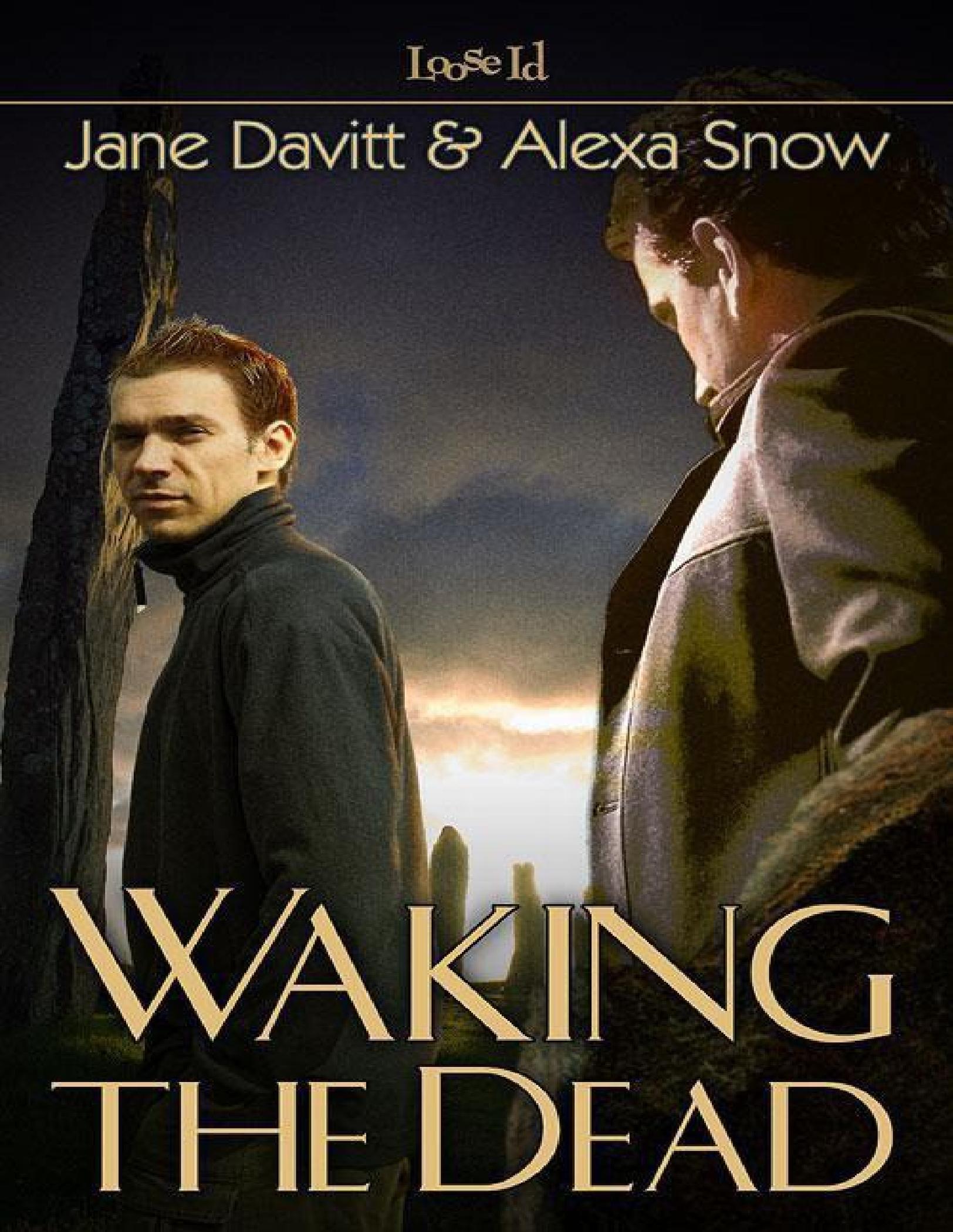


Loose Id

Jane Davitt & Alexa Snow

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric photograph of two men. On the left, a man with short brown hair, wearing a dark turtleneck, looks towards the right. On the right, another man is shown in profile, looking down. The background is a dimly lit landscape with a bright, hazy horizon line, possibly a sunset or sunrise over water. The title 'WAKING THE DEAD' is printed in large, gold, serif capital letters at the bottom.

WAKING  
THE DEAD

# **WAKING THE DEAD**

**Jane Davitt & Alexa Snow**

**LooseId<sup>®</sup>**  
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# **Waking the Dead**

**Jane Davitt & Alexa Snow**

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## Chapter One

The sound of the tires hitting the pavement smoothed out as John eased the car off the Oban ferry and onto the mainland. Nick's stomach, touchy throughout the journey across the sea despite the size of the ferry, finally settled, and he sighed and leaned back in his seat.

The journey to Glasgow airport, where Nick's brother, Josh, would be waiting, wasn't a short one, but Nick didn't care how long it was if they were driving away from the ferry, not toward it.

"All right?" John asked, reaching over to give Nick's knee a comforting pat.

"Yeah. You'd think after all these years back and forth I'd be used to it." Remembering, Nick opened the glove compartment and rifled around in it until he found a couple of the wrapped ginger candies he'd bought on Mull the last time they'd taken the ferry. "Want one?"

John snorted like he'd been mortally insulted, which Nick didn't think was fair. John might have been born within sight of the sea, like most of the people living on Traighshee, but Nick, a relative newcomer in the eyes of the islanders, even after ten years, wasn't the only one who got seasick on the ferries. There was just something about the smell of the fuel and the way they rolled. "The sea was as calm as I've ever seen it; why would I be needing one of those?"

"Because it's candy and you have a sweet tooth?"

"I'd sooner have a mint." John held out his hand before Nick could toss the spare candy back. "Oh, go on then. At least we'll both taste the same."

"It's ginger, not garlic," Nick said, but he gave it to John anyway.

John unwrapped his candy as the car in front of them accelerated and then braked sharply to let a truck join the line of vehicles making its way out onto the main road. He popped the candy deftly into his mouth. "True enough. God, will you look at the traffic? Bloody tourists."

"Tourists that are willing to pay a pretty penny to be shown the wonders of the Scottish Isles," Nick said, tucking his own candy into his cheek so he could talk unencumbered.

John had bought a van a couple of years back and now used it to drive said tourists around the islands -- the islands being Mull and Traighshee. He gave as many as three tours a day at the height of the season. Traighshee itself was small enough that more than a bit of walking was required, of course, especially when the group in question was interested in seeing the rockier shores on the western side of the island. The larger isle of Mull included many more tourist attractions, not the least of which was DuartCastle. Nick had now seen the castle so many times himself that it bored him nearly to tears, but John didn't seem to mind repeating the same information again and again. As long as the tourists were genuinely interested, John's eyes would sparkle and he'd willingly answer whatever questions they might have.

"I didn't mean young Josh, you know," John said after a short silence. He sounded abashed, which made Nick smother a smile. "He's family; it's different. I just meant -- oh, for the love of God, will you make your mind up what lane you're in?"

The car in front was straddling both lanes when it wasn't weaving between them, because, from what Nick could see, the driver was attempting to read a map at the same time as steer. With his stomach still queasy, he was glad that John didn't need directions to their destination. Focusing on a map would have made his nausea return full force. Glasgow Airport was a couple of hours away, but the route was one they'd taken often enough, and as long as the M8 wasn't at a standstill due to construction -- something Nick was philosophical about after a decade of living in Scotland -- they should be in good time to meet Josh's flight from Atlanta, via London.

It had been seven years since Josh's previous visit, which he'd made with his mother and stepfather. Now Josh, just turned eighteen and graduated from high school, was making the trip alone. He and Nick had been in regular contact, exchanging e-mail on a weekly basis for so long that Nick was convinced he knew as much about Josh's life as any of the boy's friends. They'd talked on the phone, too, although less frequently. Josh seemed to view Nick as a cross between an older, looked-up-to friend and the half brother that he actually was, and he'd been looking forward to returning to Scotland with an enthusiasm Nick associated with the young.

"You're worried about how this is going to go," Nick said. "The whole visit, I mean." John hadn't said so, not at all, but Nick could tell. He couldn't read minds like Josh could, but he didn't need to, not when it came to John,

not after all the years they'd been together.

John finally managed to pass the car in front of them when it pulled into a lay-by. Nick was relieved that John contented himself with a pitying glance at the driver, partially hidden behind a map he'd unfolded to its fullest extent. They joined the traffic heading south toward the A85, John driving with a casual expertise. Traffic, even rush-hour traffic, was more predictable than the sheep that wandered nonchalantly over the island roads; Nick's own reflexes had been honed by more than a few close encounters.

"Worried? No," John answered finally. "Just -- what's the lad going to *do* with himself? It's not like last time when he was happy to go out fishing with me or hike around with you." John rubbed the side of his nose, his other hand tapping restlessly against the wheel. "Especially at night. We can take him to the pub now and then, maybe, but I'm thinking his mother won't be pleased if we send him home with a taste for whisky."

"I wouldn't be pleased either." Nick flipped the candy across his tongue to the other cheek. "Yeah, I don't know. He seems to think there'll be a million things to do, but maybe you're right. Sitting on the couch watching the fireplace is going to seem pretty boring to a kid who's used to malls and movie theaters." He smiled to himself. "On the other hand, I seem to remember you saying the same things to me when I first came here."

John gave him a quick, mischievous glance, before his expression cleared. "Aye, but you made your own entertainment, didn't you? I seem to remember the couch being involved, too, now you mention it."

"It still is." Letting his head fall back against the headrest, Nick rolled the window down half an inch or so, just enough to let some fresh air in. "Josh is a good sport, but somehow I don't think watching us make out would be a fun evening's entertainment."

John chuckled. "I wasn't planning on scarring him for life that way, don't worry. From the way Michael tells it, he's only got to start kissing Sheila and one of his kids will be pretending to throw up a minute later. I was the same at their age, mind; I thought anyone over forty was dead below the waist."

"It's not necessarily a bad idea to disabuse them of that notion," Nick said in the fake British accent he adopted on occasion. John gave him a sour look, and he laughed. "What?"

"You know what." John managed to combine navigating a roundabout with delivering a swift, if gentle, punch to Nick's arm. "Behave, or I'll feed Josh haggis for breakfast and tell him it was your idea."

"You will *not*." Nick rubbed his arm and affected a wounded air. "Poor Josh. Coming all this way to see us, not even in the car yet, and you're already threatening him."

The road ahead of them cleared, and the sun obligingly appeared from behind a high wisp of cloud. Scotland in June -- if one overlooked the midges, which Nick tried to do as much as possible -- if it wasn't raining, was a pretty good place to be, and even if the outskirts of Oban couldn't match Traighshee as far as scenery went, the air streaming through the window was salt-scented and pleasantly cool.

"From what I remember of him, he's not the sort to get scared easily," John said. "When we were out after mackerel and that storm blew up and near as dammit overturned us, he just clung to the side of the boat, his eyes shining, and told me it was better than any ride at Disney World."

"That sounds more like 'has a death wish' than 'doesn't scare easily.' We'd better hope it's not the former or it's going to be an interesting visit." Nick frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe he'd like to climb Ben Mor. If he gets bored, we can always offer it as a suggestion. I mean, it might seem a little more exciting than Ben Dearg."

John made a noncommittal sound, concentrating on the road.

"Do you think Caitrin would be willing to show him around? She'd know what the young people do these days, at least. Although from what I've seen, it's mostly hanging around at the pub."

"If she's forgotten him dropping fish guts down the back of her T-shirt, I'm sure she will." John's mouth quirked in a small grin. "It's only been seven years, though, so I wouldn't put money on it."

Caitrin was John's sister Janet's oldest child, who was about the same age as Josh. They'd spent a fair amount of time together on his last visit, along with Caitrin's younger brother, Murray -- it had been nice for Josh to have other children close to his own age to play with, even if Caitrin had been alternately charmed and annoyed by him.

"I've sort of gotten the impression that girls can have long memories," Nick admitted. John was one of the few people he'd ever have dared to say that to; he knew John would understand that his impressions of women in general, at least until he'd come to Traighshee, had been fairly limited.

"They can hold a grudge, too," John said unhelpfully. "I wouldn't like to be in Josh's shoes if they're down at the dock when the fishing boats come in and the smell brings it all back to her." He pursed his lips. "Of course, she's been brought up to be polite to visitors, but Josh would probably count as family, and you know what she's like with me, the cheeky brat."

The fondness in John's voice robbed the words of their bite. He was closer to Caitrin than any of his other nieces and nephews, sympathizing with her ambitions in a way her mother never could. For Janet, Traighshee was all the home she'd ever wanted, and Caitrin's restlessness and talk of leaving once she turned eighteen in July had

led to some increasingly heated arguments.

Janet would have understood and approved of Caitrin leaving the island to go to university. Nick knew she and her husband Alistair would have willingly helped out with the student loans required, but Caitrin was adamant that she didn't want more school. She wanted to travel and see the world, and with all a teenager's optimism, she waved aside trivialities like a savings account that held only a few hundred pounds with an airy hand, saying that she'd find a job doing something, anything, as long as it wasn't here.

The last argument between Janet and Caitrin had resulted in Nick walking downstairs one morning, yawning and dressed only in an entirely inadequate T-shirt, to find Caitrin asleep on the couch. She'd stormed out the night before and headed for her Uncle John the way she had since childhood for any disaster from a skinned knee to the death of her pet rabbit.

Nick had abandoned all ideas of breakfast in bed, with a suitably grateful John expressing his appreciation of Nick's thoughtfulness, and tiptoed back upstairs quickly. Judging from the shocked gasp and giggle that floated up to him, not quite quickly enough.

He still hadn't completely recovered from the incident; he hadn't walked around the house in the same state of undress since, even though it was coming up to the one time of year one could really get away with it. Any time but summer was too cold, especially first thing in the morning.

Getting to the airport took longer than Nick would have liked. They'd left early to be on the safe side, though, and ended up with an hour to kill before Josh's flight got in. Nick was able to get a smoothie, not caring that John teased him about his "fancy American ways" as he drank it.

"I'll point out that this is the GlasgowInternationalAirport. If I can get it here, the argument that it's American falls kind of flat." Nick took another sip through the straw and grinned at John.

"Fruit's meant to be bitten and chewed," John said. "That glop looks like something you'd give a baby or a toothless old man, and I know you've got all your teeth because you bite me with them often enough." He took a sip of his cup of coffee and glanced around him at the people passing by, most looking harried. "God, this reminds me of that ants' nest we found in the garden last year; I put my spade through it and they boiled up, running everywhere."

Nick knew how he felt -- too many people in too small a space, which was ridiculous considering the size of the airport and the fact that they were both used to living on an island that wasn't much bigger than some villages. The more he thought about it, the more it made his skin crawl, just as if those ants from the previous summer were walking all over him. It was uncomfortably similar to the way it felt when he became aware of a ghost seeking his attention, although there weren't likely to be any ghosts here at the airport. At least, he hoped not. Dealing with Josh's arrival was enough excitement for one day.

"Maybe it'd be better if we moved over nearer to the windows." He gestured at the large panes of glass off to their left, where there were rows of seats and plenty of other people sitting, most of them with baggage of some kind or other.

"Fine by me." John picked up his drink, took one last gulp, and then deposited it in a recycle bin on their way to the window seats. A plane took off, the muted noise of its engines making its liftoff seem effortless, majestic. Somewhere up there in the empty blue of the sky, Josh's plane was defying gravity, too.

Nick wondered if Josh had thought about their father while he was flying. After the time he'd spent at the crash site where his father and so many others had died, staring at the twisted metal coffin that the plane had become, he supposed he should have had a phobia about flying, but he didn't. It had been a freak accident, no more than that, but it didn't mean that on the rare occasions he flew he didn't think about it.

"Do you ever miss it? The traveling, I mean?" John asked, gesturing out at the runways. "I know it wasn't as exciting as it sounds, but you got to see places I never will."

"Miss it?" Nick shook his head. "No, not really." Of course, there were reasons beyond the obvious -- being able to settle somewhere so remote had meant a dramatic drop in the number of ghosts he encountered, to the point where it wasn't uncommon now for him to go months between sightings. That alone would have been worth the loss of the nomadic existence he'd lived for so long. "I guess there was a certain freedom to not having to worry about things like household repairs or how to work a vacuum cleaner, but there were a lot of negatives that came along with it."

"I wouldn't like to feel I had nowhere to call home," John said. He screwed up his face in thought, the laugh lines at the corner of his blue eyes deepening. "For all that there've been times I've wanted to leave the island so badly I could taste it." He gave Nick a rueful smile. "That trip we took to Florida; we never did go back the way we said we would. Maybe not that exact place, but this winter, when it's dark at three in the afternoon and the winds are howling fit to deafen you, well, maybe we can pack our bags and go somewhere warm? I'd like that."

Nick pressed his thigh to John's. Then, feeling like that wasn't enough contact, he put a hand on John's knee.

He'd be the first to admit that the long, cold winters were the worst thing about living on Traighshee, and the idea of abandoning Rossneath, the house he'd inherited from his uncle, in the middle of January in favor of some place tropical was appealing even now. "We should. And we should look into it soon, book a flight, or before we know it, spring will be right around the corner and we'll decide to wait another year. Where should we go? The Caribbean?"

John put his hand on Nick's, and their fingers interlocked with a comforting familiarity. John's hands were always warm and slightly roughened from seawater and work. Nick thought of them moving on his body that morning, unhurried and gentle, when they'd woken early and decided to take advantage of the last time they'd be alone for a while, and smiled. John caught the change in Nick's mood and returned his smile with one of his own, slow and sexy.

"Anywhere hot enough for you to spend most of the time half naked would suit me. Come winter, you bundle yourself up in so many layers, by spring I've forgotten what you look like under the clothes."

"I've never really adjusted to the winters here -- I guess being able to tolerate them without too much complaining isn't genetic." Slowly, Nick turned their hands, leaving John's palm up on his thigh. He traced over the lines with one finger and watched John's fingers twitch. "Do you think I'm on there somewhere? I don't even know which one's your love line. Or mine." He looked at his own palm curiously.

"Some psychic you are," John told him. "Ask old Esme next time you see her in town; she swears she can tell the future in your hand or the tea leaves. Not that many people use them these days; it's all the wee bags with those strings on for dunking them." He shook his head. "I can still remember my mother skelping me for spitting out the tea leaves stuck in my teeth at the dinner table."

Nick chuckled. He couldn't really imagine Anne hitting John hard, but he could certainly see her administering a swift smack or two.

"You can laugh," John said. "I missed dessert and it was ice cream, which we didn't get that often back then." He closed his hand, capturing Nick's finger. "But I don't need Esme to tell me you're part of my future."

It was always hard for Nick to respond to things like that with anything even close to the gratitude he felt -- there were still times he looked at John and found himself filled with a sense of wonder and disbelief that he could have been so lucky. John accepted him completely, knew as much about him as anyone living, and loved him despite the challenges that came with being part of his life.

"I'd promise I'll never refuse to give you ice cream, but I know you'd suspect that it's just because I like it so much myself." He glanced up at the screen and saw Josh's flight number blinking. "Oh, that's him!"

"He's early," John commented. "They'll probably make up for it by losing his suitcase, mind."

"If they do, I'll tell him you jinxed him." Nick said.

John grinned. "He'll know you're lying." His smile faded. "Does he still --?"

"Yes." Nick knew John felt uncomfortable about Josh's ability in ways he didn't about Nick's, maybe just because he didn't know Josh all that well. Lowering his voice, even though the people around them probably weren't paying any attention, he added, "He can even read me over the phone. It's weird -- I don't know why I would have guessed that wouldn't work, but it does."

Horrified fascination passed over John's face. "That's...well, that's..." He cleared his throat. "Maybe it's because you're related and you're psychic, too? Or can he do it with everyone?" John stared out of the window at what probably wasn't even Josh's plane. "God, do you think he's doing it now?"

"He has said there are some people he really can't read at all. He's not sure why." Nick shrugged. "He's only eighteen; it could be another twenty years before he really has a handle on what he can do. And no, I don't think he's doing it now. If he couldn't block people out when he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to hear himself think. Literally."

They wandered toward the gate even though it'd probably be at least fifteen minutes before there was any sign of the passengers disembarking.

John walked beside him in silence for a while, and then ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He'd just had it cut and there was a line of paler skin showing at the nape and some gray showing among the brown, but that went for Nick's own darker hair, too.

"It can't be easy for the lad," John said. "It's more of a curse than a blessing, I'm thinking, even more than what you can do."

Reaching the gate, they moved over to stand along the wall where they wouldn't be in anyone's way. There were a number of other people waiting, but somehow Nick didn't feel as crowded as he had before. "There are fewer chances for him to feel like he helped someone, anyway. But not none. There was that time he overheard that kid thinking about suicide, remember?"

It had been a year ago at least; Josh had listened to a distraught classmate's thoughts and gone immediately to the school counselor, not explaining how he knew but urgently expressing his concern. The other boy had been

called to the office and admitted to his feelings, then had gone into therapy. He was still alive, and happier. Despite the anxiety Josh had experienced during the incident, he'd been glad to be able to help someone who likely wouldn't have gotten help any other way.

John leaned against the wall, his arm touching Nick's. Across from them, a young man had dropped his baggage and was locked in the enthusiastic embrace of his boyfriend who'd been waiting for him impatiently, pacing restlessly around. No one seemed to care, not these days, although Nick was sure there were still a few people in the crowd who disapproved. He and John -- well, more John -- were too used to being discreet in public to change their ways, but he thought that anyone looking at them would know that they were a couple even if they weren't walking off, like the younger couple, arms around each other and still exchanging kisses every few yards.

"I remember," John said. "That was a brave thing he did. It's just... I can't feel easy about the idea of having someone inside my head, somehow, not even when it's young Josh. And I'd hate for the boy to pick up on that because I *like* him, so I do. He's a fine lad, and he's family. I just --" He elbowed Nick in the side. "There he is, and he's grown, by the looks of him."

"Josh!" Nick raised a hand in greeting before he'd even really seen him, and then his eyes focused on Josh, who was well over a foot taller than he'd been the last time they'd seen him in person and considerably broader of shoulder than Nick had anticipated.

Dropping the bag he was holding, Josh came up, looked at Nick with a huge grin on his face for about four seconds, then threw both arms around him and hugged him. "Hi," Josh said in his ear.

"Hi," Nick said, a little overwhelmed by this show of affection. He patted Josh's very solid shoulder -- no wonder the boy had played football -- and Josh pulled back, still grinning. "How was your flight?"

"Long," Josh said. "And not full of sleep. I don't understand how anyone can sleep on a plane."

"I can sleep on a boat, but never a plane," John said. "Welcome back to Scotland, lad." Without a trace of self-consciousness, he repeated it in Gaelic, "*Fàilte*," and then added, "*Ciamar a tha thu?*"

Nick had picked up a fair amount of Gaelic in his time on the island, but even if he hadn't, the phrase for asking how someone was, was something he heard every time he walked into a shop. He didn't expect Josh to know it, though, so he was surprised when Josh turned toward John, stared at him for a moment, his green eyes shadowed with tiredness but bright with excitement, and then grinned and said, "I'm fine, thanks, John. How are you?"

"It's good to see you," John said. He extended his hand, and when Josh took it, pulled him in for a brief but comprehensive hug. "And I'm well, unlike your brother, here, who spent the ferry journey hanging over the side, as green as the sea."

"Still? I'd have thought you'd gotten over that by now." Josh barely managed to cover his mouth before he yawned and gave them a sheepish look. "Sorry. I think the lack of sleep's catching up on me. Just point me to the nearest Starbucks and I'll refuel."

"No Starbucks at the airport," Nick told him. "But we can get you a coffee here, as long as you don't mind that it won't have a fancy name. Or whipped cream on top."

"Are you kidding? That stuff'll clog your arteries." Josh's expression made it hard to tell if he was joking or not. "Yeah, that's fine." He looked around, confused.

"Over there," John said. "Caffè Nero. We were just there while we waited for you." He shook his head. "And I asked for a cup of tea, and all they had were herbal ones. Chai with cinnamon? What in the name of God would I be wanting to drink that for?"

Nick picked up the carry-on bag but let Josh deal with wheeling his suitcase, and they headed for the coffee shop. "So was the drive okay?" Josh asked. "Other than the ferry part."

Nick nodded. "Not bad. We made good time. How's your mom?" He had a hard time categorizing his relationship with Josh's mother, Stacy. They were fairly close in age, but she was the mother of his half brother, who was young enough to be his son... It was all kind of confusing. The fact that he genuinely liked her, and that she had encouraged him and Josh to get to know each other helped, but it didn't solve the basic problem.

"She's good," Josh said as they got in line. "A little freaked out about letting me out of the country, but I figure that's a typical mom thing. She knows you two aren't going to let me get into any trouble, though, so I don't know what she thought I was going to get up to on the plane. I mean, it's a pretty limited environment."

"Trouble?" John said, as if the word were new to him. "What trouble could you get into with us?" Nick snorted, but John continued serenely, "No, she's right to trust us to take care of you, and I'm sure you stuck to fizzy pop on the plane, isn't that right?"

"I'm too young to drink," Josh said, looking a little panicked and maybe a little bit guilty. Nick guessed he'd had one of the small bottles of wine that came with the meal, but no more than that. Stacy wasn't the sort of mother who'd tolerate underage drinking.

"Not here, you're not," John pointed out. He grimaced. "Most of the kids on the island do, but don't try to keep

up with them; they've had more practice than you."

"Lots of people have," Josh assured them, then stepped forward to the counter, and ordered his coffee. As the girl went off to make his drink, he turned and leaned against the counter. "Don't worry -- I'm seriously not interested in experimenting with...you know, liquor or whatever else might be available. I'm careful about stuff like that."

He would be, Nick realized. If the way drunk people behaved was any indication of their mental processes, listening to their thoughts must be an interesting enough experience without considering giving it a try yourself. "Well, we'll try to keep you busy while you're here."

"I'd love it if we could go fishing again," Josh said to John. "That was one of the things I remember most from when I was here before."

John beamed, which meant that it was Nick's turn to look guilty. Nick had tried to work up some enthusiasm for fishing, but without success. He was happy to cook anything John brought home and was equally happy to eat it, but the process of catching it was, in his opinion, boring, messy, and usually involved more cold seawater than he liked. John's pleasure at the idea of a companion was evident.

"Aye, that we can. I've a new boat now, bigger than the old one. I take tourists out on it sometimes to go deep-sea fishing. And there's this loch I know; we could camp out there overnight and get our lines out at dawn, when the trout are just rising. I'll show you how to tie your own flies, too." He patted Josh's shoulder. "We'll make a fisherman out of you by the time you go home. Remember that shoal of mackerel we came across when you were last here? On the other side of the island in the bay?"

"Creeth?" Josh asked.

John smiled. "Aye, Creeth, that's the one. The boat was so full of fish I couldn't see your knees."

Josh turned and accepted his coffee, thanking the girl with a smile that made her blink and flush, fluttering her eyelashes. The boy seemed completely unaware of the effect he'd had on her, continuing on with the conversation as they moved away from the counter and let other customers order their drinks. "I want to learn everything. You can show me how to clean the fish, right? And cook them?"

"Of course," Nick said. "The kitchen part of it's more my thing than John's." He was no expert -- and had a couple of years-old scars on his hands from knife mishaps to prove it -- but he could clean a fish without too much effort these days, and fry it up, too. He'd even come to terms with a fish stew recipe.

"I can grill them, but that's about it," John agreed as they sat down at an empty table, the surface still gleaming from a recent swipe with a damp cloth. "Nick's the one who gets adventurous, and if you catch him a good sized salmon or two, we'll invite some people over to share it with us. I'd like you to meet some of my family; you didn't really get the chance last time, did you? Just my mother, really."

Who had fallen for Josh immediately and fussed over him with an indulgent smile on her face that Nick had never had directed at *him*. Anne and he got on well enough these days, but they were never going to be close. In her early seventies, she was still an attractive woman, rejuvenated by her second, and very happy, marriage, but her opinion of his and John's relationship had mellowed as far as acceptance and no further.

"How is she? And Mr. Baird?" Josh asked politely.

"They're both well," John told him. "Carson's feeling the winters in his bones, but my mother's as spry as ever. She's looking forward to seeing you."

"She made this amazing dessert," Josh said, between sips of his coffee. "Soft and spongy and incredibly sweet with...custard, maybe?"

"Treachle pudding," John said, nodding. "Aye, she still makes that."

"My mom thought I was crazy for liking it." Josh pushed his hair out of his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "She thought it was too squishy or something."

"Some of the traditional Scottish foods can take a little getting used to," Nick said. He'd gotten used to all the ones he ever expected to within a couple of years, and now there were just a handful of dishes he knew he'd never like no matter how many times he tried them. He'd perfected the art of choking them down to be polite on the rare occasion he was served one of them while a guest at someone else's table, but he also usually complained about it bitterly to John later, in private.

"I like trying new things," Josh said. "As long as they aren't completely freaky, like sea anemone sushi." At the look of horror on John's face, he laughed. "I know! There are some things that just aren't meant to be food. You have to wonder who looked at them and thought, 'Gee, this slimy stuff on the bottom of this rock...it just might be edible!' Wouldn't it be better to eat grass?"

"The sheep would think so," John said dryly. "You're safe enough; the most exotic we get doesn't compare to muck like that. And I'll bet they charge you the price of a decent steak for it, too."

"More," Josh agreed. He finished his coffee. "Do we have to go soon? I don't want us to miss the last ferry

home or something.”

Nick checked his watch and exchanged a glance with John, who nodded. “We should get going. You’ve had a long journey, but it’s not over yet.”

## Chapter Two

The house had been quiet for a good half hour; John was in bed, lying back against the pillows with just a sheet as covers. It was nice, this time of year, not needing layers of blankets to keep warm. Across the hall, he could hear water running in the bathroom as Nick brushed his teeth. A minute later, the toilet flushed, then the bedroom door opened and Nick slipped inside.

"It's weird having to shut the door," Nick said. He was wearing the cotton sleep trousers he preferred as well as a T-shirt, something he rarely bothered with in the summertime.

"I don't think Josh is going to be scarred for life if he catches sight of your bare arse," John said. He yawned; it had been one long traffic jam after another on the way home, and he hated crawling along breathing in fumes. Josh had fallen asleep in the back seat, only to stumble into the house, and after a valiant attempt to stay awake long enough to eat something, he'd ended up going to bed after no more than a few bites of the casserole Janet had left for them. "But you'll be hot if you go to bed dressed like that."

"You just prefer me naked," Nick said. It wasn't as if John could argue with that, after all; it was true enough. Even after all their years together, there was rarely a moment in which he didn't view Nick's naked form with interest and admiration.

He watched as Nick undressed, draping the trousers at the foot of the bed, no doubt so that they could easily be grabbed in the morning. Time had been good to Nick; the man looked much the same as when they'd met. Oh, he weighed a few pounds more -- weight he'd sorely needed to gain as far as John was concerned -- and there were streaks of silver in his dark hair, but he didn't look a bit the worse for the changes.

"I'm not going to chance walking around with my ass bare whether it'd scar him or not." Nick slipped into bed, turning onto his side to face John. "I still haven't recovered from the shock of finding Caitrin on the couch that morning, and I don't know if she'll ever recover."

John didn't even try to hold back his grin. "Well, he's not likely to walk in on us now; I can hear him snoring." He moved closer to Nick, both of them settling down into a loose, familiar embrace, and kissed him lightly, tasting mint and beneath it a hint of the nightcap they'd had. Whisky and mint didn't mix that well, but John didn't care, not when underneath he could taste Nick. John kissed Nick again, teasing his mouth open with a well-aimed caress across his backside that made Nick's lips part in a soundless gasp.

That was one of the advantages of a long-term relationship; John knew all of Nick's vulnerable spots, and a fingertip run lightly down the crease of his arse was most definitely one of them. Nick was equally knowledgeable about *his* weaknesses, but John never felt inclined to complain about that.

"Mm. It's nice to be in bed early." Nick's lips found John's ear and brushed against it.

Of course, it wasn't uncommon for them to have an early night, although they were more likely to do so in the wintertime, when the long, cold nights stretched out before them and the idea of being curled up around each other beneath a pile of covers was appealing in more ways than one. Tonight, with Josh safely arrived, Nick seemed more relaxed than he had for the past week or more; he pressed against John and settled a hand at the back of his neck as they kissed repeatedly, taking their time about it.

John had been wondering if having his -- much -- younger brother around would make a difference to Nick and had been more or less resigned to a couple of weeks when his day would end with no more than a few quiet kisses. It wasn't as if they couldn't make up for it once Josh had left, and it wasn't as if they didn't go a few days without making love quite often anyway. Summer was busy, and there were nights when John stumbled to bed late and exhausted, in much the same state as Josh.

He wasn't tired now, though, and neither was Nick, judging by the way the kisses were increasing in duration, the heat between them building. Slow, sweet kisses, their lips parting briefly only when they caught their breath, until John broke away, almost reluctantly, but needing more. He dragged his mouth down the side of Nick's neck, pausing to kiss or nip at it gently, wanting to feel Nick shudder with arousal against him.

"John." It was barely whispered, as if Nick were determined to be quiet, but the eager warmth of his erection against John's thigh was all the answer required to the question John no longer needed to ask. Nick slid his hand down along John's spine, then cupped his arse. "You're not too tired?" he asked softly. "I know it was a long day, and you had to do all that driving..."

Nick had never completely recovered from his fears of being behind the wheel of a car -- he drove willingly enough most of the time, but if he was feeling worried or under stress, it was the first thing to go. Luckily, they lived on such a small island it hardly mattered.

John made a small scoffing noise and punctuated it with another kiss, this time on Nick's shoulder, the exposed skin cool at first, then warming under the press of his mouth. "Do I feel tired to you?" he asked. He captured Nick's hand, drew it between their bodies, and guided it to his own erection, then sighed when Nick's fingers curled around it and squeezed gently. "Never too tired for this."

It wasn't strictly true, but it was true enough in spirit; there was never a time when he didn't want this with Nick, even if sometimes sleep seduced him first.

Nick touched him slowly, fingertips tracing his length and around the sensitive head. "I want to suck you," he murmured, then slid down, breath warm against John's thigh before his lips closed around him.

"Christ," John said quietly; the hot, wet suction felt so good. Sometimes Nick would forge ahead without patience, driving John to the edge and over in a minute's time or even less, leaving him wrung out and gasping, but it didn't seem this was to be one of those nights. Instead, Nick was slow about it, lips moving down to the base and back to the crown. John's toes curled and he let his head tip back, eyes closed, focused on nothing but the incredible sensation.

His hand found its way to Nick's hair, and he stroked it. The strands slipped across his fingers like heavy silk, echoing the way Nick's tongue was sliding across his hard, heated skin in languid, thoughtful laps as if Nick had forgotten what John's cock tasted like and wanted to remind himself.

John kept his hips still with an effort, knowing that this time Nick didn't want him to do anything but accept what Nick wanted to give him. It had been a difficult lesson to learn; that he could take pleasure and not necessarily give it back, and have that be a gift in a way. Nothing in John's past, before he met Nick, had involved anything like this. He'd experienced encounters designed to be mutually satisfying, but not from any underlying desire to make his partner happy; he'd done to them what he wanted them to do for him, and vice versa.

Nick, though, just loved bringing John to the point where his mouth couldn't form words, just helpless sounds of pleasure and need, where his body was a strung-out, quivering ache of desire. And if afterward, John turned to him, still panting, with pleasure sparking through him in tiny aftershocks, Nick would arch up for a single touch and come, as if what he'd done to John had been nearly all he'd needed.

"Love you," John whispered into the darkness behind his eyes, wanting to say it while he still could. He moved his hand and traced the corner of Nick's mouth, where the skin was taut, stretched wide by his cock. "God, Nick --"

Nick made a small sound of pleasure and increased the suction; John inhaled sharply, feeling his balls draw up tight. He settled his hand at Nick's shoulder and squeezed, urging Nick to finish it because he was so close, so very close, and it wasn't going to take much more.

He felt Nick's hand, which had been resting on his thigh, move away, and a moment later a familiar slick sound and rhythmic shifting of the mattress told him that Nick was stroking himself. It didn't take long -- a low moan deep in Nick's throat, which vibrated tantalizingly around John's cock, and a splash of warmth against John's calf, and then John was coming, too. The pleasure rolled through him slowly, drawn out by the heat of Nick's mouth.

He brushed the back of his knuckles against Nick's cheek in a wordless thank you, and a short time after that, Nick, like his brother, was sleeping, and John, every misgiving and concern he'd woken up with lulled to silence, was curled up behind him, close enough that the warmth of Nick's back was against his skin, as he closed his eyes.

## Chapter Three

John slept deeply and woke early, always had, but this morning there was someone awake before him. Nick was a sleepy sprawl of arms and legs beside him, his dark hair tousled, but downstairs someone was moving about, opening cupboard doors and closing them too quickly for anything to have been taken out.

Young Josh looking for his breakfast. They'd meant to show him where the basics were the night before, but the boy had been dead on his feet. John got out of bed and dressed quickly and quietly, a skill he'd learned as a child when his father would rouse him in the dark for school or to go out fishing. He'd sometimes been halfway through his breakfast before he'd been truly awake, but his body had dressed itself and shoveled porridge and tea inside his mouth nonetheless. After a brief stop in the bathroom, where a third toothbrush and a bag of assorted toiletries sat next to his and Nick's toothbrushes and shared tube of toothpaste, he went downstairs.

Josh was in the kitchen, an empty mug in one hand, staring out of the window.

"Morning, lad," John said with a yawn, when he saw that it was barely six. God, he was getting old. "Want me to put some coffee in that for you?"

Josh yawned, too, covering his mouth with the back of one hand. He still looked tired. "That'd be great, thanks. I tried to sleep in, but my body clock's so screwed up I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"It'll be like that for a day or two," John warned him, moving to get the coffeemaker set up. "It's best not to fight it -- when you find your eyelids closing despite your best efforts, just go to bed, regardless of the hour."

"I don't know. I'm kind of stubborn." Setting his mug down on the counter, Josh looked out of the window again. "God, it's so...I don't know. I guess I forgot it really looks this amazing. Sometimes, especially when you're just a kid, you remember things being more perfect than they really are, you know?"

"Aye."

"But this is just like I remember it. It almost hurts to look at it, it's so beautiful." Josh glanced at him, looking a bit embarrassed. "Tourists must say stuff like that to you all the time."

"They do, but it doesn't mean it's not true." John took a look himself out at the view, with the dew wet on the thin, sparse grass that rolled down to the shimmer of the restless sea. From here he could just see the roof of the house he used to live in, a mile or so away, rented out now to summer visitors and often standing empty in the winter. "And it's good to be reminded of it."

"It's so quiet," Josh said wonderingly. He opened the door leading outside and took a deep breath. "I can't hear anything but the sea. No cars, no voices... It's so peaceful."

On cue the coffeemaker gave a loud gurgle and hiss, and Josh turned, a grin lighting his face.

"Mostly, it is," John agreed, smiling back. "Does that -- does it make it easier for you? It does for your brother, I think."

They were going to have to talk about what Josh could do at some point and now, with both of them not quite awake and the world sleeping around them was as good a time as any.

"Less people? Definitely." Josh handed his mug over to John. "I mean, don't get me wrong -- I learned to shut stuff out, mostly, a long time ago. Otherwise there'd have been times I think it would have driven me crazy. People can be...well, loud."

"And it's not as if you can ask them to keep it down," John observed.

"Not without them thinking I'm crazy." At John's glance, Josh amended, "I could prove to them that I'm not lying, but it wouldn't go over well."

"You say that like a man who's learned from experience." John finished pouring the coffee and handed the mug back.

Josh took the mug gratefully, wrapping both hands around it. "I told a kid once, just before junior high." He went quiet then, and John waited to see if he'd continue. "First he thought I was kidding, then he said I was a liar. When I proved to him that I wasn't, he got scared. I don't know what he told his parents, but they didn't let him hang out with me anymore after that."

"I'm sorry," John said, and meant it. "To be honest, I can see their point of view, too, but it doesn't mean I don't wish it'd turned out differently."

"I can't do as much as you think I can, you know," Josh said. "I'm thinking, too, remember, and I don't have

time to read you and talk at the same time.” He raised his mug. “And do other stuff, too. You’re thinking that I know every last detail and I can rummage around in your head and get to all your secrets, but it’s not like that. Mostly, it’s not.”

John turned away, as if not meeting Josh’s eyes would be some kind of protection, even though he knew it wouldn’t, and got himself a mug of coffee. “It’s just the surface thoughts then, is it?”

“It’s like...” Josh frowned. “It’s like you’re talking at me in two ways and if I want to, I can just listen to what your mouth’s saying, and your body language, I guess, but I can tap into what you’re thinking, too, and that’s running alongside what you’re saying, like the drumbeat’s there in a song but mostly you’re hearing the singer.”

“I’m trying to picture it, but it’s not easy,” John admitted. “I’m thinking even when you don’t do it consciously, you’re still picking up more than most people. You’d make a hell of a card player.”

“Too good,” Josh said, with enough of a wry twist to his mouth that John guessed Josh had maybe won a few too many hands to be popular. “I don’t play many games like that, to be honest. If it’s something like chess, when it’s quiet and I’m concentrating, it’s really hard not to hear. Something like football, well, I get flashes now and then, but it’s all happening too fast and there’re so many distractions...” He shrugged. “And like I said, I’m getting pretty good at controlling it. It’s not like when you first met me; back then, I was wide open, and God, some of the things I found out, I just really didn’t want to know.”

“I can imagine,” John said. “Well, I’ve not got many secrets, but if you find yourself reading my thoughts, I’d appreciate it if you bear in mind I’m a wee bit uneasy about what you can do.” He met Josh’s gaze. “But I trust you, and I like you, and you’re welcome to see for yourself that I really mean that, because I do.”

“I know. I wouldn’t have come if I thought we were going to drive each other crazy while I was here -- it wouldn’t have been worth it. I try not to spend time with people who don’t mesh up -- you know, whose words and thoughts are opposites, when they don’t say what they really mean. I can’t handle it.” The boy sounded serious about it. “Sometimes I wish I couldn’t hear what I do. I think it might make life a lot easier.”

“It probably would,” Nick said from the doorway, and they both turned to look at him. He was wearing his sleep trousers, but not the T-shirt he’d had on the night before, and was leaning against the door frame sleepily. “Life would be easier if I couldn’t see what I can, too, but I wouldn’t be me. If that makes any sense this early in the morning.”

Josh looked at Nick like he was all-knowing, which shouldn’t have come as a surprise -- he was the only person the boy knew who had an ability like his, and the only sibling, even by half. “Yeah,” Josh said. “Yeah, that makes sense. Sometimes, though...”

“Sometimes the easy way out seems pretty appealing,” Nick finished for him. John got Nick a mug of coffee. He didn’t need to be able to read minds to know Nick wanted one.

“Want some food to go along with that coffee?” he asked them both.

Josh patted his stomach. “I feel like I’m running on empty here, so, yeah, that’d be great. Let me help, though.”

John opened his mouth to tell Josh there was no need and then reconsidered. No point in making him feel like a visitor. “Nick, show Josh where everything is, and I’ll fry up some rashers of bacon.”

“Bacon?”

“You’re not a vegetarian, are you?” John asked, pausing with his hand on the fridge door. “Because I can maybe just do eggs instead?”

“No,” Josh assured him. “If it’s not still mooing -- or oinking -- I’ll eat it. It’s just Mom’s on this health kick right now; she thinks she needs to lose weight. These days, I’m lucky if I get a bowl of granola with skim milk.”

John opened the fridge and got out bacon *and* sausages. Granola for a growing lad just didn’t bear thinking about.

It didn’t take too long to get breakfast on the table. Josh set it and then made the scrambled eggs, working with the same concentration Nick gave to even the smallest of tasks. By the time they were eating, the conversation had settled into a relaxed exchange of information, with John listening mostly, sipping his coffee, as the two brothers caught up on each others’ lives. John didn’t usually read Josh’s e-mails, unless Nick called him over to see a photograph or watch a short video Josh had attached, but Nick told him the gist of them, so some of the names of Josh’s friends were familiar.

He was just about to offer to make a fresh pot of coffee when he heard the sound of footsteps on the path outside. There was a knock at the door, then it opened an inch or two and Cairtin’s familiar voice called, “Please tell me I’m not interrupting anything?”

Apparently she was still remembering Nick’s sudden, unclothed appearance the same way Nick was.

“Everyone’s dressed,” Nick said with a hint of good humor in his voice even though his cheeks were slightly flushed. “Come on in.”

Cairtin stormed into the kitchen, her color high and eyes flashing. “Uncle John, you *have* to do something about

my mam. She's being completely unreasonable about this stupid essay for that *bloody* scholarship, and I swear if she doesn't get off my back I'm going to say something I regret, I really am." She caught sight of Josh at the table and her eyes widened, her expression more than a bit horrified. "Oh, God. I'd forgotten your Josh was here."

"It's okay." Nick stood up and pulled out the empty chair. "Sit. Do you want some coffee? Tea? Have you had breakfast?"

Caitrin swallowed and pushed her hair back, revealing the rows of gleaming silver rings in her ears that had been the cause of more than one row with Janet. "A cup of tea would be nice, thank you."

"This is my brother Joshua," Nick said, moving to fill the electric kettle. "Josh, this is John's niece Caitrin Gordon. I'm sure you remember her from your last visit."

Josh stood up and offered Caitrin his hand, then drew it back to wipe it on his jeans before holding it out again. "Sorry. Butter."

"Better than fish guts," Caitrin said, shaking his hand a little awkwardly. John smothered a grin. "Wow, you have green eyes, just like Uncle Nick. Does it run in the family, then?"

"I guess," Josh said. He kept standing there. "So. Um."

"I forgot you'd be here," Caitrin explained. "I mean, I didn't *forget*, but I didn't remember it was going to be now. Which is totally my fault, since Uncle John and Nick have been talking about it for ages."

"Really?" Josh seemed pleased.

"Not to be rude, but do you think I could borrow Uncle John for a few minutes? I promise I'll bring him back." Caitrin gave John a look that said she desperately needed to talk with him, in private, about how completely absurd her mother was being. It was a look John was becoming a little more accustomed to than he liked, even if he knew it was normal for young people to rebel against their parents. At least she came to him and not one of her friends for advice.

He picked up his coffee mug and exchanged an amused, resigned eye roll with Nick when his back was to her. "Come on then, love. We'll go into the living room and leave these two to start the washing up."

"You don't have a dishwasher?" Josh blurted out.

John paused in the doorway and held up his hands, careful not to slosh coffee everywhere. "Aye. Two of them."

Josh blinked, then grinned. "Very funny."

"Only if you've got a sense of humor," John said. "Glad to know you have."

## Chapter Four

“Sorry about that,” Nick said when they’d gone. “She and her mother are having a hard time getting along right now. There’s this scholarship Janet wants Caitrin to try for and let’s just say Caitrin’s not making much progress on the essay that’s supposed to go in with the application.” Nick wasn’t sure Caitrin had even started it, actually, and the forms had all been filled in by Janet herself. Alistair, Janet’s husband, was a silent man who loved both wife and daughter -- and, as John pointed out, his own skin -- too much to get in the middle of the mother-daughter feud.

“I know what that’s like.” Josh sat back down and toyed with his last piece of bacon, then ate it. At Nick’s look, he added, “Oh, not me. My mom’s great. I mean, look at how she let me come all the way across the ocean to see you. And I only got a couple of lectures about how to be responsible and careful while I was here.”

“She knows I won’t let anything happen to you.” Nick and Stacy had talked more than a few times on the phone in preparation for Josh’s visit, and he’d assured her that he wouldn’t make the mistake of acting like Josh’s friend and not his much older half brother.

Josh nodded. “I won’t let anything happen to me. It’s not like I haven’t heard what kinds of things happened to people when they did stupid stuff.”

“They happen here, too,” Nick said. “One of Caitrin’s friends died just last year; her boyfriend got drunk, and I guess she wasn’t all that sober, either, not enough to stop him from driving or refuse to get in the car. They drove off the road and into a wall. He broke his arm; she broke her neck.”

As object lessons went, it had been a convincing one -- for a few weeks, at least. Then the teenagers had gone back to drinking and trusting to the quiet roads and their own ability to hold their ale to keep them safe. Nick thought that it lingered more for him than it had for Caitrin, what with his own memory of the accident that had killed Matthew, but appearances could be deceiving.

“God, that sucks.” Josh screwed his face up. “Did you -- did you see her? Afterwards, I mean?”

“No.” The kettle clicked itself off, and Nick poured water over Caitrin’s tea, hoping she’d be back before it had steeped for so long it was undrinkable. “I thought I might. It wouldn’t have been much of a surprise, considering, but I haven’t seen a sign of her.”

“Did you go to, you know, where she died?”

“There aren’t a lot of places on the island I *don’t* go, except some of the rockier beach areas. It’s not so big that you can avoid certain spots, really.” Nick sat down, wondering what Caitrin and John were talking about -- not that it was likely it wasn’t just more of the same. The girl was desperate to leave the island for a larger city, somewhere she imagined there’d be glitz and glamour of the sorts that she’d never experience on Traighshee, and her mother was determined to see Caitrin get a degree and a good job, preferably close by.

“I didn’t see much of it yesterday,” Josh said, “but it looks smaller than I remembered it.” He picked up his plate and the salt and pepper shakers and began to clear the table. Either he was anxious not to be a burden, or his mother had trained him well. “Or maybe I’m bigger.”

Nick snorted with amusement. “You are. I know you’ve sent me photographs, but seeing you in the flesh is something else again. I’m not used to you being taller than me.”

“I’ve stopped growing now,” Josh assured him. “I haven’t gotten any taller in the last six months or so.” He stacked the plates neatly by the sink and began to run the hot water. “So why aren’t Caitrin and her mother getting along? It can’t be just the school stuff.”

He tested the water temperature and then put the plug in. Nick reached over, picked up the bottle of dishwashing liquid, and squirted some in. They both watched as the sink filled with soapy water.

“She’s like a lot of the teenagers on the island,” Nick said. “She can’t see a future here, and I can’t say she’s entirely wrong. The trouble is she doesn’t have any idea what she’d do if she left, and that’s partly why her mother’s so against her going.”

“I guess it’d sound pretty hypocritical of me to say she shouldn’t go running off into the world,” Josh said.

Nick started bringing the rest of the plates and utensils to the sink. “Not really,” he said. “It’s different. You’re going with your mother’s approval, for one.”

“And I’m going back. Before college, anyway.” Josh washed a dish thoughtfully. “I don’t have a lot of girlfriends. Friends that are girls, I mean.”

"Yeah, I remember you telling me all about that girl you were dating last fall," Nick said, daring to tease. "Emily, right?"

"Mm-hmm. She was nice, she just wasn't a long-term partner."

"You're kind of young to be worrying about that."

Josh shook his head. "Not really. I've known for a long time I wanted someone permanent. Something like you and John have. I don't see the point of wasting time on people who aren't the right fit."

"You don't always know if someone is, right away," Nick pointed out.

"You did with John." It wasn't a question -- Josh said it like he knew, deep down.

"I did. But that's the exception, not the rule."

"It's that way for me, too," Josh said softly. "The knowing, I mean. Because that's one time I always do look inside and read people." He stood a dripping plate in the drainer, a small clump of bubbles sliding down it slowly, rainbowed by the sunlight. "I just never find what I'm looking for."

Nick couldn't blame Josh, but he had a feeling John wouldn't approve of that particular application of Josh's gift, especially not if Josh used it on his niece. "I won't tell you that you will, because nothing's sure, but I will say that you've got a better chance than most people."

Except most people, blinded by love, were willing to overlook flaws, or turn a blind eye, and something told him Josh wouldn't do that.

"Or maybe a worse chance." Josh sounded morose. "Other people don't have to know if the person they're with is thinking one thing while saying another, you know? Sometimes I don't think that's a benefit. It'd be easier if I could just pretend everything was fine, but I never can." He glanced, suddenly and with a stricken expression, toward the living room. "God, I never talk about this."

"It's okay." Nick touched Josh's shoulder reassuringly. "Believe me, they're busy with their own conversation right now."

"I should still be more careful."

"There should be places where you don't have to be careful."

"Well, there aren't. Not even at home. My dad --" Josh shook his head. "We don't talk about it. Ever. He doesn't think I can do it. That's what he says, anyway. And it's probably better that way, because the idea scares the hell out of him." He reached for a fork and began scrubbing it hard with the washcloth. "I scare him."

"You don't scare me," Nick said. "And John's dealt with worse. Around us, you can say anything you want to."

"Do people here know about you?" Josh asked. "They must, I guess, after the books?"

Nick had had four books published, and he'd become a bit of a celebrity, in Scotland, at least, if not the States. "They know. Most of them knew within six months of me being here. As crazy as it sounds, there've been more dirty looks over the fact that John and I are together than the fact that I see things sometimes."

The look Josh gave him was a doubtful one. "Seriously? That *does* sound crazy. It's like stepping back in time."

"I know!" Nick laughed a little bit -- he hadn't believed it for a second when John had suggested it would be that way, but it'd turned out to be true. "But I'm not kidding -- you don't scare me, okay? If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

"You've got a point there." Josh sighed. "It's kind of hard. Sometimes I wish I could turn it off completely."

"Yeah. Been there. And I've tried, a couple of times, but it didn't work. Figuring out how to control it helped more. You'll do that, too, as you get older."

"It's already a lot better than it used to be. I'm just impatient," Josh said. "I don't want to wait."

"The curse of the young," Nick said, echoing something John's mother said fairly often.

"If you say so." Josh grinned, his mood changing on a dime, and flipped some bubbles at Nick, catching him squarely on the nose. "Oops?"

"Troublemaker," Nick said, unable to hold back an answering grin.

He wondered if John was getting on as well with Caitrin. The fact that he couldn't hear raised voices wasn't all that reassuring; John would listen patiently to Caitrin rant, but as soon as she began to yell, he simply walked away.

## Chapter Five

“You’re not going to get me to agree that moving to London without a job is a good idea,” John said. “I’d like fine to see you at university, though,” he added. “You’ve got more brains than anyone in your family and it seems a pity not to use them.”

Caitrin flicked back her glossy black hair and gave a heavy sigh. John blinked at the twin streaks of green and purple running through it on one side; the black she came by naturally, but the streaks were new, and he had a feeling they’d sparked the latest argument with her mother.

He didn’t mind them; it reminded him of the sheen on a raven’s wing, though he didn’t plan to share that with her, and unlike the Celtic symbol tattooed on her ankle, he supposed it would grow out or even wash out over time.

“Go to university? Waste three or four more years in *school*?”

“It wouldn’t be a waste.”

“It wouldn’t be what I want to do!”

“Well, if you ever get around to telling me what it is you *do* want to do, I’d love to hear it,” John told her, keeping his voice even with an effort. It was too early in the morning for this, for all that she was his favorite niece. He took a sip of his coffee and discovered glumly that it’d gone cold while he’d been listening to her. He could hear Nick and Josh laughing together in the kitchen and he wished he was in there with them.

“*Anything* but stay here,” Caitrin said passionately. “I’d rather serve customers at a pub than be here listening to Mam whinge at me all day and night. Everything I do or say makes her angry, and I’m sick of it!”

“She just wants what’s best for you.” John thought a recording of his voice, repeating the same things over and over again would have done as much good.

“She doesn’t know what’s best for me.” Caitrin sighed.

Nick, God love him, cleared his throat from the doorway, interrupting them. “Sorry to barge in,” he said, “but your tea’s going to be useless if you don’t take it now, Cait.”

“Oh -- I forgot all about it.” Caitrin got up and wandered back into the kitchen; John followed, pausing to pat Nick’s hip gratefully.

“How did it go?” Nick asked under his breath.

John just had time to shrug before they were within earshot of Caitrin again, who, anger vented, was now eying Josh with more attention than before.

“This place must seem like the end of the world to you,” she said.

Josh blinked. “Not really.” He sounded uncertain. “It sure takes a while to get here, but I wouldn’t say it was -”

“Tourists always think it’s so quaint,” she said dismissively. “They’re mad.”

“Josh isn’t a tourist,” John said, a warning note in his voice. He wasn’t having Caitrin be rude to the lad when he was still sleep-dazed and hampered by being on his best behavior. “He’s family. Now stop badgering him and think of something he can do when he’s not out fishing with me.”

“Which will give him, what, an hour free?” She was smiling now, though, tilting her head back, her blue eyes gleaming. “If you’re interested,” she told Josh, “there’s a beach party tonight.”

“You make it sound like California,” John said. “It’s a bonfire down on the sand, and if Dan Edwards throws a dead seagull on it again, don’t come crying to me about the stink.”

“It’s not anywhere near as stupid as my daft uncle’d have you believe,” Caitrin confided to Josh. “It’s a good time; you should come along. We’ll have a few drinks and a few laughs. No seagulls, I swear it.”

“Okay.” Josh didn’t seem to take much convincing. “It sounds like fun.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The jet lag thing was a lot worse than Josh remembered it being. Of course, the last time he’d experienced it, he’d been about ten, so maybe it was just that it hit him harder now that he wasn’t a little kid. Anyway, just before lunch he’d gone upstairs to get his shoes so John could take him for a quick boat ride, and three hours later, he’d woken up lying sideways on the bed with a blanket draped carefully over him.

He went downstairs yawning and found Nick working at his desk and John sitting on the couch tying flies. “God, sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what happened.”

"Don't you?" John looked amused. "I think they call it 'sleeping.' "

Josh sat down heavily on the other end of the couch and yawned again. "I didn't even know I was that tired. I just sat down for a second, and the next thing I knew I was waking up."

"Don't worry," Nick said. "You'll get a good night's sleep tonight and be pretty much back to normal tomorrow."

"Good. I'd hate to spend the whole vacation imitating someone with narcolepsy." Josh found himself watching Nick whenever he could get away with it; there was something slightly like looking in a mirror about it. They had the same eyes, and now that he wasn't a kid anymore he was pretty sure they had the same nose, too.

"We'd hate that, too," John said. "Can't fish in your sleep, though sometimes I've tried when we've been out for forty-eight hours with no breaks."

"You do that?" Josh asked, incredulous but not disbelieving.

"Used to." John shrugged with one shoulder, most of his attention on the fly, a bright dazzle of orange and black. "When I was your age. Not now."

"Getting old," Nick said. He and John exchanged a look that left Josh feeling not excluded, not exactly, just... an observer. "Or maybe not," Nick finished, a knowing smile flickering into life and fading again too quickly for Josh to be sure he'd seen it.

He carried on watching Nick as he turned back to his computer, concentrating on his brother and still hazy with sleep, enough that he wasn't being as careful as he should have been. Because, really, slipping past the barriers everyone had, fence posts widely spaced with no wire between them for most people, was so easy, so simple, just like walking through a doorway into --

*... never get old. John -- my John -- God, last night -- I can still taste you --*

Josh jerked, his face flushed with shock. He'd done this before and fallen into some really lurid fantasies; people really did have sex on their minds a *lot*, but Nick was his brother, for God's sake, and the images that had gone along with the thoughts, mixed in with them in a way he'd have trouble describing because he experienced them as a gestalt, had been really vivid.

No, they weren't old. Not in his eyes and not in theirs, and John was looking at him with mild reproof, but Josh couldn't feel anything like fear or a hasty slamming of doors. And he *could* be blocked if someone tried real hard or was naturally closed off.

"Why don't you help me with these? Make some of your own, I mean." John said, deliberately returning his attention to the feathers and wire he held. "It's never quite the same catching a fish using another man's flies."

Distraction was a good thing at a time like this, Josh had found, so he nodded and shifted closer, looking at what John was doing. "Okay," he said. "Show me."

The rest of the afternoon was spent in fly-tying lessons and a walk down to John's old house, which Josh was assured he'd seen on his last visit even though he couldn't remember it at all. The tourists who were renting it had gone to Mull for the day, but John still wouldn't go inside, saying that it wasn't polite. Josh, who'd grown up knowing vacations as times spent mostly in hotels, where the cleaning staff would come and go seemingly as they pleased, didn't quite get that, but he didn't argue. That was another thing about being able to hear what people were thinking; he could tell when there was a chance the other person would waver.

They were just finishing up a dinner that had taken longer to cook than they'd expected -- Nick explained that the oven was temperamental at times, and the chicken ended up being in there forty minutes longer than anticipated -- when there was a knock at the door and Caitrin came in with a strong breeze at her back.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "I thought you'd be long done by now."

"We would have been," Nick told her. "If you didn't always refuse, I'd accuse you of showing up hoping for a free meal." He grinned. Josh guessed so she'd know Nick was kidding.

Caitrin had a thick sweater wrapped around her even though it had been warm earlier. "As much as I might say against my mam when we're arguing, she can cook a proper meal. She'd have my hide if she found out I'd said otherwise."

"That she would," John said. "And I wouldn't dare get in her way."

Josh swallowed a last mouthful and got up, then hesitated. "I should help clean up first."

If he was honest, he was expecting what followed, with his brother and John both waving his offer aside and telling him to be on his way, but it didn't mean he hadn't been sincere. He didn't want to be a bother, and he was a little shocked at how, well, how primitive Rossneath was. He'd never thought of his parents as wealthy, but they had a pool; a large, four-bedroom house; a cleaning service; and a man who looked after the yard once a week. His brother seemed to be living with nothing but the most basic appliances. The TV was smaller than the one in his father's car, for God's sake.

He got a jacket -- the island, even in full sunlight, was still a lot cooler than Atlanta in the summer -- and

followed Caitrin outside.

"Should I be bringing something?" he asked as they cut across the field, headed for the plume of smoke rising in the distance, pale against the still-light sky.

Caitrin chuckled. "Only yourself. There's plenty of people bringing beer and --" She steered them toward an outcrop of rock and retrieved a plastic bag that clinked. "I'm not going empty-handed."

Josh didn't need to ask why she'd hidden the bag, even without hearing her thoughts; though the drinking age in Scotland was eighteen, the adults on the island probably didn't like it much when their kids drank, and for good reason. Josh had learned a long time ago that regular kids -- by which he pretty much meant everyone else, everyone who couldn't read other people's minds -- were willing to take all kinds of chances he wouldn't. Sometimes it made him feel about a hundred years old.

"So," Josh said, because it seemed awkward not to try to make conversation. "You've lived here your whole life?"

"God, yes," Caitrin groaned. "And I don't mind telling you it's like torture. It's all well and good to come to a place like this for a visit, but more than a week or two and you'll be half out of your head with wanting to get somewhere a bit more civilized."

"Yeah." Josh reached out a hand in offering. "Can I carry that for you?"

She gave him a disbelieving look as she gave him the bag. "Talk about civilized. Here the boys are more likely to ask if they can take off your top, and as if they're doing you a favor." At the expression on his face, she quickly apologized. "God, sorry. Sometimes I say things I shouldn't."

>From Josh's point of view, of course, it was better that she said them out loud. "No, it's okay. Is it really like that here? I'm going to seem like the biggest geek in comparison."

"Not at all," Caitrin said. "You'll put some manners into the rest of them." She unbuttoned her sweater as they stepped off the road and into the grass, following a path that was invisible as far as Josh could tell. Beneath the sweater, he noted, Caitrin was wearing a low-cut top in a dark, shimmering fabric.

"So do you have a -- I mean -- are you seeing anyone?" he asked, feeling awkward about the abrupt question but wanting to know. If she had a boyfriend, he'd back off once they got to the beach and do his best to socialize without causing trouble.

She gave him a sidelong glance and he caught a flicker of interest as if she was reassessing him. Too late, he realized how his question could be interpreted and he cursed himself. It wasn't that he didn't find her attractive, because he did. Hell, she was like a sparkler, all fizz and spit and energy, and her thoughts and speech meshed in a way he didn't often see. She wouldn't lie or soften her words, and that appealed to him as much as the dark pink of her lips and the strong, supple body inside the tight jeans and clinging top.

But he was only here for a short visit.

"Not right now," she said after a moment. "And no, you won't get punched by a jealous ex if you happen to put your arm around me to keep me warm later on."

Josh smiled, feeling relieved in ways he probably shouldn't have. "But you must have had boyfriends before," he said. "I mean...well, you must have."

"A few," Caitrin admitted. "But remember what I was telling you about it being a small island? The ones that are here I've either never been interested in, or I was but it passed for one reason or another. What about you? You must have a girlfriend back home."

"Not right now." Josh found it easier to echo her choice of words. "Not for a while. After this summer, I'm going off to college, so it didn't seem like it would be fair to get too involved." It was a lot more complicated than that, of course, but she didn't need to know the details.

"University? You've that look about you, I suppose." Caitrin's tone made it clear that she didn't necessarily think that was a good thing. "You're a smart one, aren't you?"

They cleared a rise, and down below, still far off, Josh could see some sandy beach, a brightly flickering fire, and the dark shadows of people moving around it. "Not that smart."

"Smart enough," Caitrin said shrewdly. "Now, I'll warn you that you're likely to be asked a few dozen questions about Americans. Try not to be offended."

Josh laughed. "I won't. And I promise not to retaliate by asking them what they wear under their kilts or anything stupid like that."

She rolled her eyes. "You should hear some of the summer visitors. It's like we're animals in a zoo."

"They probably don't mean to be rude," Josh said. "They see the houses looking like they've been here for centuries, and they probably assume that if the land and the houses haven't changed, neither have the people."

"Some of us haven't," Caitrin said, sounding bitter. "My mother, for one."

"No, she's just being a mom," Josh assured her. "I mentioned going to a New York university and my mom

freaked; she wants me close enough that I can come home more than once a semester. And when I'm ready to move out for good, she'll be the same as your mom, I bet."

"But you're doing what a good boy's meant to." Caitrin gestured at the ground. "Careful on these rocks, they have a habit of shifting underfoot."

"Thanks." Josh was glad he was wearing his new sneakers as they navigated the rocky patch. "Why don't you just do what your mom wants? Just for a few more years, I mean. It'd get her off your back, at least."

"Believe me, you're not the first person to suggest it. I just can't. Maybe I'm stubborn, I don't know, but the thought of doing something just because it will please her makes my skin crawl. And the pity of it is, that I'd like to do this essay; I love writing and I could see myself being an author, just like your brother -- when I've seen the world a bit, of course -- but the more she nags..." Caitrin tossed back her hair and grimaced. "Oh, let's not think about it now."

As they got closer to the fire, a girl with long, wavy blonde hair raised her hand in greeting. "Cait! And who's this you've got with you?" The girl sounded cheerful, but underneath that, Josh could hear her internal voice cursing Caitrin out for dragging along a stranger and what she suspected was a tourist.

"Didn't Alec tell you?" Caitrin called back. "This is our Josh -- he's Uncle Nick's brother, here from America and staying at Rossneath for a couple of weeks."

Josh felt her annoyance ease and watched interest bloom in her eyes. "Oh! I expected, well, someone a lot older."

"We're half brothers," Josh said when they'd gotten a little closer, so he didn't have to yell it out. "Hi."

The girl scrambled up, showering the boy beside her with sand. He rolled his eyes but didn't comment, settling for brushing the sand off his jeans with one hand, a bottle of beer clutched in the other. "Hello, yourself," she said brightly, "and welcome to the island. I'm Lindsay, Cait's best friend."

The boy at her feet squinted up at Josh, his face screwed up against the smoke from the fire, which was mostly driftwood by the look of it. "And I'm Rory, like you care. Give the Yank a beer, someone, before he gets out a gun and shoots us all." He aimed a finger at the half dozen people around the bonfire and mimed firing it. "Bang, bang."

"I'm not a --" Josh broke off. Explaining that he was from the Southern states, where that word was more of an insult than a description was probably pointless. He put a friendly smile on his face and said, "You know, a beer sounds good."

"Have one of mine," Caitlin said, directing all the ice in her voice at Rory. "Here."

Josh grabbed the cool, slippery bottle and murmured a thank you. He tried to twist the top off and failed.

"Don't they have beer openers where you come from?" Rory asked, a little more friendliness in his voice. Josh had noticed that before; give someone a reason to look down on you and watch them like you better.

"Mostly, the tops twist off."

"That's not a bad notion," someone called. "But you're here now, so you'll need one of these. Catch!"

Josh put up his hand automatically and snagged the metal opener out of the air. "Thanks." He opened the bottle and slid the cap into his pocket. The sand was littered with caps, some new, some rusty, along with cigarette butts and other debris, but he couldn't bring himself to blend in by adding to it. The boy who'd thrown the opener walked around to reclaim it. He was a few inches shorter than Josh, but solidly built, his face as deeply tanned as John's by wind and weather. "Nice jacket," he said, reaching out to finger the scuffed, soft brown leather. Josh had found the jacket in a thrift store and bought it over his mother's protests that he didn't know where it'd been. He didn't, but he would've liked to; it was vintage, good quality and well-worn. Inside one of the pockets, he'd found a quarter and kept it for luck. "I'm Steve."

"Josh." He handed over the bottle opener and they shook hands.

"Be careful with that one; he'll get you drunk," a new voice said from off to the right. "Cait said she was bringing an American. She didn't say you were so tall." The guy coming toward the fire, his arm around the shoulder of a girl so pretty she almost looked like a porcelain doll, was obviously the star of the group -- everyone's attention was on him almost instantly, and he knew it. And liked it. "I'm Alec."

Starting to feel like he was some kind of oddity on display, Josh shook hands with the other guy, who was about his height.

"This is Sarah. She's a bit shy, but don't let that fool you." Alec kissed Sarah's temple, and she smiled.

Josh didn't ask what the shyness was supposed to fool him into; he could tell right away that Sarah, while probably sweet, wasn't the brightest bulb on the tree, so it wouldn't have been fooling as much as advertising.

They all got settled around the fire on some driftwood logs that had been there for some time if the way they were embedded in the sand was any indication. Caitrin sat with Josh, with Steve on the log next to theirs.

After easily fielding a few questions from the group, cheating slightly by tailoring his answers and tone to what they wanted to hear, he was reprieved by Alec, who directed the conversation to himself with a smoothness Josh had

to reluctantly admire. Content to listen and stare out past the rising sparks of the fire to the darkening sea, he drank his beer, tepid now, and weaker than he was used to, and soaked up the heat from the fire and the warmth from Caitrin beside him. The smoke smelled sweet, catching his throat, and when he licked his lips, they tasted more of salt than beer. He scooped up a handful of sand, white and cool, and let it pour through his fingers.

“So, are you like your brother, then?” Rory asked. His tone wasn’t combative, but there was enough of an edge to his thoughts that Josh tensed slightly and felt an equal uneasiness from Caitrin.

“I guess we look similar in some ways,” he began.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Then suppose you tell me what you *do* mean,” Josh said, keeping his voice light and friendly. The temptation to add, “I’m not a mind reader” was there, but he knew if he said that, he’d grin, and that wouldn’t be a good idea right then. Inside, he was shaking his head in amazement. Nick had thought that what people didn’t like most about him was his choice of partners, but that wasn’t the way this guy Rory felt; he was terrified by the idea of seeing dead people, his mind a jumble of sickening images culled from what Josh hoped were horror movies and not reality.

“What I mean is, do you see spirits, or whatever it is your brother sees?” Rory was frowning.

“No.” It was nice to be able to answer the question definitively and without lying. “I’ve never seen a ghost, and believe me when I say I’m much happier that way.”

His response seemed to reassure Rory. “I just don’t like thinking about it. It’s fucked up, that’s what it is.”

“It’s not as if there aren’t dozens of stories about things like that happening here on Traighshee,” Caitrin said, her voice low. “What about the Lennox brothers?”

“Who were they?” Josh asked, curious despite himself.

“Ah, Cait, don’t go telling tales,” Steve said. It was the first time he’d spoken up since they’d all sat down. “That’s nothing but a story, and you know it.”

“I don’t know any such thing, Stephen Ramsden!” Caitrin said, sitting up straighter and glaring at him. “Your grandparents weren’t even alive back then, let alone you, so how do you know it’s not the God’s honest truth?”

“Because it’s *crazy*,” Steve said. “Ghosts haunting the island? Who in their right minds would believe something like that?”

“Aw, go on, Cait,” Alec encouraged her. “Steve here’s just afraid he won’t be able to sleep tonight if you go telling ghost stories, but the rest of us can take it. Can’t we?” There were murmurings of agreement from around the circle.

“I’d like to hear it,” Josh said without being sure why. Maybe because of Nick? Except Nick probably already knew about every ghost story the island had and knew which were true and which were a whole lot of nothing based around a long-forgotten, easily-explained incident. He moved away from Caitrin to sit on the sand so that he could watch her face as she spoke.

“Well,” Caitrin began. “It was like this...”

The sun wouldn’t truly set for a long time; the longest day was approaching, and the island was lit with a deceptive, chancy light until close to midnight at this time of the year. Nick had told him that once, a long time ago, about how he’d sat outside reading without a flashlight until bedtime. Josh, who’d been about twelve at the time, had been intrigued. He’d looked it up and come away with his head buzzing with latitudes and orbits and solstice traditions.

In this strange mixture of shadows and reflected light from the sea and the pale sky, Caitrin was a single, fixed point, her long hair loose and tumbled, a dark frame for her animated face.

“The Lennox brothers -- two of them, Blayne and Toran, their mother Elspeth’s only children -- left the island two hundred years ago and went off to make their way in the world when they were in their early twenties.” Caitrin stared into the fire as she spoke. “No one ever expected to hear from them again. But they came back late one night, and the next morning their mam was dead. They’d murdered her, you see.”

Fascinated, Josh listened, barely breathing as he concentrated on her words.

“Everyone knew they’d come back wanting money. The islanders were furious, of course, and when Blayne and Toran realized they’d been found out, they made a run for it, down to the sea. They were caught near the caves, and the islanders pushed them inside one while they thought what to do next.” Caitrin paused and looked at Josh. “But the tide came in, quick as anything, and the men were drowned.”

Everyone was quiet, even though the others must have heard this story a hundred times.

“I don’t know,” Josh said softly. “It sounds to me like they got what they deserved.”

“Aye,” Caitrin said. “They must not have agreed, though, because their ghosts rose up and haunted the villagers who’d stood arguing on the sand while they were gasping their last breaths. It went on like that for a year or more before the villagers found a witch to do a spell to keep the spirits trapped where they belonged.”

“And everyone lived happily ever after,” Alec announced, clapping his hands. “You won’t have nightmares

over this, will you, young Josh?"

"I don't think so," Josh replied easily. "But it's a hell of a way to go; seeing the water rise and knowing there's no way out; rock at your back and --" He broke off, frowning and suddenly suspicious that they were playing a joke on him. "Hey! Why didn't they just swim out? The villagers wouldn't have stuck around if the tide was coming in and they'd have stood a chance, at least."

Caitrin laughed. "Good point! But you'll wish you hadn't asked; that's the part that freaks me out the most. They were tied, see, hand and foot. Some say they were tied with ropes made of brambles that tore at their skin when they tried to free themselves, so the water ran out of the cave red with blood that night, and still does on the anniversary of their deaths, but that's just there to make the story spookier."

"Like it needs it," Rory muttered.

Josh wondered if Nick had ever gone to this cave, and if he'd seen anything if he had. He'd heard, from both Nick and John, what it was like for Nick to see ghosts the way he did, and he knew it was no walk in the park. In comparison, it kind of made his own talent seem pretty innocuous. "I guess all that's missing is for you to tell me that tonight is the anniversary and you think we should go check out the cave." It was sounding more and more like some kind of setup.

"Nah." Alec shook his head; Sarah was looking up at him worshipfully. "If the stories have any truth to them, it was around October. Water must have been cold as ice." Sarah murmured something Josh couldn't really hear, and Alec rubbed her shoulder. "Don't worry, sweetheart; it's just a story." To the rest of the group, he said, "Let's talk about something else, yeah?"

The conversation drifted after that, and Josh, yawning again because of the three beers he'd drunk as much as the jet lag, let it wash over him, joining in only now and then. He was half asleep, watching the fire dreamily when Caitrin elbowed him in the ribs. "The fire's dying down and I'm getting chilly. Want to walk me home?"

"What? Oh... sure." Josh scrambled to his feet. "Sorry, I'm still not over the flight, I guess." He looked around. People had split into pairs and were doing what pairs of teenagers usually did when they were tipsy and in the dark. He watched Alec tip Sarah's chin up with one finger before kissing her throat and felt his body respond predictably. It'd been a while since he'd kissed someone and felt warmly fragrant skin against his hand. His own skin, sure, not that he'd jerked off since he got here.

When he looked away, Caitrin was smiling at him, her eyes promising him a kiss at least once they were alone. He smiled back and followed her through the dunes, the sky still palely lit above them.

## Chapter Six

"I don't remember what half this stuff is." Josh was looking at the pub menu with a confused expression.

"I should have sent you a cheat sheet," Nick said.

John was supposed to be meeting them for lunch, but hadn't arrived yet -- not that he could fairly be called late, since it had taken less time to walk down from the house than Nick had anticipated. He hadn't realized how much quicker the walk would be with someone more than twenty years his junior at his side, for one, and with the warm summer breeze at their backs, they'd made good time.

"Stilton mushrooms?" Josh said.

Nick patted his hand reassuringly. "It's a kind of cheese. You might not like it -- it's sort of an acquired taste."

"Okay. What about Gammon steak?"

"Ham," Nick said, giving the slightest shake of his head to Geordie to let him know they'd need a few more minutes. "Well, it comes from some particular part of the pig, I think, but I've never really figured out where. It's good. Salty."

"Yeah?"

Josh sounded doubtful, and Nick couldn't resist teasing him. "It comes with a pineapple ring."

"A what?" Josh shook his head. "Crazy. Like a Hawaiian pizza?"

"Something like that," Nick said. "I think I'll stick with the steak and kidney pie and I'll order John the same; they'll keep it warm for him if he isn't here by the time it arrives."

"Kidney?" Josh shuddered and rubbed his stomach dismally. "I'm going to starve."

"No, you're not." Nick tapped the back of the menu, a grin already spreading across his face. "They do a mean burger and fries on the kids' menu."

Josh flicked a salted peanut at him. "Just for that, I'm having the most expensive thing on the menu. Let me see..."

By the time they'd ordered, with Josh deciding to risk the gammon, the pub had filled up. "Is it always this busy?" Josh asked, sipping at his Coke. "I know it's the tourist season, but..."

"Not usually," Nick said. The two tables beside them were crowded with people who were clearly part of a group, talking to each other with a slightly self-important air. The floor around them was covered with backpacks; the tables with maps and notebooks. He lowered his voice. "They could be hikers, maybe. From their accents, they're English."

Josh's expression became unfocused for a moment, and then he wrinkled his nose. "They're part of some society," he reported. "Here to reenact a solstice ceremony at the standing stones tomorrow on Midsummer's Eve." He looked thoughtful. "Are they allowed to do that? I know Stonehenge is more or less cordoned off these days."

"The circle here is mostly tumbled down rock," Nick said dryly. "The sheep visit it more than any people do. Don't go thinking it's as impressive as the one at Callanish over on Lewis."

"Here comes John." Josh said it a moment before the pub door opened. "But if it's all falling down, why would they want to go there at all?"

"You'd know better than me." Smiling at John as he made his way toward them, Nick toed the chair to his left away from the table. "There are a lot of people on these islands who are stubborn about clinging to the old traditions. I think it makes them feel connected, maybe."

"To the past," Josh said, like he understood. "Speaking of which..."

"Don't tell me," John said, smiling warmly as he sat down. "Cait and the rest of them were filling your head with all sorts of stories last night."

"Well, a little," Josh admitted, just as they were interrupted by the delivery of their meals.

"Ah, isn't this lovely?" John looked unusually pleased at the arrival of his steak and kidney pie, steaming and accompanied by a side of peas. "A man could get used to this sort of treatment."

Nick slid the extra pint over toward John. "I thought we were better off ordering before the place got too crowded."

"We're well used to having to wait," John agreed. "This is a nice change."

Once Geordie had gone, Josh frowned down at his plate. "I don't know. I'm thinking pizza again."

"You'll like it." Nick tucked into his own meal, forgetting about the conversation they'd been in the middle of until he'd taken the first few bites. "So what were you saying?"

Josh finished chewing and swallowed. "Oh, yeah. It was about the whole haunted cave thing."

"Haunted cave?" It only sounded vaguely familiar to Nick, who'd be the first to admit that keeping track of the island's history wasn't one of his strong suits. Still, given the subject matter, he'd have thought he'd remember this bit, at least.

"Oh, God, that one?" John gave a mock shiver and stabbed a piece of steak with his fork. "Michael and I nearly went the same way as the brothers trying to find the cave. There're three down there; well, more than three, but most are so shallow you could spit the length of them. Three go pretty far back, though, and we were sure there'd be claw marks on the wall, so we got our torches --"

"Flashlights," Nick told Josh. "And don't get any ideas."

"But their hands were tied," Josh blurted out. "How could they claw at the walls?"

John looked mildly exasperated. "Well, we were only nine; how the hell would we know? And do you want to hear about how we got trapped by the tide and I lost one of my boots swimming for my life, and my dad took the skin off my arse for it?"

"I think we just did," Nick said and gave John's knee a consoling pat. "It sounds hair-raising."

"Aye, well." John shrugged and ate some peas. "It wasn't the closest we came to dying; we were an adventurous pair back then. Never did find out which cave it was, though."

"Nick would know." Josh turned, his chair scraping across the floor with a loud screech of wood on wood. "He'd be able to sense the ghosts."

His voice had risen, and Nick flinched as heads turned at the neighboring table.

"Sorry," Josh said immediately, lowering his voice and looking upset. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Nick knew they'd be listening now, but told himself they were temporary -- they'd be gone from the island soon enough.

"But you would, right?" Josh didn't seem willing, or able, to let it go. Stubborn. "You'd be able to tell which cave it was."

He nodded. "I can't imagine why not."

"Unless there's some truth to the stories and a witch really did perform some kind of spell to trap them," John pointed out.

Nick wasn't sure he wanted to think about that -- he remembered the legend now, and he hadn't wanted to think about it when he'd first heard it, either. The ghosts of people murdered by their fellow villagers, whether rightly or wrongly, who'd been angry enough to haunt them for months, maybe years, before a witch had been brought to bind their spirits to the cave where they'd died. How angry would they be now, so many years later, having been imprisoned in a place that couldn't have anything but powerfully terrifying memories? It made him shiver.

He jumped when he felt John's hand settle on his, jolting him out of his reverie.

"You all right?" John asked, and Nick nodded.

"Sometimes I think a little too much," he said in explanation.

"I know," Josh said wryly. "Believe me, I know."

John snorted and then hid his smile in his pint of beer. "You two..." he muttered.

Nick kicked his ankle under the table and was about to change the subject and move it far away from ancient horrors when two people, a man and a woman, got up from the table next to theirs and came over.

"Excuse me," the woman said smoothly. She was in her fifties, with steel gray hair in elegant waves close to her head, attractive in a polished way. She was dressed casually, but it was an expensive, well-thought-out outfit. Still, her hiking boots looked broken in, and if the pants she wore were designer ones, they were equipped with pockets and would keep her warm if the summer day turned to a rainy summer day. Her companion matched her in looking well off but lacked her confidence. He stood beside her, plucking nervously at his lip with his fingers, his gaze fixed on Nick.

"Yes?" Nick asked, trying to keep the wariness from his voice.

"We couldn't help overhearing -- you *are* Nick Kelley, aren't you?"

Oh, *great*. "Yes, I am," Nick said, hoping maybe they'd just ask for an autograph and then go away. Of course, chances were they'd want more -- it wasn't uncommon for people who'd recognized him to request an audience with That Guy Who Talks to Ghosts. They were usually hoping he'd be able to talk to some long-dead relative and weren't thrilled when he had to tell them it didn't work that way. And then there'd been that time a young woman, obsessed with beginning a new life with Nick as her husband, had shown up. Yeah, that had been fun.

"Oh, how lovely." She offered her hand, and he stood up and shook it, not seeing any way out of the situation without being rude. "I'm Bonnie Wishart, and this is my friend Fred Reynell. We're here with the Society for the

Preservation of Ancient Henges and Circles. We'd love a chance to speak with you while we're here on Traighsheel, if you could make a bit of time for us."

Nick shook Fred's hand while he was at it. "I'm sorry, I really can't," he said, indicating Josh. "My brother's here visiting from the States, and it wouldn't be fair --"

"But surely he'd understand?" Bonnie smiled politely at Josh. "Even if you could spare an hour..."

Josh looked as if he was about to be equally polite back at her and say that it was fine with him, but Nick projected a mental "*No!*" so strongly, while keeping his expression neutral, that he thought he saw John pick up on it, as well as Josh.

"The man's told you he's busy," John said without turning around, his knife and fork still active. It wasn't like him to be that abrupt -- he usually found Nick's fans, if that was the right word, more amusing than anything -- but Nick had the feeling that John, like himself, had taken a dislike to the arrogance behind Bonnie's words. She didn't seem like the sort of woman who was used to being denied.

"Busy? Another book, perhaps?" She gave an indulgent chuckle. "It *has* been some time since the last one, hasn't it?"

John took a deep breath, but Nick forestalled him. "That's right," he said. "So if you'll excuse me --"

"What we're here for would make an excellent chapter," she told him. Nick half expected her to begin dictating to him on the spot. "We're going to recreate a ceremony at the stone circle tomorrow at sunrise. We most certainly don't want an audience of the ignorant or inquisitive, but someone like you would be very welcome as our guest."

"I really appreciate the offer, but I can't." He reminded himself not to offer any of the potentially arguable reasons *why* he couldn't, because if he did she'd surely just come up with the arguments. "Thank you, though, for the interest. I hope you have a nice visit."

Keeping his eyes on the table, Nick sat down and concentrated on his food. He could feel their gazes on him, but a moment later, they wavered, and then the two of them went back to their own seats.

"I don't know why they'd want me there anyway," he muttered, glancing at John and Josh. "It's not like I'd have any clue what they were doing."

"Just as well." John cleared his throat and spoke in a more normal voice. "They're the worst kind of tourists, really."

"That sounds like an insult when you say it," Josh said. He didn't seem to think the label applied to him, which it didn't, as far as Nick was concerned, even if, strictly speaking, Josh had no blood tie to the island; Josh and he only shared a father, and that father had never set foot in Scotland. It didn't matter. He belonged here, thanks to his mother, and Josh was his half brother, and so...

"It's not," John said, and drained the last of his pint. Nick, who could guess where John was going, groaned quietly and hoped John would at least keep his voice down. "You're thinking of 'English tourist.'" He set his empty glass down with a very final, emphatic clink and raised his eyebrows at Nick. "What?"

"I think it's time we went," Nick said firmly.

Outside, the sun was warm enough to make walking around the village seem like a good idea. A ferry was coming in, ponderous and serene, and the three of them walked down to the pier to watch it dock. A fresh breeze was scudding along the water, whipping up a frill of white foam on the top of each glassy curve of green wave.

Josh made a contented sound and sniffed the air. "God, it smells so clean. I mean, yeah, I can smell that seaweed down there and the fumes from the ferry, but it's still really, really clean. They should bottle it. It beats all those fancy air fresheners."

"It does, at that," John agreed, anything else he had to say drowned out by the mournful blast of the ferry's horn. When the echoes had died down, he glanced up at the sky. "We could go sea fishing. Not for long, but maybe a couple of hours?"

"That translates as 'back only when it gets too dark to see the water,'" Nick said helpfully.

John clicked his tongue reprovingly. "It does not. I'll have the lad back by four, I promise."

"I, um, I'm meeting Caitrin back at the house at five," Josh said. He wasn't blushing but there was just enough self-consciousness to rouse Nick's suspicions. "She's going to show me --"

"Spare my innocent ears," John interrupted, which was Nick's take on it, too. "Fine. I'll have you back in time so you don't keep her waiting. Now, let's go over to the bait shop and pick up something to bribe the fish with."

"You go," Nick said, glad of an excuse to avoid the far from fragrant air of that particular store. "I need to get a few groceries at Dunn's. I'll meet you back at the car. Where did you leave it?"

"Behind the library," John said. "We won't be long."

"Right," Nick said. "I've heard that before."

John laughed, gave him a parting pat on the shoulder, and led Josh away.

Nick watched them go and then went in the opposite direction, already running through a grocery list in his

head. He rounded a corner, trying to recall if it was black pepper or the white John preferred that they were low on, and found himself a few yards away from Bonnie and Fred.

"We thought we'd try one more time to convince you," Fred said quickly before Nick could avert his eyes and pretend he hadn't seen them. "If you won't attend our ceremony tomorrow, would you at least come down to the caves with us and see if there's any truth to the legends?"

They'd been aiming their questions at locals in the pub, no doubt, and heard the whole story. "Look," Nick said, fidgeting and trying not to sound too irritated. "I've been all over this island for years. If there were any truth to it, I'd know, okay?"

"But have you been down to the caves when you were truly *open*?" Bonnie looked so hopeful that it was hard not to feel guilty.

"No, but..." Nick sighed. "Okay, fine. But I have things I have to do today, so it's got to be quick. And when nothing happens, which I'm telling you is going to be the case, then that's it."

Fred nodded. "We completely understand. It's just that there are so few opportunities for us to observe someone as sensitive as yourself. This is the chance of a lifetime, really."

"We appreciate this so much," Bonnie added.

Nick contemplated telling them his usual rates, just to see the look on their faces, but decided against it. He had taken money for what he did in the past -- his former partner, Matthew, had insisted on it, and they'd had to live on something -- but since he was certain this was legend, not fact, it wouldn't be fair.

He pulled out his cell phone. "Just let me make a quick call."

\* \* \* \* \*

The caves were all caves should be; dark, dank. The rocks that made up the floor were slippery with seaweed draped over barnacles. Nick had already lost his footing once and gotten a scraped palm, the abraded skin stinging from the salt water he'd washed it in.

This was the third and largest cave, and like the others it was empty in every way.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"That can't be right," Bonnie said, her face tight with disappointment. "This is the last cave; it *has* to be this one."

"I don't understand how you can tell just like that," Fred said, a slight edge to his voice. "Shouldn't you be, I don't know, meditating first or something?"

"I thought you'd read my books," Nick said, shivering in the damp, cool air. "Tell me the page where I ever do anything like that and I'll give you a signed copy. I don't need to meditate; if there's a spirit here, I'd know, the same way I'd know someone had been cooking if I walked into a house and smelled barbecue."

"But there has to be something." Bonnie was frowning and rubbing her upper arms in a way Nick was pretty sure was unconscious.

"Not really," Nick said. "It could be that there's no truth to the story at all. Or maybe it did happen, but on another island, or maybe there was another cave on a different part of Traighshee and it collapsed ages ago. Maybe the men that were killed never did haunt anyone, and it was just guilt that made the villagers think they were seeing things."

Fred looked around. "You're sure? There's nothing at all?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry." Nick wasn't, of course; he wasn't a bit sorry.

"Then let's go," Bonnie said abruptly. "I'm freezing." She gave Nick a look that said she blamed him for that, and he met it with a bland smile.

## Chapter Seven

“They’re mad,” John said with conviction after Nick finished telling him about the caves. “Why would you lie?”

“I don’t know.” Nick was frowning, which wasn’t a look John liked seeing on him. “Maybe they think I want to keep any discovery to myself?”

“It’s a ghost, not buried treasure. And if you found a ghost, they’d have known about it. You’d have had to talk to it; they don’t take kindly to being ignored.” John stared out of the window, watching Caitrin and Josh walk away, their heads together and, unless he was mistaken, holding hands. Well, one of them was a fast mover, and knowing his niece as he did, he’d put money on her being the one. He trusted them both not to let things go too far; Josh would be gone soon enough, and a lovesick Caitrin didn’t bear thinking about.

“They don’t,” Nick agreed. He shivered. “God, I’m freezing.”

John turned away from the window. “Aye? Well, I’m thinking I know a way to warm you up, seeing as we’re going to be alone for an hour or two.”

“Do you? Why am I not surprised?” Nick was trying to sound lighthearted, but John could tell it was nothing but an act. He slid into an embrace willingly enough, though, and his lips met John’s as eagerly as ever.

“Your nose is cold,” John told him a few moments later.

“It always feels cold down by the sea.” Nick clung to John; his mouth had tasted faintly of salt, and the Band-Aid on his scraped hand was rough against the small of John’s back, underneath his shirt.

“I think that’s just an excuse,” John said. “You were more worried about what you might see down at those caves than you wanted to let on.”

Nick smiled. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I didn’t think there’d be anyone there.”

“Aye. We’ve been all over this island hundreds of times -- you’d have felt something long before today. That doesn’t mean you weren’t worried.”

“I think it was more being reminded of the story than anything else,” Nick said. “I mean, the thought of them being trapped in there with the water rising and no way to get out.” He shivered again.

“It’s a bad way to go, right enough, but it was a long time ago, love, and if the story’s true, they killed their mother, so...”

“It’s still not right,” Nick said, his tone vehement. “It just isn’t.”

“Nick --” John felt helpless, an emotion he loathed more than most. He’d seen Nick get like this before when a spirit’s plight had left him depressed for days, but in this case, where only a story was involved, he couldn’t see why Nick was reacting so strongly. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Nothing,” Nick said. His arms tightened around John. “Don’t say anything.”

“Mmm?” John murmured. “Just do?” He didn’t wait for an answer that he wasn’t sure he’d get; he slid his hand between their bodies and cupped Nick’s groin, getting a small, secret thrill out of the way Nick responded to the caress. After all these years, even with both of them certain of each other, secure in loving and being loved, it wouldn’t have been surprising if the heat between them had lessened, but it hadn’t. Nick could get him hard and aching with a look, sometimes, and if they weren’t close to the bedroom when that happened, well, every room in the house had walls, and he was more than happy to put Nick against one and slide to his knees. Or let it hold him up while Nick did his best to fuck him through it, with John regretting nothing but that he couldn’t see Nick’s flushed face, his green eyes glittering, his lips parted on a moan of pleasure.

“Let’s --” Nick’s breath hitched in a particularly tempting manner, one which insisted that John kiss him, and not gently, either. John did, parting Nick’s lips with his own and licking at the inside of the top one with the tip of his tongue. “God,” Nick said when he’d pulled back a bit. “Are you trying to make me forget what I was going to say?”

John smiled and rubbed his thumb along Nick’s covered erection, loving the way Nick’s eyes darkened with arousal. “Not trying, no, but I can’t say I don’t like knowing that I can.”

“What I was going to say...” Nick got John to tilt his head to the side with a nudge of his nose and applied his mouth, hot and tantalizing, to the sensitive spot just under John’s jaw, making him gasp. “Let’s go upstairs. I don’t want to be interrupted.”

More could have been said -- explanations that John didn't need to hear, not because they would have spoiled the mood but because he didn't need to be like Josh to know what Nick was thinking. Neither of them bothered; they just made their way to the staircase and then up it, tumbling into the room like puppies instead of the middle-aged dogs they really were. John kicked the door closed with a foot and manhandled Nick over toward the bed, laughing when Nick's hands fumbled at the front of his jeans.

"What?" Nick asked. "What's so funny?" But he was laughing, too, and at the same time, he got John's button and zip undone and slid his hand inside to find John's skin. His fingers were cold but his touch no less delicious for it, and John groaned softly and caught his mouth in another kiss.

"Nothing," he said. His voice was hoarse. "There's nothing funny. God, Nick --"

"I know. I know. Just --"

"Get naked," John said, not sure if it was an order, a suggestion, or a plea. It didn't matter as long as it happened.

Nick stepped back and stood with his hands at his sides. His chin lifted in a challenge, his mouth quirked in a small smile. "You do it."

Because he knew once he'd got Nick out of his clothes, he wouldn't be in a fit state to deal with his own, John kept Nick waiting while he stripped, his gaze locked with Nick's and his hands shaking slightly. When every stitch he was wearing was in a heap on the floor, discarded, tossed, or kicked away, he walked behind Nick and reached around, hooking his fingers in the open neck of Nick's shirt.

"There was a time I'd have just ripped this off you," he murmured into Nick's ear, his mouth so close to it that his lips brushed the tender, soft flesh of Nick's earlobe on every other word. He pulled at the shirt until the top button was straining, ready to pop. "But it's just as good making you wait." He eased his grip on the fabric and then flicked open the top button, which gave him more skin to touch. "Of course, it means I have to wait, too..."

Nick moaned and leaned back against John's shoulder, exposing the taut, long line of his throat. John licked along it, leaving the skin shimmering for a moment, and then eased open two buttons in quick succession so that he could slide his hand inside the shirt across Nick's chest. A soft, flat nipple became a hard point under the insistent rub of his thumb, and he smiled, nuzzling into Nick's neck even as he pinched the tender skin with just enough force to make Nick gasp and arch into the rough caress.

"I know it shouldn't still surprise me that you can do this to me," Nick said. His breathing was quicker now, his body tense with desire. "But it does. All I have to do is think about you, really. And then you do things like this -- touch me, and your mouth is..." He squirmed suddenly, pressing his arse back against John's own eager length, and begged, "Please."

John slid Nick's shirt down over his shoulders, baring them, and set his teeth into one, grunting as he pushed his own hips forward. He knew what Nick would feel like inside -- aye, hot and slick -- and the familiarity didn't make him want it any less. "Ah, but you'll have to tell me what it is you want, exactly. Otherwise, how can I give it to you?"

"You," Nick said immediately.

"Not specific enough." John had finished unbuttoning Nick's shirt and slid his hand lower, but now he stopped and waited, fingertips brushing lightly enough over Nick's stomach that he would have known the man had goose bumps even if he hadn't been able to see them with his own eyes. "Do you want my mouth on you?" Nick whimpered softly, hips restless. "Or do you want me inside you?"

Nick nodded, turning his head in a mute plea for John's lips. Never able to resist that request, John kissed him. "Inside me." As a reward, John ran his palm down along Nick's erection, and Nick gasped again. "Please, John."

"God, it's my pleasure," John told him. He moved around Nick, staying close, until they were face to face again. "I need you naked," he said. "I need all of you right now, every inch bare, nothing between us."

Nick flicked at the button fastening his jeans, his eyes hazy and his mouth looking ripe for kissing. "Please," Nick said again, as if he trusted John to translate the word into "hurry up." He swayed where he stood, a shiver running through him.

John eased Nick's jeans open and down, going to his knees to finish the job. Nick cooperated with him without initiating a single movement, though from the breathy, husky gasps escaping his lips, that was only through an effort of will.

John traced the strong, supple curve of Nick's instep and watched Nick's toes curl hard from the fleeting touch.

He couldn't resist dragging his lips up along Nick's thigh, or pressing them briefly to the sweet spot just beneath the head of Nick's cock. John knew he'd linger too long if he let himself, though, so he got to his feet and kissed Nick again, the feel of all that bare skin against his own enough to make him ache with need.

"Let's get you onto the bed, love," he said, urging Nick to move with hands that trembled. It only took a few moments to pull down the covers -- only hastily pulled up that morning anyway -- and to push Nick, in all his naked

glory, down onto the mattress. "God, I want you." He climbed onto the bed as well, knelt beside Nick, and ran a hand along his skin, feeling bone and muscle and the strength that never failed to surprise him.

"Good thing I'm right here." Nick smiled, reached for John's cock, wrapped his hand around it, and began stroking.

John shuddered and fumbled for the bottle of lube that was tucked between the bed frame and the mattress. "*Christ*. I won't last long enough to fuck you if you keep that up."

"Oh, should I stop?" Innocently, Nick opened his hand, and John took the opportunity to shove the bottle of lube into it.

"Don't stop; just make good use of that."

He watched, unusually aware of the thudding of his heart in his chest, as Nick's hand spread the slick, cool liquid along the length of his erection, fingers and thumb teasing at the head until he moaned despite himself.

"When you sound like that, I don't think there's anything I wouldn't let you do to me," Nick said, sounding as if he meant it.

John watched Nick's fingers move in small circles, pressing down lightly, and fought down the need to put his hand over Nick's and shape it to a tunnel he could fuck. Nick would let him, but it wasn't what he'd asked for, and John loved giving Nick what he wanted, in bed and out of it, too much to deny them both a greater pleasure, no matter how good this felt.

He pushed Nick's hand away and picked up the lube himself. "Lie back, then, because I'm going to do plenty."

Nick sprawled out on the bed, knees up and spread wide. Without taking his gaze away from John, he ran his fingers down his thighs and over his flat stomach, teasing himself with touches that skirted the soft swell of his balls and the flushed, dark hardness of his cock.

"I don't have the words to tell you how you look doing that," John said to him, his voice barely a whisper. He let the lube pour out of the bottle over his fingers, heedless of the drips, and, tossing the bottle aside, moved to kneel between Nick's legs. "And I'm not sure I even need to give you my fingers when you're this ready for my cock, but I'm going to anyway, just to watch your face."

He pushed two fingers into Nick, carefully and slowly enough to rob the action of any force, but pressing deep inside, and felt Nick's body ease open for him, welcoming, demanding.

"God, yes," Nick said thickly. "Again."

John looked his fill at Nick's face, contorted with pleasure now, his green eyes cloudy, half-closed, and then bent to suck at the tip of Nick's cock, the tang of fluid sharp against his tongue. His fingers thrust again and again, too slowly to be enough for Nick, but he wasn't inclined to rush this.

Nick groaned, the sound long and low, and lifted his hips to meet the next thrust, and then the next. His sense of rhythm was shaky at best, but his cock was hard as it moved in John's mouth and his body clenched around John's fingers. "Fuck," he whispered, his voice breaking on the single syllable. "Fuck me."

"Soon," John told him, pulling back to speak and then applying his attention to Nick's balls. He mouthed them wetly as he slid his fingers into Nick again, so slowly that Nick trembled and gasped. "Is that good?"

"Yes." Nick had a handful of sheet fisted in his hand. "Yes, God."

Nick *smelled* incredible -- of salt and wind and the cheap herbal shampoo he bought six bottles at a time from the big chemist's on Mull -- and he tasted even better. John licked the tip of his cock, watched another drop form at the slit, and licked again. He rotated his wrist, dragging his knuckles across Nick's prostate. Nick cried out sharply and lifted his hips again.

"I could come just watching you like this," John said, his words less of an exaggeration than they sounded. Nick was close to losing every shred of control, close to begging, and John wasn't used to that, because keeping Nick waiting just wasn't something he did that often.

Maybe he should make it something he did a lot, because Nick was just so fucking beautiful like this, spread out, his skin glowing and damp with sweat, the heat and need pouring off him so that John could taste it with every breath he took. If it'd been him lying there, hurting with the need to be filled and taken and fucked, John wasn't sure he could have done it, but Nick was trying so hard to be patient...

"Don't," Nick managed to say, the single word carrying with it a weight of love and desperation. "In me, come in me -- *John* --"

"Oh, God, like I can say no to you," John muttered. He eased his fingers free, which drew a wail of loss and anticipation combined from Nick, and replaced them with the head of his cock. He nudged against the slick, tight opening, helped by the demanding tilt up of Nick's hips.

"Please." Nick clutched at John's arse, pulling him closer. "Please, please..." That was begging, sure as John had ever heard it, and the sound of it snapped whatever self-control he'd been clinging to. He plunged into Nick, who moaned, cock trapped between them giving a warning throb.

Christ, the heat of him was like something in a dream, only this was reality, with Nick's hands sliding around to his hip bones, tracing them with a featherlight touch of his thumbs.

"Don't stop," Nick said. He looked blissful now, though the tightness in his jaw still hinted at his arousal. He looked like a man who'd been given everything he ever wanted, which was just how John was feeling.

He pulled back a bit and thrust in again, going about as deep as he could in this position. There was nothing like it -- he'd had a lot of sex before Nick had come into his life, and it had felt good -- hell, there'd been times it had felt great. But none of it had ever felt like it did with Nick, who gasped his name and moved with him.

John paused, trying to get some of his control back, and Nick whimpered and lifted his hips, fucking himself on John's cock as best he could.

Oh, the hell with it. Nick wasn't going to last much longer, and there was a fine line between spinning out pleasure and sheer, bloody torture. He moved one of Nick's hands from his hip to Nick's cock in an unspoken signal that he was done teasing them both.

He could feel his climax building inexorably as he began to fuck Nick in good earnest, with all his strength behind each thrust. Nick gave him one startled look and then his eyes slid closed, a look of intense concentration on his face. John felt the room blur, nothing real but Nick under him, around him, their hands bruise-tight on each other, both of them grunting with the effort of sustaining the pace John had set. Fuck, Nick was so tight around him, so slick and tight, and -- Sparks and darkness filled his vision, and he pumped into Nick, needing to feel Nick come with him, sharing the moment.

*"Josh."*

John was on his own now. Nick had gone still, his eyes open, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling, a frown creasing his forehead, his hands by his sides.

John came because he was on the brink and that last long, driving slam into Nick had triggered it, a chain reaction he was unable to stop, but he couldn't say it was enjoyable, not when he was staring down at a Nick, who was there in body only.

He pulled out of Nick, feeling as if his teeth had been set on edge, every nerve screaming with disappointment, but if his body felt cheated, his thoughts were all of Nick. He knelt beside him and stroked Nick's face with the palm of his hand. Nick's skin was cool and damp to the touch. "Nick? Nick, love?"

There was no response.

## Chapter Eight

“Are you cold?” Josh asked, glancing at Caitrin as they headed down toward the caves. It hadn’t taken much to convince him to go along, really; he actually felt better about going now that he knew Nick hadn’t seen the slightest hint of a ghost. The idea of being in a place where there *were* ghosts, only he couldn’t see them, had no clue what they were up to, was enough to give him goose bumps. Now, the caves were just an interesting place to explore, and he was definitely drawn to Caitrin. If she wanted to spend time with him, good. If she wanted to spend time with him somewhere private, even better.

“No.” Caitrin grinned. “Unless you’re asking because you’re going to gallantly offer me your jacket to keep me warm, in which case I might change my answer.”

Josh *had* been thinking about offering, because the sweater she was wearing didn’t look as warm as the one she’d had with her the night before. “You mean you’d lie to me?” he asked, splaying one hand across his chest. “I’m wounded.”

Caitrin gave him a gentle shove. “Don’t lie to *me*. Look, there they are.” She pointed toward the sea where some rocky outcroppings sprang up. Josh could see at least one entrance to what must be a cave.

“They’re not haunted,” Josh told her.

“Your brother might not think so, but the people who’ve grown up on this island know otherwise. Why else would that story have been passed on for generations?”

“Because that’s what people do.” The sand was hard-packed under their feet, stretching out for a hundred yards or so -- the tide had been out for hours, but now it looked like it was starting to come back in. Josh caught a faint whiff of something unpleasant, dark and dead-fishy.

He caught a flash of irritation from Caitrin, but before he had time to process the thought, he was given the reality of speech, the emotion echoed in her words. “Listen, you! If you’re calling my people liars, making up stories to --”

“I’m not,” he said, startled by her vehemence but more by the perfect mirroring of her thoughts; most people filtered out a large part of their emotions, but Caitrin seemed to say what she thought, for the most part.

Which explained both why she got into so many arguments with her mother and why she wasn’t seeing anyone, he guessed.

“I’m not,” he repeated. “I’m just saying that if Nick couldn’t feel anything --”

“Do you really believe he can do that?” she asked bluntly. “I know Uncle John does, and I’ve heard people talking about some pretty weird things that happened when Uncle Nick first came here, but I’ve always... oh, I don’t know. I believe *he* believes it, but me...” She shrugged. “I’m not a kid.”

“So why do you think the cave’s haunted then?” Josh said, the words coming out with more of an edge than he’d intended because he knew she was wrong. “God, how illogical is that?”

“Why would people have talked about it for all these years if there was no truth to it at all?” Caitrin looked annoyed.

“I know he can see ghosts,” John snapped, frustrated that someone who seemed to be fairly bright was being so stubborn about this one subject, “because I can do it, too!” Caitrin’s expression wavered, and Josh backedpedaled immediately. “I mean, I can’t see ghosts.”

“Why would you say it, then? Just to make a point?” Caitrin was beautiful when angry, there was no arguing that.

“I can hear people’s thoughts.” He said it quickly, before he could talk himself out of it. It wasn’t like it really mattered what she thought of him, did it? He wouldn’t be here for long, and then he’d be a thousand miles away.

Caitrin frowned skeptically. “You can hear people’s thoughts.”

“Yeah.”

“You can hear my thoughts?”

“Yeah.” Josh wished they’d never started this conversation -- why couldn’t they have just gone into the caves, done a little bit of exploring, maybe made out for a while, and then gone home for the night? Well, him to John and Nick’s home, obviously, and Caitrin to her own.

“You can hear everything I think? Or just some things?” Caitrin was smiling now, like she thought he was just

messing around. Maybe it was better that way.

Josh decided to go along with it. "Not everything."

"Can you tell what I'm thinking now?" Caitrin stepped close to him, so close that she was pressed right up against him, and raised herself up onto her toes so she could lean in and whisper in his ear. "Can you, Josh?"

His body thought it could and started to respond eagerly right away. He dared to put a hand at her waist, steadying her, and her lips brushed against his ear.

Then she was gone, whirling away and running toward the nearest cave. "Come on, then!"

In the few seconds it took him to recover from the effects of the fleeting touch of her lips, Caitrin managed to get far enough ahead that he had to run full out to catch up, which took care of explaining away the flush on his face and quieted down the interested reaction in his jeans.

It also gave him time to decide to drop the subject; she didn't believe him, and that was really for the best.

They arrived at the first cave, panting and grinning at each other, exhilarated by the run and then peered inside. "It's dark," Josh said dubiously.

Caitrin had a purse, the way every girl he'd ever met did. Hers was a brightly embroidered Hessian bag, slung across her body to bump against her hip, and large enough to carry just about anything. She reached in and pulled out a flashlight with an air of triumph. "Fresh batteries. We should be able to explore all of the caves with this."

One light against the inky darkness didn't seem like much to Josh, but it was better than nothing. He waved his hand. "After you."

"Well, aren't you the gentleman."

"I'll go first if you give me the flashlight," Josh offered. "But I kinda thought you knew the way."

"I haven't been in them since I was a kid, but don't go thinking there're tunnels or anything like that," she said. "They're just holes in the cliff, that's all."

Josh couldn't help wondering what she expected to see, given that anything interesting would've been discovered years ago if the caves were that basic. He'd been expecting something a little more impressive, but as he admitted to himself, that expectation had been based on way too many books as a child where kids had discovered smugglers' caves with hidden entrances, maze-like tunnels carved into rock, and, of course, treasure and possibly a skeleton or two.

He didn't remember the books mentioning large droplets of icy water falling from the roof of the cave to land with a loud splat on someone's head or trickle down the back of their neck. His yelp of shock echoed from the rough walls, and the circle of yellow light cast by Caitrin's flashlight wavered as she began to laugh.

"Thanks," Josh said sourly, trying to move to a spot that wasn't so drippy and wiping water from the back of his neck as best he could -- he could feel the fabric of his T-shirt collar absorbing some of it, though, and it wasn't pleasant.

Caitrin snickered. "Are you sure you don't feel the cold fingers of a murdered spirit plucking at your clothes?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? You're the one who thinks it must be true." Now, though, standing in the darkened cave with the sounds of the sea outside -- and maybe closer than he would have guessed, if the rush of the waves, the gurgling of the water, had anything to say about it -- Josh could understand the temptation. The place sure felt creepy.

"When I was little, I thought I could hear things in the walls," Caitrin said. There was still a hint of laughter in her voice, but it was quickly disappearing behind what John knew was nervousness. "Scratching noises, as if the men, in trying to claw their way free, had embedded an echo into the rock itself." She bit her lip, then tried to smile. "Fanciful child, wasn't I?"

There was no way Josh could keep away, not when she was so anxious and, at the same time, trying so hard to hide it. He moved closer. "I can see why. It's pretty freaky, and what with growing up hearing that story -- I'm not surprised it scared you."

"I ran home," Caitrin said. In the backglow of the flashlight, her eyes shone eerily. "All the way. My dad was shouting after me, but I couldn't make myself stop." She cleared her throat and stood up straighter. "I think I'd forgotten all of that until just now."

"It's amazing how memories can be triggered," Josh told her. He sniffed the damp air, thick with the smell of rotting seaweed. "By smell, most of all." He was picking up her thoughts strongly now, her emotions intensified by her remembered fear. "You fell," he said slowly. "Took the skin off your knees because you landed so hard and didn't notice it until your mother saw you and cried out and then it started to hurt."

"How did you know that?" Caitrin's eyes widened. "My God, Josh, how could you know that? Did my uncle tell you?"

Josh shook his head. "You did. When you thought about it."

They stared at each other in silence and Josh made sure to stay very still because this wasn't really the best

place for Caitrin to panic and possibly take off, not with the dark rocks slick and wet underfoot.

"I don't believe you," Caitrin said finally, but her voice shook and it was a lie. "Someone told you. Uncle John, or maybe even my mam, the last time you were here, and you've remembered all this time."

Josh didn't answer. She didn't want to hear that it was the truth, and he couldn't be dishonest and say anything that would let her continue to fool herself. It was better to say nothing at all.

After what felt like a long, long time, Caitrin finally looked away, first down at the floor of the cave and then at the walls. "I wonder what it was like," she said, and Josh was with her as she imagined the two brothers, hands tied as the water washed up over their mouths and noses. She had a vivid imagination -- she could feel the burning in her nostrils as the salt water stung at them, and the rapid skittering of her heart as fear became terror.

It was too much; again, Josh moved closer to her, and this time she moved willingly into his arms, lifting her face for the kiss they both wanted. Her lips were warm, her sweater soft against Josh's palms. He didn't care that the flashlight she was holding dug into his back.

"You know you believe me," he said, even though he shouldn't have, when their mouths parted. They were both breathing heavily.

"Shut up," Caitrin told him. "I don't. You're a liar." And she kissed him again, her mouth fierce against his own.

"Test me," Josh demanded, pulling back from the kiss, his mouth stinging, his blood warm in his veins. He was tall enough that he had to bend his head to kiss her, and when she tilted her head back to look up at him, the cave dark, but not so dark that he couldn't see the amusement in her eyes, that was what he did, flicking his tongue past the dark pink pout of her lips to taste her and forgetting his demand.

He tried not to listen as he kissed her, but he couldn't pull back out of her head, not when their bodies were this close. He felt everything twice; his own awareness of her enjoyment of the kiss amplified by what she was thinking. His hands found the damp silk of her hair, and they stood, swaying together in the center of the cave, mouths busy and hungry, until Caitrin started to edge them toward a ledge running along the back of the cave, which was high enough that it was reasonably dry and wide enough to sit on.

They got there without taking their hands off each other, or falling over, which was an achievement in itself, the argument forgotten because this was way more fun.

Then, as Caitrin twisted free with a throaty, husky giggle, Josh, automatically reaching for her, did slip, his startled cry changing to one of pain as his outstretched hand slammed hard against the cave wall, fitting into a scooped-out depression in the rock. It crumbled like wet sand and gave way, leaving him with his hand stuck through what should have been a solid wall, feeling cold, dead air whisper across his bruised, aching fingers.

"Are you hurt?" Caitrin asked, turning to see.

Josh drew his hand carefully back through the hole, wincing as scraped knuckles were dragged across the rough surface again. "No. More surprised than anything. What the hell?"

Turning the flashlight's beam to the wall, Caitrin prodded it with her other hand. More bits crumbled down onto the ledge they were standing on; she shoved harder, and a chunk of rock larger than Josh's fist disappeared into the darkness behind, followed by a sharp, somehow wet, clack. "There's something back there," Caitrin said, sounding afraid and excited at the same time. "Some sort of space." She shone the light in, and they could see that there was another cave back there, or another section of this one as big as the part they were already standing in.

"Uh-huh. It looks like it was...I don't know, sealed up, or something. Here, careful." Josh reached into the now-larger hole, gripped onto another chunk of rock, and pulled. He could feel it give, just a little, so he tugged harder and it came away suddenly; he almost lost his balance, but Caitrin steadied him.

"Which of us needs to be careful?" she asked, grinning, and then they were working together, tugging chunks of stone free. They dropped some of them onto the ledge beside them; others fell back into the space behind the wall, some of those splashing wetly as they landed in water. When the hole was big enough, they squeezed through - - Josh first, then Caitrin, holding his hand.

"God, it's dark. You can't even see where the water's coming in," Caitrin said. There wasn't much of a place to stand -- just a few stones near the makeshift wall. Everything else was under water, the waves lapping at the rock as the tide came in.

"If it's in here, but not in the cave behind us yet, there must be some sort of underground channel leading out to sea that surfaces here," Josh said. "And the water must fill this place; the roof's barely high enough to stand in."

"It's where they died, isn't it?" Caitrin said, her voice stifled by the dark, damp air.

"I guess..." Josh took the flashlight from her and turned it on the partially demolished wall. "The salt must have eaten away at this; it's not solid rock; more like soil and rubble, compacted." The light illuminated the wall and he frowned. "Is it me, or is there something drawn on this? A pattern, or something?"

Caitrin twisted her head to look at it. "Maybe. It's awful dark in here, and it could be just erosion."

“No,” Josh insisted, “It’s painted on with something. Look, here and over there…” His fingers traced the shape his eyes were trying to identify and make familiar. It didn’t take long, not in this nightmare of a place, with the water dripping out of black rock into inky water. “God, it’s that spell you told me about.”

Caitrin gave a startled squeak Josh was willing to bet she’d deny making later and jerked her hand away from the wall. A moment later she was sliding over the rocks to land with a loud splash in the water a few feet away.

“Caitrin!” Heedless of the icy water, Josh scrambled down to her and extended his hand. The water was waist deep here, and he was starting to think that getting the hell out would be a good idea.

Caitrin’s fingers caught at his; they were cold and wet and stronger than they looked when she was panicking, which seemed to be now if her rapid breathing and frantic thoughts were any indication. Her ankle hurt, too; Josh could hear her thinking it. “I’m stuck,” she gasped. “Josh, I’m stuck. The rocks shifted when I stepped down.”

She was freaking out enough that he could tell she believed it, but he didn’t. “Relax. Here, stand with your weight on your other foot. Jesus, it’s cold.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Caitrin’s teeth were chattering, but she was making an effort to keep it together, which was good.

Josh felt down along her leg, trying to figure out how she was caught. As he reached her ankle, he encountered rough stone, and what felt like a large slab of it. Maybe she’d stepped into a depression with this foot and knocked the rock with the other. “You know, if you wanted to me to touch you, all you had to do was ask. You didn’t have to get all dramatic about it.”

She made an affronted sound, but her hand was clutching at his jacket. “Get me out.”

“I will.” He couldn’t get at her boot laces to untie them, which had been his first thought. Losing the boot would have been a small price to pay. “Here, I’m going to try to move this. When I say, pull, okay? As hard as you can.”

“All right.”

Josh couldn’t get much of a grip on the rock -- it was too rounded by years of salt water moving across it -- but he did the best he could. “Okay -- now!”

He heaved; the rock slipped against his fingertips, not seeming to have moved at all, and Caitrin made a strangled sound between her clenched teeth. “Bloody hell,” she gasped. “Ow. Did it move?”

Josh was almost afraid to tell her it hadn’t. “Maybe. Try again.” The results were the same, though, and he realized the water was already higher than it had been a few minutes before.

They were in trouble.

“Get me *out*,” Caitrin said, with more desperation than before. “Josh, please.”

“I will.” He straightened and touched her face. “I promise.” It was rash, he knew, but he had to do whatever it took to keep her calm, because if she was freaking out it was just going to make things that much harder and there was no way he was going to get her out of here without help. If someone didn’t come, she was going to drown as surely as the Lennox brothers had all those years ago, and he didn’t think he’d be able to bring himself to leave her.

“Be quiet for a few seconds, okay? I have to try something.”

## Chapter Nine

“Nick? Love?”

Someone was touching Nick’s face -- it had to be John, of course, but it was so hard to drag himself back to awareness. They’d been -- and then. There was the taste of salt water at the back of Nick’s throat, and the sensation of choking -- he rolled suddenly onto his side, gagging, and John’s warm hand settled on his shoulder.

“I’m okay,” Nick gasped, turning his head to meet John’s worried gaze. “It’s Josh. He and Caitrin are stuck in one of the caves -- I think her foot’s caught -- and the tide’s coming in. We need to go now.”

John stared at him for a heartbeat, his eyes wide with shock, and then he nodded. “You can tell me all about how you know later.” He rolled off the bed and began to drag on his clothes, his movements quick and efficient. “Here,” he said, tossing Nick his shirt. “And I’ll get blankets, rope, and a torch.”

Nick pushed his arms through the sleeves of his shirt as he scrambled off the bed, his awareness split between the familiar surroundings of their bedroom, lit and warmed by the late afternoon light, and the cold, dark cave. “Something to move the rock with. We’ll need a -- a --”

“Crowbar,” John supplied. “Aye. I’ll get it. I’ll meet you outside.” He left, fastening his jeans as he went, and Nick didn’t allow himself even one deep breath before he hurried after him.

In the kitchen, Nick shoved his feet into his boots without bothering to tie them and stumbled out the door, which John had left ajar. He thought briefly about taking a jacket, but he didn’t want to go back for one, and John was already coming toward him with a blanket tossed over his shoulder and a rope wrapped around his arm. He had a flashlight tucked under his arm and was holding a crowbar and a pickaxe.

“Take these,” John said, juggling, and Nick took the flashlight and crowbar. “The same caves you were at earlier, is it? Come on, it’ll be quicker to run than to take the car.”

“Yes.” Nick was sure, even though he couldn’t have said how. “It looked different; I don’t know why. Like a tunnel, almost.” Then there wasn’t spare breath for talking, because they were running. He ought to have tied his boots, but they were a snug enough fit even untied that he wasn’t tripping, at least.

He was winded by the time they came in sight of the caves, but he pointed and said, “That one, I think.”

John ran faster, pulling away and leaving him behind. “Cait!” he shouted, and there was an answering cry in Caitrin’s voice, high-pitched and scared.

When Nick ran into the cave, John was already applying the pickaxe to an opening in one of the walls, widening it slightly before slipping through into the space beyond. “Get some more of those rocks free at the floor,” John called to him.

There was water rushing through the gap over the ledge that Nick moved to stand on, and he realized that the previously sealed off section of the cave beyond it was filling with the tide. Quickly, he tucked the flashlight under his arm and pried some more loose stone away, widening the gap. Cold seawater rushed out over and into his boots, and he looked through into the other part of the cave to see John, Josh and Caitrin standing chest deep in water. Caitrin’s face was pale, her teeth chattering, and Josh didn’t look much better.

“Josh, are you stuck, too?” Nick asked. He wanted to tell his brother to get out of there if he wasn’t, although he doubted it would do any good.

Josh shook his head stubbornly; he probably knew what Nick was thinking. “I didn’t know if you heard me. I didn’t know if it would work in the other direction.”

“It did,” Nick said, meeting the eyes that were so like his own. “I heard you.”

Josh had an arm wrapped around Caitrin from behind, supporting her as John worked at wedging the pickaxe into some space underneath the water.

“There’s a girl,” John said encouragingly. Nick wasn’t sure if it was to Caitrin or to the stone that had her trapped. “We’ll have you out in a moment, all right?”

“All right.” Caitrin looked at her uncle trustingly.

“I can’t get it under without seeing what I’m doing. Nick, love, shine that torch over here for me,” John said, and Nick did. “Good. Now hang on. I’ll be right back.” John gave them all a confident smile, took a deep breath, and ducked under the surface of the water.

They all held their breaths with him until he resurfaced; he gasped for air, shaking water off his face.

“Nothing like a nice swim on a warm summer’s afternoon,” John said, and Nick found himself grinning. “All right; Josh, come over here and help me give this a pull, will you? Cait, I don’t suspect this is going to be any walk in the park where you’re concerned, but hang tight and we’ll have you out in a minute.”

Josh crossed to Caitrin’s other side and gripped onto the tool’s handle with John.

“On three,” John said. “And be careful about it.”

“I will,” Josh told him, nodding, and Nick knew something had passed between them, some kind of understanding.

“One...two...three.” They pulled at the handle, and Nick could see that the stone was lifting; Caitrin gasped suddenly and stumbled back, free. “There,” John said, sounding relieved. “Get back, girl; we don’t want to drop this on you again when we let it down.”

Nick reached a hand out toward Cait, who waded through the water toward him and took it, letting herself be pulled through the gap and onto the wet ledge. “You get out of there, too,” Nick said to Josh and John.

“What, and put an early end to our swim?” John asked. “Fine, fine, if you say so.” He stepped up onto the rocks at the edge of the hidden part of the cave.

“Careful,” Josh told him. “Some of those are loose. That’s how we --”

John slipped, and the pickaxe he was holding glanced handle-first off the inside wall, which crumbled instantly under the blow, sending rocks falling into both sides of the cave.

In the fraction of a second following that one, a powerful force, bright with rage and fear and half a dozen things Nick wasn’t sure he could have put a name to, burst forth as if from nowhere. Nick could see it, a swirling mass without human form, and he knew immediately that the stories had been true -- it was just that the ghosts had been so tightly bound by whatever spell had been cast that he hadn’t been able to feel them before, not at all.

And now that spell had been broken, the rocks holding the binding in place tumbled mass, a jigsaw puzzle that could never be reassembled. The spirits of the two brothers were free, and Nick instinctively held out his hand to ward them off, push them away from him. His other hand brushed against John’s head, and John rose from the crouched position the fall had left him in and glanced around him wildly.

John always had been able to see more than he liked to admit to when he was in physical contact with Nick at times like this; Nick supposed that capacity for a shared awareness was why the two of them had become so close so quickly back when they first met. But John would only have the vaguest impression of what was loose in the cave; Nick saw it all in vivid, nightmarish detail.

The spirits were howling, wordless screams of despair and rage ripping through the air. If they were trying to communicate they would need to calm down, but Nick wasn’t sure they were capable of being reasoned with.

John straightened and linked his fingers with Nick, which helped just like it always did. John was solid, real, a stubborn source of strength Nick could draw on, and would if needed.

“The brothers?” John said. “Can you talk to them?”

Nick shook his head, the small movement painful. There was so much anger... He forced the alien emotions away from him, projecting a receptive welcome as best he could while fending them away. They were trying to get into him, in a way he wasn’t used to, trying to use his mind and body as a haven, their own spirits shredding like wet tissue.

“Their bodies aren’t here,” he told John. In the outer cavern, Caitrin and Josh were talking in a frantic babble, with Josh attempting to quiet Caitrin’s panic. Josh was in his head still; Nick could feel him, a bright thread linking them, in stark contrast to the sticky cobweb of the brothers’ thoughts. Josh knew what was happening and could be trusted to get Caitrin away; at least Nick hoped so.

“No,” John said. “I thought you knew; they’re buried in the graveyard beside our house, in unhallowed ground. I’m guessing they were buried there because the priest wasn’t going to put them beside the mother they’d murdered.”

“Fuck,” Nick said. “They don’t know that’s where they are. They can’t -- they can’t anchor themselves here, and they don’t want to go, not yet, they don’t want to -- *get away from us* --”

He threw all of his and John’s combined strength of will at the spirits and felt them recoil, thwarted. Shit, this wasn’t good. He couldn’t communicate with them in any meaningful way; he wasn’t talking; he was putting up a barrier, because without it, they’d sweep through and into him, and he didn’t like to think what would happen if they succeeded. But with the barrier up, he couldn’t talk to them.

And then, abruptly, the spirits left, an aching, thrumming, charged silence all that remained. Nick leaned back against rock and felt himself start to shake. God, that had been intense and he didn’t think for a minute that it was over. The spirits had retreated or found -- found --

“They’ve gone?” John asked him, but Nick wasn’t listening. Josh. Caitrin, close and unprotected, with Josh’s mind linked to his -- God, what had he done?

"Are you okay?" he asked Josh, who'd just finished helping Caitrin sit on a rock in the part of the cave that was still dry and was wrapping the blanket John had dropped there around her shoulders.

Josh looked at him, clearly shocked by what had just happened and not doing more than going through the motions. "I -- I think so. It was real. The ghosts, I mean. You could -- they were here, but they left?"

"Yeah," Nick said. "They're gone." Not that that was necessarily a good thing, because they were too crazed with anger and fear to just disappear now that they'd been set free. And *why* had they been set free now? Why not when the wall had first started to crumble?

"There was a symbol," Josh said, swallowing and pushing his wet hair back out of his eyes. He was pale. "On the wall, on the inside. Could that have something to do with it?"

The wall that wasn't much more than rubble now; yes, that could explain it.

"Something to do with what? Are you -- oh God, you were telling the truth." Caitrin looked more than a little horrified, and Nick felt his stomach clench in sympathy for Josh, who must have seen similar looks on other faces over the years. Then the girl reached out and smacked Josh's leg with the flat of her hand. "You were telling the truth!"

"I know!" Josh said. "I told you!" He sounded relieved and annoyed at the same time, then remembered and looked at Nick again. "They're not *really* gone."

"Not for good," Nick agreed. "I don't think they could be. It's...complicated." He didn't want to say too much in front of Caitrin even if she did seem to be handling the situation fairly well, but he knew John, who couldn't hear his every thought the way Josh could, had to be wondering what the hell was going on.

John, who was soaked to the skin just like the other two and needed to get out of his wet clothes, because the sea was cold even at this time of year.

"Let's get back to the house," he said. "We can find you something to wear, Caitrin, and give you a hot bath and a drink. I don't think you want your mother to see you like this, do you?"

"God, no," John chimed in. "We'll tell her -- I'll not have you lying, mind, young Caitrin -- but there's telling and there's showing up half-drowned and scaring her to death. You know what she's like."

Caitrin nodded, her teeth chattering audibly. "I do that. Can we go now? Please?"

They made their way out of the cave, splashing through the rising water, and with very little time to spare to get onto the narrowing band of sand by the dunes. As they reached the dry, soft sand, with Nick eying the way it was clinging to his unpleasantly clammy jeans, knowing that it would be hell to wash off, Josh froze and turned his head.

"What is it?" Caitrin asked, stumbling.

"People," Josh said, indicating an outcrop of rock over to the left, back where they'd come from. "Over there."

John shaded his eyes. "Aye, I can see them -- or the jacket one of them is wearing, at least. Who the hell is it?"

"It's the people from the pub," Josh told them. "The ones you took to the cave, Nick."

Caitrin closed her lips firmly on whatever she'd been about to say and, as Nick watched, moved deliberately closer to Josh in a show of support he was sure Josh would've appreciated if his attention hadn't been on the couple who, now they'd been seen, were walking over to join them.

"I wouldn't say I took them to the cave as much as they took me," Nick said. God, the last thing they needed right now was to have to deal with these people again. "Maybe if we keep walking, they'll think we didn't see them."

It was already too late, though; Bonnie was raising her hand in greeting, and as they got closer, she called, "Is everyone all right?"

That was when Nick realized how they'd look to other people -- three of them soaking wet, two of them holding large tools that could easily be used as weapons. "Fine," he said, hoping to keep the conversation to a minimum. "Your earlier visit down here wasn't enough?" Somehow, he managed not to sound completely rude as he said it.

"Actually, we were headed to your house to ask if there wasn't a chance you'd change your mind about attending our ritual tomorrow when we saw you and Mr. McIntyre here --" Bonnie inclined her head at John politely, "-- running off. It seemed as if there might be some sort of emergency, so we thought we'd better follow and see if you needed help."

John shook his head. "No; everyone's fine, as you can see."

"Well, good." Fred was holding a pad of paper and a pen -- Nick hoped he wasn't taking notes.

Bonnie looked less convinced. Her gaze was moving restlessly from John to Josh, flicking over Caitrin as if she didn't exist. "You're not from here, are you, young man?" she asked Josh. "American, like your brother?"

"Yes." Josh gave an uncomfortable chuckle. "That's right."

"We don't want to seem rude," John said, his tone making it clear that he didn't bloody well care if they did, "but as you can see with your own eyes, we're all on the damp side here and we'd like to be getting into dry

clothes.”

“Of course,” Bonnie and Fred chorused. “How inconsiderate of us,” Bonnie added. “We’ll just walk with you up to the road. After all, there’s nothing to be seen in the caves, is there?”

“Water,” Caitrin snapped, following it with a convulsive shiver. “Lots of cold water and rocks.”

Bonnie smiled as if Caitrin had said something amusing. “Yes, I’m sure that’s all there is... now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” John said, his tone sharp.

Nick wasn’t really paying much attention. There was too much to think about and the annoying strangers were the least of his worries.

They walked through the dunes and across the field, the six of them spreading out, split into pairs, with Bonnie and Fred bringing up the rear and Nick and John leading the way. Because John was walking quickly and Nick was automatically matching his pace, it wasn’t long before a gap had opened up between them and the others. “We’ll get in, put the kettle on, maybe build a fire,” John said. “And I suppose Caitrin can take the first shower, but if she stays in there long, I swear I’ll --” His voice trailed off and he sighed. “No, I probably won’t. God, Nick, she could have drowned in there.”

“I know.” Nick remembered, vividly, the jolt of panic Josh had sent through to him, and his hand tightened on the crowbar he was still holding. “But she didn’t. Good thing you know how to use that.” He gestured at the pickaxe.

John glanced down at it as if he’d forgotten he was carrying it. “Aye.” He cast a glance over his shoulder, as if checking to see how far back Bonnie and Fred were, and then said, “We need to talk. All of us. For the love of God, don’t let that pair come in the house.”

Nick snorted. “I wasn’t planning on it, but they seem hard to shake off.”

“I’ll shut the door in their faces if I have to,” John told him.

By the time they reached the house, Nick felt as if every step was draining a little more of his strength from him. The clammy weight of his clothes, the reaction to the adrenaline rush of the rescue -- he wanted to get warm and dry and then not think about anything for a while, and he knew that wasn’t going to happen, which made his fatigue deepen.

Without words, he and John paused at the edge of their property and waited for the others to catch up. Caitrin looked exhausted, her face pale, and Josh was stumbling along beside her, in no better shape. Behind them, walking slowly, the two visitors looked half asleep, their expressions blank. Clouds were drawing in, darkening the sky, and a wind was whipping the thin, sharp grass of the field around their ankles. The four crossed the road to where Nick and John stood waiting. A rental car was parked a few hundred yards away, tucked neatly into a passing space, but Bonnie and Fred ignored it.

“We’ll say good-bye, then,” John said with a terse nod at Bonnie. He jerked his thumb at his niece. “Come on, you two, get into the house and don’t be dripping everywhere.”

“Go on with them,” Nick told him. “I’ll be right in.”

John gave him a look, but nodded and followed the younger ones inside.

To Fred and Bonnie, Nick said, “Look, I’m sure you mean well, but my brother’s only here for two weeks, and I want to spend my time with him, not with people who’re just interested in me as some kind of sideshow. I’ve had enough of that.”

“That’s not what we want from you,” Bonnie said, eyeing him with a new, different kind of interest that verged on making his skin crawl. Nick wondered what Josh would have been able to sense from her. “But I suppose we’ll just have to...live without it.”

“Yes, you will.” Nick didn’t know what was going on, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. He was keeping his barriers raised in case the Lennox brothers’ spirits came back; maybe that was messing with his ability to pick up on cues he normally would have, or something.

“Nick, are you--” It was Josh, come back to check on him. He’d changed into dry clothes and had a blanket wrapped around him. His eyes locked with Bonnie’s, and she smiled in a feral, deeply unpleasant sort of way. He didn’t finish whatever it was he’d been about to ask.

“Josh?” Nick glanced between them, worried.

“Oh shit,” Josh whispered. “Nick, it’s--”

Bonnie made a small, shocked gasp and stepped backward like someone had shoved her shoulder; something dark flew from her to Josh, disappearing like it had gone into his chest, and Josh staggered, then put a hand to his chest, looking down at it.

“Josh?”

Lifting his face slowly, Josh smiled in the same way Bonnie had half a minute before.

‘Shit’ was right, Nick thought, as Josh’s eyes flashed from green to a brown so dark it was nearly black.

## Chapter Ten

"It's been a long time," Josh said in a Scottish accent, looking directly at Fred.

"Aye, brother, it has," Fred replied. His features shifted subtly, as if another will was trying to shape them in ways this body wasn't used to, and Nick shuddered even though Fred had done nothing more than smile.

Possession. It was something he'd heard about, something he feared, in a distant, won't ever happen to me kind of way. Most of the ghosts he dealt with weren't interested in anything but sharing whatever was holding them in place, tethered, bound, and asking for help. He didn't know why the Lennox brothers were doing this, but he didn't really care.

They had to stop.

"Get out of them," he said, his voice as controlled as he could make it, addressing his words mostly to Josh. "I can help you; if you're in their minds, you know who I am and what I can do, but you have to leave their bodies. You're hurting them."

He didn't know what the effects of possession were, but he didn't think sharing mind and body with an angry, centuries-old ghost was a good idea. Two wills couldn't coexist, and if one was submerged in the other, was that reversible? God, he was lost here, consumed with concern for his brother and, if to a lesser degree, Fred and with guilt because some of this was his fault; if he hadn't forced the spirits away...

There was no time to think it through. Bonnie was still glassy-eyed, leaning against the low wall bordering the grounds of Rossneath, but the other two were poised to leave. They grinned at him, feral, fierce, and began to walk away.

"No!" Nick went after them and grabbed Josh's arm, calling out for John to help him, his voice lost in the roaring in his ears. It was like a nightmare where all his screams were silent. Josh's head jerked around, and he snarled.

Nick turned his head, too, and saw John appear at the head of the driveway, too far away for his expression to be visible. Then pain, bright and hot, blossomed at the side of his head and when he put his hand to it, he brought it away wet with blood.

Fred grinned, dropped the stone he was holding, and he and Josh ran off toward the car, their bodies moving clumsily but still too fast for Nick to even contemplate chasing them, given that his knees were buckling, turning to water.

John was there, holding onto his arm and saying something urgent; it was hard for Nick to make himself think, but he did his best to convey what he needed to. "It's the ghosts -- they're in Fred and Josh. God, John..."

"Easy," John said as he wobbled on his feet, getting an arm around him. "They're off -- we won't catch them now."

"We have to." Nick tried to get his body to cooperate, but only managed a few weaving steps in the direction Josh had gone before he almost fell again, saved only at the last second by John's support. He watched, stunned, as the car Fred and Bonnie had arrived in started and drove away, kicking up a thick spew of dust and pebbles and swerving far enough off the road that it flattened a short hedge in the process. "I have to sit down," he said weakly, and did, so suddenly that John couldn't stop him.

"Nick. Love." John's hands were on his face, looking into his eyes. "He needs a doctor." This last seemed to be directed at someone else.

"Here, I've a handkerchief," Bonnie said, her own voice shaky, and a moment later, the soft cloth was being pressed to Nick's head.

He hissed and tried to jerk away, but John steadied him. "No, let me. I'll have to get him into the car."

Finally finding his voice again, Nick said, "I'm okay. It just took me by surprise." He looked up at Bonnie, who was standing above them. "What about you?"

She shuddered and rubbed her hands over her upper arms as if trying to warm herself. "I'm all right, now that he's gone. I suppose you're willing to admit now that the legend was true?"

Nick forced his mouth into a wry grin but didn't try to nod. "Yeah. I wasn't lying before -- I really couldn't sense anything until that wall came down. It must have been one hell of a spell."

"It felt like having...I don't know, some sort of monster inside me." Bonnie crouched down and caught Nick's

gaze in her own. "I think they're after the ones that put them in that cave and let them drown. Well, after their grandchildren, at this point, I suppose, but I definitely...I felt it. Their anger."

"Then we have to stop them," Nick said.

"Easy said." John rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. "Back in the house," he said decisively. "You're going nowhere until you're in dry clothes with something for that lump on your head. I'm thinking ice, some aspirin, and a dram of whisky."

"Oh, you should never give people with head injuries alcohol!" Bonnie protested, which left Nick completely convinced that nothing of the ghost remained in her. "It's not recommended at all."

"Maybe not where you're from," John said, his arm around Nick, supporting him as they began to walk up the driveway. "Here, it's the most important part of the treatment."

Nick thought that Bonnie was too far away to hear John mutter, "You'd think even an English woman would have more sense than *that*," but he was past caring. The side of his head was throbbing and he couldn't make his feet move in anything but a slow plod toward the house when he wanted to run, race after Josh.

Inside, they left Bonnie with a glass of water at the kitchen table and went upstairs, just as slowly, so that Nick could change into dry clothes. Caitrin was still in the shower by the sound of it.

"We have to find him," Nick said to John, who was kneeling on the floor putting dry socks on his feet so he could continue holding Bonnie's handkerchief to his head.

"We will," John said shortly, finishing the job. "There. How's your head?"

"Hurts."

"I'm not surprised. Well, let's get you back downstairs and find some ice."

He was sitting at the kitchen table with a makeshift icepack held to his head when Caitrin came downstairs, having changed into a pair of John's jeans -- they were too big, and held up with a belt -- and a wool sweater that'd had an unfortunate accident in the laundry and become two sizes smaller. She stopped in the doorway, frowning. "Where's Josh?"

John cleared his throat and glanced at Nick. "Well, now, that's a bit of a long story."

"One of the ghosts is borrowing his body for a while." Nick looked at John and lifted one shoulder in a half shrug of apology. "Not so long."

"What do you mean, 'borrowed'?" Caitrin asked.

"Possessed," John said. As her expression changed, he quickly reassured her. "It'll be all right."

She gave him an incredulous look. "Did you hit your head as well as Uncle Nick?"

"Don't be so cheeky," John admonished her, but it sounded automatic. He sighed. "It *will* be all right, love. We'll see to that. Nick will talk to the ghosts, get them to see reason, and help them move on. It's what he does."

"Oh, this is crazy," Caitrin cried out. Bonnie shifted uneasily in her chair, the glass of water she'd been given barely touched. Caitrin rounded on her. "And you! What con are you trying to pull?"

"I -- I assure you --" Bonnie began.

"Caitrin," Nick said, interrupting Bonnie, who was looking distressed, her face showing what he guessed was a rare expression of confusion and indecision. "The lady's been through what Josh is going through now. She's got information that can help us and a friend of her own who's in danger, so back off, will you?"

Caitrin flounced -- there really was no other word for it -- to a chair and thumped down in it, glaring around at all of them before slow tears began to trickle down her face. John walked over to her and stood beside her, his hand gentle as he stroked her hair. "There now," he murmured. "You cry, hen."

She wiped her face and jerked her head away from his hand. "I'm not crying. I'm *angry*."

"My mistake," John said, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. "The tears confused me."

"*They're* angry," Bonnie said. "I don't understand what they want to do this for, though. I mean; they're dead." She looked at Nick appealingly. "They are, aren't they? They can't -- they can't stay here?"

"Like this? I don't know. Maybe." He didn't know enough about it, damn it, and there wasn't time to go looking for the information he needed. "They can...um. They can stay a long time, just as regular ghosts. I don't know what happens when they're like this."

"They were confused, at first." Bonnie was looking down at the table. "*He* was. He didn't like me because I'm a woman."

Nick shifted the icepack and winced. "What else did you get? Anything?"

She shook her head. "It was all...I don't know."

"You're trying to tell us that thing was in your head -- in you -- and you don't know anything more than it was 'confused'?" Caitrin's cheeks were flushed. "You must know something!"

"It was..." Bonnie closed her eyes as if she could remember better that way. "He was angry. So angry. And...I think, afraid. Underneath it. But mostly angry. He wanted --" She opened her eyes and met Nick's. "I think he wants

to find the people who did this to him. The ones who were responsible." She'd said that before.

"Long dead," Nick said briefly. "So they'll target their families." He glanced at John. "Who were the main people responsible for leaving the brothers in that cave? It wouldn't have been the whole village; there are always ringleaders."

John's forehead wrinkled in a frown. "I don't know," he said doubtfully. "The priest, aye, and maybe whoever was important back then; the richest farmer, the man who owned the most land... the teacher of the local school. The story doesn't really say."

"Oh, yes, it does," Bonnie said, sitting straighter and looking invigorated by the chance to put someone right. "I brought along a small selection of books concerned with the folklore and history of the islands, and the Lennox brothers are mentioned in several of them."

"Is that so?" John said. "And what do these books say?"

"Probably no more than you already know," she told him, "but one of them lists the people who died, supposedly because of the ghosts' revenge, and I'd say that would make a good starting point?"

"If they killed them then, why would they want to kill their ancestors now?" Caitrin asked.

"Maybe they didn't get them all before the binding spell trapped them?" Nick shrugged. "This is all guesswork."

"Did they mention who organized the spell and who did it?" John asked Bonnie. "Stands to reason the people most in fear were the guilty ones and I imagine they'd have a grudge against the witch, too."

Bonnie pursed her lips. "I think so, but I only skimmed that story. We're here for the stones and that was just something that caught my interest." She flushed. "It was a long drive up here," she confided. "And Fred isn't -- well, he can be just a little tedious at times, sweet though he is. If I'm reading, he doesn't talk to me."

"So you buried your nose in a book all the way up from England?" John said dryly. "Well, forget the stones; the rest of your group can prance around them all they want; we need you to get us those names."

She looked torn. "I want to help, of course I do, but... shouldn't we report this? Tell someone?"

*Make it into someone else's problem*, Nick translated. "Who do you suggest we tell?" he asked bluntly. "Until they do something illegal -- and I guess it might not be long until they do, but still -- the constable can't do anything, even if he wanted to. Which I doubt he would."

Nick glanced at John for confirmation. Lewis Armstrong was the man who put the fear of the law into Traighshee's citizens, when it was necessary, which wasn't all that often. Lewis would be the first to admit that he didn't believe in what he couldn't see, an admission that lessened his favor in the eyes of the church but meant that the young people on the island looked up to him. "He'd think we'd all had a bit too much to drink," John agreed, nodding.

"He might not believe us, but he might watch them if we said something had happened." Caitrin bit her lip, thinking. "What if we said they'd taken drugs? By mistake, like. We could say Josh brought them with him from America, and that they'd got into some food by accident?"

"You haven't flown internationally, have you," Nick said wryly. "I don't think he'd have gotten through the airport with them, let alone onto a plane."

"We deal with this ourselves," John said, his tone making it plain that it wasn't up for debate. "And by 'we' I mean Nick with me helping him." He looked down at Caitrin, his expression as stern as Nick had ever seen it; John was usually indulgence itself with his niece. "You're going to argue with me, and we don't have time, so I'll give you something to do. We'll all get in the car and go to this lady's --"

"Please. Call me Bonnie," she said. "I feel as if we're past the point of being formal, don't you?"

"We go to wherever Bonnie's staying," John continued.

"The Fraser Arms Hotel," she said. "We all are."

"Fine. We go there, and you and Caitrin find this book and get a list of possible targets. You can call us when you have it."

"And what will you be doing?" Caitrin asked suspiciously. "Because I want to help Josh, Uncle John, and I'll not be put somewhere safe like a baby!"

"We'll look for the car; the island's not that big, after all, and we know they won't be trying to leave it. We'll start in town, maybe go out to where the Lennox cottage was --"

"Or the graveyard," Nick put in. "They could be drawn there."

John nodded. "Aye, they might. We'll see them as we drive by if they are." He looked at Nick, his eyes warm with concern. "Are you up for this? You're awful pale, love."

"I'm okay," Nick said. He had to be -- there wasn't anyone else who could do what he could, and for all he knew, the longer that ghost was in possession of Josh's body, the harder it would be to get him out. He hated to think what Josh might be going through right now.

“Let’s go.”

It took them another ten minutes to get organized, what with three of them needing dry shoes. “We can’t chance stopping at my house,” Caitrin said. “My mam’s shopping on Mull today, but my dad might be there. He’ll want to know what’s happening, and I don’t want to lie to him.” She made do with a pair of old boots that had been tucked in the back of one of the cupboards since the house had become Nick’s -- they were probably twenty-five years old, but things had been made more sturdily back then, and they were only half a size too big.

John drove them all down to the hotel, where Bonnie and Caitrin were dropped off, and left strict instructions that they were to call if they found anything or if they saw Josh or Fred. Then he and Nick drove slowly through town, keeping an eagle eye out for Fred’s car and finally spotting it parked not too far from the pub.

And, if Nick wasn’t mistaken, there were Fred and Josh -- Blayne and Toran now -- disappearing into said pub. “There,” he said. “God, I hope all they want is a drink.”

“It’s been a long time since their last one, right enough,” John said. Off Nick’s look, he added, “Blayne and Toran, I mean.”

“True.”

“But I’m thinking they’re hunting,” John said, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel. “And not for a pint of ale.” He pulled up beside Fred’s car. “We should maybe do something so that they can’t drive away.”

“Like what? Shoot out the tires?” Nick got out of the car, fighting dizziness. He leaned against the car until John came around and slipped a hand under his arm and together they walked over to the pub. “Like you said; where are they going to go? And to be honest, I’d sooner they did drive away from the town; there’s a limit to what we can do in public.”

“Good point.”

Inside, the pub was its usual busy self, with the TV set above the bar showing a soccer match and the click of cue against ball coming from the pool table. Blayne and Toran were at the bar, already sipping at pints of lager, studying the room with a predatory, focused stare. Nick noticed that no one stood close to them; even Todd, the younger barman who pulled pints on Geordie’s nights off, had retreated to the far end of the bar, his face troubled as he slowly polished a glass with a towel.

Slowly, Nick and John walked toward them. When they were about six feet away, Nick stopped, gesturing at John not to get any nearer. “Josh.”

Toran shook his head; his eyes were so dark that even without everything else, Nick would have known something was wrong. “Not anymore.” He looked at Blayne. “I’d have thought he’d get the hint that he was better off well away from us.”

“Aye, Toran.” Blayne took another sip from his pint glass and shook his head sadly. “I remember a time when a man had the sense to avoid trouble.”

“Ah, but that was also a time when men knew better than to bed other men,” Toran said. “Back in our day, they would have been run off the island, not let to live amongst decent folk.”

Hearing those words come from Josh’s mouth, even though the voice didn’t sound much like his, was harder than Nick would have anticipated. It took everything he had not to let the hurt show on his face. “Things change,” he said.

Blayne smirked over the rim of his glass. “Aye, we know. And a good deal more is about to.”

“Oh, aye?” John settled himself into what Nick privately thought of as his fighting stance, even though it had been a long time now since John had gotten into an argument that turned physical. His hands were curled slightly, almost making fists, his weight was balanced evenly, and there was a spark of anger in his eyes. “For you two, maybe. Murdering bastards, the pair of you. You deserved all you got and it was a cleaner death than I’d have given you.”

Toran moved so quickly that Nick didn’t even have time to blink -- he grabbed onto John, turned him around, and shoved him up against the bar, snarling in his face. “We didn’t murder anyone,” he hissed. “We were *innocent*. They were the murderers, the ones that tied us up in that cave and left us to drown.”

Around them, conversations died, silence spreading outward as heads turned to watch. Todd tensed behind the bar and then began to move toward them, but caught Nick’s eye and subsided.

John, who didn’t get intimidated easily, met Toran’s aggression with a contemptuous snort. “Is that so? Not a version of the story I’ve ever heard.” Like Toran, he kept his voice down, but they were still getting too much attention. He shrugged free, and Toran let him, his breath coming in short gasps.

Nick turned to Blayne. “If that’s so --” John snorted again, but Nick continued. “Then we can talk about it, but not here. Let’s go someplace else, okay?”

Blayne tilted his head, his gaze sliding past Nick to a group of men in the corner who had gone back to their card game when John and Josh hadn’t begun to fight. “I like it here. I see an old friend.”

Nick gave the men a cursory glance. He knew them by sight, but they were twenty years older and he wasn't sure what their names were or which of them Blayne meant. "No, you don't know them," he said. "You don't know anyone alive today. You're out of your time, and you don't belong here."

"He's right," John said. "And if you'll let him, he can help to send you to where you do belong." He added, "Heaven or hell, and I'm still thinking it's going to be the last one."

A pause, and then Fred -- Blayne, Nick reminded himself -- nodded. "Fine."

Nick wasn't sure why they'd agreed; maybe it was just because they had the sense to realize that starting a brawl in a pub full of people, none of whom knew them, wasn't likely to end well. He was just glad they were willing to step outside, away from the crowd that had no idea what was going on. Hopefully, they'd be able to get this taken care of before that changed.

"So what is it you think you can do for us?" Josh asked, once they'd stepped outside and away from the pub's entrance. "Because somehow I'm doubting we have the same goals in mind."

"Well, you can't stay like this." Nick tried to sound relaxed and reasonable about it when he was feeling anything but. "You must be using up an awful lot of energy, being in these bodies the way you are. I don't think the original owners are just sitting there quietly, letting you do whatever you want."

Blayne nodded. "Aye, well. This one's none too happy about it, and that's the truth. Doesn't mean I'm going to just turn control back over to him, though, no matter how much he might want it. We were cheated, Toran and I -- it wasn't right."

"I can see how you'd feel that way," Nick said diplomatically. Across the road from the pub, a low wall ran along a steep, rocky slope leading down to the water, with a bench in front of it. "Why don't we go over there and you can tell me what happened?"

Toran rolled his eyes but after a quick glance at Blayne, he walked to the bench and sat down on it, his legs sprawled wide, his face impassive. Blayne sat beside him, and Nick and John sat facing them on the wall, the sea at their backs.

"So," John said. "Innocent, you say?"

"We watched her die," Toran said, "but the only part we had in that was walking through the door when she thought us many miles away. It was getting dark and she was always nervous, ready to jump and scream at a mouse skittering over the floor. She must have heard us coming because she peered out through the window. We saw her and waved and thought she knew it was us. We were singing -- a little drunk, happy to be home, our pockets well-lined."

"We'd a gift for her," Blayne added, his face locked in sad lines now. "A wee hand mirror. She'd had one when we were bairns and dropped it and cried for hours over it."

Despite himself, Nick felt sympathy rise, picturing the scene.

"We hammered on the door, roaring out for her to open it and let us in, not knowing why she hadn't come running to meet us..." Toran shook his head. "She lay behind the door, so close that when I pushed it open, it struck her head, but she was already dead, I swear, her eyes staring up at me, wide and empty. God, will you ever forget her eyes?" he asked his brother. "I see them now, I do --"

There were tears in Blayne's eyes. "I know. We stood there for so long, barely saying a word to each other. Shock, I think. It had been years since we'd been home, and we were so looking forward to surprising her..."

"We were still standing there, with the front door open and her body on the floor, not yet cold, when someone must have happened by." Toran wrapped his arms around himself. "Not twenty minutes later, a group came up the path with torches and weapons. We tried to run off, but they caught us near the shore. They knocked us about and tied our hands behind our backs, and put us in that cave. They wouldn't listen to a word we said, wouldn't even *hear* us..."

Nick had no idea what to say to that. He could imagine all too vividly what it would have been like, the water getting higher and higher until there was no air left to breathe.

"They were the murderers," Blayne said fiercely. "And after we died, we went after them. It was only fair -- we wanted revenge for what they'd done."

"I can understand that in a way," John said. "And I can understand why they stopped you, too."

Toran made an odd choking sound, half groan. "That spell... Trapped in that cave... It was like they wouldn't stop tormenting us. We were held there like flies in honey, struggling endlessly."

"And then we freed you," Nick said. "And now you have a choice --"

"No," John interrupted, his elbow nudging into Nick's ribs, a warning, Nick supposed. "You have a path to follow. An interrupted journey to finish."

"Go toward the light?" Nick muttered under his breath. "Somehow I don't think it's going to be that easy."

"Maybe not," John said. "You weren't angels, were you? Or was the part of the legend that had your pockets

full of stolen gold a lie, too?"

"We had money, aye," Blayne said. "Wouldn't you have, if you were coming home to see your mother for the first time in years? But it wasn't stolen; we'd earned it, every guinea."

Nick shook his head, because they were getting so far off-track it wasn't even funny. "Look, you're going to have to go, whether you want to or not. You're not powerful enough to stay here indefinitely." He hoped.

"It doesn't need to be indefinitely," Blayne said with a smirk. "Just long enough to --" He broke off as Toran suddenly groaned and clutched at his head, bending low at the waist, face hidden.

Nick was up off the wall in a shot, silently praying that Toran was somehow dissipating, or at least losing the ability to keep control of Josh the way he had been. He knelt on the ground in front of the man, and when Toran lifted Josh's face again, it was Josh's green eyes that looked back at him, anguished.

"Nick," he gasped, grabbing at Nick's hands and holding on tightly. "They want -- they want to kill people, all the ones that are related to -- God, don't let them. Please."

"I know," Nick said. He could feel John standing just behind him; Blayne had jumped to his feet and backed away a few steps. "It's okay. We won't. Just hang on."

"They're crazy." Josh pressed the heel of one hand to his temple. He was shaking. "Insane. They weren't, before, but I think all those years in that cave..."

"Toran!" Blayne's voice cracked. "Where are you, brother?"

Good question. Nick guessed Toran was still inside Josh -- no, he knew that, because he could sense him -- but Toran was quiescent now, a stronger will holding his at bay. Possession was nine-tenths of the law, and Josh was firmly entrenched after eighteen years of ownership; Toran was clinging by his fingertips.

Blayne threw his head back, his eyes lit with a roiling dark energy, his face contorted with grief and loss. "Toran!" he screamed up at the sky. "To me, brother! To me!"

"What the hell?" John asked. "Nick!"

But there was nothing he could do. As they watched -- and Nick wondered if John and Josh could even see it -- Toran's spirit escaped the prison of flesh and bone that Josh's body had become and flowed into Fred's body, joining his brother.

Blayne screamed again, exultant this time, and then moved with a speed and strength that was beyond anything a human could match. Nick caught a fist to his jaw and staggered out of the way, tasting the bright, warm copper of his blood. It filled his senses so that as he slammed against the low wall, he felt no pain. Just darkness and John's name dying on his lips as he called out a warning.

## Chapter Eleven

Fred -- Blayne -- shouldn't have been able to move so fast; John knew that as certainly as he knew anything. And yet he had. So fast that John had found himself flat on the ground, unsure what part of Blayne had hit him but sure, at least, that it had connected with his right cheek, which was throbbing.

He groaned and rolled onto his side. Josh was lying crumpled a few feet away, almost near enough to touch, and Nick -- John's heart gave a sickly throb until he saw him, half propped up against the wall and stirring now, one hand rising to touch his face gingerly.

"All right?" John asked Nick, forcing himself to his hands and knees and crawling closer to Josh.

"I think so. Josh?"

"He's out cold." John was afraid to move the boy too much, in case he was hurt in ways he couldn't see, but he touched Josh's face. "Josh? Come on, lad. Wake up now."

Nick came over and dropped to his knees beside them. "Josh? Joshua."

Another thirty seconds or so of persistence on their parts, and finally Josh blinked and groaned. He opened his eyes, closed them again.

"Josh," Nick said firmly.

Josh opened his eyes again. "Nick?"

"Yeah. It's okay. Just take it easy. Don't try to --"

But Josh was already trying to sit up. Nick made a frustrated sound and helped him, shifting to give the boy something to lean against. "Is he really gone? Is that -- I mean. I don't know." He sounded half addled, and with good reason from what John could tell.

"Out of you and gone from here, but not gone altogether," John told him. "He -- both of them -- they're inside that poor man." He shuddered. "I'm not sure they liked being apart. I'm thinking this is better for them."

"It's not better for Fred," Nick said. "Josh barely kept his head above water, and if I had to guess, I'd say what he can do helped him with that." It made sense, and John gave Nick an encouraging nod. "But Fred... he didn't seem that strong a personality to start with, and he's got two spirits in there now."

"So he's drowning," John swallowed and tried not to think of how that would feel. He'd fallen overboard once and sunk deep, but he'd got back to the surface. Somehow, he wasn't sure Fred ever would.

"Is that boy drunk like that man who just barged into me?" John turned. Marion Macready was staring down at Josh with her thin face pinched with disapproval, gray hair pinned back in a bun as tight as her lips. "All that yelling and that man nearly knocked me flying when I came to see if I could help..."

*Came to nose around and get a juicy bit of gossip to pass on and wave under my mother's nose the next time you see her.* Josh, who must have been listening in, gave a small snort of laughter, and John frowned a warning at him.

"No." Nick was running a hand through Josh's hair, no doubt checking to see if he'd given himself a goose egg when he'd fallen, and he seemed to only be half paying attention to what he was saying. "He slipped on something. You know what tourists can be like."

That was funny, because some of the islanders still didn't think of Nick as much more than a tourist himself, and Marion was one of them. She pursed her lips, clearly wondering if Nick was making fun of her, and Josh laughed again, weakly, then apologized when the woman looked affronted.

"Sorry," he said. "I think I must have hit my head."

Nick gave a short shake of his own head in John's direction to tell him Josh hadn't, that it was just a convenient excuse he'd borrowed from Nick's thoughts.

"Well, it's just not right. Those tourists need to look after their own so that they don't cause trouble like this. Drinking and carrying on, knocking people down... It's a disgrace is what it is." Marion was frowning.

"We've got matters well in hand, Marion," John said. "Tell me, which way did the man go?"

"He got into a car and drove off like the devil was chasing him." She fingered the worn clasp of her handbag, sunlight glinting off the wedding ring rolling loosely on her thin finger. Her husband had died when John was a child, and it'd soured her disposition, or so his mother had said when she hadn't known John had been listening. At eight, it hadn't left him sympathetic, but now, with Nick in his life, he could feel pity for her. If he ever lost Nick...

Well, there was no sense in thinking about that now.

"Drove where?"

"How would I be knowing where, John McIntyre?" she snapped. "With these new roads all over the island, he could have been going anywhere."

John blinked. New roads? She couldn't be meaning the small housing development on the outskirts of town; that was a single road and fifteen houses he'd helped build.

"It used to be that I could walk around this town blindfolded and not get lost," she went on. "Now, there's new shops, new faces, changes every five minutes --"

"Will you just tell me which way he went?" John kept himself from raising his voice with an effort. "Please, Marion; it's very important. You can be a big help here if you can just tell me that."

She looked fleetingly surprised, and he wondered when the last time she'd been told she mattered was. "Well, he went up

*Dumfries Street*

." That didn't help; the road led to a T-junction and the road it merged with looped all around the island. "And because he'd been so rude, I watched him go." Of course, she did. "He turned left at the junction," she finished.

Left... John followed the road in his head. Up to the stones; back past his and Nick's house... och, the man could've gone anywhere.

"Thank you, Marion." Nick smiled at her. "Really."

She bridled, a flush staining her wrinkled face. "I've got eyes and I use them, that's all. Now get that young man to bed and let him sleep it off."

With that parting shot, she left, her back straight, her steps hurried as she went to find someone to share her tidbit of news with.

Before any of them could say anything, John's cell phone rang. "Oh for God's sake, what now?" he muttered, reaching for it and flipping it open. "Hello?"

"Uncle John? It's Cait. We've got it -- the list of people who were involved in the Lennox brothers' deaths. What about you? Have you found Josh?" Caitrin sounded hopeful, as if she thought she was capable of anything, and it felt good to be able to give her the news.

"Aye, we've got him, he's right here, and back to himself again." John stood and helped Nick get the boy to his feet as Caitrin babbled her relief into his ear.

"Where are you? We'll come there."

The thought of her out on the road, where Blayne and Toran could get their hands on her, made John's blood run cold. "No," he said quickly. "No, we'll come back to you. Stay where you are, do you hear me?"

Caitrin sounded taken aback, but she agreed, and John hung up the phone. "Cait's got the information we need -- I told her we'd come there. I don't want her out with those two running around like madmen."

"Okay." Nick nodded, looking resolute. "Then let's go. We don't want to waste any more time."

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Bonnie's hotel room was crowded with five of them in it. John opened the window, ignoring Bonnie's raised eyebrows as he hadn't bothered to ask permission first, and breathed in deep. The room smelled of perfume, expensive, pervasive, and he felt as if he couldn't get enough oxygen into his lungs.

Crowded. Aye, but it was even more so inside Fred's head, the poor bastard. John swung around and put out his hand. "Let me see it."

Silent for once, she passed him the small notepad the hotel had considerably put in each room, each page mostly taken up with a line drawing of the hotel and its full address. Caitrin had needed two pages to write five names.

"That family's gone," he said, tapping the first name on the list. "It dwindled to a single son, and he died in the trenches at sixteen. Old enough to enlist with a few blind eyes turned, but he didn't leave anyone behind. And if Robert Sinclair is the one I'm thinking of --"

"He was a lawyer," Caitrin put in.

"Aye, it's a tradition in that family. But they're all long gone from the island. The last of the Sinclairs moved to Canada in the fifties. Alberta, I think." John frowned. "Somewhere with bears. One of them sends my mother Christmas cards."

"What about the others?" Nick asked. "And, you know, John, the way everyone on the island's related, the spirits could probably find a distant cousin easily enough."

"No." Josh shook his head. "They wouldn't do that. They think they've got right on their sides, and that would... I don't know. It wouldn't seem fair to them. Direct-line descendants, and I think they'd feel happier if they were men, too."

Caitrin sniffed at that and Josh rounded on her. "You want to be a target? Do you?"

"No," she said, looking startled. "It's just... they're being so..."

"They think they've been wronged," Nick said. "They don't see themselves as the villains here; like the people who killed them, they see this as justice."

"But it *isn't*," Caitrin said. "It was a misunderstanding back then, and the people alive now had nothing to do with it!"

"The sins of the fathers," John said. "Visited on the sons."

Into the silence that fell, he read out the last three names. "Robinson, Hailley, and Quinn." He tossed the notepad down on the nightstand. "They're all around still, and I know who they'll go for first."

"Who?" Bonnie asked. "How can you be so sure?"

Caitrin gasped, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. "Rory? Rory Quinn?"

"The one at the bonfire last night?" Josh grimaced. "They would have seen him in my head, wouldn't they?"

"Maybe," John said. "And from the way the car was headed, they remember where his family used to live."

"Are they still there?" Josh asked.

"No," Nick said. "They're not, but the spirits wouldn't know that."

"Then we can maybe catch up with them," John said. "Josh, you stay here with Caitrin."

"No way," Josh said immediately. "What if I remember something that could help?"

"Then you call us on the phone." Nick was impatient, John could tell, but trying to seem reasonable. "I need to know you're safe. Your mother would kill me if I let anything happen to you, and I already have."

"Okay, one, you didn't 'let' something happen to me, it just happened. It wasn't your fault." Josh stood up straighter; there was a stubborn look on his face John was intimately familiar with when it was on Nick's. "And two, you can't keep me safe if you leave me here, can you?"

Nick sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "No. But if we let you come along, there's no one to keep an eye on Caitrin."

"I don't need looking after," Caitrin said, outraged. "If Josh is going, so am I."

"Let's just pack a picnic lunch," John muttered. He turned to Bonnie. "What about you? Are you coming, too?"

She licked her lips. "I -- I should, shouldn't I?"

"No," Nick said. "I really can't think of a good reason for you to be there. You'd just be one more target if the spirits decided to change bodies."

"I couldn't go through that again," she said, her voice faint and quavering. "I'm sorry, but you don't know, you just don't know --"

"I do," Josh said. "And I think you should stay here."

"Really?" she asked eagerly. "You don't think I'm being --"

"Oh, for the love of God, get yourselves down to the car, if you're coming!" John said and headed for the door. As long as he had Nick with him, the rest of them could do as they pleased.

By the time he stepped outside, Nick was right behind him, with Josh and Cait not far behind. "I have an idea," Nick said, keeping his voice low.

"Aye? Well, let's hear it." John looked at Nick, really looked at him, and knew immediately that he wasn't going to like whatever it was Nick was thinking. "Or maybe not."

"No, listen." Nick put a hand on his arm and stopped him from walking, which gave Caitrin and Josh time to join them. "Some of the people responsible for Blayne and Toran's deaths are buried at the graveyard, right?"

"Right," Caitrin said. "A few, at least." She looked expectant, as if she had no idea where Nick was headed with this, but Josh nodded.

"They're pretty freaked out," Josh said. "I think it might work."

"What might work?" Caitrin sounded exasperated.

"If I can contact some of them -- their ghosts -- and get them to talk to the other two...that could be the solution to our problem."

"You want to raise *more* ghosts?" John said, and heard the incredulity in his voice. "We don't have enough of them running around?"

"They have to be reminded of who their real enemies are," Nick said, "and shown that they're dead."

"What makes you think the ghosts of the villagers are still around to *be* raised?" John snapped.

"Because I think they knew what they'd done." Nick's eyes looked as haunted as Fred's had been. "John, think; after the brothers were dead, the villagers must have gone back to the cottage. I know they didn't do autopsies as such back then, but they'd see not a mark on the old woman and they'd remember how nervous she was... Once they calmed down they'd start to put it all together."

"I've seen them do it," Caitrin agreed. "Time and again. They'll rush into making an assumption and then

someone will point something out, and you'll see people's faces change, not much, just a bit and by the next day --"

"The same woman who told you Tessa Rowland was no better than she should be will be asking you for the knitting pattern for some woolly booties because she wants to make sure Tessa's poor, wee fatherless bairn doesn't have cold toes. Aye, you're right." John looked at Nick, who was grinning. "What?"

"Tell me one time anyone's ever asked you for a knitting pattern."

"I was speaking hypothetically," John said with dignity. "And I can knit. My grandmother taught me. I made a scarf." It wouldn't have fit around the neck of one of his nieces' dolls, but that was beside the point.

Nick was still grinning, his green eyes sparkling with it, and John couldn't resist kissing him, a swift kiss that landed square on Nick's mouth. He didn't think he'd done that in front of Josh before, although Caitrin had certainly seen them -- and rolled her eyes over them, the cheeky brat. He didn't care; the lift to his own spirits at seeing the worry gone from Nick's eyes, if only fleetingly, demanded some expression.

"You'll have to make me one," Nick said. "You know, when this is over." He seemed ready to go back to business almost immediately, which was a pity from John's point of view, if understandable considering the circumstances. "So. I'll go to the graveyard and see what I can do there -- the rest of you try to find Blayne and Toran. Fred."

"I don't like the idea of you being there alone," John said. He might not be gifted -- or cursed -- the way Nick and Josh were, but he knew when something was sending shivers up his spine and the idea of Nick raising ghosts without him there to keep an eye on things was having that effect and more.

"I won't be," Nick said. "I'll have plenty of company."

"That's worse."

"Josh doesn't know the island the way you do." Nick was making sense, but it didn't mean that John agreed with him.

"I know the island!" Caitrin said. "I could --"

"You're not going after murderous spirits in my car," John said, giving in to the inevitable. He'd seen Caitrin drive, and he'd sooner take his chances with the ghosts. If she was distracted into the bargain, there wouldn't be an inch of paint left on the wings. "And Josh isn't either. I'll drive." He put his hand on Nick's arm, halting him as the other two began to walk toward the car. "Nick..."

"I will," Nick told him. "I'll be very careful."

## Chapter Twelve

After leaving Nick at the graveyard, John headed west with Caitrin and Josh in the backseat. The old Quinn farm was still accessible by car, but only just; the heather had grown up over the track leading to the farm, and a gate, the rotten wood splintered and dangerous, had fallen across it.

"He can't be here," Josh said. "That gate hasn't been moved in years; look at the way the grass is tangled around it."

"I see that, aye," John said. "But I can also see tire tracks over there; he just went around." He shook his head and put the car into first gear. "You youngsters are so law-abiding; give you a path and you'll follow it and never think to stray off to the side."

The heather and grass weren't easy to drive on, as high and thick as they were, and the engine whined, the tires skidding, but John managed to get past the gate and drive up to the abandoned farmhouse.

"Wouldn't he have seen it was empty and gone somewhere else?" Caitrin asked uncertainly.

John nodded at a car parked behind a barn; only its wing showed, but the paintwork gleamed. "Doesn't look like it."

"I don't think they really understood how much has changed," Josh said. "They saw the cars and the TV in the bar and all that, but Fred didn't care about them and neither did I, so they accepted them."

"Aye? Go on, lad," John encouraged him, as he scanned the buildings ahead of him for a sign of his quarry.

Josh took a deep breath. "But this, this is different. They can -- they've got this sharp, clear picture in their heads of how it should look and it doesn't and they're bewildered and scared and --"

His voice rose as he spoke, high and sharp, and John twisted around in his seat. "You're reading them, aren't you?" he said, his own voice a near whisper. "You have to be. God, be careful, lad."

"I can't help it." Josh sounded as if he was trying to hide how terrified he was, but he wasn't doing a very good job of it and John couldn't blame him. "I can't stop. It's like -- I can't shut them out. I've always been able to -- since I was just a kid, but now I can't. They're too...loud, I guess."

"Maybe try to listen to one of us instead?" Caitrin suggested, but Josh shook his head.

"They remember what this place was supposed to look like, so much that they're not totally convinced they're at the right house. They know they should be, but it's like...like when you're dreaming, and you open up the door to your bedroom, only it leads somewhere else instead. They keep waiting to wake up."

"Then they're in for a nasty surprise," John said grimly. "What do you think they'd do if I went after them? Any ideas?"

Josh closed his eyes. "They're not afraid of us. They don't think there's anything we can do to them." He opened his eyes again and looked at John. "I think they're right. They're too powerful. The front door was locked -- I don't know how, after all these years, but all they had to do was touch it and it opened."

"I hate to think what them touching one of us would do, then," Caitrin said.

"Fry our brains," Josh said. He swallowed dryly. "I -- I can't hear anyone in there but them. Fred's just... missing. Gone."

"Hiding, maybe?" John suggested, praying it was that way and knowing it most likely wasn't.

"If he is, he's doing it really well," Josh said. "I read him before, just a bit, in the pub, and he had -- he -- it was *tidy* in there. Neat and open and tidy, and there wasn't anywhere to hide because he just wasn't that kind of person, you know?"

Josh sounded on the verge of tears; John didn't blame him in the slightest, but he could remember enough of that age to know that the last person a boy wanted to be crying in front of was a pretty girl he fancied. Or, in John's case, his childhood friend Michael, all muscles and grin and making his mouth water every time that grin was turned his way. He spared that younger version of him a thought and then set about rescuing Josh.

"We'll find him in there when those two are kicked out," he said firmly enough to make it clear how he stood on the matter. "He's not a fighter, the way we are. Now, any ideas how we get them to the graveyard?"

"I have one." Josh was looking in the direction of the farmhouse, but his eyes were much farther away than that. "But you're not going to like it."

Ten minutes later -- a good five of which had been spent arguing -- John and Josh were on the porch, creeping

closer to the front door, which was very nearly closed but not latched. Caitrin, left behind the wheel of the car with strict instructions not to follow them under any circumstances, had agreed to go after Nick if anything went wrong.

Which John had to admit, to himself, at least, seemed fairly likely.

Josh nodded at him and straightened his shoulders before pushing the door open a few more inches. "Blayne?" he called. His voice was shaky. "Toran? It's me, Joshua. Can we -- I think we need to talk."

There was a sound very similar to a snort. John wondered what the two of them were thinking right then. At least Josh would know -- that had to help.

"We're coming in," John told them, and stepped in before Josh could.

It was dark inside. The house had never been more than minimally wired for electricity, and it had been abandoned long enough that John doubted the power would have worked even if it had been turned on. Fred, no, Toran and Blayne -- God, this was confusing -- was standing at the far end of the room near the fireplace, hands in his pockets.

"Get out of here," he said.

"No, I don't think we're going to do that," John said. "Not when it means leaving you both alone to do God knows what."

"God doesn't know." The brothers were smiling and speaking from a single mouth, but John could still tell that the two of them were in there. It was enough to make his skin crawl. "But we do."

"Come with us," John urged them. "Nick -- and don't bother to insult him or me, because I doubt you'll come up with anything I haven't heard before; the island's not changed that much -- Nick can help you. It's what he does."

"And where do you suppose we'll go?" The bitterness in their voices burned like flame. "I think we've cheated the devil for too long for him to let us go now."

"What did you do that was so bad?" Josh was a comfotingly solid shape at John's side, not Nick, no, but carrying with him something of his brother's strength. The lad was young, but John trusted Josh to keep his head; he'd proven himself today. "You didn't kill your mother --"

They laughed, the sound no less bitter than their words. "No, but we... we were men. We stole, sometimes, yes, we did, and we fought and men died of their wounds, maybe, but we were long gone, so who knows how many women we left weeping for their men."

"Fighting isn't murder," Josh said. "It was -- it was different then." He frowned. "You know that." His voice grew in certainty. "You don't feel guilty about a few fights. It's what you did after you were dead. To the villagers."

"What *did* you do?" John asked, unable to help himself. The legend had always been vague on that point, which had made it doubly scary. "The story goes that you rose from the cave and hunted, got the villagers from their beds, and ran them ragged until they were found in the dawn, dead and a scream still caught in their throats."

"Sounds more like they did it to themselves," Josh said shrewdly. "Guilt and imagination and they made themselves believe they were being chased."

The brothers sneered at him. "So quick to explain, to make it simple. Is that what this world has become? A place where nothing exists but what can be felt? Well, know this, Joshua, brother to abomination, they felt our hands on them, ice-cold and wet from the water. They felt our fingers squeeze and snap their bones; they felt the chill of the cave seep into their marrow. We froze them, plunged them into the darkness we were in and let them drown in it, choke on it. And we're not done, no, not even close."

John grabbed Josh's arm and tugged him back, away from the advancing horror of the meek, neatly dressed man whose eyes were drained of all but hatred and despair. He wasn't sure if Josh had any attention to spare for him, but with everything he had, he broadcast a single thought.

*Run.*

The wooden boards of the old farm porch creaked and gave under their heels as they ran. Behind them, John knew that the brothers were taking their time in following, which was somehow all the more terrifying.

"They know," Josh said, breath heaving as they reached the car. "They know how easy it'll be to kill us, they *know* --"

"Go!" John fairly shouted it at the startled Caitrin, who despite their earlier agreement had barely managed to start up the car when they'd appeared on the porch. "Go! Go!"

She put the car into reverse and pressed the pedal all the way to the floor. Dust and pebbles rattled against the undercarriage as the tires fought for purchase; Caitrin flicked the headlights on almost as an afterthought, and the sudden flare caught Fred's eyes as he paused at the top of the steps, making them glow almost maniacally for the briefest instant. Then the man was moving again, running to his own car with an unnatural speed that made John's heart leap into his throat.

"Faster," he urged Caitrin, who threw him a disbelieving glance.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" Her hands were clenched on the wheel. "I'm going to destroy your bloody car!"

"I don't care about the *car*," John growled, which told him as surely as anything how serious the situation was. "Just get us out of here!"

The car lurched as the tires hit the road; Caitrin spun the wheel, trying to get them turned around to face forward, then shifted into drive. John turned his head to look back at Fred's car, which was just starting to move.

No time to get the other two to safety; whatever happened, they were all in this together.

"We're going to the graveyard?" Josh had scrambled into the back seat without protest; he hadn't got his seatbelt on, though and he was wedged between the two front seats, talking into John's ear. "To Nick?"

"Aye." A thought struck John. "Can you tell him? Warn him, I mean?"

"I can try," Josh said. "Last time, though, it was life or death --"

The car behind them rammed into them, making Caitrin shriek and John's car quiver and jerk with the impact.

"Get your bloody seatbelt on," John growled. "I don't want the last I see of you to be your head going through the windscreen. And I'd say this qualifies as life or death, wouldn't you?"

"What happened?" Caitrin's teeth were clenched. "Did they do something to you in there?"

"We talked," John said, deliberately brief in his response.

"And?" She took a corner in a wild screech of tires, sending small stones from the road flying around them before they hailed down on the front of the car. "And?"

"Don't yell in my ear," John said irritably. "And watch that -- oh, my God, you hit one of Duncan's sheep!"

Josh turned to look. "It's okay," he reported. "It's eating grass already. I think she just hit a pothole. But they're really close; can't we go faster?"

"If you don't tell me what they said --" Caitrin was breathing hard now, her face flushed with temper and agitation.

"Put it this way, love --" John braced himself against the dashboard. "I believed them. And that's why we got the hell out of there. Now stop talking and get us to your uncle, will you? And, Josh, if you can't do whatever it is you do --" He fumbled in his pocket and took out his cell phone. "Use this instead."

There was near silence from the back seat for a moment or two, then Josh, phone still pressed to his ear, said, "He's not answering."

"Of course he's not." John was doing his best to keep his eyes on both the road and Caitrin at the same time. "Why would he want to do a thing like that, when it's what we agreed to?"

"I think Fred hit something, too," Josh reported. "A rock, I don't know. He swerved. He's a little farther back now, at least."

"Uncle John!" The frantic quality in Caitrin's voice drew John's attention from the rear windscreen. "People!"

In front of them, loomed the collection of buildings that made up the town, such as it was. A small crowd of people had just left the pub; they were in the road, which was narrow enough to begin with even if it hadn't curved in a manner that made quick travel impossible, and how the bloody hell they were going to get through there without killing themselves or someone else was beyond John.

"We'll have to stop," he told her. There was nothing for it -- he'd not be responsible for anyone's death, not if he could help it. "Wait until we're a short distance from Gillian's shop, then slam on the brakes. As soon as we're stopped, both of you out of the car as fast as you can, and away from it, you hear me? Josh?"

"I hear you," Josh said tightly. Of course he did -- everything John said out loud and plenty more that he didn't.

"Cait?"

"Okay. I know." She was concentrating on the road in front of her, just as she should be.

The group of people had seen them now and were acting like sheep themselves, scattering and bleating and doing everything but getting out of the bloody way. John slammed his fist down on the horn in the middle of the steering wheel and hoped for the best. He had a feeling the car behind them wouldn't be braking so much as crashing.

Caitrin was muttering prayers under her breath, or maybe swearing; both seemed equally appropriate responses to the situation. John eyed the rapidly decreasing distance between them and Gillian's shop and yelled "Now!" as he jammed his feet against the back of the foot well in a reflex action, as if that would somehow slow the car down.

The car skidded, swerved, and slowed, momentum sending all three of them forward. John grunted in pain as his seatbelt dug in cruelly; he'd have a line of bruising there come tomorrow. He flung his arm out across Caitrin's chest to keep her pinned back against the seat and felt a thud reverberate through his seat as Josh's knees collided with it.

The car came to a halt a scant few yards away from the startled pedestrians and then, just as John was catching his breath, every bone rattled, the car behind them struck them at what felt like full-force, as if the driver hadn't even tried to brake.

Second time around, the seatbelt hurt even more as it cut into tender, bruised skin.

John watched in vivid, eerily clear snapshot detail as the people came closer. He focused on a woman, mouth gaped open in a perfect *O* of shock, a scarf falling from her hand in a slow, endless flutter of scarlet and white silk. No; they weren't moving, were they? It was his car that was moving, propelled forward and turning sideways, spinning in a cacophony of tires on tarmac and a reek of oil and scorched rubber.

It came to rest and there was an instant of silence before John's ears began to work again and he heard the screaming.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Cait?” John asked.

“I’m fine, I’m --”

“Josh?”

“Yeah, me, too. Just shaken. God, that was one hell of a --”

“Then get out,” John said urgently. “Before he does. *Go.*”

The three of them tumbled out; the ground felt so shockingly solid under John’s feet that he stumbled, going to one knee with a hand down to steady himself. He got moving again fast, though, around the front of the car to the other side where Caitrin and Josh were.

“Get inside somewhere,” he told them. “Where’s not important, just go. Find a door that locks and get yourselves behind it.”

“Are you *crazy?*” Josh looked almost angry. “I’m not leaving you here to deal with this by yourself. Nick would kill me, for one thing, and for another, I can actually *help.*” All three of them were staring at the other car; the front of it was crushed in as if it had hit something much larger and more impressive than John’s taxi. Around them, the people who’d been milling about came closer.

Someone asked if they were all right -- John wasn’t sure who. “Of course we are,” he snapped. “We’re standing, aren’t we?”

“What the hell’s going on?” a man asked, as more people, including Rory Mitchell, Todd the barman, and some of Caitrin’s other friends, came out of the pub.

“Bloody hell,” John said wearily.

The other car, Fred’s car, which was presumably a rental he’d never see a return on the deposit for, shut off with a shudder and a groan. The breeze shifted, bringing a whiff of coolant toward them.

And then the car door opened and the shell of Fred’s body got out, his gaze fixed not on the people he’d been chasing, but Rory. John could have sworn he saw the man scent the air, but maybe he was just sniffing back some of the blood trickling down from his nose to splash on the ground.

Maybe not. The brothers didn’t seem to care that the body they’d borrowed was hurt; from where he stood, John could see the twist and dangle of a broken arm. Caitrin moaned in horror as, obeying some residual habit, the brothers turned to slam the car door and the bones in the broken arm shifted grotesquely. Fred’s expression flashed between agony and a passive, placid lack of concern. John hoped the pain meant Fred was still in there somewhere.

When the broken arm proved inefficient, Fred made a soft, exasperating tutting sound and turned his back slightly to use his other hand. John swallowed down his revulsion and nudged Caitrin’s arm. “Get Rory out of here. Take him -- take him to the church, maybe.” How much protection that would be, given the last time young Rory was in there had probably been his christening, John didn’t know, but it couldn’t hurt.

“What do I tell him?” Caitrin hissed.

“I don’t care!” John gave her an exasperated look. “Tell him anything you bloody well like, just get him to the church where there’s at least a chance he’ll be safe!”

She nodded and went; he couldn’t spare her more than another glance, but he saw her tugging Rory in the right direction, saying something to him urgently. Rory looked confused, but was going along with it, thank God.

Fred, though, had finished dealing with the ruined car and, continuing to behave as if his ruined body was little more than an uncomfortable inconvenience, began to walk toward them. John’s mouth went dry.

“Don’t freak out,” Josh told him. Then, to everyone else who was still standing around concerned, he shouted, “Get out of here! Go on, go! He’s...”

“*On drugs,*” John thought at him. That’d be the sort of thing the islanders would believe.

“He’s on drugs! Stay away from him!” Josh wasn’t all that convincing, unfortunately; they were more likely to think *he* was the one on something, what with how dramatic he was being, but at least they were looking concerned for their own safety now as well as that of the tourist who’d crashed his car.

Fred stumbled, and Jack Thomson, a softhearted bloke who’d never turn away man nor beast, stepped forward to help him. “Don’t,” John warned, but it was too late -- Jack reached out. Fred gripped onto his arm like he wasn’t going to do anything more than steady himself, but at the touch, Jack’s eyes rolled up into his head, and he began to

shake as if he were having a seizure.

Fred smiled, paused to watch with interest as Jack dropped to the ground, still twitching, and started walking again.

Oh, fuck. They were in so over their heads, and John had no idea what to do other than urge everyone else within earshot to run. He'd opened his mouth to do just that when Josh said, "Look!" and pointed north, up the hill toward home.

"Blayne! Toran!" It was Nick; Nick walking down the hill into town. He looked unnaturally strong and powerful -- under other circumstances, John would have thought it was the light, but that was the last thing it was, because Nick wasn't alone. Behind him walked the ghosts of the villagers, long dead but strangely visible to John's eyes and, by the gasps of those around him, to everyone else's as well.

It should have been dark. Lightning, thunder, all the trimmings. Instead, it was a pleasant early evening with the gulls circling overhead and the faint sound of the endless rush and splash of waves against the rocks. Idyllic. Just what a summer night on a quiet Hebridean island should be. Even the midges weren't too bad, not that they bothered John much.

The three of them should have been out fishing, taking a hike to the loch, and letting the only magic be the way the fish rose to the bait, the only words spoken low and contented, with the crackle of a fire as background. Josh would've liked that; camping out and, if he could keep his eyes open long enough, seeing the stars above, clustered thickly, bright and dim alike because up here there was no city glow to rob the night sky of its glory.

It was scarier this way. Without the darkness, there was no way to hide what he was seeing, and no way for any of the rest of them to doubt their own eyes.

Nick -- *that American, och, you know, the one who writes the books and lives with Anne's boy, John -- yes, like that, but live and let live, that's what I say, and he's nice enough for all he's not from around here* -- had raised the dead.

In some ways, those who thought he didn't belong, for all that his mother had been an islander, would be silenced now. John didn't think Nick could have called the sleeping dead from their rest if he hadn't had roots in the island that went deep. These ghosts weren't the usual ones Nick spoke with; if they were, they'd have appeared before this. They had died guilty maybe, but they'd slept sound enough while the brothers had been locked away in their cave.

They were awake now that the spell had been broken, though, their faces filled with a solemnity that didn't hide the sorrow in their eyes. Some of them would have died before the binding spell had been cast; John saw those who stood closest to Nick, the lingering horror of their deaths clearly painted onto their expressions. The rest had escaped that death, only to live out lives shadowed by what they had done.

More than the Lennox brothers needed help to rest in peace. John didn't know what happened to the spirits Nick gentled and soothed -- Nick didn't, either -- but John didn't really care. Wherever they belonged, it wasn't here among the living, and what Toran and Blayne were doing was just plain wrong.

"Whether you believe or not, I'd get yourselves to the church until this is over," John said to the growing crowd, his mouth dry with a primal fear he didn't think he'd ever conquer, no matter how many times he stood with Nick, a spirit's energy swirling around them, unseen by John but most definitely felt. "Or back into the pub, and take a dram for me, while you're in there."

Fred's attention was on Nick, but he was walking right at a huddle of people -- shit, they weren't going to move --

"Go, will you!" John yelled at them, putting all the volume into it that he could, all the fear he was feeling. "This isn't your fight!"

Most of them broke and ran at that, but not all -- Todd the barman stayed, looking shocked as the stranger with the crooked arm and the bloodied face came up to him.

"No!" John shouted and moved toward the both of them, but Josh held him back.

"You can't stop it."

"I can bloody well try!" John said, but it was too late; Fred was already touching Todd, who began to tremble immediately.

Then Nick was there. He didn't say a word, but he gestured and the ghosts behind him moved forward in a surge *through* him, and through John and Josh as well. It was like having an icy wind blow over you, only a hundred times worse -- it felt as if it froze every cell in John's body as they went. He was even convinced that, for a moment, his heart had stopped, and his blood had turned to ice in his veins. Then it was past, and he could breathe again.

The ghosts surrounded Fred; Todd fell to one side, gasping and pale but looking otherwise whole. He blinked in shock, then scabbled backward away from the ghosts, who wore expressions that were a bit difficult to translate.

"What will they do to them?" John heard himself ask. He looked at Nick, who'd surely have the answer, but

Nick looked -- empty. His eyes were vacant, his lips parted.

"He's okay," Josh hastened to assure him. "He's still there, he's just -- I don't know, connected to them, I think. Not controlling what they're doing, exactly, but...well. He woke them up, and now he has to stay with them."

It did something to John, seeing Nick that way, but he had to accept that what Josh said was true or he'd do something stupid. Like attacking Fred and becoming one more person Nick had to save.

"He can stay with them until the job's done," John muttered, not sure who he was talking to, but hoping Nick heard him on some level at least. "And then I want him back."

He wasn't one for making grand romantic gestures, and he and Nick got by without telling each other they were loved for weeks at a time, though they showed it every day, he supposed, in little ways. But if those ghosts tried to take his Nick with them wherever they were going, he'd follow them.

To hell and back, if needed, and somehow he thought that was where a few of them might be headed.

Most of the islanders had run off toward the church at that point, although it didn't seem as if they were all going to go that far; quite a few had stopped a few hundred meters away and were watching Fred and the spirits that surrounded him.

"Keep away!" Blayne and Toran sounded terrified -- they flailed Fred's arms at the ghosts, the broken one flopping obscenely. "You're the ones who deserve to be dead, not us!"

Josh inched closer to John, talking near his ear. "Nick's talking to them. They want to say something to them -- to Blayne and Toran -- but they don't have enough energy, I think. They can be here, visible, but talking out loud takes more power than they have."

John glanced at him. He barely knew where to look, really. At Nick? At Fred, who was backing away from the ghosts, which meant he had to go *through* them, something John knew was almost painful? "You tell them, then. I mean, if they can tell Nick, and you can hear what they're saying through him...or can you hear them directly?"

"It's too confusing." Josh shook his head. "I can't make any sense of it. They're all talking at once, and it's not like I can separate out one voice from another. Besides, Nick's the one who knows how to do this, not me."

"That doesn't mean you can't try. Anything's better than nothing." John watched as Fred lurched backward, through two of the ghosts, then turned and began to run away as best he could, stumbling. "God, there he goes."

"He won't go far," Nick said suddenly, his voice hoarse like he'd been screaming.

He was right -- the ghosts surrounded Fred again almost immediately.

Blayne and Toran lashed out at them, shouting. "Get away! Murderers! First, you condemned us to death, then you shut us up in that cave for all those years! You're the ones who should suffer!"

"They can't hear them," Josh said, a little bit desperate. "Blayne and Toran, I mean. They can't hear the ghosts, so they don't know they're trying to say anything at all. But Nick can -- he can hear what they're saying. He thinks they should use him."

"What does that mean?" John demanded. Nick was gone again, standing there but might as well have been a million miles away, unresponsive to John's fingers when he snapped them in front of Nick's face.

"For power." Josh didn't seem able to explain it very well. "They can use his power. I don't know, his energy, or something. He doesn't think it will hurt him."

John glared at Josh for lack of anyone else to glare at. "It better not!"

"He thinks if they don't fix this soon, the ghosts -- the other ghosts -- won't be able to stay at all, and then Blayne and Toran will be free to do whatever they want again. We're running out of time."

"Shit." John rubbed his hand over his face, trying to scrub away the panic that must be showing on it. "So tell them that. Pick one of them and concentrate on that one." Josh opened his mouth as if to protest, but John was past listening to what couldn't be done, not with Nick's sanity at stake.

He scanned the ghosts and saw one standing at the edge of the crowd, a woman, her arms folded over her chest, a shawl draped across her face. She was weeping. "That one," he said. "She's by herself; see?"

Josh chewed at his lip and then nodded and moved over to her with John close behind him. Josh came to a halt a few yards away and simply stared at the woman without speaking, though John supposed he was still communicating. This skill of Josh's was so new that he didn't hold out much hope of it working but it was all they had, so by some twisted logic, it had to.

The woman's head turned slowly, her tears still flowing silently. Josh's head tilted as if he was trying to listen to a faraway sound and then he spun around, his face pale, and met John's puzzled look.

"What is it? Did it work?"

"Oh, it worked," Josh said. "I told her and she's going to try, but John --"

"Aye?" John said, impatience thick in his voice. They just didn't have time for this. "What?"

"Do you know who she is?" Josh breathed.

"How in the name of God would I --" John began and then he paused, because there was only one person it

could be and looked at one way, it was the best choice of all.

Or the worst.

He spared Nick a quick glance, noting his pallor -- God, Nick looked like a corpse himself with that gray tinge to his skin and those wide, unblinking eyes -- and then gestured at the woman. "Tell her to hurry, lad," he said. "Before her sons are past listening even to their mother."

## Chapter Fourteen

The ghost woman was already moving, as if Josh hadn't wasted any time in urging her to act. The other ghosts paused, then backed off, making room for her to come closer to her sons, who seemed unaware of her presence at first.

Then Blayne and Toran looked up and saw her, and the fury on Fred's face melted away into something more like confusion. "Mam?"

Elspeth Lennox flickered -- it was like the power had been cut, just for a second or two -- and beside John, Nick swayed on his feet. Alarmed, John grabbed onto him and kept him upright.

The ghost's image steadied again; it might even have been a bit more solid. She spoke. "So long I've waited to see ye again, and this is my reward?"

"It's not our fault!" Blayne and Toran chorused immediately.

"Aye, I should have expected as much." She shook her head sadly. Her voice wasn't strong, but John was close enough that he could hear her clearly. "Not taking responsibility. Is that why ye didn't come home to me for so long?"

"We couldn't!" one of them -- John thought it sounded like Toran -- protested. "We wanted to return as rich men, not beggars. And then after, when they'd murdered us -- we kept trying to get to you, and then they trapped us."

"No," she corrected him. "You came from your grave with hatred in your hearts and killed my neighbors and friends. Never once did ye visit where they'd put me to rest, never once. I would have known. I would have risen to greet you as I always did."

"Not always, Mam," Toran said, his voice choked with grief. "Ah, God, to see you lying there --"

Her face softened. "I know, lad, I know. It was a terrible homecoming for you both. It's not how I would have wanted it, but ye canna blame them. Not entirely." A fond, mildly reproving indulgence crept into her voice. "Ye were always such wild boys...but good at heart, I'd never let anyone say different."

Typical mother; blind to their faults. John bit back a remonstrance that really wouldn't have been useful, and waited. She had to hurry; Nick was close to being a dead weight in his arms.

"Mam --" Toran's voice cracked and Blayne began to speak. "This is a second chance for us, don't you see? We can live out our lives, the years that were stolen from us."

Their mother reached up, her hand, insubstantial, wavering, and stroked Blayne's face. "I know it's you because I see true, but it doesnae mean I canna see that this isn't your body. He's done ye no harm and yet you've stolen his life, as was done to you."

John wasn't sure if that was confirmation that Fred was lost or not. Only one way to find out and that was to get the brothers where they belonged.

"We had to, don't you see?" Their voices were linked again, a plaintive duet, but she simply shook her head, her tears flowing again.

"You didnae sin, my bairns. Ye died unshriven, but innocent. What you did after that--"

"Has doomed us." Their joint voice was harsh now, her influence seemingly fading. "So why not add one more drop of pitch to our blackened souls?"

"Not doomed!" Elspeth's voice rose, enriched with a power John doubted it had held in life.

Nick's strength of will was speaking, not hers, Nick, who was clinging to John with a grip that was slowly weakening. John eased them both to the ground and cradled Nick to him, smoothing the dark hair back from Nick's ashen face. "I'm here, love," he murmured. "Take whatever you need from me, body or spirit; it's yours; all of me is, you know that."

He felt the jolt as Nick reached out to him with his mind a moment later, a stab of agony piercing him. Swallowing a moan of pain, he tried to relax; difficult because fighting came easier to him by far. But letting Nick do what he wanted wasn't new to him, after all, and it wasn't so bad now; he just felt drowsy, really, like he was sitting in his boat, with the waves rocking it slowly side to side to --

"John!" Josh's hand struck his face and John opened his eyes and gave him an indignant glare. "Sorry. You -- you looked like you were -- were --"

"I'm not," John said, the words shaped by lips that had gone as rubbery as they did after drinking too much. "M helping your brother."

"He looks worse than you," Josh said bluntly, his arm around John's shoulders. Nick was slumped, lying partially in John's arms, mostly on the ground.

"Never mind us, what about them?" John turned his head with an effort and blinked through the gathering dusk at the ghosts. They were clustered around Mrs. Lennox now and she was --

"Richard! Kenny! Donal!" Her voice rang out. "All who left my boys to die and paid the price, stand with me."

The figures around her pressed closer, and the brothers stumbled back until the wall of the pub was against their back.

"Do you forgive?" she demanded. "Do you?"

This was Nick speaking, John knew. Their dead mother's mouth, yes, but Nick's words, Nick's plea for absolution.

"If --" The brothers faltered, Fred's throat working for a moment. "If we forgive --"

"Then we'd all be free of this," their mother told them. "All these years will be washed away like words scratched into the sand by the waves. None of us will be trapped anymore. But if you can't...if you aren't men enough to set aside the past, no matter how painful..."

That seemed to push them over the edge. "We are! We can." Still it seemed to take an enormous amount of effort, and there was a pause so long that John was on the verge of shouting at them to get on with it, then, before they shuddered and said, "We forgive."

Nothing happened. John wondered if the magic, or whatever it was involved, could tell the difference between genuine forgiveness and the sort born of desperation, and had enough time in which to worry what would happen if it could.

"Please, Mam," Blayne and Toran whispered, bringing tears to Fred's eyes as they reached toward their mother. "We're sorry." And their mother stepped forward and enfolded them in her arms, stroking their hair as they began to weep.

Beside John, Nick made a strangled sound as he tried to draw air into his lungs and mostly failed. His lips were close to blue. At a loss for what to do to help him, John gave him a little shake and shouted at the ghosts. "Enough!"

Elsbeth turned her head and looked at him, her face etched in sorrow and pride and a thousand other things too difficult to name, and nodded. "Time to go, boys," she said, not at all loudly, and they all began to fade, going even more ghostly until they were nearly invisible, like spirits caught in photographs, white wisps of smoke. Still clutching each other, the ghosts of Blayne and Toran entwined with their mother, three becoming one.

And then they were gone, and Fred dropped to the ground as if the strings holding him had been cut.

Josh scrambled to his feet and went to him immediately, turning him onto his back and pressing fingers to his throat. "I can't feel anything," he said. "I think -- I think he's dead." The boy swallowed heavily, no doubt imagining the other man's fate as his own, but John was already turning all of his attention to Nick, who was at least breathing evenly again, a bit more color in his face.

"Nick? Come on, love, it's over."

Slowly -- too slowly for John's comfort -- Nick's eyes blinked. His tongue came out and wet his lips. "I think..." His voice was so weak that John could barely hear it. "Maybe...I got in over my head."

John couldn't help the incredulous squeak in his voice as he went to his knees and helped Nick to sit up. "Maybe? There's no maybe about it! You have me scared half out of my wits there --" His words trailed off, silenced by the overwhelming relief and love he felt. "We'll talk about it later," he said, comforted by the knowledge that there was going to be a later for them, no matter how much he was grieving over past and present deaths. "Just - just rest now."

Around them, there was a rising tumult of voices. Jack and Todd were being tended to and John had no doubt that the limited emergency services on the island would be arriving soon in the shape of the local doctor and constable. There would be questions; there would be arguments. Those who left would doubt what those who'd stayed had seen; those who'd missed all of it would never believe. And the story would get out to the press; no keeping it quiet.

John bent his head and pressed a kiss against Nick's hair. He stayed like that, his eyes closed, with the evening breeze blowing clean and sweet over them, until the doctor came.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Nick, love. Wake up.”

It was John’s voice coaxing him from the lassitude that seemed to have seeped into every cell in Nick’s body. He realized that the car had stopped moving; he’d forgotten what it was like to be this exhausted, if he ever had been. He didn’t think he had, though, not even after the accident that had killed Matthew and left him broken and desolate.

He forced his eyes open. He was in the passenger seat of his own car -- John’s had been so damaged in the accident that it wouldn’t be drivable until it had undergone significant repairs -- and John was to his left, leaning in from outside and touching his face gently with work-roughened fingers. Through the windshield, Nick could see Josh and Caitrin opening the door to the house; a moment later, the kitchen light turned on, warm yellow light washing its way out over the steps.

“There you are.” John smiled encouragingly. “Not far now, and you can sleep as long as you like.”

Moving seemed impossible. “What time is it?”

“No idea. My watch stopped, remember?” Now that he’d been reminded, Nick did. They weren’t sure why it had -- well, it had probably had something to do with the power transfer that had happened when John had offered up his own energy to Nick, but honestly, Nick had very vague memories of that. He’d been in so deep, caught up in the maelstrom of voices, that he’d barely been aware of anything that had been going on around him. If John hadn’t stepped in when he had, it was entirely possible Nick would have just slipped away, everything in him drained in the process of feeding the ghosts he’d raised.

“Nick.”

Oh. His eyes had closed again. “Sorry. Right.” Opening his eyes, Nick undid the seatbelt he was certain he hadn’t fastened in the first place and swung his legs out so that his feet were touching the ground. “This is a lot more work than I remember.”

“Aye, well, you’re not usually this tired.” John got an arm around him and kicked the car door shut as they started slowly toward the house.

“You guys okay?” Josh called from the house. He looked like he was considering coming out to help, which was ridiculous, because surely Nick could walk that far, couldn’t he?

It didn’t matter if he couldn’t, though; John was bearing his weight easily enough. John had never set foot in a gym and probably never would, but he had a wiry, reliable strength developed the old-fashioned way. Nick supposed he weighed less than a net full of wriggling, silver mackerel and was a little easier to maneuver than a wheelbarrow full of bricks.

“We’re fine,” John called back. “Just put the kettle on, will you?”

There was a pause and then Josh said in a puzzled voice. “Sure, but... why?”

John snorted. They were close enough now that Nick was counting the steps until he was inside their home. “Because there’s times when you need whisky, right enough, but if I started drinking now, I wouldn’t stop. I’ll get Nick settled and then show you how to make a proper pot of tea.”

Three, two... no, that last one had been more of a shuffle...

“I could carry you,” John said, pitching his voice low for Nick’s ears only, “but I think you’d sooner climb the stairs on your own. And, no, the sofa won’t do; you’re going to bed and that’s that.”

They were in the house now, and Nick just put his head down, let his feet do the work, and watched the carpet until it became the dark green covering their bedroom floor. Then he counted the steps again from the door to their bed.

“Easy, love, easy...” John was practically carrying him now, his arms around Nick. “There we go.”

Their bed had always felt like a haven, somewhere he and John could forget everything but the comfort and heat to be found in each other’s bodies, but right then, it felt like heaven. Nick let John strip him down to T-shirt and shorts and then used what energy he had left to get under the covers, curled up with John’s hand locked in his, John lying beside him.

He closed his eyes in what was meant to be a blink, but when he opened them again he knew it had been a lot longer. “What time is it?”

John smiled like it was a funny question, then turned his head to check the clock. "A bit after ten."

"Have I been asleep long?" Nick's mouth felt like it had been stuffed with cotton wool. His throat was dry, and he ached. He wondered why his hand felt funny until he realized his fingers were still entwined with John's.

"Not long. I did wonder if you were out for the night."

"I probably should be."

The bedroom door was open, but Josh knocked gently at the frame anyway. "Hey," he said softly. "Cait showed me how to make the tea. Do you want us to bring some up?"

Tea, heavily laced with sugar, sounded like a fantastic idea. "Yes, please," Nick said, and lay there listening to the steps creaking as Josh went back downstairs. "Stay here, okay?"

John nodded. "I will. You think I'd want to leave you after what we went through today?"

"I think it'd be reasonable for you to think you could go downstairs when we're safe in our own house." Nick's fingers felt clumsy as he tugged at the front of John's shirt in an attempt to illustrate a point he wasn't even sure existed. "And we are. Safe, I mean. I just feel like I don't want you too far away."

"I'm not going anywhere." John's hand came up and his fingers circled Nick's wrist in a firm, warm grip. "Not until I get over thinking I'd lost you."

His thumb stroked the pulse point on Nick's inner wrist, and Nick felt the light caress tingle through him. He was still too tired to respond physically, but it didn't stop him tilting his head for a kiss John readily gave him. It was a slow, sweet kiss, heady as whisky, and it left Nick feeling dizzy and yet anchored in a way he hadn't been before. Part of him had still been walking with the ghosts, his feet treading a path no one living should take; that single kiss drew him back, so that when it ended he was back in his world, back with John.

Something that looked like contentment flickered across John's face. "Aye," he said. "And when you're better I'll do more than kiss you, but I can wait."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs came before Nick could reply. John shifted his position so that he was sitting on the bed instead of lying on it, and slipped his hand into Nick's. Nick managed to sit up, which made him feel less like an invalid, and gave Josh and Caitrin a smile as they tiptoed in, a laden tray wobbling in Josh's hands.

"Just set it down over there, lad," John said, indicating a small table by the wall. "Nick takes his with sugar, and I don't."

"I'll do it," Caitrin said, her voice subdued. When they were all settled on the bed, mugs of tea in hand -- Josh was sipping gingerly at his, which amused Nick -- a silence fell around them.

Then, "It's not," Josh said. He was looking at Caitrin, but as soon as she turned her face toward him, he flushed and looked down. "Sorry."

"You should be." Caitrin was calm, but it was clear that she didn't like it one bit that Josh had read whatever it was she'd been thinking. "Has no one ever told you what it feels like, to realize that someone's been poking around in your head as if they've no concept of privacy?"

Josh blinked. "I can't help wanting to use what I can do."

"I think it's time you learned," John said bluntly. "You're not a wee lad anymore; you're a man, or near enough, and you can't continue like this. It's just not right."

"That's easy for you to say." Josh glared at John, the temper Nick had seen hints of over the years seeming to get the better of him. "You have no idea what it's like."

"No, I dare say I don't." John sounded infuriatingly calm, the way he got with Caitrin when she pushed him too far. Nick was sometimes there as a silent spectator -- Caitrin never minded an audience when she was venting -- and once John got that tone to his voice, he started counting down in his head to the moment when Caitrin would give an infuriated growl, spin on her heel, and leave, slamming the door behind her.

"I don't," John repeated, "but I do know that I'm not seeing much evidence that you're even trying to control it." Josh opened his mouth, angry words almost visibly trembling on his lips, but John continued, ignoring him. "And why would you? It's so handy, isn't it? Gives you the inside track in a way any lad your age would want. You can make people like you; get in their heads and see what they *don't* fancy about you, and fix it. And exams... how tempting is it to get the answers from someone brighter than you when they're sitting two desks over, their brains focused and sharp while yours is all fuzzy and --"

"No!" Josh scrambled off the bed, all long legs and flailing arms, his mug landing on the floor with a dull thud. He glared at John, his face scarlet, his eyes showing the glisten of gathering tears. "I *wouldn't*. I haven't. I wouldn't do that. I just -- I've *never* cheated!"

"No?" John drawled, unmoving and unmoved. Caitrin looked agitated, her face as flushed as Josh's, her expression one of pure misery. "Think it's a step up from studying body language, do you? A natural ability you've every right to use? Well, think again! You're a wolf in with the sheep, boy, disguised in a nice, fluffy white fleece, but still a wolf."

"I can't -- I don't have to listen --" Josh stammered. He turned to Nick. "Nick? *You* know. Tell him. Tell him I'm not a -- not a freak. Not what he says. *Tell* him." His voice cracked.

Nick was so torn it was physically painful. He knew how John felt about Josh's ability, and he understood why John felt that way, but he also knew what it was like to be something, someone, who was different from everyone else on such a basic level. "You're not a freak," he said, because he had to say something before too much more time went by. "And John doesn't think you are. You know that."

"But I'm not *supposed* to know it, am I." Josh sounded as miserable as Caitrin looked. "I can't win. Every time I think I've figured everything out, and I'm going to be okay..."

"Welcome to the real world," Nick said wryly.

Josh sighed. "So this is it? It never gets easier?"

"Life? No, not really." Nick glanced at John, who was letting them talk on their own even though he surely had a dozen things or more to contribute to the conversation. "When you find someone who understands you, that helps a lot, but it's not a permanent solution. What we have, you and I -- it's a permanent challenge. You'll figure things out, but there'll always be some new wrench thrown in."

"It's been so much better lately." Josh got one of the cloth napkins tucked onto the tea tray and knelt to wipe up his spilled tea. Concentrating on the task seemed to calm him down. "I really thought I was getting a handle on it, you know?"

"And then all this happened, and your control's all screwed up," Nick agreed. "I know. It'll get better again."

"But you need to clamp down on this power of yours," John said firmly. "Cait said it as well as I could -- it makes my skin crawl knowing you're poking about in my head the way you do. It has to stop."

"But I need to use it," Josh said, glancing up at John, no animosity in his eyes, just an anxiety that touched Nick. "I was given it, and there has to be a reason for that. And today -- I helped; you know I did."

"Aye," John agreed readily. "I don't have a word to say about that -- well, no bad ones, anyway. You did well, and it must have been scary as hell. I was proud of you, and I know Nick is, too, isn't that right, love?"

Nick nodded. Proud and terrified, even now that it was over and Josh -- all of them -- were safe.

"But you must be able to see the difference between using it like that and using it to see if young Cait here has a mind to kiss you --"

"Uncle John!" Caitrin gave John's arm a solid thump. "Josh isn't the only one who needs to mind his own business."

John grinned unrepentantly. "Maybe." His grin faded and his attention returned to Josh. "Well? Do you? See the difference, I mean?"

Josh nodded slowly. "Yeah, of course I do."

"And as for using it --" John blew out a gusty breath. "I can think of a few places it'd be useful and allowable; you'd be good as a cop. No one could lie to you. Or a therapist." He shrugged. "I don't know you well enough to know what you want to do with your life. I just know you need to work on controlling what you can do before someone gets hurt." He eyed Josh. "And if anyone works out what you can do, that someone might be you, and that's not something I'd like to see."

Nick hadn't ever really let himself think about that, even though deep down he knew it was a possibility, for himself as well as Josh. He didn't *want* to think about it.

"I *can* control it, most of the time," Josh explained. "It's just when things get kind of crazy that it starts to slip, and if I don't have anyone around to remind me..."

Nick had been luckier than he'd realized in that respect when he'd been Josh's age. At least he'd had Matthew, who'd known him so well -- even when he didn't -- and who'd helped him keep it together through all those years. Matthew wouldn't have been happy here on Traighshee, but he'd approve of the books Nick had written, even if he'd have urged Nick to take it further, to accept the offers of television shows and whatever might have followed.

"But you must have friends you can share this with," Caitrin protested. "People you trust."

Josh shook his head. "Would you? Be willing to hang around with someone like me, I mean, knowing what you know?"

"I would. Yes." Caitrin seemed sure of it, and by the look on Josh's face he was as surprised by her declaration as Nick was, even if it didn't necessarily mean much considering Josh would be going home in a week or so.

Josh gave Caitrin a smile that, to his older brother, looked on the way to being besotted. "You know something? You match, inside and out. You never think one thing and tell me another. It's so... God, it's such a relief." He turned to John and Nick. "You two do it, too," he said, clearly as a hasty afterthought, "but you already knew about me. Caitrin was like that from the moment I met her."

Nick watched Caitrin's face turn a delicate pink and sipped at his tea to hide his smile. With every moment, he was feeling better. Not enough to want to get out of bed, no, but better.

It meant that the questions John had fended off with a glare at the constable, Lewis Armstrong, and some choice words, would be heading his way soon, but Nick imagined Lewis had his hands full interviewing the other witnesses, all of whom were probably bombarding him with conflicting accounts of what, to an outside observer, had maybe been nothing more than a car crash with one of the drivers wandering around dazed and then collapsing, dead.

If you overlooked the ghosts, of course.

Nick hadn't had any idea what was going to happen when he'd walked into the graveyard, hands steady but something inside his chest trembling. He'd communicated with hundreds of ghosts, maybe thousands, that had died leaving important things undone, important words unsaid, but he'd never deliberately tried to wake ghosts that had been sleeping for years. He still wasn't sure why it had worked; it might have had something to do with the spell done so many years before.

"Nick?" John said gently, getting his attention, and he looked up. Everyone was watching him.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about the ghosts. The other ones, the villagers." He watched as John's thumb rubbed across his knuckles soothingly and did his best not to shiver. "I still don't know why I was able to get them to come back."

"I'm not sure they were really gone." Josh frowned thoughtfully.

"Do you think they were trapped?" Nick asked.

Josh nodded, leaning forward. "I wondered if the spell went wrong, somehow, and caught them, too? Because it was like they couldn't leave. That was the impression I got, anyway..."

"That's horrible." Caitrin shuddered. "I mean, you could say it was justice in a way, but still..."

"I think it's more that like it or not, their fates were all," John let go of Nick's hand and slotted his fingers together to illustrate his point, "knotted together, aye?" He drew his hands apart and then patted Nick's knee through the covers. "Until you unraveled them. And I don't know where they've all gone, but I'm a sentimental devil, just ask anyone, so I'll believe it was to somewhere above, not below, and maybe light a candle for them the next time I'm in church."

Since they'd gotten a new minister who, unlike his predecessor, didn't cross the street to avoid John and Nick, John did occasionally go with his mother and stepfather to church, although most Sundays when the church bells rang out, he rolled over, draped his arm over Nick, sighed contentedly, and went back to sleep.

Nick's mug of tea, empty except for the dregs now, felt very heavy in his hand. He reached over and set it on the bedside table. "I'm not sure I want to think about it. Where they went, I mean." He was pretty sure he didn't believe in hell -- or at least that was what he told himself -- even though he knew it was possible to be trapped in between life and death, an idea that scared him so deeply that it made him feel like being sick. Or possibly catatonic.

"They went wherever they were meant to," John said, in what was probably supposed to be a comforting tone. Trying to be charitable, Nick told himself that nothing would have been comforting right then.

"Nick?" Josh sounded like he knew he shouldn't ask but couldn't help himself.

"What?"

Josh swallowed. "I know -- it's probably not fair to ask this, but --"

"Yes," Nick said. "I will. I promise. I'd never leave you like that." He'd never leave anyone, not if he could help it.

There was a little smile playing at the corners of Josh's mouth. "Now who's the one that can read minds?"

"You think you're the first person who's asked me that?" Nick smiled back and leaned against the headboard, grateful for its support. "Okay, *almost* asked me."

Caitrin stood and began to gather the mugs and put them on the tray, her movements jerky and her mouth twisted as if she was about to cry. Delayed reaction, and the conversation probably wasn't helping.

Nick cleared his throat. "Josh? Why don't you give Caitrin a hand with those? No need to wash up, just put them in the kitchen. I think I'm going to doze off again."

Josh nodded and went over to the tray, picking it up over Caitrin's halfhearted protest that it wasn't heavy and she could manage. The two of them went downstairs, the sound of their conversation floating back until a door was closed and a relative silence fell.

"He's a good lad," John said. "I don't think you really need to worry about him."

Nick nodded and slid down in the bed, curling onto his side facing John. "Need isn't really the right word to use, when you're talking about worrying. I'll worry anyway. I'd worry even if he wasn't...you know. Unique."

"Aye, he's that, all right." John's hand stroked Nick's hair; it felt good, and Nick's eyes slipped closed despite himself. "Just like his brother."

"I just --" A yawn cut him off, and he turned his face into the pillow to hide it. "Just want to know he's safe."

"He is. You made sure of that tonight."

“But I couldn’t save everyone.” It was a thought that left him feeling empty and aching, and he discovered that he had a handful of John’s T-shirt curled up in his fist. God, it *hurt*, knowing that he’d failed.

“One dead.” John sighed. “It could have been more. God, Nick, if you hadn’t stopped them, we could have had the whole town grieving. As it is, well, I didn’t know Fred, but for all I wish you could have saved him, he was dead the moment both of them went inside him. I mean no disrespect to Fred when I say he wasn’t strong enough to hold on, because, you and Josh aside, I doubt anyone would be. Those brothers had one hell of a lot of anger fueling them.”

“You would have kicked their asses out,” Nick said with a sleepy certainty. “Told them to go away...”

John gave a soft chuckle and Nick felt a kiss press against his temple. “Maybe. I don’t like pushy folk. I’m glad I never had to find out, though, and that was down to you protecting me in the cave.”

“Always will.” The words were hard to speak now; like leaves dropped into a stream, they were whirling away before he could catch them, shape them, make them come out right. “Always.”

“I know.” John’s words were part of the darkness rocking Nick gently. “Me, too, Nick. Always.”

## Chapter Sixteen

“This is probably all a lot to take in,” Josh said, wishing it had come out sounding less like an apology.

Caitrin was at the sink washing dishes, or at least pretending to. Her hands were in the soapy water, but her shoulders were tense, and Josh was pretty sure -- even without cheating -- that she was still trying not to cry. “Well, it’s not as if I didn’t already know about Uncle Nick.”

“You just never got to see an example of it before?”

She nodded. “It was a bit of a shock, I’ll admit that. And I wouldn’t be surprised if Rory leaves Traighshee as soon as he can get his things together. He’s had enough.”

“What about you?” Josh asked.

“Me? I’d had enough long before today, hadn’t I. Long before I saw you with your eyes wild, and that tourist Fred lying dead on the ground.” Caitrin’s voice broke, and Josh went to her, turning her around and pulling her into a hug.

“Hey. It’s okay to be freaked out.”

“Is it? Well, I’m glad I have your permission.” Caitrin’s hands were wet, and he could feel the water soaking into the back of his T-shirt; despite her words, she clung to him.

There didn’t seem to be much to say that would help so Josh, with vague memories from a dozen movies swirling in his head, settled for kissing the side of Caitrin’s face and then, when her head tilted slightly, just enough, her mouth.

The kiss was better than the ones in the cave; less fire and urgency to it, maybe, with a deeper sweetness and trust. They’d gone through too much, too soon, but it didn’t feel as if it’d put a barrier between them.

He made sure to stay out of her thoughts, and really, when he knew that they’d be identical to what her lips were telling him as they moved against his, he didn’t need to look.

A gust of air brushed over him, and he registered it vaguely as coming from an open door, but Caitrin had chosen that moment to slide her tongue into his mouth in a slow, liquid caress that made Josh feel as if every part of his body but one was melting down.

“Well, I see I needn’t have rushed over here without so much as taking my coat off,” Janet said. “You’re fine, the both of you.”

Shit. Josh let go of Caitrin and stepped back a single, guilty pace. “Janet! Uh, I mean, Mrs. Gordon.”

“Janet will do, as you’re family and too old to call me ‘aunt.’” Janet gave them both a look that blended asperity with concern. “I got off the ferry, my arms twice the length from the weight of my shopping bags, wanting nothing more than to get home and have a nice cup of tea, and the whole town’s in an uproar. Dead tourists, car crashes, ghosts -- and you two in the middle of it. Now, I can see for myself that neither of you is hurt, but would you mind telling me what in the name of God is going on?”

Josh tried to frame a reply that wouldn’t involve actual lies, but he didn’t get a chance to say any of it. With a choked sob, Caitrin threw herself into her mother’s arms. “Oh, Mam, it was awful; you don’t know what it was like. Mam, I was so scared!”

“Shush now, lovely,” Janet murmured, her arms enfolding Caitrin. “I’ve got you, hen.”

Over Caitrin’s head, her eyes met Josh’s, and she jerked her head in an unmistakable signal for him to leave, still reciting a litany of reassurance, her hand patting Caitrin’s back.

He was smart enough to take a hint when it was more like an order and retreated to the living room. It was impossible to shut out the conversation the two were having entirely, though, and he was relieved when he heard the creak of John’s footsteps on the stairs.

“Is that Janet, then?” John asked.

“Yeah.” Josh put his hands into his pockets. “Cait was pretty upset. I mean, I thought she was doing okay, but then her mom came in, and she kind of lost it.”

“Aye, well, mothers have a tendency to bring that out in their children, I’ve found.” John sighed and sat down on the back of the couch, which didn’t look like a very comfortable seat.

“Is Nick asleep?”

John nodded. “He’ll be tired for days after that. It takes it out of him and tonight, well, it wasn’t the way it

usually goes.”

“It was pretty spectacular, what he did,” Josh said. “Seeing him walking toward us with those ghosts behind him like a -- like an army of the dead; I’ll never forget it.”

“I hope some of the people there will,” John said. “I don’t fancy explaining it and discussing it from now until Christmas, I can tell you.”

“I don’t think everyone saw it as clearly as we did,” Josh assured him. “We knew what was going on and they didn’t. It makes a difference.”

John didn’t look entirely convinced, but he shrugged. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

“John! Get in here!” Janet’s voice rang out, and John flinched, then rubbed the back of his neck. “Wish me luck,” he said to Josh, and then squared his shoulders and walked into the kitchen to face the wrath of his sister.

## Chapter Seventeen

“He was pretty green,” Caitrin observed, turning toward John again. The bathroom door with the little cartoon man on it had just swung closed behind Nick, who’d made a sudden and desperate dash for it after they’d walked through a cloud of perfume at the terminal.

“Aye, well, he survived the ferry trips without being sick. I suppose we should be impressed he lasted this long.” John sighed and wondered if he ought to go after Nick. He decided to give him two minutes on his own.

“I’m the one who ought to be sick,” Caitrin said. “An actual airplane!”

“It’s a wonder you’ve survived to the advanced age of eighteen without flying,” John told her.

She gave him an irritated look. “What’s a wonder is that Mam let you and Uncle Nick bring me rather than insisting on taking me herself. She’d have sobbed all over me; I’m sure I’d have died of embarrassment. Dad, now, he just hugged me and told me he’d miss me.”

John hid a smile by turning to look toward the gate they’d been headed for when Nick had suddenly felt ill; there’d been no dearth of tears when Janet and Caitrin had said their good-byes back on Traighshee, and Caitrin had spent the first ferry journey dabbing at her eyes with tissues. “I’m going after him,” he said, and took a step toward the bathroom at the same time the door swung open and Nick came out.

“Sorry,” Nick said. He was a bit pale, but otherwise looked better than he had.

“It was enough to turn anyone’s stomach,” John said, not entirely just out of loyalty. He smiled at Caitrin. “You take after me, lass. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be fine,” she echoed before scrunching up her face in a way John was fairly sure she knew looked cute. “Suppose Josh isn’t there to meet me?”

John snorted. The months since Josh had left had been filled with e-mails and phone calls between the two teenagers, culminating in Caitrin’s acceptance as an exchange student at the college Josh had chosen, her expenses paid by the Stevenson estate. The scholarship paid for a graduate course anywhere in the world, with a generous allowance included, and when Caitrin’s essay had been chosen by the trustees as that year’s winner, Janet had walked around beaming proudly for days.

John had been proud, too, his pride tempered by a wry amusement that with the right incentive, Caitrin was only too happy to use the brains she’d been born with, after years of declaring that only losers with no lives wanted to bury themselves in a school in search of a degree.

“If he’s not waiting when you walk through customs, call me and I’ll eat my fishing hat, flies and all.”

Caitrin rolled her eyes, a move she’d perfected at least six years before. “That’s a mental image I’d have preferred to live without, thank you very much.”

“I’m with you,” Nick said. At John’s look, he added, “Well, think about it. Eating fishing flies is a very, very bad idea.”

“Isn’t the point that I wouldn’t need to? Josh will be there.”

“He will.” Nick smiled at Caitrin reassuringly. “You know he will. He hasn’t talked about anything for else for weeks.”

She blushed and looked down, fiddling with the strap of her carry-on bag.

“You’ll call us when you get there?” John said as the three of them resumed their journey toward the gate. “Promise?”

“I will, you know I will.”

They got to the security gate and Caitrin turned. “I go through there, right?”

“Yeah, and don’t spend too much in the duty free shops,” Nick teased her. “They’ll announce your flight; you just go to the gate, up to the desk --”

“Your passport,” John said. “Now, you’re sure you’ve got it?”

“Yes! You checked it in the car, remember?” Caitrin got the passport out anyway and brandished it under John’s nose. “See?”

“Then give your uncle a hug and be on your way,” John said gruffly. He got a rib-cracking squeeze, a kiss planted on his cheek, and a whispered “thank you,” and he supposed Nick had the same a moment later, but he was staring at the ground, his throat constricted. She seemed so damn young to be flying halfway around the world on

her own.

They waved until she'd vanished from sight and then turned to each other.

"Well," John said. "That's that."

"I hope she's okay on the plane." Nick seemed reluctant to leave.

"She'll be fine. She's a grand girl going off on the adventure of a lifetime, isn't she?" John touched Nick's hand lightly, tugging at his fingers to get him moving, and they started to walk back the way they'd come. "And we'll be doing the same in a few months, remember? I'm looking forward to a long holiday with you somewhere tropical."

"It's funny," Nick said. "That she's so anxious to leave Traighshee, when I feel like I was waiting my whole life to find it. And you."

John put his arm around Nick's shoulders and pulled him in for a hug as they walked. Sometimes Nick said things that made him feel breathless, struck by just how much he loved him and the never-failing wonder of being loved back.

"I wanted to leave at her age, too," he said. "I thought I had to go because what I wanted wasn't on the island -- and I was right; it wasn't. But it was on its way, though I didn't know it and, you --" He paused and, ignoring the people around them, cupped Nick's face in his hands. "You were worth waiting for."

He waited for Nick to smile and then brushed his thumb lightly across Nick's lips. "Later," he said and didn't make it a question but a promise.

## Epilogue

“Finally,” Nick said as he shoved open the door to Rossneath.

They’d spent the previous two weeks -- two wonderful, incredibly romantic weeks -- in Curacao. Long, luxurious days on the beach, an afternoon diving off the coast, and evenings of tropical drinks and delicious meals had added up to the best vacation of Nick’s life. Of course, the fact that it was a vacation he’d taken with John would have made it that anyway. They’d spent many hours exploring each other’s bodies, exhausting each other until they were capable of nothing except collapsing into sleep.

Still, the journey home had been excruciating even though Nick had managed not to get sick on either of the ferry rides. Now he was grateful to be home.

“Someone’s been sitting in our chairs,” John said, with good humor in his voice, and Nick blinked and smiled as he discovered that the heat had been turned up. He’d been expecting -- and he was sure John had, too -- the house to be cold, the sheets damp and miserable in comparison to their amazing vacation in the Caribbean.

“There’s a note.” Nick picked it up and read it. It was in John’s sister Janet’s handwriting, and only said, *Dinner in the stove, bed turned down, fire banked. Welcome home.* He passed the note to John, who read it and smiled even more widely. “She deserves a medal.”

“Or a lovely souvenir from Curacao,” John agreed. His eyes were very blue against his bronzed skin; he hadn’t burned once, although Nick’s regular reminders to apply sunscreen probably had something to do with that. Nick himself hadn’t been so lucky and his nose was peeling.

They’d brought an entire carry-on bag of gifts back with them. Nick shrugged the strap off his shoulder and set the bag down on a chair. The kitchen smelled wonderful, like roasted meat and vegetables or maybe some sort of stew, and it was *warm*.

“Do you want to eat?” John asked. There was an inflection to his voice that made Nick think any hunger John was feeling was for something other than food, no matter how good dinner smelled.

He smiled at John. “I could eat,” he said, deliberately teasing him as he’d done so often on their vacation, which had transported them not just to a different part of the world but to an earlier time in their relationship when a look or a word could kindle heat between them that left them desperate with the need to get closer, mouths clinging, hands busy.

It still happened that way even here at home -- God, he hoped it always would -- but in recent years it had been more of a steady, constant warmth, their lovemaking falling into a familiar routine. Nick liked that comfortable certainty of loving and being loved, but he wasn’t quite ready to go back to it. One last time.

“Could you now?” John said, nodding his head thoughtfully. “So the turned-down bed doesn’t interest you in the slightest? That’s a pity.”

“Aye.” Nick grinned at the look on John’s face when he used a properly Scottish word like that, even coming close to approximating the accent. “On the other hand, there’s the sofa waiting in the next room, and a fire that just needs a few logs thrown onto it...”

That was all the encouragement John needed; he crossed the small distance between them and pulled Nick into a passionate kiss that took his breath away. Fingers slid up into Nick’s hair and tugged, lifting his chin, and John’s lips found Nick’s throat and mouthed at it.

“What about dinner?” Nick gasped. His body apparently had no trouble becoming aroused even though they’d been traveling for what felt like forever. He’d been sure all he’d be capable of when they’d arrived home was collapsing into a deep sleep, but he’d been wrong.

“It can wait. I can’t.” John sounded pretty definite about that, his voice husky, his lips finding places on Nick’s neck that made Nick shiver. “God, you make me want you just by being in the same room as me, you know that? All these years and I still can’t keep my hands off you.”

Those hands were finding their way under the jacket Nick still wore and tugging it off him to fall to the floor with Nick cooperating as best he could and returning the favor. By the time they’d moved into the living room, never breaking their embrace, they’d managed to shed their jackets and shoes and they were working on the rest of what they wore.

John gave Nick one last kiss, one last not so gentle bite at Nick’s lip, and then moved away. “I’ll build up the

fire so you don't get chilled."

"It's not that cold."

John bent to pick up a log and gave him a narrow-eyed glance. "It will be when you're naked," he pointed out.

Perching on the edge of the couch, Nick watched as John put two logs onto the fire. He had it roaring in a minute or so, a lifetime of experience with the chore made him an expert as far as Nick was concerned. As he bent to the task, Nick could see the white line of pale skin at the back of John's neck underneath his hairline. Nick was almost overwhelmed with the desire to press his lips to that skin. Instead, he undid the front of his slacks -- which were too thin for this climate and had been bought specifically for their trip -- eased down his underwear, drew out his half-hard cock, and began stroking it.

It felt wanton, overly indulgent, to be sitting there on the couch with his cock in his hand, but any sense of embarrassment vanished when John turned and saw him.

John didn't say a word. He didn't have to. The look on his face, yearning, heated, loving as it was, was enough to make Nick's breath catch in his throat. He expected John to move closer, but John just rubbed his hands once over his thighs, a restless, unthinking movement, and stayed by the fire, kneeling, watching, his eyes intent.

Nick made his next stroke tighter, slower, and made himself moan without meaning to, because good as it felt -- and it did -- the way John's eyes widened and darkened when he did it, his tongue passing over his lips, was even more arousing. He loved knowing he could do this to John; bring him, quite literally, to his knees.

Deliberately, never taking his gaze off John, he stroked the tip of a finger across the head of his cock, still working it with his other hand, and then brought it to his mouth to taste. It was blatant, but it worked. John swore under his breath, the spell of silence broken, and he stood and stripped off his clothes, the firelight painting his strong, tanned body with flickering shadows.

"Don't stop," John told him when his hand faltered. "You look incredible, do you know that?"

John was the one that looked incredible, naked and aroused, as he sank down onto the couch beside Nick and rested a hand on Nick's inner thigh. Nick wished he'd taken off his slacks already, because he knew exactly what John's slightly calloused, work-worn fingers felt like against bare skin, but then John's eyes met his, and he remembered what he was supposed to be doing.

His hand hadn't forgotten, at least. He stroked himself again, harder this time, drawing a bead of clear fluid to the tip of his cock where it glistened in the firelight.

"Touch me," he heard himself whisper. "God, John, please."

John leaned down, and Nick sucked in a sharp breath as John's tongue slid across the glossed-wet skin, the contact over too soon. John ran his tongue over his lips again and smiled, then began to unbutton Nick's shirt with careful, precise movements. Nick wouldn't have cared if John had ripped it off him, but in some ways the control John was clearly fighting to maintain was more arousing than the loss of it would have been.

He helped John strip him bare and then lay back on the couch, sprawled out and staring up at John who had moved to kneel over him, his cock pale against the thatch of light brown hair surrounding it, his balls already drawn up tight.

Nick reached up and ran his fingers through the hair on John's chest -- hair that was more salt-and-pepper than pepper these days, and no less attractive to him for it. In fact, as the years went on, he found the gradual changes in John's body almost unbearably sexy. "You have tan lines," he said, tracing them with his fingertips. In the low light, the delineation between pale and sun-browned skin seemed softer.

"So do you." John's thumb brushed across Nick's hip where his own skin turned from its normal pale shade to a slightly darker beige, then lower, catching and dragging through the hair on Nick's thigh and teasing the incredibly sensitive skin there.

Nick took John's hand, not to move it to his erection, much though he craved a touch there, but just to hold it for a moment, palm to palm, fingers pressed together.

John looked at him and smiled. "Handfasted," he said, his voice low and clear against the crackle of the fire. "In the olden days, it was how a couple got betrothed or wed up here when there was no priest around. If I had a cord handy, I'd wrap it around our wrists and bind us one to the other."

Nick's breath caught; his chest felt tight, and his heart gave a little extra thump-thump. He slipped his fingers between John's, interlacing them, holding on tight. "Do it. Find something we can use."

John's eyes widened. "Love --" He glanced down and away, so that all Nick could see was the soft rumple of his hair and then sighed and looked back up. His eyes, sea blue, sky blue, were full of rare tears, and as Nick watched, John reached up to rub them away, giving him a rueful smile. "You always did know how to get to me. Aye. I will. Wait here." John brought their linked hands up to his lips, gave the back of Nick's hand a swift, warm kiss, and then stood. He walked over to the dresser that stood against one wall and pulled out a drawer they used for all sorts of oddments.

Nick found himself on his feet as John walked back to him, holding a rough length of twine that had been floating around in the drawer for years, probably. He half remembered shoving it out of his way dozens of times when he'd been looking for something else, at least.

"Like this," John said, taking Nick's right hand in his left and interlacing their fingers again. "And the cord goes around our wrists."

Between the two of them, they managed to get the twine tied. A little too tightly, with some of the strands cutting into their skin, but somehow that seemed appropriate. They had to work together to get it done, but they knew how to do that, even if this particular task was new.

"Now what?" Nick's voice was hushed, the crackle of the fire louder.

"I don't know. This?" John brought his free hand to Nick's face, and Nick felt tears sting his own eyes without falling. John's hand was shaking, but the touch was still the most comforting Nick had ever felt, wordlessly conveying a love he'd never -- would never -- take for granted. He leaned into the hand cupping his face and kissed the thumb that brushed lightly over his mouth.

When John's lips replaced his thumb, Nick closed his eyes and kissed him, a brief, almost chaste kiss, oddly formal. John drew back and, with happiness alive in his eyes, grinned at him, a wicked, mischievous grin. "Och, you can do better than that, can't you, Nick?"

John's thumbnail scored Nick's palm in a deliberately arousing caress, and Nick shivered.

"I love you," John said, murmuring the words because they were so close he didn't need to do more than that. "And I don't know what words we're supposed to say, but you're mine, and I'm damn sure I'm yours, and it's been a long time since I've doubted that. I've never known what I did to deserve you, but I thank God I've got you. Nick. My Nick."

The tears that had been threatening spilled over. Nick blinked them away as quickly as he could, more because he wanted to see John clearly than because he was ashamed of them. John had seen him cry before, on many occasions -- this time wouldn't be the first or last. "I'm so lucky to have you," Nick said. He had to stop and swallow past the lump in his throat. "I'll never stop being grateful for you, not ever."

Their hands were gripping each other tightly enough to hurt, but Nick didn't care. He wanted to feel John's strength, to know that John was there, would always be there, holding on.

John's arm went around him and brought him even closer, John's face against his, tear-wet as was Nick's. They were both no more than half-hard now, their emotions taking over from their arousal but that didn't mean that Nick wasn't aware of how good it felt to stand like this. He put his arm around John and ran his hand over John's back, an action he'd done countless times before, the curve of bone and muscle so familiar.

"When you go, or I do --" John stumbled over the words, and Nick wished he could see his face. "Nick -- I don't ask you to promise because you've told me you don't know what's next any more than I do, but there has to be something or what you do wouldn't be needed --" He took a breath Nick could feel as if his own body had taken it, a long, deep breath that he released a moment later. "Wait for me, will you? If you go first? Because I'll tell you now, I won't be far behind you."

"Don't say that." It was an automatic response, no thinking required, but that didn't mean John's words had been easy to hear. Nick's chest ached fiercely at the thought of John dying, and he knew it was true for him, too -- if John died first, he wouldn't be able to go on long without him. "I will. I'll wait. I couldn't go anywhere without you." He sounded as desperate as he felt, considering it, and he clutched at John with his free arm as best he could in the awkward position. "But you...just go, if you can. Don't try to wait if it means you might get trapped here. I couldn't stand that."

He could barely stand it now, literally -- John was half holding him up.

"Anyway, wherever you end up, I'll find you. Don't worry about that, okay? I'll find you. I promise." Nick was nearly sobbing now, memories of ghosts' despair and anguish clawing at him.

"Oh, God, Nick, don't." John sounded horrified now. "I didn't mean to upset you, love. It's just -- I can't see me finding much happiness anywhere if you weren't with me. I'd sooner there be nothing than an eternity with you missing. But for the love of God, ignore me, because that's just not something we need to be thinking about right now." John pressed frantic, coaxing, soft kisses against Nick's hair and cheek over and over until Nick had to turn his face to answer them.

"Sorry," he said, gasping. John's lips caught at his and Nick kissed him back, harder than he'd meant to, the near-pain of it comforting somehow. "God, it scares me more than anything, the thought of losing you. But I won't. We won't. That's what this is for." He shifted his arm slightly and the twine that bound their wrists together made John's arm move with his. Nick's eyes burned with tears and he had to clear his throat. "I'll never leave you. Never. Not when I'm alive, and not...after."

"I know that. I do." John nodded, his hand making slow, regular passes over Nick's back. "And now you can

help me to take this string off because I'm making us both a cup of tea and I need both hands for that."

"No," Nick said urgently. He pulled back so he could see John's face. "Not yet. I haven't... There are still things I want to say. Need to. I... You know I love you. I hope you know how much, and I hope you know that with this twine or without, with the words spoken or not..." God, was it possible to be any worse at this? He sounded like an idiot, but he soldiered on because it was important to him that John hear it all. "Being married -- if we could, I mean -- wouldn't make me any more committed than I am. There's never been anyone else for me."

John smiled at him. "I've never needed anything more than what we've had all these years, either. And I've never doubted you love me. You walked off that ferry, and I just -- I knew. I still do. I always will." He brushed the back of his knuckles over Nick's face. "Always," he repeated.

"Me, too," Nick said. "Always." He gazed into John's eyes, spellbound, until he finally had to blink and look down at their wrists. "Okay, yeah. Tea would be good. Preferably with some whisky added." He felt a bit shaky as, working together, they unknotted the twine -- it was harder to do than he would have guessed. He handed John his slacks and pulled on his own, then took a blanket off the back of the couch and draped it around his shoulders as he followed John into the kitchen.

Staring out the window at the gathering dusk, John's arm around Nick's waist, they stood in a comfortable silence as the water in the kettle boiled.

"We could maybe put a bench out there in the spring," John said eventually. "Then sit out there and watch the sun set over the sea. I could build one easy enough. There's driftwood stacked behind the shed that might do the job."

"I'll help," Nick said.

"Mmph."

"Hey!" Nick protested. "I can saw and hammer and nail."

"You can, I'll not deny it. It's just that half the time you hammer your own thumb as often as the nail."

"That's --" Nick began to defend himself and then reconsidered, remembering the throb of a bruised thumb as vividly as when it'd been injured. "Okay, you're better at it than I am. But I still want to help."

Steam poured out of the spout in a pale plume, and the kettle clicked off. John hugged Nick to him and then moved away to make the tea. "Fine by me."

Nick loitered behind John as he put tea leaves into the pot and poured the water in, not wanting to be too far from him right then. When he'd finished, Nick wrapped his arms and the blanket around John from behind, enveloping him in slightly scratchy wool. His chin fit neatly over John's shoulder, and he kissed the juncture of shoulder and neck softly, the barest brush of his lips. Still easily aroused by John and having been cheated not fifteen minutes before of the release it had wanted, his body responded immediately to the closeness and to John's familiar male scent.

"We didn't finish what we started," John said as Nick caressed his bare stomach beneath the blanket.

"No."

"Would you like to?" It was a totally unnecessary question, what with the way Nick's renewed erection was poking against John's ass.

Nick smiled against John's neck and kissed it again. "Mm-hmm," he said. "Yes. I believe I would."

Somehow, neither of them was inclined to abandon the tea. Maybe it was because it seemed wrong not to finish *something* they'd started; maybe it was because they took so much pleasure in teasing each other with touches and the press of lips to sensitive spots behind ears and under the curve of jaws. Whatever it was, they took their time drinking their tea, the splash of whisky added to the mugs providing an extra bit of warmth. By the time they were down to the dregs, Nick was sitting on John's lap kissing him, licking the taste of tea and spirits from his mouth and sighing happily.

"Do you want to go back to the couch?" John bit gently at Nick's shoulder, his lips holding the heat of the tea. "Or up to bed? Or stay right here?" As he spoke, his hand was busy between them, deftly unfastening first Nick's, then his slacks. Nick was hard enough by then for him to sigh with relief as his erection slipped free and into John's waiting caress. John groaned and grazed his teeth across Nick's neck as his hand tightened. "God, will we ever not want this, do you think?"

"I hope not." Nick meant it with all his heart. He couldn't imagine not wanting John -- not wanting to feel John's skin bare against his own, John's cock stroking its way inside him, making him moan and cry out and shake and come. Even now, John's hand was teasing him in short, slow pulls at the head of his cock; Nick shifted so he could touch the tip of John's, the skin there so soft and delicate that it was no wonder it drove him crazy. He remembered he was supposed to be answering John's question. Questions. "I don't know. Um. Maybe the couch. Near the fire." Although if John kept doing what he was doing, Nick might not be capable of moving anywhere at all.

John seemed to feel the same way, because his hand stayed where it was and kept moving, never enough to bring Nick close to coming, but more than enough to make him want that release with a growing desperation. After a few moments, though, John gave a sigh and rolled his eyes. "You're right. And you're heavy."

"I'm not the one who ate dessert every night," Nick pointed out as he slid off John's lap and led the way back to the couch.

"No." John's hand landed on Nick's ass, delivering a light smack. "And I'm not the one who kept drinking cocktails with half a fruit basket in them."

"Fruit's very healthy." Nick kicked off his slacks and turned to see that John had already gotten rid of his. "And if you want my body, maybe you'd better start apologizing for that crack about me putting on weight."

John's mouth quirked in a grin that matched the one shaping Nick's lips. "Happy to, love. On bended knees, if that's what you want."

Whatever John was planning to do on his knees, Nick really didn't think it would involve apologizing, and he was proved right as John stepped closer and sank down. Once on his knees, with the heat of the nearby fire like a touch on Nick's side, John pressed slow kisses on Nick's stomach, dragging his mouth across skin over and over until Nick's breath was escaping in harsh, quick pants, and his fingers were clutching John's shoulders.

Nick wanted to find words to ask John to move his attentions to the erection jutting up so close to his mouth -- hell, he'd be happy to beg if it got him that wet, welcoming heat to slide into -- but it was John who groaned and muttered an unnecessary, "Please," before taking the tip of Nick's cock between his lips. For a moment, Nick felt the flick of John's tongue, tasting, exploring, and then John groaned again and opened his mouth wider. His hands were curved around Nick's ass, and even as Nick tried not to push forward greedily, John urged him to do just that with a firm pressure, guiding Nick's cock deep into his mouth.

It always felt deliciously wrong to do this -- fucking someone's mouth seemed impolite -- but there was no doubt that John loved it as much as Nick did, what with the soft noises he made, muffled in his throat, as Nick pushed between his lips. The slide was slick and perfect, but much too short. Nick wanted to keep going deeper; each thrust ended too soon, and he had to distract himself with the soft feel of John's hair in his hands, the solid jut of his skull, each inch of it lovingly traced as John sucked him.

Nick would have liked it to go on forever, but within two minutes he was moaning and trembling, his calf muscles starting to ache with the effort of holding back. He wanted to come like this. He wanted to come with John inside him. Which he wanted more was hard to decide.

"John," he gasped.

John paused, gave one final, hungry suck, and then took his mouth away and tilted his head back. The clear lines of his lips were softened, blurred, and his eyes were clouded with arousal. It was an effort to look away from his face, but Nick glanced down and saw how hard John was, his cock untouched because John's hands had never left Nick's body. The visual, and the vivid memories of what it felt like to be fucked by John, made the decision easier than it had been a few moments earlier.

"Mmm?" John said, the murmur of inquiry seemingly all he could manage in the way of speech.

"I want you to fuck me." Nick traced two fingertips across John's suntanned cheekbone to his ear, then down along his jaw to his mouth. "Here, in our house."

"Love," John said, "there's nothing I'd like more."

John stood and they kissed for a minute, Nick's hand wrapped around the heavy, familiar weight of John's cock. Pressed against John's thigh, his own cock was still slick as a result of John's attention; it wasn't until John made a muffled sound and moved to retrieve an almost-empty bottle of lube from the drawer in the table beside the couch that Nick took a deep breath and sat down, grateful for the opportunity because his legs were suddenly weak with desire.

"Nearly out of this," John said absently, holding the bottle up. "But there's enough for now." He gave Nick a quick grin. "Which is just as well, as I don't think I have the patience to go hunting for more." He tossed the bottle up and caught it neatly, his gaze fixed on Nick. "If you want me to fuck you, you'll need to move." He reached out and ran his fingers roughly, lovingly through Nick's hair. "God, I'm aching for you as if we haven't done this for weeks. Months."

"I know exactly what you mean," Nick said. He caught John's hand with his own and pressed an awkward kiss to the knuckles, trying to think where he could move to that would make it easiest for John to get inside him as soon as possible. "Here, what about this?" Turning around, he got up onto his knees on the couch cushion and leaned against the back of the couch. "Will this do?"

He heard John's eager intake of breath and knew that the answer was yes even before John spoke. "God, yes." There was the flip of the bottle's cap opening, then John's slick, somewhat cold fingers were pressing into Nick gently, easing him open.

Nick exhaled and relaxed, moaning as John's fingers pushed deeper. "Fuck. Oh, God, that feels so good."

"It's going to feel better," John promised. Nick felt a kiss against his shoulder, John's breath warm, vaguely whisky-scented, and then, after one final slow, deep thrust of John's fingers, he was left empty again, waiting.

Before he had time to do more than murmur a protest that he knew he didn't really need to make, the head of John's cock was pressing against him, entering him, opening him, filling him. Behind him, John made a soft, exultant sound, his hands gripping Nick's hips. "Nick --"

Nick leaned forward so he could rest his head on his hands and concentrate on breathing; if he didn't, he was going to come really, really soon, and even though he knew it would feel fantastic, so did this. He wanted to enjoy it as long as he could. John paused when he was as deep as he could go. Experimentally, Nick tightened his body around John's cock, eliciting groans from both of them, and then John started to move again.

A long, slow pull out, a brief pause, and an even longer, slower thrust back in. It wasn't slow enough that it made Nick completely crazy, but it was a close thing. "God." He shuddered as John's hips moved away from him again; John's hands held his own hips in place. "Please."

"You want faster?" John rocked forward the barest amount possible; Nick felt a hot prickle of sweat break out along his spine, and he gritted his teeth, holding back another plea. "You want me to stop teasing you?" John chuckled, the sound choked off as he slid his cock deeper with what felt to Nick like an involuntary jerk of John's hips. He could feel John's control shredding, splintering. "Oh, God, Nick, it's me I'm tormenting, love, not you, but I just don't want this to end." He moved one hand up to Nick's nape, and Nick shuddered at the possessive clasp, shivers chasing over him. "If I fuck you hard and fast -- and God, I want to -- I'll come. I damn nearly did just from my fingers in you, seeing the way you moved, hearing you --"

John's words were tumbling out, and he was moving in spite of them, smooth, perfect strokes, the words continuing as if they were the only way John had of distracting himself. Nick barely understood them, too lost in the pleasure tearing through him, but the soft cadence of John's voice itself was like an additional touch.

"Watching you come...feeling you..." John thrust deep again, the head of his cock glancing off Nick's prostate, and Nick bit down on the inside of his own cheek in a desperate attempt to stave off the orgasm that was gathering low in his belly like a snake waiting to strike.

"God, I'm -- John --" Nick found himself rocking back to meet each thrust now. John wrapped an arm around him, hand sliding down along his chest and lower until it encircled his hard, swollen cock, and that was all it took. Nick came, crying out and jerking helplessly in John's hand, his ass clenching around John in waves that felt so good they almost hurt.

He caught his breath and then heard John say his name and felt John freeze in place for a moment before driving into him in one long, hard stroke and staying there.

"Nick --"

He could feel John's climax as intensely as he'd felt his own, could almost believe he heard the way John's thoughts went from a chaotic, urgent clamor to stillness, pure sensation wiping his mind clean for a moment.

Then the sense of oneness ebbed, and it was just him, drawing in air in greedy gasps as if he'd been holding his breath, and John behind him, hugging him, easing Nick down to lie on the couch in an uncomfortable, perfect, messy tangle of sweat-slicked bodies.

Nick kept thinking he should say something, like "Wow," maybe, but it didn't seem like he had enough energy to form a word. It took ages for his heartbeat to slow to anything close to normal, and by the time it had, the fire was dying down, its pops and cracks less frequent, too.

"I don't want to get up," he said finally. Not that it would be comfortable to spend the night where they were, limbs awkwardly placed, but it was such a perfect moment that he didn't want to dislodge it. He wanted to hold onto this, keep it.

"No, but I'm thinking we should," John said, his words punctuated by a yawn. "Clean up, eat, go to bed...our bed." He yawned again and rubbed his face against Nick's shoulder with a sleepy affection. "I liked it fine in that fancy hotel, but I'm glad we're back." He lifted his head and gave Nick a contented look.

"Yeah. Me too." Nick tilted his chin and kissed John, a crooked, misaligned kiss that only involved half their mouths. He agreed; it had been an amazing holiday -- he couldn't imagine a better one.

But it was good to be home.

☪ THE END ☪

## **Jane Davitt**

Jane Davitt is English, and has been living in Canada with her husband, two children, and two cats, since 1997. Writing and reading are her main occupations but if she ever had any spare time she might spend it gardening, walking, or doing cross stitch.

Jane has been writing since 2005 and wishes she'd started earlier. She is a huge fan of SF, fantasy, erotica, and mystery novels and has a tendency to get addicted to TV shows that get cancelled all too soon.

She owns over 4,000 books, rarely gives any away, but is happy to loan them, and is of the firm opinion that there is no such thing as 'too many books'.

## **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, ancient house in New England with her husband, young son, and two little-old-lady cats.