch in the spare room. You'll need to get that fixed."

Nick nodded and jotted down another note, the way he had every time John had finished a sentence that way. There wasn't much to do, not really; it was a good, solidly built house, but even before he'd gone off to the nursing home it'd been a while since Ian Kelley had done much to keep the place in shape. There were a dozen small jobs, and as many again that would take the two of them to tackle if Nick wanted to see out the winter in comfort.

"Right." John nodded at the stack of peat in a small lean-to close to the back door. "Do you want me to show you the trick of a peat fire? You might as well use them up as they're cut, although when they're gone, coal's probably easier. Unless you do get the central heating in before winter; then you can keep your hands clean altogether."

"I guess you might as well show me." Nick's expression made it clear that he was somewhat less than thrilled with the prospect. "But I think I'm probably going to go with the central heating. Is there someone nearby who'd be able to put it in?"

John nodded again. "There is. Niall. He's a cousin of mine, but he's the only one on the island who's qualified, so it's not as if I'm playing favorites. I'll speak to him if you like; send him over to give you an estimate."

"Thanks." Nick looked more grateful for that than for the fire-making offer.

"But if there's a power cut in January, and you can't build a fire, you're going to be awfully cold," John went on, eyeing him sternly. "So let me show you what to do, and then if you're still wanting to, we can take out the boat and see what's biting." He grinned, "Gutting a fish will take the smell of smoke off your hands, I promise you."

"Somehow I get the impression that you think that's going to make me feel better." Nick grinned back, tucking the small pad of paper and pencil into his pocket as he came over to help carry some of the peat into the house.

"There's nothing wrong with the smell of fish," John told him as they walked through the kitchen to the sitting room that ran the length of the house. "Not when it's fresh anyway, or at least that's what my dad always used to say when my mother complained."

He'd said more than that, but John wasn't ready to tell Nick how his father had endured his mother's scolding for a while as he stood there, his hair damp from the sea, his eyes tired but content, before grinning at her and asking if the way he smelled meant she wasn't going to kiss him again, because if so he'd throw every fish back in the sea because they weren't worth it. She'd always relented and given him the kiss he'd asked for, always. No, he wasn't going to tell Nick that.

He placed the peat on the hearthstone and knelt down, starting to clear away what was left of the fire he'd built the night before. "You stop noticing the smell after a while." He turned his head to glance up at Nick, who was standing with his arms folded, looking down at him as if he was something on the Discovery channel. "Or are you trying to tell me I stink of it?" He raised the sleeve of his dark-green sweater to his nose and gave it a cautious sniff, smelling oil and smoke and yes, maybe a bit of a hint of fish.

Nick laughed and knelt down beside him, touching the peat again with the tips of his fingers. John remembered what it had felt like to hold Nick's hand and looked back into the fireplace as Nick said, "No. More like smoke. But I probably do, too, after an hour in that pub." He offered the sleeve of his own sweatshirt to John, who reluctantly obliged him by leaning over and sniffing it. Nick smelled of smoke, yes, but also of unfamiliar laundry detergent.

"Well, now that you're down here, you can get some kindling from that box beside you." John's voice was a little gruff to his own ears. "Small bits, mind; the idea is to use them to get things going."

When Nick turned and began to sort obediently through what was left in the box, John edged away a little, putting some space between them. He was damn sure he couldn't have put it any plainer in the pub -- and God knows why he'd felt the need to do that with a man he'd known for no more than a day -- and Nick's reaction -- or lack of one -- had left John feeling at a loss. He didn't know what to think, but as it was obvious Nick wasn't interested in him as anything but an information source and someone to keep him company until he found his feet, a bit of space between them was called for.

Not that it was going to be easy to do that. John had always thought that he could take a hint as well as the next man, but he couldn't bring himself to break the connection he felt between them. Even if Nick had been more forthcoming, it wouldn't have changed anything. Nick was going to be living on the island, surrounded by people who would be watching him, inquisitive and ready to judge. John knew what that was like and he knew what it made Nick. Off-limits.

Cursing himself for saying even as much as he had, John took a newspaper from the magazine rack by the fire

and began to tear off small pieces, crumpling them loosely in his hand.

Nick turned back with a large handful of thin twigs balanced carefully in his left hand, fingers curled slightly around them. "Are these okay? I haven't made a fire for ... well, since I was about seven or eight, probably, and it was always with logs, not peat. What were you saying about coal?"

John nodded at the fireplace. "They're fine. Put them in and sort of criss-cross them, so that there's space for the air to get through. A coal fire will burn longer than wood, but they're both expensive up here. You'll need a bag or two for emergencies, or if Niall doesn't get your central heating in by the time the cold weather comes." John rolled his eyes tolerantly, just thinking about Niall. "He's an idle devil sometimes, for all that he's family, but maybe with you not being a summer visitor, he'll pull his finger out. Just don't be paying him in advance, whatever you do."

"I appreciate the advice." Nick leaned in closer as he set the twigs into a pattern so close to the one John would have used that it was almost uncanny. Bigger knew more than he was letting on, John thought, although he didn't think it was a deliberate facade. Just didn't have enough confidence in himself.

"There." Nick straightened up, his weight back on his heels again as he turned, gesturing toward the stack of peat that was on John's other side. "Now, do we --" His voice broke off, and John, who'd also turned to look at the peat, turned back in time to see him swallow, face white as a sheet.

"Nick?" John's gaze dropped to Nick's wrist, wondering if the man had jarred it somehow and already blaming himself for letting Nick carry in the peat. "Are you all right?" He looked at Nick's face again and saw Nick's eyes widen, the green of them all but disappearing as his pupils dilated.

Nick's jaw tightened and he swallowed, blinking. "Yeah, I'm fine." He dragged his gaze over to John, making a valiant effort, even though it was clear that he was far from fine. "What ... what do we do with the peat?" His eyes flickered off to the side again, and then back.

Every instinct John had was telling him that there was something behind him, something bad. It wasn't reasonable, and it couldn't be true, but it was how he felt when he saw those sidelong, panicked glances of Nick's. Telling himself that turning to look would be pure foolishness, he took a deep breath. "Set a small piece on top, and then we'll light the kindling under it." He straightened and stood up to get the box of matches off the mantelpiece, his gaze going to the room behind him despite his good intentions as his fingers closed around the familiar shape.

He wasn't sure what he expected to see, but his mind was busy conjuring up horrors, maybe even the ghost of old Ian, which was just plain ridiculous. For a moment his fear was instinctive and unreasoning, feeding on the panic pouring off Nick, painting a rising darkness in the corner, but when he blinked there was nothing but a wooden chair there, set squarely against the wall.

Nothing. Well, of course there was nothing. Feeling ridiculous for having even bothered to look, and hoping that Nick hadn't noticed, John held out the box of matches. "There you go."

Nick's gaze was down on the hearthstone as if he were determined to keep it there, but when John spoke, he glanced up long enough to reach for the matches with a hand that trembled slightly. He set the box on his thigh and reached for a small piece of peat as John got down beside him again, unable to keep from seeing how Nick twitched at the movement. "Put the peat on top," Nick repeated, not sounding like himself at all. "Put the peat on top and light the kindling." He picked up the matches and opened the box with an uneven force that caused them to scatter all over the floor and hearth. "Fuck."

John stretched out his hand and caught Nick's wrist as he started to pick up the matches. Nick's skin was cool and clammy. "Leave them. I'll do it." Nick's head was bowed again, a wide strip of smooth, tanned skin exposed between his hairline and the collar of his sweatshirt. "You're still tired," John went on, keeping his voice steady. "There's no rush to do everything all at once and I should've remembered that." He let go of Nick's wrist and began to brush the matches together into a small heap.

"Sorry." Nick struggled to his feet. "I'm sorry. I'm just going to go upstairs for a minute, okay? I'll be right back."

He didn't wait for John to reply, but turned and headed almost blindly for the stairs as John watched him. Nick bumped into the wall at the foot of the staircase, his shoulder hitting it, and John had to quell the impulse to get up and go after him, make sure he got up the stairs okay. It almost looked as if he were trying to walk with his eyes closed. The sound of his footsteps on the wooden stairs was uneven, too quick considering how unsteady he'd been on his feet. John breathed a sigh of relief when Nick reached the top and the bathroom door slammed shut.

He couldn't help but listen as he gathered up the matches from the hearth, putting them back into the box. What the hell was wrong with the man? It was clear that he was recovering from some kind of trauma, but John was starting to doubt that it was as simple as a car accident and a broken wrist. He didn't, he realized, know anything more about Nick than what the man had told him. For all he knew, Nick could be sick. Mentally ill.

He could hear the sound of footsteps back and forth on the bathroom floor, and what after a few moments

began to sound like a muttered voice. It got louder and more anguished, though; Nick was talking to himself, begging for ... something.

John hesitated and then went over to the stairs. Growing up amongst people who were by nature reserved made him feel awkward, even embarrassed, about intruding, but he couldn't leave Nick, not when he was in this state. It didn't matter that the man was new into his life; he liked him, and when it came down to it, right now he was the only friend Nick had.

Hoping that a friendly ear was all that was needed, not a doctor, John climbed the stairs, hearing fragments of words mumbled too low to be intelligible, although when Nick's voice rose on a frantic "Please!" it was clear enough.

He came to the closed door and raised his hand to knock softly on it. He caught his breath, his hand falling to his side as that disconcerting sense of wrongness crawled over him again, making him shudder convulsively, every hair on his body raising as his skin prickled into goose bumps.

"Nick," he said urgently, his voice cracking. "Let me in, man. Let me help you."

He wasn't sure if he wanted himself in there, or Nick out here on the landing, but he was beginning to feel strongly that company would be welcome.

Nick was still pacing, from the sound of his footsteps, and still muttering, but now John was close enough to hear most of it clearly. "No," Nick was saying. "No, no, no. No! Stop it. I can't -- God, *shut up!* Just ... I can't understand. No. Please." The last word was half sob, half whimper, the sound of it going straight to John's heart like he'd imagine the twist of a knife would. A grown man shouldn't sound like that. It wasn't right.

"Nick. Open the door." He reached for the handle.

There was a violent thump inside the bathroom, as if Nick had slapped both hands full force against the wall. "No!"

John had no idea what else to say. Should he offer to go get help? Was the man mad? Having some sort of psychotic break?

"You're wrong!" Nick's voice was loud again. "I can't. No. I don't want you here."

Setting his teeth against the sudden flare of hurt, and telling himself that Nick was too out of his head to know what he was saying, John reached out once more for the door handle. The door was locked, which came as no surprise, and although he thumped his fist against it, his temper rising because it was easier to feel angry and it pushed away the unease, it stayed that way.

He stepped back, breathing unevenly. One more time. The shadows in the hallway were gathering darkness into themselves, his palms were slippery with sweat, and he wanted nothing as much as to be out in the sunshine, breathing clean salt air, but he'd try one more time ...

"Will you open the door? Will you let me see that you're all right?"

Nick's voice was rising in a scream before he'd finished speaking, "Will you just fucking *leave me alone?*"

John didn't remember starting to move, but he remembered the feel of the stair rail under his hand as he grabbed at it to halt his fall when his hurrying feet missed a step. Remembered the sound of his feet echoing in the emptiness as he left the house in a stumbling run, harsh breaths painful in a throat swollen with tears that got no further than that.

And then his hands closed around the steering wheel of his car, warm from the sun, and the anger took him, shaking the disjointed puzzle pieces of his flight from the house and organizing them neatly into something normal, something that didn't mean he'd run because he was scared, or because he was aching with the loss of something he'd never had.

He brought his fist down hard against the dashboard, bruising it and loving the pain that followed because that he could understand, *that* made sense.

Nick didn't.

"Fucking Yank," he whispered savagely. "Fucking *tourist* --"

He drove away without looking back, heading for the beach where his boat lay waiting on the white sand, scoured clean by the wind and the sea.

Chapter Four

Two hours later, John sighed and headed for shore, pulling hard at the oars, feeling the clench of his arm and thigh muscles with every stroke. The time spent sitting in the sunshine had done a lot to restore his calm, even though he'd never had so much as a bite while holding his fishing rod. He hadn't cared; he'd only wanted the ritual of it to soothe the edges of his anger; to un-ruffle his feathers, so to speak. And it had.

It wasn't until he was a hundred yards from shore that he saw a huddled figure; small, arms wrapped around itself, up on the rocks. He knew immediately that it was Nick -- he'd recognize anyone else, and Nick's dark hair was different enough to any of the locals' that there was no question.

Turning the boat around and heading back out to sea, John told himself, would be childish, but the temptation was definitely there for a few moments. Still, he continued to row and was nearly to shore when he saw Nick stand up and begin to head toward him, picking his way across the rocks with less care than he ought to have.

Slimy with seaweed, exposed by the receding waves, the rocks weren't easy to navigate at the best of times, and as John watched, his eyes drawn unwillingly to the man who was to blame for him feeling about as miserable as he'd been in months, Nick's foot slipped and he fell heavily, his outstretched hands smacking hard against a patch of sand.

Even out on the water, with the slap of the waves loud against the hull, John heard the sound Nick made as his injured wrist took the brunt of his fall, and he pulled hard on the oars, beaching his boat and jumping out while the water was still deep enough to soak his jeans to above the knee. Grabbing the rope attached to the prow of the boat, John hauled it high enough up the beach to be safe for now and ran over to Nick, the remnants of his anger driven out by that anguished, sharp cry of pain, firmly lodged in his head.

Nick had gotten himself into a sitting position, but was bent forward around his wrist, cradling it in his other hand and rocking back and forth slightly as he cursed a long string of profanities in his flat American accent. His lips were drawn tight, his brow furrowed in pain, and as John got down on his knees next to him he looked up. "Shouldn't have let me out of the hospital, should they?" Nick said with a gasp of laughter, although it was the least amused laughter John had ever heard and it left him wondering if Nick had been in hospital for more than just his wrist. "Fuck. Oh fuck." Nick dropped his head down and rocked back and forth some more.

"Let me see it." Concern roughened John's voice; he slipped his arm around Nick's shoulders without thinking, pulling him closer. Nick curled in on himself, turning slightly so that his head was snug against John's collarbone but still clutching his injured wrist protectively.

John sighed and brought his other arm up across their bodies, giving Nick something to rest his injured hand on and waiting for the pain to recede enough that Nick would let him look at it.

The wind caught a strand of Nick's dark hair, ruffling it so that it brushed John's chin, and he sighed again and began to rub his hand gently against Nick's back, murmuring to him as he did. "Hurts, does it? Aye, it must. You went flying, didn't you? Thought you'd more sense than that. Do they not have seaweed in America then, that you don't know how slippery it is?"

Nick went still in his arms and John bent his head and let the wind take Nick's hair across his lips.

"I needed to see you," Nick said after a minute or so, unmoving. It told John something that he needed to know, the way Nick half-lay, nestled against him, allowing an intimacy that most other men wouldn't. Could it be as simple as that, then? That he'd been right about Nick from the start, but Nick wasn't the sort of man that could accept himself? Not that it made much difference. It wasn't as if he knew Nick well enough to discuss something so personal and given his own ingrained discretion, he couldn't blame Nick for being cautious.

John continued to rub his back, and Nick sighed and sat up shakily without pulling away. "Well, I'm here, but whatever you want to say can wait until I've seen what you've done to yourself."

Nick moved his right hand away, leaving his left hand lying across John's forearm. It was swelling at the wrist but there was nothing to make John think that it was broken, judging by the way Nick was able to rotate it gingerly. Had to have hurt though.

They were sitting on the sand with a small rock pool behind them, six inches deep, the black rocks visible through the clear water and sprinkled with barnacles. John turned Nick around and plunged Nick's hand into the icy water, transferring his hold on him and keeping a reassuring arm across Nick's back as Nick gasped in shock. "Aye, it's cold this time of year." John noticed his own wet jeans for the first time, splattered with sand and clinging clammy to his legs. "Is it helping?"

"I don't know." Nick gasped the words breathily. He turned his head to look at John, their faces close enough that John could see the little flecks of golden-brown in Nick's green eyes. "I think so." He blinked, his lashes dark, his nose perfectly sculpted and his hair mussed by the wind. "I have to tell you something. About me. There's something you don't know about me."

John stared thoughtfully at him, wondering what Nick was seeing in his face and hoping it was nothing that would make him move away. "This morning I'd have said you were wrong about that. About me not knowing. Now I'm not so sure. Assuming we're not talking about you being gay, what is it that you want to tell me?"

Nick shivered and closed his eyes, turning his face away; John could feel him trembling. "Oh God, I can't, you're going to think I'm crazy."

"I already think that, I was hoping you'd give me a reason to change my mind."

Slowly, as if admitting that he bugged small sheep in his spare time, Nick muttered, "I'm psychic." Before John could do more than gape at him, Nick went on, "God, it's such a cliché, isn't it? A psychic medium goes to a remote island in Scotland to live in his recently deceased uncle's house and starts seeing ghosts? It might as well be the plot of a cheesy romance novel." He laughed a bit hysterically. "You're missing the ruffled pirate shirt," And, when John looked at him, puzzled, clarified, "That the hero wears? On the cover?"

"I've spent the better part of my life trying not to give people here too many clues about what I am. Somehow I think a ruffled shirt would be making it entirely too easy." Ignoring Nick's splutter of laughter, still edged with something less stable than amusement, John leaned against the rock, letting his hand fall away from Nick's back. "So that wasn't me you were telling to go away back in the house?" He wasn't sure why he wanted to clear that up first, but he did. The rest of it could wait until he knew, because if Nick didn't want him around, then the rest of it didn't matter.

"No." Nick took his wrist out of the pool, resting it on his thigh as he reached out to touch John's arm with his good hand. "No. When you just left like that ... I didn't know if you thought that I was, or if you just thought I was crazy, but that's why I came out here. Because I wanted to explain. It was so stupid of me, thinking that I'd be able to ignore them out here."

John frowned, his thoughts going back to the moment before he, well, ran out of the house, because that's what he'd done and there was no hiding it now. "I couldn't stay," he said slowly. "I was wanting to help you -- I could hear you and it was --" His throat closed up in memory and he brought his hand up to clasp Nick's where it rested against his arm, his fingers closing tightly around it. "God, it was awful. And I've never felt so terrified in my life. It was like ..." He stared into Nick's eyes, seeing nothing in them of the madness he'd feared, just a resigned sympathy. "Like the house was pushing me out. I ran. Ran because I was scared spitless. Ran, and left you, and made myself believe you'd told me to go, because it was easier than thinking myself a coward, afraid of the dark like a bairn."

Nick's hand squeezed his arm reassuringly. "Could you feel it? He wasn't really angry -- he wouldn't have done anything to you. Or me. He's just been waiting a long time, and he's stubborn. He's ..." Stiffening, Nick swallowed and looked away. "Maybe you don't want to talk about this. And that's fine -- we don't have to. I don't have to."

John gave a short choke of laughter, dragging their linked hands down to rest on his knee, not letting go. "Oh, I want to talk about it. Trust me, I do. I'd rather be knowing the truth than imagining all sorts." He took a deep breath, surprised by how much better he felt now that Nick was being open with him, and glanced around the beach, edged by high dunes, a sweeping narrow crescent of sand with driftwood lying on it, wind-carved down to smoothness. "And even out here, in the sun, it's easy for me to be dreaming up horrors, so tell me. Tell me why you were angry for a start, because you *were*. If it couldn't hurt you --?"

"I didn't say couldn't, I said wouldn't. It depends on how strong they are." Nick didn't pull his hand away, seeming content to leave it where it was. "I was just hoping -- and I know now that it was stupid, that it's not something I can get away from, no matter how far I run ... I knew it before actually, I just didn't want to admit it. It's like I needed to pretend that there was someplace I could hide from it. I wanted it to be here."

"I can understand you wanting some peace, but I'm thinking you'd need to have moved to the moon to get it." John realized that he was stroking his thumb across the back of Nick's hand and stopped abruptly, feeling a flush of heat rise in his face. "So how did you make it -- him -- go away? No, wait -- they *can* hurt you? Is that what happened to your wrist then?"

"It's pretty rare that a ghost has enough power to affect anything physically," Nick said. "I've seen it a few times, but not a lot -- and when I have, it's always been in a place where stuff's already been, you know, falling off of shelves and stuff. I'm sure there's some technical words for it -- manifestation, ectoplasm. I don't know. Maybe I'd be better off if I did, but I always thought that making it too scientific would screw up the instinct of it, and sometimes it seemed like the instinct was the only thing keeping me going."

Nick shifted, flexing his bad hand slightly and wincing. "But no, I did this all on my own. Usually they look however they looked when they were alive, but every once in a while they're ... kind of messed up. I guess that's where the whole headless horseman thing came from." Nick smiled weakly, and John's stomach curled itself into another knot at the thought of it. "It was right in the road, right in front of the car, and I ... I should have known that it wasn't a real person, but sometimes I get so ... it's just hard to tell, sometimes. So I swerved and ran off the road into a tree." His eyes were closed now, his breathing uneven.

John couldn't help himself; his free hand came up to curve around Nick's jaw and slide up into his thick dark hair, the need to give comfort outweighing any other consideration. "Of course you did. Anyone would've done the same. What else were you to think or do?"

To his surprise, Nick leaned into the touch, shivering. "I should have known better. I should have known."

"You're not allowed to be startled? To act without thinking?" John moved his hand until it cupped the back of Nick's neck, his fingers rubbing gently at the tense muscles there. "You're awful hard on yourself. It must be hell on your nerves. Never knowing when it's going to happen, on edge all the time, waiting ... Or is it not like that?"

"Sometimes it is. Sometimes I don't see or hear anything for weeks, and then I kind of ... forget. Well, not really, but at least I stop thinking about it all the time." Nick's voice was low enough that it was hard to hear him, the way his head was tilted down as John rubbed his neck some more. "And sometimes, when I touch someone, I can see ... I don't know. Premonitions, I guess." He glanced up, as if making sure that John wasn't laughing at him. "Once, there was a little girl. With long blonde hair. We were in a store, and she touched me, and I saw ..." Eyes squeezed shut, "She drowned. I saw it. I mean, I didn't see it, but I could see it then, with her hair all spread out and floating ..." He shifted his arm in his lap and hissed, "Fuck."

"Let me take you into town, to the doctor." John pulled back with some reluctance, letting his other hand drop away after one final, reassuring pat on Nick's back. He was sure there was more Nick wanted to tell him, but it could wait. And admittedly there were some things he didn't care to hear the details of. "You need to have that looked at."

Nick immediately straightened up, his lips set determinedly. "No, there's too many ... I can't. It's not that bad, I just strained it. It's my own fault for not wrapping it up."

"Too many' what? And even if it was your fault, which it wasn't, that doesn't mean you can't get it seen to." He looked at Nick's wrist, noting that the swelling didn't seem to be getting any worse. The cold water had helped then. Good. "Will you not let me help you?" He was almost pleading with the man. "Because Lord knows, I want to do something after leaving you alone like that."

Nick glanced up at him again, eyes wary as if he were expecting rejection. "You could drive me back to the house. When I'm alone, it's worse. I can't stop listening, when they ..." He tilted his head to the side, squeezing his eyes shut, his voice soft and rough-edged. "He won't stop until I fix it. But I don't know what's wrong."

The words spun out in the wind, blowing away down the length of the shore in tiny wisps that John fancied, just for a moment, he could see. "Then I'll stay with you." John was relieved that it was so simple. "Stay until you get it sorted out. This ghost -- it'll be local, will it? Not one you brought with you?"

"He must be." Nick got up gingerly, as if afraid of jarring his wrist. As John stood up as well, Nick added, "It's not just him. It won't be. He's the first, which might mean he's stronger; or maybe just that he's more observant."

"They -- they sort of hunt you then?" John was horrified by the thought of it. He didn't wonder about Nick's restlessness any more, or the endlessly searching look in his eyes. "Track you down? What for? What do they want you to *do*, in the name of God? They're dead!"

"I know!" Nick snapped, with a spark that reminded John that the man wasn't beaten down, not entirely, despite the fact that he was holding his hurt arm awkwardly at his side like a broken wing. "Believe me, I know!" He licked his lips in what looked like a nervous habit. "But they don't; not always. It depends on how long they've been dead. At first it's like they don't know what happened, but they usually figure it out eventually."

"Eventually? So it's just a matter of enduring it until they ... fade away? Nothing you can do to just make them leave you be?" John began to move over to his boat, with Nick falling into step beside him. "I'll need to move it up to anchor it." He nodded at the rock he used as a mooring point when he left the boat here instead of at the jetty in town. "Then we'll get you home."

Nick stood there silently as John pulled his boat up and secured it; guaranteed the one time he failed to do so properly the tide would be high and carry the boat out to sea. When he'd finished and straightened up, Nick was watching him.

"You don't have to do this. Any of it. It wouldn't make you a bad person if it was all too weird to deal with. I'd understand."

"Would you?" John started to walk up the beach, the fine sand dragging at his feet. "Aye, well, I'll remember that, although I can't say I agree with you. But you're forgetting that I felt that damn ghost myself, although I don't

suppose it was anything like what you went through, and I want it gone.” He turned his head. “This ghost -- can you describe it? Draw it? Hell, can you take its picture? Because if it’s from here -- if it’s from the graveyard -- then the odds are it’s someone I know, or someone I’m related to.” He shook his head. “God, I hope it’s not my grandfather or he’ll be trying to drag me off to hell for my wicked ways, so he will, the miserable old bugger.”

There was what sounded like a bit of a smile in Nick’s voice. “Your wicked ways?” he repeated, as if the idea amused him. “No, I don’t think so. It feels younger. And old -- um, like it’s been around a long time. Hundreds of years, maybe. That happens. I don’t usually get a lot of detail, though, not about what they look like. This one’s a man, I can tell that much. Not a lot more, though.”

“Probably still related,” John said glumly. “Hell, you and I are, did you not know that? And trust me, Granddad wouldn’t approve of the way I’d turned out at all.” Just thinking about the man’s reaction to having a grandson who was gay made John shudder, even though Charles McClure had been dead a good fifteen years.

“We’re related?” Nick stopped briefly.

John turned to him, feeling a flicker of amusement -- and hope -- at Nick’s reaction. “Aye. Let me see now ...” He pursed his lips in thought and then nodded. “Your grandmother’s cousin was my great uncle. I’m thinking that makes us cousins. About seven times removed, mind you.” He cleared his throat, fighting back a smile because Nick had looked so damn thunderstruck. “Is that a problem for some reason, then?”

“The fact that we’re cousins -- very distant cousins, extremely distant cousins -- is probably less a problem than the fact that I --” Nick cut himself off and shook his head. “Sorry. It’s too soon.”

John felt a twinge of shame at teasing him, but the idea that there was any barrier at all to him and Nick getting closer was worrying. “If there’s anything about me -- about what I am -- that’s making you wish we’d not met, I’d be grateful if you’d tell me now.” He was tired of the evasions and hints. “And for all that it’s been no more than a day since I first set eyes on you, it’s been one hell of a day.” The wind whipped the sharp, thin blades of dune grass across his damp jeans and he shivered, feeling suddenly weary and cold. “You know more about me than all but a handful of people on this island. And I’ve seen what you are. What you do. We don’t have to be friends, we don’t have to fuck, but we’re not strangers. Not now.”

“I don’t know why I came here, if it wasn’t to meet you,” Nick searched John’s eyes, and took a step in his direction. “Don’t get me wrong -- I don’t think I believe in fate, or some bigger meaning. Well, okay, I believe that there’s more to life than we’re born and we die, but I really would be crazy if I didn’t, considering ...” John felt his lips twitch in a tentative smile. “But if we’re going to be friends ... and I think we are ... I don’t want to be the kind of friend that makes your life harder instead of easier. So, from where I’m standing, the problem ...” And Nick stepped closer still, although not, John noted, so close that anyone watching might have suspected anything, “The problem is that I’m wondering what you might look like without your clothes on. And I don’t know how long I’ll be happy just wondering. And none of it’s a problem for me unless it’s a problem for you, and I’m thinking it might be.”

“God.” John’s body reacted to Nick’s words with an immediacy that left him breathless. Nick seemed able to get a response from him with just his words that other men would have needed to have been naked, hands and mouth busy, to achieve. “You --” He shook his head, caught between arousal and the caution that, after all these years, was ingrained. He wished, quite desperately, that they’d met anywhere but here. He couldn’t imagine Nick as a casual pickup in a pub, drifting out of his life a bare few hours after they’d met. No. That wouldn’t be enough for John when it came to Nick -- but at least off this island they’d have a chance at something. “Don’t think that.” The wind took his words as he spoke them. “That I don’t want you, because I do. Have done since I saw you. I just -- I’ve never -- not here. Not on the island.”

He moved closer, because he couldn’t help it, could he? He couldn’t keep away from him, couldn’t keep his hands off him. Nick’s face was warm against the curve of John’s hand but he didn’t move, holding himself still, waiting. “And it was never easy, but I managed. Now --” John brought his other hand up, pushing a lock of dark hair back off Nick’s forehead and feeling everything shift with that single, gentle touch, doubts and fears falling away. They’d return; he wasn’t so lost in this sudden yearning as to think that they wouldn’t, but for now he was free of them. “Now I just -- I can’t do it. God, Nick --”

He could see Nick swallow and glance down uncertainly. “Not here. Not yet. I can’t; I need you to see, first. What it’s really like with me, because if you don’t believe that it’s real, if there’s even some little part of you that thinks I’m just crazy or deluded or making it all up, then I can’t.” His eyes were worried even as his good hand came up and rested at John’s waist, making him shiver with something more than the chill. “You’re cold.”

“I’m soaked through,” John pointed out. “I’ll be fine; I’ve a change of clothes in the car.” It was a grand way of describing a pair of worn jeans, ripped and soft with washing, but as long as they were dry he didn’t care. Rain didn’t bother him, but the sea in spring was icy. “So do you think -- will he still be there? When we go back?”

He was hoping that if he knew, if he was ready, it wouldn’t be as bad. He wasn’t planning on telling Nick that

he already did believe him; he just had to find out if he had the guts to stand beside him with his skin crawling and his heart hurting it was beating so fast.

"Maybe," Nick replied as they started walking toward the car again, John taking care to go slowly as the footing was unfamiliar to Nick. "It depends on how strong he is, and how stubborn. He's been waiting a long time for someone to fix whatever it is he thinks he left undone." He sighed.

"So you don't think your uncle had the gift, then?" Curiosity was doing a lot to dispel his apprehension because it was always the not knowing that scared him most. "Do you know anyone else who has? And how long has it been that you could --" He stopped himself short, giving Nick an apologetic smile, "Sorry; I didn't mean to be interrogating you like that."

Nick shrugged. They'd reached the car, and he leaned against it while John opened the door and reached into the back seat for the jeans. "I don't mind. I've met other people who could do what I do; most of them were better at it than me." He didn't seem upset by the prospect.

John sat down on a nearby rock and dealt with undoing his bootlaces, struggling a little because they were water-soaked and the knots had tightened. "I doubt it's the sort of thing they give you marks out of ten on," he said wryly. "Is that what you do, then? People ask you to come and get rid of ghosts in their house, or something?"

He stood up and hesitated with his hand on his belt buckle. With anyone else he'd have skinned out of his wet jeans without a thought, but after what Nick had just said ... John eyed him uncertainly and then saw the amusement in Nick's eyes.

"Aye, you can smile." John unfastened his belt and zip, pushing his jeans down. He sat back on the rock, shivering at the feel of the rough, cold stone against his skin and began to peel the wet, clinging denim off his legs. "But try and restrain yourself, will you, for all that I know I've got a fine pair of knees on me."

He couldn't help but glance up again, and when he did, Nick was keeping his eyes innocently trained up at the sky. "I don't know what you're talking about." Nick looked as appealing as John had seen him, a smile teasing at his lips. John emerged triumphant from his fight to get his wet jeans off the rest of the way and used the waistband, which was still dry, to scrub at his legs before putting on the worn but clean pair. "Yes, it was my job. More in a driving around kind of way than anything else, and I think a lot of it was because it made my mom happy. I haven't had a permanent place to live in ... hmm, I don't know. Ten years? But I'm done with that. Maybe not as retired as I'd hoped, but ..."

"I can't imagine that." John shoved his feet back into his damp boots but didn't bother to fasten them as he'd only be taking them off when they got back to Nick's house. He walked past Nick to the car and threw his wet jeans into the trunk, hoping he'd remember they were there and not find them the next time he opened it and loaded in a tourist's luggage. "I've never lived anywhere but at my parents' house until I moved -- and that was just a few miles up the road. Never been outside Scotland, if it comes to that."

John started the car, seeing out of the corner of his eye how Nick tensed and then made a deliberate effort to sit back. He couldn't help thinking that there was more to the crash story than Nick had told him, what with the way the other man fastened his seat belt as if it were a lifeline, but he didn't comment, just made an effort to drive as carefully as possible over the rough ground beyond the dunes until they reached the road.

"What about your father? Did he like the traveling?"

"So much that he left just after I was born," Nick agreed. "I met him once, when I was about twelve. Let's just say I wasn't impressed and leave it at that. I don't know where he is now."

John kept his eyes on the road ahead, not inclined to disagree with Nick's assessment. His own father had been such a strong, vital force in his life that it was hard to imagine growing up without him. It struck him then just how alone Nick was when it came to family. "You grew up with just her then. Just your mother ..." He shook his head ruefully. "And here's me, able to call half the island kin and all of them thinking they've a right to meddle with every breath I take sometimes. I'd still take that over being alone, mind you, but it can get a wee bit annoying at times."

"I wouldn't know how to deal with it."

John turned into the driveway leading up to Rossneath House, giving it a hard stare, but seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Just gray stone and empty windows.

They both got out of the car and Nick started toward the house, then he turned and shaded his eyes with a hand as he looked back at John, who still hadn't quite convinced his legs to move. "I guess it wouldn't reassure you if I said that they aren't limited to being *inside* the house, would it?"

"No. Not really." John sighed, willing himself to walk to Nick, but not getting much further than that. "You'll not be thinking much of me right now, will you?"

"What?" Nick sounded surprised, even as he took a step backwards toward the house. It seemed such an automatic movement that John had to wonder if it was some sort of instinct. "Because you aren't exactly jumping at

the chance to go back inside where there might be things you can't see or hear walking around? No; actually, the fact that you're willing to at all nets you plenty of points in my book." He gestured with his good hand. "Come on."

John stared past him at the house and then shrugged. "The fish weren't biting worth a damn anyway," he muttered and strode forward, with Nick falling into step beside him. "Promise me something," he said as they reached the back door.

"What?" Nick sounded a little cautious.

"If you see it behind me, tell me? Because I *felt* it when we were lighting the fire, and I couldn't see it." John shuddered. "I didn't like that one bit. If you tell me it's there, I'll know I'm not imagining it and it won't matter so much."

"Okay. I'll tell you." Nick reached out and turned the door handle without hesitation, the way he was holding his other arm reminding John of his injury. "I'm kind of surprised you could feel it. Most people can't, you know."

The inside of the house was quiet, but John couldn't help but feel that the silence was ominous rather than peaceful.

"I'm just going to go upstairs and ..." Nick stopped and looked at John. "On second thought, maybe you'd better come with me."

"I *am* coming with you," John said with absolute certainty and a grimace at the idea of being alone in the house. "There's no maybe about it." He glanced around, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, and then gestured at the stairs. "But I think I'll be letting you go first."

Nick reached out and patted his shoulder before starting up the staircase. "It's okay, I'm pretty sure we're alone. Maybe he got tired of hanging around and gave up. I mean, he'll be back, but right now I think it's just us."

John followed Nick into the bedroom, where Nick sorted through the clothes heaped on the chair and soon came out with the elastic bandage he'd been wearing the day before.

"You said most people can't tell they're there," John said as Nick worked the bandage onto his hand. "But the people who ask for your help can? Is that because they're connected to the ghost, or because of the kind of people they are? Because I've never felt anything like that before, and I'm wondering why I can now."

"I don't know." Nick frowned thoughtfully. "I guess it could be because they're connected somehow. Well, and sometimes it's because they're getting some kind of physical proof that something's not right -- hearing the sounds of things the spirit is moving around, stuff like that." He rotated his wrist slightly and finished fastening the end of the bandage, then flexed his hand experimentally. "Ow! You've never heard or seen anything you couldn't explain?"

"Only when I've been drinking, and I've always thought that *was* the explanation," John grinned. He shook his head, sobering. "No. Never. Not like *that*." A thought occurred to him and he said tentatively, "You mentioned that you had a business partner; could he?"

If he had, John had to wonder if it'd become more than he could cope with, and how much it'd hurt Nick when he left. Not that Nick had said anything to imply he'd been close to whoever his business partner was -- it could have been a woman, come to that -- but whoever it'd been, they weren't with Nick now. Perhaps they hadn't taken kindly to Nick deciding to come to this remote island, where it wasn't likely that he'd be earning much, no matter how many ghosts he helped out.

Nick had gone a bit distant again, for all he hadn't moved from where he was standing. "Matthew? No. No, he never ..." Nick shook his head and looked over to the window; John didn't think he could see the graveyard from there. "He couldn't. He didn't even think I could."

That didn't make any sense at all. "He worked with you and he didn't *believe* you?" John frowned. "What in the name of God did he think you *were* doing then? Did he think you were conning the people you helped?" He could feel anger stir at the thought of it and tried to damp it down; if he hadn't felt what he had, maybe he'd have had a hard job believing Nick, too. But he wouldn't have gone into business with him, thinking Nick deluded at best, a fake at worst.

Nick shrugged a bit, not meeting John's eyes. "I don't know; I guess he thought that if people were happy, it didn't matter too much if it was real or not. It's hard to explain. We were ... friends." There was just enough hesitation before the word to give John a hint of how things had been.

"And now you're not?" The words slipped out before he could call them back and he sighed. "This is a good place for you to either tell me what happened, or tell me to mind my own damn business." He held Nick's gaze. "I'm not meaning to pry, but you're saying bits and pieces and I just feel --" He made a frustrated sound, "Feel there's more to this than you and him breaking up."

Nick shut his eyes and nodded. "Matthew was in the car with me the night I ran it off the road and into that tree. The night I did this." He gestured with his bandaged arm and made a face like a small child trying to swallow around a sore throat, like the pain was too much to bear. "He's dead." Nick's eyes met John's squarely. "I killed

him.”

John held very still, the truth of it rushing down on him and leaving him lost for words. He could see it all now, and knowing wasn't helping for once “No. No, you didn't,” he said eventually, seeing the rejection appear on Nick's face, as if the man wasn't willing to hear that for some reason. “Not if that's how it happened. It was an accident, and you know it. God, you can't blame yourself for it when you're lucky you're not dead, too!”

“I wished I was, for a while.” Nick was very still, as if keeping himself together with enormous effort. “And there's no guarantee that something like that might not happen again.”

“I don't suppose there is,” John said slowly. “I can easily think of how a ghost appearing could startle you into doing something that would hurt yourself or someone else ... but I'm not seeing how that makes you different than the rest of us. I've driven along and had a deer leap out in front of me; big brute too, eyes wild with fear. I did just what you did, without thinking twice, and I was lucky no worse happened to me than a few bruises.” He stepped closer to Nick, feeling pity and regret. “It wasn't very long ago, was it, since you lost him? Three months? Too soon -- aye. I see what you mean by that now.”

It came to him that of all the men he'd been involved with, Nick was the first he wanted to do more than sleep with. Oh, he wanted to fuck him, God, yes. He was aching for the feel of Nick's skin under his hands, and the taste of him filling his mouth. It just didn't end there. He wanted more than that from Nick. Wanted to spend time with him as they got to know each other; wanted Nick to trust him enough to share more about his life. Even if it did scare the spit from his mouth just thinking about it. He wished he knew how Nick felt about him, but with Nick still mourning, by the sounds of it, he wasn't going to push him.

“But it wouldn't have happened to a normal person,” Nick said. “A normal person wouldn't have to worry about suddenly hearing a voice in an empty house and falling down the stairs, right?” He sounded stretched nearly to the breaking point, John thought. “God, Matthew never let me forget that one. He used to tease me about it every time we went out for a drink.” Darkly, Nick added, “Guess he wouldn't have if he'd had any idea how things were going to end up.”

“He sounds like a --” John stopped himself before he spoke out of turn. The man was dead after all, and if Nick had loved him he couldn't have been a complete prat. “It was a terrible thing to happen. I'm very sorry.” He swallowed. “Is he -- have you -- seen him? Did he come back?”

Nick shook his head wordlessly in an answer to at least one of the questions, although John couldn't be sure which, and then suddenly stiffened, closing his eyes and turning his head to the side a bit as if listening to something. “No.” It wasn't more than a whisper.

“Nick?”

“No, it's not ... no. Not like that.” Nick was trembling, clearly speaking to someone John couldn't hear.

John lifted his hand and then let it fall back, not sure what would happen if he touched Nick but hating seeing him like this and not being able to comfort him. His hand clenched into a fist, frustration filling him and leaving no room for fear. Besides, he wasn't feeling anything this time ...

Then something in the corner of the room flickered, and the shadows there *moved*, a barely perceptible shift that shouldn't have dried John's mouth the way it did.

Chapter Five

John couldn't see more than the flickering shift, and he couldn't hear anything but Nick's whispered words, but he could tell that there was something in the room with them. There was a heaviness to the air, weighted down as it got before a storm, when he'd feel restless and irritable, with his skin fair crawling on his bones, waiting for the thunder to come and end it. Each lungful of air felt tainted, as if he was breathing in decay and dust, choking him until he raised his hand to his throat, hearing his breath rasp harshly.

"What is it saying? What does it want?" he asked, the words rough and labored.

"No. Stop; I can't ..." Nick shook his head, eyes still closed. "What do you want me to do?" He was tense, his breathing quick as he listened. "Oh, God. How can I ..." He reached out with his injured hand. "John ..."

"I'm here. Right here." Carefully, slowly, John slid his fingers under Nick's until their palms were touching, all his attention on Nick now, because he was all that mattered to John. It wasn't that he didn't feel sympathy for the ghosts -- for all he knew, he'd end up as one himself -- but Nick was alive, and harrying him like this just didn't seem fair somehow. What did they expect him to do, anyway?

He closed his hand gently around Nick's and waited.

Nick was shivering, although his fingers were warm enough in John's. "He killed his friend," Nick whispered, opening his eyes. "It was an accident -- he didn't mean to. Something with a gun. In the highlands? Here." Nick's other hand touched his own chest fleetingly before falling back down to his side again. His lip trembled. "And then he died, too, and they brought him back here. He wants me to tell him it wasn't his fault." It was clear that this was something Nick didn't think himself capable of.

John couldn't help wondering if this particular ghost had been drawn to Nick because of their shared experience. As Nick didn't seem able to forgive himself for what had happened to Matthew, it wasn't likely he'd be willing to reassure the ghost, though -- and somehow John knew that a lie wouldn't work. Nick had to believe it --

"Then tell him." John made his words forceful, trying to get through to Nick, grabbing his arm and shaking him slightly because Nick's eyes were unfocused and hazy. "If he was the man's friend it *had* to have been an accident -- and if he wasn't, if he did it on purpose, then he wouldn't feel this badly over it. He's telling you the truth and you know it. *Tell* him. Give him what he needs."

"I can't," Nick said, but it sounded automatic, as if he hadn't had time to think about it yet. He gasped, flinching away from something John couldn't hear. "Yes. Okay. Okay! It's not your fault. You said it yourself -- it was an accident. The gun -- yes, I know. I know. Misfired." Muttered, "They were always doing that." With more conviction, now. "It wasn't your fault. You --"

Nick flinched again, violently enough this time that he pulled away from John. He moved blindly across the room, narrowly missed colliding with the chest of drawers, and ended up with one shoulder pressed against the wall, eyes shut and his head shaking back and forth slightly. "You shouldn't have. It wasn't your fault. They wouldn't have blamed you. They knew you loved him." There were tears in Nick's voice now, although they weren't being shed. "I know. I know you loved him."

The room was quiet, and John fancied that he could feel the presence, whatever it had been, receding. The sun came out from behind a cloud a moment later, painting wide swathes of white-gold across the carpet.

Without warning, Nick slid down the wall to huddle on the floor, both arms pulled in against himself.

John walked over to him and went to his knees beside him, pulling Nick into a tight, hard hug, desperately needing the reassurance of the contact. Nick's body was rigid in his arms, wracked by convulsive shudders.

"Hush now." John stroked an anxious, clumsy hand over Nick's hair, realizing with a distant astonishment that he was trembling himself. "You did it; he's gone. Hush now, I'm here."

Nick clutched at him. "He killed himself," he said hoarsely, pressing his forehead to John's arm.

"Aye." John let his hand rest against the back of Nick's neck. "I can see how a man would want to do that when he'd lost a friend. When he was grieving."

Nick nodded, the movement awkward, but didn't let go of John. His skin was warm against John's hand, and the sunlight was warm on the back of John's neck. He could see specks of dust floating in the beam of sunshine beside him.

Slowly, the two of them relaxed, Nick's shudders fading away.

When Nick turned his head to look at John, their noses were nearly touching. If there'd been tears in Nick's eyes earlier, the only hint of them now was in the darkness of his eyelashes. "How freaked out are you?"

“By you being this close to me, or by the ghost?” John asked, not needing to do more than murmur the words, feeling as if just thinking them would be enough, as close as they were.

Nick breathed out, his lips curling into a smile for a fraction of an instant, there and gone. “I meant by the ghost.” His voice was as quiet as John’s had been and, his hand, which had been holding onto John’s sweater, stopped clutching and started stroking over the knit. “But if being this close to me freaks you out, maybe we should stop.”

“I didn’t say it did,” John pointed out, dragging his fingertips in a lazy spiral against Nick’s neck and smiling a little at the entirely different shiver Nick gave. “Maybe a bit. Maybe just a little bit. But in a good way.” John tilted his head and leaned in an inch. “D’you want me to stop then?” he whispered against Nick’s mouth, still not kissing him, not exactly. Just ... asking him, with their lips touching by chance on every other word, so that when he’d finished saying them he held still, very still, waiting.

Nick answered him without words, tilting his own head so that their lips brushed together in what anyone might have called a kiss, although it was over before John could properly enjoy it. “This is probably where one of us says we should wait.” Nick’s eyebrows lifted in a question.

“Well, it’s not going to be me.” John felt very sure about that. . His thumb found the soft skin behind Nick’s ear and stroked along it. “You can if you must, but for God’s sake say it soon because I’m wanting to kiss you very badly and I’m not feeling as patient as I should.”

“Screw patience.” Nick kissed John again with what felt like a great deal of yearning. There was no hesitation about it, and not much gentleness either, but Nick’s lips were warm and his hand was curled into a fist around a fold of John’s sweater again.

It’d been months since John had kissed someone, and it hadn’t been like this when he had; a hasty, perfunctory crush of mouth on mouth, both of them tasting of whiskey and really not wanting to do more than get off, eyes closed because faces didn’t matter.

This was different. If his eyes closed as Nick’s tongue slipped inside his mouth, it was so he could concentrate on the taste of him, and he could see the green of Nick’s eyes even in the dark, limned on the inside of his eyelids, bright and dazzling.

He shifted, tugging Nick closer still, dragging a hand through Nick’s hair and groaning with arousal as Nick bit down on his lip, flicking his tongue over the spot a second later to soothe the sharp sting, and then doing it again, harder.

“Fuck,” Nick muttered, wrapping an arm around him. “John ... you don’t want to get involved with me.” It was a fairly unconvincing argument, being immediately followed by a kiss so fierce they gasped into it.

“I’m giving that impression, am I?” John managed to say. “Sorry about that --”

He captured Nick’s earlobe between his teeth and then kissed down the line of his neck, nuzzling into his collarbone and tasting salt on Nick’s skin, left there by the sea breezes. “Want this.” He formed the words with difficulty because his mouth didn’t want to be talking. “Want you --”

Nick moaned softly, the sound of it doing things to John he wasn’t sure had ever been done to him before. A warm hand slid up underneath the waistband of John’s sweater and rested on his back, and Nick’s mouth found his again, insistent, before moving down to kiss his throat. “There’s a perfectly good bed in here, you know,” Nick murmured.

“I know.” John tipped his head back and yielded to the onslaught of gentle and not-so-gentle kisses. He brought his hand up inside Nick’s sweatshirt, caressing him with an urgent haste, wanting more, when an hour ago this would’ve been enough. “I made it for you yesterday, remember, and left you to sleep in it alone when all I wanted to do was to crawl in naked beside you.”

“Oh God.” Nick shuddered, pressing his mouth to John’s pulse point. “But that was before you knew. It’s not enough to scare you away?”

“Does it look as if it is?” John asked him, tracing the fine line of hair on Nick’s stomach, following it up and spreading his hand flat on Nick’s chest, feeling the thud of his heart. “I can’t say I like that you have to go through this, but now I’ve had time to get used to the idea I’m not planning on doing any more fleeing in terror, and I’d be grateful if you’d forget that I ever did.” He caught the hard bump of Nick’s nipple between thumb and finger and teased it harder. “And I was in more of a temper than anything, to be honest.”

They were both on their knees; Nick’s arm around his back tightened, trapping John’s hand between them, but John didn’t care because it also meant that their lower bodies were touching, rubbing against each other. “John ...” Nick’s voice was low and desperate.

“Right here.” John tried to tug up Nick’s sweatshirt with his free hand and failed. “God, will you just get out of these fucking clothes so I can get my hands on you? Please?”

“Here, just ...” With the two of them working at it, they managed to get Nick’s sweatshirt off over his head

without disturbing his bandage, and then John's sweater off, as well. Nick ran a hand down along John's chest with a great deal more patience than John was feeling just then, tracing over his stomach and then lower, over the thin, worn fabric of his old jeans.

"I can *feel* that," John said through gritted teeth, unable to keep his hips from pushing forward eagerly, shamelessly hungry for more. "And I'm all out of spare jeans, so will you stop it until I take these off?"

"Let me do it." Nick kissed him again. There was something knowing about him, as if he could see things in John that he liked, things that he wanted ... or maybe that was just a fancy of John's brought on by the fact that the man was unfastening his jeans and sliding a hand inside over bare skin that twitched and throbbed.

John brought his hand smacking down around Nick's wrist. "Stop it," he growled, feeling his skin tighten and heat as if he'd stepped under a scalding shower. "God, will you *stop* that?" He tugged Nick's hand out, gasping at the drag of Nick's hand over his cock, and held their linked hands out to the side, meeting Nick's unrepentant grin with a stern, utterly unconvincing look. "Right." He reached out to deal with the button and zip on Nick's jeans. "See how you like it, then ..."

John intended to tease him, or better yet get another of those needy moans out of him, but the moment his hand closed on Nick's cock, hot and hard, he was lost. "Oh, *fuck*," he groaned. "Nick --"

They fell back onto the carpet, mouths avid, hands grabbing and pulling at clothes until they finally managed to free themselves from a tangle of jeans and shorts.

Side by side, they kissed frantically, taking control by turns. Nick was, more by luck than design, lying on his left side, so the hand that he had free to run over John's body happened to be his good one. Which was something John would have, if he'd had the time or inclination, thanked God for, because there was no denying that Nick had a way of touching him that was more than a bit like magic. He slid that hand everywhere -- down along John's bare back, over his hip, down his leg and back up along his inner thigh. It would have had John biting his lower lip if it hadn't been already occupied.

"God," Nick muttered into the next kiss, willingly allowing John's tongue into his hot, slick mouth to taste him.

John's exploring hand found the place where Nick's back curved into his arse, running his hand over the dip and rise of it again and again as his tongue darted against Nick's before finally letting his hand go lower to cup the hard muscle and pull Nick closer. His cock was full, aching for a touch it hadn't had since they stripped, and he found himself jerking his hips, sliding his erection against Nick's flat stomach and groaning at the friction, enough to tease his arousal higher, but too limited to be satisfying. He pulled back, breaking the kiss and sliding his hand between them, rubbing the back of his fingers slowly against Nick's cock, moving it up and then slipping it behind Nick's cock so that he could curl his hand around him.

"Touch me." John stared into Nick's eyes and saw the green of them darken. "God, I need your hand on me."

Nick's breath sounded harsh and raw in his throat as he closed his warm fingers around John's aching cock, making John twitch. Nick was looking at him with what seemed to be smoldering arousal, and his hips rocked forward, pushing his hard cock into John's fist. "God. John." Nick leaned in and kissed him again, more slowly now, and with one of those little moans that John had so wanted to hear again. "There's a perfectly good ... oh God ... and here we are on the ..." Nick gasped and pressed closer, his grip tight around John's cock and so, so perfect.

"You want to move?" John asked incredulously, kissing him between the words, his hand busy working a cock he wanted inside him soon, wanted to taste, but knowing they'd never last that long, not this first time. His thumb, sweeping restlessly over the exposed head of Nick's cock, was sliding over skin slicked wet with pre-come and he was close to coming himself. "You want to move *now*?"

"No." Nick was laughing and kissing him at the same time. "No, not now. Couldn't ... oh God, *John* ..." Nick's cock throbbed a warning in his hand, Nick's fingers pulling and dragging at John's erection as Nick cried out in surprise and came in jolts of hot fluid that slicked John's hand.

Watching Nick come would've been enough to have John following him; there was something so open and unguarded in his face right then that seeing it felt more intimate than what they were doing. But as Nick climaxed, his hand tightened almost painfully around John's cock, and held in that relentless grip he came, throwing his head back, an anguished sound torn from him because it was over and he knew what a difference that could make.

While he could, before Nick moved away, retreating behind a joke or a casual comment, he let his head rest against Nick's shoulder, pressing his lips against the warm skin below it and waiting for that imperceptible tensing that told him Nick had recovered and wanted to be left alone.

Unlike the two of them, it didn't come. Nick did uncurl his hand from around John's softening cock and move eventually, as his breathing slowed, but he kissed John's hair and nuzzled at it until John lifted his face and looked at him. "Mm. You okay?" Nick asked, relaxed enough that it seemed clear he expected an affirmative answer.

John smiled at him, relief warming his voice. "Never better." He glanced down and grinned at the mess they were in without feeling particularly bothered by it. The carpet wasn't thick enough to be comfortable and he shifted

onto his back, rubbing ruefully at his hipbone, where he was probably going to have a bruise. He looked up at Nick. "Next time, we use the bed." He made it a bit of a question, still not completely certain of himself.

"Hey, I tried to vote for it this time. It's not my fault that we got carried away. Well, not *just* my fault, anyway." Nick was watching John a little bit warily now.

"I'm really not complaining," John assured him. "*Really* not." He propped himself up on an elbow and slipped his arm around Nick's waist. "You -- that was --" He came to a halt and gave Nick a beseeching look. "I'm trying to tell you that that was special without scaring you off by coming on too strong. Can you fill in the blanks? Because I think you've reduced me to incoherence here."

"I don't scare that easily." Nick traced a pattern over John's hip with his fingertips. "You really ... you really believe me, don't you?"

John shrugged and answered honestly. "I have to. It's either that or think I've lost my mind. I can't hear them talk to you and I can't see them, not really, just shadows that aren't even there when I look at them -- but I can *feel* them and I know something's with us. Aye, I believe you." He was close enough that leaning in to kiss Nick was easy; a slow kiss that had his eyes closing in pleasure as Nick's mouth opened under his, not passionate but reassuring, which right then was even better.

The kiss ended and he smiled at Nick. "Shall we get cleaned up a bit then?"

* * * * *

Once they were cleaned up and dressed again, Nick and John went back downstairs. The house was quiet, which was a relief; Nick was trying not to think about when his next visitor would show up. He was still trying to get his head around how stupid he'd been to assume that he could just run away from his abilities, when he'd never been able to before. It was like he'd thought that Scotland -- and Traighshee specifically -- would be some kind of oasis that would shelter him from everything he'd known to be true.

And he definitely hadn't factored someone like John into the picture. He'd basically accepted that he'd be alone for the rest of his life, living by himself like a hermit. Like his Uncle Ian, when it came right down to it. The thought that that might not be the case left him feeling stunned.

After a quick lesson in how to start a peat fire that Nick was able to actually stick around for, he sat back on his heels and looked at John, who was carefully poking at the blaze. "I'm starved. Do you want a sandwich or something?"

John nodded. "If it wouldn't be putting you to any trouble."

Nick wondered if he'd ever get used to how polite everyone was on the island. "Making two isn't more trouble than making one." He got up stiffly, stretched, and headed for the kitchen with John at his heels. "I really need to do some serious shopping." Nick surveyed the little he had in the refrigerator. "Do most people do all their shopping here on the island? Or do they go over to Mull?"

"They make a few trips a year and really stock up," John told him. "Fill their freezers ... and people grow their own vegetables and the like, although somehow I'm not seeing you with a spade in your hand."

Nick took out the sliced turkey he'd had the sense to buy the day before and set the package on the counter, then turned on the water to wash his hands. "You don't think I'm the farming type?"

John leaned back against the counter and gave him an amused look. "I do not. Am I wrong then? Can you not wait to get digging, weeding and killing slugs? You're a little late to be planting seeds this year, but there's nothing to stop you from trying."

"Maybe next year." Nick reached for a towel that had definitely seen better days. "After I've read about a thousand books." He went over to the cupboard where he was sure he'd seen an unopened jar of mustard and retrieved it, and then said, raising one eyebrow, "Slugs? Really?"

"Well, yes." John shrugged. "But they're easy enough to get rid of. You put beer in a jam jar, bury the jar level with the ground, and they rush to it, fall in, and die happy."

The scary thing was that Nick didn't think that he was joking.

"Doesn't sound like a bad way to go, if you wanted to end it all." Nick tried to sound fairly noncommittal. He opened the bread bag and set to work making two sandwiches, assuming John would stop him if he didn't want mustard, and wondering if there was any liquor in the house. He hadn't thought to buy any.

"I know some men on the island who're headed that way." John grimaced. Nick gave him a questioning look and he shrugged. "Not much else to do but drink, and so that's what they do. It all looks pretty now, and the tourists love the peace, but in the winter, it's bleak and lonely, and dark at four ... don't get that on any of the postcards. How do you think you'll cope with it?"

Nick dug around in a drawer looking for a sharp knife, hoping he wouldn't stab himself. He wondered if this

was John's way of telling him that this wasn't anything more than a short term thing. Somehow, he found that possibility extremely depressing, even though being alone here was what he'd been anticipating. "I guess I'll drink. And try to write a book. Matthew was always on my case about that, but we never had time. We were always too busy going from one place to the next."

"You won't be wanting company, then?" John's face was blank; Nick couldn't quite work out how serious he was. "Next door neighbors dropping by and the like? Because there's other things to do on long winter nights than sup whiskey, but if you're set on writing you'll need to be by yourself, I suppose."

"Would it look suspicious, do you think?" Nick asked, cutting the sandwiches in half neatly and putting them on plates. "Two men spending a lot of time together, alone?" He could pretend that it was just a hypothetical question.

Something changed on John's face, making Nick realize that he'd just said something wrong "Maybe." John's voice was dull. "If there wasn't a damn good reason for it. And you've a neighbor who'd be only too willing to agree. The minister's not one to keep his mouth closed if he thinks the Lord wants him to be speaking out." John glanced down at the plate beside him. "In fact, I'd best be on my way before someone starts wondering why my car's still here when it's too late for me to be working. I know I said I'd stay, but I'm thinking you don't need me now that we've taken care of ... everything."

"Oh." Damn, Nick thought. He should have kept his mouth shut. Borrowing trouble, that's what his mother would have called it. "I was hoping ... but yeah. Okay."

John picked up his sandwich and studied it before taking a bite. "Hoping what? Is there something more needs doing?" He hesitated, looking torn. "I'll help you, don't worry about it. I'm just so used to being careful -- What is it?"

"No. Never mind." Nick was selfish, was the problem. He'd gotten used to years of having Matthew there all the time, taking care of stuff for him. Sure, Nick's abilities had provided them both with a more than comfortable living, but Nick wouldn't have been able to do any of it on his own. He'd probably have been locked up somewhere in a straightjacket actually. That thought made him smile at the irony, and he glanced up to catch John watching him. "It's okay; you're right. I'll be fine."

"You were wanting me to stay, weren't you? In case you get another visitor from over there." John jerked his head in the direction of the graveyard. "And you're still tired and you don't want to be alone when you wake in the dark."

Nick took a bite of his sandwich and chewed slowly, giving himself time to think about how to answer. "Yes," he said finally. He wanted to tell himself that it was as simple as not wanting to be alone, but it was more than that; he wanted *John* there. "I'd like it if you'd stay. But I understand why you wouldn't want to. And I don't think you're wrong. I've never ... well, you know. In my line of work, if you can even call it that, no one cares what you do in your bedroom; you're already a freak. A freak that can help people, sure, but that doesn't mean they don't move away from you if you get too close. But it's always temporary. People I hadn't seen before and would probably never see again, so I learned not to care too much what they thought of me. I can see how it would be different for you."

John sighed, pushing his fingers back through his hair. "First, you're not a freak. There's plenty on the island who'd believe what you can do besides me, and even some who might be able to see the ghosts themselves. You're in Scotland now, remember? We grow up on tales of brownies and selkies and the like." He nodded at Nick. "I'm guessing you got what you can do from your mother's side, not your father's." He took a step closer and ran his hand up Nick's arm until it lay warm on his shoulder. "And second, I'd never step back from you, because I like you close to me. As close as we can get suits me fine."

Nick appreciated the reassurance, but it didn't change the facts. "So what do we do? Make a list of excuses why we're spending so much time together? Only see each other during the day and go our separate ways every night?" He was assuming too much and he knew it, but he couldn't pretend he wasn't hoping.

"I don't know." John's hand dropped away. "I've never had to think about it before and this -- you -- it's happened so fast that I'm still catching my breath from it all." He gazed across the kitchen, lost in thought. "Tonight's not a problem. I'll drive home and walk back across the fields to you. After that --" Nick's expression must've given him away because John groaned. "You think this is crazy, don't you? And it is. It's just -- I grew up here being told every other Sunday, it felt like, that the likes of me were unnatural, heading for hell. It took me years to get to the point of not believing that, although I don't recall it ever stopping me from getting off with someone when I could, which wasn't often and never here. Never on the island."

Despite what had flitted through his head, Nick knew one thing. "This isn't crazy. This is *normal* -- it shouldn't be, but it is. It's how some people live. Maybe not everywhere, but lots of places. And I don't ..." He put his hand out and touched John's arm the way John had touched his. The sky was slowly darkening outside, the peat fire in the

other room making the faintest golden glow in the doorway. "I don't want to screw up your life. I really don't want that. So however you want to do this is okay with me."

"It isn't normal," John said, his voice low and forceful, his hand coming up to cover Nick's, his fingers clinging almost desperately. "Unless lying and hiding and pretending is normal. Unless going months without being touched is normal, because you can't work out a way to get off this place alone so that you can go to the city to pick someone up. And even then I'm still lying. There's not a man I've fucked that knows my real name. Is that normal, then?"

Nick turned his hand, lacing his fingers through John's and pulling him closer until their bodies were nearly touching. "Hey ..." He wished he was better at knowing what to say. It was so hard to imagine a life like that -- Matthew, who Nick had always loved, even when he'd hated him, had been part of his life for so long that he couldn't picture being really alone. "God, John ... I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"How could you? It's not been like that for you, has it?" John kissed Nick then, a hard, almost violent kiss that left Nick's mouth stinging, a jolt of arousal going through him. "Tell me; what do you miss most about him? About Matthew?"

The question startled Nick. He blinked and let go of John's hand, bringing his own up to touch John's cheek, thumb rubbing across his cheekbone. "I guess ... maybe that he knew me so well. We were friends for a long time. He helped keep me together when I was falling apart." It didn't sound like much out loud.

"He *knew* you," John repeated thoughtfully. "For years. Aye, I see." He turned his head so that his lips found the center of Nick's palm, pressing against it in a kiss as lingering and gentle as the last one had been swift and bruising before he turned back to meet Nick's gaze. "I've had a day or two, not years, but somehow I'm thinking I know you, too."

"Yeah." Nick heard his voice shake because this was just so *fast*, not to mention intense. "Yeah, I think you do."

John nodded, looking satisfied but not surprised, and if he felt anything like the way Nick did, it was no wonder. "Then I'll be staying tonight and the hell with it." He sounded pretty calm about it. "Although --" He hesitated. "If you're going to stay here, it's maybe not just me who should be worried about people finding out, you know. It's not just me who needs protecting."

"So we'll think of something to say. For a while, at least. Play up the distant cousins angle, maybe, and tell people I'm, I don't know, researching genealogy or something. It'll be weeks before anyone is suspicious." Nick hoped that was true, although he had no real way of knowing. Wanted it to be true, in the same way he wanted to take off John's clothes and scatter them across the floor in the dying light, to get down on his knees and suck John's cock with both of John's hands on his head, to have John fuck his mouth.

John smiled slowly. "It won't be weeks if they ever see you look at me like that. What were you just thinking?" His fingers stroked up the side of Nick's neck and drifted across his mouth, leaving his skin tingling. "God, I can't see you without wanting you," John whispered. "Can't kiss you even once without getting hard"

Nick's breath caught in his throat, but he was very aware of the precariousness of their situation, with dark coming on and John's car parked in front of his house. "I know. Me, too. But your car ... you were right about not leaving it here."

John bit down on his lip -- which nearly undid Nick's resolve -- and nodded reluctantly. "Aye." He took a deliberate step backward, not taking his eyes off Nick's face, and then turned away abruptly. "I'll see you later then."

The door closed behind him, leaving Nick alone. It wasn't until Nick moved several minutes later that he realized John hadn't eaten more than a few bites of his sandwich.

Chapter Six

Nick sighed and went to sit at the kitchen table to finish his own meal, then decided that the best thing to do while John was gone was to keep busy. One glance at the desk in the sitting room told him that he didn't want to sort through any more papers today, but he wasn't sure what he *did* want to do.

He went upstairs and into the room filled with bookshelves, sat on the floor in front of the one that looked most promising, and took out a book. And then another. The first few weren't immediately interesting, but it wasn't long before he found one that was. It actually seemed to be some kind of diary or journal, in what might have been a woman's handwriting. He had a hard time reading it, sometimes needing to sound out words that stumped him because they were either difficult to read or just utterly unfamiliar.

Eventually, he came to realize that this was his grandmother's journal -- it held a combination of recipes, house information, and dates that must have held meaning for her. She'd been a religious woman; that much was clear by the numerous mentions of "God" and "His Will." But she'd also been indulgent in some ways, if the many recipes for soaps and lotions scented with lavender were any indication. She'd liked lavender.

Nick had completely lost track of time and was startled when he heard the sound of the door downstairs opening and closing. Heart pounding a bit more than it should have been, he got up and went to the top of the stairs and called down, "John?"

"You were expecting someone else?" John sounded more relaxed than when he'd left, and when he appeared at the bottom of the stairs he was smiling. "Aye, it's me." He lifted up his hand and showed Nick a bottle. "Whiskey. Definitely a traditional house-warming gift in these parts."

"In my line of work, someone else is always a possibility," Nick said ruefully, starting down the stairs. "You left your sandwich, before."

"I did, yes, but if I'd stayed to eat it, I don't think I'd have had the strength of will to leave. I made myself another when I got home."

John had obviously showered and changed, too; his hair was still slightly damp and the ripped jeans had been replaced by a clean pair with no holes.

"Good." Nick reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped in front of John, studying the lines of his face, reminding himself what he looked like. He felt suddenly awkward, as if they were strangers, which on one level they were. He went with the one thing that seemed to make sense. "Thanks. For the whiskey. Want to have a drink?"

John passed him the bottle with a small nod, the smile fading away, making Nick realize suddenly just how receptive John was to his moods, almost mirroring them back to him. He wondered if it was based in insecurity as much as anything, because from what little John had said, he couldn't have any experience being in a relationship at all.

He got out two glasses and poured them both some of the whiskey, noting that it was an Islay malt, distilled not that far away from Traighshee.

"Do you remember what to say?" John asked him, when they'd settled down on the couch before what was left of the fire, his face lightening a little. He raised his glass, the firelight striking amber sparks from the whiskey inside it, and gave Nick an expectant look.

Nick didn't. "I say it wrong anyway." He felt self-conscious, wondering why he'd thought it was a good idea to have this man here for the whole night when they hardly knew each other.

John smiled. "You're right; you do. But I'm thinking you'll pick it up soon, and more besides. And if you don't master the Gaelic, well, everyone on the island speaks English."

It had never occurred to Nick that all of the islanders were bilingual and he began to have serious second thoughts about his ability to ever fit in. He'd seen this place as a refuge, but it was starting to feel more and more like a mistake.

John sighed and took a sip of his whiskey. "I'm thinking from your face -- and don't *ever* play cards for money in the pub, because they'll leave you with nothing in your pockets but fluff -- that you're wishing I'd stayed home because this is one hell of an awkward situation to be in. And I'd make an excuse and leave, and trust me I thought up some fine and convincing ones when I was sitting at home, fair shaking at the thought of coming here again, but something tells me I'd be sorry for it when I was back there with nothing to do but think about you sitting here alone."

Nick took a much bigger swallow of his whiskey than he probably should have, relieved at the burn, and tried

to relax. "I just don't know what to say." The fire made a soft hissing sound different from the crackle of a wood fire; it sounded wrong to Nick, and he wondered if he'd ever get used to it. "I had this idea in my head," he tried to explain. "Of how things would be here. And I basically didn't get any of it right. I'm still kind of ... adjusting."

"You need to forget what you expected. And you need to remember that you've gone through a hell of a lot and you're still tired from traveling." John took a contemplative sip from his glass and stared at the fire. "Why don't you go to bed? You've pushed yourself about as far as you can go today, what with ghosts, and tripping on rocks, and letting yourself get seduced by strange men. Go to bed. I'll sleep here, and if you get visited by someone who's not just looking for a goodnight kiss, yell and I'll come running."

"Let's just sit here for a little while." Nick took another sip of whiskey and studied John's profile while the other man was occupied looking into the fire. "You didn't seduce me," he said after a minute, watching as John's face turned toward him. "I wanted it just as much as you did." Nick smiled a little bit, hoping to lighten the mood. "And you're not *that* strange."

"I don't see how I can seem anything else through your eyes," John replied. "For all that we have in common." He looked at Nick. "But I'm hoping you'll get used to me in time, and after all, it's just the same for me." He shook his head sadly, a glint of laughter in his eyes. "I never thought I'd fall so low as to kiss a man who can't get his lips around a simple 'Slainte Mhath.' Even the English tourists say it better than you do."

Nick flexed his left hand, which was resting on his thigh, and didn't feel more than a dull ache. That was a relief -- for a minute, on the beach, he'd wondered if he'd broken it again, and the thought of it had sent a surge of panic through him. "I'll practice," he promised. "Just not tonight." He looked over at John again, thinking now that the whiskey was running through him that there were other things he wanted to do tonight and none of them worked with John sleeping on the couch.

"Do it with a dram in your hand and just keep sipping." John was staring at the small, leaping flames again, his fingers tight around his glass. "Would you have come here if you hadn't had the accident, do you think? Just out of curiosity?"

"I don't know." But Nick could easily imagine having spent the next ten years doing exactly what he'd been doing for the previous ten, after graduation hadn't brought with it any job he could do, and Matthew had persuaded him to market his abilities, although he'd phrased it differently. A decade spent driving around the country with Matthew, letting Matthew take care of him. There'd been something he'd liked about that, even if he wasn't happy about having liked it. He missed Matthew; losing him was like losing the use of his hand. Slowly, gradually, the pain of it was fading, but with alarming regularity he'd forget just long enough so that when he was reminded it took his breath away, leaving his chest aching. "Probably not. Maybe for a week or something, just to see the house. But I don't think we would have stayed."

John's gaze came to his face then. "If you'd been here with Matthew I wouldn't have wanted you to." His words were blunt to the point of being rude. "God, it would have been hell to meet you and know I could never --" He broke off, looking distressed. "I shouldn't have said that. You'll be thinking I'm glad of your loss, and I'm not, I swear it. I'd not wish ill on another, or pain on you."

Upset because John was, Nick finished his whiskey in one large swallow and moved closer. "I know." He put his hand on John's knee. "I understand. Really."

John glanced down at Nick's hand and then set his glass aside on the table by the couch, his movements careful. "Aye? It's more than I do." He curled his fingers under Nick's where they rested on his leg and brushed his thumb over the top of Nick's hand. "And I don't understand why I can do that, just that, and feel like my bones are melting from the heat of it, either." He brought Nick's hand up and studied it. "Looks like just the usual sort of hand," he murmured, dipping his head and flickering his tongue across Nick's fingertips before biting down gently on the middle one.

Nick started to get hard instantly, his lips parting as John's teeth and tongue did incredible, astonishing things to his fingers. He gasped when John bit down on the pad of his ring finger.

It was just a usual hand. It was John that was different. Special.

"John," he whispered. "John, I --" Nick moved, turning and finding John's mouth with his own, kissing him like someone who had been working outside all day in the hot sun might drink a glass of water, as if John might quench every thirst he'd ever had. He let his left hand fall down into John's lap, not trying to do much but provide pressure if it was wanted, and focused all his attention on the taste of John's mouth, on the strength of his lips and the warm, round flavor of the whiskey.

John was holding onto him, holding him close, and all the urgency of the afternoon was there again, waiting to flare up, held at bay only by the fact that kissing John was too good to rush. John's hands slid up to cup Nick's face, managing to be gentle even as his tongue swept deep inside Nick's mouth with an assurance that he hadn't shown earlier.

It wasn't one kiss; it was dozens, their mouths clinging and breaking apart only to come together again as they slid down lower on the wide couch. It'd been years since Nick had kissed like this, years since he'd wanted to. It was the way he'd kissed when he was younger, when kissing had been enough to have him on the edge of coming. Doing it now, knowing what was waiting for him when they moved on, lent an edge to it that left him breathless. Or maybe that was from the slow slide of John's mouth on his and the way John's hands were finding every place on his neck that made him shiver.

Half lying on top of John now, Nick didn't care about the awkwardness of their position or the fact that the fire seemed to be dying. He didn't care that the curtains were opened and someone might easily look in and see the two of them making out on the couch like teenagers. All he cared about was John, and the soft, rumbled sounds of satisfaction that were escaping both of them as they kissed.

Nick slid his hand up underneath John's shirt and groaned at the feel of smooth skin over hard, wiry muscle. A surge of desire too strong to deny made him slide down away from John's mouth while simultaneously shoving John's shirt higher, baring his chest and stomach to Nick's eager lips.

He took a second to glance up at John, who stared back at him, wordless, the blue of his eyes half-hidden, and then bent his head, dragging his mouth over a nipple and licking at it until it rose to his tongue before moving on from the winter-pale skin of John's chest down to the spreading line of dark hair striping his flat stomach. He paused sometimes, trying to remember each place where a kiss or a scrape of teeth made John's breath catch or hiss out in a whimper, but not for long.

Not when he could always see another place he wanted to kiss and taste.

Nick moved lower, pressing kisses to John's shaft under the layer of denim and smiling when John swore in a low voice and dropped a hand down to stroke his hair encouragingly. He worked at the stubborn button on John's jeans with clumsy fingers, not paying any attention to the ache in his wrist in his determination to free John's erection.

"Let me." John's hand came down. Nick watched John's stomach muscles contract as he hooked his thumb inside the waistband of his jeans and flicked the button open a moment later. "Is that what you were trying to do?" John murmured. "Or were you planning to carry on driving me near demented a while longer?"

"That's what I was trying to do." Nick pulled back fabric, exposing the head of John's cock. He inhaled the scent of John, just faintly musky underneath the crisp smell of soap, and drew a shuddering breath. "Wanted to do this before, in the kitchen." Nick pressed a wet, sucking kiss to the sensitive tip and shivered in sympathy at John's small cry. "Wanted to take off all your clothes and suck you. Have you come in my mouth, with your hands holding my head still." He licked, tasting a hint of salt, and felt his own cock twitch.

"You could have had that." John's voice was intense as his hand pushed its way roughly, urgently through Nick's hair to cup his head. "If you'd said, if I'd known that was behind the look in your eyes, I'd have left you with the taste of me in your mouth. So that you'd remember me and we wouldn't have had to start over tonight, with you looking down at me, so fucking polite, as if you hadn't come in my hand, on my skin, earlier today." John shook his head. "Christ, you scared me."

Nick's heart skipped a beat, and he moved up along John's body to kiss him again, feeling John's cock pressed against his own clothed hip. "I scared you?"

"I thought --" John closed his eyes, screwing up his face in an oddly endearing way, and then opened them and met Nick's worried look without flinching. "Thought you'd changed your mind. Didn't want me. And as it was what I'd been telling myself might happen the whole time I was away, it didn't take much to have me feeling that way." He shook his head, reaching out to touch Nick's face briefly. "And it wouldn't be strange if you did feel like that. You're still grieving, and I'd wonder if you weren't."

Nick kissed John again. "There isn't any part of me that doesn't want you." It was the truth. That part, at least, was simple. Everything else he could think about later, when he didn't ache from wanting John. "Come upstairs? Come to bed with me."

"At least this time you didn't wait to ask me that until I was past caring where we were as long as we were touching." John glanced down at himself and grinned. "Only just though ..."

They stood and made their way up the stairs, John's hand warm in Nick's. The light was still on in the book room, and John glanced inside. The diary was still lying on the floor, open. They paused by the doorway. "I think it was my grandmother's. Recipes and things. She liked lavender." Nick's thoughts seemed disconnected, separate from his body, which was still emphatically insisting it get what it wanted.

"Aye? They grow lots of it on Mull. Not here, though." John didn't comment further, letting Nick lead him into the main bedroom and then kicking the door shut behind him. The slam of it closing was as emphatic as the kiss Nick got a moment later, with John's mouth demanding and insistent as if the short break had driven his arousal higher.

Nick groaned against John's lips, more loudly than the physical situation warranted but just right for the erotic pictures and sensations that were going through his head -- the imagined feel of John's bare skin against his own, the imagined sight of John standing naked and erect before him. He slid his hand inside John's pants and touched his cock lightly before sliding down onto his knees, working fabric down over John's narrow hips and nuzzling at his balls, feeling John tense and gasp above him. "I want to taste you," Nick whispered, looking up at John. "Want to suck you?"

"Do it, then." John leaned back against the closed door as if he needed its support. "God, will you do it before I'm the one on my knees?"

Nick licked John's balls, mouthed at them, and then ran his lips up along the shaft until he reached the tip before taking John into his mouth completely, focusing most of his attention on the head as he sucked. When he glanced up, he could see that John's head had fallen back against the door, his eyes closed, breath harsh. It made Nick want to do more; want to do everything. He wanted John to press him up against the wall from behind and fuck him, and he moaned at the thought even as he sucked harder.

And John's hands slipped around his head, large, warm hands, work-roughened and strong, holding him still, as if that was all the support he needed.

"You'll tell me if you want me to stop." John pushed away from the door and rubbed his thumbs slowly along Nick's temples as he waited for Nick to adjust to the change in position. Nick didn't bother pulling his head away to answer. It hadn't really been a question anyway.

John began to fuck Nick's mouth with lazy, slow thrusts that gave Nick time to breathe and swallow, time to swirl his tongue over the small slit in the head of John's cock, catching each drop of pre-come as it welled up and spilled, time to get used to the difference after years of doing this to another man.

He wasn't comparing them, because he couldn't think of anyone but John right then, but Nick found himself automatically doing to John what Matthew would've liked and then catching himself and stopping, frustration making him lose the rhythm they'd found, so that it wasn't entirely unexpected when John made a small, pained sound and stopped because Nick had scraped him too deeply with his teeth for it to be anything like pleasurable.

"Sorry." Nick pulled back, frustrated and disgusted with himself. "I'm not ... I'm sorry." He wouldn't have blamed John for deciding to put a stop to this right then, under the circumstances, and that left him feeling empty and bleak.

John sank down on his knees and put his hands back where they'd been on Nick's head, holding him in place. John looked concerned rather than annoyed, his gaze traveling over Nick's face anxiously. "Did I hurt you? I didn't mean to." He moved one hand to Nick's shoulder, kneading it gently, and brushed his fingers across Nick's lips, barely skimming them. "Or did you stop because you thought you'd hurt me?" John sounded as if he hoped that was the reason.

Because he *really* didn't want to go into what lay behind his ineptitude, Nick nodded, rewarded by an instant look of relieved comprehension on John's face.

"It wasn't that bad -- and you were in the perfect position to kiss it better, you know." A small grin lightened John's expression even more.

Nick wished that he was better at this. Not just fucking, because when it came right down to it he didn't think he was all that bad at that, but the relationship thing. It had never worked with Matthew, and he'd always known that it was his fault. Matthew had wanted it; Nick was the one who'd always held him at arm's length, keeping him from getting too close.

And this wasn't the time to explain about any of that, but Nick didn't have any other words.

"Right," John said when Nick didn't respond to his joke. "We're back to the thinking too much, are we?" He sighed and stood up, dragging his shirt over his head, his words momentarily muffled. "I'm getting in that bed you seem so keen on using." His shirt landed on the floor close to where Nick was still kneeling, although he'd twisted around to watch John. "And I'm hoping you'll join me, or I'll feel obliged to get out and go back to the couch, as I won't take your own bed from you." His jeans hit the floor with a louder thud and Nick got a glimpse of him naked - - and still hard -- before John pulled back the covers and got into bed. "And if I've taken your side, you've only got yourself to blame for it," he added, giving his pillow an irritable thump before shoving it behind his head.

A little uncertain if John was genuinely upset, Nick got up and started to undress. The long sleeved T-shirt he'd put on earlier was first to go, baring his chest in the cool room and more than aware of John's eyes on him. "I've only slept here one night." He undid his pants and shoved them down over his hips almost defiantly. "I don't have a side yet." Nick kicked his feet free of his pants and moved over to the bed, getting in next to John and resting a hand on John's chest. "And I don't want you to sleep on the couch."

"Then will you just come here and -- *God* --" John gave up talking with a despairing look that was almost comical -- and since Nick was still finding it hard to tell when John was serious or not, that might've been

intentional -- and pulled Nick down on top of him, kissing him with an intensity that couldn't be mistaken for anything else, his hands skimming down Nick's back to his ass with an impatience that didn't stop them from feeling good.

Then he did it again, more slowly, dragging his nails from Nick's shoulders down, never taking his eyes off Nick's face. "Now you look like you did in the kitchen. As if you're thinking of what you want to do with me and nothing else. And if you knew what you looked like right now, you'd know why I'm always going to say yes to you."

Nick shuddered, his cock getting harder against John's thigh as he leaned down to kiss him. He meant to say something; to reassure John that he really *did* want him, to apologize for being so fucked up. But as soon as their lips touched, Nick was lost in the kiss, in the taste of John's mouth and the feel of his body. "God," he whispered, throwing himself into the next kiss, and then the next. He shifted, taking some of his weight onto his arms, and dragged his cock up along John's.

John's head moved restlessly on the pillow, matching his hands which were roving over Nick's body in eager, almost hungry sweeps. In the dimness of the room, lit only by the last traces of the daylight that lingered at this time of the year, he was a shadowy figure, indistinct as the ghosts. For a single wild moment, Nick wondered if he was; a ghost conjured up from his loneliness and guilt-tinged grief. Then John's teeth dug into his shoulder as their cocks nudged again and the sharp, sweet pain drew him back to the present.

"John." It was a barely more than a groan, but if he'd been a religious man at all he might have called it a prayer. They rocked together slowly, their breathing uneven, John's mouth licking and biting at the skin of Nick's collarbone and throat before finding his lips again.

Nick couldn't remember ever being so hard. Well, maybe years before, when he'd been sixteen and he and Matthew had first discovered sex. But their innocent fumbling hadn't been anything like *this*. This was heat -- despite the fact that he was shivering -- and painful desire, the coming together of two bodies that knew the kinds of pleasure they were capable of and sought to find it with each other. He could feel the head of his cock painting a damp trail the length of John's shaft with each stuttered upward drag, and he let out a little, startled moan when John's tongue flickered over his again.

"Will you lie back?" John whispered against his lips. "Let me take you in my mouth, let me fuck you?"

Nick's erection throbbed painfully and he whimpered against John's lips, kissing him three, four times more before he could answer. "Yes."

John rolled them over so that Nick was the one underneath, John's delicious weight bearing down on him, solid and warm. Any lingering shivers died away when John kissed him, fingers rubbing over his nipple and making him gasp into John's mouth.

He felt John's leg slide between his and nudge them apart, the shift in position alone enough to make his breath quicken. John met his eyes and smiled at him before taking Nick's hand in his and bringing it to his mouth, separating out Nick's middle finger and capturing it between his thumb and finger, running them along it slowly before taking it into his mouth as he'd done earlier.

Nick's hips jerked instinctively, his cock feeling the echo of each teasing lick, bite and suck, and John's eyes closed for a moment in response, letting Nick's finger slip free as he rubbed against Nick, groaning softly.

"God, you're so --" The bed heaved beneath Nick as John rose up to kneel between his legs, the covers sliding off his back. "-- distracting," John finished, grinning down at him. "But I'm a single-minded man."

He moved back a little and then put his hands on either side of Nick's hips and leaned forward, so that the only point of contact between them was John's tongue as he dragged it slowly up Nick's cock, doing that half a dozen times before finally bringing his hand across to hold it.

The warm circle of John's fingers was tight around the base of his cock, and John's mouth was just as tight around the tip, sucking hard for a moment before opening his mouth wider to take Nick inside.

Nick's breathing, already quicker than normal, sped up even more as John's lips, hot and wet and perfect, slid down his shaft. He wanted to stay still, but he couldn't *not* push up into that slick heat. He tangled a hand in John's short hair, which was soft under his palm, and threw his head back as John sucked at him. "God, John. Oh fuck that's good."

He trembled and licked his own lips, which were suddenly dry. His chest felt tight with arousal, his skin tingling.

John lifted his head and stared up at him, his eyes glazed over. He brought his hand up, smoothing it over the spit-wet skin of Nick's cock, never taking his eyes off Nick's face, working his cock with slow, forceful jerks of his wrist that left Nick on the edge of coming.

Nick bit down hard on his lip, his fingers tightening around a fistful of John's hair, any words, even "please," lost in the need for John to go back to what he'd been doing.

John's head dipped suddenly and Nick cried out as the firm pressure of John's hand disappeared, replaced by the soft, fluid wrap of his mouth, with John's tongue sensuous and hot against him.

"John ... oh God ..." Nick panted, writhing every part of his body but the part he most wanted to move, desperately on the edge of coming and trying to hold off because he wasn't sure what John wanted. He grabbed onto a handful of blanket and tried to concentrate on the rough scratch of the wool. "John. I can't --"

John shifted slightly, without ever stopping what his tongue and teeth were doing, and slipped his hands under Nick's ass, wordlessly encouraging him to move, to push up into the warm haven of John's mouth.

His hips thrust up once, twice, three times, each shove accompanied by a low, breathy cry, and Nick came, gasping John's name and tipping his head back so that the air rasped in his throat. He could feel, dimly, John's mouth encouraging him, but that sensation was faint compared to what his own body was doing, which apparently was attempting to turn itself inside out through his cock in a glorious flare of ecstasy.

John's mouth tightened on him as he swallowed, triggering a final surge, and then Nick fell back, his eyes closed, dizzy with pleasure, and so utterly spent that when John's mouth left him, with a slow, gentle drag of his tongue across exhausted flesh as a grace note, he couldn't even whimper.

The bed shifted and John came to lie beside him, his arm a comforting weight across Nick's chest, his body snuggled up against him. John kissed Nick's shoulder, making a small, appreciative sound but not seeming in any rush to talk.

He focused on breathing for a minute or so, wondering if John could feel the fierce pounding of his heart. He reached down and found John's hand with his own, bringing it up to rest on his chest. "Feel that?"

"Mm." John's mouth was against Nick's shoulder. There was a questioning sound to it.

"That's because of you." Nick turned his head and smiled at John, then shifted onto his side and curled his hand around John's cock, making him groan softly.

"And that's because of you." John nuzzled into Nick's neck. "Although the way I felt when you came, I'm surprised it's still in that state." He lifted his head and smiled at Nick wonderingly. "You don't hold back at all, you know that? It's all there on your face, and the way you move, those sounds you make -- Christ, I could come just from listening to you."

"As long as I'm not pronouncing stuff wrong," Nick teased gently. He moved his hand, stroking John's cock and watching as his eyes closed and his lips parted. "I'd say I'm hoping you still want to fuck me, but I don't have anything. No condoms, nothing. I wasn't exactly thinking I was going to need them out here."

John tensed up; not much, but enough that Nick couldn't miss it given how close they were, and then relaxed. "I'm thinking you weren't a Boy Scout then? Or do they not have them in America?"

"They do, but I wasn't." Nick had never been anywhere for long enough to join anything like that.

"Well, neither was I, but I've still got a couple of condoms in the back pocket of my jeans." John shrugged. "Wouldn't matter if anyone found them, after all. But lube, no, I'd never buy that here, or keep any around." He smiled a little sourly. "What would any decent man be wanting it for anyway? But it doesn't matter --" His hand came down over Nick's and squeezed it briefly so that Nick's fingers tightened around John's cock. "Not when you're touching me like this."

Part of Nick wanted to insist that they go in search of something -- maybe there was some lotion in the bathroom, for instance -- but he was comfortable and warm and he didn't really want to get out of bed, not even if it meant being able to feel John's cock pushing its way inside him. So he kissed John, just once more, and then slid down underneath the covers. "I think we can make do for now." He licked John's balls and felt them tighten. "As long as we can get some in the next couple of days. Because I don't want to have to wait much longer than that for you to fuck me."

John groaned.

Closing his eyes, Nick started a slow stroking of John's cock with his hand from just below the head all the way down to the base of the shaft. He took just the tip into his mouth, swirling his tongue around to wet it, and then sucked hard. There was nothing teasing about this. He didn't want to draw it out or to make John wait. He wanted to bring John off in his mouth, to taste him, to hear him cry out with pleasure and know that he'd been the cause of it.

He felt John's hand on his head, lightly at first and then, as he took John deeper, John's fingers clenched, drawing Nick's hair into his grasp before they relaxed. "Oh God." John's hips jerked forward helplessly. "Oh, yes ... God."

Nick felt the tip of John's cock nudge the back of his throat and eased back just a little, lapping at the slick head eagerly when he could, breathing in a scent that aroused him more than he'd expected, even if, right then, he wasn't capable of a physical response.

But it lent an urgency to what he was doing, and for all that his body was still tingling from coming hard enough that he'd practically forgotten how to breathe, he needed John's release as much as he'd needed his own.

He wasn't sure what he did that sent John over, but there was a moment of stillness as John froze, his cock deep in Nick's mouth, and then John gasped, "Nick --" in an anguished sob and came, his cock hardening and then pulsing against Nick's tongue, his hand dropping to Nick's shoulder and gripping it tightly.

Nick pulled back enough so that he could get more than a hint of the taste of it, swallowing and sucking again, but more gently now as John shuddered and gasped his way to a release that seemed all too brief to Nick. He waited until John relaxed all at once, sagging down into the mattress, to let go of his cock and move up to kiss him. That was brief, too, since John was still trying to get his breath back and Nick could sympathize with how that felt. He stroked his hand along John's side and back, memorizing how skin lay over firm muscle, marveling at how different John felt from what he was used to.

After a moment John's hand began to move too, tracing down the line of Nick's spine and back up, his fingernails dragging languidly over Nick's skin and finding places Nick hadn't realized needed scratching. Nick arched his back so that John's fingers could reach a spot just below his shoulder blade and made a contented sound.

"Aye, that's about how I feel," John murmured.

Nick smiled. There was something about John's voice, his accent, that was comforting, and Nick didn't think it was just that it reminded him of how his mother had sounded when he was small -- her accent had faded after years in the States until, by the time she'd gotten sick, it was barely noticeable. Maybe it was something specific about John, or maybe that was just a romantic fantasy. "God, I'm tired."

"Then go to sleep." John paused and added thoughtfully, "Well, you'll maybe want to brush your teeth first ..."

"If you don't like my breath you can bite me," Nick grumbled good-naturedly, closing his eyes. He was bone tired and could tell that he'd be asleep in minutes if nothing stopped him, so he rolled over and pulled John's arm around his waist. "Wake me up if you need anything."

He thought he heard John say something in reply, but the words got muddled in his head, and it didn't really matter because John's arm didn't move away, and with that solid warmth behind him, Nick sighed and went from awake to asleep in the middle of it.

Chapter Seven

For all that he'd been tired himself, John had ended up going to bed earlier than usual, and that, combined with the fact that he was in a strange bed, meant that he was sleeping lightly. He and Nick had rolled apart at some point, shifting positions in their sleep, so that when John woke fully he was facing away from the center of the bed. It took him a little while to realize that the bed was empty and to backtrack his memories to the sound of the door creaking open which must have been what woke him.

Rolling over to his side, he waited for Nick to come back from the bathroom, not awake enough to be thinking about more than snuggling up to him, but looking forward to that all the same because it wasn't something he got the chance to do often -- ever -- and Nick fitted against his body like a cat, boneless and warm.

The louder sound of the kitchen door slamming closed in the wind robbed John of more than his sleepy anticipation.

He dressed with a speed that cost him a broken fingernail as he snatched impatiently at the zip on his jeans and ran down the stairs, heedless of the darkness.

He'd seen where Nick was going through the bedroom window, and it wasn't likely that there was anything lurking in the shadows that filled the house.

No.

They'd be over there. In the graveyard.

Waiting.

He paused for long enough to shove his feet into his boots, discarded by the kitchen door, and then followed Nick through the fitful moonlight, with the rush of the sea in the distance like the breath of the night in his ears.

Nick didn't seem to be in any hurry, which meant that John could tell that even at his own current pace he'd catch up to the man long before he reached the graveyard.

No, it wasn't Nick's speed that concerned him. What worried him was the way Nick moved -- as if he were drugged. Or maybe as if he were one of those ghosts, himself. He never looked down, but he didn't put a foot wrong, moving steadily with his head tilted a bit to one side every now and then, listening.

The thought of what he might be listening to was another thing that concerned John. After a few more minutes, when he'd narrowed the distance between them, he called Nick's name in a low voice, wanting to see the reaction, but there wasn't one. John might as well not have been there. He wondered if Nick was even capable of hearing him. Was the man in some sort of trance? Was he awake?

Less than a quarter of a mile from the graveyard, Nick stopped suddenly, his head shaking back and forth a bit.

Hoping that Nick was shaking off whatever was making him act this way -- and John really didn't want to let the words "controlling him" cross his mind, but they did -- John hurried forward, joining Nick just as he began to talk. The words were the same as before in that John was listening to one half of a conversation, and if Nick sounded bewildered, John felt completely lost.

"Nick," he said cautiously.

-- can't understand you -- why did God want him back?"

John stepped around in front of Nick, staring into his face and seeing nothing to show that Nick even knew he was there.

"I know." Nick's voice was gentle, reassuring. For some reason he couldn't quite put his finger on, it made John's stomach clench to hear it. "I know you did. But I don't know what you want me to -- no!" John and Nick flinched at the same time. "No, don't ... okay. Okay."

And Nick began to move forward again. He would have walked right through John if John hadn't stepped out of his way quickly enough.

Silent now, he walked beside Nick, following a path that existed only as an imaginary straight line, leading from the house to, he assumed, a particular gravestone. Stumbling through a tangle of bramble that Nick stepped over without pausing, John tried to work out where they were going. It wasn't the new part of the graveyard, where the earth was still heaped high over two graves; Nick's course would take him to the left of that.

Nick had stopped speaking. John *really* didn't like that. When Nick talked to the ghosts he faced them; when he was silent John didn't know where they were.

"Supposed to *tell* me if they're behind me," he muttered, feeling panic rise and choke him. Setting his teeth and walking just a little closer to Nick so that their sleeves brushed, he fought the urge to turn and look behind him,

knowing that once he did that, his tenuous control would snap and he'd start to run, dragging Nick with him because there was no way that he was leaving him here.

They were entering the graveyard itself when, all at once, as though whatever force had been controlling him had stopped, Nick stumbled. John caught him by the elbow and steadied him; Nick didn't acknowledge his presence, but got his feet under him only to begin moving forward again. He was weaving now, going in one direction and then a slightly different one like someone holding a dowsing stick and trying to let it guide him.

"There ... no, I know," Nick muttered, heading for the area of the graveyard that housed the less recent graves. Not the oldest ones, but the ones from the past fifty years or so, John thought, straining his eyes to read them in the thin rays of moonlight.

Nick dropped down onto his knees in front of a gravestone, reaching out to brace one hand on the top of it as if it were nothing more than a convenient piece of furniture. Maybe to him, John thought a bit hysterically, it was.

"I don't want to see ..." Nick whispered brokenly, shaking his head. "Please, I don't ..."

John moved around to squat beside him, peering at the markings on the headstone and then, when they proved impossible to read, reaching out and tracing the deep grooves of the letters with his finger. Pity and anger were rising within him, and a fierce protectiveness. No one should have to endure this -- the pain and guilt of a thousand tragic lives, inescapable and unwanted. It might be that the ghosts went on to something better afterwards, and John supposed the people who asked for Nick's help were satisfied, but he didn't care about them.

He cared about Nick. Who didn't want to see whatever horrors were being paraded in front of him -- and the graveyard held its share of bodies broken by the rocks and the sea, burned and twisted bodies -- and shouldn't have to.

By the time John had finished deciphering the first name, he was starting to sweat, cold prickles crawling over his skin.

He knew whose grave Nick was kneeling before.

He waited to trace out the first letter of the surname, just to be certain, and then turned his head. Nick was muttering to himself now, the sound merging with the sougling of the wind through the trees that formed a windbreak around the graves.

"God, no. Don't. Don't. Please." Nick's hands were over his face, but it was clear that didn't prevent him seeing what he was seeing. His shoulders were shaking, his voice shattered. "Don't. Oh God." He was crying.

It was cold, but John had better sense than to blame the fact that he was trembling on that. The sensation of *something* else other than the two of them was strong, terrifying, making his skin crawl. He almost fancied he could hear a voice that wasn't Nick's, a low moan of anguish rising and falling, and he rocked back onto his heels and put a hand on Nick's arm.

Nick didn't give any indication of knowing he was there. The man lifted his face, tear-streaked. "I can't!" he called, the words breaking. "It's not ... I can't give you what you want!"

"What does she want?" John shook Nick's arm. "Nick, it's me, John. Wake up and tell me. What does your grandmother want of you?"

Given that they were kneeling by the grave of a child who'd been born in the spring and never seen summer, it wasn't hard to guess why Nick was distraught.

"He died, Nick. Your uncle he would have been, but he died and no one knew -- no one wanted to know --"

John knew a hundred tales about the people on the island, tales told in front of him while he was a child, adult voices dropping to whispers, meaningful glances and silences saying more than the words, tales embroidered and embellished until the plain weave of them was hidden. He knew many stories about his ancestors, so that people who'd been dust before his parents were born seemed real to him, not shadowy figures.

And he knew the tale of the dead baby at Rossneath as well as Geordie the barman. Better. Geordie wasn't kin to the Kelley's, but the McIntyres were. Distant kin now, maybe, but once they'd been closer, and John knew the story.

Memory took him back to the kitchen of his mother's house, with him sitting on the sun-warmed step, an apple in his hand, and him trying to bite it with his two front teeth missing. His mother and Auntie Kate had been talking while his mother baked, the rhythmic thud of her rolling pin punctuating her words.

"-- never was a baby more wanted. Never. Fair beside herself with joy was Kirsty after waiting four years and thinking she was barren, and the minister preaching at her about her wifely duty, the wicked old man, as if it was her fault that she wasn't blessed --"

"But it was a hard birth."

"Aye. Twenty hours and the baby breech --"

He'd frowned over that, he remembered, because they'd paused and said no more, as if they both knew --

"And he'd have been how old when he --?"

“Six weeks, no more, and the tiniest scrap of a bairn, with blue eyes and the softest hair, all golden it was, all curls, my mother said.” John’s mother had smiled. “And mine all bald until they were eight months!”

“They say she was never the same afterwards?”

John’s mother had sniffed, sprinkling flour lavishly over the wooden table where she was working, so that it filled the air and made John’s nose tickle with a sneeze he held back because he wanted to know about this wee baby and if he made a sound they’d remember he was there.

“She was fine to look at her, from all accounts. Never shed a tear. Just stared at everyone, with her hands tight around the Bible she wouldn’t put down, and said it was God’s will and he wanted her baby back. And the minister flinched every time she said it because her eyes were -- John! Have done making a mess there! Be off with you and play.”

It’d been another ten years before John found out that most people believed Kirsty had killed her baby, smothering it as he lay in the apple wood cradle Nick’s grandfather had made. Believed it without proof, whispered it behind their hands -- watched and waited after Ian was born ...

But Ian had survived, and twenty years later so had Fiona, and Kirsty had died without ever confessing to a sin that would surely have damned her in many eyes.

“Nick --” John needed him to wake. Really needed it. He grabbed at Nick’s cold hand, gripping it tightly. “Will you not look at me? *Please?*”

Nick gasped at the touch of skin on skin, so violently that it was as if he’d been denied air for some time. His eyes were wild, his hand tightening on John’s so that it hurt, not that John cared. “This is why they come to me. Because of this. It’s always this, things like this, and I -- God, I *don’t want this.*”

Nick turned away from John, letting go of his hand and scrambling several feet to the left, digging at the earth with clawed fingers and sobbing.

“He’s here!” Nick cried. He was staring at something John couldn’t see. “He’s been here all this time, and I can’t ... oh God. I can.” There was wonder in his voice, a horrified sort of wonder as he pressed both hands to the ground in a position that must have hurt his wrist although he gave no sign of it. “Please. Please, you have to ... it’s time. It’s time. No more of this, restless and ... please.”

John moved closer, not touching Nick now because he wasn’t sure what he was doing and didn’t want to interfere.

“Yes.” Nick sat back, his damp, earth-stained hand groping for John’s. “There. There he is. Go on. Go ahead.”

To John’s utter astonishment, he felt something shift; not a click in his head so much as a sliding sensation, an unnatural settling of something foreign and *wrong* over his eyes at the same time the scent of lavender wafted over him. He held Nick’s hand tighter and looked up.

Kirsty Kelley’s ghost -- and that’s what she was, there was no doubting it, despite the fact that she was much younger than the woman must have been when she died -- was floating just above the ground not eight feet away. She was translucent, a white, swirling cloud with long hair that defied gravity just as she did herself. She opened her arms and embraced the smaller ghost that had joined her, and the mood of the graveyard around them changed, too, becoming somehow lighter, less frightening.

“She was looking for her baby?” John murmured as Nick relaxed and let their linked hands come down to rest on his knee. “All this time -- God, the poor lady.”

He couldn’t stop staring at her, his mind trying to make sense of what his eyes were seeing and failing, because every time he thought he’d captured a memory of what was before him, it slipped away, like water through his hands.

Then Nick drew his hand away and it was just the two of them, kneeling on the dew-wet grass with the sky lightening in the east behind them.

Nick’s breathing was wrong, but he cleared his throat and asked, “You saw them?”

John nodded. “When you took my hand, I did, aye.” He glanced around. “She’s gone now, has she? Both of them? It feels ... different.” He took his own uneven breath. “*I feel different.* Christ, Nick, I can’t -- you do that all the time? I’m -- I can’t stop shaking --”

He felt Nick’s hand clasp his again and it took all he had not to pull his hand away instinctively, but that would have hurt Nick, and John didn’t want to do that, ever. So he brought his other hand up to hold onto Nick and waited for the trembling to stop, burying his head in Nick’s shoulder until it did.

“Shh.” Nick’s hand was comforting even though it was as cold as John’s own. His other hand stroked John’s hair, coming to resting at the back of John’s neck. “It’s okay.”

When John didn’t do anything more than nod, the hand at the back of his neck squeezed reassuringly. It astounded John that Nick had anything left in him to give, and that thought made him lift his head and look at Nick.

“I’m sorry.”

John shook his head, not prepared to let Nick take on any more guilt, no matter how minor. “No. Don’t be. You didn’t ask me to come after you -- it was my choice. And seeing her wasn’t frightening. She looked content enough. It was what came before, when I couldn’t make you answer me, and I didn’t know what to do --” He sighed and sat back, still holding onto Nick. “I shouldn’t have tried to wake you, maybe.”

“I knew you were there,” Nick said seriously, watching him. “I could hear you. You were just ... I don’t know. You felt far away. Like she was real and you were the ghost.”

“Well, I’m not.” John poked Nick in the ribs. “See? Real.” He shivered. “But I’m cold, and can we be going back to the house now?” He glanced around the graveyard. “No one else waiting to have you sort out their problems? Right then.” John stood up and stretched out his hand to Nick. “The first ferry off the island leaves at nine o’ clock. If you were on it, I wouldn’t blame you. It’s been one hell of a welcome that you’ve had.”

Their hands clasped, and John pulled Nick to his feet, but Nick kept moving forward until they were touching, hip to hip. “I’m not leaving.” Nick spoke softly, but it wasn’t in the tone of voice John would have liked. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Aye, you do,” John told him, trying to gauge Nick’s mood. “I’m thinking in some ways anywhere else would be better for you than this. Or do you think once you’ve laid every ghost on the island you’ll be left in peace?”

It came out sounding a little more sarcastic than he’d intended, tiredness and reaction putting him on edge. He felt that since he’d shaken Nick’s hand in the shop he’d not had a peaceful moment, and in some ways it was too much of an alteration to the unvaried routine of his life. He needed time to adjust and it didn’t look as if he was going to get it.

“Well ... actually, yeah. Or at least a little more peace than I’d find somewhere else.” Nick wrapped his arms around himself.

John sighed. “I wouldn’t be holding your breath.” He turned to walk away. “It could take you years to work your way through them all, and by then I’ll probably be lying there with them and you can sort me out as an encore.”

After a crack like that he really expected Nick to get angry with him, and rightfully so, but Nick didn’t say anything. Just followed along behind him silently; when John glanced back at him, Nick’s arms were still wrapped around himself, his eyes on the ground.

“Nick --” John came to a halt and reached out his hand before letting it fall back, not sure Nick would want anything from him but an apology. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.” Nick didn’t look up and John waited a moment, the darkness lifting with every moment as the sun edged higher towards the horizon. “I’m sorry,” he repeated helplessly. “I’m just not used to this. Any of it. And it’s not that I don’t want it -- I want *you* -- it’s just that I can’t catch my breath somehow. You’ve had years to get accustomed to the ghosts, and being in love, and I’ve had --”

He stopped, hearing what he’d just said lie between them, feeling naked and exposed. You didn’t do that. You didn’t tell a man you’d known for less than two days that you loved him. Not when he’d buried his partner weeks before. Not when he wasn’t going to be around for long, no matter what he said. Not when he was risk and temptation wrapped up in a body John couldn’t keep his hands off.

Nick hunched his shoulders, keeping his head down. His dark hair stood out like negative space as the world of shadows around them melted away. “I was never in love with Matthew. So we’re on equal footing as far as that’s concerned, anyway.” His eyes met John’s so briefly that John thought he might have imagined it, but before he could even make sense of the words, let alone react, Nick began to walk again, passing John and continuing on toward the house.

“Wait!” John went after him, stumbling over the same bramble that had caught him before. The small, viciously sharp thorns stabbed through his sock and tore at his ankle, doing nothing to improve his temper. He freed himself and caught up with Nick, who hadn’t even turned to look back, grabbing at his arm. “Will you tell me what that’s supposed to mean?” he demanded. “You were with him for years and you didn’t love him? What kind of a way to live is that?”

The prick of thorns was nothing compared to the sting of Nick’s words when he spun around, shoving John’s hand away from his arm. “Don’t you dare say that I didn’t love him!” Nick snarled, his good hand curled into a fist as though he were tempted to punch John. “I loved him since we were sixteen years old! He was my best friend, and if you think I didn’t do my damndest to fall in love with him then you don’t know *anything* about me. And I don’t know where you get off thinking you can criticize the way I’ve lived when you’ve never had anything but quick fucks with people who didn’t even know your *name*.”

If there’d been anything to say to that, John still wouldn’t have been capable of replying. Anger, sick with shame and dark with hurt, stripped him of speech, and left him trembling with the force of it.

John tried to speak, got as far as saying, “No --” and then shook his head to clear the buzzing, roaring sound that was making it impossible to think.

"No." He made a better job of it this time. "You know it, and if it's slipped your mind, I'll remind you, shall I? It's John. John Robert McIntyre and you don't fucking work at falling in love, you stupid fuck, it just happens. And now I'm wishing to God it hadn't happened to me, for I'm hating you right now and I don't want -- I don't -- oh God, Nick --"

"Shut up." Nick grabbed onto the front of John's shirt, pulled him in close, and kissed him, so hard that after a moment John tasted the sharp, salty tang of blood and knew that Nick must have split his lip. "Shut up," he repeated, more gently now, one arm slipping around John's waist and the other up into his hair, and the next kiss was gentle, too. Warm and gentle, and John felt his anger melt away. "Don't hate me," Nick murmured. "I know I'm ... God, John, I'm a mess, I know that, but don't hate me."

John shook his head, unable to meet Nick's eyes. "I'm the one should be saying that. You didn't say anything that wasn't true and we both know it. And of both of us, you've got more excuse for being fucked up than me."

"I'm not sure we need excuses." Nick leaned his forehead against John's, his hand still on the back of John's neck. "But I still shouldn't have said that. This is your life, here, and if it wasn't ... if I hadn't met you ..." He sounded sad. "Don't hate me."

"I don't." John couldn't make that sound anything but desperate. "Nick, I don't. I --" He looked around them, wishing they were still hidden by the darkness or within the blind walls of the house. Wishing even now, with Nick's face hollowed out by tiredness and hurt, he wasn't thinking that someone could be watching them, standing here in view of the road and the manse as they were. "Can we just go?" he asked. "Back to your house? Talk about this there?"

"Sure." Something shuttered closed behind Nick's eyes as he very deliberately let go of John and stepped back away from him. "Yeah. Let's just go back to the house."

Miserable, John couldn't do anything but walk beside him. Couldn't say anything, which seemed to be fine with Nick, because he wasn't saying anything either. By the time they reached the house, the silence had gone from awkward to something a bit emptier, a bit bleaker.

They walked into the kitchen and Nick went over to the kettle, switching it on without looking at John who stood, irresolute, in the middle of the room.

"Will you tell me something?" The words burst out of him and he didn't wait for Nick to answer, just carried on talking into the dead air that surrounded them both. "Will you tell me why you couldn't love him when you let me get this close, this fast? Just because I believed you? Just because I can see them too?" He lifted his hand to touch his lip, swollen where Nick's teeth had cut it. "Would you have still wanted me if I couldn't?"

"I don't know." Nick stood with his back to John, and it was terrifying how those three words made John's heart feel like ice before Nick went on and made it clear that he was talking about Matthew and not answering John's last question. "I wanted to be in love with him. I tried, but I never could. Maybe it was because there was some part of him that thought I was crazy. I don't know."

"I can see how that would hurt you. What I can't see is why you stayed with him. I've spent years settling for the best I could get -- and it wasn't much -- but you didn't need to."

Nick turned around, leaning against the countertop. "I don't know. Partially because of the work. Partially because I *did* -- do -- love him, even if it was never the way he wanted me to. And he took care of stuff." He ran a hand over the back of his neck as if it were sore. "Sometimes I'm not all that together. Especially after. Can you imagine what it would be like to be alone and have something like that happen?" It was clear that it was something Nick had imagined many times, and probably experienced a few times as well.

John still didn't get it -- wasn't sure he ever would -- but he felt a certain sympathy for Matthew. Being in love with someone who loved you, but wasn't in love with you, slept with you because why the hell not, stayed with you because you were useful -- it must have been frustrating as hell. On the other hand, years of knowing the person you were closest to thought that you were crazy couldn't have been much fun either.

"No, I can't." John made an effort. "I'm glad you had him. I just feel -- sorry for him, I suppose."

"I tried to tell him that he should go." The kettle began to boil, the mundane sound a sharp contrast to the events of the last hour, and Nick moved to a cupboard and got out some mugs. "That it wasn't fair to him. He wouldn't."

"I wouldn't have gone either," John told him. "Not if I thought there was a chance I could change your mind."

"I did try. That has to count for something."

John nodded, not having any trouble believing him and finally appreciating the trap the two of them had been in, with Nick loving Matthew -- needing Matthew -- too much to push him away with any conviction, leaving Matthew hoping, always hoping.

Nick made some instant coffee, and they sat down at the table sipping it in silence. The hostility that had flared up between them had drained away, but it had left John feeling cautious, even a little wary.

“Can I get you some breakfast?” Nick asked. “Toast, or there’s some cereal -- well, you know what I’ve got as well as I do.”

He smiled, and John answered it, but he shook his head. If he was going to leave and stand any chance of getting home without being seen, he had to go now. Early though it was, there would be people waking soon and five miles out of town wasn’t enough to guarantee privacy.

“I’d best go. I don’t want to, but it’s nearly six and --” John didn’t finish his sentence. Didn’t need to. “Look, why don’t you try and get some more sleep and I’ll be back later? Start on the roof, maybe, so the next time it rains it stays outside the house?” He drained his coffee and stood up, walking over to the sink to rinse his mug.

When he turned Nick was still at the table watching him.

“I’ll come back.” It was all John could promise right then.

“You’d have to sooner or later. It’s not a big enough island that you could avoid me forever, even if you wanted to.” There seemed to be a lot behind the words that Nick *wasn’t* saying.

John looked at him, seeing the strain on his face, and shook his head. “I don’t. There’s a lot of things I want to do when it comes to you, but avoiding you isn’t one of them.” He paused with his hand on the door knob. “It can’t have been easy for you, what you just did. With her being family and all. I’m sorry I made it harder for you.”

The early morning air struck cool against his face as he walked across the fields to his house. Walked without looking back at the gray stone of Rossneath House or over to the graveyard. Right now he just wanted to go home.

Chapter Eight

After John left, Nick did go back to bed for a while. He slept heavily and woke groggy and out of sorts, feeling like he didn't belong. A long shower did some good -- not to mention it demonstrated exactly how much hot water was in the tank, which was probably important to know -- and a quick breakfast did more. He'd finished washing the dishes and gone back into the sitting room and was attempting a second go at sorting through everything in the desk when he heard a knock on the door. Frowning, Nick went to answer it.

"Mr. Kelley?" The man on the doorstep was about fifty, dressed in a neat, dark suit and with graying hair brushed smoothly back from his forehead. He looked ... official, Nick thought, taking in the man's air of confidence. He summoned up the energy to smile politely. "Yes? Can I help you?"

The man smiled, his brown eyes warming slightly. "My, but you've a look of your uncle about you! I'm sorry to disturb you; I know you must be very busy settling in, but I just wanted to welcome you to the island." He nodded his head in the direction of the churchyard. "I'm Andrew Sinclair, the minister. I knew your uncle well." He held out his hand. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Nick shook the other man's hand and glanced over his shoulder into the house. "Hi; it's nice to meet you. I'm Nick Kelley. Would you like to come in for a cup of tea? The place is kind of a mess ..."

"If it wouldn't be putting you to any trouble." That immediately had Nick thinking about John, who'd used those exact words, but meant them.

By the time Andrew Sinclair was sitting at the kitchen table, insisting with a smile that he was fine there, Nick could feel the start of a headache. It wasn't that the man was unfriendly, because he wasn't. It wasn't because in the space of time it had taken to boil a kettle and make a pot of tea he'd asked a steady stream of questions, because they hadn't been intrusive, not really. No; the headache was down to the fact that the minister was assuming one hell of a lot and setting him right wasn't going to be easy without giving away a lot more about himself than Nick had intended. Lying wasn't something he felt comfortable doing, but he was being gently maneuvered into a tight corner.

He'd never planned to hide the fact that he was gay, because it wasn't something that he was used to seeing as a secret, but he hadn't thought that it would be an issue given that he hadn't -- really hadn't -- planned on John. Now he was left floundering, wondering what was best; not for him, but for John. If he agreed that yes, it'd be nice if he met a nice girl on the island, and the next church social event would be the ideal opportunity, would that be a smart move, or would it lead to more problems than he could deal with?

"I'm planning on leading a very quiet life here." The silence was getting a little awkward and he felt he had to say something. "Writing and -- researching. I'm interested in tracing my family tree."

He was only somewhat interested really, but it would give him an excuse to ask about people who'd lived and died on the island. If he was going to be dealing with more ghosts, it'd be handy to have some idea of what their problems were.

"I suppose I'm connected to a lot of people on the island." He gave Sinclair a smile and passed him the sugar. "I'm getting some renovations done on the house, and it turns out the man who's doing them is some sort of distant cousin. What're the odds?"

"Ah, yes." Sinclair stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into his tea with a meditative look on his face. "John McIntyre. Good worker and well thought of on the island. His mother's a fine woman and one of my parishioners. You'll have heard, perhaps, that she's a recent widow? Tragic, but the Lord gives and the Lord takes away." He sighed and sipped his tea. "John's not one for the church going though, I'm afraid. His mother's expressed some concern to me about his state of mind; when you have a loss to deal with and no spiritual support -- well. And of course, he's not married, so he has no family of his own to lift his spirits."

Nick tried to think of what he could say that would make it sound like he didn't really know John all that well, and then he realized that he really *didn't* know John all that well. There was something between them, something powerful -- or maybe it was just that they both wanted there to be, that they were caught up in the newness and intensity of it. NRE, Matthew had called it. New Relationship Energy. "He said something about some friends of his who are married to each other? It sounded like they were pretty close."

"Michael and Sheila Stewart." Andrew Sinclair nodded, again with that slightly questioning look flickering in his eyes, as though the facts he knew were warring with what his instincts told him. "Rumor has it -- and when you've been in a place like this as long as I have, you soon learn to take rumors with a wee pinch of salt -- that

Michael and John were rivals for Sheila's affections when they were younger, but I think she made the right choice myself. There's something a bit strange about a man of John's age who doesn't make any effort to find himself a young lady, wouldn't you say? I don't know where I'd be without Mrs. Sinclair, that's a certain fact!"

Nick sipped at his own tea and thought quickly. "I think some men are just happier on their own. Maybe there's no one on the island who's available and ready to settle down? It must be hard, being fairly isolated. Difficult to meet people, and even the ones you meet might not be interested in living here?"

Andrew Sinclair pursed his lips and gave a reluctant, slightly grudging nod before attacking -- and it was starting to feel like that -- from a different angle. "It's sad to see the way the young people can't wait to move off the islands." His eyes narrowed. "I just hope they don't regret turning their backs on their heritage and responsibilities. Your mother never came back here, did she?"

"No. She never got the chance." It was calculated to create an assumption that she might have, and Nick was gratified to see Sinclair's face express what might have been at least a hint of regret. "But I'm here now, and I plan to stay."

"Well, that's good to hear," Sinclair said heartily. "It's all going to seem a little different to you, I suppose, but it's a beautiful place and the fishing's good." He looked at Nick a little dubiously. "Or would you be one of those vegetarians, then?"

Nick laughed. There was nervousness behind it, sure, but it was good to be able to answer a question honestly and without worrying how it would be taken. "No, I'm not a vegetarian. Not much of a cook, either, I'm afraid. I was actually thinking that I might try to find a course, a cooking class. I guess there wouldn't be anything like that here on Traighshee, but maybe on Mull?" He'd just thought of it now, but he did like the small amounts of cooking he knew how to do, and since he'd have the time and his own kitchen now, it wasn't a bad idea.

Andrew Sinclair stared at him as if he'd just said he planned on taking lessons in Ancient Egyptian. "Cooking? Well, there's a small community center on the island here and some of the, uh, artistic types run classes on pottery and such, but cooking, well, I'm not ashamed to admit that I stay out of the kitchen myself. That's Mrs. Sinclair's territory, and you know what the ladies are like!" He chuckled and then shook his head. "Maybe you should think about getting someone in to cook and clean for you? I could ask around the congregation and see if there's anyone available?"

"I appreciate the offer, but let's give it a few weeks?" Nick hoped he wasn't being impolite without realizing it. "I think I might be able to do it on my own. But if you thought there might be someone who'd be willing to give a man a chance in the kitchen, that would be great. I can use all the help I can get, there, and I would like to be able to be self-sufficient."

"Of course." Sinclair's cordiality returned as he stood up. "Just let me know if I can be of any help. We're all very pleased to see a Kelley back on the island -- and, perhaps, sitting in the church on Sunday?"

Nick wasn't quite sure if that was a seal of approval or a final test, but before he could form a diplomatic negative he heard the sound of footsteps and John appeared at the open kitchen door, his gaze lingering on the minister thoughtfully.

"Good morning, Mr. Sinclair." John's voice was polite rather than warm. He glanced at Nick and nodded briefly. "Morning, Nick. Thought I'd just make a start on the roof, unless there's anything else you've found that needs attention?"

Nick did his best to sound casual and not to let his eyes linger too long on John. "No. I mean, yes, the roof would be great, thanks." John disappeared again. Turning his attention back to the minister, Nick reached out to shake his hand. "I really appreciate you taking the time to come and introduce yourself. Especially since we're neighbors. I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of each other." He gave the man what he hoped was a friendly smile.

"But not on Sunday?" Sinclair asked archly. He shook his head, chuckling. "I won't press you. But you'd be most welcome, and if you're looking into your family history, you must come over and look at the parish register some time; fascinating reading." He made his way to the door and then paused. "Your uncle's grave -- you'll be wanting to see it? He left instructions regarding a headstone so there's nothing that needs to be done, but I can show you where he's buried. A sad loss." For the first time since he'd arrived, he sounded natural, even regretful, as if he was genuinely sorry about Ian Kelley's death.

"Thank you. I never knew him, but I'm starting to wish I could have." That was a little bit more of a lie than Nick was comfortable with -- not because there wasn't a part of him that would have been interested to know his uncle while the man had still been alive, but because he couldn't help dreading that he might still get the opportunity to meet the man in spirit if not in flesh. "I'll ... I'll come over later in the week and visit his grave."

Andrew Sinclair nodded and then winced at a squeal of metal on metal as John extended a ladder before leaning it against the wall a few yards from the door with what seemed like an unnecessary amount of noise. "Well, I can see you're busy, so I'll leave you to it." He lowered his voice. "The islanders -- sterling people, as I'm sure

you'll find, but not always the most reliable workers. You might want to keep a close eye on John if you're paying him by the hour. Make sure he doesn't take advantage of you."

In a different mood, Nick would have laughed. He was grateful that he didn't feel even slightly tempted to now. "Don't worry. It may not look like it, but I can take care of myself."

He wondered if that had sounded even remotely convincing as he went outside with Sinclair and watched as the man walked away, heading for town instead of back to the church. When Sinclair was at least a quarter of a mile away, Nick turned and walked over to the foot of the ladder, which John had already climbed, and stood looking up at him.

"Well, much though I'd love to be taking advantage of you, it won't be today." John's voice carried on the clear, still air. "Now I'm up here I can see a few more places where you're missing tiles and it's not just a matter of slotting the new ones in, do you see? You have to take off the ones above as well." He began to climb down, the ladder shaking so that Nick automatically put out a hand to brace it, and then stepped off onto the grass beside Nick. "Might be best if you get someone to look at it." He stared across the field at the retreating figure of the minister. "Bloody Englishman," he muttered, managing to make it sound like a combination of character flaw and insult. He nodded at the ladder. "Do you want to go up and see for yourself, then?"

Nick shook his head. "Not really. What do you mean, Englishman?"

"I mean he's English, what else, and he can keep his bloody opinions about us to himself." John snorted. "Fifteen years he's been here, and he still doesn't have a clue."

"He sounds like everyone else to me," Nick said, and John gave him a look. "What? He does. Did you know he thinks I should get someone in to cook and clean for me?"

"In the first place, he doesn't sound like *me*," John said testily. "He's from fucking Penrith. And when he tells you that you need someone to do your housework, he's thinking of you settling down with some nice, God-fearing lassie and getting her pregnant inside of the year, so if I were you, I'd stick to starving in squalor, but what the hell do I know anyway?"

"A hell of a lot more than me." Nick watched John's face, trying to figure out how annoyed he really was. Maybe not really, he decided. "I don't even know where Penrith is. Although I can't say I'm all that interested in starving. Or squalor. You think that means I should get a lassie?"

John opened his mouth, saw the grin Nick was having trouble suppressing, and narrowed his eyes. "It's across the border and that's all you need to know. And stop smirking at me like that, or I'll send you half-a-dozen of them to make your life miserable and serve you right." He gave Nick a decisive nod and then leaned back against the wall of the house, a grin of his own spreading across his face. "Och, go and put the kettle on, will you? After being polite to him I need something to take the taste away."

Nick licked his lips. "I could give you something else to take the taste away." He met John's eyes. Then, before John could do anything than blink at him, he turned and went inside.

He'd done no more than fill the kettle before John appeared in the doorway, studying him in silence before shaking his head and walking over to him. "You're not going to get much work out of me if all I'm thinking about is kissing you, you know." He stood closer than normal, but not actually touching Nick, his gaze traveling over Nick's face. "And after that, kissing you is all I *can* think about. Satisfied? Or are you waiting for me to hammer something and hit my thumb because I'm remembering you naked beneath me?"

"I don't know that there's anything that needs hammering." Nick felt pleased that he could get that kind of a reaction out of John, but it didn't feel natural, trying to flirt like this. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even wanted to. "Speaking of which, if we're not going to fix the roof today -- and who am I going to get to do it? -- then what *are* we going to do? We can't paint the ceiling in the spare room until the leak's fixed."

"When I was getting the ladder out of the garage I had a look at your uncle's car." John stepped back just a little. "If you know where the keys are, we can see if we can get it started. I know you don't feel like driving it just yet, but it makes no sense letting it rust. And I left word with Niall this morning to come over and give you a price on the central heating sometime this week; I'll call him back and tell him to bring along his brother Terry; he's a roofer."

"That'd be good. Get everything done at once." Mention of the car had brought any sense of relaxation Nick had been feeling to a grinding halt. "I think I found the keys in the desk. At least they looked like car keys." Nick turned and headed for the sitting room, where he'd left the keys sitting out. "Maybe I can sell it?"

John's hand came up to touch his arm, halting him. "Maybe you can think about using it?"

"I can walk. The exercise will probably be good for me." But Nick didn't sound confident, even to his own ears, and he let John turn him until they were facing each other.

"You're thinking it could happen again and you'd hurt yourself, or someone else?" John asked. "Or is it just that when you get behind the wheel you can't stop remembering?" His hand rubbed against Nick's arm, warm and

strong. "It doesn't have to be something you do today, but you can't spend your life walking or being carried from place to place by someone else." He took a deep breath. "But don't think I'm not sympathetic. I've spent the day jumping at every shadow thinking maybe I can see them now, too. Or is that just when I'm holding your hand, do you think?"

"I don't know." Nick was grateful for the change of subject. "I've never had that happen before. Usually, someone can either see stuff or they can't. I don't know what that was."

"That's not making me feel any better. Christ, it's really not." John shook his head. "I was hoping you'd tell me that you know just what happened, because I'm still thinking about it and sort of flinching away, if you know what I mean." He walked past Nick and picked up the car keys, tossing them over to Nick who caught them one-handed without thinking. "How old were you? The first time?"

Nick shook his head. "I don't remember." He followed John reluctantly out the door and toward the garage. "Too young to know that I was seeing something I shouldn't have been. I saw things for a long time before I mentioned it to my mother, and then there was all this serious discussion about it. What I saw, when I saw it, did I ever hear things that weren't really there? Well, how was I supposed to know? They were really there to me."

"There's so many lies we tell children trying to shield them, and so much we see and pretend we don't." John's eyes were a little distant. "I wouldn't have blamed you for thinking people were lying to you when they said they couldn't see them." He gave Nick a sidelong glance as they got to the garage. "Did she believe you? Your mother?"

"Oh, yeah. She was all excited about it. She thought it was neat." At the time, Nick hadn't understood why, although in retrospect he did. "For like the first year after she found out, every time I heard or saw something that might not have been there, I was supposed to ask her if she'd heard it or seen it." The garage door was open, and they stepped inside into the dim light, the edges of the keys biting into Nick's skin.

John held out his hand for the keys, his face troubled. "I don't know what to say. I keep getting angry with people for the way they've treated you, and it turns out you don't mind so much, or maybe they had their reasons, but for the life of me I can't see how a mother could be glad her son was going to be burdened the way you are. Neat? It didn't look neat to me when you were curled up and shaking, trying to make them go away. I'm glad she trusted you, mind, but --" He broke off and closed his hand over the keys. "If you could, would you make it stop?"

It took some effort to force himself to let go of the keys, but no matter what he did, Nick couldn't find an answer to the question. "I don't know." He tried not to think of how he must look, during. Once, Matthew had borrowed a video camera and taped a session, and that had been more than enough for Nick. Five minutes into viewing the tape, he'd told Matthew to shut it off, and when Matthew hadn't, he'd left the room, trying to erase the mental image of himself as a crazy person.

Even knowing that it had been real hadn't helped.

"I think she was crazy." What was that, transference? Talking about someone else instead of yourself? "When she killed the baby, I mean. Some kind of postpartum depression. Psychosis."

A furrow appeared in John's forehead. "Talking to you is like skipping a stone over the water," he said plaintively. "Kirsty, you're meaning? Aye. And back then, they'd not have seen the signs. Poor lady." He cleared his throat. "She -- people sort of guessed, you know, but they didn't -- they never said anything. They maybe kept a close eye on her when your uncle was born though." He looked at Nick. "It's one of the stories on the island, but apart from idiots like Geordie, I can't see people mentioning it to you. And if they do, it won't matter now, will it? She's at rest. Both of them are."

"She didn't mean to do it. I mean, she did, but she wasn't in her right mind. She still wasn't, when I was talking to her. I think she's okay now, though." It was usually complicated, but in this case, once Nick had understood, it had been simple.

"She said God wanted the baby back," John told him, shuddering slightly. "I think she'd have to have been mad to believe that." He met Nick's eyes. "You think afterwards they go somewhere? Heaven or hell? Or just fade away?"

Nick looked away, down at the rough dirt floor of the garage. "I don't know. I don't want to know. I can't think about it." If he did ... but he couldn't. It was hard enough seeing the big picture and knowing that you were one of not all that many people who could. Knowing that there might be other pictures that you couldn't even see ... that was too much.

John made a frustrated sound. "With me, it's different. I want to know. It's bothering me that I don't know. Last week, before I met you --" He paused and his hand came up to cup Nick's face for an instant in a brief caress. "God, I feel as if I should've known you were coming, which makes no sense at all. *I'm* not the psychic one."

"No, but you're something. I mean, there's something there." Nick felt sure of that. "We'll figure out what it is."

John's face was a mixture of trepidation and interest for a moment as he considered that, but then he shrugged.

"I think it's just whatever you have spilling over onto me because I'm close. Because *we're* close. If you weren't near me I doubt I'd see anything. Won't stop me damn near levitating when I'm on my own in the dark and something goes bump, but I'll get used to it. No; it's just -- last week I was certain about things, and now I'm not. And I don't know whether to thank you or thump you for that, but as it's not your fault I'll probably do neither."

"If it's not my fault I don't know whose it is." Not that Nick actually felt all that guilty. Maybe his guilt was too busy lingering on Matthew's death. At that thought, he glanced nervously at the car.

"It's not your fault that you can see ghosts and it seems to be catching." John's gaze followed Nick's, his forehead crinkling up again. "That's not something I'm inclined to blame you for. Making me realize every other man I've been with was about as exciting as cold porridge is another thing entirely." John smiled at him. "Distracting, didn't I say? Aye, that'll be right."

Nick glanced at the car again. It was small, gray, and looked older than any car he'd ever driven in. Considering his mother's lack of income when he'd been a kid, that was saying a lot. "Maybe it won't start."

"Obviously not a skill I have," John muttered under his breath. "No, it probably won't. The battery might be flat, and I can see from here that the tires are low. But that's only to be expected." He walked past Nick, unlocked the car, and got in, turning the key and listening carefully. The engine made a strangled, coughing sound and nothing else. John tightened his lips and tried again, this time with better results, making Nick step backward as the engine almost caught. The third time it did turn over and John pressed down on the gas pedal -- the accelerator here, Nick supposed -- and the engine roared to life.

John turned it off after a minute that lasted much longer than that, it seemed to Nick, and stepped out into a fume-filled garage.

"Aye. Well there you go," he said quietly. "I think it'll make it to the garage in town and we can fill the tires and maybe get some supplies to change the oil." He tilted his head and stared at Nick. "You'll be needing to get it taxed and tested though, and I suppose you'll not have any insurance --" Nick nodded, feeling relieved. "-- but that doesn't matter because you're not planning to even sit behind the wheel, are you?" John finished calmly.

"No." Nick's voice and his chest felt tight. "I'm not."

He couldn't say anything else, so he walked to the doorway and stood there with his back to the car, looking out across all the green, with the pale blue above it. It was like some giant hand had come down and wiped out almost all signs of civilization, leaving nothing behind but grass and sky. He took a breath, letting the clean air fill his lungs and take away some of his tension on the exhale.

"I climbed that mountain over there when I was thirteen." John came to stand beside him, pointing towards the mountain that dominated the scenery to the north. "Ben Dearg, it's called. 2,300 feet above sea level. Set off in the morning with Michael, the two of us swearing we'd not come back until we'd reached the summit."

"And did you?"

"We said we did in school on the Monday," John said dryly. "But the truth of it is that a mist came down, our food was all gone, and we got no more than half way up before we turned back." He moved away from the garage with Nick beside him. "It was another seven years before I reached the top, and that time I went alone." John shoved his hands into his pockets, staring over at the mountain before rolling his eyes and looking away. "Michael and Sheila had got engaged and I was needing to get away. Spent the night up there, soaked through and miserable, but loving it too, the way you do when you're that age. It's all extremes and I was extremely heartbroken." He bit down on his lip and then grinned, shaking his head. "It passed."

Nick let that sink in, looking at John now instead of the scenery. At the line of John's shoulder, deceptively narrow for the strength underneath it, and the way his hand was tucked into his pocket. "It wasn't Sheila who you were in love with."

He watched the corner of John's mouth curl up in a small smile. "Well, of course it wasn't. I told you that already."

"Did Michael know?" Nick asked it gently, not sure how sore a subject it might still be even after a number of years.

John lifted one shoulder. "How could he not?" He turned his head to look at Nick, his eyes troubled now. "Look, I can tell you what happened if you like, but it's not that interesting, and we've done nothing this morning. I'm supposed to be helping you."

"It's interesting to me, but if you don't want to talk about it, that's okay. Maybe you will some other time." Nick tilted his head to the side and looked at John. "Or we could go for a walk. Down to the beach?"

"Distracting and persistent." John sounded resigned. "Fine. We'll walk to the beach, I'll tell you the story of my life up to Monday when we met, and you can do your best to stay awake for the fifteen minutes or so it'll take to bring you up to speed." He set off down the driveway, with Nick falling into step beside him, both of them walking

in a companionable silence as they crossed the road and started along the narrow track leading down to the beach.

Chapter Nine

The grass beneath Nick's feet was thin and heather grew amongst it. The air was scented faintly with an aromatic, bitter smell that gradually gave way to the salt-tang of the sea. Above them, gulls soared and dipped, their hoarse cries echoing against the heavy crash of the waves. It wasn't like anywhere he'd ever been, and it still didn't feel like home, but the muted colors and smooth, weathered land around him were restful, which was just what he wanted right then.

"So how old were you when you knew you were gay?" John asked him finally when they reached the dunes. "When it all fell into place for you? Or did it just happen gradually?"

"Fourteen? Fifteen? Somewhere around there." Nick didn't really remember how old he'd been. "I guess it happened gradually, but I know one morning I woke up -- I was lying in bed looking at the ceiling -- and I just knew." The sand here, still far from the water, was soft, shifting under their feet as they walked.

John nodded. "Took me a while to match up the way I was feeling with a label, if you see what I mean. I'd grown up hearing all about the sin of it, along with whatever else the minister thought would have us on the edge of our seats on a Sunday, but it didn't seem relevant." He scuffed at the sand with his boot, uncovering a shell, the perfect curve existing only in the exposed portion, rough-edged and fretted underneath. "Relevant was going swimming at the loch, getting an eyeful of Michael's bare arse, and being awful glad there was a lot of cold, deep water around."

"You'd never felt that way about girls?" Nick shot John a look. "You'll tell me if I'm asking too many questions, right?"

"I don't mind talking to you. It's not like you're going to tell me I'm a blight on God's green earth, is it? And I've asked you enough about yourself."

The beach was deserted, which Nick was starting to take for granted. He supposed if you'd lived here all your life the urge to get a shovel and pail and make sand castles wasn't all that strong. Maybe it would change once the schools closed for summer, but for now they had the curve of white sand to themselves, flat wet sand giving way to a band of shingle and then the rise and hollows of the dunes.

"Girls." John smiled wryly. "Aye." He bent to pick up a stone, weighed it in his hand, and then threw it out to sea with enough force to send it flying high before it fell and was lost in the rushing waves. "I kissed Sheila long before Michael did. Kissed her and didn't hate it, but it wasn't doing much for me or her. But we kept at it for long enough that folks got used to us being together, and it took me a while to realize that she was hanging around me because she wanted Michael, and we were fair inseparable back then."

"So people didn't just get the wrong idea about you and Sheila because they see what they want to see." Nick crouched down and traced a finger around a large stone that was half-embedded in the sand, drawing a shallow circle in the sand and then spiraling it out into an almost Egyptian-looking symbol. "I take it you and Michael never ..." He let the question fade away unasked, knowing that John would understand.

"Michael is not gay." John separated out the words with a careful precision. "He's also not someone I ever should have fallen in love with, but God help me, I did." He sat down, drawing up his knees and resting his arms on top of them, the sleeves of his sweater sliding back up so that his bony, strong wrists were bared. "So, no. We never." He turned his head and met Nick's eyes. "I kissed him. Once. And that's not something anyone knows but him and me, and maybe Sheila, just so we're clear." There was a warning in his voice, almost an edge of panic, but when Nick did no more than nod reassuringly, he carried on. "I don't know how old you were, your first time, but I was eighteen and it felt like -- God, I don't know how I stood it, waiting that long, but it wasn't like I'd had any choice."

"I was sixteen." Nick kept his voice low and soothing. "It was with Matthew." It was always with Matthew, even the handful of times it hadn't been. "I don't think we even meant to. I mean, we'd been jerking off together for months ..."

It occurred to him that he'd never talked to anyone like this before; like sex was just something normal. He and Matthew had never really talked about it at all, and there'd never been anyone else that he'd been comfortable enough with. It wasn't like you'd talk to your *mother* about the sex -- the gay sex -- that you were having. Or weren't having but wanted.

"He had this lube," Nick continued. "You know, for masturbating. And we put it on each other, and then we were rubbing against each other, and then he was on top of me and ..." They'd looked at each other, and then

Matthew had pushed inside him slowly, and it had hurt, but he'd *wanted* it.

"It sounds like you were lucky. Both of you. You were friends and you stayed that way." John grinned unexpectedly. "And over here, all we use is a hand, but fair enough." He scooped up a handful of sand, letting it pour from his tilted palm, grains of it caught by the breeze and taken away. "I didn't even know his last name, but I suppose I was lucky, too. Michael and I, we'd gone off the island, you see. There was a friend of ours, bright lad, who'd ended up at university over in Stirling, and he asked us over for the weekend. He was sharing a house with two other lads, and they were off with their girlfriends in Edinburgh at the Festival, so there was room for us."

John exhaled. "We got there Saturday morning, and we were drunk within a few hours. Dave knew all the pubs, all the places to go ... don't think he got more than a Third in his degree in the end, but I doubt he ever sobered up enough to care."

Nick rocked back and sat, the packed sand hard underneath his ass, and waited for John to continue. The sound of the waves down the beach was rhythmic in an imperfect sort of way, the breeze a bit colder than Nick would have liked, despite the warm sunshine, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, he was content to wait.

"We didn't have much money, but people were buying us drinks when they found out we were visiting, and it didn't take much to get us drunk. And we were all looking to get off with someone, even Michael, because he'd had this row with Sheila the week before about him looking for work on one of the rigs, and they'd split up. Didn't last - they were always fighting back then -- but right then he was pissed off and looking for something he could spite her with." John gave Nick a wry look. "I loved him, but I never said he was perfect." He arched his eyebrow. "Am I boring you yet?"

"No." Nick put his hand down on the sand between them. "So what happened?"

John stretched out his legs and rolled onto his side, propping his head on his hand. He scattered a handful of sand across Nick's hand, silky and cool, and began to cover it with a concentration that seemed absolute. "We'd got house keys, and we weren't that far from Dave's place, so we didn't care that we'd left him two pubs behind. More fun just the two of us anyway. There was a club and we had enough for the cover charge, so we went in. Michael -- well, he was a good-looking lad. Still is. Wasn't long before he'd got off with this girl, and they were away in a corner with his tongue down her throat before I'd even finished my first pint." He glanced up. "Aye. It bothered me. Partly for Sheila's sake, because I liked her and I knew she'd be hurt when he told her, but being a selfish wee bugger, mostly for my own."

Nick's hand was buried now, the infinitesimal grains pressing against his skin. It felt odd, as if it wasn't attached to his wrist anymore, separate from him.

"Then I saw this lad watching me from the dance floor, only it turned out I'd been the one staring at him, and he gave this little jerk of his head and --" John circled Nick's wrist with his fingers, warm and gritty, and tugged, freeing him. "I went to him and we danced, not even pretending that we weren't together, though he never touched me. No one noticed; no one cared. Or if they did, seeing as most of them were students, they wouldn't have said anything. Probably thought it was cool being gay, or something." John made an expressive face, linking his fingers with Nick's. "We ended up in the alley behind the club, kissing and touching, and Christ, I think I'd have let him have me there, if he'd asked, but he didn't. He'd have been in his early twenties, I suppose, and he said he had a flat, said I could stay the night, but I wouldn't. So I took him back to Dave's. House was empty, and when we got to my room, I just let him show me, let him tell me what to do --"

John's voice slowed, and his fingers tightened for a moment before relaxing again. He slid his hand free and began to brush the sand from the back of Nick's hand, taking as much care as he had with the burying of it.

Nick stayed still, letting John do whatever he needed to. He tried to picture it -- John as a younger man, in a dark alley beside a club, pushed up against a wall, being kissed and fondled ... then the two of them in a stranger's bed, on sheets that smelled unfamiliar, naked skin on naked skin ...

Swallowing, Nick asked softly, "And it was good? You liked it?"

John blew across Nick's hand, the warm air lost in the cool breeze after the first instant, clearing away what sand was left clinging to it. He looked up into Nick's eyes and smiled. "Aye. I was too drunk to be shy, but not so drunk I couldn't enjoy it, and he was -- kind, I suppose. Hurt me a little when we finally got around to fucking, but that was my fault for rushing him." He sat up, his shoulders tensing slightly. "Michael came in to me the next morning. Found us saying goodbye. He was dressed, which is more than I was, and I was half-wanting him gone, but randy enough even with a hangover to be hard just from kissing him, and so Michael got an eyeful."

It was hard for Nick to imagine what John might have felt at that moment -- he'd led a fairly sheltered life in some ways, something he certainly wouldn't deny. "Did Michael take it badly?"

"I didn't give him the chance. The man -- Richard, his name was -- took one look at Michael and left us to it. The way I was acting, he probably thought Michael was my boyfriend or something." John shrugged. "I just went to pieces, and Michael being Michael, he closed the door before Dave heard me, came over, and gave me a shoulder to

cry on.” John looked mildly embarrassed. “Literally. I told him everything I hadn’t been telling him, found out it wasn’t exactly news to him, and God knows why he did it, because he can’t have wanted to, but he kissed me.”

John glanced at Nick. “I’ll not say I didn’t hope -- just for a moment -- but he was doing it to show me there was no chance, more than anything, I suppose. And then he remembered he was eighteen, and a lad, and not supposed to be emotional at nine in the morning, and he threw up in the wastepaper bin.” John looked thoughtful. “I like to think it was because Dave had started frying some bacon and it was a wee bit much on top of all the lager he’d been drinking, rather than the kiss.”

“I feel like I can say with a fair amount of confidence that it wasn’t the kiss,” Nick told him. If they’d been inside, he’d have leaned over and kissed John just to reassure him, but he couldn’t help but be conscious of where they were, of the fact that even though it seemed like they were alone, they might not be.

It was kind of weird, actually, the instinct to want to kiss John. He and Matthew had never kissed like that. Not casually, not in public. Most of the time, not even when they were fucking. It hadn’t been a part of their relationship for some reason. It had never occurred to Nick that it might have been a way of keeping Matthew at a distance until just now.

Still, he found himself warming to Michael, who’d comforted John and not rejected him. “I’m glad that he was so good about it. I’m sure it would have been a lot harder if he’d reacted badly.”

“Back then, the way I felt about him?” John shook his head. “It would have broken me. But he didn’t. And I repaid the favor in the train on the way back by telling him just how hard I’d thump him if he breathed a word to Sheila about the tart he’d picked up. In fact, I took her off his hands.”

“What do you mean?”

John grinned. “We got back and told people I was the one who’d got off with Karen -- not that Michael did more than kiss her, because it turned out she’d a boyfriend waiting at home -- and he was the one who’d spent the weekend missing Sheila, and didn’t she know he only wanted to work on the rigs to save up enough to buy her a ring?” John rolled his eyes. “So we’re back at me freezing my arse off on the mountain six months later feeling sentimental because it’d never be the same again -- though seeing as it was another two years before they tied the knot I was a bit previous there -- and now I’m going to shut up, because you must be sick to death of hearing me talk.”

“I’m not.” Nick looked up from the small pattern of rocks he’d been creating in the sand. “I like knowing about you. I want to know.” Maybe it was because his own life seemed repetitive when he thought of it, the same stuff happening again and again, but everything about John and John’s life interested him.

“Well, now you do.” John gave a sigh that sounded more relieved than anything. “I maybe should’ve saved something back for a rainy day, but that’s about it. I’ve spent the last twelve years meeting men like Richard -- even went out with a few of them more than once, although it never amounted to much -- and admitting what I was just never -- it was never the right time, somehow, and now it’s too late.”

Nick rested his chin on his knee and looked out to sea. There were birds circling, and he didn’t know if they were seagulls or something else entirely. “Why is it too late?”

“I tell people and not only do they find out what I am, they find out I’ve been lying to them for years. Somehow I can’t see it going down well.” John sounded not bitter but resigned, as if he’d become so used to the situation that it didn’t bother him anymore. “You think I’d do that to my friends? To my mother? She’d be shamed in front of everyone and it’d be my fault.” John shook his head. “It’s too late,” he repeated.

“So you’ll just be alone and miserable for the rest of your life because you don’t want to *upset* anyone?” Nick asked disbelievingly, lifting his head and looking at John. “You can’t be serious.”

John looked stubborn. “It’s different for you. You’ve never settled down any place. I’ve lived my whole life here and I care what people think of me. Care what my mother and sisters would say. I *know* what they’d be like. I know how they’d change and I can’t -- I don’t want to see it in their faces.”

Nick was totally unprepared to deal with this. He didn’t have any idea what to do that might be helpful. He did, however, know that he wasn’t interested in spending the next however many years sneaking around behind everyone’s backs. He’d been prepared to live alone here, but he wasn’t prepared to pretend he was alone when he wasn’t.

So he brushed his hands off on his thighs and offered the right one to John. “Okay,” he said, as John reached out tentatively and they shook hands. “Well, I’m glad we met. And I appreciate all your help. I’d like it if we could be friends.”

There was a moment when he didn’t think John was going to get it, but the man wasn’t stupid. Not about most things anyway. The bewilderment and hurt faded off his face to be replaced by comprehension.

“That’s not going to work,” John told him. “I don’t think you’re serious, and I don’t think you’re the kind of man who bullies someone into a decision they’re not ready to make.”

"I understand." Nick didn't let go of John's hand. He thought anyone looking at them would think they were two men making a deal of some kind.

Maybe they were.

"And I don't expect you to make a decision right away. But I'm glad to hear that you think you'll be making one eventually." Nick couldn't help but worry that it would be a decision he wouldn't like, but he couldn't focus on that, not now.

"I didn't say that." John's hand tightened as if no matter what he said he wasn't prepared to let Nick just walk away. "Nick -- you just got here. And for all that I'm ready to lose myself in loving you because it's the easiest thing in the world to do that, I can't just -- You could go. You *will* go. And if I've told people ... when you do, I'll have nothing left."

Nick couldn't help the little niggling feeling of annoyance over the assumption that he'd been lying when he said he *had* nowhere else to go. He had money set aside, true, but he didn't plan to go back to his former career, not without Matthew to manage the details, and he didn't have anywhere else to live. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Tell me that after you've spent a winter here. When it's dark most of the time and you're stuck in your house with nothing to do but think. And tell me how you plan to live unless you go back to what you were doing -- and if you do, then you'll be leaving and we're back where we started." John let go of Nick's hand. "You turned up with less luggage than a tourist here for a weekend and you expect me to think that aye, you're stopping, you'll be here next week, next month, next year? And friends? When I can't see you without wanting you? Oh, aye, I'm feeling very fucking friendly towards you, trust me!"

Frustrated and feeling like nothing he said was going to make a difference, Nick stood up. "The stuff I brought with me is pretty much everything I own. There's a box of books that I shipped, but I'm a lot less complicated than you seem to think I am." He sighed. "And I'd rather be your friend than nothing at all, if we can't be.. more. That's what you're telling me, right?"

John got to his feet and stared at him in a bewilderment that seemed to be genuine. "I'm not telling you that. You are. And either you're complicated, or I'm thick, because I can't understand you at all right now. I want you. And it's not just about the way you can get me hard with a look because sex was the last thing on my mind when I walked into the graveyard after you last night. I just -- I don't want anyone to know about me."

Nick nodded, folding his arms to quell the urge to reach out and touch John. "I know. I know." His chest ached with tension. "So ... we'll just give it some time?" He didn't want to do that, not really, but it wasn't looking as if he had a choice.

"You're saying that but you don't look happy about it." John gave him a perplexed frown. "I don't -- can you just tell me what the problem is? Why it matters that everyone doesn't know our business? Please. I want to know. Because it's as much for your sake as mine. If you're serious about settling down here, then you've got to fit in, and telling everyone that you're gay isn't going to help with that."

"It doesn't matter," Nick said. "I mean, I don't mind keeping it quiet for a while. I understand why you'd want to. But I don't want to plan on living the rest of my life like that."

"Then you hadn't better plan on spending the rest of your life here."

"And that's okay with you? You're all right with just accepting the fact that you have no other choice but to be unhappy?" Nick was frowning. "Because *I'm* not okay with that. You deserve better."

"I don't want to be unhappy," John protested. "I'm doing this to *avoid* being unhappy. And I *was* happy up to ten minutes ago -- meeting you -- God, Nick --" He stepped closer and reached up to cup Nick's face with a hand that always seemed to be warm when it touched Nick. "Do you not know what that was like?"

"I think I do." Nick searched John's eyes for a reassurance that he couldn't have even put a name to. "I know what it was like to meet you. I didn't think I'd ever feel like this about anyone. It's crazy." It had to be; they barely knew each other, and there were so many things stacked against them.

"It makes more sense than turning away from it." John brushed his thumb slowly across Nick's cheek and then took a deep breath, letting his hand fall away. "I told you I'll be seeing my mother this afternoon. She'll be asking about you and I'm going to have to tell her a pack of lies. I don't -- I don't *like* that. I don't mind keeping quiet about what you do, because that's not my business, but not telling her I've met someone when you're all I'm thinking about --" He sighed. "I'll try. I'll maybe try to tell her if it's what you want."

Part of Nick wanted to say yes, but regardless of what he wanted, it was too soon for John. He could see that. "No. There's no hurry, is there? I'm not going anywhere." Maybe if he kept repeating that it would help.

"I hope not." John sounded as definite about that as he'd been unsure about confiding in his mother. He cleared his throat as they turned and began to walk back to the house. "The ghosts -- I'm right that you don't want them mentioning then?"

"I wouldn't ask you to lie for me." Nick glanced down, realizing that there was sand in his shoes. "But if you

could not mention them, yeah, that'd be good. It's just ... well, like you said, it would change the way people think of me, and I haven't even had a chance to convince them that I'm okay yet. You know?"

John nodded. "And you're thinking I've had thirty years to be convincing, and it's time I took a chance?" It was said lightly enough to make it sound like a way out of the disagreement rather than a return to it. "You could be right."

They reached the grass and Nick paused to kick off his shoes and empty them of the sand.

"When we get back, you owe me a cup of tea. Or would that be taking advantage of you, seeing as I've done no more than climb a ladder and turn a key?"

The amount of sand that Nick was shaking out of his shoe was scary. "You've done a lot more than that." Nick crouched down and tied his laces. "I think I probably owe you more than tea."

"Something else to take the taste away ...?" John quoted thoughtfully. Nick glanced up slowly and felt his doubts and disappointment melt away because John was *looking* at him, his eyes warm with need, and there wasn't anything Nick wanted to change about that expression. "You never did tell me exactly what you meant by that."

Standing up, Nick didn't do anything to hide his desire from showing on his face. "Come on back to the house and I'll show you."

* * * * *

John wondered if Nick knew just how good he looked pressed back against a door with his mouth kissed wide-open and his shirt undone. With a hand that he resolutely refused to allow to tremble, he reached down and slid the button on Nick's jeans free and pulled down the zip.

"This is where you tell me there's a bed waiting behind us," he murmured, sliding to his knees and managing to kiss his way down Nick's chest and stomach as he did it. "And I don't listen because it'd mean stopping kissing you for a good three seconds to get there."

"We have time," Nick gasped, tangling his hand in John's hair and, when John glanced up at him, licking his swollen lips. "I don't care about the bed. I just -- oh God, John." His final words accompanied John's first lick across the tip of Nick's cock, now freed and in his hand. It was hard and twitching like it had a mind of its own, which John knew from personal experience it probably did.

"I'll let you get to it in a minute," John promised before running his tongue around the head in a slow spiral that ended up with Nick's cock deep in his mouth. He held it there, loving the way he had to shape his lips around it, welcoming the slight ache in his jaw muscles, and then pulled back, closing his mouth just a little, so that every inch exposed was dragged past his teeth. He grinned as Nick's hand tightened, tugging hard at his hair. "Count to sixty -"

"Count? What's that?" Nick's head had tipped back against the door and his eyes were shut, but John closed his mouth around the head of Nick's cock again and applied suction and Nick obediently started, "One. Two. Ah ... three."

John lifted his head and gave him an amused look. "I didn't mean aloud." He brought his other hand up to stroke lightly across Nick's balls and then nuzzled into them, exploring the texture of the skin and inhaling the warm, musky smell that was already familiar, because it was Nick, and he didn't feel like a stranger when they were doing this, and he never had. "In fact, if you managed to get to sixty, I'd be worried I was doing something wrong."

"You're not doing anything wrong." Nick's voice sounded soft and hoarse. "Fuck ..." His hand caressed John's hair, thumb tracing the back edge of John's ear as John applied his tongue in a long, wide lick that had Nick's hips pushing forward. "God, you're good at that."

"Think ... with you ... I could be good at a lot of things," John managed to say, too caught up in what he was doing to be anything but brief. He had memories of doing this to other men, in other rooms. Memories that had filled his head as his hand worked his cock in the night, experiencing a frustration that made each climax a reminder of his loneliness rather than a relief from it. Somehow he couldn't see himself ever bothering to think of them again.

Not when the lightest of touches from Nick's hand left him aching for more.

Nick pushed forward again and John shifted his hands to Nick's hips, his fingers spread, and pushed him back against the door, holding him still while he took him in as deeply as he could, swirling his tongue around the shaft and then curling it back to tease at the tip of it.

The sound that Nick made went straight to John's own cock -- a combination between a groan and a whimper, one of his hands moving to cover John's on his thigh. The taste on John's tongue was faintly salty and less bitter than he was familiar with, as if there was something about Nick that was purer than other men, a thought that would have made John laugh at himself if his mouth hadn't been otherwise occupied.

"John," Nick breathed. "God. Oh."

John twisted his hand under Nick's, linking their fingers, needing something to hold onto as he lost himself in

the pleasure of doing everything he could to make Nick happy. And he *knew* when he was. As he'd told him, there was something so open about Nick's responses, and John, who was used to encounters carried out for the most part in silence, rushed and rarely tender, was finding that he could match it with an unexpected eloquence of his own without feeling ridiculous.

And every whispered, whimpered, encouraging sound he got just made him want more.

He rubbed his hand over Nick's hip, over the sharp jut of bone, stroking his thumb over the smooth hollow beside it and feeling Nick's stomach muscles contract. He wanted to lie beside Nick and find every place on his body where a touch made him shiver or squirm helplessly as he giggled. Wanted to spend hours kissing him, just that, nothing more -- and he'd fucked people in under five minutes, and he wanted that too, but with Nick it'd be different. It wouldn't be impersonal and a bare step up from jerking off. No; it'd be because the two of them were so aroused they couldn't make it last. He could see that happening; a look or a smile from Nick bringing him to a place where all that would matter would be getting inside him, with Nick's eyes darkening the way they did, and his mouth inviting a hard, needy kiss, and he'd be smiling, exultant and waiting as John took him where he stood, against a wall, bent over a counter or a chair, urgent and loving and --

John moaned around Nick's cock, sucking fiercely at it, hungry for the moment when Nick would stiffen and arch and come, wanting to hear him cry out. His own cock was hard enough that it'd take no more than a touch to make him come, but he didn't mind waiting, and that was new, too.

A strangled sound escaped Nick, fingers tightening on John's and a dull thud radiating through him as his head thumped back against the solid wood of the door. "John ..." He was quivering, his breathing ragged and quick, so tense that John couldn't help but be impressed by his ability to hold back.

He redoubled his efforts, licking and sucking. Nick was gasping his name with every breath now, his desperation fairly pouring off him.

"Oh God." Nick's words were blurring together. "Oh God ..." And he came, bucking forward into John's willing mouth, pulsing and throbbing and crying out, flooding John's tongue with the taste of him as he trembled and groaned.

Reluctantly, John let Nick's cock slide free of his mouth, contenting himself with a final kiss against the slippery skin before standing up on legs gone wobbly. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then rested his forehead against Nick's, holding him to him. "Come and lie down with me. If we can make it that far."

"I don't know," Nick said shakily. "I'm feeling pretty attached to this door right now." His hand, slender but strong, settled on the back of John's neck and pulled him in close for a kiss stuttered by Nick's still-uneven breathing.

Together, they moved toward the bed. Nick removed John's shirt and dropped it to the floor, skimming his palms over John's chest and stomach, lips pressing a line of hot kisses to John's already heated flesh as he undid the front of John's trousers and let them fall. Then he lay back on the bed, looking no less attractive for the fact that his cock was half softened now, and pulled at John, who kicked his legs free of the rest of his clothes and joined him.

Nick's hand closed around John's erection, making him gasp.

"Tonight --" John tried to distract himself because he was so close to coming, so ready ... "Can I come back here? I want to be with you." He thought about how their sleep had been interrupted the night before and pushed his concerns aside. He hoped that it wouldn't happen again, but if it did, at least he knew what to expect. He raised himself up on his elbow and stared down at Nick, putting his hand over Nick's where it held him. "Want to fuck you until you're past talking and sleep beside you. And if you move your hand, I'm going to come, I swear it. Christ, Nick, I don't know what you do to me --"

"I *want* to make you come," Nick said huskily. "Hopefully lots of times."

John groaned and closed his eyes, hoping to hold off just a bit longer, and certain that he wouldn't be able to if he had to keep looking at Nick. Without meaning to, he tightened his grip on Nick's hand, and Nick seemed to take that as indication that he could begin to stroke him, and John was poised on the brink, his heart thundering in his chest as he waited to fall.

"Come," Nick whispered. "Come back tonight, come back tonight and fuck me, just ... come."

John let his hand fall away in mute surrender and turned his head into Nick's shoulder, kissing it blindly as his body obeyed, his mouth open on a gasp. As he came, he bit down hard, feeling Nick shudder with him as they clung to each other, sharing what John was feeling as he had done when Nick had come.

He raised his head when he felt capable of talking and stared at the mark he'd left with his teeth. It wasn't deep enough to have cut the skin, but deep enough to bruise it. John brushed his lips over the mark and glanced at Nick. "I'll apologize for hurting you, but I don't think I'd be convincing if I said I'm sorry I did it."

"I don't care." Nick kissed John hard enough to make them both moan. "It doesn't bother me." They rearranged themselves a bit, got settled into a more comfortable position with John's mouth next to Nick's shoulder and an arm

around his waist. "If you want to come back for dinner, I'll cook," Nick offered. "Although I can't promise it will be anything more than edible."

"I'd like that." John was feeling peaceful and sleepy and sated. "And I haven't forgotten I promised to take you fishing. I'm not much of a cook myself, but it's hard to ruin mackerel an hour out of the water. Maybe tomorrow we can go out on the sea? Not that there's not work to be done here, but I'm thinking you should take a bit of time to get used to the place. Relax a bit."

"If you want." Nick's hand traced across John's shoulder, the touch firm enough that it didn't tickle. "Or we could go up that mountain. The one we were looking at before?" He shifted, rolling over onto his stomach and propping his head up on his hand as he looked at John. "I kind of like the idea of seeing it. You know, a place you went when you were younger." He made a face. "Did that sound way too ... I don't know, romantic?"

John shook his head, feeling touched. "No. Besides, by the time you get to the top, you'll be sweaty and bitten to death. Does that make you feel better?" He stroked down the long line of Nick's back and let his hand rest in the hollow at its base. "I'm not looking for you to bring me flowers," he said. "But I think I could stand you being romantic now and then."

Chapter Ten

John let his mother add another cake to her plate and smiled. The periodic announcement that she was dieting was about the only effort she actually made to do so, but it didn't matter. Her sixtieth birthday was two days away, and she was still pretty, the red hair he hadn't inherited, and the blue eyes he had, unfaded and bright.

The weekly visit was something she'd insisted on when he'd moved out. He was supposed to pay over his rent, but they'd long since arranged for a more prosaic transfer of funds from his account to hers, and now it was just a chance to catch up.

Not that they didn't see each other during the rest of the week. For a woman who did as much as Anne McIntyre, she always seemed to be at home when he called by, and if she thought he needed to talk she could clear the room of assorted offspring and grandchildren with a look.

And sometimes, in the year since his father's death, he'd been the one doing the listening.

Leaving Nick's bed -- leaving Nick -- had been something he would only have done for her, but he hadn't minded. Even if showering away every trace of what he'd been doing felt less like common cleanliness and more like the first stage in a deception.

Nick's words on the beach were still with him. He'd had time to think as he walked back across the fields, and he'd done nothing with it but circle around a problem all their talking had done nothing but define.

It wasn't that he didn't understand Nick's frustration. Christ, the man must be thinking he was pathetic, and the worst of it was that John agreed with him. He'd talked about not hurting people, but if he was going to be honest, the person he was most concerned about getting hurt was him. He'd seen what this island did to people who were different; how rough edges got smoothed off more than the rocks on the beaches. Seen how the pressure of a society still governed by tradition and the church could wear away at someone until they gave up, gave in, or left.

Oh, the new century had rolled around here, as well as everywhere else. Few homes were without TVs and computers if they had a teenager in them, and every year things got looser, more tolerant. But it was so gradual, it was barely perceptible, and the people who might have made a difference -- the rebels, the discontented -- well, they left, didn't they?

Like Fiona. And now her son was back, bringing with him an attitude that was, quite literally, foreign to John.

Nick had obviously dealt with prejudice -- probably more so than John, whose worst memories were only of suffering through anti-gay jokes with a tight smile and the urge to throw up or hit someone rising behind his gritted teeth -- but it didn't seem to have made him wary. All his secrets revolved around his ability to see ghosts, and that, to John's mind, was something that the islanders would have accepted fairly easily, especially if he'd said he was a writer.

Even for the islanders, being gay was, it seemed, slightly more allowable if you were creative. Went with the territory. John had to admit that the lesbian couple who'd spent six months on the island weaving impenetrable scarves and shawls with wool from local sheep, dyed with natural berries and the like; well, they'd been accepted as much as visitors ever would be. Some raised eyebrows and clucked tongues, but they'd been in their early fifties, clearly well past an age where any man would want them, and so utterly unself-conscious that they'd compelled a tolerance John knew wouldn't be extended to him.

Olivia and Diana had been strangers. He was family. Related to half the island, not an artistic bone in his body, and with a grandfather on his mother's side who would've had his name out of the family Bible with a stroke of his fine-nibbed pen once he knew.

Sometimes John wished he knew how much of that dogmatic certainty had been passed down to his mother. His father hadn't cared about such things; he'd gone to church to keep the peace but there'd been no conviction there, you could tell. His mother, though -- for all her outward practicality, Anne had a streak of Celtic mystery running through her like a gray rock banded with crystal, unexpected and sharply beautiful. Her religion married both sides of her nature, and John hated that when his father had died the minister had done more to comfort her than he could, murmuring quotations and assurances in her ear as she wept, her stoicism broken by a prayer, when he'd held her to him and not known how to make her let go and grieve.

"So," Anne began, "you could have knocked me down with a feather when Stella told me who'd shown up in her place on Monday." She nibbled at an éclair as if small bites meant fewer calories. "Ian Kelley's nephew! I called you yesterday to ask you what he was like, but you weren't in." Anne licked cream off her finger and smiled at him as he sat opposite her, his face flushing. "You never knew his mother, of course, but I did, and she was a bonnie

lass; does he favor her then?"

"How the hell should I know?" Her eyes widened, less at the fact that he'd sworn, although he didn't usually, not when he was with her, and more at his tone. "Sorry, it's just -- you said yourself; I didn't know her."

"And Mr. Sinclair said you were helping him settle; that's kind of you, love. He's nice then, is he?"

"He's -- aye, he's well enough." John fought the urge to describe Nick in detail because he wanted to talk about him. "Doesn't treat me -- people -- like we're backward. Unlike that *bloody* minister."

"John!" The reproof was immediate and sharp, color flashing into Anne's cheeks. "I won't have you speak of him that way."

"And I won't have him telling Nick to keep an eye on me in case I rip him off when he pays me for the work I've done!" John snapped. "He'd do well to mind his own business."

"I'm sure you misunderstood him." Anne's face was troubled. "He'd have been joking, or just -- just looking out for the lad."

"He's no' a lad. My age, in fact -- unless you think I still qualify as a kid?"

She chuckled. "Sometimes, aye, I think you do, for all that you're my eldest." She put her plate back on the table. "Never mind. Tell me about him; is he married? Does he have children?"

"He's got no one." John took a secret comfort in the knowledge that that wasn't true now. Nick had him. "His father's -- he's not around anymore."

"Poor Fiona." Anne sighed. "She'd have liked to have seen her grandchildren before she died."

From the little he'd heard of her, nothing seemed less likely. "You don't know that," John objected. "Maybe she wasn't all that bothered about them."

Anne smiled serenely. "All women with sons want to see them have children." That showed a stunning lack of regard for the facts as John could think of several exceptions right there on the island.

"Well, don't hold your breath waiting for me to add to the throng of grandchildren you've got."

"When you find the right one, you'll change your mind," Anne told him. "When you stop wishing for what might have been."

Irritation at the fiction he'd created chafed at John. "If you're meaning Sheila, I've no thought for her that way, and it's been many a year since I did."

Anne studied him as if judging his sincerity and then smiled. "Well, that's good to know, son."

"Aye, but it still doesn't mean you're getting more grandchildren."

"Why ever not?" Anne straightened up, looking indignant. "You're a fine man and there's not an unattached woman on this island who'd turn you down!"

"They won't be getting the chance."

John felt a strange exhilaration fill him, as if years of hiding, years of having this conversation, with very different dialogue, were in the past, never to be part of his future.

"Well, we'll see about that on Friday." Anne gave a determined nod of her head. "At the party. I'll not have you getting up to mischief, but if you were to see someone who took your fancy --"

"Party? What party?" John gulped down his lukewarm tea and glared at her, the moment lost. "There is no party!"

A quietly confident smile passed over Anne McIntyre's face. "I'm turning sixty, Stella's cleaning like she's got the inspectors in, your sister took me shopping for a new dress, just in case of something she didn't go into details about, and people keep smiling at me in the shops, and looking so full of a secret it's all I can do not to poke them and watch them pop. Of course there's a party."

Defeated, he narrowed his eyes at her. "If there is, you didn't hear it from me. God, Stella's going to have the hide off me, if Janet leaves her any."

"I won't say a word if you tell me when it is so I've time to get ready," she promised.

"Eight. It's at eight. And that's it. Not another word, woman."

She stood up, her mouth pursed in a gleeful smile. "Not another word." As she reached the door, she turned back. "Why don't you ask Nick to come? If he's nice, and if he's staying, it'll be a good chance for him to meet people."

"I don't think he'd be comfortable -- he doesn't know anyone -- it's a small do -- it's just family really." John stopped babbling, got up and followed her to the door.

"It hadn't better be small," Anne said crisply. "And he *is* family. His mother's cousin was --"

"Your Uncle James, aye, I know."

She nodded. "That's right. And he knows you, doesn't he? And you'll take care of him until he finds his feet?"

John leaned forward and kissed her cheek, surprising them both. "Aye. I'll take care of him for you." He grinned. "So shall I break Carson's heart and ask you for the first dance, then?"

She blushed. "And what makes you think I'd say yes to either of you?" She smoothed her hair back. "Carson ... he's just a good friend, you know that."

"He'd like to be more," John said.

Anne's mouth set firmly. "I'm a widow and still in mourning."

"We all are," John told her. "But if you think Dad would want you grieving forever --"

"It's too soon. Now have done, John." Anne turned and began to walk away. "And think on," she called back. "I want to see you dancing with someone on Friday!"

* * * * *

By the time John set out for Nick's house, it was later than he'd anticipated it being. Not too late for a late supper, but late enough that the sun was setting, the colors of it smeared across the sky like someone had painted it with a wet brush. John snorted at the fanciful notion and reminded himself that he didn't have to go completely daft just because he was in love.

God. There'd been times he'd never thought he'd find someone, and now that he had, he couldn't help but think that it was a hell of a lot more complicated than he'd ever imagined. Not that he'd thought it'd be easy, mind, but the fact that Nick was on the island and planning to stay made it a bit less simple than it'd have been if he'd been on Mull, for example.

As he neared Rossneath, dirt and stones crunching under his boots, John saw that the light was on in the garage. Frowning, he headed for it, wondering if they'd left the light on earlier or if Nick had come out to look for something.

To say that he was surprised to find Nick sitting in the driver's seat of the car would have been an understatement. Nick didn't seem to know that he was there, the car being face-in, so John stopped and watched. Waited.

All he could see was the back of Nick's head and the steering wheel. As John watched, Nick lifted his hands and put them on the wheel, gripping it tightly, and then letting them drop down into his lap again.

Pity and admiration held John in place, unwilling to leave in case Nick needed him, not wanting to step forward in case he broke the resolve that had let Nick go this far. He settled for stepping back, out of Nick's view if he glanced into the mirror, and waited.

Nick raised his hand to the key, holding onto it, but didn't turn it. It occurred to John that Nick might not be capable of shifting the gears, what with his weak wrist being on the left, but somehow he doubted it was going to be an issue. He thought it was more that Nick was testing himself.

Dropping his left hand back into his lap, Nick put the right onto the steering wheel again and leaned forward, resting his head on his arm. John could see his shoulders rising and falling with each breath, but he didn't think the man was weeping.

Then, just as John was thinking that he'd go to him, Nick straightened up and got out of the car. He shut the door, keys in hand, and flinched when he saw John standing there, clearly startled. "Shit. How long have you been here?"

"Not long," John said awkwardly, wishing that he'd handled it differently now. Nick's face looked -- not hostile, no, but closed off. It seemed as if every time they left each other, even for just a few hours, they had to start to get to know each other all over again. "I didn't want -- you didn't look like you wanted company. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Nick's expression changed to something more like sheepish, and he put a hand into his pocket. "I thought it might be easier without an audience. But I'm glad you're here. I walked into town and got food. How's your mom?" He moved to shut off the light and stepped outside, shutting the door.

"She's fine." They turned to walk towards the house. "She, ah, wants to meet you. We're having a birthday party for her on Friday night at Stella's and she wants you to come." John frowned. "It was *supposed* to be a surprise but -- oh, Carson probably said something to her. He never could keep a secret worth a damn, and he's the one doing most of the organizing so she's likely been wondering where he's got to the last week or so."

"Carson? The man we saw at the pub?"

"Aye, Carson Baird." John glanced at Nick, who seemed to be relaxing.

Nick opened the door to the house and John followed him inside. The lights were on in the kitchen, the room warm and filled with a rich smell coming from a pot on the range top. At John's look, Nick explained, "Chicken soup. It's about the closest thing to real cooking I can manage. Plus it's a good excuse to eat garlic bread."

"Homemade soup seems like real cooking to me." John sniffed appreciatively. "I don't starve if I have to feed myself, but I eat more at Stella's than I probably should, if only so I'm not left with a lot of dishes to wash."

Nick kicked off his shoes and went to the sink, setting the car keys on the countertop and washing his hands. There was a foil wrapped loaf on top of the range beside the soup pot. "Can you show me how to work the oven?"

Nick asked, moving over to stir the soup. "I figured out how to work the burners, obviously, but it's been a long time since I used a gas stove, and I have to admit I was a little nervous about blowing the house up."

"That's probably the stove your mother would've cooked on." John joined him, eyeing it a little warily himself. "You'll need to have a match ready, turn it on here, and shove your head inside and light the burner at the back." He shook his head. "Not one for moving with the times, was your uncle."

"Apparently not." Nick reached for the box of matches that was over the stove and opened it, taking out one match. John opened the oven and watched as Nick crouched down in front of it. "So someone really thought it was a good idea to build these things so that you had to have your head inside a metal box that holds fire?"

John chuckled, although he could understand Nick's concern. Nick lit the match, turned the knob, and leaned in. A familiar whooshing sound confirmed that he'd managed to light the stove.

"Tell me I'll get used to this?" Nick put the wrapped loaf into the oven and shut the door.

"You could get a new one," John offered. "Preferably before you burn off your eyebrows." He couldn't see anything that Nick needed help with, so he sat down at the table. "You haven't said if you'll be coming on Friday night? You don't have to, but I suppose my mother's right; it's a good way of meeting everyone."

He'd thought about it on the way over and decided that his initial reaction of panic had been shortsighted. It was a good idea. Nick could tell people about himself once, in a setting where people, although interested, wouldn't be paying as much attention as usual, and they'd go home thinking they knew all about him and be satisfied with that.

And he'd do his best to let Nick handle it on his own and sit with Sheila and Michael, or his family, and try not to let his gaze go to Nick too often. He'd stay sober too, so that he could drive them back, because by the end of the night he wouldn't want a five-mile walk to stand between him and Nick's bed.

"I'll come if you don't think it'll be too weird." Nick went over to the refrigerator and took out two bottled beers. He held one up. "Do you want one?"

John nodded, and Nick walked over to the table and handed one of the bottles to him, then sat down, slouching in the chair slightly.

"I think I'm going to have to make arrangements to get my groceries delivered. You were right about it being too far to walk, for more than a couple of things, anyway."

"George will do it, but he'll charge you for it," John warned him. "If you like, we can take the ferry over to Mull at the weekend and go to a supermarket there. More choice, and even with the price of the ferry, it's cheaper."

Nick drank some of his beer and nodded. "That'd be great." He touched the bottom of the beer bottle to the table and then lifted it up, looking at the small ring of damp left behind on the wood. He rubbed at it with his fingers. "Are you going to end up pissed off at me for taking advantage of you? That's what Sinclair should have been worried about, not the other way around."

"What?" John was honestly thrown by the question. "You haven't asked me for anything; I've offered. How is that taking advantage of me?" He shook his head. "You worry too much."

"Probably." Nick offered him a wry smile, rolling the bottom of his beer bottle on the table and making a swirled pattern of circles. "The bread'll only take about fifteen minutes." He glanced back at the range. "I feel like I've been hungry since I got here. All the fresh air, maybe. Or the stress of being somewhere new?"

"If fresh air makes you hungry, you'll be getting plenty of it tomorrow. Assuming you still want to climb Ben Dearg, that is? The weather forecast is good." John had given some thought to a route they could take that, although longer, avoided any actual climbing for the sake of Nick's injured wrist. "And as for the stress, well, I can't argue with you there. I'm feeling more than a little of it myself."

Nick didn't move, but somehow he seemed to exude sympathy as if he'd leaned forward and touched John. "I'm sorry. Me turning up here isn't the easiest thing for you."

Setting his beer down on the table, John stood up and walked around to Nick, who turned his head to glance up at him in surprise.

Which made it very easy to kiss him; a firm kiss that didn't last long enough for the beer-chilled lips under his to warm and part, although Nick didn't pull away.

"Stop it." John straightened and gave Nick a direct look. "You don't have to apologize for anything you've done to me, and I've no regrets at all about you coming here." John leaned against the table, which was solid oak and didn't move, and reached across it for his beer bottle. "Here's to us." He clinked it gently against Nick's bottle. "Will you drink to that?"

Nick still had that wide-eyed look about him, startled but not displeased. He nodded. "Yes." He didn't sound quite like himself, as if he was a bit overcome, and John had to wonder about his life that a simple declaration like that could overwhelm him.

"You're not to be thinking all the stress in my life came with you stepping off the ferry. It didn't. And you

stepping back onto it and sailing off into the sunset wouldn't do a damn thing but make me so miserable there'd be no living with me." John took a long swallow of his beer. "I tried to tell her today." He avoided Nick's eyes. "She was going on about grandchildren of all things and I just couldn't bear it." He picked at the label on the bottle, peeling it back. "So I came as close as I ever had to telling her and she just --" John shook his head. "It didn't register with her at all. Oh, she got the part where I'm not hankering after Sheila; that suited her, so she was listening to that, but the rest of it? No. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Nick stood up and pushed his chair to the side to make room so that he could lean against the table beside John. "You tried; that's something. Maybe she did hear you, but she just needed some time to let it sink in. To accept it."

"Maybe. Or maybe I was breaking it to her so gently it didn't break at all." John sighed. "It wasn't the right time anyway. Not just before her birthday. It's the first one since Dad died, and for all that she's excited she's going to be missing him on Friday."

"There's no hurry," Nick agreed. He slipped his arm around John's waist and leaned in to kiss his ear, doing something a bit more distracting with his tongue than John had been prepared for but which was in no way unwelcome.

John closed his eyes and felt his body go from being aware that Nick was close enough to kiss, in a pleasantly low-key way, to being aroused to the point of wanting to fuck him over the sturdy table because it was the closest flat surface. It was a shift that Nick seemed able to trigger without doing much at all really. Breathing shallowly, he reminded himself that he'd only just got there, they were both hungry, and by the smell of it the garlic bread needed to come out of the oven.

It didn't work.

"Stop that." Even as he spoke, he was tugging Nick closer and running his hand eagerly over Nick's backside. "You need to ... need to ..." Nick was biting on his earlobe, and John could feel a warm tingle race through his body. "God, Nick --" He turned his head and found Nick's neck with his mouth. "Bread is burning," he mumbled, sucking gently at the smooth skin. "Unless you like it extra-crispy."

"It's not burning," Nick barely whispered into his ear. There was a brief pause. "Yeah, okay, maybe it is," and the two of them detangled themselves.

John leaned back against the table and watched Nick's backside as he bent over to retrieve the bread, which didn't do much to take the edge off, that was certain.

The bread, unwrapped, wasn't more than slightly dark brown. Nick gestured at John. "Sit down."

John did, but that didn't stop him watching Nick with a great deal of pleasure as the man served up the food and put it on the table.

"I should have thought about the garlic," Nick apologized as he sat. "But I guess if we're both eating it, it shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"The way I'm feeling right now, you could eat raw fish and it wouldn't put me off kissing you." It was no more than the truth. "And yes, I know some people do, but the closest you'll get to sushi up here is smoked salmon, which isn't quite the same."

"I don't think it's sushi if it's smoked." Nick tore off a slice of garlic bread and dropped it directly into his bowl of soup, where it immediately began to absorb liquid and sink, and then poked it with his spoon. "I like sushi, actually."

"Somehow I thought you might." John spooned up some soup. "I'm saddened but not surprised."

Nick laughed. "Have you ever had any?"

John took a piece of bread and clucked his tongue reprovingly. "I'm wounded that you think I'd judge something I hadn't tried. I've had it. Didn't like it. As you'll find out for yourself, Stella's fond of theme nights. The fact that barely anyone shows up for them doesn't seem to put her off. Japanese night was last May. You just missed the Caribbean one, and God knows what she's planning next." John took a bite of bread, chewed, swallowed, and said blandly, "I'll think of a way you can soothe my hurt feelings, don't worry. No need to apologize."

Nick was looking at John with an expression he was quite sure was amusement despite the fact that Nick had just put nearly an entire piece of bread into his mouth and was chewing. He swallowed and spoke. "Just let me know. Whatever it takes to make it up to you."

"Whatever it takes?" John fished out a piece of chicken from his bowl and looked over at Nick. "Insult me again."

"Um ..." Nick looked at him thoughtfully for several long moments, then dropped his gaze to his bowl and spooned up some soup. "Sorry; I can't think of anything."

"Really?" John contemplated that for a moment, feeling pleased, even if they were just joking, and then shrugged. "Well, we have only just met."

"I could make something up?" Nick offered. "I don't like the way you dress, you're funny-looking ... your mother smells of elderberries?"

"That makes four insults." John nodded, finding that he couldn't hold back his grin any longer. "And four whatever-it-takes. That's enough to be going on with." He took another piece of bread and dunked it in his soup. "This soup is really good."

Nick didn't seem to have any complaints about it himself, if the way he was eating was any indication. "Good. I've done more cooking in the past couple of days than I have in years. I kind of like it, though. I asked Sinclair -- sorry, I just forget his first name. Is it polite to call a minister by his first name? -- anyway, I asked him if he knew anyone that might be willing to show me how to cook. He seemed to think that was a pretty strange thing to want to do."

"You can call him what you like to me, but you'd better say 'Mr. Sinclair' to his face." John's mild dislike of the minister deepened. "He's a traditional sort of man; thinks God created woman to do cooking and cleaning and such. I doubt he's ever made himself more than a piece of toast in his life. Ignore him." A thought occurred to him. "Stella. You ask her. She's too busy to teach you herself, but she might know someone. Katy, who works in her kitchen, could come here and give you a crash course or something. Or you could get a book. It can't be that hard to follow instructions and that's all a recipe is."

"I just thought it would be easier to learn hands-on." Nick used the side of his spoon to cut the piece of bread he'd dropped into his soup earlier. "There are a couple of books in one of the cupboards, but I think they're from the late eighteen hundreds or something. I didn't even know what some of the ingredients were."

John raised his eyebrows. "Oh, aye? Neeps and tatties, cullen skink and the like? Show them to Stella and she'll be all for doing an authentic Scottish night, and you'll get to taste haggis for the first time." He gave Nick a challenging look. "Or does a stuffed sheep's stomach not sound appealing then?"

It wasn't something John was particularly fond of, although he'd had it once or twice, but he enjoyed watching the fascinated look of horror creep over a tourist's face when they found out how it was made.

"Not really." Nick gave him a bland look. "Actually, it sounds worse than raw fish, but I'll try it if you think I'd like it. Is it any good?"

John kicked him under the table. "Spoilsport," he said without rancor. "You're supposed to go pale and then turn an interesting shade of green. It's not bad, but I'd rather have another bowl of this soup, if there's any going."

"There's plenty." Nick stood up and snagged John's bowl, taking it over to the range. "Oh, and it would help if I actually turned the burner off before going away and ignoring it. This would be why I could use actual cooking lessons and not just a book." He ladled some more soup into the bowl. "Will everyone else think it's weird I want to learn how to cook, or is that just Sinclair's thing?"

"Why do you care? And no, I can't see why they would. Your uncle looked after himself just fine until he got too poorly; cooked and cleaned, and so do I." John considered what he'd just said. "Well, more or less. My mother's been known to comment on the state of the kitchen floor from time to time, but if she thinks I'm mopping it up when I'm in off the boat, bone-tired and soaking-wet ... well, I'm not, then."

"I don't see the point of cleaning unless it's going to make a pretty big difference." Nick set John's bowl in front of him again and sat back down. "You could get someone in to that kind of stuff, though, if you wanted to?" It was definitely a question.

"Can't afford it." John grinned, trying to picture his sisters' faces if they found out he'd paid someone to clean his bathroom. "But if you can, and you really don't want to be bothered, aye, there's a cleaning service on the island. Mother and daughter team. They mostly do the holiday cottages, but that's more in the summer."

"I don't know. I might not like people traipsing through here all the time. I kind of like my privacy." Nick finished his beer. "But maybe a couple of times a year, just to keep the worst of the filth under control."

"Sounds like a plan. It probably isn't worth getting them in before you tear the place up though, and speaking of which, Niall and his brother said they'd come over on Monday, if that suits you."

John had had to have a quiet word with Niall, as he'd been planning to charge Nick over the odds on the grounds that he was an American and could afford it, but he wasn't going to mention that.

Nick groaned. "Oh, God, they're going to have to rip the walls open and stuff, aren't they. That should be fun." He stood up and went over to the refrigerator. "You want another beer?"

"Thanks. You -- maybe by then, if -- well, maybe you could stay at my place if it gets too bad. With the dust and the noise, I mean."

John finished what was left of his first beer just to give him something to do that wasn't looking anxiously at Nick to see how he'd react to that idea.

Because he'd been thinking about what they'd discussed, he really had. The idea of being able to be with Nick whenever the hell he wanted without worrying, of being able to speak without guarding his tongue -- well, it was

what he wanted, no doubt about it.

The only problem was that it was like winning the Lottery; you could lose yourself in dreams of what you'd do, and have the money spent by the end of them, but the reality was that it wasn't going to happen, and that distant vision of him and Nick together, openly, was about as likely as his numbers coming up one Saturday night.

And asking Nick to stay at his house temporarily wasn't particularly brave, so he didn't know why he felt as if he'd just done something momentous. He'd got three bedrooms after all, and in some ways there'd be less said about Nick stopping than if he'd made the same offer to Katy.

John realized his head was aching trying to predict the town's reactions and sighed in frustration.

Nick set the fresh bottle at his elbow and looked down at him, one hand coming up to brush tentative fingers across John's cheek. "It's okay. People would probably talk. I get that."

"I'd have had Niall or Michael over to stay without thinking twice," John said heavily. "It's just because I know damn well you'd be in my bed that I think everyone else would know that, too. Which makes no sense, so you don't need to point that out."

Nick's hand didn't move away, and he turned his face into the light touch, grateful for the comfort.

"It's okay," Nick repeated, bending down and kissing him. Nick's mouth was soft, gentle, comforting, and yet the reassurance of the kiss lasted only moments before it turned into something more eager. Nick's hand continued to cup John's face, mouths exploring each other, the taste of garlic so unimportant that it barely registered. "I don't care about any of it," Nick murmured between kisses. "If we have to hide and pretend we're just friends. Whatever. I don't care. I just want you."

"You've got me." John meant it. "And we can do better than that, I swear it." He stood up so that he could put his arms around Nick properly, the arousal that half an hour of eating and talking had damped down flaring to life again. "God, it's not been five hours and I want you again. What do you do to me? Or do you think that's the fault of the fresh air, too?"

"We can blame it on the fresh air if you want." Nick ran his hands over John's back and kissed his jaw. "I don't care why, really. I've never been like this with anyone." He pressed against John hungrily, and when John turned his head to claim another kiss Nick made a small sound of pleasure.

"Maybe 'blame' and 'fault' aren't really the right words. I'm thinking it's just you, and I don't care either as long as you don't stop whatever it is you're doing." Nick moved to lean against the table, spreading his legs enough that John could stand between them, their lower bodies touching. John groaned as he felt how hard Nick was already, unable to keep from rubbing up against him. "God, please don't stop."

"I never want to stop." Nick kissed the corner of John's mouth. "I just want to ... keep doing this forever ..."
His hands slid down to John's arse and curled into claws, pulling John toward him. Breathlessly, Nick asked, "Would it be showing a total lack of self control if I undressed you right here?"

"Aye, it probably would." John gasped as Nick's teeth found his ear and bit down on it. "But don't let that stop you. Assuming you don't mind being bent over this table five minutes later that is." John shuddered from just picturing Nick like that, his fingers gripping the edge of the table, his skin glowing pale against the dark wood, glancing back over his shoulder with his face showing every bit of the need he'd be feeling. "Or we could try and make it upstairs, but for God's sake think of something we can use for lube, because I don't know how much longer I can wait for us to fuck."

It crossed John's mind to wonder if Nick would rather be the one doing the fucking. It wasn't the impression he'd got though, so he decided to wait and see. It didn't matter to him all that much. The only thing he was certain of was that he was all in favor of anything that involved Nick and him naked and enjoying themselves.

"I bought lube." Nick got one hand beneath the waistband of John's jeans, caressing bare skin. "Today. And condoms. Everything. Oh God, John, I want to be naked in bed with you. I want to be able to see you, touch you."

"You did?" John had a moment of worry about the implications of that, but it faded as Nick's hand slid further down, the tips of his fingers grazing across John's cock. "Good. Oh fuck, your hand --" He leaned his head against Nick's shoulder, trying to stop himself from squirming, or begging, or both. "Well, wherever you left them is where I want to be, and if it's your bedroom you're going to have to stop that or I'll be too weak in the knees to walk up the stairs."

"Okay." Nick's voice sounded so normal that John might have thought Nick wasn't as eager as he was if he hadn't seen the sparkle in Nick's eyes. "Come on -- let's go upstairs."

Chapter Eleven

The bed had been hastily made, the bottle of lube and a box of condoms set on the bedside table and the curtains drawn. John wondered if Nick preferred not to see the graveyard, and thought for a moment about suggesting that they could rearrange the upstairs of the house so that Nick could use a different room as his bedroom. But then Nick's mouth was on his, and Nick's hands were slowly removing his clothes, and most of the thoughts that went through John's head on a regular basis fled in favor of blissful sensation.

As neither of them wanted to stop kissing for long, it took a while to get naked, but John didn't mind. Taking it at a leisurely pace meant that he got to have his hands on Nick for longer, the anticipation building deliciously and the urgency lost because they'd arrived at where they wanted to be the moment they'd started kissing. Coming was something he was starting to think of as signaling the end of the fun, rather than being the point of it.

When the last piece of clothing was on the floor, he stepped back a little and looked at Nick in silence, stretching out his hand and tracing a line from the hollow at Nick's throat down, dragging his fingers slowly over smooth skin and fine, dark hair until the head of Nick's cock was resting under his palm, warm and slick.

Then he slipped his arm around Nick's neck and pulled him closer, kissing him with a hunger he didn't think he could ever sate.

Nick pressed closer, molding their bodies together and giving another one of those little whimpers against John's lips. His hands were on John's arse again, stroking over the skin more lightly than John thought he could have managed at that moment, when barely touching was the exact opposite of what he wanted to do.

"I'd like to point out," Nick mumbled against John's throat, "that we're yet again standing when we could be using the perfectly good bed."

"You distracted me again." John tipped his head back, wondering if Nick could feel the way his heart was racing. "And if you want me on the bed, all you have to do is get on it yourself and I'll be beside you not a moment later."

"Or I could do this." Nick maneuvered them both in the direction of the bed. The mattress hit the backs of John's knees at the same time Nick's hand found his erection and began to stroke it very slowly. "Weren't you saying something about needing to lie down before?" Nick asked innocently.

After making sure that Nick wasn't actually holding onto him, John fell backwards, dragging Nick with him so that they landed in a sprawled tangle, both of them laughing as they scrambled higher up the bed and then falling silent again as they began to kiss, their eyes closing as their lips met.

John ran his hand from Nick's shoulder to his thigh, feeling Nick edge toward him, his upper leg sliding over John's, rubbing against him eagerly. He moved his hand higher again, stroking over the exposed skin of Nick's inner thigh and brushing against his balls with a light, testing touch. Nick turned his head, finding John's mouth and kissing him hard, his tongue darting inside and exploring John's mouth as John's hand continued to rove over Nick's body.

Nick's leg slid higher in a wordless invitation, and John cupped Nick's balls as best he could at this angle, rolling them gently in his hand and feeling them tighten, getting an eager, hungry sound in response that was all the encouragement he needed.

He couldn't hurry with Nick somehow, not even now, when he was hard and aching with arousal. It took a whimper from Nick to have him slip his fingers back across the smooth strip of skin behind Nick's balls and tease gently at the opening to his body, feeling Nick's fingernails dig into his back in response.

"Want you." John could hear the yearning he felt in his voice, making it shake. "Never wanted anyone the way I want you."

Nick's mouth settled over John's nipple, lips and tongue teasing it into a tight peak at the first touch and each subsequent lick sending a jolt of arousal to John's cock. John realized that he was trembling -- not in a visible way, and not even in a way that he thought Nick could feel, but deep inside, where no one knew about it but him. He wanted Nick so desperately that he was, quite literally, shaken to the core.

Nick's own breathing was none too steady as John's fingertip circled and rubbed.

John wanted to do more. Wanted to know what Nick felt like inside, hot and tight. Still, it was hard to get himself to move enough to reach for the lube, although by the time he'd slicked his fingers he was already thinking it was worth it, just for the look on Nick's face, impatient and turned on, as he wasted some of the lube pulling at Nick's balls before sliding back.

One finger slipped inside and Nick cried out softly, imploring, his cock against John's thigh twitching in response.

The intimacy of that first deep touch was intense enough to make meeting Nick's gaze an effort because John felt exposed, shivering with it, sharing his emotions where before he'd never given more than his body. He managed it, and was rewarded by the expression on Nick's face as John's fingers teased him, fucked him, spread him, his mouth open as he panted hoarsely, his eyes wide.

"Going to give you more than that," John promised him, flickering his tongue across Nick's lower lip and biting down on it gently. He twisted his wrist until he coaxed another soft, desperate whimper from Nick, gasping against the mouth he was kissing as Nick clenched around his fingers. "Going to give you everything I have, Nick."

Nick inhaled shakily. "Yeah," he whispered, his breath warm against John's lips, his hips moving restlessly as John fucked him slowly with two fingers. "Need it. Need *you*. God ..." Nick's hand fumbled and found John's cock again, squeezing and rubbing rather inexpertly as his state of arousal made coordination difficult. Strangely, that just made it hotter.

John had to close his eyes then, his free hand gripping Nick's shoulder, clinging to it as he dealt with a surge of arousal that had his hips moving in short, involuntary jerks, pushing up into Nick's fist.

"How do you want to do this?" The words were distant in his head because he was concentrating on the details; the soft fall of Nick's hair against his cheek, the strong ripple of muscle squeezing his fingers, the way they were breathing in unison. "I don't know what you like yet." Having time and chance to find out would be another first for him. He eased his fingers out of Nick, kissing him as he did, and moved away, giving Nick room. "Show me."

Nick flushed, and John suspected that it was more from embarrassment than arousal. "Let me do this part," he mumbled, reaching past John's arm for the box of condoms and opening it, taking out a small packet. He tore it open and propped himself up on his elbow, then frowned and sat up. "Sorry -- easier like this." He bent and kissed the head of John's cock, drawing a startled gasp from him, before using careful fingers to smooth the condom on. It unrolled slowly down the length of John's shaft, tight and just a bit slick inside, and when it was on Nick fondled John's balls.

Then Nick lay back again, pulling John on top of him and kissing him.

"Like this."

John took a moment to smooth his clean hand over Nick's hair and smile down at him. "Fine by me."

Even as aroused as they both were, there was enough weight of expectation to make Nick tense up slightly as John began to push inside him and for John to be just not quite at the right angle anyway. They paused, meeting each other's eyes, and then Nick smiled reassuringly and John relaxed. It really didn't matter if this wasn't perfect. They'd have plenty of time to reach the point where it was as close to that state as it got.

Bending over, he kissed Nick again, reaching between them to stroke Nick's erection until he felt Nick's hands run over his back to cup his arse, urging him on.

Easing into Nick in one smooth, short slide, repeating it until he was deep inside him, suddenly became the easiest thing in the world.

"God, you feel incredible." John hooked his hand under Nick's leg and started to fuck him slowly, unable to look away from him. "Nick --"

Nick's breath caught in his throat, his body arching beneath John's. He groaned with the next thrust, moving with John and pulling him deeper, legs spread wider as they found a rhythm together. "God. God, John."

"Is it good?" John pushed in again. "Tell me." He wanted to hear Nick say it.

"*Fuck*, yes," Nick gasped.

John kissed him, his tongue demanding in Nick's mouth, needing more. Nick was tight and hot inside, more perfect than anything John had ever felt before, and yet somehow that wasn't enough; he needed to know that it was like that for Nick, too. He pulled back a bit farther and shoved forward, a sharp jab that made Nick whimper.

"*John*." Nick was trembling, his cock leaking onto his stomach.

Sliding his hand free and continuing to fuck Nick with strong, deep strokes that drew groans from each of them, John curled his hand around Nick's cock, gripping it tightly and then running his thumb over the glistening head, bringing his hand up to his mouth and licking it clean with a swipe of his tongue.

Nick shuddered and groaned, rocking his hips to meet the next thrust. "God ... John, touch me again, *please*."

"Like this?" John asked, his voice unsteady. The backs of his fingers brushed against Nick's cock, barely touching it, going from balls to wet tip and then moving away. John felt a shiver run through him just from the way Nick's cock jerked in response, making his next thrust deeper, rougher. "Or do you want more than that?"

"More. God, I'm so close ..." Nick closed his eyes, but opened them again immediately, as if he couldn't bear to not be looking at John. He was gasping, his body hot and smooth around John's cock, and John could feel the tension in his thighs, in his hands still on John's arse.

He would have liked to make Nick wait, draw out this moment of clarity before everything blurred together in a rush of sensation, tease him just a little, with himself as tormented by the delay as Nick. Some time he would. Make the next touch light, and the one after that. Feel Nick's body taut and quivering beneath him, around him, watch his eyes fill with a wild, blind need that was a reflection of the look in his own.

Not now though. God, no, not now. His hand was on Nick before the man had finished speaking, his fingers wrapping around the hot, slick-tipped cock and working it with the same ruthless speed and strength he'd have used on himself at this point, his cock pushing into Nick with a matching force.

"Nick ... oh, fuck, yes." He could feel his body draw in on itself, readying for that moment of utter stillness before it was wrenched apart and shattered, needing something more; one more slide into the tight, welcoming heat, one more repetition of his name from Nick's lips, one more --

Nick came, silently and with a clench of his body so fierce that there was nothing John could do but follow him, crying out at the intensity of it. It lasted a lot longer than he was used to, each wave of pleasure forcing another cry from him until he collapsed on top of Nick, shuddering and gasping desperately for air.

Warm hands slid gently over John's back and shoulders in long, soothing strokes. He felt Nick press an awkward kiss to his hair and the warm, moist air that he was exhaling wafting back over his own lips and chin as he struggled to gain enough control of his body again so that he could move.

"No, don't," Nick said, when John started to shift his weight. "Stay."

"I wasn't planning on going far." John relaxed again, turning his head and finding Nick's mouth with his own, kissing him and hoping some of what he was feeling was conveyed in the kisses because he didn't think he could put it into words.

He propped himself up on one elbow and brought his hand to Nick's face, cupping it and stroking along the line of his jaw in slow, gentle sweeps of his thumb, watching Nick's eyes flicker in a regret he shared as John eased out of him in an inevitable separation.

The way that Nick relaxed and settled in beside him as he lay down, seemingly content and trusting, meant more than John could have put into words.

* * * * *

They'd been walking, Nick thought, practically forever.

He knew on a practical level that it had only been a few hours, and there had been times when it had most definitely been walking as opposed to climbing, although there'd been patches of that, too. The air was so fresh and sharp, with an edge of salt to it, that it made their surroundings seem even further removed from civilization than they were. Grass and gorse and hedges and all kinds of things that must have had real names, even if they escaped Nick and probably would have even if he'd cared what they were called, were all around them, and they'd seen more than their fair share of sheep and even a couple of animals that he'd thought were goats.

The sky was blue, surprisingly so -- it was the most perfect day he'd seen since he'd been on the island. Not that he'd been here all that long, but he'd been under the impression that good weather was few and far between in Scotland, or at least that the periods of blue sky were brief at best.

Nick realized that he was panting a bit more than was comfortable and glanced up at John's back in front of him, trying not to watch the way John's ass flexed and relaxed with each step. "Can we ... stop for a minute?"

John turned and glanced back at him, looking not at all out of breath although his face was slightly flushed. "Aye, of course we can. There's no rush now, is there?" He scanned the mountainside and then nodded at a flat slab of stone jutting out with a patch of short, wiry grass behind it. "Think you can stagger that far?"

Since it was no more than thirty feet away, Nick felt he could spare the energy to glare at John as he walked over to it, getting a chuckle in response.

"You're doing well," John said kindly as they sat down, placing their backpacks beside them. "This isn't something that you're used to, then?" He opened his pack and dug out two bottles of water, passing one to Nick before unscrewing the cap on his and taking a long drink, the muscles of his throat working as he swallowed.

"The walk I took yesterday into town was the longest one in years," Nick admitted, tipping his bottle up and swallowing a mouthful of water. "It's not that I don't like it, it's just ... well, I never know what I'm going to come across, you know? And we always moved around so much, there weren't all that many places that were familiar."

John gestured at what, even halfway up the mountain, was a spectacular view across rolling moorland out to the sea, dotted with distant pale smudges Nick knew were islands but couldn't name. "And I know every rock on the island. I know who lives in every house you can see down there, I know what's growing in every field ... and there's times when that's comforting, and times when I feel so damn *bored* --"

"You should go somewhere." Nick abandoned the discomfort of the rock and sat on the ground instead, lying down flat and looking up at the sky. "Somewhere different. You should see America, Canada, Italy. Whatever

sounds good.” He didn’t look at John, unsure how the suggestion would be taken and wanting it to seem as casual as possible just in case.

His view of blue sky and a trail of white cloud was replaced by John’s face as he moved to lie next to Nick and leaned over to kiss him “Sorry.” John smiled down at him. “It’s becoming a habit.” He rolled to his back. “Travel. Well, I could go abroad tomorrow, if I wanted. There was a job offer that didn’t work out and I ended up with a passport, an Icelandic phrasebook, and a really warm parka. I just -- there was nowhere I really wanted to go, and no one to go with. Michael and I used to talk about seeing the world -- but after Sheila -- well.”

“Iceland? Really?” Nick found himself smiling at the thought of it. He turned his head and looked at John’s profile. “You could go somewhere now, if you wanted to.” John tucked his hands beneath his head, listening in silence. “We could. I’ve been all over America -- well, parts of it, at least -- but there are plenty of other places I’ve wondered about.” Not that the idea of travel appealed to Nick all that much right then, when he was looking forward to putting down roots for the first time since he’d been a kid, but in a few years he might feel differently.

John considered that for a moment without rushing to answer the way Nick was used to people doing, as if silence was a sin.

“I’d like that. And you’ll have to leave sometimes, won’t you? Or do you think folk won’t find you here and ask for help?” John glanced at Nick. “How did that work?” he asked, sounding mildly curious. “Them finding you, I mean. Did you -- did you advertise? Or are you registered with an organization?”

“Not really an official one.” Nick met John’s eyes briefly before they both turned their heads to look up at the sky again. “Sort of an underground. No one who didn’t know it was there would know. Does that make sense?” He looked at John again, and the other man nodded. “People who are having ... trouble, with that kind of thing ... eventually, they figure out who’ll believe them and who won’t, and they find someone who can help.” He grimaced; he’d always tried not to think about that too much. “Matthew handled most of it. I had enough trouble dealing with all the situations that we just kind of stumbled upon.”

“I remember you telling me that he was your business partner,” John said slowly. “You’ll be missing him in more ways than one, then; it must have felt as if there was nothing left of your life when he died. No one to ... shield you. No one who cared about you; just cared about what you could do.” John sat up and reached for his bottle of water, not looking at Nick, his voice just a little too even. “What now? You can’t stop doing what you do and you’ll need -- you’ll need another Matthew.” He looked at Nick then and there was a world of regret in his eyes. “I’d do anything to help you, but I can’t do that. Wouldn’t know where to start.”

“He shielded me because it was in his own interest.” Nick closed his own eyes because he didn’t want to see that look in John’s.

He’d only been here a few days; there were moments when he worried that he was bonding with John because he was trying to replace Matthew, because he didn’t want to be alone. Deep down, he didn’t think it was that simple. There was something about John that he was drawn to.

“I don’t want another Matthew.” Nick wanted to be honest with John. He breathed in slowly through his nose. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want a partner, but ... not like that. I don’t want to go back to that life.” He opened his eyes and rolled onto his side, looking at John. “I can’t run from what I am. I know that. But that doesn’t mean I have to live my life for everyone else but me.”

John moved over so that they were facing each other, looking less worried now for some reason. “Seems to me that we’ve both been doing a lot of that,” he murmured, propping his head on his hand. “Well, it’s in my interests to have you happy, that’s all. And I’d say you were old enough to know what’s best for you without anyone else’s help.” He cleared his throat. “It doesn’t have to be me, you know. I won’t -- I’d understand. You and me, we just, well, it happened, but it’s so soon after -- and it’s not like you’ve had time to find someone else, someone better.” John rolled his eyes in disgust at himself. “Christ, could I make a worse job of this?” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to feel obliged,” John said. “You stayed with Matthew for years because you didn’t want to hurt him. You don’t have to do that with me.”

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you,” Nick agreed, reaching out his hand and tracing John’s nose with a fingertip. “But I do want to stay here, with you, and see where this goes. You might be the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I’m not stupid enough to let something like that go. To let someone like you go.” Nick knew that his emotion was plain on his face as he slipped his hand back behind John’s neck and pulled him closer until their lips met.

John kissed him back without hesitation, his lips warm and gentle and his hand coming to rest on Nick’s waist. “It doesn’t bother you that this is all so fast? Three days and we’re somewhere other people don’t get to in months? Years, even?”

“Did I say it didn’t bother me?” Nick brushed his lips over John’s because it was so damned hard not to when the man was so close. “Well, no, actually, it doesn’t *bother* me. Worry me a little bit? Yeah. But I’ve spent my life

learning to trust my instincts, or at least trying to, and I don't want to go into this half-assed." He hitched himself up a little higher and clarified. "If we're going to try, I'm going to try all the way. I'm not going to hold back out of worry that it might not work out, because if I do, maybe it *won't* work out. You know?"

"A self-fulfilling prophecy, aye," John said unexpectedly. He lifted his shoulder in a small shrug. "I couldn't walk away from you and live with myself afterwards, but it doesn't mean I'm not scared. I'm not used to feeling like this. I'm not used to caring this much." He pushed his hand through Nick's hair, smoothing it back, and stared at him, his blue eyes serious. "And I do. When you fell on the beach, I was so fucking angry and hurt and I *still* couldn't keep from going to you. I don't think I ever could if I thought that you needed me."

"I really am sorry about that." Nick had apologized before, but that didn't mean he couldn't do it again. "I just ... you know that thing I was saying about trusting my instincts? Well, it doesn't always work out as well as I'd like to. I didn't trust them when they said you wouldn't freak out if I told you what I was."

"You don't have to apologize." John looked a little surprised. "It wasn't your fault I got the wrong idea entirely. And thinking I'd understand about the ghosts and such when we'd only just met, well, I can see why you'd doubt yourself there. And I suppose you have to be careful who you tell." He grinned, looking suddenly mischievous. "Looking the way you do, I'm thinking you'd have had a fair few people getting starry-eyed over you, if they'd known you could speak to the dead."

Nick knew that John was trying to lighten the mood, but he couldn't manage anything but a strained smile. "That's one of the things Matthew and I used to argue about. He wanted to go big -- TV shows, websites, that kind of thing. He used to say that we'd be rolling in money. That we'd never have to worry about anything again."

It had been typical of what Matthew had believed; that enough money could buy happiness.

John blinked at him. "He'd known you fifteen years or more and couldn't see how much you'd hate something like that?" he said incredulously. "Money -- aye, well, there's no denying it's handy, but it's not worth losing what you are to get it." He shook his head. "I don't think we'd have got along well, for all that we've got in common with us both liking you." John squinted up at the sun, changing the subject. "We should carry on, if you're rested."

"Yeah, okay." Nick got up and stretched, feeling a little bit bleaker than he should, what with the way the sun was shining and the clouds were blowing across the sky in a lazy, shifting pattern. There were sheep on the hillside below them making whatever noise it was sheep made, a sort of stuttered bleating sound, and all Nick could see was Matthew's still face, and all he could hear was the hiss of the radiator and the distant wail of a siren.

"Don't." John reached out and took his hand, drawing Nick back to the present. "You're remembering him and wishing it'd gone differently, aren't you? The same way I have over my father, time and time again. And it doesn't help to save them in your head; no matter what we do, they're gone, and there's no changing that, even for you."

"I know," Nick snapped, a little more sharply than he'd meant to, taking his hand back and seeing the flicker of hurt in John's eyes at the withdrawal. "I know. You're right. Sorry."

John reached down and picked up his backpack, shoving his water bottle inside with what looked like more force than was needed, leaving Nick's apology unacknowledged. Then, as Nick watched, he bent down and picked up two stones, choosing one and slipping it inside his jacket pocket.

"There's a cairn at the top." John turned the remaining stone in his hand. "People take a rock up and leave it there in celebration of the climb. I never climbed this mountain with my dad; not sure he ever went up it himself, come to that, but I'll leave one of these in memory of him. Do you want to do the same for Matthew?"

"Yes." Nick wasn't sure if he was ready to acknowledge that his agreement was more about John than it was about Matthew. "I'm sorry." He held out his hand slowly, and just as slowly John reached out and put the stone into his palm. "I'm ... probably not going to be normal about him for a while." It was another apology, although not in so many words.

John looked at him with a frown. "Normal?" Something very like impatience roughened his voice. "Grieving for someone you loved when they've been there for half your life, and being a wee bit snappy now and then is normal. And the way he died -- well, that was bad. But you don't need to excuse yourself to me. There's not a day gone by that I haven't thought about my father and felt like -- Oh God, you *know* how I feel. I was supposed to go out with them that day and didn't. Do you think I don't blame myself, just a little, for that? With three of us it might've been different -- we could've kept the boat from going over, got back to shore --" He stopped, breathing quickly. "Deal with it how you like, but don't feel you need to pretend. Yell at me if you like, cry on me if you want. Just -- don't apologize, or I won't be able to ask the same from you when I need someone to share the hurt with."

After a few seconds of staring at Nick, John turned and started to walk up the mountain again. It wasn't until then that Nick was able to move, to speak, to go after him and grab onto his wrist and stop him. John pivoted and looked back, and Nick kissed him, so hard that it hurt. Just the once, and then, while they were still standing close together, Nick said, "I don't want to yell at you. And I'm not ready to cry -- I don't know if I'll ever be. But I'm here. You can ask me for anything and I'll give it to you."

John's hand touched his face, lighter than the breeze, warmer than the sun, and then dropped to grip his shoulder. "If I have to, I'll ask you. And thank you." He leaned in and kissed Nick back, making it less bruising, soothing away the sting. "Mountain," he murmured into Nick's ear. "Needs climbing so that we can go home, where there's that perfectly good bed."

"Right." Nick nodded. He stepped back and slipped the stone into his pocket, and then put his backpack on. "Let's go."

They started to walk again, and Nick did his best to let the peacefulness of the setting relax him. The rhythm of putting one foot in front of the other, of breathing, of the distant enough that they had to be imagined crash of the waves were like a balm to his raw nerves, so that by the time they reached the next fairly flat spot of ground and John slowed down, he glanced sideways at him and smiled a smile so genuine that it felt like his face might split in two.

John grinned back. "Nearly there. If we'd come up the south face you'd have a nice bit of rock climbing to do about now, but I've never been one for doing things the hard way when there's no need for it." He pointed ahead at a steep, rocky slope rising up sharply. "You can't see it because of the angle, but at the top of that is, well, the top." He pursed up his lips. "I want you to go first. See how from here there's a path? Faint, but it's there. Get it fixed in your head before you start and you'll be fine. I'll be right behind you."

Nick frowned a little bit. "Okay. As long as you don't mind that you could probably do it in half the time."

"And sit at the top, all on my own, waiting for you?" John shook his head. "Where's the fun in that?" His eyes glinted with amusement. "And this way I'll get the chance to stare at *your* arse, because I'm damn sure you've been getting an eyeful of mine all morning." He winked at Nick and then patted his backside gently. "Off you go, then."

Self-consciously, Nick went. He didn't stay self-conscious for long, though, because soon enough he was concentrating on where he put his feet and eventually his good hand as the climb became steeper. It never really ventured into the territory of dangerous -- Nick knew that on a theoretical level -- but there were times when he felt as if a foot put wrong might result in him falling who knew how far, and that was enough to make him focus carefully on what he was doing.

"That's it," John called out encouragingly, reminding him that if he fell there'd be someone there to break his fall -- or, knowing his luck, he'd take John with him and they'd both end up at the bottom of the slope. Then his groping hand came down on what wasn't a narrow ledge of rock, but a plateau, and he hauled himself up and stood on the top of the mountain, his breath catching in his dry throat, the wind scouring the sweat from his forehead.

For a minute or two, he was alone up there, and he suspected that John was deliberately taking his time to allow him this moment of solitude and accomplishment. He'd never really understood why people wanted to scale peaks, go faster, higher, further. Still didn't, not really, but he felt satisfaction stir as he looked around him. He'd gotten here. It had taken hours and it'd taxed him physically, more than he'd expected, but he'd done it.

The cairn John had mentioned was in the center of the rocky expanse, and Nick walked over to it and added the small stone, setting it right at the top. It was prey to the wind and the storms, and it would've been safer tucked in lower down, but Matthew would have put it there, he knew that.

Then he walked past the cairn to stare at the view behind the mountain, the one he hadn't been looking at in quick, snatched glimpses as he climbed, and felt his breath quicken.

There were other islands out there, he knew that, but all he could see as far as the horizon was the ocean, sparkling, shimmering, glinting green. And his homeland lay on the other side of that shifting, deceptively peaceful water. Standing here, he was in possession of both his old life and his new, and the sense of displacement faded.

Behind him, he heard John reach the top, and he waited for the clink of stone on stone before turning to go over to him.

"Worth the climb?" John asked, setting down his pack.

"Yes. Although I don't think I expected it to be quite that challenging." Nick shrugged and put his own pack down beside John's. "But it's beautiful. I can see why it means something to you."

"Doesn't it call to anything in you?" John squatted down and rummaged in his pack, pulling out two cans of lager and offering one to Nick.

"What?" Nick took a can and held it in his hand. "No. I mean, yes, it does; that's what I meant." He breathed in the air deeply. "It's like ... a sense of perspective. Like I know where I am in the world. Does that make sense?"

John opened the can, holding it away from him as the lager foamed up and drenched his hand. He shook it dry and swiped it casually against his jeans before taking a drink. "Aye, I think so. Does it feel like home? Even a little?"

"Not really." Nick suspected the answer would disappoint John. "It feels like I don't have a home. I mean, I'm an American, and I always will be, even though my mother was from here." He wasn't sure that was entirely true from the islanders' viewpoints, based on what some of them had said, but it felt true to him. "But I never really had

a home there, either. Not since I was little.”

He looked at John, who’d just taken another drink from his lager, and opened his own can, which did the same thing John’s had, bubbling up and over the top and his hand. The liquid was faintly cooled and smelled malty.

“Give it time. You only just got here.” John set his drink down. “How’s your appetite today? Want to eat before we start back down? Which, before you start smiling, is harder on the legs than walking up.”

“As long as it doesn’t look like it’s going to rain, I’m happy to stay up here as long as we can.” Nick drank some of his lager. His stomach contracted. “Food would be good. I’ve got cookies. Biscuits.” He’d grown up using both words because of his mother, but had eventually started to use the American term since it was less confusing. He’d have to train himself back out of it now.

“Suits me.” John sat down with his back against the cairn and began to take out some supplies for them; a couple of apples, some thick sandwiches of homemade bread with cheese or beef between the soft, chewy slices, and two chunks of fruit cake, dark and moist. “If I fall asleep after this, feel free to kick me if I snore.” He took a bite of his apple and then grinned. “Do I?”

“Snore? No. But I was wondering if I did, what with all the kicking that was going on last night.” Nick sat down beside John and nudged him with his knee to let him know that he was kidding, which it was clear John already did from the grin on his face as he crunched away at his apple. “I’m a pretty heavy sleeper. I probably wouldn’t notice even if you did snore.”

“Good.” John set his half-eaten apple down on the small plastic bag it had come out of. “I’d hate to think I did anything that made you wish I wasn’t in bed with you.” He slipped his hand up to Nick’s face and turned it so that he could kiss him. “And even though you were pulling the covers off me every time you turned over, I wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else last night.”

Nick stole another kiss, unwilling to give up the warmth of John’s mouth once it was offered. They’d had sex again that morning after waking up, slow and sweet, without any of the desperation they’d both felt the night before, and with Nick lying on his belly, John’s mouth pressed to the back of Nick’s shoulder as John thrust into him. Nick had used the pillow to stifle his moans and had come on the sheets a good five minutes before John found his own shuddering release, hands propping him up and cock pushing deeper in measured strokes.

He wanted to wake up like that every morning, with John’s insistent erection rubbing against his and John’s arms around him.

“I guess it would be too cold to sleep up here, even at the height of summer,” Nick said wistfully, resting his hand on John’s thigh and looking out across the island.

“You’d get bitten to death before you froze.” John slipped his arm around Nick’s shoulders and nuzzled gently into his neck for a moment, his mouth tickling and teasing. “We could though, if you like. Maybe in August when it’s as hot as it gets. Doesn’t even have to be all the way up here; there’s a loch inland a bit. We could sleep on the shore and I’d catch you a fish for supper and breakfast. Maybe even swim; it’s not too deep.” John smiled, tracing his finger along Nick’s jaw. “I’d like to have you wet and naked, lying in the heather beside me, cuddling up to get warm.” His thumb brushed against Nick’s mouth, followed by his lips. “It’s starting to get dark again by then, properly dark. The stars are so thick you can’t see the sky, and the air’s like honey with the scent of the heather.”

“Sounds perfect.” They began to kiss again, neither of them pulling away, John’s hand on Nick’s shoulder kneading gently as Nick turned to face him more fully. John’s mouth tasted sharp and sweet, and the feel of his tongue in Nick’s mouth was enough to make Nick hard. He ran his own hand up John’s thigh.

“God, Nick,” John whispered, sounding tempted to the point of surrender. “You -- we can’t. Not here.”

Nick moved his hand higher and let it rest against the undeniable evidence that John was as aroused as he was, rewarded by a soft sound of need and another kiss, John’s mouth eager but tense against his.

He could feel how torn John was, and as much as he wanted him, Nick didn’t want to do anything that would hurt him. “I know.” Nick pressed one last kiss to John’s warm lips before pulling back, turning his head and looking down at the trampled grass between his boots as he tried to get himself under control. After a moment or two, he dared a glance in John’s direction, wondering if the other man was angry that he’d pushed it even as far as he had.

John was looking at him with a dejected, frustrated expression that somehow made Nick feel better. “I’m sorry. It’s just -- I know we haven’t seen a soul all morning, but trust me, there’s people about, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there were climbers on the south face heading up here for their lunch, the same as us.”

“Then let’s not give them anything to look at but a couple of guys eating lunch.” Nick leaned over and snagged one of the sandwiches. He took an enormous bite so that he wouldn’t have to say anything for a minute or so, chewing slowly and looking at the world below them, greens and browns blending together if he let his eyes go unfocused.

John sighed and settled back, taking a sandwich of his own. “When we get back, you’ll be aching from head to foot.”

"I kind of am already." Nick swallowed his mouthful, enjoying the tangy bite of whatever was spread over the cheese. "But I'll survive."

"I've got to do some errands for the party tomorrow. It won't take me long, but I was wondering -- Thursday nights Michael and Sheila usually come by after supper and stay a while. We watch a film, or just talk, and Sheila's mum minds the kids. Would you come and join us? I'd like fine for you to meet them before the party."

Nick was surprised and probably did a poor job of hiding it. "Okay. I mean ... are you sure you want to do that?"

"If you're not too tired. They're my friends, and I'd rather you met them when we're not in a crowd." John cleared his throat. "They'll see me with you, and they'll know you're more than a neighbor just from the look on my face. Are you sure you won't mind that?"

"I don't care who knows." Nick met John's blue eyes for a few very long seconds before looking away, embarrassed by the knowledge that his devotion was already so strong and impossible to deny. "If I'm tired, I'll take a nap before dinner. Like you said, they're your friends. I want to meet them. And it'd be nice to have a couple of familiar faces at the party."

John took a drink from his can of lager, draining it, and nodded, looking pleased. "That's settled then."

Chapter Twelve

Settled was a good word. It was a word that meant everything was okay, that everyone was relaxed and where they belonged.

It was also the last thing that Nick felt as he stood at John's front door trying to get up the courage to knock.

He was late, although not late enough that anyone would have been worried about him. He would have thought he was fashionably late, only he'd never been a hundred percent clear on what that meant. All the muscles in his legs ached from their earlier climb up Ben whatever it was, the mountain, and he hadn't been able to sleep no matter how hard he'd tried when he'd gone back to the house. He'd lain on the bed staring at the ceiling and getting himself worked up into an almost frenzy over the necessity of meeting John's friends.

It was very clear to Nick that this was a test. If Sheila and Michael didn't like him, it was going to be a big deal to John, and Nick wasn't oblivious enough to think that John's high school friends would be the ones being abandoned in favor of his new boyfriend.

The night was cold, and Nick's hands, even balled up in the pockets of his jacket, were freezing. This was stupid. He should knock on the door.

About a minute later, he did, and immediately heard the sound of footsteps inside the house. He pasted on a smile as the door started to open.

Seeing John standing in the doorway smiling back at him with what looked like relief and pleasure on his face helped a little.

"I was thinking I should have picked you up to save you the walk," John said by way of greeting. "At least it's on the level though. Come on in."

He stepped back and Nick walked into the hall, struck at once by how different it was from Rossneath, even if this house had belonged to John's grandparents who were, he supposed, not that much older than his uncle had been. The faded paper on the walls that he'd become used to was replaced here by cream paint dotted with paintings that looked as if they were of local beauty spots, and the floor was covered in a hard-wearing carpet in deep green. It was comfortable without being quite like John somehow, and Nick remembered that the plan had originally been to rent the house to tourists, which might explain the slightly bland decor.

John pushed open a door off the hall, and Nick followed him into a room that ran the length of the house, with a large dining table at one end, on wooden flooring, and a conventional grouping of a couch and two chairs, coffee table, and TV where he was standing.

A couch that was occupied by Michael and Sheila, who were gazing at him with frank interest but no more, the smiles on their faces polite and meaningless.

They didn't know, then.

Sheila was pretty; green eyes and red hair, with a bright warmth about her. As she glanced away from Nick to John, her smile became genuine and her affection for him was clear.

"Hello, Mr. Kelley." Her gaze returned to Nick. "John was getting worried about you."

John's "I was not, then!" mingled with her husband's "Sheila!" and she grinned mischievously at Nick, who couldn't help grinning back.

Michael stood up and stretched out his hand to shake Nick's. "Welcome to the island, Mr. Kelley. I'm Michael Stewart."

Michael's grip was firm, and Nick found himself looking into warm brown eyes that were surrounded by smile lines. Michael looked relaxed, comfortable in his own skin, his light brown hair slightly long and mussed.

Nick thought he could see, at least on a superficial level, what had attracted John to the man.

"Nick Kelley." Nick released Michael's hand and smiled at Sheila, who'd stood up behind Michael and slipped an arm around his waist. "John told you that we climbed the mountain today? It was better exercise than I was expecting."

"I don't think I would've made it to the top and back without someone carrying me," Sheila said frankly. "You'll be stiff tomorrow, I expect, and wishing you'd just gone out fishing, which is all the exercise these two usually get, I can tell you." She dug Michael in the ribs, ignoring his yelp of protest, and turned to pick up a glass of white wine from the table. "Are you not going to offer Mr. Kelley a drink, John?"

John flushed, looking as on edge as Nick had ever seen him. "Aye, of course I am, Sheila. What will you take, Nick? Whiskey or beer? And if Sheila's left you any, there's wine."

"Of course I left some!" Sheila jumped in before Nick could even respond. "Unlike some people in this room, I limit myself to one drink a night." She winked at Nick. "I just use a big glass."

"Um ... whiskey's fine." A small part of Nick wished that he'd stayed on the other side of the door.

"I'll help," Sheila announced, as if it were perfectly reasonable to suggest that a grown man might need help in pouring a glass of whiskey. She grabbed John by the arm and started the two of them toward what Nick assumed must be the kitchen. "Give you two a chance to get acquainted."

Michael and Nick were left looking at each other awkwardly. "She's very nice."

"Aye, she's a fine lass." Michael glanced in the direction she'd gone. "I take it you're not married?"

Nick shook his head as they both moved to sit down, Michael in the same spot he'd been sitting before on the couch and Nick in the nearest chair. "No."

There was an appraising look in Michael's eyes that was doing nothing to make Nick feel anything approaching relaxed. "So you arrived on Monday and bumped into John right away? That was nice, you being neighbors and all."

"I was dead on my feet. I'd been traveling for the best part of twenty-four hours with no sleep; John was very kind about helping me get settled in."

"That sounds like John." Michael nodded. "He's not one for standing by when someone needs help." He reached for a can of beer on the table and held it in his hands, turning it slowly. "Can't say that I've ever known him go to this much trouble for someone he's only just met though." He glanced at Nick. "You two must have something in common, maybe?"

"We're actually related." Nick hoped that focusing on that would be enough of an answer. "Really distantly -- some thing about my great aunt and ... okay, I have no idea. Which is one of the things I'm interested in; tracing my family's history. John says he's willing to help. Maybe he's interested in finding out more, too?"

Michael took a drink of beer. "Suppose he might be. Never heard him talk all that much about it, but who knows what goes on inside other people's heads?"

That was the sort of comment that made Nick uncomfortable, but his instinct in that situation was to open himself up more fully in the hopes that the other person would trust him. "I was kind of worried about coming here tonight." He lowered his voice and met Michael's gaze. "Being new on the island ... I know people are going to see me as an outsider, but I want to fit in."

"And you're using John to do it?" Michael's eyes narrowed a little. "From what he said, I got the idea he thought you two were friends."

Mildly exasperated, Nick sighed. "I was getting the impression you didn't *want* John and I to be friends."

"I want John to be *happy*," Michael shot back at him. "And I don't know how much of a priority that is with you because I don't know you." Some of the tension went out of him and he sank back against the cushions. "I *don't* know you, do I? So I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions about you two, and if I'm wrong you're going to think I'm mad making all this fuss." He took a drink from his can of lager and then said moodily. "I'm making a mess of this, aren't I?"

Nick was wishing for a drink of his own. "You're looking out for him." He was struggling to find the right words. "He's lucky to have friends that care enough about him to do that."

Michael gave him a look that Nick couldn't help thinking was a bit disappointed, as if he'd been hoping for more, but given John's attitude there was no question of Nick saying anything until he was sure that John hadn't changed his mind about telling his friends.

"Aye," Michael said flatly. "So what part of the States are you from, Nick?"

Faced with that abrupt change of subject, onto something that he wanted to discuss even less, Nick was deeply grateful for the squeal of excitement Sheila gave that had Michael's head turning towards the kitchen.

"What the hell are they doing in there?" he muttered.

Nick shrugged helplessly, feeling his face burn. "Something to do with the, uh, party tomorrow?"

Michael gave him a skeptical look. "Oh, aye. Look, Nick --"

Sheila came back into the room with her eyes sparkling and John two steps behind her looking acutely embarrassed, rescuing Nick once again, even if only temporarily.

"Michael, love, you know what I always said I'd do when John finally met someone?" Without waiting for an answer she rushed across the room, bent over, and kissed Nick's cheek, hugging him hard before stepping back. "There now."

"Um ... thank you." Nick looked from Sheila to John in bewilderment. He'd heard what the woman had said, but under the circumstances he doubted that he'd heard her correctly.

"You don't mean ..." Michael sat forward, looking as confused as Nick felt.

"Yes!" Sheila's hands were clasped together like those of a little girl seeing Disneyland for the first time. "Can you believe it? After all this time." She turned her head and looked at John delightedly before turning her attention

back to Nick. "Now, you'll have to tell us all about you. Every detail."

Nick's first instinct was to run from the room, but he had enough sense to ignore it. "There's not that much to tell." He gave John a grateful glance as the man handed him the glass of whiskey he'd brought out of the kitchen.

"Hang on," Michael said. "Sheila, just stop for a minute, will you? Just *stop*." He turned to look at John, who had stepped away from Nick's chair so that he was standing alone. Watching them, Nick was painfully aware that John had loved Michael for years -- still did -- and that they had a lifetime of shared memories.

He had just over three days' worth.

"John? You only just met him, for God's sake! He'll be here until the winter comes and then he'll be selling up and going home like all the tourists do; you can't just -- God, this doesn't make any sense. You've never wanted people to know about you; this is going to change everything."

Nick wanted a drink, but raising his glass to his lips would've meant taking his eyes off John and he wasn't going to do that. John's flush had faded and his face was resolute.

"It is, aye. I'm seeing that right now." John's voice was level. "And I can see how it looks to you, but you'll just have to trust me that what's between me and Nick isn't a step up from a one-night-stand and it doesn't bloody well matter how long we've known each other or if he stays or if he leaves. I was planning to tell you both even before Sheila started in with her questions, but it's not something I want going further. Not yet."

"How can you say it doesn't matter if he leaves?" Michael got up and walked to the other side of the room, running a hand through his hair and leaving it sticking up in a way that would have been comical under other circumstances. "As if you'll just shrug and forget about him? You *know* that's not how you are, John! And I don't want to have to pick up the pieces when you fall apart."

"So you're worried about you?" Nick asked.

The glare that Michael gave him was punctuated by a pointed finger. "I'll deal with you later." Sheila made a small sound of protest.

"No, you won't." Nick tried to stay calm as he swallowed some whiskey and then set the glass down on the table and stood up. "I don't owe you anything. You don't have to like me if you're determined not to, but that has the added benefit of me not needing to listen to anything you say." He didn't intend to walk out, not when he knew that would hurt John, but he wasn't going to take whatever shit Michael wanted to throw in his direction.

"It would matter if he left," John said quietly, all his attention focused on Michael. "It just wouldn't change the way I feel about him. Nothing would. That's all I meant. And I'll ask you both to sit down, please," he added, with a flash of irritation. "Unless you're planning to thump him, Michael, for coming back to a house he owns, on an island his family's lived on for years, and taking a fancy to me that I'm more than happy about. Tell me what bothers you the most about that, will you?"

Most of the air seemed to go out of Michael at that, although he crossed his arms briefly before going back over and sitting down. As Nick sat, too, Michael muttered at him, "Wouldn't have hit you. I'm not like that."

"It's okay." Nick sighed. "Look, I can see how it seems to you and why you're concerned, but I'm not planning on leaving any time soon. I've spent my whole life wandering, and I'm sick of it. You're just going to have to take my word for that or give me time to prove it." He glanced at John. "And just for the record, I'm happy with anyone knowing John and I are together, but I'm starting to understand why he doesn't want people to know. If his best friend freaks out -- and you already knew he was gay -- I don't imagine the rest of the island's going to be reacting the way Sheila did." He smiled at her. "Thanks for that, by the way."

"I'm very happy for you." Sheila frowned at her husband. "And certain other people in this room will be as well, once they've had a chance to get it through their thick skulls that this is a good thing."

"It's not that I don't want him to be happy!" Michael protested, although he sounded less angry and more confused now. "You know that."

"Aye, I do," John said. "That's why I was so surprised." Nick didn't think he had been surprised, though, and that thought was pretty depressing, because it meant that John had been right about how people would react, and the thought of going through this multiple times ... well, it was more than he wanted to think about right then.

"And I wouldn't have hit him." Michael was looking at John now.

"No," John said softly, meaningfully. "You wouldn't have."

"You're saying he can't fight his own battles?" Michael demanded, picking up on the implication in John's words a beat ahead of Sheila, who rolled her eyes and sighed.

"With a wrist he broke not three months back? I don't think it'd be a fight you'd be proud of winning, Michael."

Nick kept quiet, sure that anything he added wouldn't help the situation.

"Aye, and you'd be sleeping on the couch for the next fortnight if you beat up on a man who didn't do nothing to ye but turn up on Traighshee. You've at least three stone on him, Michael!" Sheila's eyes flashed -- it was clear

that she didn't have any trouble throwing in her two cents.

"Stop attacking me, woman!" The look in Sheila's eyes turned to something closer to fury. "I'm sorry," Michael said quickly, holding up both hands in a conciliatory gesture. "To all of you. I wouldn't have hit you." He looked at Nick pleadingly. "I won't deny that I wasn't expecting this, but I'm not the sort of man who goes around doing things like that."

"Forget it," Nick said. "Please. I never thought that you would and I'm sure John didn't either."

"I shouldn't have said that," John admitted. He gave Michael a swift, rueful smile. "If we're into the apologies this soon, it's a good sign, isn't it?" He glanced at Nick. "When we start disagreeing it can sometimes take hours before he admits I'm right."

Sheila moved to sit by Michael, slipping her hand into his and squeezing it. "You're not always right, John, and well you know it." She smiled at Nick. "When we're on our own some time, there's a dozen tales I can tell you about this pair." Her smile faded. "John -- you'll be telling your mother, won't you? After the party, I mean. You can't keep this from her."

John rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't -- I tried, Sheila. Told her I wasn't still thinking of you --"

"You'd better not be." There was an amused twist to Michael's mouth, as if it was an old joke.

"No," Nick agreed calmly. "You hadn't."

There was a pause, and then Michael grinned. "Christ, you sound like you mean that."

"I told her and more besides." John came over to sit on the arm of Nick's chair, letting his hand fall across Nick's shoulder. As gestures went, that was all it was; Nick could feel how tense John was and he didn't relax even when Sheila smiled and Michael did no more than blink, looking a little uncertain but certainly not hostile. "She didn't listen."

"Well, you'll just have to try again." Sheila leaned forward looking determined.

"Someone's going to find out sooner or later," Michael agreed. "Do you really want anyone but you telling her something like that?"

"I will." John gave his friends an apologetic look. "I was just -- she hasn't even met Nick yet, for God's sake. I was hoping to do it ... gradually?" Nick was fairly sure his own expression matched the ones on Sheila and Michael's face; John wasn't going to get any support for that plan by the looks of it.

"I'm not sure we really need to talk about this right now," Nick said gently.

"No, no, of course we don't." Sheila looked down at the floor, and then back up at them, her head tilted to one side a bit. "What should we talk about, then?"

Michael cleared his throat and gave Nick a friendly smile. "So what is it that you do for a living, Nick?"

Sheila beamed at him approvingly and they both looked at Nick and waited for him to reply.

"We don't need to talk about that either," John said firmly.

"Actually, what I'd really like to talk about is your kids. How many do you have? Two?" Nick was well practiced in how to talk to parents about their children -- most families had them, after all -- and he knew from experience how successful it usually was a way of changing the subject.

Sheila immediately started to describe the children in detail, and Nick exchanged a glance with John, who squeezed his shoulder.

* * * * *

When he watched Sheila and Michael walk down the path, heading for their home and their family, John was used to feeling a small pang of envy for the way they fitted together and their evident happiness, blunted over time until it barely registered. Tonight he felt nothing but relief that they were leaving.

It hadn't gone badly after that rocky start. Nick had charmed them both in the end, and if Michael's eyes had still held a faint wariness when he shook hands with Nick before leaving, it'd been wiped away by amusement at the far more enthusiastic farewell he'd received from Sheila. She'd been the only one drinking the wine and the bottle was empty ... Nick hadn't seemed to mind, but John was dreading going back into the front room.

"I am so sorry," he began as he walked through the doorway. "God, that was -- I don't know what you must be thinking, but I never meant for it to go that way."

Nick had cleared away the glasses and the bowls that had held an assortment of chips and nuts and was sitting on the couch looking tired, and no wonder.

"It's okay." Nick waved a hand. "Come here?"

John went, sinking down onto the couch next to Nick, and then relaxing when Nick put a hand on his thigh.

"It wasn't so bad. Hell, I can think of lots of ways in which it could have been worse."

"Sheila could've shoved her hand down your trousers and her tongue down your throat? Michael could've asked twenty questions trying to find out what you do instead of ten?" John shook his head as Nick grinned. "You're

being very nice about this. Are you sure you don't want to give me hell for not telling them before you got here? They were late, and I kept thinking you'd be arriving any minute, you see, and I didn't want to be halfway through, so I put it off." He slid his hand into Nick's and let his head rest on Nick's shoulder, just for a moment. "Go on; I'm ready. I can take it. Yell at me if you like."

"Don't be stupid. I'm not going to yell at you." Nick's hand slid up into John's hair, encouraging him to leave his head where it was. "It's not your fault that they didn't react perfectly -- well, that Michael didn't. And it's not just your job to tell people."

"I can't see why you should have to walk up to total strangers and tell them you've got involved with someone like me. You know, if it wasn't for this party, I'd go over and tell her now. Then tell Geordie in the pub, after swearing him to secrecy, and the whole island would know by closing time, and we wouldn't have to lift a finger. I'm that sick of it all."

Right then, John meant it. With Nick's fingers stroking along his hair, soothing away the tension, he wanted an end to the lies, an end to the pretending. Just wanted Nick.

John tilted his head back and found Nick waiting for his kiss.

It was slow and brief, and then Nick murmured, "It's gonna be okay. We'll work everything out." Warm fingers traced lightly along the side of John's neck. "What about one of those skywriters? You think it would be too expensive to have a plane fly overhead?" There was a gentle humor in his voice.

"An ad in the local paper?" Then -- and it had to be the whiskey talking -- John snickered, struck by an idea. "The minister makes announcements during the service sometimes. 'Items of community interest,' he calls them. I'm damn sure we qualify for that."

In the morning, when he was sober and Nick wasn't there, warm and real and loving, he'd most likely go cold at the very idea, but right then it seemed pretty funny.

Nick laughed and pressed a crooked kiss to John's temple. "Or we could just try to act naturally and see what happens?" When John tensed at the thought, unable to help himself, Nick amended, "After you've had a chance to tell your mother."

"I can't see me ever having the guts to kiss you in the middle of the bar," John admitted. "Or hold your hand walking down the street, or do anything that you're used to doing with Matthew." Nick's face changed, his smile fading, and John cursed himself. "It's not that I wouldn't want to. God, it's not that at all! I'd just be so worried about who was looking, what they were whispering -- Oh, Christ, I'm sorry. If I tried, I couldn't sound any more pathetic, could I?"

He pulled away from Nick, feeling that he didn't deserve any sort of comfort after a confession like that.

"Stop." Nick's voice and hands were insistent as he turned to face John and urged John to shift and turn, too. When they were looking at each other, John still feeling small and ashamed, Nick said, "I never did any of those things with Matthew. We were friends -- close friends -- who had sex together. We didn't go to any special trouble to hide it, but we didn't go around announcing it from the rooftops, either, so get that idea out of your head. This is *fine*. You need some time to get used to the idea of all this, and that's okay. I'm not in a hurry. I'm gonna be here for a long time."

"I don't know why I feel as if there's a hurry." John wished that it wasn't too soon to be able to tell Nick that he loved him and have it sound like more than words. He slipped his arm around Nick, rubbing his hand slowly over his back. "I've never been the hurrying sort. But with you -- God, you make me feel like there aren't enough hours in the day to do all I want to do with you."

"There are. There's time. It's okay." And then they were kissing again, Nick's mouth hot against John's, his hands stroking over John's sides and lower back. Nick tasted of whiskey and salt, and he kissed like no one John had ever known.

"I should take you back home," John said, with his lips against Nick's dark hair a while later. "You're falling asleep on me."

They were lying on the couch, doing no more than holding each other and kissing, talking when they felt like it, but with the contented, comfortable silences stretching out as the minutes went by. John tightened his arms around Nick and said, "Aye, I should. I will." Nick stirred against him, running his hand lightly over John's chest, and John sighed. "I had a cat like you once. She'd get settled on my lap and I'd tell her I had to stand up, really I did. Then she'd reach out her paw and dig in her claws, daring me to shift an inch."

"I don't have claws," Nick murmured sleepily, nuzzling John's throat. "I like cats, though. Is there somewhere I could get one?"

John nodded. "Aye, plenty of places. Jack Thomson's got a barn full of cats that're having more kittens than he knows what to do with."

Nick muttered something unintelligible in response, his body relaxing just a bit more against John's.

Only the knowledge that if they fell asleep like this Nick would wake up hurting worse than the climb had already guaranteed he would give John the willpower to sit up, dislodging Nick.

"You'll thank me for this tomorrow," John said firmly when Nick gave him a reproachful look. "You need to sleep in a bed and -- God." John leaned in and kissed Nick full on his mouth, waking them both up because it was harder than he'd intended. The man had no business looking that good with his hair all tousled and his eyes sleepy. He drew back before he did more than kiss him. "I can't stay with you tonight. I need to take the early ferry and get some supplies for Stella from Mull and you need some sleep, not me disturbing you at five in the morning."

John thought about the form the disturbing might take and bit down on his lip, seeing from the glint in Nick's eyes that he was thinking the exact same thing.

"Stop that." Even John didn't think that he sounded convincing.

"Okay, okay." Nick rubbed at his face. "You're right -- I'm probably too tired to do anything more than sleep, and if I want to be able to get out of bed at all tomorrow I'd better get off my feet pretty soon." In direct contradiction to his words, he stood up. "Are you sure you don't mind driving me back?"

John shook his head. "I don't mind at all. What I'll mind is turning the car around and coming back here." He got to his feet and winced, feeling the effects of being in one position for too long. "Sheila's right," he muttered. "I don't get enough exercise. You're not going to be the only one waking up aching."

"You're in much better shape than me."

They managed to get their jackets on and get out the door and into the car. Nick seemed tired enough that he wasn't, for once, tense about riding in the passenger seat, leaning his head back against the headrest behind him and closing his eyes as he yawned and John started up the car.

The drive took just a few minutes longer than usual, with John, aware that strictly speaking he'd had perhaps one whiskey too many, taking his time. The moonless darkness pressed against the car, enclosing them tightly, but John knew the road too well to care.

A rabbit appeared on the section of illuminated road ahead, caught and entranced by the yellow beams of the headlights, and John braked carefully, less bothered about hitting it than startling Nick.

"These rabbits are a nuisance." John watched it vanish with an impudent flash of its white tail. "Worse than the sheep at this time of night."

Nick grunted sleepily and John smiled and drove on.

When they reached Rossneath Nick was asleep, just as he had been the first time John had driven him home. He'd left an outside light on, and the interior of the car was bright enough for John to be able to look at Nick for a long moment, without guilt now, and with the knowledge that he could wake Nick with a touch, or a kiss, warming him.

He stretched out his hand and then paused, remembering how he'd found Nick, huddled and shaking on the ground, clearly terrified. It'd been the way that sight had made him feel -- concerned, protective -- that had taken his instant attraction and deepened it into something more. It didn't mean that he ever wanted to see Nick like that again, though.

He took Nick's hand and held it firmly then said his name softly. "Nick? Nick, love. You're home."

Nick's hand twitched and then tightened on his a second before Nick's eyes opened, a sharp breath inward setting Nick trembling and tensing at the same time. Awareness of where he was came on a bit more slowly, his grip gradually easing as he relaxed, although John felt sure that the man's heart was racing. "God," Nick breathed, curling toward him, burying his face unexpectedly against John's chest. "God."

His arms went around Nick at once, the seatbelts they both wore getting in the way a little, but John wasn't inclined to spare the time it would take to unfasten them. "Ssh, it's all right, Nick. You fell asleep, that's all. We're home."

He'd planned to do no more than drop Nick off and drive away, but he changed his mind. He'd see Nick safe in bed before he left him alone, no matter how much harder it would make leaving him.

"Don't let me get into this car again unless I've had intravenous caffeine first." Nick didn't move. His voice was muffled, but John could still hear the shakiness in it, and he couldn't help but marvel at the man's ability to attempt lightheartedness even when frightened.

The world was quiet outside the car. John used his hands to comfort Nick, rubbing the back of his neck and his arm.

"I should've thought. Turned on the radio; opened the windows." John felt as if he'd let Nick down in some way. "But not sung to you, because that's enough to give you nightmares by itself."

Nick smiled against his chest, his breath warm through the thin shirt John was wearing. John reached between them and pressed the release button on their seat belts. "Come on. Let's get you to where you can sleep, love."

The endearment slipped out again before John could stop it. The first time he didn't think that Nick had

noticed, being still mostly asleep, but this time the man couldn't avoid hearing it. Glad that his flush was hidden in the shadows, John eased his seatbelt off and fumbled with the handle to the door.

By the time he'd gone around to the other side of the car, Nick was shutting his own door, looking so weary when he smiled at John that it tugged at his heart. "You going to be okay getting home?" Nick asked, as they started for the door. "I could ..." An enormous yawn, "Make coffee. Or tea?"

"Or a three-course meal?" John suggested dryly. "You're dead on your feet. I'm going to see you to bed and then I'm off. If you hurry up brushing your teeth I'll be on my way in five minutes, maybe less."

Nick yawned again as they went inside, and a third time on the way up the stairs. He seemed barely able to keep his eyes open as he brushed his teeth, and for a moment while he was bending over to untie his shoes, John feared that he'd actually fallen asleep.

None of that seemed very important when Nick began to undress, pulling his shirt over his head to reveal his chest, nipples peaked and tight in the cool of the room, slender shoulders pale in the light from the hallway. John had to look away when Nick started to undo his trousers and slide them over his hips, but he glanced at him again when Nick didn't get into bed immediately, unable to help himself.

"You're sure you can't stay?"

"You couldn't have asked me that *before* you were naked?" John didn't even try to hide how tempted he was. Nick raised his hand to scratch his thumbnail idly over his ribs, the casual movement coming close to undoing John's resolve. "No. I can't. And will you get into bed for God's sake?"

He couldn't help noticing the pleading edge to his voice.

Thankfully, Nick either figured out why John was sounding so desperate, or he really was that exhausted, because he got into bed without another word, the brief flash of his bare arse before it disappeared beneath the covers what John hoped would be the last temptation. "Shit, it's cold," Nick murmured, pulling the covers up over his head until he was completely hidden.

Abandoning all plans of kissing him good night, John smiled at the Nick-shaped lump in the bed. "I'll buy you some flannel pajamas for your birthday, shall I?" He thought about that as he turned towards the door. "When is your birthday? And how old are you anyway?" He shook his head before Nick could answer. "No, never mind. I'll just add them to the list of questions we never got around to asking because we were too busy with the naked in bed part."

Nick mumbled something that trailed off into silence.

John waited until he was certain Nick was safely asleep before walking through the silent -- hopefully empty of ghosts -- house and back to his car.

Every step felt like a misstep, and he couldn't shake the image of Nick standing there naked and asking him to stay. It echoed in his head as he drove, clamored insistently at him as he climbed into bed; stilled only when his hand moved down and dealt with the physical effects of the memory.

Coming in a hurried, brutally fast climax, thinking of Nick every second, left his body ready for sleep, but he still felt that he was in the wrong place.

He didn't belong here anymore, if he ever had. He belonged in a cool, dusty house, haunted by ghosts, seen and unseen.

He belonged with Nick.

Sleep came before John had finished forming that thought, taking him into dreams he couldn't remember when he woke, his alarm clock shrilling in his ear and a day full of hours to get through before he saw Nick again.

Chapter Thirteen

“Maybe we can have the party next week?” John stepped out of Katy’s way as she staggered past, her arms heaped with pale-green napkins to iron and fold.

Stella gave a scornful sniff and tossed her head. “It’s all in hand,” she insisted. “The party’s not for another eight hours, lad! Relax, will you?”

“I *am* relaxed.” John frowned at the centerpiece of yellow roses on one of the tables, and then bent to pick up a napkin that had slipped from Katy’s grasp. “Didn’t we decide on pink for the flowers and blue for the --”

“Janet!” Stella called, snatching the napkin from him. “Will you no’ come and deal with your brother before I stuff an apple in his mouth and serve him as the starter?”

There was barely a moment’s pause before Janet appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, a smudge of pale pastel icing on her nose. “Come in here and keep me company while I finish the cake.” Her tone of voice brooked no disagreement, and John obeyed. Janet waited until she’d picked up the icing bag again before she continued. “Don’t give Stella a hard time, do you hear me? You know what a challenge it was, convincing her to let me do even this much. If she changes her mind at the last minute and throws me out, it’ll be you I blame and not her.”

“After all these years I’m well used to that.” John dragged his finger around the inside of the bowl Janet was using, scooping up some icing. He got a glare that made it taste all the sweeter and gave Janet a grin in return. “You’ve all done a grand job,” he told her sincerely. “I can see that and so will Mam. I’m just -- I’ve things on my mind, that’s all.”

Janet looked at him shrewdly, and for a moment he thought she knew. The possibility twisted his stomach into a hard knot. She finished the decorative swirl she was putting on the edge of the cake and straightened up. “She’s every right to be happy, John.” John didn’t know whether to feel relieved that she *didn’t* know or worried because that meant he’d actually have to sort out how to *tell* her. “With any luck, she’s a lot of years left, and I for one don’t want her spending them alone.”

“You’re meaning Carson? Och, Janet, that’s not bothering me! I agree with you, and there’s no one I can think of who’s better suited to take care of her, although she won’t have it that they’re anything more than friends.” He rolled his eyes. “Did you see the bouquet of flowers he’s got Stella keeping for him in the storeroom? Sixty red roses! I’d like to see her say that that’s just a friendly gesture!” He pulled out a chair and sat down at the table, trying to find the words he needed. “No, it’s not Carson, it’s, well, it’s me. Something to do with me.”

He watched alarm flicker in her eyes and added hastily, “I’m fine. Not sick, not in trouble, nothing like that.”

She regarded him, and then nodded and went back to work on the cake. “All right. What is it, then?”

John opened his mouth to reply just as Stella came into the kitchen. She bustled over and stood beside Janet, looking down at the cake. “I’ve seen dozens nowhere near as nice as this, love. You’ve a right talent for it.”

Janet grinned. “Mam always said I had a fine hand. I hope she’s pleased by it.” Even John had to admit that the cake was a work of art, although he had no idea what to call most of the designs it was decorated with.

“Of course she’ll be pleased! And the fact that you’ve gone to so much trouble to mark her birthday. You’re a good daughter.” Stella sounded approving in ways she rarely did.

“Am I not a good son, then?” John was caught between conflicting emotions at the interruption. “Haven’t I been at your beck and call, the pair of you, until my head’s fair spinning with all the lists and instructions?”

Stella gave the back of his head a light cuff. “Away with you! Fishing for compliments like that.” She picked up a tray of glasses and smiled at him. “But since you ask, aye, Anne’s lucky to have a fine son, so she is, and I know she’s proud of all three of you.” She turned to Janet. “I know Andrea’s sorry to be missing the party; how’s the wee bairn doing, then? Little Anne?”

Janet launched into details about her newborn niece’s progress, and, the moment lost, although he couldn’t say that he minded, John left them to it.

* * * * *

Nick was stiff and sore even after his shower, the climb from the day before having strained muscles he’d forgotten he had. He had a leisurely breakfast that consisted of coffee and toast, spent a little while straightening up, and then decided to take a walk. It was nice out, and he remembered reading somewhere that the best cure for sore muscles was more of what had made them sore in the first place.

Strangely, he found himself walking toward the church and graveyard, as if that had been his intended purpose

all along. The sunshine warmed the back of his neck as he entered the graveyard and walked around, looking at the headstones and letting the quiet calm of the place wash over him. There was part of him that was tense, waiting, but the rest of him was relaxed, and he was unsurprised when he came to his Uncle Ian's grave, clearly marked with a freshly cut stone. Nick sank down onto the grass, unmindful of the tiny amounts of dew still clinging there, and traced the letters of his uncle's name, trying to imagine the man.

He couldn't get any sense that his uncle was there, which was a relief. He'd seen people visit graves and come away with a vague sense that they'd communicated with whoever lay buried there, but that harmless delusion wasn't one he could share.

He *knew* that nothing of Ian Kelley remained here but his bones; knew it with a certainty that left no room for doubt.

Even so, when he eventually stood, brushing a few blades of grass from his knees, he felt better. Welcomed, somehow, and accepted. It might be nothing but his own response to the island and to John that made him feel that way -- well, it *was*, it couldn't be anything else -- but it was still a good feeling, and he was smiling as he turned to go.

He'd taken no more than three steps when his name was called.

"Mr. Kelley! Nick!" Andrew Sinclair was walking toward him, his expression reflecting the solemnity of their surroundings, but his voice warm. Nick waited by his uncle's grave, the breeze from the sea cool against his face.

"I saw you from the manse," Sinclair said by way of greeting, "but I didn't want to intrude until you'd had chance to pay your respects." He glanced at the grave. "He left instructions for some flowers to be planted but didn't specify what; perhaps you'd like to decide?"

"I don't know what he would have liked. You knew him better than I did." Nick tried to think. "Or maybe Mrs. McIntyre would know? John said that she'd visited him."

"She did, many times." Sinclair looked a little abashed. "More than I did, for which I hope you'll forgive me, but the trip there and back ... with the ferry schedule it would've meant a whole day off the island, and that wasn't easy to arrange." He cleared his throat. "Having said that, I was the last person to visit before he passed away, and I do like to think that I brought him some comfort as we prayed together."

Sinclair turned to look at the sea in the distance, blue under the matching sky. "He spoke of you," he said unexpectedly. "Told me that he'd left you the house, and that he hoped that you'd settle here, so that there was still a Kelley at Rossneath to carry on the line. He set a lot of store on the family name and traditions, did Ian." Sinclair nodded slowly. "Aye, he'd be glad to see you here, I'm sure of it."

"I'm glad to be here, so it's nice to think that's true." They were both quiet, breathing in the crisp air, and then Nick asked, "Do you think he missed my mother?"

Sinclair hesitated. "He must have," he admitted finally. "I'll not hide it from you; he was awful bitter about her leaving the way she did. That was many years before I came to the island, of course, but do you know, I'd been acquainted with your uncle for five years before I heard him mention her name?" He shook his head, bending to tug up a weed from the grass and shredding it between his fingers. "It's not good to hold a grudge that long. We're all sad when a young person decides to leave the island, but this life isn't for everyone. It's hard at times, and it's only natural for some to want to see the world a little." He smiled, tossing the weed aside. "And sometimes, like you, they come back when they've had enough of wandering, just as we pray they will."

It was awkward the way Sinclair kept mentioning praying, but Nick decided it was best not to bring it up. The man was entitled to his religious beliefs even if Nick didn't share them. "She never wanted to come back. She was just ... she didn't even want to own anything unless she had to. She liked that I hadn't settled down. She wanted me to live like that."

Sinclair sniffed a little disapprovingly, as if he'd used up all his tolerance and was reverting to being judgmental. "Well, she'd the right to live how she chose, of course, but I'm surprised she didn't want better for you. Didn't want to see you with a home, a job, and a family around you?" His eyes narrowed. "What is it that you do, anyway, if you don't mind me asking?"

Nick remembered what John had suggested. "I'm a writer. I've written articles for magazines, things like that. I was planning to take some time off now -- concentrate on fixing up the house and getting settled -- and then I thought I might focus on genealogy. Learn some of the family history, maybe write something about the process while I'm at it." None of it was a lie, although the hopeful look that he gave Sinclair was put on. "Maybe you could help point me in the right direction? Tell me who I could talk to and where to look?"

"Yes, you said that before," Sinclair answered. "I just took it that that would be a hobby of sorts, I suppose. I didn't realize you meant it was all you'd be doing." It was clear it didn't meet with his approval. He shrugged. "There's the church records and such, if you'd like to take a look at them. Just let me know when you're wanting to see them and I'll get Mrs. Sinclair to show you. And the old people on the island will spend hours telling you stories

if you let them -- in fact, it's getting them to stop that's the hard part!"

He laughed at that, but Nick didn't feel inclined to join him.

Instead, he awkwardly tucked his hands into his pockets and nodded. "I should probably get going." He tried to sound reluctant to do so. "It's going to take me a month to get the house cleaned up, so no point in putting it off."

"Always better to push your work in front of you than to drag it behind you." Sinclair produced the platitude without a trace of self-consciousness. "I won't say goodbye though; I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of each other." His eyes twinkled. "Sunday service is at nine, in case you were wondering."

"Thank you. I'll let you know. About the records, I mean." Nick smiled. "Have a good day. It looks like it's going to be a nice one."

Sinclair squinted up at the sky and shook his head. "There's rain forecast for all of next week." He turned away. "Enjoy this while you can, Mr. Kelley. It won't last forever."

* * * * *

His mother's birthday party was in full swing before John realized that he still hadn't seen Nick.

She'd had her hair done that afternoon, and was wearing the new outfit Janet had persuaded her to buy. He'd made her blush by telling her that she looked beautiful and not a day over forty-five, which delighted her enough that the small lie was well worth it.

People were drinking wine and whiskey, most of it served by Carson, who was grinning and talking to everyone who came within earshot between stealing glances in John's mother's direction, making sure that she was having a good time. John's Uncle Collum had arrived early on the ferry from Mull, where he'd gone to live after his brother had died. For the first time in a while, his face was smiling as he gathered Anne up in a hug and then set about finding some of his old cronies with an eye to a card game in a quiet corner.

John was across the room when he saw Nick slip inside, shutting the door behind him. There were twenty people between them, and Nick was immediately set upon by Sheila, who'd been talking to some of her girlfriends on that side of the room. John was able to watch as Nick greeted her, smiling and shaking her hand and accepting the kiss on the cheek she no doubt couldn't resist bestowing upon him.

Even though John was determined to end the pretense within the next few days, as far as his mother was concerned at least, the habit of concealment was too ingrained for him not to approve of the impression Nick was making as he was swept into a crowd of women, all ripe for a flirtation with a good-looking stranger who combined the exotic with the familiar, given his accent, which they were no doubt exclaiming over, and his family connections.

He watched Nick have a drink pressed into his hand by Moira, who'd probably spun their brief encounter in the shop that first day into something requiring a background of violins to do it justice. John smiled as Nick said something that had the women bursting out into laughter that rang out over the music -- and then realized that he'd done nothing but watch Nick since he walked in, with God knows what expression on his face.

"Is that young Nick Kelley then?" He turned and found his mother looking not at him but at Nick, her face unreadable, a faint question in her eyes.

"Aye, it is."

"Do you want to rescue him?"

"I don't think he's in any danger." John repressed the urge to do just that. "Unless he goes deaf from the giggling."

"You could do it because I'd like to meet him," his mother pointed out. "Not that I'd want to inconvenience you just for the sake of pleasing an old woman on her birthday."

John grinned, unable to take her manipulation as anything more than amusing in that moment. "Or for the sake of pleasing a woman who's not a bit old. Aye, I'll go get him."

Still, as he crossed the room, dodging people in the midst of conversation, he was painfully aware of what the proper way to interact with Nick in public would be, especially with this many people around. He couldn't help but wince at the way Nick's eyes warmed when Nick spotted him.

"Glad you could make it." John used a little more formality than normal.

Nick's expression lost some of its eagerness, but he carried on smiling. "It was very kind of your mother to invite me." Nick stressed the words "your mother" just a little. "Speaking of which, I should tell her that in person -"

John nodded. "That's why I came over. She's asking to meet you."

"Och, away with you," said Moira shrilly, grabbing hold of Nick's arm. "He's having fun with us, aren't you, Nicky?"

John had never liked Moira much, and she knew it. Spiteful, gossipy, and when she'd had a few -- and she

certainly had tonight, judging by the way she was swaying as she clung determinedly to “Nicky’s” arm -- all her worst qualities were intensified.

But it took seeing her with her hands all over Nick to make John realize how deep his dislike went.

“I really am.” Nick patted Moira’s hands where they were clinging to his arm and then somehow managed to detach himself from her grasp. “It’s nice to see you again, Moira. But I should go and say happy birthday to Mrs. McIntyre, don’t you think? I wouldn’t want to be rude.”

Moira made a sound of protest, but let him go. “As long as you promise to come back and have some drinks with us, right, girls?”

Appearing from the crowd, Sheila said, “Come on now, girls, what do we need a man for? We’ll have us a fine time without any of them, won’t we? We spend far too much time taking care of them as it is.”

John threw her a grateful glance as he and Nick started to make their way across the room.

“Are they always like that?” Nick’s tone made it clear that he was less pleased about it than he’d seemed.

“You’ll notice they didn’t try and hang on to *me*,” John said dryly, the background noise giving them a certain privacy. Walking beside Nick and being careful not to even brush against him wasn’t easy. Not when he hadn’t seen him all day. “Don’t let it bother you; you’re new and they’re out to enjoy themselves, that’s all.” He gave Nick a sidelong glance and couldn’t resist teasing him. “It doesn’t hurt that you’re a good-looking man of the world, and they think they’re in with a chance, of course.” He grinned, shaking his head. “‘Nicky’? Is that something you’d like me to call you, then? You’ve only to say, you know.”

“I think we’d better stick with ‘Nick,’ unless there are certain occasions on which you’re inclined to use my full name,” Nick said blandly. There was no time for John to respond -- they’d reached his mother, and Nick was offering her his hand gallantly. “Mrs. McIntyre, I’m Dominic Kelley. Thank you so much for having me.”

John’s mother seemed pleasantly flustered, fluttering her eyelashes like a young girl. “Mr. Kelley, it’s lovely to meet you. I knew your dear uncle well; it’s always nice to have family return to the island.”

“I’ve been wanting to come here for a long time. I’m looking forward to learning more about my family history, which I understand from John is also yours.”

“Indeed it is, and I knew your mother well, of course.” John watched his mother’s face soften with sympathy. “I’m so sorry for your loss. She was -- oh, she was such a lively soul. Never still. This island wasn’t the place for her, but I do hope you find it welcoming.”

“It’s exactly what I’ve been looking for.” Nick’s voice rang with sincerity, as if he’d never spoken truer words. “And John’s been great, introducing me to people and helping me figure out how to get the house fixed up. I’m hoping to stay on permanently.”

His mother gave the smile that transfigured her face. “I’m very glad to hear that. Very glad, indeed.”

John wondered if it was the praise of him that she meant, or Nick’s promise to stay. Both, maybe.

Carson appeared at her side. “Anne? Stella wanted me to tell you that she’s ready to start serving the food, if you think it’s time.”

Carson gave Nick a nod and a smile, but most of his attention was focused on Anne, and John felt an awareness stir to life that Carson really didn’t see anyone else when his mother was in the room. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, somehow. He didn’t mind the idea of them together -- of course he didn’t -- but that depth of feeling toward his mother seemed like something only his father had the right to feel. Telling himself not to be ridiculous, John gave Carson a more-than-usually warm smile and a clap on the shoulder that had him blinking in pleased surprise.

“Aye, now would be fine.” Anne glanced at John, with a flush rising in her face. “Excuse me, Nick; I’ll be sure to find you again later so we can talk.”

“I’d like that.” Nick waited until Anne and Carson had left to talk to Stella and then turned to John. “I had no idea there’d be so many people here.”

John shrugged, not at all surprised by the turnout. “It’s a party -- and my mother knows everyone on the island.” He met Nick’s eyes. “I’m glad you came. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Do I look as nervous as I feel?” Nick asked, grinning. In truth, he looked perfectly at ease, as if he already knew everyone and attended parties like this all the time.

“You look fine.” John gave Nick a quizzical look. “And I feel as if I need someone to introduce *us*. I’ve been thinking ‘Nick’ was short for ‘Nicholas.’”

“Yeah, I don’t know why I used my full name like that.” Nick brushed his hair back out of his eyes. “No one’s ever called me anything but Nick. I guess it just felt more formal, or something.”

“I like it.” John glanced around and saw more than a few eyes on them. Time for them to mingle with the guests before Moira decided to swoop down on them again. “Want to meet some more distant relatives then?”

“If I don’t, people are going to start looking at us funny, aren’t they?” Nick looked around. “Or are they

already? Yeah, sure, let's make the rounds before anyone starts to suspect anything." He sounded conspiratorial and not unhappy about it, but the fact that he was thinking it at all made John feel somewhat guilty.

They began to thread through the crowds, with John stopping to introduce Nick now and then to people he knew well, most of whom remembered Nick's mother, and all of whom seemed genuinely pleased to meet him. Nick was managing to keep his smile unforced and to make each repetition of his pleasure at being on the island and determination to stay sound fresh.

It was all going well.

"And that's Sandy Dalglish over there." John led Nick over to the far corner of the room, wondering how long it would be before they could leave without people commenting. Hours, probably. The crowd around the buffet table was thinning out, and he'd decided to make this the last introduction before they went to get some food. He'd been hearing about this menu for weeks and he wasn't sure he felt like eating it after the endless discussions, but Nick might be hungry.

He had to lean in close to shout in Nick's ear over the noise, putting his hand on Nick's shoulder as he did so. It was an automatic, unthinking action, but it was the first time he'd touched him since he'd arrived. John felt the shock of it go through him and knew that Nick had felt it too. He kept his hand in place, deliberately controlling his reaction, his fingers tightening slightly and then relaxing; as close to a caress as he could manage. "He's lived next door to my parents all my life. You'll like him; he's the one to go to if you want to hear stories about the island."

He stepped back, feeling the heat rise in his face and curling the fingers that had touched Nick protectively into a loose fist.

Nick nodded. "Maybe not here, though," he said loudly, leaning in a bit but not touching John. "But you could introduce us so I could talk to him another time?"

It was the most genuine interest Nick had shown, so John tipped his head in Sandy's direction and they moved toward the man. Sandy was laughing at something someone passing by had said, but he smiled broadly at John as he and Nick approached, showing off his missing teeth and reaching out to clap John on the shoulder.

"How are ye then, John? Lovely job you've done with this party."

"Fine, thanks, Sandy. And I'll be sure to pass on your compliments to Janet and Stella, who are the ones that deserve it after all their hard work." John glanced at Nick. "Can I introduce you to Nick Kelley? He's Ian's nephew, fresh from America and planning to fix up Rossneath."

Sandy turned his grin to Nick, reaching out a callused hand. "Nice to meet ye, lad." Nick put his hand in Sandy's. "It's good to know the house won't be empty -- always a shame when that happens. Why, I remember the day your uncle went off to the mainland, thinking ..."

Whatever it was Sandy had been saying or planning to say trailed off at the expression on Nick's face, one of slow dawning realization. Nick was trembling, his breath quick and unsteady as he stared at Sandy with his eyes slightly unfocused, as if it weren't really Sandy he was looking at but something much further away.

"It's the kettle," Nick gasped, his hand tightening on Sandy's to the point where even John could see it.

Sandy looked puzzled, but not yet concerned. "What, lad? Speak up."

"The *kettle*." Nick's voice was louder and held a hint of hysteria. "Something ... I can't tell. You get ... and you're ..." He dropped Sandy's hand, backing away, and then bolted for the door before John could do anything to stop him.

"What the hell --" Sandy exclaimed, looking bewildered and a little displeased. "Has he been at the whiskey, then? Fine way to behave!" He nursed his hand, giving John a severe look. "Well? Go after him, then! He looked like the devil was at his heels."

"I -- he's tired, still. Jet lag and --" John gave up trying to explain, settling for giving Sandy's shoulder a swift pat, and then turning to follow Nick, ignoring the looks he was getting from people who'd already stepped out of the way for Nick, pushing through them with little regard for courtesy. He caught his mother's eye briefly, noting how pale she was, but he didn't have time to go to her, not when Nick needed him, and Carson was by her side anyway, his face anxious and questioning.

John found Nick in a narrow alleyway at the side of the building, sitting at the bottom of a short flight of stairs leading up to a storeroom. His head was buried in his hands and he didn't look up as John approached him.

"What did you see?" John sat beside him, putting his arm around Nick's shoulders. "What was wrong?"

"Don't touch me!" Nick jumped to his feet, pacing a short distance before turning back toward John, who could barely react to the rejection in his desire to find out what Nick had seen. "Don't touch ... God, I didn't want to see that. I don't want to know ..." He was weaving slightly and put his hands up over his face again, but removed them immediately, pulling at the neck of his shirt until the thread holding the top button gave up under the strain. "Can't breathe." Nick sounded panicked.

"Yes, you can." John kept his voice calm. He stood and went to Nick, standing just in front of him. "You can

breathe just fine. All that fresh air, here, remember? On the mountain, blowing across your face, down on the beach, cold from the sea --" He took Nick's hands, gripping them tightly when Nick tried to pull them away. "No. You can touch me. I'm safe." He heard Nick's words echo in his head and flashed on an image of Sandy and Nick's hands meeting. "But Sandy isn't? Is that it? Or was it a ghost you saw behind him?"

"No. No. There was ... it was just like that little girl. The one who drowned." Nick squeezed his eyes shut, swaying, and John guided him over to the steps, pushing him down to a sitting position when it seemed that Nick wouldn't fight him.

Nick lifted his face and looked at John, his eyes wild, terrified, his breathing too fast. Even in the dim light John could see the tinge of blue to Nick's lips.

"He can't breathe." Nick curled the fingers of his right hand into the front of John's shirt where he crouched before him. "Everything will stop working, and there's ... like a fist, here." Nick's hand pressed against John's chest. "And they'll find him the next day and he'll be *dead*, oh *God* ..." Nick began to weep silently.

"We can stop it," John said urgently, desperately, clasping Nick's hand and feeling the chill of it against his palm. Sandy, dead? He was old, yes, and it was well known on the island that he had a weak heart, but the man wasn't done with living, not by a long way. "Now that we know, we can do something. Is it a short in the electric kettle? Something like that?" He brought his hand up to stroke roughly through Nick's hair, pulling him close. Nick was wracked with shivers; his falling tears the only warmth his body had to offer. "Nick, love, don't. I know it's awful to see it like that but it doesn't have to be that way."

Nick pressed himself closer, hands grabbing onto John where they could and holding tightly. "I don't want to do this anymore," he said brokenly. "What will ... when it's people I *know*? People I ... care about?" He didn't seem able to stop crying.

There was nothing John could offer in comfort but his arms around Nick and a gentle flow of reassurances they both knew were meaningless.

Because if Nick stayed in one place, then it *would* be the deaths of people he knew that he was foretelling, and it would be their ghosts he'd see walking towards him.

And there was nothing to stop it happening. John wasn't sure that Nick would want it to stop, not really. It was part of him, had been for years, and if it went, there was no way to know what the consequences might be.

He sat there, with Nick in his arms, rocking him slightly back and forwards like a child, pressing kisses to his hair and forehead and waiting for Nick's tears to stop. When they didn't and the front of John's shirt was damp with them, he pushed Nick away from him "Stop it now. You have to stop now, Nick. Cry later, if you must, but now you have to tell me. When will it happen, do you know? Soon? Tonight?"

Nick swallowed and nodded. "I think tonight, or I ... wouldn't have seen it." He had to clear his throat before he could go on, fisting both hands into the front of John's shirt. "I don't know for sure, but I think so. Or maybe in the morning? Something about ... I don't know. All I saw was the kettle, and then he was clutching at his chest, and he couldn't breathe ..." Nick drew a shuddering breath, and the sounds of the party inside filtered through to John, who hadn't been hearing them for some time. "We have to tell him. Will he listen to me? Or just think I'm crazy?"

John thought about it, his mind busy with half a dozen ways of getting Sandy on his own and willing to listen to a stranger he thought was drunk. Reluctantly, he shook his head. "He won't believe you. Stubborn as they come, and he's been supping whiskey all night, which won't help." He stood up. "Wait here. Will you do that? Wait, and I'll go back in and tell my mother you're not feeling well and I'm taking you home."

"What about Sandy?" Nick objected..

John gave him a reassuring smile. "Well, we won't be breaking in, because he's never locked his door that I can remember, but I wouldn't care if we had to smash down the door under the circumstances. We'll get over to his house and take a look around; see what we can find. Shouldn't take long."

"Okay." Nick didn't let go of him, though, and they ended up getting to their feet together and walking as far as the corner of the building, where Nick seemed to run out of energy and leaned against the wall, reluctantly untangling the fingers of one hand from John's shirt. "I'm sorry. I didn't want this to happen. Especially tonight."

"Will you stop apologizing for things that aren't your fault?" John felt exasperated. "I'd rather you'd have seen it than not, despite what it does to you. Wait here, all right? I'll be back in a few minutes." He had to uncurl Nick's other hand, but it latched onto his as if it had a mind of its own, and before he could do anything else about it, Nick tugged him in close and kissed him.

Nick's lips were cold and salty, but John didn't -- couldn't -- let the kiss linger, as much as he might have wanted to. This wasn't the place or time.

He ran his hand down Nick's face gently and then stepped back. "I won't be long," he promised.

Nick nodded, something that looked a little like hope in his eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

Nick was shivering, and he felt very distinctly like he was going to throw up as John opened the door to Sandy's house and they went inside. The hall was thick with dust and cobwebs, the air a bit stale and smelling faintly of mildew, and every few seconds, out of the corner of his eye, Nick could see something ...

He shut his eyes and clutched the flashlight that John had thrust into his grip, and even though he was holding it tightly enough that the edges of the switch were cutting into his flesh it didn't stop his hands from trembling. "You're sure no one will be able to see us?"

"Aye." John reached back for Nick's hand as they moved through the darkened house. "We're far enough away, and more than half the island's at Stella's in any case." They'd decided not to turn on any lights just to be on the safe side, which was why they were both holding flashlights.

The hallway opened up into a wider room that was the kitchen, Nick saw after a few seconds. To his right, a thin gray spectre hovered, determined, and Nick stumbled and almost fell as he startled away from it. "Shit." John turned and grabbed onto him, keeping him upright.

"Are you all right?" John sounded concerned. "Do you want to sit down?" His hand didn't move away, gripping Nick's arm firmly, reminding him that they were here to fix this, make it right, so that the ghost he could see -- who wasn't even that, just the echo of a possibility, no more -- would vanish.

"No." Nick shook his head. "I mean ... no, I don't want to sit down." Run out of there, maybe, but not sit down. He steadied himself and took a deep breath, looking around the darkened kitchen. "I keep seeing ... something. Not a ghost, not really, but ... something. We have to fix this."

"And we will." John sent the beam from his flashlight over the countertops. "Right. You mentioned the kettle? I'll start there." He walked over to it and shook his head. "Christ, it belongs in a museum, so it does. Brown cloth flex! I haven't seen anything wired with this for years." He examined the flex cautiously, after unplugging the kettle, and frowned. "I can't see anything wrong, mind you." He turned to Nick. "I'm going to find the fuse box and see what sort of state that's in. Will you be all right here?"

"Yes." But as soon as he said it, Nick knew it wasn't true, and he was moving toward John before he could think. "No. I want to come with you."

There was no trace of impatience on John's face. "Come here." He put his arms around Nick and hugged him close. "It's going to be fine." John's breath was warm against the side of Nick's face, smelling faintly of whiskey. "I trust what you saw, and I'll help you to make it right, I promise." With his hand in Nick's, he led them through the house to a cupboard under the stairs that housed what even Nick, who didn't know much about such matters, could see was an antiquated fuse box.

Leaning against the wall, Nick watched as John, muttering to himself under his breath, opened the fuse box and fiddled with the fuses inside. He took one out, looked at it carefully, shone the flashlight's beam into the socket it had been removed from, and then put it back. While he continued to fiddle with fuses, Nick turned his head and saw a flitting, ghostly image in his peripheral vision. He closed his eyes again and waited.

"This all looks fine." John sounded puzzled rather than exasperated. "I don't know where else to look ... if it's the wiring itself, we don't have time to check that." He stepped out of the cupboard and closed the door. "Let's take another look at the kettle. If needs be, we'll just take the damn thing with us."

"Okay." They made their way back to the kitchen, where John checked the wiring again but still didn't manage to find anything suspicious. "Maybe it's something inside?" Nick suggested, picking the kettle up in desperation. The handle wobbled and a small wave of room-temperature water splashed over him, wetting both hand and shirt. Before he could react, the vision he'd had earlier flashed through him again -- the searing burn as boiling water hit his skin, the sharp clench in his chest as his heart seized at the shock, the sensation of not being able to breathe, and then the darkness swallowing him up ...

Nick let go of the kettle with a gasp and staggered back, reeling.

"Nick!" John was there at once, supporting him, his hand reaching out to touch the spreading patch of damp on Nick's shirt, tugging it away from his skin. "It's not hot," he discovered a moment later. "God, I thought somehow we'd switched the kettle on, or something."

He looked shaken, and Nick couldn't blame him.

"That's how it happened." Nick grabbed onto John's hand and squeezed it to make sure the other man heard what he was saying. "Happens. How it happens. He gets burned, and I think ... I think he has a heart attack. Or a

stroke or something. His chest, and ..." It was like someone crushing his heart, like a muscle cramp in the most vital part of the body, and it hurt so much that Nick was left speechless, holding onto John as tightly as he could.

"Och, the poor man!" John said with a quick sympathy, his arms strong around Nick. "Aye, he would. It's not six months since he had a heart attack, and something like that --" He shuddered, sending a matching shiver over Nick. "All alone," he murmured, "and no one to help him, or know there was anything wrong. It's a horrible way to --"

There was a pause and then John began to chuckle. "I'm sorry," he managed to say as Nick lifted his head and stared at him. "It's just -- I was feeling awful sad there, and there's no need, is there? If we can find a screwdriver, I'll have that handle fixed in a minute, and it's not going to happen. Do you hear me, Nick?" His hands came up to cup Nick's face, his eyes shining. "It's not going to happen," he repeated. "You did it, love. You saved him."

For what felt like a very long moment, Nick just stood there staring at him uncomprehendingly, and then he felt his own lips curling into a smile. "I ... did?"

"I don't see anyone else in the room who has visions and a soggy shirt." John was starting to look delighted. "I'm thinking you did, Mr. Dominic Kelley, and I'm thinking you should be proud of yourself."

Still stunned, Nick glanced around the room, looking for phantoms lurking in the shadows, and saw nothing. There wasn't anything there in the house but the two of them, and John was going to repair the kettle and for *once* something wasn't going to end in death. Nick wasn't even sure how to feel about that, other than happy. He wasn't sure he felt proud because it had never seemed as if his abilities were his as much as he belonged to *them*, as if he were some sort of tool and the world was using him, but he did feel relieved and grateful, and that, he thought, was probably enough.

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Nick was so distracted by the time they left Sandy's house that he didn't notice that he wasn't anxious about riding in the car until they'd pulled up at Rossneath. He and John had both been snickering under their breath as they left Sandy's house, Nick's relief turned to something giddy because he just couldn't believe that they'd managed to avert disaster.

He got out of the car and shut the door with more force than was necessary then trotted around the front and grabbed onto John with both hands, spinning them in what anyone watching would have thought an awkward whiskey-induced dance. "We did it."

"You did it," John corrected, halting them and pulling Nick to him for a fierce, exuberant hug. "And for all that it hurt you to see that, you can't be minding it now, can you?" He kissed Nick hard. "And God, I've been wanting to do this all night --"

John's mouth was eager against his, both of them still more than a little overwhelmed with all that they'd gone through, their reactions not quite normal now. Everything seemed heightened and exaggerated by the sure and certain knowledge that they'd saved a life in a way that most people would have said was impossible.

Nick groaned and ran his hands over John where he could. "Do you have to go back?" he asked, kissing John again. "Will you feel guilty if you don't?"

"I told my mother I might, but you saw what it was like; she won't miss me, and it's nearly eleven o'clock now." John's lips dragged slowly over Nick's throat, leaving his skin tingling. "And none of that matters, because I'm not leaving you tonight. Now can we go inside?" John's breath was warm against Nick's neck as he bit gently at the sensitive skin. "Want to show you how much I've missed you today --"

Nick's hands tightened involuntarily on John's hips. "Inside's good," he gasped, tugging at John to get them moving in the right direction even though he'd have been happy to just stand there for as long as John wanted to continue to do what he was doing.

Slowly, between and sometimes during kisses, they managed to make their way to the house and through the doorway. John kicked the door shut with his foot and pressed Nick up against the wall, his tongue exploring Nick's mouth. Nick gave back as good as he got, practically vibrating with the knowledge that for once he'd been able to change things, to save someone.

"You make me feel --" John's voice trailed off as he started to undo Nick's shirt, kissing each exposed inch of skin with an eager hunger that Nick shared. "God, Nick -- I want to tear every stitch off you and fuck you right here where we stand, but I want to take hours doing nothing but this as well." He slid his hands inside Nick's shirt, caressing his chest as he smiled at him. "I don't think I'm making any sense, am I? And that's your fault too."

"You don't need to make sense." Nick closed his eyes for a second or two and then opened them again so that he could look into John's intensely blue ones. "Just don't stop touching me. John ... I've never felt like this before. I was always ... being done to, trying to figure out how to get through it without going crazy, but now ... it feels like I could actually *do* something. Like ..." He trailed off as John's lips and tongue found his nipple, teasing it until it

contracted with a twitch of pleasure that sparked behind Nick's again-closed eyelids and down to his cock.

"Like what?" John murmured without taking his mouth away from Nick's skin, the words creating half-kisses that were maddeningly light. "You can do anything you want to me, you know that, and if you don't, I'm telling you now. Suck me, fuck me, have me on my knees for you. Tonight there's not a chance I'd say no to you."

Nick just got harder at the thought. He started to unbutton John's shirt, wanting to touch skin. "If I can do anything," he repeated, barely above a whisper, "then I want you upstairs in my bed. I want your mouth on me, I want ... God, John, I just want you. I want you."

John stepped back without taking his eyes off Nick, finishing the job Nick's hands had started and shrugging out of his shirt, taking another step back, and then another, heading towards the doorway, and beyond that, the stairs.

"Come on, then." John extended his hand to Nick, his shirt hanging down from his other hand, a splash of light in the dim room. "For God's sake, come on, because I can't -- I can't -- *Nick*." His voice dropped and caught on a soft groan. "I can't breathe for wanting you. I can't bear it, needing you this much."

Nick followed like a man in a dream, reaching for John's hand and, for a moment, more than half convinced that he was nothing more than a ghost, insubstantial. It was almost a shock when his fingers closed around John's, warm and solid and alive, and Nick couldn't wait long enough to get upstairs -- he had to step closer to John and kiss him right then, once and fiercely.

They stopped twice on the stairs to kiss again, Nick's shirt joining John's on the steps, abandoned there as they found their way to the bed and continued to undress each other, hands learning the form of each other's bodies slowly. When John's hand brushed against Nick's bare and hardened cock, making it jump, Nick quivered and bit his own lip. John's body was perfect, hard and compact, well muscled, his belly flat above the erection that rose up to meet it, and Nick couldn't keep from touching the smooth skin.

The sound John made was close to anguished, and his hand rose to capture Nick's wrist. Nick was expecting John to drag their linked hands down to John's cock -- and he was already anticipating the moan he could coax from John then -- but John shuddered and released him a moment later, rolling to his back and tilting his head to stare at Nick in a wordless invitation, his hands flat at his side. As Nick watched, John's fingers spread and dug into the covers, but his body remained still; his legs spread slightly, utterly open to Nick's gaze and touch.

Nick hadn't forgotten what John had said before, so he decided to take advantage of that now. Of course, it required *knowing* what he wanted to do, and that was only a problem because there were so many things he wanted to do to and with the man lying beside him.

Slowly, Nick slid down between John's thighs, spreading them wider, and licked a trail up along the skin there. He tongued John's balls, watching as they tightened and John's cock twitched in response. "God, I love your body," Nick murmured, running his hands up and down John's thighs and feeling the soft, slightly wiry hair crinkle against his palms. He licked John's shaft all the way to the tip, tasting salt there.

He felt John's hand rest lightly against his head for a moment, stroking his hair in encouragement or, he couldn't help hoping, just because John couldn't help touching him. John's hand dropped to his shoulder, with his thumb tracing along Nick's collar bone before it returned to its original position on the bed.

"It's mutual." John's hips lifted an inch or two, so that the head of his cock rubbed slowly against Nick's parted lips. His voice sounded tight, as if he was struggling to keep control, but there was enough humor underlying it to make Nick relax a little. "But I think you can see that for yourself."

"I like seeing it." Nick licked the shaft again and then traced the ridge under the head with his tongue, listening to John's intake of breath. He slid his index finger into his mouth and sucked on it, wetting it. As he slipped that hand between John's legs and teased his opening with the slick fingertip, Nick paid attention to John's reactions, noting the quick rise of hips, and he used that moment to close his lips around the head of John's cock, sucking and licking avidly as he breathed in the scent of him.

John made an inarticulate sound and Nick felt the tremor that ran through him before John made what felt like a deliberate effort to relax, his breathing slowing. "You're entirely too good at this. I'm not sure I can -- Christ, Nick --" John's head fell back and his hand reached up blindly, clutching at Nick's arm. "Are you going to fuck me, then?" he asked with a directness that was unexpected but not unwelcome. "I want you to. Want you in me, Nick."

Nick's cock throbbed at the thought, and he hitched himself up onto one elbow, meeting John's eyes as he pushed his finger slowly inside him. John's eyes closed briefly, his body tightening around Nick in a clench of heat that Nick knew would feel amazing around his cock. "I want to. God, I do. But I've never ... I never have."

Hearing himself say it out loud made him flush; he was too old to be as inexperienced as he was. He had a sudden, painfully clear memory of Matthew on top of him, fucking him hard, the taste of Matthew's sweat sharp on his skin.

John slipped his hand around Nick's neck and brought his head down, kissing him slowly, sliding his tongue over Nick's and flickering it against the roof of his mouth. "Aye? But you want to? You want me?" Nick nodded

and John smiled. "I can't see a problem then."

Nick would have grinned back at him, but as it turned out he was too busy kissing him hungrily and reaching for the lube. He'd done this part before, and he was so eager that he didn't feel self-conscious at all as he slicked John up, two fingers pushed deep, fucking him slowly and rubbing over the spot that made John groan and arch beneath him.

"Like this?" Nick shifted so that he was over John, hand still working between his thighs, mouth still swallowing John's gasps and cock thrusting against the hot, moist line where John's leg met his body. "Can we do it like this?" He wanted to be on top, where he could kiss John and watch his face.

"Any way you like." John sounded as if he was having trouble fitting words together. "I told you that. I meant it. Yours. I'm yours." John arched up so that his cock rubbed against Nick's belly, his face twisting as he sucked in a shaky breath. "Nick -- please --"

"God." Nick kissed John one last time and forced himself to move away long and far enough to fumble a condom onto his erection, and then, trembling, he lined up and started to press inside.

The angle was off, and he hadn't expected it to be so tight -- it was totally different from a mouth or fist. It almost hurt, and that realization made him wonder if it was hurting John. He looked at John anxiously, then kissed him because it was too hard to look at John and *not* kiss him, and John was tense but Nick didn't think it was tense in a bad way. He pressed forward again, shifting so the angle would change, and froze when he slid deep, his mouth open, his eyes wide. "John," he whispered in awe, as the other man met his gaze.

"You feel --" John shook his head and reached out, stroking his hands over Nick's sides, restless, uncoordinated touches. "Can't tell you how good you feel in me." He bit down on his lip as his hands paused and clutched at Nick's hips, pulling him deeper still. His face looked distant for a moment as if he was exploring his body's reaction, and then he smiled and his attention was fully on Nick again. "Tell me you'll be wanting to do this again, love."

"Probably eight times a day," Nick gasped. He was already moving without even needing to think about it, his body knowing exactly what to do, and it felt so incredible that he wondered how he'd gone so many years without it. The heat of John's body around him, and the way their bodies moved together, thrusting and rubbing ...

"Nick --" John lifted his hand and ran it over Nick's chest. His hand was warm and the callused skin on his fingertips dragged and caught at Nick's nipple as he rubbed them over it in a rough caress, drawing a moan from Nick. John's hand moved down and then dropped to his own cock, wet-tipped and hard, curling around it for an instant, sliding along it and then releasing it as he groaned, his eyes closing as a shudder ran through him. "I don't want to come -- not yet. Don't want this to end --"

"Then don't do that." Nick shifted his weight onto his good hand and used the other to catch John's before pinning it to the mattress at head level. He pulled back and thrust forward quickly, and they both groaned. Leaning down, Nick kissed John slowly, propped up on one elbow now so that he could feel John's erection sliding against his stomach with every thrust. "God, you feel so good," he murmured against John's lips.

He felt John's wrist flex and tense within his grasp as he pushed inside him, mirroring the shifting pressure around his cock. John was kissing him back, seemingly as content as Nick to draw this out as long as possible, with long, slow thrusts that were starting with a gasp and ending with a whimper as they moved together, finding a rhythm that was gradually increasing in speed no matter how much they tried to hold back.

The sounds John was making were intoxicating. Nick didn't think he'd ever done anything to make Matthew sound that lost to pleasure, that needy. John's gaze was fixed on him, eyes wide and wild, his face showing everything that he was feeling in a way that increased Nick's arousal just by looking at him.

"Nick, oh Christ --"

John was barely coherent now, his words emerging in between labored, harsh breaths, his chest rising and falling quickly. His free hand was resting against Nick's ass, running over it in short, swift strokes, with his fingernails scratching lightly at the skin.

Nick couldn't help it -- as much as he wanted to keep doing this, he was moving faster, thrusting into John more roughly. His fingers slid across John's palm to entwine with John's fingers, and he was making small, involuntary sounds with each thrust. "John. *John*." The knowledge that he was going to come swept over him, unavoidable and joyous. "I can't ... oh God, yes. Yes."

John's hand clenched hard on his as he came, deep inside John's body with John's arm around him, holding him close. The intensity of his climax left him shaken and breathless, staring down at John, unable to look away.

The hand on his back moved up to the back of his neck, and then John pulled him down and kissed him, pressing his lips against Nick's half a dozen times, murmuring his name between them. "Nick -- oh God, lad --"

His hand rubbed restlessly against Nick's neck and his kisses became desperate, his teeth biting at Nick's lip, his tongue licking over the bitten, swollen flesh a moment later. "Touch me, will you?" he whispered frantically. "I

don't -- I want it to be your hand on me. Please, Nick, fuck, I can't wait -- so damn close --"

The flash of guilt lasted only a second before Nick pushed it aside in favor of doing what John had asked. He moved just enough to be able to wrap his hand around John's gorgeous, flushed cock, the skin hot and silky smooth against his palm as he began to stroke it. John gasped, arching beneath him, and then started to come. He was almost silent as the first jolt of fluid striped his chest and belly, his body tightening around Nick's sensitive flesh, and it wasn't until it was over and John had relaxed, going limp as he tried to catch his breath, that he whispered Nick's name again.

"I'm right here." Nick nuzzled John's jaw. "And I'm not going anywhere. God, how could I? I never want to leave you."

There was something very like bewilderment in John's eyes, as if he was struggling to accept that, but then his face cleared and certainty replaced the confusion. "It's not been a week yet." He cupped Nick's face in his hand. "I can't say how it's possible to know this soon, but I'll not leave you either. This place, yes, if we have to, but not you. Not now." John brushed his thumb over Nick's lips and then kissed them. He echoed Nick's words back to him. "How could I?"

Nick knew with utter certainty that he wouldn't be able to bear it if John left that night. "Spend the night here? Please? I want to wake up with you next to me. I need to." He hoped he didn't sound as anxious as he felt.

"I wasn't planning on going home tonight, and I'm damned if I'm getting up at sunrise either." John glanced around the room as they moved apart and began to clean up. "I like it here," he said suddenly. "It feels ... welcoming. Do you feel that, too? Or am I getting fanciful all of a sudden?"

Nick shook his head as he returned to the bed after throwing away the used condom. "No; I like it, too. It's weird, though. It feels like too much space for one person. I can imagine my grandmother raising her family here, but it seems too big for me. Maybe it's just that I can hardly remember living in one place at all, let alone a whole house."

"It's a nice house." John settled in close beside Nick and put his arm around him. "Solid. My great grandfather built it," he added, with a note of pride in his voice. "I'm named after him."

There was something about the continuity of that which appealed to Nick. Another link, however tenuous, between him and John; another link to a past that he was beginning, slowly, to feel connected to, as if he really did belong here, on this remote island where the sea was all around, in every breath he took, with the ebb and surge of it echoed in the soft, musical voices of the islanders.

Nick tongued John's shoulder, licking at the taste of sweat that lingered there. "Did you know him? Your great grandfather?" He ran his hand along John's side, relishing the ability to touch him without anyone there to disapprove.

"I can remember him." John's breath was warm against Nick's face. His hand began to trail over Nick's back, exploring each hollow and curve. "Just. I'd have been six when he died. He was a quiet man. Strong. He'd carry me up high on his shoulder when we were out walking and I got tired, and I was never scared that he'd let me fall, because you couldn't imagine that happening, somehow."

"I would have been scared I'd fall." Nick thought back to the boy he'd been. "I would have ridden on his shoulders anyway, but I'd have been scared. I always made myself do things that scared me."

John pressed a soft kiss against Nick's throat and then tilted his head, meeting Nick's gaze. "You still do. It's one way of dealing with things, and a brave one, but don't feel you have to do anything with me that you don't want to."

"I won't. I haven't." Nick felt a little puzzled.

"Fucking me, I mean. If you haven't before, I'm thinking there was a good reason, but --" John frowned, his eyes questioning. "You *liked* it," he said. "I couldn't be mistaken about that."

"You weren't," Nick said reassuringly, his hand stroking over John's ass. "Of course I liked it. It just wasn't ... I don't know, I just never did. Not with Matthew, and then the few other people I've been with here and there, I was nervous enough about it being new and different without adding a whole other element of new, you know?"

John nodded slowly. "I can see that happening with the new people. Not with Matthew, though, but I suppose if you got in the way of it always being him --" He shrugged, dismissing the subject, and shifted closer, his leg pushing between Nick's so that their bodies were touching in a dozen places. "Aye, well. Either way suits me fine, in case you were wondering."

"Me, too." Nick grinned and kissed John gently, sucking on his lower lip and closing his eyes as he inhaled the scent of them both. He wasn't sleepy, but he was sated, at least temporarily, and their combined body heat made enough warmth that he was comfortable.

John made a contented sound, managing to nestle closer still as he returned the kiss. "Come out on the boat with me tomorrow." He began to cover Nick's shoulder and what he could reach of Nick's chest with slow, drowsy

kisses. "You've been here all this time and never been on the sea. It's not right."

He sounded quite serious about it and he finished with a slightly reproving, if still gentle, bite at the skin above Nick's nipple.

"Hey." Nick laughed. "Okay, okay. Tomorrow we'll go out on the boat, and you can show me how to fish. If you won't be too frustrated by my complete lack of experience and skill."

"Maybe I'll give you an incentive to be a quick learner." John bent his head and let the tip of his tongue tease around Nick's nipple until it was hard enough for him to catch between his teeth. "Let me see now ..." He glanced up at Nick, looking thoughtful. "Right. How's this then? If you *don't* catch something, you have to swim back?"

It was obvious that he was holding back a grin from the slight quiver of his lips as he pressed them together firmly.

"I'm a pretty good swimmer, but I can't say that sounds all that appealing." Nick reached down and ran his fingers through John's hair.

"Hmm." John turned his head so that Nick's caressing hand fell across his mouth and kissed the palm, his tongue darting out to flick at it lightly. "Well, I suppose if it's not appealing, it's not much of an incentive, is it?"

"Not really," Nick agreed, returning his hand to where it was, and twining a lock of John's hair around his fingers before tugging at it gently. "Try again."

John drummed his fingers against Nick's hip, pretending to be lost in thought. "Fine. If you catch something edible, and seaweed *doesn't* count, then we'll stop fishing and I'll take you over to one of the islands over to the west -- there's three of them, all empty saving a rabbit or two -- and cook it for you." John returned his attention to Nick's chest, seemingly determined to kiss every inch. "And you can have me for dessert." His thumb made lazy circles in the hollow of Nick's hip, matched by the ones his tongue was painting across Nick's skin.

Nick's cock was stirring against his thigh, his eyes closing as John's mouth settled at his nipple again and sucked at it. "That sounds better," he gasped, staying as still as he could manage and letting John touch him. "Makes me actually excited about the possibility of catching a fish." John's hair was soft against his fingers, his tongue hot and distracting against Nick's skin.

"Fishing is exciting," John corrected him, pausing for a moment and giving Nick a stern look that melted into a smug grin. "I'm the icing on the cake." Nick couldn't help returning it with a grin of his own, and John moved back up the bed and pulled Nick into his arms. "God, I love making you smile like that." He sounded as if he meant it. "Love feeling this happy with someone. With *you*."

Nick wrapped his own arms around John and held on. "I know." He pressed his lips to the tender spot where John's neck and shoulder met. "I feel the same way." It was exhilarating and not a little frightening if he let himself think about it too much. He pulled John on top of him, wanting to feel the man's weight.

John smiled at him. "I seem to remember when we were downstairs you said you wanted something," he murmured, taking some of his weight on his forearms, but still leaving Nick pinned beneath him, something that was comforting and arousing at the same time. "Me in your bed, which I am, and my mouth on you. Is that still what you want?" He lifted up slightly and ran his hand in a rough circle over Nick's upper chest where he'd been kissing him. "Because that bit's taken care of," he said. "But there's more work to be done, I'm thinking."

His hand stroked lower, over Nick's stomach, fingers crooked, and he met Nick's gaze calmly. "I'm not going to let you sleep tonight. Not until I've given you what you wanted. Not until you've nothing left to give me."

Nick arched beneath John's touch, every nerve thrumming with arousal as John slid lower and closed warm lips around his cock. "Yes," he whispered. "Please."

He'd give John everything he had, and willingly.

Chapter Fifteen

"I thought that was a joke. Syrup? On your cooked breakfast? On *sausages*?" John shook his head. "It's bad enough that the English put it on their porridge instead of salt, but you Americans --" Words failed him, and he shook his head again and reached for the ketchup bottle and the salt, clearing them off the table as Nick stacked their plates, grinning but choosing not to defend the indefensible.

Or maybe he was just having too much fun listening to John rant. John didn't care. It was enough that Nick was happy, and he knew that he certainly was.

The late morning sunshine -- and John couldn't remember the last time he'd got out of bed at ten, but then he wasn't used to sleeping in a bed that had a warm Nick in it -- illuminated more than a few cobwebs, but John still felt at home here, as he'd never really done in his grandparents' house. He shut the cupboard door and turned to find Nick close enough to be kissed.

"If we're going out fishing, we'll need to go back to my house and get some rods and tackle." His arms were around Nick and damp, freshly washed hair was brushing his face. "But the tide's not right for another few hours yet, which gives us time to --"

"Mmm?" Nick asked politely. "Time to --?"

John grinned and captured the hand that was starting to unfasten his jeans. "Dig for lugworms. We'll be needing bait."

"Lugworms?" Nick repeated, turning John around and backing him up until his arse hit the edge of the table, twisting his hand free of John's grip and going back to the job of unfastening his jeans. "Huh. I guess there's more of a language barrier than I'd realized -- I've never heard them called *that* before." Warm fingers touched John's traitorously swelling cock, Nick's lips and teeth tracing the side of John's throat. "God, your skin tastes so good."

John's eyes, which had been closed, opened.

His mother was standing on the other side of the back door, her expression one of stunned dismay as she looked through the glass and their eyes met.

"Oh, *fuck*."

Nick's head jerked up. He followed John's gaze and then stepped, not back, but in front of John, giving him chance to fumble hastily at his jeans, fastening them with fingers that were trembling slightly and icy-cold with shock.

When Nick stepped aside again, his face mirroring the concern John knew was on his own, John's mother was turning away, her head bowed and her hand coming up to rub at eyes John knew were wet with tears. He'd seen her cry too often this last year not to recognize the signs.

He found himself moving to the door alone, Nick hanging back as if unsure how involved John would want him to be. He opened it, and his mother stopped with her back to him, waiting. Waiting for him to say something.

John had no words. Neither of them moved.

"Come in," he heard Nick say from behind him. "Mrs. McIntyre, please. Come in and have a cup of tea."

"Aye." John found his voice again, although it didn't sound like his, strained and desperate. He couldn't imagine a worse way for her to have found out what he'd been planning to tell her later that day, but with Nick there helping him, a calm presence behind him, he allowed himself to hope that he could salvage something of the careful speeches he'd been rehearsing in his head and make her see --

"Please. I -- will you not turn around, even?"

She turned slowly, her eyes lowered and her hands clasped in front of her, hands that were trembling as much as John's had been. He stepped forward instinctively and hugged her. "Oh, God, Mother, please. Don't. Don't cry. Please."

He felt her lean into his embrace for a moment, her head resting against his shoulder, but then she pushed away and faced him with anger darkening her eyes. "Don't cry? I'll cry if I damn well choose to, John Robert McIntyre! After what I've just seen, I've got a right to do worse than that!"

"Fine." John found her anger easier to bear than her silence. "Cry. Swear at me. Do whatever you like, but just come in, for the love of God, and let me explain."

"If you loved God, you wouldn't do such things!" his mother snapped, but apparently her anger was short-lived, because her shoulders slumped and she moved past John and into the kitchen, going without another word to the table and sitting down in the chair Nick pulled out for her.

Nick went to put the kettle on as John shut the door again and stood helplessly, not knowing what to do.

"I knew something was wrong last night," his mother said finally, breaking the silence. "Soon as I saw the two of you together." She turned her head and looked at Nick. "Is this what you do, then? Turn women's fine, upstanding sons into abominations in God's eyes?"

Nick's gaze flickered over to John.

"If that's what I am in your eyes, it's how I've always been," John told her. He was damned if he was letting anyone, even his mother, make Nick the scapegoat for his actions. "You needn't be looking to blame him for it, or any of the other men I've --"

"Others?" Her voice cracked. "There've been *others*?"

"Well, of course there --" John took a deep breath and walked over to sit beside his mother. "Listen. No, *look* at me, Mam." The childhood name slipped out easily as he took her hand in his, chafing it gently. "I was going to tell you today. About me. About Nick. I should've told you years ago, but I was --"

"Ashamed?" she asked coldly. "Aye, I can understand that."

"I've never been ashamed of what I am." That was true enough. "I just knew you'd be like this, and I couldn't bear to see you look at me with anything but love in your eyes. Scared, maybe, aye. Of what you'd think. Of the whole lot of you on this bloody island staring at me as if I was some sort of freak. So you can call me a coward and a liar if you're wanting to, and I'll not argue with you, but you needn't think I'm going to repent my sins, because I haven't done anything wrong."

"Ye *have*, John. It's not right. Men should be with women, get married and have families ..." His mother's eyes were less angry and more hurt now as acceptance began to set in. "It's not too late. You could still find a nice girl and settle down."

"I could do *what*?" John stared at her, groping for words that wouldn't hurt or insult her. "You've just seen me with Nick and you think -- oh Lord. Mother, I'm gay. I'm not going to ever go looking for a girl, nice or otherwise. If you're meaning that you want to see me find someone I can love, well, he's standing right there, but don't ever --" He let go of her hand. "I know you're upset, and you've every right to be. I've deceived you. For years, I've deceived you, although it wasn't all for selfish reasons. But now you know and I'm glad of it. I -- I didn't like you not knowing."

He could feel the hot sting of gathering tears at the disillusioned, defeated look on her face, but he blinked them away. They wouldn't help. Nothing would.

The kettle clicked off, and John turned to see Nick making tea, his back to the both of them, shoulders tense. He wished he could spare the man some comfort, and hoped that Nick would understand why he couldn't.

"I'm sure everyone on the island knows by now," his mother said. "You know how rumors spread. Young Moira's telling anyone who'll listen, and some of those that won't, that she saw the two of you ... together ... last night when she went outside to smoke a cigarette. Not leaving what she saw up to folks' imagination, neither." Fresh tears glistened in her eyes. "Carson told me this morning, and I went over to let you know the lies she was spreading and to ask what you might have done to her to have her telling such tales, only to find you not at home. So I came over here." She didn't as much as look at Nick as he set a cup of tea in front of her.

There was something about all this that wasn't right, but John couldn't concentrate when he was finding it hard to get air into his lungs. Oddly, it wasn't panic as much as anger that he was feeling. "The nosy, interfering, spiteful --" He ran out of ways to describe Moira that wouldn't have had his mother's eyes widening in affront more than they were already. "And you're angry now, because you're thinking I lied when I told you Nick wasn't well. Think I left your party just so that I could be with him." She bowed her head in what might have been assent, and he sighed. "That wasn't a lie, Mother." He pushed her cup nearer to her and watched her fingers curl around the handle automatically. "I wanted to be with him, aye, I did, but I'd not have left your party just for that. You know I wouldn't."

"Then why did you go?" Anne lifted her head, looking at him and then Nick, who was leaning against the counter with his eyes fixed on the empty doorway. "Did you fall out, the two of you? I saw *him* --" She indicated Nick with a sharp nod of her head. "-- leave in a hurry with a face on him that'd turn the milk, and you go after him, but I thought -- oh, I don't know *what* I thought!"

"It was true, what he told you." Nick sounded like he'd rather be doing anything than speaking. He wasn't looking at either of them. "I wasn't ... I see things, sometimes. I don't want to. Saying that I'm 'not well' after it happens would be ... kind of an understatement." His eyes shut. "No, not now. I can't." He looked at John. "I'm sorry. I can't. I'm sorry, John." And without pausing long enough to grab a jacket or to let John respond, Nick was gone, out the back door and shutting it loudly behind him.

"Nick!" John got to his feet, shoving his chair back and taking two steps toward the door before he changed his mind. He rounded on his mother, who was wide-eyed and pale, her hand covering her mouth. "Do you know what

upset him last night? Do you?" He was shouting now, raising his voice to her as he'd never done in his life "He saw Sandy, dead. Saw him as clear as I see you right now. I don't know about you, but I think he'd a right to be shaken by that, and if *Moira* --" He couldn't help the way his mouth twisted as he said her name because it was like biting into something rotten. "If *Moira* had an ounce of compassion in her, which I doubt, she'd have seen that he was crying and I was doing no more than comforting him. *Christ*."

He kicked out at his chair and sent it skidding across the floor, needing to do *something* to bleed off the tension rising in him, and then looked at his mother.

"And now you'll be thinking we're crazy, as well as abominations, or whatever the fuck you called me." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"That will do." Anne stood up and walked over to him, her chin jutting out the way his own did when he was in a temper. The way it was now. "John, that will do."

John took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to get hold of himself because, if nothing else, shouting at his mother wasn't going to solve anything.

"Get yourself a cup of tea and sit down." His mother gestured at a chair as if she expected him to obey.

Rather numbly, he did, sitting at the table with both hands wrapped around his mug and waiting for her to say whatever she was going to say. He was worried about her, and worried about Nick, but he didn't feel anything at all for himself.

"Now, I understand that you're upset, but I'll not allow you to speak to me in that tone of voice. I raised you better than that."

"Aye, you did." John felt the heat of the mug scald his hands and welcomed the discomfort as a distraction. "And I'm sorry." He swallowed some tea and looked at her, frowning slightly. She seemed calmer than he'd expected, or maybe, like him, she was so stunned with shock that one more wasn't making any difference. "Do you believe me then? About what he can do? Because I swear it's true, and Sandy owes him his life, although I don't plan on telling him that."

"I believe there's something touched about the lad, and that's the truth." His mother held up a hand. "No, hush now and let me speak, John." She took a sip of tea as if to give herself a moment to think. "Now, I don't know him well enough to say he's a bad sort, this Nick, but it's clear to me that he's not right in the head. I'm not saying it's his fault -- his mother was always a bit touched, and I can't say it's a surprise to find out that he inherited that as well. He's ill, John. I don't know what it is he's told you, but he's managed to convince you of things that aren't true, and I won't stand for it. It's not too late to change where this is headed -- you can still find a young woman to marry, have a few children, put all this behind you. You're a good man, and you feel sorry for him, I can see that, but that's no reason to jeopardize your own future."

"Get out," John said dully.

"What?"

John reached over and took the cup from her hand before standing up and taking it to the sink and emptying it. The brown liquid swirled around the plug hole, trickling away.

"John!"

"You'll not sit in his house and talk about him like that." John was unable to look away from the streaks of tea remaining in the sink. He turned on the tap and watched the spluttering stream of water chase the stains away. "It's all a pack of lies anyway. His mother couldn't do what he can; she just wanted to see more than this island, that's all. She wasn't touched; she was just restless. Adventurous. You want to blame him for me liking men, too, but you can't. He didn't do anything. I knew what I was -- oh God, how old was I? Fourteen? Aye, maybe. Fourteen, and as deep in love with Michael as you can be at that age."

He turned to where she sat and said harshly, "Will you get out, as I've told you to?"

She shook her head, her lips shaping a word that he knew was a name.

"Aye. Michael. And since we're holding nothing back; yes, he knew. He and Sheila both know what I am and how I felt about him. And they know about Nick, too, and they're glad for me."

"They may be saying so, and Michael's a good enough friend to you that he'd not be rude to your face, I'm sure, but no decent person would be happy for someone who was ... that way." Anne seemed incapable of being direct as far as the proper word for it went. "When word gets to Reverend Sinclair ... I hate to think. You'll never be allowed to set foot in the church again if you admit that it's true, you know that."

"I don't, but to be perfectly honest, I don't care."

"You will soon enough!" His mother rose to her feet again, her voice shrill. "When young Nick leaves the island, leaves *you* alone here with our good family name dragged through the mud. You won't have a friend left, John. Please ... I beg you ... it's not too late to turn this around. Please."

"Will you just --" John heard his voice rise again and didn't care. "For the last time of saying it, I can't change

and I'm done with lying about it. I know you're not stupid but you're acting as if you are." He strode to the door and flung it open. "Out. And I don't see Nick leaving, or why the hell he should, but if he does, I'll be on the ferry with him, just so you know."

"You wouldn't!" His mother looked utterly horrified, as if the idea of him leaving Traighshee was something she'd never considered.

"I would, Mam; I care for him that much, you see." John hated that this was so difficult for her, but he couldn't help but feel that she was making it worse by refusing to see reason.

"John ..." Anne reached a hand toward him, and then let it fall back down at her side. "Very well. You need some time to think about things, and I won't have it said that I wouldna give you that time. I've things to do -- your sister to thank properly for that party, for one. I'll talk to you later."

"Will you tell her?" John asked curiously as she walked past him through the doorway. She paused and glanced back at him. "Janet, I mean? Or does she already know? Christ, is there a mob waiting back at my house and all my windows broken?" He laughed without humor as her eyes widened. "What? I'm sure Sinclair could find a bit in the Bible to make that the right and proper thing to do." A thought occurred to him and he said slowly, "They can do and say what the hell they like to me, but anyone goes near Nick or this house and I'll sort them, you understand? You've been very ready to put this on him, Mam, but if I hear that you've been telling anyone else it's his fault, I'll not find it easy to forgive you."

"I wouldn't do that. And I'm not the one who'll be needing forgiveness, John." Anne turned and began to walk away.

John didn't know if he should believe her, but he felt not the slightest desire to say anything else to her at that moment, so he let her go.

He stood there, the back door open, the crash of the sea against the shore nothing but a faint sound from here, the house silent around him, and wondered what the fuck he was going to do.

* * * * *

John ended up on his boat, heading out until Traighshee was a distant shape behind him and before him was nothing but the sea. Then he cut the engine and let the boat ride the gentle swell of the waves.

His mind was as empty as the blue sky above, but gradually as he sat on the wide wooden seat, his hands missing the weight of his fishing rod, it began to fill with scattered thoughts and emotions: dull misery over his mother's reaction, and worry for Nick's state of mind taking up the most space.

But really it was just too much to make sense of, and although the slow rock of the boat and the measured slap of the sea against the prow were enough to make his eyelids droop, he resisted the temptation to doze. He needed to, though; not like he'd had much sleep, now was it? Not with Nick and him wearing each other out, fucking until they couldn't have come again if their lives depended on it and even then not being willing to stop kissing and touching and saying -- God, what hadn't they said? Teasing each other, laughing, lying together with murmured words taking the places of kisses when they were too drowsy to move their heads the inch it would take to bring their lips together ...

It was thinking of Nick that finally got John headed toward shore again; none of this was Nick's fault, and it wasn't fair to leave him on his own to deal with it.

He'd barely beached the boat and started his car toward the center of the island -- not certain where he was going, just knowing that he should find Nick -- when he passed Paul Sutherland on the side of the road, walking with his sheep dog and a fishing pole. Paul raised a hand and John slowed the car automatically, not coming to a complete stop until they were even with each other.

"Fish biting?" Paul asked.

"I wouldn't know." John spoke more brusquely than he normally would, waiting for some kind of comment. Was this what life would be like from now on? Always wondering when someone might say something?

Paul nodded. "Hear you've been busy with other things." John pressed his foot to the floor, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

In the mirror he saw Paul turn to gape after him, looking startled, but what did he expect? John braked sharply and turned onto a side road that led back to town. Nick would have to wait. He wasn't having this. Let them all take a good look at him, let them all get the chance to point and whisper, and, if they had the guts, let them come and say what they wanted right to his face. His hands gripped the steering wheel hard. God, he wanted to hit someone right now, more than he'd ever wanted to in his life.

And if Moira was one of the people he bumped into, he might forget that he'd been brought up never to lay a hand on a woman.

He went to Geordie's place and drank his first glass of whiskey standing at the bar before retreating to a dark

corner with his second and a beer. There'd been a bit of smirk from Geordie, but nothing more once he'd seen the look on John's face.

No one approached him. A few people did look in his direction, but with what appeared to be curiosity rather than anything else. John had managed to get several more drinks into him before the door opened and a large gang of men came in, laughing and patting each other on the backs. They went to the bar without so much as a glance at John, continuing to talk loudly as they ordered their first round and then made their way to some tables that had to be pushed together. It became clear from their discussion that they were celebrating some team's victory -- John had never cared for sports all that much, and was enough out of the loop after the past few days that he had no idea what match they were pleased with the outcome of.

He'd as hard a head as most, but drinking this much, this fast, on top of very little sleep, was making him feel detached from the scene around him. Which was probably why he didn't notice that one of the men in the group was Michael, until he stood and headed toward the toilets.

John contemplated following him so that they could talk and then chuckled sourly, staring down into the glass he held. Aye, and wouldn't *that* give them something to think about? The two of them in there for far longer than they needed to be and no one coming in, just in case they'd see something they didn't want to see. Except he wouldn't for the world have Michael brought into this.

As soon as the door closed behind Michael, the group at the table exchanged glances and leaned in closer, lowering their voices. John sat back in his chair, shifting so that he could watch them, still feeling like an onlooker in a play. He took an appreciative sip of his whiskey at the first mention of his name, and a second when it was followed by a snigger from one of the men. He was far enough away that he couldn't catch all of what was said, but as their voices rose in an excited gabble, he heard enough.

They'd "always known," had they? Because men like him, they "just couldn't hide it"? At least, given that not one of them had set foot in church in years, he didn't have to listen to God's supposed opinion of him. Just theirs.

He carried on his own drinking game, taking a sip for every epithet, and soon had an empty glass.

Michael had headed for the bar when he came out of the toilets and was ordering some food by the looks of it. He turned to glance at his friends, a puzzled look on his face as if he didn't know what they were talking about, but he still didn't seem to have noticed John.

Handing over some money, Michael went back and joined the others at the table, his expression slowly changing from one of confusion into an uncertain smile when one of the lads looked at him and clapped him on the shoulder, saying something that John couldn't make out. Michael shook his head a little bit, but he was still smiling.

Then his eyes cleared and he turned his head in John's direction, following the gesture another of the lads made, and the smile froze on his face when their gazes met and locked.

Barely managing to keep himself from throwing the table over in the hot haze of fury that washed over him, John grabbed his jacket and left the bar, taking savage pleasure in slamming the door on his way out.

The cooler air helped clear his head as he walked over to George Dunn's shop, determined to buy a bottle and do a proper job getting the rest of the way drunk until he didn't need to think about anything at all; not the way his mother had looked at him, not the way Michael had, and not the ruins his life was in.

The shop was fairly busy, but his arrival brought a silence that spread in ripples until the only person speaking was Sheila's mother, at the end of the line at the checkout with her back turned to the door, chattering away to a friend whose widened eyes and deepening flush seemed lost on Peggy.

"-- and I said, you'll not be letting him look after those precious bairns again, I trust, not now, and she looked at me, and you'll never guess what she -- what? What is it?" Peggy turned, her sharp face alight with interest. She met John's level gaze and gulped. "Oh."

"What do you want then, John?" George asked, his voice cold.

John raised his eyebrows in ironic surprise and jerked his thumb at the queue. "There's others before me, George."

A spark of malice flared in George's eyes. "I'll not refuse to serve you, but I'd rather you didn't linger. Either tell me what you want, or leave."

John took a step forward, the shoppers parting before him. "What did you just say? You'll not refuse my money? Well, no, of course you wouldn't, George. You'd serve the devil himself if he had the cash and well we both know it." He took out his wallet and extracted some notes. "Since you're gracious enough to still want me as a customer, despite my ... inclinations, I'll take a bottle of whiskey and drink to your very good health." He slammed the notes down and took the bottle from George's hand. "And George? I'm in a hurry today, but if you ever try and throw me out of here again, I'll do what my father did once, when you put your wicked tongue to work talking about that lassie who got pregnant over at Innistree, and break your fucking nose."

There were gasps from more than one person as he turned and stalked back out of the shop, grateful for the

solid weight of the glass bottle in his hand. He wasn't sure he trusted himself to drive, so instead he kept walking, not looking at anything but the ground in front of him as he made his way down to the jetty.

John sat down and looked out over the water. The sun was low in the west behind him, the chill in the air encouraging him to wrench the cap off his bottle and have a drink. He did, and then another, long swigs of the amber whiskey burning on their way down and warming him from within.

This was his home. He'd spent his life here; he belonged here. He'd always thought that he did, anyway. And now he felt alien and it was a damned nasty feeling, even with the whiskey to smooth out the razor-edges of the pain in his gut when he let his thoughts stray to Michael's face.

God, he'd never thought Michael would *do* that. He'd not fancied himself in love with Michael for a long time, and even when he had been, it'd not come near what he felt for Nick -- but Michael still mattered to him, he was still important.

"Bastard," he muttered thickly, taking another drink. "Disloyal, two-faced bastard."

There was a soft scuff of shoe on the sand-encrusted jetty behind him and he turned his head, scrambling to his feet and swaying, coming close to stumbling back into the water.

Nick's hand came out and took a handful of his coat, holding him steady.

"Oh God," John said. "I forgot all about you."

Nick blinked and stepped back half a step without letting go of him. "You didn't forget where to buy booze." He waved his free hand in front of his face. "Jesus. You could light your breath on fire. Give me that." He took the bottle of whiskey from John's hand.

John let him take it without a struggle. "I didn't mean -- oh Christ, that didn't come out right at all," he muttered. "I was looking for you, and then --" He tried to piece together the reasoning behind coming into town, but it was like scooping up seaweed; his thoughts slithered away the tighter he clutched at them. "I wanted to show them." He made an effort to keep his words clear and distinct. "Show them that I was damned if I'd be treated like that. And then I was going to find you and tell you -- something. I forget what, but it was important." He squinted against the setting sun, trying to decipher the expression on Nick's face, shadowed as it was. "I'm sorry. Maybe that was what it was. I don't remember. But I am."

"You don't need to be. Unless you get sick and throw up on me. Then I'll expect multiple apologies." Nick didn't sound upset, and he bent to set the bottle down before taking John's chin in his hand and making John meet his eyes as the world spun lazily in the background. "None of this is your fault, and I'm not going to let you drink yourself into a coma so that you can pretend it's not happening. Okay?"

John tried to smile. "It wasn't working anyway. No matter how much I drank. Could still see his face --" He shuddered, remembering Michael's expression, and to his surprise Nick did too, swallowing dryly and letting his hand fall. Suspicion flared. "What?" he demanded. "Has someone said something to you, as well? Because I might be drunk, but not so much that I can't teach them to keep their fucking opinions to themselves."

"No, nothing like that." Nick shook his head. "I've just been walking around -- I didn't give anyone a chance to say anything. Come on, let's get you home. Where's your car?"

John indicated vaguely in the direction of Geordie's pub, which seemed to be enough to make Nick understand and get them started walking in that direction with one arm around John's waist.

"Whose face?" Nick asked.

"What? Oh ..." John scowled. "Michael. So-called bloody best friend, Michael. I was in the pub, and there were these pillocks having a grand time calling me all the names under the sun, and what did he do?" He didn't wait for Nick to reply. "He *laughed*. Then he saw me, and his face ... Guilty as hell."

At the back of his mind something was telling him that it hadn't been quite like that, but he wasn't listening. Each time he'd replayed that moment, Michael's betrayal had become etched more deeply in his memory, and if the current version wasn't quite faithful to the original it wasn't far off, he was sure of it.

A man was walking towards them and John slung his arm around Nick's shoulders with a defiant glare at the passerby, who, being a tourist, returned it with a puzzled smile that faded as he got close enough to smell the whiskey fumes.

"What the fuck are you staring at?" John snarled.

"Jesus Christ," Nick muttered. "Look, do you think you can keep from verbally assaulting people until we get to the car?"

"He was looking at us!"

"Everyone's a suspect." Nick tightened his arm around John when the ground under their feet seemed to tilt. "Just concentrate on not falling over."

"You wouldn't catch me?" John stared down at the ground. It looked hard, he supposed, but somehow lying down didn't seem like such a bad idea. "I want to rest a bit. Stop."

"No." Nick was speeding up, if anything. "And I would catch you, but I'd prefer it if you stayed upright a bit longer. We're almost there."

John lifted his head and studied their surroundings. "Down this alley." He tugged Nick to the right. "Brings you out in the car park. Shortcut."

"God, I hope you're right," Nick said half under his breath as they turned and started down the alley. "You can rest when we get to the car, okay? You'll be home in bed before you know it."

Home. John wasn't quite sure where that was now, but he was certain the house he rented from his mother didn't qualify. He couldn't blame Nick for not wanting him at Rossneath, though. Not in the state he was in.

"I will. Thank you." He ruined the good impression by stumbling and nearly bringing them both to the ground. "Oh, fuck. I'm just -- Nick, leave me, will you? Just -- God, I don't know why you're bothering with me."

He wrenched himself out of Nick's grasp and leaned back against the wall, willing himself not to slide down it because if he did, he doubted he'd be able to get up again.

"If you hadn't met me, you'd have been fine," John said morosely. "Settling in nicely, everyone pleased to see you. My fault. *Is* my fault. All my fault. I'll tell them that, and they won't hate you, then. Just me. And it'll all be fine." He pushed himself away from the wall and fished out his keys. "Don't worry about a thing." He managed to walk unaided to the end of the alley and up to his car.

"I'm worried about you getting behind the wheel like this." Nick appeared as if from nowhere, unfolding John's hand from around his keys. "And none of this is your fault, so stop saying that."

John found himself being led around to the other side of the car and pushed into the seat there.

"Can you do the seatbelt yourself, or do you need me to do it?"

"I can do it," John said sullenly. "I'm not *that* drunk." Still, it took him several attempts to get the metal thing into the other thing -- whatever they were called -- and by the time he'd managed it, Nick was already in the driver's seat.

"Okay, here we go." Nick took several deep breaths before turning the car on. "Let me know if you think you're going to be sick or anything, okay?"

"I'm fine." John rested his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. There was a jerk as if Nick was struggling with the unfamiliar gearshift and then they began to move, the motion of the car almost enough to make John think that he was going to be sick, but it wasn't as if they had far to go, after all.

Even with his eyes closed, and very drunk, he knew exactly where they were on the road, so when Nick pulled over a good mile short of John's house after swearing and braking sharply, John forced his eyes open and turned his head.

Nick was pale, staring ahead at the road, where a sheep, ambling along unconcernedly, provided an excellent reason for their sudden stop, if not Nick's evident distress.

Unless you knew how he felt about driving.

"Nick?" John roused from his own misery. "God, I never thought -- love, you shouldn't be driving. I'd never have expected you to -- Are you all right?" He reached out and laid his hand over Nick's where it gripped the wheel, and he could feel Nick trembling. "Let's get out," he urged him. "We can walk. It isn't far."

"No, I'm fine." Nick's shallow breathing belied his words. "We can't just leave the car here -- someone else could come along and crash into it." He shivered, but when the sheep finished crossing the road, he put the car into gear again and started forward slowly. "You're right -- it's not too much further."

John didn't say anything, not wanting to distract him, but kept his eyes open as they drove along, hoping that they didn't meet another vehicle or another animal who didn't have the sense God gave it.

Almost before he knew it, they were pulling up the long drive toward his own house. Nick didn't say anything until the car was stopped and shut off. "Here we go." His voice was shaking. He got out with the keys clutched in his fist and came around to the other side of the car where John was still struggling to get the seat belt unfastened. "Here, let me ..." Nick leaned in and undid the seat belt.

John leaned forward just a little and brushed his lips against Nick's cheek. "Thank you," he said quietly, meaning it as much as any words he'd ever spoken. He let Nick help him out of the car and then leaned against it, studying his house. The windows were dark, which hopefully meant that his mother hadn't used her key and was sitting in there waiting for him, and as far as he could see, his prediction of vandalism, never really seriously meant, hadn't come true.

"I'm going to sleep this off." Nick was watching him in silence, some color returning to his face. "I want to talk to you, but I'm in no fit state right now. Can I --?" John hesitated. He'd been about to ask Nick if he could come to him later but maybe Nick wanted to be alone? Too tired to be diplomatic, and sick of evasions, he said simply, "If you'd prefer I kept away, tonight or any night, you've only to say, but if I'm sober enough later, do you mind if I come over?"

“I’ll come in and get you settled.” Nick didn’t sound as if he’d accept a refusal. “I want to make sure you’re okay. Plus I don’t think you’ll be in any shape to come over to my place, driving *or* walking. Come on; you should probably drink some water before you do anything else.”

“You could be right,” John admitted, a wave of dizziness hitting him, accompanied by a prickle of sweat breaking out on his forehead. “But I think you’d better wait until I’ve finished throwing up before you give me any water.”

He made it to the bathroom. Barely. After that it all got a little blurred around the edges until he found himself in bed, with what felt like a gallon of cool water and two aspirin inside him, the curtains drawn against the long twilight, and Nick’s hand stroking his head as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Nick sat on the edge of John's bed for the first half hour, running his hand gently over John's hair until he was sure the man was asleep. The bed was big enough for two, but somehow it didn't feel right to lie down with him, so he moved a chair over near it and sat, watching John's face as the room slowly darkened.

He'd spent the day thinking, so there wasn't a lot to go over now. He didn't want to leave the island unless John did, and he didn't care what people he barely knew said about them being together. He did care about people knowing he was psychic, but there wasn't much chance that he'd be able to hide it long term, so he'd just do what he could and try not to worry about it too much. As a method of dealing with frightening situations, it was one that seemed to serve him well -- he'd been terrified when he'd gotten behind the wheel of John's car and started it up, the butterflies in his stomach violent enough that he'd been more concerned that *he* might throw up than that John would, but he'd done his best not to think about what might happen and tried to concentrate on the mechanics.

He hadn't killed either of them, so it was an improvement over the last time he'd driven. The one thing he couldn't help worrying about was that he was pretty sure that the ghost that had turned up earlier in his own kitchen was John's father, and he had no idea how to tell John.

Because the ghost had turned up when John's mother had been there, Nick had to assume that it had something to say to her. He didn't want the added complication of this issue on top of the fact that Anne was already unhappy about his relationship with her son, and again there was nothing he could do about it except hope that the ghost wouldn't get too stubborn before a good time to bring up the topic rolled around.

The room was dark now. On the bed, John stirred and groaned softly, and Nick got up and moved back over to sit beside him, rubbing his shoulder. "Shh. It's okay."

John rolled over and snuggled against Nick's leg, not looking anything like fully awake, his forehead furrowed as if even asleep he'd taken his problems with him. He made an indeterminate sound that didn't really sound like a word and then suddenly jerked awake, lifting his head and blinking up at Nick, looking startled.

"Nick?" It came out in a croak and Nick reached out for the glass of water he'd put by the bed and held it where John could take a gulp of it.

"Thanks." John rubbed his hand across his face and yawned. "God, I've felt better, I can tell you." He shifted position until he was sitting beside Nick with a pillow behind his head and then sighed and reached for Nick's hand. "This is the part where I apologize for putting you through one hell of a day, right?"

"No, this is where you don't apologize because none of it was your fault," Nick said firmly. "You aren't responsible for anyone's reactions but your own." He turned John's hand in his and stroked his other hand over the palm. "Okay ... so maybe the drinking was your fault, but I'm willing to overlook it this once." He smiled to let John know that he was kidding and bent to kiss his forehead. "You should probably just get some more sleep."

"I'm planning on an early night, but right now I think I want a shower and maybe some food." John ran his tongue experimentally over his teeth. "Was that you I remember ramming a toothbrush in my mouth and scrubbing away? You've a brutal streak in you, did you know that?"

His fingers closed around Nick's hand; the way he was clinging to it was a better indication of his feelings than what he was saying.

Nick curled himself up onto the bed and around John, holding him. "I know."

John turned his head into Nick's shoulder, wrapping his arm clumsily around Nick's waist and taking a fistful of his shirt in a convulsive grip. He was shaking, and it took Nick a while to realize that it was because he was crying, tears slipping silently from eyes closed as tightly as his lips.

Helplessly, feeling like his heart was breaking, Nick tightened his arms and held on. "Shhh. It's okay. It's gonna be okay." Guilt swelled in his chest and he felt sick. He'd been telling the truth when he'd said that none of this was John's fault, but he himself wasn't so innocent, was he. He was the one who'd come out here and gotten involved, messed up John's life. "I'm sorry," Nick whispered into John's hair. "God, I'm so sorry. But we'll make it better. I promise."

John shook his head without speaking, and Nick had to admit that as promises went, it wasn't an easy one to keep. They could leave if they had to, but he didn't *want* to; although he'd like to travel with John sometime in the future, if they had one, John belonged here.

With a sigh, John released his grip on Nick and rolled over, grabbing a tissue from the box by the bed and drying his face. "Sorry." John turned back to Nick and glanced down at the damp patch on Nick's shirt with a rueful

look on his face. "And while I'm at it, I have to apologize for my mother. Driving you out of your own house like that; saying all those things. I just -- I didn't know her, to be honest with you." His voice deepened with indignation. "God! She was so -- there was no getting through to her. About me, about what you can do."

"Maybe once she has a chance to get used to the idea, it'll be different," Nick suggested, rubbing John's upper arm. "It's probably a lot to take in all at once." As for his own abilities, he knew there were people who'd never believe.

"Aye." John sounded doubtful, which wasn't surprising given what little Nick had seen of his mother. "I'm still sorry you felt you had to leave though. You should've just told her to get out the way I did." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I've never fallen out with her like that before. Never spoken to her that way. My mother and Michael. If you'd have asked me last week who I could trust to stand by me in this world or the next, it'd have been those two, and now --"

Nick wasn't sure if he should keep encouraging John not to give up on them; would that just make it more difficult if they ended up not being able to accept John the way he was? "She's your mother. She loves you." He felt sure of that much, at least. "If you want to take a shower, I could make you something to eat."

"I'd like that. And you must be starving yourself." John sat up, wincing slightly and rubbing his hand over his forehead. "So while I was out getting drunk and threatening to break people's noses for them, what did you do with yourself besides walk? And how did you find me anyway?" He frowned. "You always do. That time when you fell on the beach, you said you were looking for me but you didn't know I'd gone out on the boat. Is that something else you can do, then? Track me?" He didn't seem disturbed by the idea.

"I don't know. Every once in a while something like that would happen with Matthew, but I always thought it was one of those brain-share things. You know, because we'd been friends for so long." Nick sat up, too, and found that he was unbuttoning the front of John's shirt idly and one-handed, wanting to touch his skin. "I mostly just walked. And I sat on the beach for a long time. I went back to the house; I knew you wouldn't be there." John's chest hair was soft under his fingers.

"I like that." John slipped his arm around Nick's shoulders. "That you'll always know where I am if you need me, or I need you. And I needed you today." He gave Nick a searching, almost hesitant look and then leaned in slowly and kissed him, his free hand coming up to cover Nick's where it rested against his chest.

John tasted, thankfully, of toothpaste more than anything else, and his skin was warm against Nick's palm as they kissed. "I'm sorry -- I shouldn't have left when I did. I should have been there with you" He kissed John again, then just looked at him, trying to figure out if this was the right time to mention his father. The thought of upsetting John made him feel awful, but it didn't seem right not to say anything, either.

"No. It was maybe for the best that you weren't. This way I got to hear just what she was thinking and I'd rather be knowing the worst. It's why I went into town, just to get it over with. Well, that and I was feeling like getting into a fight with someone I could hit." He gave Nick a small grin. "I didn't though. Glared at a few people but I didn't hit one of them. I suppose that was for the best, too."

"Yeah." Nick pulled his hand back out of John's shirt and stood up, not meeting his eyes now because he didn't want to have to tell him, and the only thing he could think of to get out of it was to put a little bit of space between them. Or, which was even more tempting with the memory of John's skin against his hand, avoid talking by joining John in the shower and taking him back to bed afterwards. Nick reminded himself that John was still tired and that in the aftermath of sex he might find it difficult not to share his thoughts. "Go on and take your shower, and I'll go poke around in the kitchen."

He could feel John's gaze follow him as he left the room, but he didn't look back. Not when he knew that if he did, he'd end up back on that bed kissing John some more.

It took John about twenty minutes to shower and change, but when he came into the kitchen, where Nick was scraping scrambled eggs from a pan onto two plates, he looked reasonably alert. Nick had spent most of the time trying to find what he needed; it was frustrating, especially when he felt like he was prying somehow. It struck him that as Rossneath John never seemed to feel anything but at home, although the house was almost as new to him as it was to Nick from what he'd said.

"You made tea?" John rested the back of his hand against the brown china teapot to test its temperature, although the steam curling out of the spout should have been indication enough. "Thanks. A few cups and I'll be back to normal." He smiled. "Don't hate me for it, but I'm not one for hangovers. Michael now --" He caught himself and then carried on steadily. "He suffers terribly the next day, but me, a bit of a sleep and I'm fine."

Nick had been dreading them being in the same room together again, but now that John was there, he couldn't do anything but turn to him and put his arms around him. He could feel John tense, startled, and then relax, strong arms encircling him. He couldn't tell John about his father. Not yet. Not when John's mouth was warm and gentle against his, John clearly aware that Nick needed him for some reason, even if he didn't know what it was.

Nick held on tightly and whimpered into the next kiss, trying his best not to beg for more intensity. "Please," he whispered, giving up the attempt almost at once, wanting desperately to lose himself in an arousal that was already mounting just from kissing John. "Can we --? God, John, I've never wanted anyone like I want you, never needed ..." He gave up on trying to talk and just let John kiss him, John's tongue flicking over his lips and making him shiver.

"You want me?" John's hand was still thrust through Nick's hair, and he tightened his grip and turned Nick's head a little so that he could drag his mouth up the side of Nick's neck to his ear, biting and sucking at the lobe until it stung and throbbed hotly. "Well, you've got me ..." John's hand slackened and slipped down, stroking at the back of Nick's neck and making him shiver because the delicacy of the touch was such a contrast to the way John was kissing him now, hard, demanding kisses, with John seemingly determined to leave them both breathless. "You had me from the moment I saw you --"

"Please." Nick's own hands scrabbled at the back of John's shirt, shoving it up and out of his way so that he could touch John's warm skin, feeling it sleek and smooth over strong muscle. His cock was already hard, aching. "Need you in me. Need you to fuck me."

"How much do you need it?" John asked, hooking his hand in the open vee of Nick's shirt and using his thumb to slip the top button free. "So much that I'm wasting time doing this, when I should be just sliding your jeans down and bending you over this table or putting you up against a wall?" John tugged down sharply, freeing a few more buttons, and pushed the shirt back with impatient haste so that he could stroke his fingertips across Nick's nipple, still with that maddeningly not-quite-enough gentleness of touch. "That much? Because I can. If it's what you want, I can. I can fuck you fast and hard right here and never walk in this room again without remembering how I made you come screaming out my name." He bent his head and bit down hard on the skin he'd been touching, drawing a moan from Nick. "Tell me you need me that much." His voice was shaking and his hands were urgent and hard on Nick's body. "Because it's how much I want you --"

"I do." Nick was barely able to form the words. "Oh God, I do. That much and more." He didn't care at all what John did -- if he bent him over the table or pushed him down onto the floor. Neither was something he would have accepted from Matthew, despite the fact that with Matthew the sex had been about sex and nothing more, never even about their friendship, although of course they'd been friends, and he'd loved Matthew ...

But it had been nothing like this.

He was almost ready to come just from what they were doing, with his pants still fastened and his hands pulling John closer as best he could.

From the way John was looking at him, he wasn't alone in feeling like that. It'd just been too much, all of it, ever since he'd arrived on this island, the few quiet, peaceful moments lost in the storm he and John seemed to have raised.

And now he didn't want either peace or conflict, but something that took the best of both and would grant him a short space of time with nothing to do but feel.

John kissed him again, adding a final, teasing nip at Nick's lip, his eyes gleaming as if, like Nick, he'd decided to forget everything waiting for them in favor of what they both wanted right now.

"Strip as much as you need." John stepped back. "While I find something we can use --" He walked over to a cupboard, his hand sliding into the back pocket of his jeans and coming out with a small, foil square.

Nick grinned. "Boy Scout." He kicked off his jeans and shorts, leaving it at that.

"Ever been fucked against a wall, Nick?" John asked without turning, reaching into the cupboard and taking out what looked like a small bottle of cooking oil. He put it on the counter and began to undo his jeans. "With your legs spread wide and the bricks tearing your hands until it's not just come but blood you leave behind?"

He turned and held up his hand, palm towards Nick, a faint, ragged scar across it. "I have. Once. It wasn't much fun afterwards, but at the time I damn near bit through my lip trying to keep quiet." John pushed down his jeans, stepping out of them and his shorts, and picked up the bottle. "You know what? I don't care how much noise you make, Nick." He walked toward Nick, who was at the point where nothing else existed but John and what he was about to do, his heart hammering painfully in his chest and his cock as hard as it could get.

"Turn around," John said, with his voice low but his accent strong, and Nick obeyed automatically. "Now lean over the table."

Nick did, bracing his hands on the edge of the solid piece of furniture and gasping when he felt slick fingers touching him, and then one pushing inside him, breaching him, going deep, making him moan.

"That's right. Make as much noise as you like," John whispered. His chest was pressed to Nick's back, his breath warm against Nick's shoulder when he added a second finger.

"Please," Nick begged. "John, please."

The fingers left him and he took a swift breath and released it as the head of John's cock pressed and pushed,

and, *fuck*, just shoved inside him in a thrust that was never fast enough to hurt, but which didn't stop until John was deep in him, his hands sliding under Nick's shirt and scoring his back in a raking caress and then coming back to grip his hips.

"You feel --" John's words ended in a gasp, and then he slid out just enough and the next thrust was one long, sweet slide with Nick crying out hoarsely as it ended, his body tightening around John's cock, his eyes squeezed closed because he didn't want to see anything right then.

Nick held on to the table desperately, glad that it was there to help hold him up as John slid into him again and again. He was chanting John's name under his breath with every thrust, his cock so hard that it hurt, but he didn't care at all about coming because that would mean this was almost over and he didn't want that. He wanted this to go on and on.

The harsh sound of John's breathing.

The slick sound as John's cock thrust in and out of him.

The faint smell of the cooking oil.

"John," Nick gasped again.

"Aye, it's me." John almost growled the words, his fingers sliding around to the front of Nick's hips but never going anywhere near his cock. "Me fucking you. Me loving you. It's always going to be me."

Just those words were almost enough to push Nick over the edge -- as it was, he couldn't do more than make a sound that was strangled and full of protest as he struggled not to come. John's cock shoved into him again, hard, and the table Nick was braced against creaked and groaned, sliding half an inch with the force of their fucking. "It's you," he managed. "Always you. No one else."

It was nearly terrifying how quickly that had become true.

He thought he heard John say his name, but it was lost in the blur of sensation as John's hips jerked forward again and again, fucking him with deep, swift strokes that drove away every doubt and concern because there wasn't room for anything in his head right then but this. John was in him and around him, the heat of his body as reassuring as the solid strength of the hands that were holding Nick in place so that every surge forward sent that perfect, tormenting shiver and spark through him.

Nick's breathing rasped in his throat, his lungs working as hard as if he were running at top speed and his palms aching where they were pressed against the edge of the table. His fingertips were tingling and his heart was pounding, and he was, whether he wanted to admit it or not, scared, even though he couldn't remember why. He couldn't form a thought. He could only feel and be fucked, too far gone to do more than grunt with each delicious stroke now as he trembled.

He knew that it couldn't last much longer, for John at least. Without anything touching his cock but air he wasn't sure he *could* come, even though he'd never been so close for so long. There'd never been a reason to wait until John, never been a time when he'd held back to make it last longer, because getting to come had been the whole point.

Behind him, John cried out, exultant and despairing, and Nick felt his body tense as John came, seeking the release that he himself had almost given up on achieving. John's hands left Nick and smacked down on the table on either side of him, supporting John's weight as he fell forward, covering Nick's body with his own. Nick's shirt had been pushed up, exposing most of his back, and he felt the beat of John's racing heart against his skin, matching his own.

They stayed like that for a long moment, and then John brought his arm across to hug Nick to him, kissing the back of his neck "Oh, you --" he murmured. "Oh God, Nick -- Stay there, will you? Please?"

John eased out of him and pressed another kiss to the back of Nick's neck before moving away for just long enough to deal with the condom, judging by the sound of it. Nick's head hung down between his trembling arms and he was panting; harsh gasps as his body tried to override his will and end the torment of wanting. His cock was straining forward, blindly seeking something to rub against, flushed dark with beads of pre-come leaking from it.

His hand moved to touch it.

"Don't you fucking dare," John said from behind him. "I want that, too."

"Then *take* it," Nick snarled, some of his control slipping away, although he managed not to move. He shut his eyes tightly, taking deep, ragged breaths as he waited for John to do something, anything. "God, John, please ..."

John's hands were on his arms, turning him around, and then one warm hand was sliding up Nick's inner thigh until he cried out as knuckles rubbed his balls. "Hush, love." John was murmuring his words against Nick's mouth. Nick licked at John's lips, shoving forward until the tip of his cock kissed John's hip moistly. "I'll take care of you."

Past the point of reason, Nick pressed down on John's shoulder, and John dropped almost immediately to his knees, opening his mouth as Nick guided the head of his cock inside.

John's lips closed around his shaft avidly, sucking hard, with his tongue lapping at the head, swirling over it in greedy, eager swipes.

Nick slid his hands into John's hair and pushed forward, watching his cock disappear into John's mouth and groaning at the sight of it. John glanced up and met his eyes, and he looked ... happy.

Happy to let Nick fuck his mouth, if that was what Nick wanted to do, and there was nothing Nick wanted more.

Unfortunately, he'd been holding back long enough that he couldn't wait -- four thrusts and Nick was crying out, shuddering, spilling himself over John's tongue until there was nothing left but a dull weight in his groin and a very strong need *not* to be standing up. Nick wavered on his feet.

"Come here before you fall over." John's hand came up and encircled his wrist, pulling Nick down to straddle his lap and immediately wrapping his arms around him in a warmly protective hug with his cheek rubbing gently against Nick's. "Are you all right?" he asked after a moment, when they were both back to breathing rather than gasping for air. "I didn't hurt you?"

Nick wriggled a little bit -- he was sore, but not unpleasantly so. "No. What about you?" He brushed his thumb over the corner of John's mouth tenderly.

John's tongue ran across his lips and he smiled, stroking his hands slowly over Nick's back. "I'm fine. More than fine." His smile faded, without dimming the happiness in his eyes. "I love you, Nick. I've never had the chance or the reason to say it before, and now that I can I'll probably say it too often, but I'm telling you anyway."

"I'm not sure there's any such thing as saying it too often." Nick held John's face between his hands and kissed him softly. "I love you. More than I thought it was possible to love someone."

"It's not going to be easy." John kissed him back, matching Nick's gentleness. "Today people weren't sure what to think, but tomorrow -- God, I don't want to think about that." He leaned his forehead against Nick's and sighed. "Let's get up. And if it won't hurt your feelings, I think we'd better make a fresh pot of tea. I doubt that one's drinkable by now."

"You're probably fussier than I am and I *still* think you're right." They managed to get to their feet and Nick started to look around for his pants. "And if the tea's no good, I'm sure the eggs are totally inedible. You make tea, I'll make eggs, and then we'll ..." Picking up his pants, he hesitated. "I guess I shouldn't assume you want me to spend the night."

John gave him a fondly exasperated look as he got dressed. "I'm thinking you don't need to assume it." He walked over to Nick and gave him a one-armed hug as he tucked his shirt in. "I always want to be with you, but as it's not two minutes since I told you why that is, I'm not going to tell you again."

"I have to tell you something." Nick put his arms around John, one hand sliding up to the back of John's neck and holding on, keeping them both where they were so he didn't have to see John's face when he said the words. He hated himself for being such a coward. "It's why you might not want me to stay." He didn't wait for John to reply. "There was another ghost, earlier today. I don't ... I don't know for sure, but I think ... I think it was your father."

The arms around him tightened, and he felt John take a long, slow breath before he spoke. "My father? You saw --?" There was a pause, with John standing very still, lost in thought, as if he was replaying what had happened in the kitchen. "Aye. I remember now. You were looking over at the door, weren't you? And you said something about 'not now,' but I thought you were meaning --"

John's arms dropped away and he stepped back so that Nick had no choice but to meet his eyes. "Was it -- was it very bad?" he asked hoarsely, his eyes dark with pain. "Did he look -- God, Nick, if I have to see him looking like he did when they took him from the water, I'm not sure I can do it --" He turned on his heel, looking around the room with swift, uneasy glances. "Christ, is he here now? While we were --? God! Can you see him?" He turned back to Nick and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Tell me if he's here!"

Nick jerked himself free and backed away, coming up against the cupboard behind him. "No." He shook his head. "No, no, he's not here." John's intensity and pain were too much, even though he'd expected them. "I think it was just because your mother was there. Maybe. I don't know. He didn't ... he looked fine."

John blinked at him. "Fine? He's a year dead! How can he -- fuck, this is insane." He took a shaky breath, scrubbing his hands over his face. "I didn't mean to shout at you like that." He gave Nick an apologetic look, although Nick noticed that John made no move to close the gap between them. "It's just -- these ghosts you see are people with problems; people who did something awful. My dad -- he wasn't like that. He was just -- normal. Why would he be here still? Are you sure you're not seeing someone else? If he'd a look of me, it might be a relative from years ago?"

His voice was pleading now, and it was almost more than Nick could bear to hear.

"Maybe I'm wrong." Nick's wrist ached suddenly and inexplicably, and his head felt like he was the one who'd had too much to drink. He felt a strong urge to walk back to Rossneath, crawl between his sheets, and stay there for

the rest of his life.

Some day John would die.

"Look, I didn't ... I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't ... that I wasn't ..." Nick's breath shivered. It was always going to be like this. "I'll go home."

"If you do, I'm coming with you." John's voice was so soft that Nick could barely hear it. John compressed his lips, looking like someone about to jump out of a plane without a parachute, and then walked up to Nick and held out his hand. "He's my dad. He shouldn't be your problem. If he's like the rest, he'll stay until you sort it out, whatever it is, and until that's taken care of, I'm not leaving your side. I can't always be holding your hand, maybe, but when he comes, you're to tell me, you understand? And then --" John's hand took Nick's and squeezed it gently. "Then we'll lay him to rest like he deserves." John shook his head, his eyes troubled. "You shouldn't have to do this. I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't have to do this." Nick didn't pull his hand away even though part of him wanted to. "You wouldn't have to, if it weren't for me." He knew what John needed to hear. "I'll tell you. If he ... God, John. Tell me you don't hate me?"

"Hate you?" John sounded genuinely puzzled. "If it wasn't for you, he'd have no one to help him, although I still can't think what it is that's troubling him, mind you. If you hadn't come here, he'd just be waiting and waiting --" He looked horrified at the thought, and Nick couldn't blame him. John's hand came up to cup Nick's face, caressing it gently. "Leaving aside the fact that I'm as deep in love with you as I can be, I'd have to be one hell of an ungrateful sod to hate you for preventing that."

Nick looked into John's blue eyes, needing more reassurance but not wanting to ask for it. John must have understood, though, because the man pulled him in close, strong arms hugging him tightly, and Nick found himself clinging to John in much the same way John had clung to him earlier. "I love you." The words stuck in Nick's throat. "And it scares the hell out of me. I don't want to lose you."

"It scares me, too," John admitted. "But I wouldn't swap it for not loving you, not for a minute." He threaded his hand through Nick's hair, tilting his head back and staring at him intently. "Would you? Are you wishing we'd not met? Are you? Can you tell me you love me and still wish that?" John shook his head. "No, of course you can't," he whispered, pulling Nick closer and kissing him with a new tenderness.

Nick relaxed, hearing the conviction in John's voice. "You know I don't." He hugged John gratefully, and they stood like that for a long time, neither of them willing to let go right away. But eventually, Nick stepped back, smiling. "Scrambled eggs, right?"

As he went to the refrigerator and took out the carton of eggs again he realized that that he felt almost at peace. The gnawing worry that he was used to living with had eased, the sense of being out of control a little less.

He was ... almost content.

More importantly, he could imagine a time when he'd be completely content.

And that was worth almost everything he'd been through.

Chapter Seventeen

"It's flopping! God, it's -- do something!"

John gave the fish squirming in the bottom of the boat a cursory glance. "It's a reflex action. Pick it up and knock its head against the side, if you like." One look at Nick's face told him that hadn't been the right thing to say. Bending down, John grasped the slippery body of the mackerel and took his own advice.

Nick shuddered.

"You're not going to want to eat it now, are you?" John said resignedly.

"I don't know." Nick gave it a dubious look. "Is it going to have all its parts when eating time rolls around?"

"Some of them won't be there." John debated whether or not going into details would help and settled for patting Nick's knee reassuringly with the hand he hadn't used to pick up the fish.

Which didn't mean that it was clean, exactly, but it was the best he could do.

"We're not catching much worth keeping anyway; want to head back in? You can steer if you like until we get into shore; you need to learn how to handle her."

"I don't see why." Nick was grinning. "Jeez, I just took up driving a car again last night and now you want me to learn how to drive a boat? Way to put the pressure on." Still smiling, he moved over to sit beside John on the rear seat.

"I've got every faith in your ability," John said serenely. "And you couldn't ask for a nicer day to learn." He squinted up at the cloudless sky. "You brought the good weather with you, didn't you? Apart from that first day, it hasn't rained since you got here." He started the engine and put Nick's hand on the tiller. "Hold it, but don't grab at it. You twist it to make it go faster and the gears are here. Right; off you go; straight ahead and keep an eye out for sharks."

Nick gave him a skeptical look.

John grinned. "Aye, there are. Basking sharks. But I'm mostly teasing you."

He waited to make sure that Nick was confident enough with what he was doing and then moved to the middle of the boat, keeping an eye out for anything that would give Nick problems, although there were no rocks or shallows nearby, and there wasn't another boat in sight.

Even though he couldn't really say that Nick had taken to fishing, he seemed to be enjoying being out on the sea, which was the main thing. It was where John spent a lot of his time, and although he didn't expect Nick to be at his side every minute, the idea that if he went out on his boat, he went alone, wasn't a comfortable one.

With the noise of the engine making talking difficult, he lapsed into silence, occasionally glancing back and getting a grin from Nick, who seemed to have succumbed to the exhilaration of skimming over the glass-clear water and had increased his speed to the point where a fine spray of sea water was arcing on either side of the prow, dazzlingly bright in the sun.

They'd woken early that morning -- and got up late, the intervening time being taken up with the slow, leisurely lovemaking John thought he could very easily get used to and a lot of talk about absolutely nothing, which had done more to relax John than Nick's hand teasing him for what felt like hours before he'd finally relented and got John off with five hard, merciless jerks of his wrist, leaving him gasping like that fish.

Without discussing it, they'd avoided Nick's house and headed out to sea with the mellow clangor of the church bell fading behind them, replaced by the soulful cries of the gulls and the thrum of the engine.

And if they were heading back to deal with everything that they'd deliberately not thought of for the last twelve hours, at least they were going to be dealing with it together. There was a comfort to be had in that, and John felt oddly peaceful as he took over from Nick and brought them safely up to the jetty.

Stepping out of the boat and finding Michael waiting for them, sitting on a lobster trap with his hands busy unraveling a piece of net, shattered that fragile peace in an instant.

Nick must have seen something about Michael that John didn't, or at least that John didn't want to see just then, because he put a hand on John's lower back after they'd got out of the boat. "Give him a chance, okay? He's been your friend for a long time."

"He had his chance yesterday." John stared across at the silently waiting figure. "And I don't think he wants another. Probably come to tell me to keep my distance from Sheila and the kids or something. In which case, I bloody well *will* thump him."

"Do you want me to give you two some time alone?" Nick asked, hanging back and looking as uncertain as

John felt.

John turned to him and couldn't help smiling. Nick had the rods and the tackle box in one hand -- he'd refused to carry the fish, which were still twitching, and John had those in a plastic bag -- and a smudge of oil on his cheek that made him look years younger somehow. "Aye, maybe. If we get to fighting, I'd as soon you not watch me get beaten to a pulp." He took the car keys out of his pocket and passed them to Nick. "Here. You go and put all that in the car, will you? I'll not be long."

"Okay." Nick hesitated, then turned and started up the beach to the right to where the car was parked.

John sighed and looked at Michael, who stood up and headed toward him, glancing from the ground up to John's face and back down again in a way that wasn't like him. Well, that was good, at least -- it meant the man wasn't looking for a fight.

Then Michael got close enough for John to see his face clearly for the first time and a concern too long-standing to be forgotten overnight had him closing the gap between them in long strides. "Michael? What in God's name happened to you, man?"

He gripped Michael's arms, staring anxiously at a cut and bruised face with one eye all but shut. No, Michael wouldn't be looking for a fight today, but John wanted to know who'd started the one that had left Michael this marked up. And it would've been more than one man he'd have been up against; he'd seen Michael fight before but never finish as anything but the winner, and usually with no more than scraped knuckles or a bloody nose.

Michael winced away from the hand John couldn't help but reach toward his face. "Och, don't touch me. I've had Sheila holding ice packs to my eye half the night, and it still hurts like fire." His good eye searched John's. "What the bloody hell do you *think* happened?"

"How the fuck should I know?" John's resentment rose again. "I left, remember? I don't know who you and your friends went after once I wasn't around; I'm just glad they hit back. It's what I should've done to you myself, but I'd had a bellyful of that place by then." He drew himself up and jabbed his finger into Michael's chest. "I can tell you something, though -- you'll not be laughing at me again without me blacking your other eye, by God, you won't."

He was trembling with the force of his emotion, his hands curled into fists because this was *Michael*, dammit, *Michael*, and the last time they'd fought, it'd been over a comic they'd both wanted and they'd made up a week later and cut their fingers with John's penknife, swearing in blood that they'd never --

"I didn't know you," John said quietly. "I just didn't know you." He turned and spat into the sand and met Michael's gaze squarely as he wiped his mouth. "I bloody well do now."

The heel of Michael's hand shot out and shoved at John's shoulder, pushing him back a step. "Bastard," Michael hissed as John stared at him in shock. "Said it yourself, didn't you? *You left*. But let me ask you this: Before you did, did you see me laughing? At *all*? I can answer that for you, you know ... *no*. Some of those other blokes were, yeah, and about two minutes after you left, I took them to task for it." Michael looked a bit rueful then, brushing the backs of his knuckles across his mouth. "About two minutes after that, there were about four of them thumping me."

"You -- you looked at me and you were smiling -- and I'd been sitting there listening to them go on about me, and I thought --" John ran out of ways to excuse himself and settled for a quiet, heartfelt, "Oh, *fuck*."

Michael snorted and John went on, "I'm sorry, Michael. Sorry I doubted you and sorry you got hurt on my account." He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, glancing up apologetically at Michael's ruined face. The sight of it didn't bother him that much; he'd have taken worse for Michael and not regretted doing it, and he knew -- *now* he knew -- that the same held good for Michael. "Yesterday was ... not a good day, you know? Thinking I'd lost you on top of my mother and -- well, let's just say it did more than the whiskey to get me fighting mad."

"Aye." Michael nodded. "So she knows, then?"

"And not because I told her, although believe me I tried." John sighed. "She turned up at Nick's house yesterday morning and caught us in the middle of ... well, it could have been worse, I suppose." At least they hadn't been doing much more than kissing. If she'd turned up at his own place last night she'd have got an eyeful of more.

"She's not an unreasonable woman, but it's still a bit hard to take." Michael jerked his head. "Sent your Nick off to the car, I see. Worried that I'd thump him?"

John gave him a sidelong look and saw the traces of a smile. "Aye. I was petrified, but then I recalled what Sheila told you she'd do if you laid a finger on him and stopped worrying." He cleared his throat. "And did Geordie ban you then?" he asked.

Michael nodded and gestured in the direction of the car and they started walking slowly across the hard-packed sand. "Me and all the other blokes. You know him, though; won't be more than a week before he's forgotten that we're not meant to be in there, and he likes the business too much to keep us away in any case."

John nodded, scuffing at the sand with his foot. "It was Moira. Stupid cow took a fancy to Nick, and then

caught us outside --”

“Christ, can you two not keep your hands off each other when there’s people about?” Michael demanded, sounding genuinely annoyed. “Last I heard, you were wanting to keep it quiet, but you’ve only yourself to blame for it getting out, the way you’ve been carrying on.”

“It wasn’t like that!” John said indignantly. “What, do you think I left my own mother’s birthday party for a quick shag in an alley with a man I was planning on spending the night with anyway? You know me better than that! Nick was upset over something, something bad, and I was trying to calm him down.”

“Upset over what? Does he want you to do something you don’t want to? If he’s manipulating you --”

“He’s not. He wouldn’t.” John tried not to get angry over what Michael was thinking, tried to remind himself that it was because Michael was his friend and didn’t want to see him hurt. “No, it was ...”

He trailed off, feeling that it wasn’t fair to tell Nick’s secrets. Nick was sitting on the boot of the car, hands resting in the empty air between his knees and looking out to sea, but as they began to get closer he turned and looked at them.

The wind was ruffling his dark hair and he had a small, anxious frown on his face. John felt his throat constrict with frustrated anger and love because he didn’t want Nick looking like that. He wanted him happy, with those green eyes of his lit up with it and his mouth curved in a smile.

He swung around and put his hand on Michael’s arm, halting him. “What have people been saying about him?” Michael opened his mouth to reply and John shook his head impatiently, guessing what he was about to say. “Besides that. Besides being gay and damned to hell for seducing and corrupting me. Sandy. Has he been talking?”

Michael looked confused. “No. Nothing that I’ve heard, at any rate. It went round that Nick had too much to drink the other night and got sick, but now I think people figure that was just an excuse for the two of you to ...” He glanced down, embarrassed.

“For the love of God, I’m thirty-one, not some randy seventeen-year-old!” John snapped. “Dirty-minded gits, always willing to think the worst of folk.” He bit his lip, trying to calm down “He’d had one drink, that’s all, and we weren’t planning on leaving early but we had to. And it wasn’t for *that*.” He sighed. “Oh, this is just impossible -- look, will you let me ask him if he’ll tell you what happened? And if he does, will you listen and trust me when I say every word’s the truth? Because there’s more to this than most of you know.”

“All right.” Michael slowed, letting John go on ahead.

As he neared the car, Nick slid down off the boot. “Is everything okay?”

“Aye.” John guessed from Nick’s widening eyes as he looked past John and saw Michael’s face that he’d do a better job than John had at working out what had happened. “Nick -- will you tell him? About why we left and what we did? I’m not asking you to tell the world and I’m past giving a damn what most people think or say but I can’t -- I need him to know. Will you? Please?”

He was close enough now that he could’ve reached out and touched Nick, but he didn’t. Not because of Michael, silently waiting behind them, but because he wanted Nick to be able to say no if he had to, and it’d be easier for him to say that without knowing how much John’s hands were shaking right now.

He was still holding the bag of fish, and he clenched his fingers tightly around the handles, his gaze fixed on Nick’s face.

It was clear that Nick was uncomfortable with the idea, but after a moment he nodded. “Yeah, okay.” He looked over John’s shoulder to where Michael was waiting and lifted his chin to indicate that the other man should join them, which Michael did, John shifting to one side so that Michael and Nick could have a proper conversation.

“John thinks you should know,” Nick started. “And he’s probably right, if there’s any chance that we’re going to be friends.”

“I wouldn’t say that’s impossible,” Michael said. John shot him a look, but it was clear from Michael’s expression that he’d meant it good-naturedly, and just as clear from Nick’s tone as he started speaking again that it had been taken that way as well.

“I ... have this ability,” Nick began. He was hesitant enough in describing it that John knew that he hadn’t needed to very often. John wondered if Matthew had done most of the talking for him. “I can see things. Hear things, sometimes. Ghosts.”

“You’re joking.” Michael’s face twisted scornfully.

“No. Although believe me, there are times when I wish I was.” Nick grimaced. “Anyway ... because I know they’re there, they usually want something from me. There’s usually something I can do for them, to help them, so they can move on.”

John set the bag of fish down, rubbing his hand clean on his jeans without thinking about it. Here, in the sunshine, with the familiar smell of seaweed and fish rising up and the town behind them Sunday-quiet, what they were discussing seemed ridiculous.

Maybe they should've taken Michael to the graveyard and told him there.

"It's true." John took over from Nick because now that they'd started to tell Michael he knew he'd take it better coming from him. "I've seen one. Felt one, too, and it's enough to give a man nightmares when you don't know what's going on, I can tell you. I followed him out to the graveyard in the middle of the night and I saw -- God, Michael, I touched his hand and I saw Kirsty, his grandmother, clear as I'm seeing you now." He shuddered, remembering. "You can't know what it's like. And he can hear them, too, and it's all the time for him." Michael's face was setting in stubborn lines and John carried on quickly before Michael said something he might end up regretting. "Last night when he shook Sandy's hand he had this ... premonition, vision -- God, I don't know what it's called! Saw him dead of a heart attack brought on by him getting scalded."

"He would have been." Nick wrapped his arms around himself. "It's okay; you don't have to believe me. I know it sounds crazy."

"It does, a bit." Michael sounded as if he was making an effort to be polite, which John supposed was an improvement of sorts..

"I know." Nick sighed and glanced at John. "See? This is why ..." He turned his attention back to Michael. "Anyway, while Sandy was still at Mrs. McIntyre's party we went to his house and checked it out. And it turned out the handle on his kettle was loose. John fixed it."

Michael looked between them. "So when everyone thought you were out there getting off, you were actually doing a spot of breaking in and DIY?" he asked incredulously. "Will you come and fix that leaky tap of mine and save us all from drowning in our beds, too?"

John rolled his eyes, keeping a tight hold on his temper. "Look, you know what Sandy's like for not throwing anything away and using everything until it falls to bits. Nick picked up that kettle and got fair drenched; if it'd been Sandy making himself a cup of tea after the party and the water was boiling -- well, he wouldn't be sitting in church today, I can tell you that! And I don't know if he'll let me over the threshold, but if he won't, I'd take it as a kindness if you'd go and take a look around; there's likely more than the kettle that he's neglected over the years."

"Aye, all right." Michael shrugged. "I'll have Sheila bake him something and use that as an excuse to stop by." He looked at each of them in turn. "Not that I'm saying I believe there's anything to any of this, in case you're thinking it. And I'm not saying I *don't* believe. You can't just lay something like this on a man and expect him to nod and smile and agree with everything you say."

John caught Nick's eye. *He'd* believed Nick. Without thinking about it at all. Believed him because he'd seen, he'd *felt* -- but he would have trusted Nick without that.

Didn't mean he expected anyone else to, though.

"No, I can't," John said. "But I can ask you to believe that I'd not lie to you when I say that's why we left."

"Aye, I do believe that much," Michael said. "I've no reason to think you'd lie to me, John. We've been friends too long for that."

Nick was still, silent, but radiating discomfort as loudly as if he'd been shouting.

John sighed. "Right, then. That's something." He leaned against the car, not touching Nick, but close to him, and changed the subject, directing it away from Nick's abilities. "Is Sheila blaming me for the state you're in?" he asked, cringing slightly at the thought of her wrath, which he'd experienced in the past more than once. It'd be just his luck if he'd managed to antagonize the only person on the island who was enthusiastic about his relationship with Nick. "And what the hell did she say to her mother? Peggy was in the shop yesterday, and I may have been drunk, but from what I recall, she didn't sound too pleased."

"You've gone mad if you think Sheila was anything but delighted once she found out how my face got to looking this way," Michael said. "I can't remember the last time she was so pleased with me. Kept going on about how proud she was." His cheeks flushed slightly at the memory. "You can guess as well as anyone what she told her mother. That it was none of her business, and that people ought to be happy for you rather than sticking their noses where they don't belong."

John shook his head, unable to stop a smile from spreading across his face. "She's a fine woman, your Sheila, but you don't need me telling you that. I'm glad she's not hating me for spoiling your good looks for a week or two." He swallowed, finding it hard to express himself. "I'm grateful to you, Michael. And I know fine if they'd come at you singly, you'd not have a mark on you. There wasn't a one of them you couldn't have beaten." He thought of the faces around the table and his lips thinned. "Bastards," he said succinctly.

"I'd imagine a couple of them will think twice before running their mouths off again." Michael nodded, looking grimly satisfied "You needn't thank me, though. It's no more than you deserve, having your friends stand up for you. Known each other a long time, and you've never given me reason to think you're anything but a decent man. Anyone with any sense will figure that out, given enough time." Michael's lips, always expressive, twisted into a wry grin. "Time, and a few broken bones."

John grinned back and then sobered when he saw that Nick was looking a bit concerned. "Aye, but you're not to be doing this again. I can fight my own battles and you've more than me to look after. Besides, most of the ones doing the talking won't be the ones you can thump." He grimaced. "Like Sinclair and my mother, just for starters. I don't give a damn what he thinks, but my mother ... aye, I'll have to talk to her once she's calmed down."

"She might just need some time," Nick said. John was quite sure that Nick had said that before, as well, possibly when he'd been quite drunk and less capable of listening to reason.

"Aye, she might." He wasn't all that hopeful, but there was no point in being negative, and he couldn't help but be a bit concerned over how quiet Nick was being.

"Well, I should probably be getting back home before Sheila dishes up Sunday dinner and I'm not there to eat it," Michael said. "Because even being a hero wouldn't save me then."

"Aye, you'd best do that." John eyed Michael speculatively, noting the stiff way he was holding himself and guessing that his ribs were as bruised as his face. "Take it easy, will you?" He settled for a gentle pat on Michael's shoulder rather than a hug and winced as even that brought a groan to Michael's lips.

"I will. And we'll see you on Thursday as normal?" Michael kept his tone casual but John heard the tension in his voice.

"Well, of course," John told him.

Michael nodded at Nick. "See you Thursday then, Nick."

They watched him walk away and then John turned to Nick. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." When John waited patiently Nick shrugged and leaned against the car. "I hadn't realized how ... physical people were going to be. About the fact that we're together." He looked worried.

"Well, if it's any consolation, they'll mostly just stick to talking behind our backs," John said wryly. "Yesterday they knew well and good I could hear them, but they didn't come over and start anything; if I know Michael he's the one who stopped talking and waded in because he's happier talking with his fists, always has been." He shrugged. "I'm not shedding any tears for the likes of Tommy Robson and his mates, no matter how hurt they got, and neither should you."

"I wasn't thinking about them." Nick was looking in the direction Michael had gone.

John followed his gaze. "What did you expect him to do? He's my friend. I'd have done the same for him -- have done, if it comes to that. And I'd do as much for you, and more. I'm not saying I'll be out there looking for trouble, but if it comes and it's men like that bringing it, would you want me to walk away?"

He moved closer to Nick, reaching out to rub a hand along his arm and trying to work out just what was bothering him. Michael's face was a mess, there was no denying it, but there were four other men who'd be in a similar state, and as far as Michael was concerned, that was all that mattered. He wouldn't be fretting over his injuries, especially not when Sheila was, for once, cooing approval instead of telling him that one more scrap and she'd be moving back in with her mother -- an idle threat if ever there was one.

Nick was looking down at the sand now, watching as grains of it shifted in the light winds. "What if I said yes? Yes, I'd want you to walk away. Let them call you every name in the book, let them think whatever they want about us. I'd rather that than have that," he nodded in Michael's direction, "happen to you." He lifted his eyes to John's, wary, looking for all the world as if he were a dog waiting to be kicked.

"And if I had no choice?" John hated that he couldn't just give Nick what he wanted and promise to walk away. "Nick, love, if someone hit you I'd be tearing them apart before they had a chance to do it a second time, and if they hit me I can't see me turning the other cheek" He studied Nick's apprehensive face and sighed. "It's been years since I got in a fight. Years. And I can take care of myself. It's really not something you should be worrying about." He didn't even look around to see if anyone was watching before reaching out and hugging Nick to him. "Come here, will you? God, don't look like that. It's not going to happen."

Nick's arms gripped him tightly. Each time they embraced, John was surprised by the strength in Nick's form, although he supposed he ought not to have been, considering how many years Nick had been living the way he had. "Just promise me you'll be careful." Nick's breath was moist against John's neck. "I won't ask for anything else."

"I can do that." John felt relieved. "What, do you think I want to end up in that state? With my face so sore you wouldn't be able to kiss me?" He shook his head. "God, maybe I *will* walk away ..."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you." Nick pulled back so they could look at each other. "I'd wait another year to touch you if I had to, but I don't want to have to wait at all. I want you all the time."

Nick's words -- and the look in his eyes as he said them -- made John feel a glow of pleasure that he was sure was reflected in his face as he smiled at him. "It's the same way I feel about you, so you won't find me arguing with that." He kissed Nick, tasting the salt on his lips, and made an effort to step back before he did more than just brush his lips over Nick's. "We should get these fish in your fridge, or better yet under the grill."

"Wouldn't that require the kind of thing that might tempt the grill to explode?" Nick held his hand out

reluctantly for the bag of fish and gestured at the car door, where John's keys were hanging from the lock.

John slid into the driver's seat and smiled across at Nick as he got in. "Tell you what," he said kindly. "We'll have sushi instead."

Chapter Eighteen

“He’s not here,” Nick said again. It was the third time since they’d finished eating, and the fifth since they’d been back at the house. John didn’t even have to finish asking the question at this point before Nick was answering him. “It’s okay.” Nick patted John’s shoulder and took the dish cloth out of his hands, hanging it up on a hook on the side of the refrigerator. “I know this is a big deal. I’ll say if I hear or see *anything*, okay?”

John nodded sheepishly. He couldn’t help being on edge, waiting.

“We could go sit in the other room?” Nick suggested. “Or take a walk?” He seemed remarkably relaxed about the whole thing.

“I’d sooner stay in the house. Do you think -- is there any way that you can, well, call him?” Vague memories of a dozen horror films rose up and John swallowed. “Or maybe that’s not such a good idea.” He gave Nick an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be trying to do your job for you. So do you think it’ll be here in the kitchen again? Or anywhere in the house as long as it’s where you are?”

“I’m starting to think it’s your mother he needs help with.” Nick came closer and pulled John into his arms, holding him firmly, one hand running up and down his back, and John sighed and leaned into the embrace. “He’s had plenty of opportunities to come back, I think. Maybe it’s an energy thing. Sometimes they need a certain person’s energy, or a particular place, but there’s no reason to think it’s here and nowhere else. He seemed pretty ... determined.”

“My mother?” John gave that some consideration as he relaxed into the warmth of Nick’s arms, resting his head against his shoulder gratefully. “They seemed to be happy, but I suppose ... well, you never know, do you? There might have been something I didn’t know about going on.” He felt doubtful though. Anne and Fergus had been quietly, deeply content, and it’d shown. He lifted his head and met Nick’s eyes, frowning as he followed a thought to its logical conclusion. “Do you mean we can’t sort this out without my mother being there?”

“Maybe not. It’s hard to know for sure.” Nick sounded a bit frustrated, which John thought must come with the territory. He probably spent a fair amount of his time not knowing for sure what it was the ghosts wanted. “Or we could go to her. If you think she’d let us in.”

John hugged him and then stepped back. Holding Nick wasn’t making thinking easy. Not when just turning his head would bring his mouth dragging gently over Nick’s neck, making him give that little shiver ... “Aye, she will. She knows the neighbors will be watching, and it wouldn’t be Christian to turn her son from the door.”

“He still might not show up,” Nick warned, even as he turned to pick up his jacket from the back of the chair it was draped over. “And like you said, maybe it wasn’t even your dad.”

“I need to see her anyway.” John was wondering if he wanted it to be his father or not. The thought of seeing him again -- was that horrifying or tempting? He couldn’t decide. “I can’t leave it the way it is, and she’s had time to think it over, maybe.”

He glanced around the kitchen, wishing they could stay here, getting to know each other. It hadn’t even been a full week yet --

Nick was watching him, his eyes sympathetic. John sighed and opened the door. “She’s got a dog. A yappy wee thing called Hector. Don’t try and make friends with him; if he doesn’t take to you, he’ll bite you, and if he does, he’ll likely pee on the carpet.”

“I’ll try to ignore him,” Nick promised as they went outside and John shut the door behind them. “I’m not really a dog person anyway.” He took a shuddering breath, suddenly looking apprehensive. “This isn’t going to be fun.”

“I can’t imagine how it could be.” They got into the car and John started it up, waiting for Nick to get his seatbelt on before putting it into gear.

They drove to his mother’s house without talking, the soft, muffled crunch of stones under the tires as they pulled into the driveway breaking their silence. “Don’t worry,” Nick said. “It’ll be okay.”

John looked across at him. “Will you promise me something? Will you promise not to listen if she tells you that you’ve ruined my life and it’d be better if you left, or anything like that? Because I can tell you now, it’s not true.” He sighed. “I hope to God that she doesn’t, though. You don’t want to see me bruised, and I’m the same way about you getting hurt.” He leaned across and kissed Nick, feeling what was becoming a familiar ache of love and longing just from the briefest of touches. “Right, then, let’s --” He broke off, recognizing the car parked in front of the house. “Oh, well, *that’s* going to make it easy.”

“What?”

John got out of the car and strode towards the front door. “It’s the minister come to call,” he flung back over his shoulder at Nick. “Aye, he’s a fine one when the ladies need comforting, is Mr. Sinclair.”

He reached the door and hesitated. Normally, he’d have just walked in, but now -- oh, the hell with it, he thought and opened the door.

His mother and Andrew Sinclair were sitting side-by-side on the couch, an open Bible on Sinclair’s lap and an earnest, anxious expression on his face.

“Hello, Mother.” John gave the minister a curt nod. “Mr. Sinclair.” Nick came in behind him and John smiled. “And you’ve both met Nick of course.”

“I hope you both realize that there’s no place in heaven for men who practice the sorts of things you do.” Mr. Sinclair started to stand up but was pulled back down by Anne’s clutching grip on his hand. “I thought better of you, Kelley. If your uncle had known the kind of man he was bringing to the island, he’d have burned his house down sooner than see you live in it.”

“My uncle knew I was gay. My mother told him, a long time ago, so I’ll have to disagree with you there.” Nick seemed to be taking the accusation more coolly than John would have expected. “And if I believed in God -- which I don’t -- I don’t think I’d believe that he’d be all that concerned with what responsible adults do in the privacy of their bedrooms.”

“You’d be wrong!” John’s mother said. “You *are* wrong. This isn’t acceptable, what you’re doing.”

“I don’t recall asking you to accept it.” John’s gaze traveled from the minister to his mother. “Either of you. It’s none of your damn business. It’s also not what I came here for.” He looked at Sinclair. “I don’t know what you were doing before I got here, but I’m thinking you weren’t reminding my mother of what a good son I’ve been to her all these years and how much I love her.” His gaze went back to his mother’s face and he saw that she’d been crying. “No, of course you weren’t, or she wouldn’t be looking like this. Mam, I’m sorry. Not for loving Nick, not ever for that, but for letting you think something about me that wasn’t true. I’ll ask your forgiveness for that, if nothing else.”

“I can’t give you anything if you persist in sinning.” Anne’s voice cracked. “I’d sooner see you dead than see you with him, and that’s the truth.”

“No, it isn’t.” John refused to let her words hurt him. “You know it isn’t.”

She met his gaze defiantly and then bit her lip, glancing down. “I just wanted you to be happy,” she whispered. “Just wanted you to be --”

“Normal?” John asked dryly. He shook his head, losing patience with the discussion. “Och, it doesn’t matter. All the talking in the world won’t change me, and like I said, I didn’t really come here to see you.” He glared at the minister. “And I *really* didn’t want to see you, you sanctimonious piece of --”

“John!”

His mother’s voice and Nick’s rang out at the same time, and he turned to see Nick staring at the corner of the room.

“I’ll be asking you to leave now,” John said to Sinclair, moving to Nick’s side and stretching out his hand. “This is family business.”

“This is your mother’s house,” Sinclair said, and Nick’s hand tightened painfully on John’s. Sinclair’s face hardened with disapproval as his gaze fell to their linked hands. “Let go of him!”

John decided to appeal to his mother instead of the minister. “Mam, you know what I told you about Nick. What he can do.” John was trying to avoid saying it in so many words in front of Sinclair, if he could.

“Aye. One more reason why he shouldn’t be a part of your life.” Anne nodded firmly, as if saying that would make it happen. Sinclair stood up and she glanced at him appealingly. “Please, Mr. Sinclair. If we maybe pray for them --?”

“They’re godless and depraved. What would be the point?”

Nick shook his head. “No point.” He sounded distracted. “John --”

“Oh, the hell with it --” John muttered. He stepped closer to Nick and slid his hand behind Nick’s head, turning him and kissing him hard.

It wasn’t easy to sustain the kiss, not when his mother gave a shocked gasp, not when he was certain his father’s ghost was watching, but he prolonged it, trusting Nick to understand and cooperate, until Sinclair backed away, fumbling for the door handle.

“I’ll not stay and watch this,” he declared. “It’s disgusting, and you should be ashamed of yourself, so you should.”

John broke the kiss and looked over Nick’s shoulder at Sinclair, whose thin lips were curved in a tight, angry line. “Will you get out, man? Before I forget that you’re a man of God and put you out myself?”

“Aye.” Sinclair’s head was bobbing with agitation as he nodded. “Aye, I’ll go sooner than watch your

lewdness --"

The door slammed behind him a moment later, and John turned his attention to Nick, who was breathing quickly, nostrils flaring, eyes closed. "He says ... he says there's a pair of earrings. Under his pillow." Nick spoke almost flatly, as if he were trying to relay the information with as little emotion as possible. "The ones he bought you on your honeymoon. You keep them there to remember him."

Anne stood up in shock, fingers pressed to her lips. "How do you know that?" she demanded, glaring at Nick, who opened his eyes in time to see her expression.

"He told me," Nick said. "Fergus. That was your dad's name, wasn't it?" he asked John.

"I didn't ever tell you, not that I recall, but yes, it was." John hadn't been able to bring himself to turn to the corner when Sinclair had been there, and now he'd gone he still couldn't. What was Nick seeing? What would he see if he looked?

"You may have my son fooled, Mr. Kelley, but you can't fool me." Anne raised her chin defiantly.

"What do you think I did?" Nick snapped, rounding on her with a fury John hadn't expected, and which he had to admit he didn't like seeing directed at his mother, even though under the circumstances she deserved it. "Do you think I went up to your bedroom and looked for something to convince you with?" He was trembling. "What? Oh, back to your bedroom."

"Aye." Anne still looked wary. "Aye ... the bedroom's in the back."

John closed his eyes and felt something, he wasn't sure what, flow between himself and Nick. Some strength, some comfort. He opened his eyes and turned his head.

His father stood watching him, with a faint smile on his face, dressed as he'd been on the day he'd put out to sea with his brother for a few hours fishing. The injury that had ended his life hadn't carried over into death; he looked as John remembered him, his brown hair showing some gray, his thin, browned cheeks creased as much by smiling as sixty years of living, hazy and indistinct but with memory and love making him real.

"Dad. Oh God, *Dad* --"

The blow from his mother's hand as it whipped up and struck his cheek drew blood as her wedding ring cut his lip open.

"You dare! You dare! In his house and on the Sabbath! Get out. Take your, your -- *him* and get out!"

John tasted the warm salt of his own blood and stared aghast at his mother, white-faced with fury, tears streaming down her face.

"He's there, Mother. He *is*. I wouldn't lie to you about that. You know I wouldn't. Take my hand. *Please*. It's you he wants; he only comes when you and Nick are both there. He wants something, and he can't rest until -- Will you not just take my hand?"

He stopped, his chest heaving as he caught his breath, the pleading words tumbling out in a frantic rush as he held out his hand to her.

"Please? Mam, *please*?"

Anne didn't move, staring at him.

"He says you need to believe he's here," Nick whispered in the quiet, the ticking of the clock the loudest sound in the room. "No, I know. Wait. What? There's ... he says there was a scare before you were married. That you thought you were pregnant. That no one else knew."

Nodding, John's mother's lips twitched in something close to a smile, slowly. "No one. I never told ..." Her hand reached out and took John's still outstretched one and held on, her fingers rough and strong. "I can't see him. Is he really here?"

"He is," Nick said. "You can't see him?"

She shook her head mutely, her eyes wide and holding a mixture of apprehension and hope.

"It's not my hand you need to be holding," John told her. "It's his."

Anne turned to look at Nick again and he held out his hand at once. Without speaking, and moving with a reluctance that John wasn't quite sure how to interpret, she took Nick's hand, linking them in a circle.

"Now, Mam? *Now* can you see him?" John asked urgently, watching his father's ghost move to stand beside Nick, in front of her. "He's right there, he's --"

"Hush." Anne's voice was breaking, her face twisting with grief and longing. "I can see him. Oh, Fergus, love, oh God ..."

Nick was shaking, and there were tears in his eyes; John wasn't sure why. Was it physically painful for him to connect with the ghosts? He'd have to ask. "He says he loves you," Nick said. "He says he always will."

John's mother nodded, the desperation in her hand mirroring the desperation in Nick's as they each clutched at John. "Aye, love. I know. Why ... why can't I hear him? Why can't I hear you, love?"

"It takes a lot of strength to materialize like this. It's probably ..." Fergus's image, thin and wisp-like to begin

with, wavered and faded, leaving nothing. Anne made a small sound of dismay, but Nick shook his head. "It's okay. He's not gone, he's just ..."

The sound of his Da's voice filled John's head, so familiar and missed that his throat swelled up with unshed tears.

Couldn't rest until you knew that I was all right, Fergus said. And until I knew you were. Needed to know that you were happy.

"I miss you. So much," Anne said softly.

Startled, John glanced at his mother, realizing that she'd heard him, too; that the message was for her, not him, although in many ways it applied to them both. *You've got years left, love. Years to live and be happy with someone else. You're not to mourn me any longer.*

"As if I could ever look at another man!" Anne's voice strengthened with indignation. John eyed her curiously. There was something, some undertone of guilt there, and Anne was blushing.

Fergus laughed quietly, the sound bringing a sudden sting of tears to John's eyes. He'd not forgotten it, but he'd never thought to hear that amused, soft chuckle again. *Did you have your eyes closed when you were kissing Carson, then? Love, he's a good man. He'll take care of you. Don't worry about it.*

"I don't want to love anyone else."

I don't think it's up to you. Fergus's voice was getting thinner, harder to understand. Love doesn't work like that, does it, John? John felt Nick's hand tighten on his. Be happy, lad. All of you.

His mother was weeping quietly, and after a few more seconds Nick's shoulders slumped. "He's gone."

John released Nick's hand and pulled his mother to him, cradling her against his chest as she cried and feeling the tension leave her until she finally lifted her head and stared up at him. "I don't -- I don't know what to say," she whispered. She freed herself from his grip, patting his arm and then, with a sorrowful look passing over her face, stroking his cheek, where the imprint of her hand was still, John guessed, clearly visible. "I'm sorry for that, John. I've never struck you in anger. Never. I'm ... I'm sorry."

He caught her hand in his and squeezed it reassuringly. "It doesn't matter, Mam."

"It does," she insisted and then swallowed and turned to Nick. "It hasn't changed my mind. About you two. I can't be ... glad. I just can't. It's not what I'd have wished for him, and I'll not lie and say it is. But what you just did --" Her eyes filled again, and she took a stumbling step towards Nick and hugged him. "Thank you." The words were almost inaudible. Nick hugged her back, a little uncertainly, and she looked up at him and brushed the tears from his face with her fingers. "Too many tears." Anne gave a determined sniff, stepping away from them and sitting down heavily. "John, lad, will you no' be putting the kettle on? I think Mr. Kelley would like a nice cup of tea."

"I'd like you to call me Nick."

Anne gave him a level look and then smiled. "Do you take sugar, then, Nick?"

Epilogue

One Year Later

“Thank God,” Nick said fervently, shutting and double latching the hotel door behind them as John went over and dropped his suitcase and travel bag down next to the armchair. They’d been on the plane for the better part of the day, and now all he wanted to do was wash off the worst of the grime and collapse into bed.

Being back in America was ... weird. Familiar, but not in the way he’d expected it would be. Part of it was being with John, of course, and part of it was that he’d gotten so used to being in Scotland. Used to hearing everyone’s accents -- and John swore that Nick was starting to develop a bit of one himself, although Nick wasn’t sure that he could hear it in his own voice. Americans sounded flat in comparison.

Nick manhandled his suitcase into the closet area and rubbed his hand over his face wearily. “Want to take a shower?”

“You go first.” John headed to the window. “I just want to look at the view.”

It was nine at night, which meant that there wasn’t much to see apart from a very ordinary town street, but John had stepped off the plane and immediately turned into a rubbernecking tourist, wide-eyed and enthusiastic over each unfamiliar sight.

Nick went over and stood behind him, slipping an arm around John’s waist and pulling him back until he was leaning against Nick’s chest. He nuzzled John’s ear gently. “Does it really look that different?”

“You know it does.” John relaxed against him. “Christ, you could fit the biggest town on Traighsheel inside that shopping center -- mall -- we passed, and lose it.” He turned his head away slightly, exposing his neck for Nick to kiss. “I told you I hadn’t seen much of the world. Do you want me to pretend I’m not impressed?”

“I don’t want you to pretend anything.” Nick kissed the soft skin of John’s neck and felt the rumble as John murmured appreciatively. “But it’ll still be there in the morning. Come shower with me.” He wasn’t thinking about tomorrow, not yet, and he wanted the distraction of John’s naked form against his.

John turned and wrapped his arms around Nick, smiling at him. “Aye, it will. And so will you, come to that, but no matter what side of the Atlantic we’re on, I’ll take looking at you over cars and shops every time.” He took a handful of Nick’s shirt and tugged at it gently, pulling it free of his pants. “Especially if you’re wearing nothing but water.”

They made their way into the bathroom, slowly undressing each other between kisses and then needing to stop while Nick fiddled with the unfamiliar shower controls, John’s hands distracting him as he tried to adjust the water to the right temperature. They were kissing again before they were even under the spray, teasing each other with light touches that they’d perfected over the months they’d been together.

John reached for the small bar of complimentary soap, stripping off the paper, and then stepped under the shower, turning his face up to the water. His cock was half-hard already, and the fine, powerful spray was outlining every muscle, every hollow and curve on his body. “Come here.” He reached out for Nick, making room for him under the jet.

There was nothing Nick wanted more -- he barely paid any attention to the hot water streaming over him as he moved closer, sighing as he ran his hands over the planes of John’s body, warm and wet. His right hand slid down to fondle John’s balls, and he felt John’s dick twitch against his wrist as John’s hands, slick with soap, slipped around to his lower back. “I want to fuck you tonight,” Nick murmured, his lips caressing John’s ear. “Want to be inside you.”

He felt John shiver and press closer to him. “Then I’m thinking this should be a very quick shower.” John’s hand moved down to Nick’s ass and Nick gasped as John’s finger worked its way inside him, gently insistent, making Nick’s tiredness recede as arousal jolted his body awake. “Unless you were planning on doing it in here?”

John knew exactly how to drive him crazy, Nick thought as he stroked John’s cock slowly and pressed his mouth to John’s shoulder, breathing through his nose. He groaned, stifling the sound against John’s skin, his own thumb curling over the tip of John’s cock and sliding back the foreskin. “What?” Nick muttered distractedly. “Was I ... supposed to be ... answering something?”

He got a chuckle for an answer and felt John’s finger slip deeper and then slide back out, rubbing along the strip of skin behind Nick’s balls before he reached for the soap again. “No need. I’d rather we used the bed tonight anyway.” John tilted his hips, pushing his cock through the curl of Nick’s fingers. “Never seen one that wide ...

seems a shame not to use it for more than sleeping.”

His soapy hands moved over Nick’s skin, caressing it rather than washing it, his fingernails digging in now and then as Nick continued to touch him, their mouths meeting in a series of long kisses, tasting water and each other as their tongues explored and teased.

John’s hands slowed and he gripped Nick’s hips, pushing him back a little, his thumbs tracing small circles against the thin skin beneath the jutting hip bones, leaving Nick shivering because his cock, which John had only touched briefly, was throbbing urgently with each slow rotation. “Nick --” John’s voice was husky, catching on each word, his eyes dark with need. “You’re clean. Can we not get out of here now? Please?”

However Nick had managed before not to think of what was to come the next day, in the place Matthew had died, was lost to him now, his hands sliding over John’s skin with a feverish, desperate need to reassure himself that John was alive, safe. “Yes,” he gasped, doing his best to drive back the fear even as he shut off the shower with a quick wrench of his wrist and urged John out, kissing him with one hand on the back of his wet head in case he walked him into the door frame by accident.

The bed wasn’t far from the bathroom door, and Nick didn’t care enough about towels to bother with them. At the edge of the bed he paused, trying to remember where he’d put the lube he’d packed and turning to retrieve it from the carry-on bag as soon as he had. John’s blue eyes were watching him, lips slightly swollen from the force of Nick’s kisses. “Turn around.” Nick’s lube-slick fingers found their way into John’s body before John had even settled his weight onto his hands and knees on the bed.

John turned his head to glance back at Nick over his shoulder. There wasn’t any sign of protest on his face, just a faint surprise, but Nick paused, breathing quickly, waiting.

“There’s no need to stop.” John caught his lip between his teeth, biting down hard as Nick’s fingers twisted and slid inside him. “God, Nick, what are you waiting for?” His voice was half-challenge, half-plea. “Fuck me.”

Nick worked his fingers deeper, pressing firmly and reveling in the sound of John’s deep groan, then replaced fingers with cock and pushed forward.

They didn’t do this all that often, with Nick the one doing the penetrating, so he had to wait, trembling, until John’s body relaxed and let him in. John was hot and slick inside, and so tight that Nick had to close his eyes, but it felt like he’d already been wanting this too long, and he clutched at John’s hips and started to fuck him hard.

Every time he did this, he wondered why he didn’t do it more often, because there was nothing about it that he didn’t love, from the way John was clawing at the smooth, heavy cover on the bed, making sounds that might have been words at some point but which were emerging as hoarse, inarticulate cries, to the ability to make this happen just the way he wanted it to.

It wasn’t John he was controlling; John who gave him everything he wanted, all he needed; no, it was his life, for just a few snatched moments, at least. And he didn’t do this often because these days he didn’t often feel like this. These days, he was content, relaxed, confident ... a new Nick.

Yeah.

And tomorrow the new and improved Nick was going to have to face something that had taken his life and twisted it viciously until it had snapped like his wrist had. It didn’t matter that what he had now was so much better; that he woke up smiling more often than not. It was a change that he’d had forced on him, and when he thought about that he needed *this*.

Needed John.

Luckily, even when he was like this, Nick never had the urge to fuck John hard enough to hurt him. It wasn’t that he was holding back, it was just that this was all he needed, all that was necessary, this and nothing more. John’s body clenched around him like a brutal fist, John’s hip bones pressed against Nick’s fingers, and he could feel his own muscles tightening up, making it harder to breathe. The cheap hotel rug was rough against his feet, and he felt the sudden urge to taste John’s skin, so he bent and licked a line up John’s spine, sweat and the metallic tang of shower water mingling to fill his senses and make him gasp.

Nick slid his hand around and cupped John’s balls -- not touching his cock, not yet, but fondling the soft skin there at the base of it.

He could feel the heat pooled there and he pushed inside John again, seeking it out, hearing his name spill from John’s lips with every breath he took, although he wasn’t sure John knew he was doing it.

“Nick -- God --” John’s head sank down as Nick’s hand continued to tease him and no more, his shoulders tensed. “Please.”

Nick groaned, letting go of John and leaning back, both hands on John’s hips again as he watched his glistening cock disappear into John’s body. They were both slick with lube, the sensations threatening to overwhelm Nick, and he didn’t care -- didn’t care about anything but how it felt.

“Come for me.” Nick thrust deeper, and then wrapped his arms around John, pulling him up onto his knees, the

angle of each stroke changed. John shuddered and turned his head for a kiss, and Nick gave it, open-mouthed and gasping as he fucked John with a rocking, knees-bent motion and his hand found John's cock, the wet tip of it rubbing over his fingers. "Like this? Should I -- oh fuck, *John ...*"

He came in a scalding rush, one hand still wrapped around John's erection and the other on his chest, curled so that only the heel of his hand and his fingertips touched John's skin, his tongue tracing John's upper lip.

The blue of John's eyes swam behind Nick's eyes as he squeezed them closed, unable to help it, although he didn't want to miss anything, not when John was looking at him like that, as lost in the moment as Nick was.

Opening his eyes with an effort, Nick eased out of John, and turned John to his back on the bed, his hand still tight around John's cock, tense and hot against his palm. John moaned, his hips lifting off the bed a little, his eyes glazed but fixed on Nick's face.

Nick moved to kneel over John, kissing him as his hand began to move, slipping his arm under John's head and holding him close.

"Nick -- oh God -- I can't --"

John pulled his mouth away from Nick's, panting, his face flushed. Nick felt the tremor that ran through John as he came, felt John's cock jerk helplessly in his grip.

He didn't stop moving his hand, running it from base to tip and back again, dragging the foreskin up and down until the sound John made was more plea than pleasure. He gentled his mouth on John's, kissing him softly. "Love you," Nick whispered, the words as natural as breathing. "God, I love you so much. I'd do anything for you." It was true, and he knew that John felt the same way -- his presence here was proof of it, his unfailing support of whatever Nick wanted or needed to do.

"I don't need anything but that." John rubbed his face against Nick's shoulder and then kissed it. "You loving me." He smiled. "Well, maybe another shower." His arms tightened around Nick, drawing him close. "But there's no rush."

His mouth sought out Nick's again, his lips warm and strong and Nick had to agree.

No rush at all.

* * * * *

"I don't know if I can do this." Nick was driving the rental car because John had been worried about being on the other side of the road.

"Aye, you can." There was enough confidence in John's voice to give the simple reassurance weight. "I've never known you to fail at anything you've put your mind to." He grinned. "Though I'm still waiting for you to gut a fish, mind."

His hand came to rest on Nick's knee for a brief moment and then he glanced out of the window, his voice hesitant now. "Are we close, do you think?"

"Yeah." Nick had spent some time on the airplane the day before looking at maps, figuring out exactly where his car accident with Matthew had happened and how to get back there. It looked different in the daytime -- the sun was shining, although there weren't many other cars on the road -- but he knew he'd recognize the spot where it had happened.

If nothing else, the tree that they'd hit would bear the scars of the crash in a more physical way than he did.

The past year had healed him. His wrist rarely bothered him now, other than the occasional ache when a storm front was moving in, and he'd settled down psychically, too. Maybe it was having a place to call home that had helped; maybe it was having John, who'd moved in with him after deciding to let his mother rent his grandparent's house to someone else. Anne wasn't thrilled with their relationship, and probably never would be, but she was civil, and that was enough for Nick.

He saw fewer ghosts now. The fact that he was on an island with a small population meant that there weren't all that many to see.

As Nick turned the car around the curve that led to the stretch of road where Matthew had died, he tensed. He couldn't help it. He slowed down when the road straightened out. "Here." He nodded with his chin. "Over there. I'm ... oh God. I have to stop."

Nick tried not to brake too abruptly even though he knew John was wearing his seat belt, but the front tires shifted in the loose dirt on the side of the road as the car stopped. He was out the door in a flash, holding onto the car for support as dry heaves hit him like a punch in the stomach.

He heard John get out and come to him, moving quickly but without panic, almost as if he'd been expecting this and was prepared for it. Maybe he had been. The months that they'd been together had done nothing to lessen the strength of that initial, instant attraction and everything to deepen it. John would know exactly how he was feeling -- would share it to a certain extent -- but with enough distance to be able to comfort Nick.

They made a good team.

"I'm here." John's arm wrapped around Nick's shoulders. "Right here, love."

Swallowing and wiping at his damp eyes, Nick straightened up, grateful for John's support. "This is why I didn't eat anything this morning." He was glad he hadn't.

"Aye, I thought so." John moved his arm down to Nick's waist. He turned his head and looked behind Nick. "Is that it, then?"

Nick rotated slowly, not really wanting to see. There was a small part of him that was worried about seeing Matthew here, even though Matthew had promised him dozens of times -- often at Nick's insistence -- that he had enough sense to move on and that he knew better than to haunt Nick. Nick didn't have any reason not to think that was true. He knew that if there was one last thing Matthew could have given him, it would be his absence.

The tree was half dead, scarred from the impact of the car, but otherwise it blended in with the surrounding woods well enough. Most people wouldn't have noticed it at all. There were no tire marks on the pavement, no crosses or flowers to indicate that this was where a man had died.

As if in a dream, Nick moved away from John and started to walk toward it.

He'd seen it through the windshield that night, the wide, thick trunk illuminated by the fitful, dying headlights of the car. He reached it and traced his fingers over the bark, touching it and wondering if, like him, it was recovering. That it still bore leaves was a good sign, he supposed, even if the pale, bare branches jutting out here and there told another story.

But, really, it wasn't the tree that was important. It had signaled the end of his journey -- and Matthew's -- that night, but he'd come here to deal with the ghost whose sudden, horrific appearance had sent him veering off the road.

"Where are you?" he murmured, closing his eyes. "I'm here. I'm sorry it's taken me this long to come back to help you, but I'm here now."

This long. A year. A year before he'd brought himself to admit that until this one ghost was laid to rest he'd never be at peace himself. A year to erase the last, lingering resentment towards the unknown man who had, in death, still been capable of affecting the living.

John waited patiently, giving him space, and Nick took a deep breath and opened himself up, letting it come.

There was a whisper, a slippery sound like something sinking into water. Nick flinched away from it instinctively, curling a hand up around his head to block his ear.

Here ... people and ... so alone. It was a vicious hiss, angry and frightening.

"I'm sorry," Nick gasped. "I know, I shouldn't have ..."

John came up beside him and reached for his hand, murmuring reassurances, and Nick took heart.

"I'm here now. Tell me what you need."

Images flashed over him, vivid and quick, like being assaulted by a slide show that left out too much information to be a complete picture. Each image *hurt*, searing into his brain, too bright for his eyes to take.

A hiker, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, walking through the forest.

The same man sitting at the base of a wide tree, huddled for warmth.

A hand stretched out on the ground, unmoving and covered with ants.

"Shit!" Nick flailed wildly only to discover himself sitting with John's arms around him, holding him together.

"Tell me what you saw." John's voice was calm and undemanding. They'd done this before, with John's questions pulling details from Nick that he hadn't been aware of absorbing, helping him to piece together what needed to be done.

"He was walking," Nick said. "He got lost ... hurt, too. He couldn't walk. His ankle. He broke his ankle." He felt a throb in his own left ankle as he said it, intense but fading fast. Ghost pain. Real, and somehow not; he'd rarely mentioned it to Matthew, not wanting it to seem like he was looking for sympathy, or weak. But there was nothing that he couldn't share with John. "He waited ... God, a really long time. Hoping someone would come."

"And they didn't." It wasn't a question.

"The animals came." Nick shuddered, but knew that it wasn't really that bad when you thought about it logically. The man had been dead when they found him, Nick was sure of it. "But no one else did, and he's in there, deep in there." He frowned. "I don't know why they never found him, but that's what he wants. To be found. To be buried. His family ... they think ... oh, God, I don't know what they're thinking, but he wants them to know. To be sure."

"We'll need to tell the police." John sounded a little concerned about that, even as his hand moved in slow, gentle circles on Nick's back. "Will they believe you, do you think?"

Another flash went through his head, sharper than the others. This one was emotional rather than visual -- the stark, intense terror of a spirit who hadn't realized that his physical body was dead, watching as flesh was torn from

bone by a fox. Nick clutched at John and pressed his forehead to John's chest, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. "Okay! I know. I know. I'll ... I know."

John's touch was comforting. "Nick. Police?" That was just what Nick needed at times like this -- to be reminded of the concrete, of what had to be done.

"Yes." Nick nodded, the words coming painfully. "There's a cop in Scranton who knows me. A detective. He'll back me up when we call the locals." He shivered and breathed deeply, reassured by John's scent and presence. "God, he was so *alone*."

"Then, maybe, but not now." John's hand was warm on Nick's face. "Tell me when you're ready to go. There's no rush. We've got plenty of time."

"Do we?" Nick asked idly. It wasn't a serious question, and John knew enough not to answer it. John's hand slid across his skin and came to rest at the back of his neck. Nick turned his head, letting his temple rest against John's shoulder as he looked at the trees and the thin strips of sky that were visible between the branches. Now that they were quiet, he could hear the chirping of birds and the sound of his own breathing, slow and relaxed.

John's thumb traced a tendon in his neck gently, rubbing at it as he waited for Nick.

After another minute or so, Nick pulled away. They untangled themselves and stood up. He couldn't resist going to the tree one more time, touching the scarred wood of it and then looking down at the small scars on his own wrist, faded from dark pink to pale now on their way to white. They'd fade with time. Pretty much everything would.

But not, Nick thought, turning and meeting John's blue eyes, everything.

He was glad he'd gotten the chance to learn that lesson.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" Nick asked.

John smiled as Nick walked over and put his arms around him. "Aye, I think I do. It might even be almost as much as I love you."

Nick didn't turn his head to look at the tree again. Whispering a silent goodbye to any ghosts that might be near enough to hear, he kissed John before they started back toward the car, arms around each other's waists and the sun shining on the backs of their necks.

"Let's go," Nick said. "And afterwards, when we've taken care of this guy ..."

"Mmm?" asked John.

"Well ... where do you want to go? Pick a direction; we're on holiday." Nick smiled, deliberately using the word John would have and picturing the expression on John's face when he saw New York City or the Grand Canyon.

"There's a perfectly good bed waiting at the hotel."

"There are perfectly good beds everywhere," Nick told him, grinning.

He was looking forward to trying them out.

THE ENDS

Jane Davitt

I am English, married with two daughters, and I emigrated to Canada in 1997. I'm an inveterate reader who began writing in 2002 at the age of 38 and discovered that it's just as much fun being the one putting the words on paper as being the one reading them.

Writing is something that's become part of my life and I sometimes wonder just what I did with the hours I now spend tapping away at my computer. It can't have been important I suppose. I'm a fan of detective, fantasy and science fiction and collect vintage children's books too. Our house is filled with over 4,000 books and we all love to read. Apart from the cats.

I did have hobbies but now I write mostly. If I wasn't writing, I might be gardening, cross stitching or walking. I do still manage to volunteer at my daughter's school and at the local library.

Visit Jane on the Web at www.janedavitt.com.

Alexa Snow

Alexa Snow is an emotional person who appreciates practicality in others. She's prone to crying at inconvenient times, drinking too much coffee, and staying up too late playing with words (either reading or writing.) A background of schooling she wasn't all that interested in resulted in a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and a vague sense of wasted time. Alexa lives in a tiny old house in New England with her husband, young son, more books than she has time to count, and a small but oft-changing collection of pets.

Visit Alexa on the Web at <http://home.comcast.net/~alexasnow/wsb/html/view.cgi-home.html-.html>.