

Grandma's House  
(Little Red Riding Hood)

My dearest granddaughter,

Though we have never met, I feel I know you. We are one blood, and for a Scot, blood is everything. Family and clan count more than physical distance, or years of silence--yes, even more than pride. I discarded that cold comfort long ago, when I begged your mother to bring you home. How I longed to know you! Hold you. Watch you grow.

Sadly, my Maris refused to return to me. Now she is gone, so suddenly, and my hope of reconciliation has died with her. But you, my precious child, are very much alive. I pray you will cross the ocean between us and come to me...

#

Tasha MacLeod folded the crisp white stationary bearing her grandmother's impeccable penmanship, and slipped it carefully

into the front pocket of her backpack. Sliding down on the slick leather seat, she jammed her fists into the pockets of her red sweatshirt hoodie and stared at the lush greenery streaming by the limousine window. Rolling pastures. Fluffy white cotton-ball sheep. Cloud-strewn sky. If not for the occasional forbidding castle, she might have been home in Vermont.

Scotland. She was actually in Scotland. An uneasy thrill ping-ponged around in her stomach. It wasn't that she was afraid, exactly. More like confused. Tasha's mother had rarely mentioned her birth country or her family there, but when she had, she hadn't disguised her bitterness. And she'd always used the past tense. Tasha had grown up thinking her grandmother was dead.

Until a month or so after the funeral, when the letter came from a Lady Rossalyn MacLeod of Scotland. Her grandmother. Perfectly legit, Mama's lawyer had told Tasha--he'd investigated, and the woman's identity was what she claimed it to be. Tasha, who hadn't known any family other than her mother, had been seized by a fierce curiosity. And, if truth be told, more than a little resentment. Why hadn't her mother ever told her they weren't alone in the world?

So here Tasha was, on a trip to grandma's house. It sounded so quaint. So cozy. So comfortable. Or at least it had until a Rolls Royce limo, complete with taciturn, white-gloved driver, had met her plane in Edinburgh. She stretched out her legs.

There was so much room, her feet didn't reach the opposite seat. She'd grown up in public housing; until Mama's funeral, she'd never ridden in a limousine in her life. And that one had been nothing like this. Her seatbelt seemed wholly inadequate for how adrift she felt.

The limo glided through a village. A quaint cluster of cottages and shops flashed by, and then they were in the countryside again. She jabbed the intercom button. The driver-- who'd squelched every conversational gambit Tasha had attempted in the last five hours--glanced into the rear view mirror.

"Aye, Miss MacLeod?"

"How much farther?"

"We're already on MacLeod land, miss. The village we just passed belongs to the estate." Decelerating, he executed a wide right turn between a pair of massive stone pillars. "Just a mile or so to the main house, now."

A mile on a narrow twisting drive, through dense forest. Ten minutes later, Tasha choked back a hysterical laugh as the forest gave way to a wide expanse of manicured lawn that would have done any golf course proud. She blinked. House, had the driver said? More like a freaking castle. Solid and gray, the ancient structure set on a gentle rise of land came complete with turrets. The grassy depression ringing it even looked like it had once been a moat.

The limo glided past a pair of sleek Mercedes sedans,

coming to a halt before a massive arched doorway topped by a carved family crest. Swallowing became very difficult. Rossalyn--Tasha had trouble calling the woman 'grandmother' in her mind--had to be richer than God. Mama had traded this for a life of near poverty in a foreign country? It was unbelievable. Barely eighteen when Tasha was born, scraping by on her wages as a cleaning lady, Maris had barely managed to feed and clothe herself and her daughter. More often than not during her childhood, Tasha had gone to bed hungry. Never once during all that time had Mama hinted she'd come from money.

The limo driver exited the vehicle and rounded the hood, on his way to Tasha's door. That kind of servant stuff crept Tasha out. Grabbing her backpack and the pathetic gingham-trimmed gift basket of Vermont maple fudge and preserves that had seemed like a good idea at the time, Tasha hopped out of the limo under her own steam.

A recent rain had turned the stone pavement into a slippery charcoal black mirror. Steadying herself with one hand on the car door, she turned away from the driver's quiet disapproval.

And that's when she saw it. A black wolf, standing at the forest's edge, less than fifty feet away. A slanting ray of the late afternoon sun glinted yellow on its eyes.

The animal bared its teeth. A low growl erupted from its throat. The sound seemed to vibrate, not in Tasha's ears, but in her mind.

Panic flashed through her, leaving her face flushed and her hands ice cold. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't look away from the creature. It was huge, much larger than any dog. And it was looking right at her.

The driver reached her side; Tasha horrified him by clutching at his arm.

His gruff Scots accent seemed very far away. "Miss MacLeod? What is it? Are ye ill?"

She looked up at him. "That...wolf. It won't...attack, will it?"

"Wolf?" His tone sharpened. "What wolf?"

She lifted a finger, pointing. She was trembling like an aspen leaf. "The one over th--"

Her words died in her throat. The wolf was gone.

"'Twas a dog," the driver said. "Nothing more."

Tasha swallowed hard. A dog. Of course. She lowered her hand, struggling to inhale around the clenched fist in her chest. "I...Jet lag, I guess."

"Of course, miss."

And then a female voice called her name, and all thoughts of the wolf fled.

"Natasha."

An elegant elderly woman, costumed in a fashionable wool suit, emerged from the arched doorway, the heels of her suede boots clicking as she glided toward Tasha. Her blond hair, shot

through with white, reflected the dying sunlight.

"Grandmother?" The word felt thick on Tasha's tongue.

"Oh, my dear, dear lass." Tasha found herself enfolded tightly in Rossalyn's arms. When her grandmother drew back, tears were glistening in her vivid blue eyes. She held Tasha at arms length, searching her face intently.

"At last, you're here," she said softly. She smiled. "Oh, how I have prayed for this day."

Awkwardly, Tasha pressed the gift basket into Rossalyn's hands. "Um...I brought you this."

"How thoughtful, my dear." Rossalyn handed the basket off to the driver. "Here--leave your rucksack for Angus as well, there's a good lass. Tea will be laid in the drawing room shortly. Although," she added, frowning slightly as she took in Tasha's red hoodie sweatshirt and faded jeans for the first time, "you might wish to change into something less...casual. But no," she decided in an abrupt reversal of tone and purpose that left Tasha's head spinning. "Hunter's expected at the office for a late meeting. Tea cannot wait."

"Hunter?" Tasha asked.

"My right hand man at MacLeod Textiles. A most capable lad. Distant kin, actually." She cocked her head. "Let me see...Hunter would be your fifth cousin twice removed, I believe. Top in his class at Oxford, and a fine rugby player besides. One couldn't ask for better."

"I see," Tasha said cautiously.

Rossalyn linked her arm through Tasha's and guided her under the arched portal into an open castle forecourt. A profusion of roses was just coming into bloom. Beyond the garden, a doorman bowed them into a dark-paneled entry hall, then looked at Tasha expectantly.

"Fergus will take your jacket, my dear," Rossalyn prompted.

"Oh." Tasha unzipped her hoodie and shrugged it into the man's waiting hands.

Her left shirt sleeve caught, hiking up her arm. Before Tasha could adjust it, Rossalyn frowned and caught Tasha's hand. Turning it palm upward, she exposed a vivid red circle, about the size of a quarter, on Tasha's wrist.

"Why, my dear, whatever happened? Did you burn yourself?"

Cheeks burning, Tasha tugged her wrist from her grandmother's grasp. "No. It's not a burn. It's a birthmark."

"Truly? It looks so...raw. And painful."

"It's always been there," Tasha said, shoving down her sleeve. And its appearance had always bothered her. It looked like someone had branded her with a hot iron. It was the reason she rarely wore short sleeves. "It's no big deal. It doesn't hurt at all."

But the mark tingled sometimes. The sensation started now, tiny needle points dancing on her skin. She resisted the urge to rub them away.

"A good dermatologist could remove it, perhaps," Rossalyn said.

"Probably." Tasha would've had it done already, if she'd had the money.

Rossalyn was silent for a moment, then she once again took Tasha's arm. "Come. Hunter is waiting."

She steered Tasha through a large room filled with heavy, brooding furniture and dark, glowering oil paintings. Lighting was dim, giving Tasha the impression she'd been caught in a museum after closing hours. A set of double doors gave way into a smaller, more cheerful room.

One end of a comfortably worn leather couch held the most sinfully gorgeous man Tasha had ever seen in her life.

The young Adonis rose as they entered. God, but was he tall. Six-four, at least. He wore business attire--charcoal gray suit, crisp white shirt, red silk tie. His fair hair reflected the light from the wall sconce behind him, forming a sort of halo about his head.

"Hunter," Rossalyn said, smiling. "May I present my granddaughter. Tasha MacLeod."

Hunter inclined his golden head. "Tasha. It's a pleasure." His Scots accent was faint, his speech carrying more of a British flavor.

"Um...thank you," she said, then shut her eyes briefly. Apparently, the part of her brain dedicated to composing witty

conversation had shut down. But then, a handsome man tended to do that to her. Especially when he wore a thousand-dollar suit opposite her thrift store jeans.

Rossalyn perched herself elegantly on an armchair, waving Tasha to the sofa next to Hunter. Tasha sank into the soft leather, feeling like a grubby duck. A uniformed maid appeared, carrying a laden tea tray. Tasha suddenly remembered how hungry she was.

Hunter flashed her a smile. Tasha's heart stuttered. The man was gorgeous enough with a serious expression; with a grin he was downright lethal.

"Jet-lagged?" he asked.

"A little."

"Horrid things, planes." Rossalyn gave a delicate shudder as she sipped her tea. "I will never step foot on one."

"It was my first time on an airplane," Tasha confessed.

"Really?" Hunter said. "I'll have to take you up in the corporate jet."

He bit into a triangle of shortbread, somehow managing to consume the pastry without a single crumb falling in his lap. Tasha was not quite as adept.

Conversation turned to business. MacLeod Textiles, Tasha gathered, was a major exporter of Scottish wool. Hence the acres and acres of sheep pasture she'd passed on the way here.

"Have you worked for my grandmother a long time?" Tasha

asked.

Hunter grinned at Rossalyn, who returned his regard with a motherly smile. "More than twenty years. I was a lad of nine when I first came to MacLeod Castle. Rossalyn took me in when my father died. Your grandmother taught me everything I know about the wool business."

"Perhaps that was true once," Rossalyn put in with a light laugh. "But Hunter left me behind years ago. He's made the business what it is today."

"Our wool is the finest in Scotland," Hunter said. "We have a chain of stores here in the U.K., but a good portion of our business is in exports. Every fleece we process comes from our own sheep, born and raised here on the estate."

"You do have a lot of sheep," Tasha said. "Must be hard to keep the wolf from the door."

Rossalyn's chin jerked up. "What did you say? What wolf?"

Tasha's eyes widened. "I...no wolf. It was just a joke. Because I thought I saw a dog on the driveway..."

Hunter's brows came down. "Impossible. We don't keep dogs."

"Perhaps...perhaps it was a stray." Rossalyn's tone was strained. She exchanged a glance with Hunter, whose lips thinned.

"What did the animal look like?" Hunter asked, his gaze intent.

"Um...big, black. Shaggy. It kind of looked like a wolf."

But honestly, I don't even know if I really saw it. It was there and gone in a second. I might have imagined the whole thing."

"Maybe," Hunter said.

But he didn't seem convinced.

#

"Well? What do you think?"

"What I think hardly matters. Does she have the mark?"

"She does. Just as I suspected."

"She can't know what it means. If she did, she would never have mentioned the wolf."

"That beast is bold, to come so close."

"He wants her."

"Of course. But she is ours. He will not have her."

#

It was still dark when Tasha sat up in bed, wide awake. A glance at her watch, glowing softly on the night table, revealed the time as three a.m. Ten p.m. at home--the start of her shift at the hospital, where she worked as a nurse's aid. Giving up on sleep, she swung her legs over the edge of the mattress. The darn thing was so high off the ground that a wrong turn in the night could result in permanent injury.

The second floor room Rossalyn had given her overlooked the grounds behind the castle. A damp sweet breeze wafted through the open casement. The moon, just shy of full, hung as a round, hazy ball above a shadow-strewn terraced garden. Wisps of fog

curled on the neat gravel pathways.

Her birthmark tingled. She rubbed it, aware of a growing need to be out under the sky. Could she find her way to a back door? She'd give it a try, anyway. Dressing quickly, she grabbed her red hoodie--it'd been neatly hung in an antique wardrobe by unseen hands--and slipped quietly down the carpeted stairway.

Fifteen minutes and a few false turns later, Tasha stepped into cool, damp air and inhaled deeply. Moonlight painted the garden in liquid silver, giving the mist curling about her ankles an otherworldly glow. Hidden birds called the dawn. She moved down the path, away from the castle. It was like walking on a cloud. Or into a dream.

She glided between two long rows of planting beds, filled with budding roses, arching lilacs, and a myriad of other blooms she couldn't name. A long arbor of trellised vines arced over a moonshine-dappled path, beckoning like a tunnel to a fairy world. She stepped into the archway.

The semicircle of light at the other end framed a large canine figure.

Her breath left her. The animal was no figment of her imagination--the black wolf was as real as she was. The enormous creature lifted its head. Its eyes glinted gold in the moonlight.

She should have been terrified. She should have backed away. She didn't. Amazingly, the wolf didn't repel; it

fascinated. Her chest felt strange, as if her ribcage was expanding and contracting at the same time. Anticipation wound a spring in her belly.

The voice, when it came, was a faint vibration in her mind.

Come to me, lass.

Entranced, she started toward the beast, her footsteps soft on the gravel path. For a moment, it just stood, watching. Then, turning, it loped out of view. A sudden, inexplicable sense of loss sliced through Tasha's heart.

"No!"

She broke into a run. But when she arrived, panting, at the other end of the long arbor, the wolf was nowhere to be seen.

Her birthmark sparkled. She spun around, searching the shadows. "Come back!"

She held her breath and strained her ears, listening. Nothing. Her heartbeat slowed to normal, some measure of sanity returning. What the hell was she doing, chasing after a large, stray dog in the dark? She was lucky the thing hadn't turned and lunged.

An early dawn was breaking. Sighing, she turned around, prepared to make her way back to the castle. Until she looked up and saw a man standing ten paces in front of her, blocking her path.

The first thought that registered in her startled brain was that the stranger was wearing a kilt. Her second thought was

that he looked damn good in it.

His kilt was a simple green and blue tartan belted at his waist and diagonally sashed over his broad, white shirted chest. His dark hair, longish and slightly tangled, curled at his jaw. He wasn't handsome--not like Hunter, in any case--but there was something compelling in his expression. Something that made Tasha take a step toward him, before she realized what she was doing and stopped.

He moved toward her on silent feet. Abruptly, sanity intruded on the spell he'd seemed to cast about her. She had no idea who he was, or what he wanted.

She fought the urge to turn and bolt--she sensed he could outrun her in a heartbeat. Would a scream bring help fast enough, if the need arose? She had to hope that it would. In the meantime, she'd just act as if the stranger was harmless, and hope like hell it was true.

She cleared her throat. He halted, barely three steps away. Close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from his body. She tilted her head back to get a better look at his face, noticing his eyes for the first time. They were light brown, almost golden. Intelligent. Soulful. Without doubt the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen.

"Hello." She was unaccountably breathless.

He nodded. "Good morn, lass."

His Scots burr was rough, lingering like a caress. So

unlike Hunter's clipped, British-tinged tone. Though why she had the urge to compare the two men, she couldn't say.

"Did you see a dog here in the garden?" she asked suddenly.  
"A big black one? No collar."

Amusement gleamed in his eyes. "A dog, lass?"

"Well, it looked almost like a wolf, but of course, that's ridiculous. He was over by the arbor. Is he yours?"

His lips curved. "Nay lass. I know him, though. Goes where he will, that one."

"A stray?"

"He willna hurt ye."

She eased forward a step, hinting she wanted to pass. He didn't seem to be inclined to move out of the way. She stopped.

"Do you work here?" she asked. "In the gardens?"

His smile widened. "I'm no gardener, if that's what ye mean." He inclined his head. "I'm Kieran MacDonald." He paused. "I live in the village."

Her shoulders relaxed, marginally. A neighbor, not a vagrant. "Kieran," she said cautiously. "That's a nice name. I'm--"

"Tasha MacLeod."

Her brows shot up. "How did you know?"

"How many American granddaughters do ye imagine Rossalyn MacLeod has?"

She smiled sheepishly. "Just the one, I guess. I suppose

everyone in the village knows about my visit?"

"As they know of your mother's recent death," he said quietly. "'Tis sorry I am for your loss."

Tasha's throat threatened to close. "Thank you."

"She was a beautiful lass, your mother. Kind, as well. Her eyes were always laughing."

She couldn't help but stare. "You knew her?"

"Aye. She was ten years older than me, but I worshipped her. Almost as much as your father did."

Her head grew light. "You knew my father, too?"

"Why of course. He was a MacDonald as well, though not a close kin."

"What...what was his name? His first name, I mean."

His brow creased. "Ye do not know?"

Tasha shook her head. "I don't know anything about my father. Only that he died before my mother left for America. Mama...she never spoke of him. Didn't have a picture. And she wouldn't even tell me his name."

Kieran was silent for a moment. "Ewan," he said at last. "Ewan Artur MacDonald."

"Ewan." She repeated the syllables softly. "Thank you. I never understood why Mama wouldn't talk of him. She would only say it was better if I didn't know anything. Safer."

"Aye. Most likely it was. But ye are no longer a child."

She looked up sharply. "What do you mean by that? What do

you know of him? What was he like? How did he die?"

His jaw set. "Ewan was a fine lad. Bold, brave. He loved Maris more than life itself. As for how he died..." He let out a breath. "Aye, I remember it well. He was murdered."

"Murdered?" Tasha was aghast. "By who?"

Kieran grimaced. "'Twas a long time ago, lass. Perhaps 'tis better to leave it be." He paused. "Ye have the look of him, ye know. His hair was as black as yours."

She touched her cheek. "I thought that might be the case. My mother was fair, and Rossalyn is as well."

"Ye have Ewan's eyes, as well. And his way of moving." Suddenly, he reached out and captured her wrist. "Forgive me, lass. I must know..."

She stood transfixed, stunned by the sudden heat of his fingertips on her skin. He turned her left hand palm upward and pushed back the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

Air hissed through his teeth. "Mo Dhia. I dared to hope, but I never truly dreamed..."

He touched her birthmark--just the lightest brush of a forefinger, but the contact shot something dark and electric through Tasha's body. The red stain tingled brilliantly, like newly uncorked champagne bubbling from the bottle.

"Do you feel your soul, lass? Here?"

She stared at him.

Understanding filled his gaze. "Aye, I thought so."

He stroked the birthmark again--a slow, deliberate stroke this time. The champagne mellowed, tingling and sparkling like stars. Heat sped through her veins; her pulse thundered in her ears. Her entire body hummed with restless elation.

A low, sensuous pull tugged at her belly. Kieran's grip on her arm tightened, urging her closer. His free hand cupped the back of her head. Her tongue darted between her lips; her gaze focused on the stubbled line of his jaw. With just the slightest movement, she could lean forward and taste him. The urge was almost overwhelming.

His eyes were twin shards of smoldering amber. His scent surrounded her, dark musk that weakened her knees. Her palm flattened on the hard plane of his chest, the coarse wool of his tartan rough under her touch. His heart pounded beneath her fingers, its beat every bit as wild as her own.

His gaze dropped to her lips; his sharp inhale was audible. He's going to kiss me, she thought in a daze. And I'm going to let him...

Footsteps. Angry. Behind her.

"Let her go, MacDonald. Now."

Kieran's head came up; his arms tightened around her like bands of steel. Tasha wrenched her head around and gasped. Hunter stood on the path, not ten steps away. He held a tiny, silver-barreled pistol trained on Kieran's head.

Hunter advanced, gun unwavering. "Step away, MacDonald."

You're far too big a target to miss, even with a woman as your shield."

"Ye wouldna shoot. Ye wouldna risk her."

"Would you?"

Kieran swore under his breath. Abruptly, he shoved Tasha to one side. The force sent her sprawling. Gravel bit into her knees; she swallowed a cry of pain. Hunter extended his arm, and for one awful second, Tasha was sure he was going to shoot.

"No!" she gasped. "Hunter, no! Are you crazy? He...he wasn't hurting me."

Hunter spared her a glance. "He had his hands on you."

"That's no reason to shoot him!"

"I think it is."

Kieran, incredibly, spread his arms. "Kill me then, man. Now. And put an end to this."

"No--" Tasha scrambled to her feet and grabbed Hunter's arm. "No. You can't."

Hunter frowned down at her. "The man's trespassing where he doesn't belong. He assaulted you. God only knows what he might have done if I hadn't stopped him."

"Nothing happened. I'm fine."

"He'll go to the constable, then," Hunter bit off. "I'll escort him there myself."

But when they turned, Kieran was gone.

#

"Thank God that scum didn't hurt you."

Hunter's tone held nothing but sheer relief, and his arm across Tasha's shoulder was nothing but comforting as they made their way back to the castle. Why, then, did it feel so...wrong?

"Who is he?"

"Vermin." Hunter spat the word. "A predator, and every man and woman in the village knows it. He should have been jailed last summer, after a village girl went missing. But nothing could be proven, and the blighter went free." He gave Tasha a long, measured look. "You had an extremely close call."

Extremely close. Just one second more and Kieran would have kissed her...

Hunter's jaw tightened. "It's a damn good thing I got there when I did."

Tasha looked up at him. "How did you find me? Just then, I mean?"

"You set off a silent alarm when you left the castle. I've been looking for you for over a half hour. It was foolish of you to go out alone, Tasha. Promise me you won't do it again."

She shook off his arm. "I'm not a child."

He exhaled. "I'm only trying to protect you."

He sounded so hurt that Tasha laid a hand on his arm and summoned a conciliatory smile. "I know. I had...I had no idea the garden wouldn't be safe."

"Come to me next time. I'm happy to escort you wherever you

want to go."

They climbed the steps to the terrace, where a very pale Rossalyn stood wringing her hands. "Oh, my dear, you're all right. Whatever happened? Did you get lost?"

Grimly, Hunter recounted what had happened in the garden.

"That scoundrel!" Rossalyn exclaimed. "I'll see him locked up for this. Call the constable, Hunter."

"It's not necessary," Tasha insisted. "Really. All he did was talk to me."

"He tried to kiss you," Hunter said flatly.

The blood drained from Rossalyn's face, leaving her pale as a corpse. Her hand, claw-like, went to her throat.

"And did he?"

"No," Tasha hastened to assure her. "He didn't."

"Thank God," Rossalyn whispered.

#

"You should have shot him."

"In front of the girl, with her begging me not to? That hardly would have helped our cause."

"MacDonald forces our hand. Now that he's touched her once, he'll soon return. We have to act quickly. You have to act quickly."

"It may be difficult. She's only known me a day, after all."

"MacDonald had her for mere minutes. Is he more a man than

you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then do what you must. Today." A pause. "She will understand, once it's over."

#

"Will you help me to my private parlor, Tasha?" Rossalyn asked halfway through the midday meal. "I don't feel very well, I'm afraid."

Tasha pushed her plate toward the center of the table. She didn't feel like eating, anyway. Her stomach was still churning from her early morning misadventure. Would Hunter really have killed Kieran? The very idea nauseated her.

Rossalyn leaned heavily on Tasha's arm as they ascended the stair to her suite of rooms.

"I am so sorry about what happened to you this morning," the older woman said. "I fear it was my fault, my dear. I should have known Kieran MacDonald would try to make trouble. He's cut from the same cloth as your father."

Tasha stopped in front of Rossalyn's door. "What do you mean by that?"

Rossalyn gave her a sad smile. "I don't mean to disillusion you, my dear, but your father--he was as deceitful as he was handsome. Glib, he was, and manipulative. Not a cent to his name. He lured my Maris into his web, thinking I would accept him as a son." She snorted. "As if a MacDonald could ever be fit

for anything better than mucking out stables! He was after her inheritance, of course, but would she listen to me? No. She gave herself to the bounder. Then, when she became pregnant, I wouldn't allow her to ruin her life by marrying the scoundrel. That's when Ewan MacDonald realized Maris's fortune would not be lining his pockets. He abandoned her."

"I thought...I thought he was murdered."

"Murdered? Is that what Kieran MacDonald told you? It's a lie. Ewan MacDonald died by his own folly. Stole a car, then ran it off a bridge in a heavy rain. I thought Maris would come to her senses, then, but she did not. She disappeared. And she was clever about it. I hired the best investigators, but it was years before they located her."

Tasha was silent as she tried to reconcile her grandmother's description of her father with the glowing picture Kieran had painted of him. She couldn't. Who was lying?

She opened the door to Rossalyn's room. "But...all that happened so long ago. It has nothing to do with Kieran MacDonald--he was a young boy when all that happened."

"He's a MacDonald. Blood will tell, Tasha."

I'm a MacDonald, too, she wanted to shout. Instead, she said, "I just don't see why Hunter felt he had to threaten the poor man with a gun."

"Don't you? MacDonald tried to kiss you! It's natural enough for a man like Hunter to defend his woman from an

interloper."

"But--I'm not Hunter's woman."

"You will be. He's quite taken with you, you know."

Tasha stared. "He only met me yesterday."

Rossalyn smiled. "It's called love at first sight. You have my blessing, of course. Hunter is a fine man." She gave Tasha a little push, propelling her across the threshold and into the parlor. "I'm an incorrigible romantic, you know. I do hope you'll forgive this little trick. All the better to encourage you, my dear."

Before Tasha could reply, she found the door shut gently but firmly in her face. A key scraped. Tasha gaped at the knob for one long moment before she grasped it and twisted, to no avail.

Rossalyn had locked her in.

A floorboard creaked. She spun around to find Hunter standing in the center of the room, watching her. He'd removed his jacket; it was folded neatly over the back of a chair. The glint of possession in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine.

"Hunter. What's going on?"

Hunter moved toward her. Her birthmark burned. Tasha shrank back, her spine pressing against the door.

"It's simple, really," he said. "You're to become my lover."

"You're insane. I don't sleep with men I barely know!"

"No? You were about to spread your legs for MacDonald."

Tasha gasped her outrage. "I certainly was n--"

Hunter's hands closed on her shoulders. His eyes were heavy-lidded, his smile seductive. A chill sank into her bones.

His thumb traced the line of her collarbone. "I advise you not to fight me, Tasha. You won't win. Our joining is inevitable. Here. I'll show you." He drew back, slipping the cufflink from his left shirt sleeve. Rolling up the sleeve, he presented his wrist for her inspection.

She stared at the red mark. "You...you have the same birthmark I do?"

He nodded. "As does Rossalyn. But since her birth, no other females of our clan have been born marked. Until you. Do you know what that means?"

Tasha shook her head.

"It means, my Tasha, that you are mine."

He pressed her up against the door and covered her mouth with his. Tasha nearly gagged. Twisting, she managed to jab an elbow into his gut.

Hunter barked a sharp curse. With efficient movements, he wrapped his arms around her and hauled her across the room. She caught a glimpse of his destination--a sofa--and launched into a frenzy of kicks and punches.

He laughed as he threw her down on the couch, easily capturing her flailing limbs. Pinning her wrists over her head,

he ran a proprietary hand over her body.

"Stop it, Tasha. You'll only hurt yourself. You can't change what's going to happen. We're fated to be together. The birthmarks prove it."

"You're insane. How could you do this?"

"Don't you understand yet? You're the clan's only marked female of childbearing age. One of our marked males has to have you, or the gift will pass from the MacLeods forever. Rossalyn has decided that you will be mine." He paused. "At the very least, you will not be his."

"You're talking about Kieran."

He bared his teeth. "I should have killed the bastard when I had the chance."

"Kieran...does he have the mark, too?"

"He does. Little good it will do him after you're mine. The MacDonalds have no marked females."

"Except me," Tasha said.

Hunter's eyes glinted dangerously. He grabbed the hem of her tee shirt and ripped the garment over her head, taking her bra with it. He twisted the fabric around her wrists, binding them.

"You," he said. "Are mine."

Panic slid through her. "No. Please. Don't do this--"

"No more talking."

He unsnapped her waistband of her jeans and yanked at the

zipper. Tasha writhed and bucked, but her struggles only seemed to encourage him. He yanked off her jeans and panties.

Her breath came in spurts. God, no. This could not be happening.

He started working his belt.

Help. Please--

In the deepest recesses of her mind, an answer came. I am coming. An instant later, a large, canine shadow passed by the window.

Tasha's birthmark tingled. A revelation struck. She went absolutely still. The mark. The gift. The wolf.

Her dazed mind refused to absorb the possibility. It was insane.

Wasn't it?

Hunter, alerted by the sudden cessation of Tasha's struggles, looked down. She stared back, every muscle rigid, her heart thudding against her ribs.

"You...you're... Kieran, too, he's... Oh, my God."

The window exploded above the sofa exploded, showering broken glass and splintered wood down on the sofa. A snarling blur hurtled overhead.

The massive black wolf landed and turned in one smooth, savage movement.

Hunter let out an unholy growl. Tasha's eyes went wide as he leaped backward, his clothes ripping to shreds as a dark

light rippled over his body. Tasha scuttled upright, tearing at the shirt binding her wrists as Hunter, the man, changed into a snarling wolf.

The two beasts, one black, one gray, circled the small room, heads lowered, teeth bared, fur bristling along their spines. Then, in a blur of movement, they sprang.

The fight was short and brutal. At the end, the gray wolf lay belly up, its enemy's teeth at its throat. The black wolf gave its victim a shake, then, in a magnanimous show of mercy, raised its head. Whimpering, the gray wolf scrambled under a table, tail tucked between its legs.

The black wolf looked at Tasha.

Did I come in time, lass?

She wasn't insane. She wasn't. She'd heard his voice in her mind.

"K...Kieran? Are you...are you the wolf?"

"Aye. 'Tis I, lass." His golden eyes pinned her in place.

"Did I come in time?" he repeated, his gaze sweeping down her body.

Tasha abruptly realized she was naked. "Y..yes. Yes, you did." She glanced at the gray wolf that was Hunter, cowering under a table. "He didn't hurt me."

Deep emotion shuddered through his massive, furred body.

"Taing do Dhia." Thank God.

"How did you know I needed you?"

"I heard your call."

"In...in your mind? Like I'm hearing you now?"

"Aye. Mates can communicate this way, as long as one of them has the form of a wolf."

She had trouble catching her breath. "One of us? What does that mean, exactly?"

His golden wolf's eyes caressed her. "You and I bear the mark of the moon. You have the gift, as I do. And...I would have you as my mate. His regal head lowered in respect. If you will accept me.

Tasha looked into Kieran's amber eyes, and something deep in her soul clicked into place.

Will you have me, m'leannán? Will you be my mate?

Her heart trembled. Her birthmark tingled in soaring, expanding joy.

Yes. Yes, Kieran. I'll have you.

And she began to change.

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Two black wolves loped out of the castle and dashed through the deepening shadows. A moment later, a gray wolf staggered through the door and onto the terrace, blood dripping from a nasty gash on its flank.

A silver she-wolf stepped from the shadows.

The gray wolf lowered its head and tucked its tail between its legs.

The she-wolf's gaze fixed on the cavorting blacks. She had intervened between lovers once before, when her daughter had turned her back on the pack, but now? She was soul-tired. Defeated. If the powerful male she'd raised from a pup could not triumph, there was naught she could do but accept her defeat.

Standing still as a statue, Rossalyn MacLeod watched her granddaughter and her chosen mate melt into the forest gloaming.