

## *The Meeting*

The king sat at the long table, looking at the six men across from him—wondering if he was doing the right thing. Was he making a wise decision?

The six men on the other side of the table represented the most fearsome lairds ever known, heads of the six most powerful clans in the land.

Wolf, the most powerful of them all, sat directly across from him, drinking his mead, eyeing everyone else, always on the alert. His men were outside with the others, guarding the castle.

Aron, the next most powerful, was next to Wolf, doing the same. Observing, always observing, listening to everyone else. Even though it seemed he cared not what was going on around him, he knew all that was going on, inside and out.

Erich sat on the left of Wolf. Unmannered, but still a force to be reckoned with. Sly, the manipulator of the group, Erich knew how to make men do his bidding, even if they thought better of it.

On both sides, sat the rest—Isaac, the wise, educated in France as a lad and England as a young man, he was a man of learning, powerful and respected for his wisdom in most things.

Isaac, the oldest one, was experienced in most everything. He held the history of most clans—all the wars and skirmishes, what they were about, when they took place, and how long they lasted.

Samuel, the playboy of the bunch, was next. Handsome and suave, he could turn any woman's eyes to him. He swore never to settle down and marry. His sister lived with him, to play hostess, when needed.

This was the first time all six of them had ever actually sat down together, all at once, which is why the security of the meeting was so sizable and was kept a strict secret from all others. It was the reason they each had their men guarding every square inch of the castle and its lands. It would be a tempting target for other lairds who wanted the power which came with taking them all down. The lairds still had a mistrust of the English, even though this king had been working hard to bring peace, at long last, to the land.

As the king looked around him, he decided he was about to do the single most important thing to ensure peace. He was going to put the most important person, besides his precious wife, in danger. He also knew this was long the plan. Years, he had been planning this. Training his precious goddaughter, his wife's niece, to do what most men couldn't do. He was placing her in more danger than she had ever been in. His wife knew of his plans but was afraid. Truth be told, so was he. He loved his goddaughter like a daughter of blood. But this had to be done. His precious Amanda didn't know of the plan yet, and he hated that he would have to tell her. His wife had been hinting at it for days, now, easing her into the idea of marriage.

His lovely Amanda was the only daughter of the queen's sister who died of the sickness, when Amanda was but a baby. Amanda came to live at the castle with them, was taught to be a lady and sent to France, to learn healing. She had been taught healing by the best in the land. At eighteen, she had already spent three years in France, learning from the some of the best doctors

there. Healing was her dream, her passion, her life. To help others ease their suffering was her dream.

She was a quiet child, not likely to get into much mischief unless she thought someone else needed help. A lady in a true sense. The king also knew she was stubborn, going her own way, even if it put her in harm's way if she thought she was right. The only two times he'd had to punish her were because she refused to see danger. The king knew he didn't punish her as much as maybe would have benefited her, but her tears caused his own wife's tears, and he couldn't abide either; both together nearly broke his heart. She had grown up headstrong but with a giving heart. He knew the man he was giving her to was a strong laird who would rule not only his clan but his wife and who would insist on being obeyed by all. He also knew Wolf had a sister he loved dearly and she was Amanda's age. Hopefully, she would ease Amanda's way. Wolf was the one who would protect her the best of any of them. He had saved the king's life a couple of times, already; he would protect his Mandy with his own.

It was time to get this meeting started and explain his plan to these strong men.

Food and drink were brought in for all. A side of beef, cooked over a grate of fire until the juices flowed into the fire, lamb, potatoes, vegetables and, for dessert, apple pie from the stores of apples. There were barrels of ale for the men outside, not on guard duty.

Before the meal got started, a knock came on the door. A small woman, not more than five-foot, petite, with long blonde hair in a braid to the back of her knees, dressed in green silk to match her eyes, entered when bade. She approached the king and curtsayed prettily.

"Your Majesty, the queen has asked that I deliver this message before you sup."

"Thank you, Amanda, tell the queen I received her message, if you please. May I introduce you to our quests? This is Wolf, laird of the McKinney clan, Aron, Erich, Isaac, Isaac, and Samuel, all lairds of much respected clans"

"Very pleased to meet you all. May I be excused, Your Majesty? I have a sick child to tend to."

"Of course, my dear."

With that, the very pretty, petite Amanda curtsayed again and left, the king watching her until the door shut again.

"That was my goddaughter, Amanda. I plan on her marrying Wolf."

With that statement, all the lairds started arguing.

"Why Wolf? I also have a son who must marry," an angry Isaac yelled.

Everyone was talking louder and louder, stating their case about why she should marry in their clan until, finally, the king had had enough.

"Be still!" He slammed his goblet down, splashing mead on the table. "I am the king and she is my goddaughter. She will marry whom I say. I have thought long and hard about this. Now listen, all of you. If, when I am finished telling you my plan, you don't agree, you may leave, with my blessing. I will not put one of the most precious things in my possession in danger, for any man. I will know who is with me or not. Understood?"

All the men nodded, curious as to the king's plan to bring lasting peace.

"First, I wish my darling Amanda to marry Wolf. I owe him my life, and though I know Mandy will not be an easy ride, she will be interesting, and he will not be bored. She is headstrong and stubborn, sometimes, and very quiet and giving to others. When she is quiet, you must guard her the most. She will be hatching a plan to get her own way. She will think she is right or that she is helping another, but she will put herself in harm's way. I need someone strong enough to tame her, for she has never answered to anyone but my wife or me. She is not malicious or mean but

suffers from caring too much, sometimes. She has been trained extensively in nursing. The most modern methods, with the best doctors I could find. What I want is for you six men to talk to your healers and find a young girl from each of your clans to train with Mandy. I will build an infirmary next to the abbey, a day's ride from Wolf's stronghold. That is in the middle of all of you. The girls may stay at Wolf's keep with Mandy, when she is not in the infirmary, as I want her to have a normal marriage. Treat her the same as you would any of the wives, for that is what she will be. She will teach at the infirmary one week. Find someone your healers recommend—someone who will embrace what they learn, for they will, in turn, teach another the skill of healing. After six months, they will return home to become a healer to your clan. I expect each of you to provide soldiers for Mandy and the girls to go back and forth, but in truth, most of the time will be spent at Wolf's keep. Are you agreeable, Wolf"?

The king looked to his friend, the man to whom he owed his life. "Will you keep her safe, even if you have to punish her severely—something I couldn't bring myself to do? Do the rest of you men agree? For I tell you, now, if any clan causes a problem in this plan, I will think very badly of it and punishments will be very painful, if not fatal. Even if you don't go in with the rest, I expect these girls to be protected. Do I make myself clear?

They all agreed to the king's plan.

Now, the king and queen needed to convince Mandy.

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"Please, my king, I do not want to marry. I am afraid to leave here; this is the only home I know. Please, my queen, do not let this happen." Mandy was in tears, begging them both.

They were in the royal couple's private chambers. A fire in the huge fireplace kept the chamber warm, even on the coldest of winter nights. Murals hung on the walls, in all their splendor, plush furniture scattered around the huge room. In the next room, Mandy knew, was the bedroom, with a huge bed. The king and queen were quite different from many, they loved one another and slept together. Each side of the bedroom had huge dressing rooms, one for each of them. In this receiving room, on a plush, long lounging chair were the king and queen. Mandy was sitting in a chair opposite them both. The queen was looking to her husband for guidance.

"Mandy, my child, you had to know you would be wed, sooner or later, preferably sooner. You know why this is necessary. It will insure the peace. The plan is ingenious in its simplicity. We need this peace. Wolf saved my life; he, above all others, will protect you. Most of all, he is strong and fair. He will not make your life a misery. I am hoping the two of you can find the love your aunt and I have, little one. If you cannot find love, at least, you will have peace and a goal—to train the other girls to be great healers for all the six clans. It will bring the six clans together. Aron and Wolf grew up as brothers, their fathers having been neighbors and their grandfathers before them. Aron and Wolf trained at the other's keep, as lads. They got into mischief together and fought wars together, watching out for each other—just like brothers. Aron will be marrying Wolf's sister, Melody, right along with you. Of course, Melody has the advantage of growing up with Aron. I believe she has had feelings for him, for years. She is your age and someone you can talk to, when you feel the need. She will help you adjust. Mandy, I hate to see you go, but this is your calling and your duty. We must all sacrifice for peace, even you. Please, Mandy, my little one, can you see how you are upsetting your aunt?" The king tried to explain to Mandy in the gentlest way he could.

Mandy faced her aunt with tears in her eyes and saw the woman who had been her mother for years. The woman who helped her talk the king into letting her go to France to learn more medicine. The same woman who took her side, even against the king, from time to time. The woman who loved her when she had no one else. The one whom she would give her life for. Sitting next to the king, with tears in her eyes, and for the first time, the queen was not trying to talk the king out of this.

"Aunt Charlotte, do you want me to do this?"

Mandy's aunt looked at her through tearful eyes.

"It is important, little one, it must be done. I have insisted that you be allowed to spend time visiting us, every year, unless, of course, you are expecting a child or it is too dangerous. At least, you will not be totally lost to us. Also, if you are in trouble, the priests at the abbey have been instructed to send word to us, immediately, or deliver you back to us. The priests will be keeping an eye on you for us. They will inform us of how you are doing. You will not be completely alone."

Amanda ran to her aunt and sat between her and the king. Hugging one and, then, the other.

"I trust you both, I am just so afraid of Wolf; he is so...so...big. I am so small."

The king chuckled. He knew this would be new for his darling godchild. She would finally know obedience, structure, safety and, hopefully, love.

"So, it is done; thank you, Mandy, from all of us, you give us the hope of peace. Now, I must talk to Wolf privately then have a meeting with the other five. You and Melody will be wed in two days. This afternoon and tomorrow, the men hunt for the huge feast we will have for, not one, but two young ladies. It will also give your aunt time to fashion a wedding dress to rival all others. It will not be the huge wedding I had envisioned, years ago, but it will be nice, I promise you. I expect you for a late dinner, tonight, to meet your intended."

With that, the king left the ladies. Charlotte hugged Mandy. "Let's get the seamstresses up here to get that beautiful dress ready."

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While Charlotte and Mandy were summoning the many women who would sew Mandy's and Melody's dresses, a maid was dispatched to bring Melody to their room. Charlotte decided it was a good time to have a discussion with both girls about their wedding night. Charlotte knew Melody had not had a mother since she was very young. Both girls, she was sure, would have many questions.

"I know you are afraid, girls, but there is no need. If your husbands care for you at all, they will make sure it is a pleasant experience. They will be patient and explain all you need to know. Please, do not be afraid. We have known Wolf for many years. He will protect you and not hurt you unnecessarily. You are in good hands, Mandy. Melody, I do not know Aron very well, but if he is a friend of Wolf's, I am sure the same applies to you. You also should know they are both lairds and are responsible for very large clans. Both are some of the most powerful clans in Ireland. Wolf and Aron will be obeyed, in all things, or you will find yourself punished severely. They are charged with protecting you and you must obey them always or they cannot properly see to your safety. Do you understand, girls? Amanda, we should have taken a firmer hand with you but I could not do it, nor could the king—not to my poor, motherless niece." The queen gave both girls a hug before continuing with the preparations for two very special weddings.

There were six seamstresses for Mandy and six for Melody.

Fabrics from all over the world were brought for both to look at and choose. Soon enough, everyone was very busy readying for the two weddings.

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In his private study, behind a huge desk, sat the king. Wolf sat on a plush, comfortable chair, in front of the desk.

"I know you were expecting this wedding, as we had discussed it a couple of years ago, already, but I have to know you are willing. I will not trust my Mandy to someone who doesn't want her. You both deserve better."

The king looked to Wolf, one of his most trusted loyal subjects. He knew Wolf wanted this peace as much as he did.

"I will be honored to wed your godchild, my king. I will protect her with my life, provide for her, and, hopefully, someday, love her. I hope that, in the not so distant future, she will give me a son to guide and teach, to carry on as laird, when I am gone. I am ready to settle down and start a family."

The king smiled. That is what he wanted to hear.

"Mandy can be a handful; you must know it will take a strong hand to tame her but not break her spirit. It will take patience but I trust you to have it. In return, she will be invaluable to you. She is very learned in medicine, very smart, almost too smart for her own good, sometimes. She is many things, but an angel is not one of them. She doesn't think of it as having her own way, she sees it as knowing she is right. You will never be bored, Wolf, I guarantee it." Both men laughed.

"That is exactly what I was hoping for, Your Majesty. Aron is more than ready to wed Melody. He will, also, have his hands full, even though Melody has been across my knee and punished for her willfulness, many times. We will truly be brothers now, even though he has always felt like one."

"I am glad it is settled. You understand you must let her teach these girls and be a healer, it is in her to comfort and heal. I cannot change that."

"I do understand, Your Majesty. I will allow her much freedom, if she doesn't put herself in harm's way."

The king stood and summoned a butler to bring in the rest of the lairds.

"Let us bring in the others so we may discuss what I envision for us all."

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Michael, the trusted butler, brought in a tray of the finest Irish whiskey and a bottle of the best brandy, along with glasses for all.

"Thank you, Michael, you may go about your duties; this will take some time. I hope everything is set for a late dinner. I would think seven or eight. Please, let us know."

The butler bowed from the waist, backing out of the room.

Soon, every one of the six lairds were seated around the huge desk, drinks in hand. They had come, at the king's command, to listen to his plan, every man exceedingly curious to hear how this could benefit their clan.

He began by saying, "First of all, thank you all for coming when I needed you. I know it was quite a feat. My plan is to have a healer in every clan. One who is educated in the latest in medicines. I want them to work alongside the current healer. I want the old and new to share

techniques. I also want each of you to send a girl who is interested in healing to Wolf, as I said before. With the girls living together, I think that will help us all learn about one another, get to know one another. I envision Amanda training them in the newest methods of healing. I expect you all to visit your girls, often, to see that they are healthy and happy. I wish you to send a guard along with the girls to stay at Wolf's keep, as well—a guard you trust. As a reward, I am sending with each of you ten of my purest milk cows, bred to only the cows that produce the most milk. Along with the cows, I will send six bulls. You must rotate these bulls, every year, among the clans. My goal is to have fresh milk for every family with children, in your clan. Take good care of these cows and breed them carefully and, each year, give the calves to a family with children so, someday, they will all have milk. Of course, you must keep some at the keep for everyone. Also, I am sending ten of my best beef cows to each clan. I will send men who will help you understand how to breed them and keep them healthy. That means buildings for them, to keep them safe. Thus, I am sending materials for barns and a greenhouse for medicinal plants. Each clan will need these healing plants. Mandy is selecting and letting the gardener know which cuttings she will be taking. She also knows their uses and will teach the girls. The green house will be part of the keeps. They must be where they will be kept warm all year and have plenty of light. Mandy suggested a room off the kitchen. If you need more men or anything else I have not thought of, please feel free to contact me. The priests at the abbey are to keep me informed and send messages back and forth, at regular intervals. Are there any questions?"

The king looked to each man for approval or confusion before he continued. The men nodded.

"Most of you will be leaving together, day after tomorrow. If you think of anything, let me know; in the meantime, enjoy all we have to offer. The hunt is at dawn, tomorrow. The weddings, two days from now. That is all, for now."

Michael knocked at the closed door.

"Enter." They all spoke at the same time.

Michael bowed to his king and said, "The cook says seven tonight is good for her. Everything is under control."

"Thank you, Michael." Turning to the men, he added, "Gentlemen, dinner is at seven sharp; good day."

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The dinner was a formal affair, with all the lairds wearing the plaids of their clan.

The two girls and the queen looked lovely. Mandy was wearing a violet velvet dress with eyelets around the neckline and the hem. The violet matched her eyes. Her long blonde hair was piled in a complicated style that only her maid could create.

Melody's dress was blue, the color of her eyes. Her dark hair was put up in the same way as Mandy's. Both girls had ribbons the color of their dresses and slippers to match. They were both petite girls, topping at five-foot, each. Neither of them weighed more than one-hundred-ten pounds. The queen, of course, was the most beautiful of them all, with an embroidered velvet dress of a mint green color. She was regal looking but just as petite as the girls.

As they sat at the table together, they discussed the wedding that was to take place the next evening. The fitting was scheduled for tonight, after dinner. Neither girl had the patience to wait but they had no choice.

Both men were well over six-foot, much taller than their brides-to-be. They were warriors, strong and fit and very pleasing to the eye.

The queen smiled; both girls looked so adorable. The hair style gave them each a couple of inches but neither was more than a sprite. She loved her goddaughter so much and had so many doubts, but she trusted the king to do what was right for the girls and the kingdom. She knew he loved Amanda as much as she did.

The girls were stealing glances at their intended husbands. Melody had grown up with her future husband and knew him well. She knew he would love her and protect her and even punish her, if she didn't follow the rules of safety and obedience.

Mandy was just now getting a good look at her intended. Wolf was a big man, as she had stated earlier. In fact, all the lairds were big, powerful men, well-muscled and skilled warriors. Wolf and Aron were both broad of shoulder, lean of hip and easy on the eye. All of the lairds were strong and had the look of authority about them, even the older Isaac.

She could tell that Wolf could see her sneaking peeks at him. She knew Aron was also watching Melody carefully.

Both of the women possessed spirit and passion. The men would never have a boring marriage and neither would have it any other way. Both men introduced themselves to Mandy, before dinner. Wolf carried the conversation with his little Amanda throughout the entire meal. He smiled to himself, every time he asked her a question, because her cheeks would get rosy with embarrassment. It was obvious she had little experience talking to men. Though she did travel to France and learn from the best men of medicine, it was different than talking to a man who would soon be her husband.

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After dinner, the men excused themselves early, claiming an early morning was needed to hunt for food for the wedding and to supply the armies on the march home. There was danger in the forest. Some would do much to hurt the king. If they knew the king's goddaughter rode with them, it would put them in even more danger, therefore, they did not want to stop to hunt on the way. They would eat lightly and sleep cold until they got to the four corners, where most of them would split up to go to their own keeps. Some of the men had already been out hunting, today. The forest outside of the castle grounds went for miles and was plentiful with animals.

The castle gardens were huge and well-tended. Mandy took Melody to the garden to talk to the gardener about the seeds and slips of plants. Both girls were becoming fast friends. Mandy wanted to take along licorice for stomach problems, pain relief and relief from sores, mistletoe to ease heart conditions, blood pressure problems, and to be used for toothaches and pain in the joints. arnica was a member of the sun flower family, used as a cream to sooth muscles, reduce inflammation, treat bruises or prevent them and to treat sprains. She also suggested Indian ginseng, used to speed recovery; the bark is used as an antibiotic and to help with sleep. Also, quite a few young aspen trees; she used the bark to make a tea to treat fever, cough and as an anti-inflammatory. The inner bark was very beneficial. There were many more seedlings and seeds being brought, all with medical properties, and Mandy knew how to use them all.

Mandy was used to sneaking into the forest for moss and other things she could use in her healing. Most of the time, no one knew. She was happy being on her own, not paying attention to anything but her beloved healing plants. The king forbade it but what he didn't know usually didn't hurt him. Unless, of course, someone came across her and tattled. That had been the cause of her

only spankings from the king. It really hurt, but the worst part was it was embarrassing. She knew the king had a hard time punishing her because he couldn't stand to see her cry or to see his queen hurt. She knew it was for her own good but she enjoyed the game of testing the king and winning and she knew his weakness was his lady. Amanda used it to her advantage, usually for the good of her patients, she told herself, many times. It was for the good of the sick and hurt.

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Tonight, she had her wedding on her mind. The queen waited for both girls to go to Amanda's room, where the seamstresses all waited to start the fittings for the most beautiful wedding dresses in the land. They had been sewing all morning and afternoon, into the evening, and would continue into the night, until everything was perfect.

The queen was just as excited as the girls. "Stop squirming, you two, and let the seamstresses do their jobs," she admonished.

Amanda rolled her eyes at Melody and said, "We *are* standing still but it takes so long."

After what seemed like many hours but really was closer to two, the girls were let go to get their baths and get ready for an early bed. The seamstresses would want another fitting, in the morning, to finish. Amanda gave Melody a hug as they parted, both girls giggling at all the excitement. How would they ever sleep, each girl was thinking.

The queen also wondered how they would rest, as excited as they both were. She sighed and kissed each girl good night as she said, "Right to sleep now, girls, you don't want dark circles under those gorgeous eyes, tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Majesty," they chorused. The girls bathed and, finally, went to sleep, dreaming of their wedding, their wedding nights, and their most handsome grooms.

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The lairds, of course, were dreaming of their beautiful brides and their wedding nights, as well. Aron had waited for his little Melody to grow up, for years. Finally, she would be his.

Wolf had seen Amanda, a time or two, on visits to the king but he didn't know very much about her. The king kept her very well protected.

Both Aron and Wolf had been with other lovers, over the years, when they were in their late teens and late twenties. Both men were healthy males, with healthy sex drives. This was different; these women were going to be their wives, wives to lairds, helpmates and the mother of their children. The wife of a laird was not an easy one. Most lairds were very dominant. They demanded obedience and submission. Their wives would be expected to set a strong example for the people.

And, soon, it was morning. The day of the wedding had arrived.



## *The Wedding*

As the afternoon progressed, the dresses were getting their final touches. The men all returned from a successful hunt. The cooks were all very busy in the kitchen. Tables were put out in the shade, just outside the castle. Villagers were arriving for the wedding and the feast outside. Many carriages, with high ranking men inside, arrived with beautifully dressed ladies. Amanda knew some of them but not all. She helped Melody as best she could with the introductions. The queen also helped, where Amanda couldn't. The girls kept looking for their men but they seemed to have disappeared. The great hall was filled with flowers; the fragrance was beautiful. The flowers were vibrant and colorful. The tables at the great hall were decorated with china plates and crystal goblets, the fancy embroidered plush chairs all pushed in, and place cards had been set on each table, for all the invited guests.

The girls and the queen were ushered into the queen's waiting rooms to dress. The dresses would be the talk of the town. They were gorgeous. Both wedding dresses were identical, in order to help the seamstresses to get them finished in time. Both were pure white, with French lace over the top of the white silk underdresses. They were slightly low cut, with sleeves that came to a point at the hands. The headpieces were stunning, with pearls around the head piece, itself, and a long lace train. Both girls had their hair done up, again, in a different, unique design. The queen gave each girl a different pearl necklace that went perfectly with the lower cut neckline.

"This is your wedding present from us," she explained to the girls. She turned and reached into her jewelry box. She removed two identical rings. I had ten of these made. Each had a medium sized diamond in the center of an intertwining band.

The girls looked in awe, as she continued, "This is for the girls who marry into another clan, to intertwine the clans together. They are your wedding rings; I will have them sent to your grooms. They may give you one of their own, if so, this can go on the other hand. It signifies the uniting of the clans. It lets anyone who sees these know you are special so they do not harm you. The six girls you choose from the other clans, to train with Amanda, may have one of these, if they choose to marry a man of another clan. I have spoken to all the lairds and they know this. This is to help with your protection. Anyone who would harm a woman with this ring will be dealt with most severely, both by the king and by the other lairds. Do you girls understand? The king will have the other rings waiting for the next bride." Both girls nodded as the queen called for her husband, the king, to come and collect the rings to deliver them to the grooms. Everything was ready, now.

The men waited at the chapel for their brides, the pews full of the gentry and peers of the realm. Carriages, all magnificent, with blooded horses to pull them, were lined outside. The lead carriage would be the wedding party's but hadn't arrived with the queen and girls yet. The priest was waiting patiently, with a bible in his hand, the grooms not so patiently. All the lairds stood on each side of the grooms, in their very finest plaids. Musicians were ready with their bagpipes, waiting to usher in the brides with a traditional Irish wedding song, played on the soulful pipes. Outside the chapel, past the carriages, hundreds of villagers from all over stood to get a glimpse of the brides and the wedding party as they entered and left. All the villagers would then go to the castle, where the many tables outside were being prepared with a feast for all.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a carriage being pulled by spirited horses. Everyone in the small church hushed—not a sound, except for the birds singing outside the door. Then, as the girls exited the carriage, a cheer rang out over the land that could be heard for miles. The queen walked in first, regally, to be ushered to the front pew.

The king stood by the door, taking both girls by the arm, one on each side of him. Amanda, on the king's right, and Melody, on his left, he regally walked the girls up the aisle and announced, "I give this woman to you, Wolf," He nodded to Wolf, handing Amanda off to him. Looking at the other groom, he said, "And to you, Aron." He nodded and handed Melody over to her intended, as well.

Before he sat down, he added, "I give to you these beautiful women, to keep safe, to be your wives, in all ways."

Wolf and Aron both replied, "With pleasure, Your Majesty."

The king's voice rang out loud enough for everyone to hear, "May this be the first step to uniting all the clans."

With that, he stepped back and took a seat next to his queen, taking her small hand in his large one. He kissed her gently and wiped the tear sliding down her cheek. His eyes were suspiciously moist, too.

The rest of the ceremony went off without a hitch with the priest giving the vows to be repeated by both parties—to love, honor and obey, for the girls, and to love, honor, cherish and protect, for the men.

Next, the special rings were given to both girls, by their new husbands. As the priest said, "May these rings signify a happy marriage and may they keep you safe," the men gently put them on their brides' fingers. The two couples turned to the pews and the bagpipes started playing as they walked to the carriage. Again, the cheering was deafening.

Back at the castle, the feast was being laid out on the table—roasted duckling in a glazed sauce, roasted boar, with an apple in its mouth, pheasant, deer, and all manner of vegetables, in sauces of every kind. Everything was laid out for a feast, inside and out. Champaign, wines from all over the globe, Irish whiskey, and ales from all around.

The king raised his goblet and said, "To peace; let us begin the feast."

Clapping, followed by a hush, as Wolf and Aron prepared their new wives' plates. After a Toast to both brides and grooms, the feast began.

After the meal, the musicians began to play, both English dances and Irish.

Upstairs in their special wing of the castle, next to the king and queen's wing, the girls' rooms were being prepared. Silk sheets and down pillows, candles all around, flowers in all the vases, and finally, the girls' gowns. Lace gowns, so sheer you could see through them, waited for the new brides. A little later, a warm bath, with sweet smelling roses strewn around in the water, would be prepared. The smell of delicate roses filling the ladies' room, where the girls would prepare for their husbands before going to the adjoining room and their wedding bed.

It was close to midnight, when the queen brought the girls upstairs to their baths, both in her own room. She followed Mandy into her room at the end of the hall, letting Melody know she would be with her, shortly. The maid helped Mandy undress and carefully packed her wedding dress away for the journey, the next morning, to her new home. Mandy got into the sweet-smelling bath, enjoying the warm water and soothing scents.

"Mandy, my beloved, you have been the daughter I never had. Your mother, my sister, would have been so proud of you, today. You looked just like she did on her wedding day. I remember it well. I will miss you terribly, and though we have been apart many times before, this

is different. You will now have your own husband to obey and your own children to raise. Wolf has agreed to bring you for a visit, in a year. I hope the time passes quickly."

Mandy nodded and smiled.

The queen, her aunt, continued, "Let me explain some things so you are not frightened, later tonight. I know you know a man and women's bodies; you are a healer, but this is different. Please know my husband and I have a very loving sex life and I want that for you girls, too. Your husband will be patient with you. I know Wolf, and he will be gentle, the first time. It will hurt the first time only but if your husband cares about your pleasure, sex can be very nice. It will make you feel things that will be amazing and will help you learn to love your husband. Your new husband will answer any questions, if you just ask him. Enjoy your wedding night the same as your uncle and I have; we love you so much."

Mandy knew the queen was close to tears; she never referred to herself or the king as her aunt and uncle, or godparents. She threw her arms around the queen.

"I love you both so much, too. I will be brave tonight; I will ask my husband, if I have any questions, and I will trust him to teach me to love him."

She gave the queen a kiss on the cheek and sent her to Melody, for her talk. She quickly called for her maid to help her with her beautiful gown and her cheeks grew warm, when she realized she could see through it and so would her husband. When she was as ready as she could be, she sent the maid away to whisper in the king's ear that she was ready and waiting for her husband. The king, in turn, whispered to Wolf the same message. The smile that lit up Wolf's face could have lit up the whole castle. Gone was the stern, in charge face. Instead, appeared a man's face filled with wonder. He nodded and hurried behind the butler, to the door of the room he would share with his new wife.

He knocked before entering and, seeing his Mandy under the covers with the comforter up to her chin, his smile grew even more. He was really going to love this night.

\* \* \*

Wolf could see the terror in Amanda's eyes as they peeked out of the comforter. He also knew he had to be patient with his new wife as it was her first time. He knew Melody and her new husband were down the long hall, in their own room, and that the stone walls would hide their every sound. They were quite alone. His bath was waiting for him. On the chair, next to it, was his robe, which wouldn't be worn tonight.

"Mandy, you don't need to fear me; I will bath, first, then comes our wedding night. Did your aunt talk to you about our wedding night and what to expect?"

"Not really," she replied quietly. "She said she knew you would be patient and mindful of my first time, that you would know how to make sure I had pleasure, as well as yourself. I know what our bodies look like. I am a healer. I have seen young and old men and women naked. I have seen animals mate. I know which parts go where but it is different with my husband. I am afraid it will hurt."

"It will hurt, the first time, when I breach your maidenhead. After that, I promise to make it feel so good, you will not mind. I will be as careful as I can, Amanda. I will not hurt you more than necessary.

Wolf lowered himself into the bath and moaned. The hot water felt so good on sore muscles.

He began by washing his hair then the rest of his body. When he got out and dried himself, he walked to the bed, naked, and tried to ease her mind.

Amanda looked at her husband's body as Wolf pulled the covers back and lay on the bed. He was very well endowed.

He gently pulled her covers off her, looking at his treasure.

"I want to look and touch you, first, is that all right?"

She nodded, still having a slightly frightened look in her gorgeous violet eyes but the terror was gone. Wolf started out by just looking at his wife. She was tiny. She had just the right size breasts. Not too big or not too small, just a handful, standing proud, firm, with rose colored nipples. He wanted a sample of that but knew he had to go slow. Next was her pussy. He sat up, spreading her legs apart to get a good view.

"Let me look, Amanda, before I touch." He could see the moisture just beginning to show itself. Her legs were muscular and slender, her feet small. He bent down to nuzzle her neck, worked his way to her cute little rosebud mouth, nibbling on her lips gently and, finally, kissing her. She accepted his kiss nervously but found she enjoyed it. His manly smell surrounded her. He smelled of fresh air and pine. He worked his way to her breasts, taking first, one nipple, and then, the other, in his mouth. She lifted off the bed, moaning her pleasure, her breath coming faster. She felt a tingling between her legs. He sucked gently, playing with his tongue on her nipple; all the while she moaned louder. He scooted lower in the bed, continuing with her breasts, rolling her nipples between his fingers. His tongue found her pussy and swiped her magic little love button. When he sucked gently on her clit, she almost came off the bed.

"Please, Wolf, please." He lifted his head with a chuckle.

"Please what, my bride, what do you want from me?"

"I don't know but, please, I need something, please, Wolf. Please," she begged.

He had mercy on his new bride. He put two of his fingers in her pussy and stroked her clit gently with his rough thumb. He knew she was close to coming for the first time. He pumped into her, stroking, while he could feel her getting tighter and tighter, closer and closer. He moved up and took her right breast in his mouth and pulled with his teeth. She shattered, screaming, "Aww, Oh...my...aww. It feels so good...aww."

She was squirming all over the bed so Wolf had all he could do to stay in place. He hovered over her, his cock at her woman's entrance, while she started coming down from the pleasure. He buried himself, breaking her maidenhead in one smooth push, smothering her cry of pain as they turned to pleasure, once again. He wanted to go slow, to be gentle, but he didn't have it in him. He needed her, hard and fast.

Next time would be slow. Lifting her legs over his broad shoulders, he pumped into her hard, her screams of pleasure echoing in his ears. Close to her climax once again, he growled, "Now, little wife, come, now, with me." With a mighty roar, Wolf pumped his seed into her, and with a scream, she came again. He rolled to his side and gathered his little bride up into his arms.

"Amanda, you please me greatly. You are such a passionate woman, we will make beautiful children, someday, you and I."

She could hear his mighty heart beating under her ear as she snuggled closer, sleep almost upon her.

"Sleep, little one, we leave late this night. We all want to be a couple of hours out before dawn, for all our safety. Already, one of our men has been ambushed and killed. Hear me, Amanda, and obey me, do not leave to go anywhere without me or one of my men at your side, do not

disobey me Do you hear me, Amanda? Do not force me to punish you. I would rather not have that unpleasant chore, at least, not until we reach home."

When she didn't answer, he asked her again, "I need to hear your answer; do you hear me and understand, little Amanda?"

Amanda understood. "Yes, sir husband, I hear you."

Wolf relaxed against her, kissing the top of her head. "Your things have been put into wagons and have gone, this afternoon, all but a few clothes we will take by horseback. We move quickly, to reach the safety of the four corners, where we will split up for our homes. Sleep while you can; I will wake you, in a few hours."

With that, Wolf and Amanda slept soundly. A few hours later, a quiet knock on the door woke Wolf. He looked down at his lovely bride, dressed quickly, and met his second in command, Joffrey, outside the door.

"We are almost ready, if you want to check everything is in order, Laird." Wolf nodded, walking next to the man he trusted like another brother. He went outside, where there was chaos everywhere. All the lairds were making sure that everything was ready for the trip back to their own clan.

\* \* \*

Aron was next to Wolf and would ride slightly to the right and behind him, with Melody at his side. The other lairds were behind him, with their most trusted fanning out behind or in front, as scouts. There was great danger outside the castle. Many renegade clans, out for themselves, didn't want this peace. One of them had already ordered mischief. The king had sent much food with them so they didn't need to stop to hunt, for a few days. They would ride hard and fast.

The lairds would ride with their own clan, to split them up. This was a perfect opportunity to get them all at one time, even with all the soldiers who rode with them, to guard them.

When all the lairds were confident all was in order, they all gathered around the king, once more.

The king spoke to them, by saying, "The maids are getting the girls ready and fed, up in their rooms, while we talk. Samuel, Isaac, Isaac, Aron and Erich will bring their girls to your keep, as soon as they hear from their healers. The healers will know which girls are interested in learning. They will also bring one soldier to guard them, at all times. In six months, the girls will be returned to your clans, to become healers of their own clans. It would be nice for them to get together again, every year, to discuss things they have learned on their own. They should pass all this knowledge around but I leave that up to you."

The king had six gold charms in his hand.

"These are for the girls. I want them protected, whether they marry into another clan or not. They are healers and important to the crown." He held up the medallions, each, a gold circle with a crown etched deep. It was hanging on a heavy gold chain.

"Each girl will put it on before her journey, to let everyone know she is protected by the crown. I will personally hang any man or woman who harms any girl who is wearing one."

With that, he gave each laird a medallion. He walked up to Amanda and put hers around her neck, before bowing and turning, to continue. "I wish you all luck and remind you that I have messengers, in the form of monks at the abbey, near you. If you need to get a message to me, they have orders to ride hard, if need be. They will also be carriers, relaying any messages that may need to be delivered, whether it be for a request of more materials or more men or of danger. They

are sworn to secrecy, for their own safety, and I expect the secrecy to be maintained. I hope I am understood? Feel free, if you need to get word to me, to send the message to them to be passed on to me and I will reply with all haste. Use this as an emergency service and not to just tattle or chat. Lastly, I want to thank you and let you know you will all be rewarded with a new medical building to treat the ill or injured. Each clan is, even now, having one built. I have sent the materials and men. It will have the best in medicines and, now, the best in healers. Soon, you will have the best teachers for the next generations to come. If you find a girl or man who would like to travel to learn more on healing, please send him to me. I will see to it, they get the most up to date training and, someday, they will train another bunch of girls or men on the newest methods. This way, the modern healing continues, along with the old ways of healing, through all the clans and, hopefully, the peace. Go with God, all of you, good luck and thank you. If you have any needs, feel free to let me know, by way of the monks. I will help, the best that I can."

The queen had tears in her eyes as she kissed both girls and hugged them. "Be safe, Wolf and Aron agreed to let you visit, after the year. I will miss you both." She took Amanda aside. "I have loved you like my own, please be happy. Now, kiss the king goodbye and behave, for heaven's sake. Remember, Wolf will not hesitate to punish you, as you need. He is not soft, like the king and me. "

She turned the girls toward the king, who gave them both a hug. He whispered in their ears, "I have had gold coins sewn in your riding gowns, in case of emergency. Be safe and use them to help others, if you don't need them. I can easily give you more, for a cause you deem good or needed." He smiled and both girls returned his smile, knowing it was his way to try and keep them safe.

Both girls turned to their husbands and mounts. They each squealed in delight, when they saw what their husbands held—two beautiful horses, one black, the other chestnut.

Amanda and Melody ran to their husbands and looked over the horses. Amanda crooned to the horse her husband held, "Such a beauty. Wolf, where did you get them?"

Wolf laughed at the joy in Amanda's eyes. "Isaac breeds them; we bought them for you girls, as a wedding present. They are Irish draughts. Part Irish ponies and part Arabian. They are admired for their intelligence and spirit and speed, but most of all, for their endurance. They can run for miles over rough terrain. We bought these for you and a stud for each of us, so we can breed them. The two of you will get the first colts to train to your whistle."

Aron spoke next, "You girls will train them just as you want, to come when you whistle, to kneel so you can mount. Remember, these horses are bred for their intelligence, as much as anything else. They are our gift to you." With that, the husbands helped the girls mount. "We will also breed them, just as Isaac does.

They also learned that the cattle were already on their way to the separate clans. *The adventure was starting.*