

*Prologue: Scotland, Tenth Century*

Blood dripped from Findlay Sheridan's sword, drops of gore trailing him as he stumbled across the battlefield, too weary for elation at the outcome of the day. Once again, his warriors had taken on the Morrigan's minions and won, but at great cost. The earth and sky converged in one horizonless hue of red—grass, shields, swords, bodies, sky, sun—all red. Blood red. Ailsa foresaw the victory. And the blood. She'd told him as much. He knew she worried for him while he worried for his sons and his friends.

He remembered seeing his eldest, Graeme, struggling with the Morrigan's champion while she kept Findlay occupied with two lesser warriors. Findlay fought them remorselessly until they succumbed to his superior strength and skill. Still, more came, always more. Through the din of battle, he could hear the banshees screaming, shrieking the names of the dead.

Urgently, he traversed the field, trying to remember where he'd seen the Morrigan setting her champion on Graeme. The wounded and dying called to him, but in his singular mission, he blocked them out, desperate to know about his sons. He'd lost sight of Riordan and Owen, the twins, early in the battle, but he counted on them to take care of each other as they always did. All should be waiting at the rendezvous point at the standing stone near the loch. The burning need to reach his sons goaded him as his legs ate up ground on his way to meet up with his family.

His journey to the meeting place took a roundabout route through the fallen and the dying. Half way across the field, the mists rose around him, and he struggled to find his way. All at once, a form materialized from among the dead, the Morrigan's champion. The distant wails of the banshees told him the dying wasn't over.

Automatically, Findlay put away thoughts of his family as he readied himself for one last battle. The Morrigan's champion stood at least a head taller than Findlay's six feet, his torso streaming blood. In the recesses of his mind, Findlay thought Graeme had damaged this warrior. Then there was no time for thinking—only acting and reacting as the combatants danced their deadly dance.

The eeriness of their lone battle echoed in the single clanging of one sword on the other, one sword bashing one shield, one man grunting and screaming as he lunged again and again at the injured warrior, knocking him back toward the stream feeding the loch. At last, Findlay saw an opening and plunged his sword to the hilt in the Viking's chest. The man blinked, stunned, before tumbling backward in an ungainly heap of weaponry, flesh, and blood.

Without ceremony, Findlay put one foot on the warrior's chest and retrieved his sword, which is when he saw the other wound in the man's chest, equally deep, equally fatal. How did the man rise up? How did he fight again? Recognizing magic at work, Findlay spun around searching for the goddess, knowing she taunted him, baited him. The Morrigan, the Washer at the Ford, stood beside the little stream running thick with the day's blood. By her side stood a beautiful woman, her black hair cascading in waves down her straight back. Findlay's heart dropped into his stomach as he recognized the woman, his own dear Ailsa. Why did she stand with the Morrigan? Why did she stand in blood?

He blinked and shook his head, trying to clear his vision. Still, he saw the same picture. The Morrigan turned slowly toward him, her red eyes glowing evilly.

“So, Findlay Sheridan, you thought you won today, and indeed the field is littered with my warriors.” She flicked her hand nonchalantly. “They were expendable, merely a distraction for the real prize I coveted.” Her evil expression nearly stopped his heart. “Ailsa. Without her,

you can no longer win. You can no longer fight. Your failure to pay homage to my sister Maeve has brought you to this point. Think on that during the long nights to come in your lonely bed in your great hall.” The venom in her smile turned the blood in his veins to ice as he watched her lead Ailsa across the stream.

“Noooo!” Findlay screamed. “Ye cannae take her! She isnae a warrior. Ye’re only allowed tae take warriors across yer river of blood. Ye defy the Dagda! Ye defy Danu!” Findlay lunged toward the stream, yet he could not cross it. An invisible barrier, a wall he could not see, prevented his progress.

“The gods make alliances with whom we will for our own purposes. The times are changing. The rules are changing. Man must adjust.” The Morrigan stepped across the river, leading Ailsa who looked back one last time, her eyes filled with sorrow, before she disappeared into the mists. Findlay fell to his knees, his glorious golden hair turning snow white in an instant as his life force died within him.

For a man to be a warrior, he needed three things: his name, his weapon, and his talisman. A man could fight for a while with only his name and his weapon, but he would taste defeat early. If he wished to be mighty, if he wished to be victorious in battle, a warrior must have his talisman, the one woman the fates chose to complete him, or he was nothing but an ordinary man with ordinary skill—a foot soldier easily bested in combat. Without Ailsa, Findlay was nothing. The Morrigan had won. He sat on the bank of the stream and wept.

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When Findlay’s sons found him at last, relief and shock shone on their faces. In the morning when they’d all set out to battle, Findlay was a man in his prime—tall, straight, massive, his hair flowing in golden waves over his broad shoulders—a warrior leader his men

revered and followed without question. Now an old gray-haired man sat on the banks of the stream, defeated. His battle gear marked him as Findlay Sheridan; otherwise, his sons would not have recognized their own father, so changed was he.

In a reedy voice, Findlay gave his sons the news. “The Morrigan has taken yer mother. She made sure I made it tae the ford in time tae watch but tae late tae stop her. ’Twas her plan all along, tae start a battle tae distract us from her real purpose—taking yer mother, my talisman, my wife.” He stared blindly into the distance, all his tears spent. “My one true love.”

“But Father, the Morrigan cannae take a talisman. She can only take warriors in the heat o’ battle. Mother was never a warrior,” Graeme protested.

“The rules have changed. The gods have formed new alliances among themselves. Not only can she take an unprotected talisman during battle, but she can also limit the time fer a warrior tae find his talisman. From now on, a warrior cannae begin the search fer his talisman until he reaches his twenty-first year, and he must find her by midnight o’ his twenty-eighth year or he becomes subject tae the Morrigan. He can join her as one o’ her champions fighting against his fellow warriors, or he can become a fugitive whose only allies are fugitive warriors like himself.”

“How soon until this second condition begins?” asked Riordan.

“It has already begun. Graeme, ye have three days tae find yer talisman or submit tae the Morrigan or become a fugitive yer brothers and I cannae aid,” Findlay said. The tears resumed. No longer had he the strength to control or hide his fears. Graeme paid the price. Within a month of the battle, he crossed the ford with the Morrigan while his brothers watched helplessly. At least he died fighting her and her minions rather than turning against his family. The supreme war goddess’s bloodlust and her sexually voracious sister Maeve’s unrequited desire for Findlay

Sheridan led to a blood feud with the most powerful warrior family in Scotland. The war would last for centuries.

## *Chapter One*

### *Montana, Twenty-First Century*

The dreams kept coming, more frequent, more urgent. What started as one or two a month after Gram Afton died at the summer solstice had escalated to one or two a week. Alyssa Macaulay's sleep loss meant she couldn't concentrate on her thesis writing. Even more disturbing, she heard strange noises around her house when she awoke from those dreams. Shadow was edgy as well, insisting on sleeping on the floor at the foot of her bed rather than in his usual spot on a rug in the laundry room.

At first, she thought the dreams came from her research, but the battles were modern, the warriors dressed in jeans, leather jackets, and boots rather than chain mail, wool, and leather leggings. The battles, however, were as bloody as any medieval combat she'd read about. She could hear men screaming and feel the disturbance in the air as they wielded their mighty swords. None of it made sense, yet all of it was vivid and so, so real. As were the tracks of someone's boots in the thin layer of snow outside her cabin this morning, a circumstance that sent her online investigating local security firms.

When she arrived at the offices of Security Consultants Unlimited, the understated sign beside the door on the second floor of one of the converted hotels in town reassured her. Inside, she observed modern chrome-and-leather furniture in the reception area, which exuded an atmosphere of competence and efficiency. The muted colors of a watercolor landscape of a mountain meadow at sunset softened the starkness of the décor. The receptionist, a woman with graying hair cut in a close spike and wearing a chic charcoal suit over a magenta silk blouse, addressed her. "How may we help you, miss?"

The woman's desk plate bore the name Isla, a Celtic name, which gave Alyssa an odd sense of comfort. "I need to speak to someone about a home security system, please."

"Of course. One moment." The woman pressed a button on her phone alerting someone in one of the two offices adjoining the reception area.

During the few minutes Alyssa waited, the receptionist remained busy at the two computers on her desk. Alyssa hoped the business would have time to help her as soon as she needed it.

"Mr. Sheridan will see you now, miss," Isla said, her tone business-like, her expression kindly.

According to the internet and the front door of the office, Rowan Sheridan was the branch manager for Security Consultants Unlimited. She'd formed an idea he'd be a fatherly type who would assure her that his company could be of service in the very near future—like today. When she opened the door to his office, she stared at the man sitting behind the huge oak desk on which sat three computer monitors and some files. She consulted the name on the door again to be sure she'd entered the right room.

This man was no father figure who would gently assuage her fears. Dressed in a brick-red Henley, he looked more like an outfitter for a hunting camp than a security professional. The man was all shoulders and chest. As he arose gracefully from his chair, she saw he stood at least a foot taller than her own five feet two. His size overwhelmed her when he came around the desk to greet her. At least that's what she told herself to account for the butterflies taking flight in her belly.

"Hello, I'm Rowan Sheridan." His large hand swallowed her much smaller one in a firm handshake. When he touched her, a tingling ran up her arm and lasted for several seconds after

he let her go. He looked at her with a curious expression, and she realized she hadn't introduced herself.

“My name is Alyssa Macaulay. I-I'm interested in a home security system.”

The man's intense aquamarine eyes bored into her, and she wondered what he tried to see.

“Do you have certain items or rooms you'd like secured, or do you need a system for your entire residence?” He leaned casually against his desk and crossed his big arms over his massive chest.

His baritone voice called to her on a visceral level, and she had to drag her attention from the sound into the conversation. Giving herself a mental shake, she responded, “My residence. I'm not looking to protect treasures.” She shrugged. “I don't have any. But I live alone in a somewhat remote area, and lately I've been hearing weird noises around my house at night.”

With a flick of his hand, he indicated the leather chair behind her. “Please. Have a seat.”

She sat.

“Do you want motion sensors outside and inside your home? Or what were you thinking?”

He didn't seem to notice her nerves, or maybe he was being polite to make a sale.

“I hadn't thought that far. Perhaps I need someone to come out to my house and determine the best course of action. Would any of your employees be free in the next day or two?” Alyssa was hoping that as the manager, Rowan Sheridan only consulted and sent out the other employees on installations. The office looked small, but he was obviously monitoring systems, so that must mean someone else did the legwork, which would suit her just fine. So unexpectedly handsome and intense a man made her nervous.

His buzzing phone interrupted them, and he excused himself to take the call. Following a few noncommittal comments, he ended the conversation.

“I’m sorry, Miss Macaulay. I have a service call, but my secretary will be able to schedule an appointment for you.”

“Oh, I thought as the manager, you worked from your office.” Alyssa wanted to take it back as soon as she said it, especially in the accusatory tone in which it slipped out.

“Actually, I spend as much time in the field as I do in the office. I’ll be taking your case personally.” He gave her a pointed look. “Isla will figure out a time that works for both of us. Nice to meet you.” He stepped around his desk again and took her hand. This time he held it a fraction of a second too long, and the tingling was even more intense than the first time. Alyssa couldn’t figure out what happened between them as he ushered her back into the reception area.

He closed the door to his office, and Isla looked up at Alyssa expectantly.

“Apparently, Mr. Sheridan is being called away. To be honest, I’d hoped someone could look at my home soon, like maybe today.”

“I’m afraid Mr. Sheridan is booked until the end of the week, but I can put you on his calendar for Monday morning. Will that work?”

She checked her calendar and realized Monday morning would be the soonest she was available too although she gladly would have rearranged her schedule if she could have had someone out earlier. She took the date, but as she left the office, she wondered if Monday was too long to wait.

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Alyssa snapped awake, her heart pounding a wild rhythm in her chest. It took several seconds to ascertain she’d fallen asleep on top of her research notes. Sitting up at her desk in the

cubbyhole masquerading as her office in the university graduate school, she sucked in several deep breaths to calm herself down. The dreams were coming during the *day*? And the warrior she'd been dreaming of now had a face. He looked exactly like Rowan Sheridan. What was up with that?

The vividness of her dream unnerved her like nothing in her previous experience. In perfect detail, she recalled the events she'd dreamed. Like sitting in the front row of a movie theater, she'd watched as the Rowan Sheridan look-alike took on an even larger man than he in hand-to-hand combat using the claymores of ancient warriors. Rowan wore a heavy leather jacket over his red shirt as a kind of armor against the blows of the combatants battling him.

The size and fierceness of the warrior he faced didn't faze him, but to Alyssa's horror, the other man didn't fight fair. Three of his buddies took turns aiming slicing blows at Rowan's back, cutting his jacket to ribbons.

He fought on, apparently oblivious to the blows he sustained, focused on his singular mission to best his opponent. At last the huge man made a fatal mistake when he reacted to Rowan's feint, and Rowan ran his sword through the man's chest. The big man blinked several times in surprise before his eyes rolled back, and he slumped to the pavement.

The Rowan look-alike rested on his sword, his breath coming in rapid pants before his eyelids fluttered closed, and he slid, boneless, to the ground. Out of nowhere, another warrior who looked a lot like Rowan raced to his side and shouted at him. As she watched the two men together, she thought Rowan should be taken to a hospital immediately, but he didn't want that. At the very least he should be taken to his own bed, she'd decided.

That's when she'd awakened. The ability to recall so many details of her dream afterwards rattled her almost as much as the dream itself. If she didn't know better, she would

have thought it wasn't a dream. Obviously, she needed to go home, regroup, maybe leave behind her studies for the evening. Perhaps these Celtic warriors would let her be if she put them aside for a little while.

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"I left you a note to let me be. What are you doing in my room shouting about calling a healer?" Rowan growled.

"Your bloody clothes on the bathroom floor made me think you had a bit of trouble this time, so I thought I'd better check on you. Your back's a mess, Mr. Universe, in case you didn't know, so I was *thinking* about calling a healer. Jesus."

"I know my back isn't pretty anymore. Six long wounds that will leave scars. It's a message, Seamus, and I got it loud and clear. Now let me rest." Rowan said the last bit into his pillow.

His roommate, Seamus Lochlann, grumbled something obscene under his breath, but he paid no attention. The wounds on his back were on fire. But if he concentrated on the silver-gray eyes of a certain beautiful pixie he'd met in his office that afternoon, he could ignore the pain. If only he could ignore the message.

*Chapter Two*

Friday night, Alyssa sat in the lounge area of the bar alone, nearly swallowed up in the cushions of a low couch. Instead of a drink on the table in front of her, she'd fanned out her research notes. She only had her thesis on Celtic mythology left to complete her master's degree, yet she couldn't concentrate. The battle dreams from her catnap in her office the day before haunted her. When the man she watched went down, her desperation to save him overwhelmed her. It still did.

At home the night before, she'd had trouble falling asleep. Sensing her unease, Shadow whined at the foot of her bed. Her whole body prickled as awareness of something evil lurking outside her cabin washed over her. When Shadow jumped up onto her bed, a habit she'd broken him of while he was still a puppy, she didn't discipline him or push him off. Instead, she took comfort in his enormous size and his loyalty, petting him and trying to sort out her thoughts. This morning when she'd stepped outside for wood for the stove, she'd noticed a concentration of footprints outside her bedroom window. Well and truly spooked, she decided to lodge a report with the police and wished again that she'd been able to acquire a security system yesterday—or even last week.

The tracks outside her house reminded her of when she'd lost her parents in a home invasion. She couldn't remember any details other than she'd been visiting her Grandma Afton on that fateful night and had lived with Gram until it was time to go off to college. Though it had been nine months since her grandmother died, Alyssa hadn't adjusted to being orphaned. Current events weren't making things any easier for her. Truly alone in the world for the first time, she was afraid.

Ceri Ross's exuberant entrance interrupted her morose thoughts. "Hey, girl! What are you doing here with all those notes scattered everywhere and not a drink in sight? You couldn't say 'back off' better to all the cute guys in this place if you put up a neon sign." The tinkling bells of Ceri's laughter accompanied her words as she unzipped her shearling jacket and dropped it on the couch opposite Alyssa.

"If I looked like you, I couldn't pile notes high enough to scare guys away. Me, I'm more the invisible type, drink or no drink. Besides, I didn't want to get too far ahead, even if you're driving."

"You wouldn't be invisible, you know, if you decided to dress in color. Your monochromatic black from head to foot makes you look like a professional mourner." Ceri rolled her eyes as she unwound her rainbow-colored cashmere scarf from her neck and dropped it on her coat.

"You know, not all of us have your sunshiny coloring that lends itself so well to a rainbow palette," Alyssa said with a sniff.

"What are your plans for tomorrow? Because we should go shopping. How Bill ever found you in all your black, I'll never know."

Alyssa gasped, and Ceri amended her tone promptly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought him up. He was a first-class creep, but at least he had good taste in women." She winked. "Even if you are especially hard to find in a dimly lit room."

"Good thing I had all my notes spread on the table since the one person with whom I want to share a drink on a Friday evening had no trouble finding me." Sarcasm dripped all over her words.

“Sorry, hon. That was rude of me.” Ceri glanced around the room. “I’m restless. There’s a big storm coming in, and the change in pressure or something has me on edge.”

“It couldn’t be that you’re between boyfriends, could it?” Alyssa’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

“That too. White wine as usual? I’ll buy the first round.”

Ceri’s generous offer didn’t fool Alyssa who knew her friend wanted to scope out the available prospects in the Under-Cover Lounge. She thought the name of the bar unfortunate, but she liked the relaxed atmosphere and the décor of low tables, deep couches, and rich pine paneling. The place exuded an ambience more like a library or a den than a bar. The clientele tended to business types and grad students rather than the rowdy undergrads populating the sports bars and dance clubs in town, which suited her. She’d met Bill Forbes in a sports bar, and the whole competition thing there should have warned her that theirs would not be a long and happy relationship. Still, it hurt she hadn’t measured up, especially in bed as he’d so graphically described to her the night he walked out.

“Wow, do you look down. Does an afternoon of shopping weird you out that much?” Ceri asked, as she set a glass of wine in front of Alyssa.

“Sorry. Thinking about my thesis. I’m having writer’s block. I’m not sure what I want to say, so I keep going back to my research notes, hoping something will magically jump out at me.”

“I know it’s March Alys, but give it a rest. What you need is a mini-break, maybe a trip to Chico to soak in the hot pools and have a massage. Or we could book a flight to Denver, do some power shopping, take in a hockey game or a concert. I could use a change of scenery for a few days too.”

“You’re not going to let up on the shopping thing, are you? Would it help to know I went online last night and ordered a sapphire-blue vest?”

“You went shopping online? Hello, you went shopping at all? I can hardly believe it.” She cast her eyes heavenward. “Maybe my little girl is finally becoming a woman.”

“There are times, Ceri, when you can be supremely annoying.”

“Alyssa, you need to drink rather than sip your wine because I’m in need of a story,” she said, changing the subject. “See the guy at the end of the bar, the one in the tweed jacket and Wranglers? Probably just in off the ranch and looking for a little love.”

“He’s not wearing boots. Those loafers peg him as a professor, probably visiting from somewhere. The perfectly styled hair doesn’t say rancher either. He must use half a bottle of mousse on that mane after he gets out of the shower.”

“At least we have the same target. So, he’s a visiting professor. Now what?”

“Let’s see.” Alyssa sipped her wine. “He’s here on loan from MIT to teach engineering to the hickabillies. He left his girlfriend at home because she has a great job as a manager at Nordstrom’s, and they’re gearing up for the St. Patrick’s Day sale.”

“Wait a minute. How do you, Miss Please-don’t-make-me-shop-ever, know about major department store sales? I’m having trouble wrapping my head around you being anywhere near a store like Nordstrom’s voluntarily. Give me a minute with this.” Ceri grinned and slugged back a gulp of wine.

Irritated colored her voice. “Are we still playing the game or what?”

“Sure.” Ceri looked anything but chastised.

Alyssa glared at her friend from beneath her brows before she continued. “He’s left behind his girlfriend, and he’s already hooked up with an aerobics instructor on loan to the P.E.

department. She's from California and will sashay in wearing an oversized puffy coat and skinny jeans stuffed into knee-high leather boots with four-inch heels."

Enjoying her story, Alyssa leaned back against the cushions and smirked. "She's going to order some fruity drink that comes in a tall fancy glass and needs at least two garnishes—a couple of citrus slices or an umbrella or both."

"Why a fruity drink? Why not wine—or a beer?"

"She wants to see if the guy is cheap or not. It's early days in their relationship. The fruity drinks cost a mint, so she's feeling him out. If he buys her one and then suggests a switch—or worse—he expects her to go dutch—she knows whether she's going to dinner with him or catching a movie on her own."

Ceri scooted to the edge of her couch and stretched up to watch. "Check it out. He looks expectant."

Alyssa craned her neck to see around other patrons in her line of sight of the door. "I don't see her, do you?"

"Oh hey, we were way off. She's definitely a stylish lady, but she looks old enough to be his mom."

As the woman walked up to the professor, he held out his hands and greeted her warmly, kissing her cheek and saying "Hi, Mom" in her ear, his lips easy for Alyssa and Ceri to read. Both women burst out laughing.

"I bet you the next round she still orders an expensive drink," Alyssa said.

"You're on."

*Chapter Three*

“She scarred me this time, deep and permanent. She’s serious, and I’m running out of time,” Rowan said.

“If you’d taken the help I offered when you returned from this latest fight instead of holing up in your room, maybe you wouldn’t have scars, Superman.”

“Seamus, I think there are harpies out there who nag a whole lot less than you do, and they’re probably prettier and better cooks.”

Seamus shook his head and changed the subject. “I dreamed of a long-legged, honey blonde, built to your exact specs. Maybe today is the day we meet her.”

“Long-legged, honey blondes are your dream girls, not mine,” Rowan reminded him.

“Yeah, I keep forgetting you aren’t particular.” Seamus laughed.

Snow swirled around them as the men walked along the street. Rowan and Seamus were similarly dressed in insulated denim jackets, jeans, and gloves. Still, the men hunched their shoulders against the wind making an insidious assault on their body heat. Installing a security system in the unheated confines of a new house made them even more susceptible to the nastiness of the weather, so when they passed a bar popular with the professional set and Seamus suggested stopping, Rowan didn’t argue.

“Looks like we’re a bit late for a table.”

“We can still grab a beer and stand near the bar. That would go a long way toward helping me face Taranis’s latest tantrums out there.” Seamus gestured outside at the snow and wind.

Rowan nodded and stepped up to the bar to place his order. While Rowan ordered beers, Seamus scanned the scene. When he didn't waste time arguing about who was paying, Rowan blinked in surprise.

"I found us a place to sit. Follow me."

He paid for the drinks before following Seamus to a table where two women sat deeply engaged in conversation. The women were so engrossed they didn't even look up when the two men approached.

*"Your honey blonde is gorgeous—easily one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen,"* Rowan communicated telepathically to Seamus. The long layers of her hair curled slightly as they cascaded over her shoulders and down to the middle of her back. The soft turtleneck she wore accentuated her ample curves. Then she glanced up at them with meadow-green eyes the color of her sweater. Her full lips curved into a half smile as she gazed at the two of them.

Only when she turned to her friend for an opinion did either man acknowledge the other woman seated across from the blonde. The woman lifted one delicate raven wing of an eyebrow above her silver-gray eyes, and Rowan felt sucker-punched.

"Would you gentlemen like to join us?" the blonde asked with a smile.

Seamus nearly spilled both of their drinks taking the seat nearest the blonde, and Rowan grinned at his friend's obvious interest. The arrangement suited him fine since it meant he would be seated right next to the woman whose eyes had given him something else to focus on rather than his pain.

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Alyssa's breath lodged in her throat as she took in the athletic beauty of Rowan Sheridan. Seeing him in the ordinary confines of a bar was far better than watching a facsimile of him

battling a nasty warrior who didn't play fair. At least she'd only dreamed of him since he obviously didn't bear any wounds from a sword fight as he gracefully lowered himself onto the couch beside her.

"Thanks for sharing your table, ladies," his blond friend began smoothly. "What's the bet, and can we get in on it?" He pointed back and forth at himself and Rowan. "I'm Seamus. And this brooding beast is Rowan. Nice to meet you."

Seamus smiled in a way that included everyone. Ceri smiled back and subtly moved closer to him. However, if someone had asked Alyssa later about this first encounter with these men, she wouldn't have been able to describe Seamus beyond his hair and his smile. Her gaze clung to Rowan.

Rowan Sheridan was about the sexiest man she'd ever seen. Logically, she knew he couldn't be a giant, but looking up at him from deep in the cushions of the couch, she appreciated his size, all broad shoulders and deep chest, trim hips, and long legs. He cut his chestnut hair close on the sides but kept it long enough on top to show off some natural waves her fingers itched to slide through. Though she took in all of him in a flash, his eyes arrested her attention, aquamarine depths so intense she was powerless to look away from them. Idly, she thought if he stretched his sculpted mouth into a real smile, his classically handsome face would transform into something approaching art.

Of course, Ceri riveted the men's attention. Alyssa didn't begrudge her friend her beauty, especially since Ceri didn't flaunt it. It was a part of her she accepted—like breathing. At this moment, however, she tried to harness a jealousy for her friend she'd never experienced before. She should probably acknowledge she and Rowan had met, but after the awkward experience in his office yesterday, she couldn't find anything to say.

It didn't matter. As usual, Ceri commandeered the conversation, which was one of the reasons Alyssa loved her. Ceri mastered social situations. Alyssa was—quiet. Or bookish, studious, boring as her former boyfriend Bill Forbes had described her. But that was a long time ago, and Rowan was definitely not Bill. Rowan radiated hot, which had Alyssa thinking thoughts she, of all people, didn't think—certainly not about a stranger she only met yesterday.

She gave herself a mental shake and tuned in to the conversation.

“See the guy and his mom at the end of the bar? The bet is that she orders an expensive drink on his tab. I think since she's his mom, she's going to be worried about his finances and will order something conservative, but my friend here thinks she'll order something he's going to have to spend money on.”

“What makes you think that?” Rowan asked Alyssa.

She cleared her throat. “She has a carefully maintained salon haircut, and she's wearing tight jeans under her designer jacket. Her boots, though practical, are expensive. She's been making men pay for her for a long time, and her son won't be an exception.”

“That's a rather cynical observation of your gender,” Seamus said, tipping back his beer.

“Not really. I've spent a lot of time watching people.” She paused to watch the couple in question. “There it is. Tall, blue, two citruses, and an umbrella. And he's telling the bartender to put it on his tab. The next round is on you, Ceri.” She grinned over the rim of her wine glass before taking a sip.

Seamus turned to Ceri. “If you'll let us stay awhile, I'll cover your bet.”

“That's an offer I won't refuse,” Ceri said, her eyes sparkling.

Alyssa shot her friend a look, but Ceri shrugged and returned her attention to Seamus.

“We didn't catch your names,” he said.

“I’m Ceri Ross, and this is Alyssa Macaulay.”

Seamus and Rowan exchanged a look before Seamus said, “Fate must have led us to this bar tonight to meet two beautiful women of Scottish descent. Are you Scots by ancestry or by marriage?”

“I’m no genealogist, but I think my family heritage is Scots. Seamus sounds Irish though,” Ceri said.

“Oh, both countries claim Seamus. I’m such a lovable guy that everyone wants a piece of me,” he deadpanned.

Rowan rolled his eyes and sipped his beer.

“With a name like Macaulay, you must be Scots, woman,” Seamus said, addressing Alyssa. His eye might be on Ceri, but he apparently wanted to include Alyssa too.

Despite the fact he’d called her “woman”—she strangely didn’t feel annoyed with him. Something in his voice had her smiling in spite of herself. “My grandmother kept our family tree, and she wanted me to be proud of my Scots heritage, so yes, in answer to your question, I’m most definitely Scots.” She laughed. “That’s an absurd pickup line, by the way, but it works as an icebreaker.”

“I always thought your Scottish heritage was why you chose to pursue Celtic mythology for your thesis,” Ceri said, her eyes asking the question.

“I chose Celtic mythology because the stories intrigued me when I was working on my English degree. It had nothing to do with Gram Afton or my heritage or anything.”

It took a beat for Alyssa to notice that at Ceri’s question, both men had gone unnaturally still as if her answer would unlock the secrets of the universe. Because so many people knew so little about the Celts beyond the professional basketball team that used the French pronunciation

with an *s* rather than the British pronunciation with a *k*, she was used to having to defend her choice. It irritated her that Ceri was clueless. She didn't want to talk about her thesis with these men, no matter how hot they were or how Scots their names. In her experience, academics didn't resonate with hands-on types like Seamus and Rowan.

"I believe I owe a round of drinks. What are you having? Better yet, how 'bout you come with me, Ceri?" Seamus said, interrupting the sudden tension at their table.

With Ceri and Seamus safely out of earshot, Rowan turned to Alyssa. "Any particular reason we're pretending we've never met?"

"If we said we'd met, we'd have to explain the circumstances. It's Friday night, and discussing my security issues would be a downer, especially when our mutual friends seem to be hitting it off so well." She hid her nervousness with a sip of wine. "It's never good to talk shop after five o'clock. Isn't there a rule about that or something?"

"If you say so, but you seemed pretty worried yesterday. I had the impression you wanted help right away—or maybe sooner. Something happen since then?"

"No, but I haven't told my friend about the prowler, and I don't want to worry her, so can we leave it alone for now?"

Rowan crossed his arms over his chest. "You didn't say anything about a prowler to me either. New snow fell last night. Were there fresh tracks around your house?"

Their friends' return to the table with another round of drinks interrupted their conversation. Ceri laughed at something Seamus said, and neither seemed to notice the two of them studiously not talking. After a few minutes, Alyssa said, "Please excuse me. I need a little time in the ladies' room."

"Me too. Be right back, gentlemen. Hold down the fort, would you?"

“What is it with women going to the restroom in pairs?” Seamus asked playfully.

“To talk about you. Why else?” Ceri grinned before she followed Alyssa.

When they reached the powder room, Ceri said, “Alyssa, those two are hot and so nice. Seamus is seriously cute in a linebacker kind of way, and Rowan is in to you. You have to learn to let go of your prejudices and trust in the innate goodness of human nature.”

A tremor of hope thrilled through her before she tamped it down. “Your imagination is in overdrive, Ceri, love. Make sure I have your car keys when you make your decision about which one is going to get lucky tonight. I don’t want to be stranded.”

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As the men enjoyed their beers, Seamus teased Rowan. “The hot silver-eyed elf is into you, man.”

“Uh-huh,” Rowan snorted before downing a gulp of his beer.

“Seriously. She can’t keep her eyes off you.”

“How would you know? Your eyes haven’t strayed from Ceri from the moment you spotted her across the room.”

“She is definitely one beautiful woman.” Seamus waggled his brows and Rowan couldn’t help but laugh at him.

Turning his attention to the books and papers strewn over the table between them, he said, “I wonder what Alyssa is learning in her research on Celtic mythology.” He leafed half-heartedly through the research notes when his eyes caught sight of an intricate hand-embroidered bookmark. He didn’t question why he needed to touch it, but the second his fingertips skimmed the threads, his entire body buzzed with energy.

“You’re not even going to try tonight, are you? You still have three months until Morgan cranks up the pressure. Besides, once you find your talisman, no more hook-ups for you. You’ll be well and truly on the shelf, old man, and how much fun will that be for me, having to take care of so many women on my own?” He sighed dramatically. “You know how generous I am.” He winked.

Rowan gave him a long-suffering eye roll.

After taking a swig of his beer, Seamus continued. “Though you’re shielding your thoughts, you’ve hardly taken your eyes off Alyssa since we met them, so why not admit your attraction and get on with it?”

“All right. Let’s invite them out to dinner. Think of some suggestions.”

When the women returned to the table, talk turned to Ceri and her real estate business before Seamus started cracking jokes and telling outrageous stories about their clients’ wild and weird security requests. By the time he got around to suggesting dinner, Alyssa had even smiled a couple of times. Rowan sensed this was no small feat.

“I know a great little Italian place within walking distance. It’ll be Rowan’s treat.”

Seamus winked at Alyssa and smiled at Ceri.

Judging from the look on her face, Alyssa was about to decline when Ceri pre-empted her. “We’d love to join you for dinner.”

With an audible sigh, Alyssa gathered her research into an oversized bag and shrugged into her red wool coat, looking as though she’d rather be anywhere else. He was going to have to work on her. Good thing Rowan enjoyed a challenge.

Seamus and Ceri led the way out of the bar. As Rowan silently ushered Alyssa ahead of him, he admired the sexy way she walked. He held the door for her and casually placed his hand at the base of her spine as she exited the bar into the freezing early March evening.