

“Please explain to me again why I am doing this.”

My husband, Timber MacDuff, jerked the steering wheel of our Chevy truck around to avoid colliding with a compact car hastily backing out of a handicapped space in front of Gordarosa’s Main Street Theater.

“Feckin’ idiots.” Accident prevented, at least for the moment, he relaxed back into his bucket seat, left hand resting on the wheel in a manner I could almost call negligent. His right hand reached out and squeezed my thigh.

“Because you told Bill you would months ago, aye?” he said in the soft Scottish lilt that nearly thirty years in America hadn’t managed to erase. “Come now. It won’t be so bad.”

“I suppose.” I glanced across the cab at him, but his eyes were on the street, scanning it for a parking place. He wouldn’t find one. At seven-thirty on this last Wednesday evening in September, cars packed the three-block strip of downtown, all carrying people to the opening event of the First Annual Gordarosa Harvest Festival.

“I didn’t mind when it was just Bill,” I went on, as if we hadn’t had this conversation a dozen times or more in the last month. “I liked the idea of a performers’ showcase.”

“But...?” Timber turned the truck up Church Street, hoping to find a space off the main drag.

“It’s been blown out of proportion. An arts festival at this time of year...I’m not sure the town can support it.” Gordarosa’s population of fifteen hundred did include more than its fair share of musicians, poets, potters and other artists, as well as a great many alternative-minded people. But the bulk of the citizens were ranchers and coal miners, farmers and small business owners. I couldn’t convince myself they’d be all that interested, especially not when half the events took place on weeknights.

It had started innocently enough. Bill Jamison, the bandleader for local rock group Right as Rain, also owned and acted as chief engineer for the Gordarosa Valley Recording Studio, which he ran out of the basement of the house he shared with his partner, Eva Destruction, Right as Rain’s bassist. Most of the local musicians went to Bill’s studio to record their CDs. So Bill had come up with the idea of putting together a sampler CD featuring all those local artists and staging a concert where folks could see them all in one place at one time. I’d agreed to participate because my Celtic band, Red Branch, had been one of the groups to record a CD at GVRS,

and it had seemed like good exposure. I hadn't reckoned with it becoming a huge deal.

"Breda thinks it can." Timber's black leather pants squeaked as he shifted his weight and spun the wheel again, taking the truck up to Orchard, still in search of a parking space.

"Breda's lived here two months. She has no idea what this town can support." My best friend, Breda Ni Fhearraigh, late of New York City, had recently been hired as the manager of the Gordarosa Arts Center. Approached for her business acumen, she'd taken Bill's original idea and run with it, transforming a one-night performers' showcase into a four-day festival complete with a poetry reading, artists' studio tours, a pub crawl and a fair in River Trail Park on the north side of town.

My husband grunted in satisfaction at finally finding a place to park as he pulled the truck into the Methodist Church lot, a quarter of a mile from downtown and almost empty. Lucky for us the Methodists didn't hold Wednesday night services, as some denominations did. "We're here. Grab your gig bag, love. We've a bit of a walk, and we're on in less than an hour."

"We should have walked from home." I got out of the truck, twisting my ankle in the process, and cursed under my breath. "I had no idea it would be so crowded down here."

"Thus proving your fears about the viability of a festival groundless."

I glared at him. Timber leaned on the hood of the truck and grinned back in his lazy way, a stray lock of his wavy, dark hair falling into one twilight blue eye. Six-foot-four and built to match, the sight of him, as always, sent a thrill through me. I had much better things to do with my Wednesday night than play a twenty-minute gig for which I was not being paid.

"At least we've got a forty-minute set on Saturday night," I grumbled, grabbing the satchel containing my flute and whistles out of the back of the truck. We weren't being paid for Saturday night, either, but the gig would keep the rest of the band happy. As I reached for my gig bag, my waist-length hair fell over my shoulders, getting in my way. I pushed the offending locks back with an impatient growl, caught my gig bag on the edge of the truck bed as I tried to haul it out, and dropped it on my toe.

“Do you need help?” Timber had already claimed his own gig bag and slung the case containing his bodhrán over his shoulder, and started out of the parking lot.

“No. I need to cut off my hair.” Auburn and as straight as if it had been ironed, I couldn’t do anything with it but let it hang or braid it back. I’d chosen the former for tonight, and it was annoying me.

“Och, don’t do that. Maybe Breda will fix it for you if there’s time.”

I sniffed. Breda often dealt with my hair before gigs; she alone could make the mass of it perform to any standard. But Breda had already been downtown at the theater setting up for tonight’s show when the time came for me to get ready. Besides, I was so irked with her over the whole festival thing that we were barely speaking.

“Come on. Let’s go.” I caught up with my husband in a few steps, but my ankle twisted again on the rough pavement and I stumbled. My brown, high-heeled boots had not been made for walking.

“You should have worn different shoes.” Timber caught me about the waist with his free hand, steadying me. He kissed me on the neck, his beard scratchy on my skin, and his fingers trailed over the bodice of my green lace dress. I slapped his hand away.

“None of that. I would have worn different shoes if I’d known half Colorado would be here and we’d have to walk a mile to the venue. What’s Steve going to do with them all? The theater only seats a couple hundred.”

Timber merely shrugged and let me go. Clearly he did not consider the theater owner’s tribulations any of his concern.

“Why so cranky?” he asked as we started toward Main Street in the gathering twilight. “Is it just the gig?”

I paced beside him for half a block in silence before answering with a sigh.

“I don’t like festivals. There’s always too much crazy energy, with the crowds and the noise. It gets to me. And Frank and Lisa are always on their worst behavior.” Frank Delacourt and Lisa Bristol comprised the other half of Red Branch, as guitarist and fiddle player, respectively. “I hate having to ride herd on them and make sure they get the job done instead of swanning about lapping up adulation they haven’t earned. Honestly, Timber, these days I

don't know why I ever thought I liked being a musician in the first place."

"You love being a musician. You hate being a bandleader."

"Wise man. I should listen to you more often."

"Aye, you should."

We joined a herd of bodies all hastening down First Street to Main and the concert. I stumbled and almost fell again as someone jostled me; Timber took my arm and steered me aside.

"Looks as if the press release did its work," he commented.

Breda had advertised the Gordarosa Harvest Festival in every paper from Aspen to Moab, hoping to draw a more moneyed crowd than our little town could provide. What's more, she had enlisted Vic Houston, a bluegrass artist on the Honey Ridge label, who had retired to Gordarosa a year ago, to contact his friends in the music industry on the festival's behalf. He promised promoters and label reps, both at the performers' showcase to which we were headed and at the big concert Saturday. This had gone a long way to mollifying tempers of musicians who were going to a lot of effort without being paid. Canny, my friend Breda. Pity she hadn't been able to do anything to solve my problems.

Reaching the alley leading to the theater's back entrance, Timber and I peeled off the crowd and started down the rutted gravel. I spared a glance for the empty lot on the corner of First and Main, surrounded by chain link fence, where the Emerald Isle pub had stood until the past July. The rubble of the bar had been cleared from the site not more than a month ago. Most of it had been used to fill the gaping hole that had once been a demon's prison—once been, because I had freed the demon myself last summer to prevent its being controlled by a magician with an evil agenda. The street lights cast a harsh, bluish-green glow over ground not entirely smooth. Breda, who owned the lot because her late father had owned the pub, was always saying she intended to turn the lot into a memorial park and garden, but she hadn't got around to it yet.

Breda and Timber were the two of the three people in town who knew I was a witch, Breda because that magician last summer had tried to sacrifice her to gain the demon's allegiance, which I had prevented by slapping him in the face with magic; Timber because he was my husband and a shaman as well. I trusted both of them with my secret. I wasn't sure I trusted the third person in the know, the demon himself. When I had released him I'd thought he'd leave

the area. Instead, he'd taken up residence. Consequently, since last July, I'd been keeping my inner eye peeled for any untoward magical activity in Gordarosa, either from the demon or anything else. So far, I'd spotted nothing requiring my intervention.

Midway down the block, the back door to the aptly-named Main Street Theater stood open to the mild September night, spilling soft gold into the alley. Timber and I hastened through it into the dressing room, a cavernous space of cinder block walls that had once enclosed a tractor garage. Musicians and their gear crammed the room from wall to wall; the performers' showcase featured a dozen bands. Not all the members of all the groups were present, but enough were to fill the air with a heavy musk of Patchouli oil and perspiration. The atmosphere hummed with anticipation.

I forced my way between two members of the bluegrass band, Mama's Choice, who were sharing a suspicious pipe on the back step, and plunged deeper in, looking for a place to stow my gig bag until our turn came. Spotting what seemed to be a free area in a corner, I made for it, only to find it occupied by a small, porcelain saucer and a matching bowl. The bowl sported a rim of white inside, indicating the recent presence of milk or cream. I frowned at it.

"Steve's keeping a cat?" I asked Timber as he came up behind me.

He gave his eloquent shrug again. "If he is, it's hiding now, aye? Over here."

He guided me through the crowd to the other side of the room, where a familiar guitar case stood propped against a wall. In its shadow lay an equally familiar fiddle case. Sighing, I plunked my gig bag down with the things belonging to Red Branch's other, less talented half. Timber set his own gig bag, crammed with a dumbek and various other percussive noisemakers, next to mine and laid his bodhrán case on top. Then we both straightened up and glanced around for the rest of our band.

I found them soon enough, more by sound than sight. Frank's nasal voice rose above the others of those clustered by the refreshments table where, beer in hand, Frank held forth on the merits of various types of guitar strings to a dark haired young woman in a white dress—Sylvie, a high school senior with a stunning voice. Her eyes glazed as she looked at him; I thought she

was searching for an opportunity to get away. Lisa's braying laugh erupted from the group gathered around a TV in one corner. The TV displayed a closed-circuit video of the action on stage—a necessity, since no one in the dressing room could have the least idea how the show was proceeding without it.

A sigh of relief left my lips at seeing both band members present and accounted for; they had been known to wander off at inconvenient times. Both were attired appropriately, as well: Lisa in a sleeveless blue velvet mini dress and Frank in black slacks and a tuxedo shirt. Good. Presenting a professional appearance at a gig seemed so obvious to me that I rarely gave it a second thought. With Frank and Lisa, I could never be sure. Most of the time they got it right. But I had never forgotten the time Lisa had showed up to play a wedding wearing tattered old jeans and a sweater covered in dog hair, and I'd had to send her home to change.

Sylvie disengaged herself from Frank and disappeared into the crowd. Frank grabbed another beer from the refreshments table and headed for the back door. At a jerk of my head, Timber took off to keep track of him. I gave a mental hike to my skirts and went to join Lisa.

"Who's up?" I asked as I squeezed into the gang watching the show on the TV

"Andrew Rose," Julian, the drummer from Right as Rain, informed me. "He's singing about his sagebrush."

"Gawd, he's *awful!*" Lisa bellowed.

A frosty silence fell. Glancing around, I noticed the expressions on the faces around me had become rather fixed. I grimaced. Lisa had it right; Andrew Rose, a singer-songwriter with pretensions of spirituality, *was* awful. But in the close-knit musician's community of Gordarosa, that kind of thing went better unsaid.

My eyes strayed to the clock over the back exit and then to the order of performance posted on the stage door.

"Right." I touched Lisa; she jerked away from me as if burned. "Mama's Choice is next and then it's us. I'm going up front, but I should be back in fifteen minutes or so."

She nodded, her eyes glued to the screen. I did not tell her to stay put. She would only have uttered some scathing comment designed to keep me in my place. Besides, she didn't look likely to go anywhere.

I returned to my gig bag, collected a stack of CDs and left through the back door, giving a cursory nod to Timber and Frank as I passed. I didn't hear what they were talking about, but I noticed that now Timber's eyes looked glazed. Rounding the corner of the theater, I took the shortcut through the narrow park between it and the Oddfellows' building. The park, usually empty at night except for the odd group of bored teenagers, was full of people taking a break from the entertainment, having a smoke, getting a breath of air, or standing around in groups, chatting.

When at last I broke through into Main Street, I found it even more crowded than the park. In the block in front of the theater, people milled around like cattle. Half of them didn't have a hope of getting inside and didn't seem to care. Some seemed to be coming, others to be going. Some just stood around hoping to see and be seen. A number had small children in tow, not all of them well-behaved. I saw Rain and Sky Montoya dragging their six-year-old son, Tobias, away from a friendly black Lab with a bandana around its neck. His screams for a puppy of his own cut through the general rumble, as did his mother's increasingly shrill protestations that this was impossible.

Performers circulated, signing CDs. A Mariachi band had set up in front of the Mexican restaurant on the corner. At the other end of the street, a Folk duo played Kingston Trio covers in front of the bank. My head began to pound from all the unrestrained energy beating at me like a hammer. I'd been loath to put up a shield before; a performer needs to feel the mood of the audience, after all. But I'd be no good to anyone if I didn't get some relief. I drew up some earth energy and threw it around me, and felt better at once.

The shield helped me as I shouldered my way through the crowd, my stack of CDs cradled in front of me like a child. People sprang away from me by instinct, leaving my path clear. Gaining the front door of the theater, I burst into an area of relative calm and let my shield drop. My headache returned, but it wasn't as intense and I could ignore it. I wiped sweat from my forehead and wondered if there were any way I could make it back to the dressing room in the less than fifteen minutes I had left. A burst of applause from the house told me Andrew Rose had finished his set. Allowing for a five minute changeover and a twenty minute set for Mama's Choice, I decided I had plenty of time.

Spotting the long table to one side of the lobby where CDs by the various bands playing in the showcase were displayed for sale, I slipped along the concession stand to dump my wares before folks taking advantage of the set change to stretch their legs could cut me off. A couple of people were already there, scanning Bill's compilation CD. I waited to one side, wanting a word with the person running the counter. Then the couple moved along and the beautiful, raven-haired woman behind the table raised her ice blue eyes to mine.

"Caitlin!" Breda Ni Fhearraigh's voice was tart as a bowl of lemons. "How wonderful to see you. I always loved that dress. Your hair sucks, though."

I plopped my stack of CDs onto the table beside a fishbowl bearing the legend, "Donate to KGOR, YOUR volunteer-run radio station!" in bright blue crayon on orange construction paper.

"Hello, Breda," I replied, pretending to straighten my CDs. "Look, can we call a truce?"

Her eyes flashed. "I'm not the one who decided to pitch a fit about this festival. I can't believe it, Caitlin! Sometimes I wonder if Frank and Lisa aren't right about you. No fear like fear of fame."

That stung. "Frank and Lisa can..." I hissed.

All at once Breda relented. "Let's forget it. No good you getting upset before your gig."

I regarded her from narrow eyes. I missed Breda quite a lot and wanted her friendship back, but I couldn't help but suspect there would be a high price on her renewed goodwill.

She returned my gaze, the picture of innocence in her black silk jacket and plum camisole. The silver on her fingers gleamed in the low lobby lights as she brushed her bobbed hair back behind one ring-bedecked ear.

"All right. And...I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Well, you can make it up to me. In fact," her face glowed as she sprung her trap, "you can make it up to me tomorrow. Come to the poetry reading with me tomorrow night and all will be forgiven."

"The poetry reading?" I groaned. "Oh, Breda, please. Not that."

"I need you to come."

"Why? You know how I hate poetry readings. All that angst. It gets under my skin." I gave her a meaningful glance, to be sure she got it.



“I do know.” She returned my gaze; she got it, all right. Other than Timber, only she knew of my powers. “I also know you’re not exactly helpless.”

“But...”

“I need you to come because everyone knows how much you hate readings.” I must have looked as mystified as I felt, because she went on, “I’m worried about this, Caitlin. The Writers’ Guild wanted Friday night, but I couldn’t give them Friday night because of the pub crawl. I promised them we’d have a great turnout even on a Thursday. Everyone knows how much you hate readings, so if I can leak that you’re going, everyone will think there must be something pretty terrific in store to attract you, and they’ll come too. It’s simple.”

I stared at her. “You have an evil mind.”

“So you’ll do it? I’ll fix your hair,” she wheedled.

I sighed. “Oh, all right. But I’ll have to take a rain check on the hair. We’re on in...” I glanced up, noticing that the lobby had become very still. Only a few people loitered, some getting popcorn or beer, some chatting in the alcove in front of the restrooms, and a couple pointedly waiting for me to be done with Breda so they could have a chance at the CDs. The high, lonesome sound of Mama’s Choice drifted through the heavy velvet curtains separating the lobby from the theater proper. The clock over the concession counter read eight-twenty. “Crap. We’re on in ten minutes. Gotta run.”

Spinning around, I suited actions to words, but only made it as far as the door before colliding with a couple just coming in. For a few seconds the three of us did a stupid little dance, trying to get out of each other’s way. Then the man grabbed me by the elbows, picked me up and set me aside, grinning.

“Caitlin!” he exclaimed. “How’s it going?”

Vic Houston’s official bio described him, in not very original terms, as “a long, tall drink of water.” It did not mention that his wiry frame was all muscle; I am not a small woman and not many could have manhandled me as casually as he did. His craggy good looks had something of the wolf about them, with shaggy blond hair gone almost all the way grey, a sharp nose and chin, and melting brown eyes. I saw something of the wolf in his grin, too. He looked as though he couldn’t decide whether to romp with me or eat me. Maybe both.

If I had been the one on Vic's arm, I would have objected most strenuously to his turning such a grin on another woman. Cassiopeia Jones, however, was one of those rare people who looked for the good in everyone around her and found it more often than not. A warm smile in her grey eyes, she held out her blue silk-clad arms to me. I hugged her, taking care not to snag my dress on any of her expensive turquoise jewelry. She had quite a lot of it on, from matching necklace and earrings set in silver to a rope of rough stones looped around her left boot. She didn't usually go around flaunting her wealth, but she would be playing later tonight and had dressed the part.

I knew Vic would be joining her for a song or two, but he hadn't taken any trouble over his appearance. In fact, he looked almost drab in his faded blue jeans and Guatemalan shirt. Around his neck he sported a macramé hemp and bead choker of the sort I had seen on a lot of the alternative crowd in recent days. Vic's was remarkable in its ugliness. The beads were a nasty bluish-purple color, with streaks of green like an old bruise, and the cord was grimy, as if he had been wearing it for a while without bothering to wash. A single blue crystal teardrop lay in the hollow of Vic's throat, the sole thing of beauty about the piece.

"Have you been on yet?" Cassie asked as she released me.

I shook my head. "We're on next." I listened for a minute to the faint sound of a mandolin solo coming from the theater. "In fact, I need to get backstage. It sounds like Mama's Choice is finishing up."

"Oh, I wanted to hear them!" Disappointment rang clear in Cassie's voice. I kept my face blank. Mama's Choice was the new act in town and everyone wanted to hear them. It had been a couple years since a Red Branch gig held that kind of appeal.

"You'll get a chance on Saturday," Vic soothed her.

I heard the mandolin solo end in a flourish, then a number of cheers and a crescendo of applause. Out of the corner of my eye I saw people begin to shove their way through the lobby curtains.

"I've really got to..." I began, attempting to shove my way between Vic and Cassie. Vic grabbed my arm.

"You'll never get around; the street is jammed. Anyway, I wanted to ask you something about Saturday."

“What about it?” I began walking backward through the lobby, dragging him along. Cassie trailed in our wake. My gaze met hers over Vic’s head; she rolled her eyes at me.

“Well, Bill and I were wondering if Red Branch would consider switching spots with Mama’s Choice.”

I froze. I knew the order of performance. Mama’s Choice had an afternoon spot at four-thirty, when people would be tired from spending the day in the park and thinking about going home for dinner. Red Branch had a prime evening spot at seven, when all those folks would be rested up and returning ready to party.

“No.” I said.

“But your music is more restful, Caitlin,” Vic pleaded. “Better for winding down the afternoon. Mama’s Choice is...”

“I don’t care what Mama’s Choice is.” Restful? I’d give him restful! Let him try dancing a few jigs and reels and then tell me if he thought Celtic music was restful. Anyway, I knew it was bullshit. Bill and Vic wanted to put us out of the way because we didn’t fit in. Celtic music didn’t have the same draw Bluegrass did. Besides—I had to admit it—we weren’t very good. After almost three years of playing together, Red Branch couldn’t match the polish Mama’s Choice showed even in their infancy.

“We fixed the schedule a month ago, Vic,” I told him. “Next festival you can do whatever you want. Not this one. Now I have to go.”

As if on cue, I heard Timber’s voice roar from the theater.

“Caitlin! Get in here!”

I tore my arm out of Vic’s grasp. His grin had vanished, replaced by a flat, cold look of disapproval. I remembered he had a reputation as a bad man to cross.

Ever the peacemaker, Cassie came up between us. “Are we going to have coffee soon?”

*What an inane question*, I thought, but I said, “Sure. Call me.”

“Caitlin!” Timber bellowed again. I heard laughter from the audience and my face burned.

I turned and ran, across the lobby and through the curtains, and down the center aisle to the stage where my band awaited me, Timber concerned, Frank smiling into his guitar, and Lisa looking thunderous, as usual. *They had better play well tonight*, I thought as I grasped Timber’s outstretched hand and he hauled me up beside him. *It’s only four songs; surely we can manage that much.*

Timber thrust my flute at me. I took it in my left hand, grabbed my mic stand with my right and flashed my best stage smile out over the house.

“Good Evening!” I sang out. “We’re Red Branch and we’re going to be playing some songs and tunes to lighten your heart and your feet, so kick off your shoes and clear the aisles! We’re going to start off with a set of jigs; this is ‘The Kesh,’ ‘The Liling Banshee,’ and ‘The Connaughtman’s Rambles.’”

I gave the beat and raised my flute to my lips, smiling all the while. But I couldn’t help noticing, with a sinking sensation deep in the pit of my stomach, that half the audience had vanished.