

## Prologue

“Please, you cannot go. What will I do if I lose you as well?” Anne pleaded with Stephen. She placed herself in front of the curtained doorway to prevent him from leaving the hut, but he continued to gather his weapons, not even giving her the satisfaction of stopping his movements to argue with her.

“If I do not go, all will be lost.”

“All is lost already. We are outnumbered. They caught us unaware. We trusted them, and they turned on us like rabid dogs.”

Her eyes were steady, changing from a moss color to a hard, brittle green, with the hatred reflected in them not aimed at Stephen, but for the fighting outside. She willed him to look at her, to listen to her.

“You and I can rally those left inside the village, join those already escaping into the forest, regroup, and hit them when they least expect it. If you go out there now, we have no hope. Not Clan McCleary, not you and I.” Her pleading voice rose to defiance.

That stopped him for a brief moment as he cast his disbelieving eyes on Anne. Her Christian name was a concession her Pagan father had made to his wife. She stood, proud, not letting the fact that she was a woman and supposed to be submissive, or so her grandfather and brother tried to remind her verbally and sometimes physically, get in the way of trying to save Stephen. If she thought he would believe her, she would tell him what she felt, what she dreamt. But he would only laugh, not believing her and her witch’s wisdom. How many times had that sparked an argument between them?

“After all this time, you would think not to support me in my decision to do what must be done? We must attack these lying heathens and drive them back!” He threw his arms in the direction of the O’Connor land. “And you would choose now to throw our handfasting in my face?” He asked her incredulously.

They had been handfasted on the Spring Equinox instead of married. Stephen knew he had to prove himself to her tyrannical grandfather and stubborn brother before they would allow Anne to marry someone not of Clan McCleary. At this moment, not even his feelings for her could stop him from being a hero, from driving back the O’Connors into the hole they crawled from when they set upon the gates of the village only a short time ago. Many of the men in Clan McCleary had been slaughtered before a cry could be raised and arms gathered. The crofter’s huts were burning, the thick black smoke from the thatched roofs choking the air. Screams of the wounded and the dying assailed their ears. They stared at each other, neither willing to see the other’s side. If he did not join the fray taking place all around them, how could he go to Anne’s grandfather after a year and a day and ask him to allow Stephen to be Anne’s husband?

Pleading with her to understand, he grabbed both of her arms in his tight grip, “I’ve said I love you. But your grandfather and brother control you, as they control all of Clan McCleary. There will be no future for us, no hope, if I do not leave now and do what I can to save what is left. Sneak into the forest and await me there. Or you can stay here, and be another victim of the O’Connor cruelty. The rest we’ll deal with after the fighting.”

He pulled her into his arms and set his mouth to hers, bruisingly. She was drowning. She always did when Stephen held her and let loose just a little of his tightly

controlled emotions. Every argument went out of her head. She felt herself lean into him, and realized she could deny him nothing. He set her apart from him, still gripping her arms.

“Meet me in the clearing, where the spring comes up from the ground. Gather the wounded who can walk, collect as many weapons as you can carry, and see what food might not have been trampled or burned in the fighting. If I don’t meet you by dawn, you know what you have to do.”

With that, Stephen set her aside from the door of the hut, and dove into the fighting outside.

The sounds took on a buzz in Anne’s head like a thousand angry bees. She could no longer discern the screams of men and women from those of horses or the crackling of fires as the village was no match for the inferno that was devouring it. She had the feeling that something was coming to an end.

She stood for an indeterminate time before she felt a prickling at the back of her neck, and turned in time to have the sword aimed at her head deflect off her shoulder. She cried and fell back, her right hand immediately going to the wound to staunch the flow of blood. The attacker hefted the sword again, but then realized who was in front of him, sprawled on the floor of the hut. His hair was long and stringy, his face smudged with soot from the fires he had set. He was bare-chested except for the tartan thrown over his shoulder. The stench in her nostrils indicated that he hadn’t bathed in days.

*No better way to bring the Clan McCleary to their murderin’ knees than takin’ the Ol’ Leader’s gran’ daughter,* the marauder thought. A grim smile crept across his face.

He lowered his sword to drop on the floor and reached for the belt holding his kilt and scabbard.

Anne glanced from his face to his hands, and recognized what he was about to do. Trying not to panic, she scrambled across the floor, away from him. She didn't get far, as the hut wasn't all that big. He simply took two steps, and was standing over her, his sword on the floor behind him, his grin a full lecherous leer at what was to come. Frozen on the floor, with no more room to crawl away, Anne faced the raider standing over her. She stretched her uninjured arm towards her boot and the knife she kept there, which lay in a specially made sheath in the soft leather. Never taking her eyes from the man, she tried to keep the feared look in her eyes, and the hate out. He had his kilt lifted, and his filthy body stood over hers.

“Say, what ya think yer Grandda's to say to me being in charge of Clan McCleary? Once you're carrying me babe, he'll have to listen to Ol' Raine,” and the cackle of laughter did nothing but solidify Anne's resolve.

As he fell on her, she shifted her wrist to expose the knife she had retrieved. It buried itself deep in the belly of Ol' Raine. A look of stunned surprise was on his face as his life's blood colored the dirt of the hut.

Pushing the body off of her, she struggled to her feet, only to bend over and lose the remnants of her late dinner next to the body. She had only killed one other man, and the reaction was the same. It mattered not that it was her life or theirs. Sweeping her golden hair behind her, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Only then did her attention get drawn back to her left shoulder.

Goddess, did the wound burn! Ripping the cleanest part of Ol' Raine's kilt, she made herself a makeshift bandage that she wound around her shoulder. The bleeding started to slow. Luckily, it wasn't her sword arm, or things would be more grim than they already were. Anne wiped off her knife and resheathed it in her boot. She picked up Ol' Raine's sword, hers long gone in the main house that was first set afire, and strapped it to her waist, having to wind the belt around twice to keep it from falling from her hips. Taking the black woolen cloak hanging on the peg by the curtained door, and swirling it around her, she looked one last time at the hut that she shared with Stephen. *Yes*, she thought, *something had come to an end, but not everything*. She darted out into the melee.

The sunrise was streaked with bright red and pink hues, more from the smoke of the few remaining fires burning what was left of the grass fields and huts in the village, than the rising mist from the forest. Anne had been pacing the last several minutes, trying to stop the itch between her shoulder blades, the foreboding that never ceased to bring trouble close behind it. If Stephen survived the fighting, he should have been here by now. She stopped long enough to look over those she was able to lead into the relative safe haven of the forest, to gather with those who already had sought refuge there. Three women, two old men, three boys not older than fourteen summers, and a handful of wounded soldiers took their turns passing a flask of water and sharing the corn cakes she was able to smuggle from what was left of the baker's cottage. Another glance at the sky told her what her intuition had been telling her for a while. As she glanced again at the remaining members of Clan McCleary, she knew what she had to do.

## Chapter 1

“Bollocks,” Duncan exclaimed as he examined the tracks. The group Duncan and his men had been following were leading him on a merry chase. He signaled for his band to make camp. Maybe, just maybe, their prey will circle around, not expecting to find him and his warriors, and they could surprise the group that they had been following.

Duncan heard recently much about the McClearys, and not much of it good. Rumors had been circulating for some time as to the real leader of the ragtag McCleary Clan. Some said it was a distant cousin who was outcast from his own home because he murdered his father. Others said there wasn't really any Clan McCleary, as they had all been either killed or integrated into other clans in the North. But the most recent, and the one he was interested in, was that a small band of warriors was being led by the granddaughter of Old McCleary. If that be the case, she had a lot to answer for, starting with why she was raiding his sheep and burning villages that were under O'Connor protection.

“Should we make a fire?” Douglas asked, already his arms full of kindling.

“Aye. Let them see that we are not going anywhere. Station Enos, Mathew, Seth, and Malcolm out as sentries. The rest of you can go about making camp. Around dark, I’d imagine they’ll come looking for food or perhaps to make off with our weapons. But we’ll be waiting.”

Douglas nodded, and moved off to carry out the orders. Douglas, a mountain of a man, and the only one taller than Duncan, silently moved about the clearing, dispatching his leader’s commands. Commands or no, there wasn’t one in their band who would have argued or complained when it came to Duncan. He had been leading Clan O’Connor since the death of his older brother five years ago. Unlike Seamus, Duncan had not been groomed for clan leadership. Younger than Seamus, he was consequently left at home to guard the homestead and the village, to study and to learn things like medicine and politics. His brother went out to make peace, or war, Duncan thought, with the surrounding clans. With the McClearys. Douglas was the only one to make it home from that battle five years ago.

The McClearys had long been neighbors of the O’Connors, their individual fates always seemed to be interwoven. When the Clan leader died in a poor wager of a knife throwing contest, after many tankards of ale, the grandfather took control of the McClearys. There were fights between the grandfather and the rightful Chieftain, Bryan McCleary. Because of poor decisions on both their parts, they forced the Clan to move further north, hoping to reestablish the Clan with a wool economy. For years, the O’Connors had been helping the McClearys make it through harsh winters by supplying them with food stores. On a delivery, the McClearys attacked the hand that fed them. The Battle of Lough Sheelin was the result. After barely half a day of fighting, Seamus

and the other Clan O'Connor soldiers gone, Douglas made for Ballinderry Castle. The McClearys never came knocking on their door, but remained just out of reach. Duncan, the last male heir of the true Clan O'Connor, had no choice but to accept leadership of the Clan. His good heart was overshadowed by the brutal murder of his brother. He vowed revenge, but he was unsure as to whether or not a Clan McCleary was left on which to exact it.

Now there was no question. The proof lay in the drying mud. His horses had shoes, and these tracks did not. Mountain ponies from the North, he was sure. There looked to be about a dozen. It mattered not. He would capture their so-called leader and justice would be done. Then the raiding would stop. And so would the ache in his heart over his brother's death.

## Chapter 2

Anne signaled the others, then silently slid off Friend, her horse, and onto the ground. Dusk was settling in around them. There would be no moon tonight, to their benefit, and if the Goddess smiled on them, they would have food and a few more weapons by night's end.

She knew the moment she and the remaining members of Clan McCleary were being followed. It started two days ago, that familiar ache between Anne's shoulders. Then the dreams. She dared not tell the others, as they would no longer follow her if they knew she made her decisions on where they went and what they did based on her dreams and her witch's wisdom. The words made her cringe inside, to think of what Stephen

called her Sight, her intuition, feelings she had grown used to having and to using to keep her alive and safe from harm.

The dreams took more deciphering and time for her to figure out their meaning. Lately, the dreams had been of an unknown man, not those of Stephen, of whom she had dreamed of in the past. If she thought about it, she dreamed of Stephen less and less. She wondered if time would totally erase her memories of him from her mind. She shook her head at her silent musings and forced herself back to the task at hand, but the dream she'd had last night still lingered. It was the most vivid visions she had ever had.

*The man was tall and dark, his face not shown to her. There was a silver light coming from behind him, through him, that formed into a ribbon coming from his heart out towards her. She wasn't afraid, but felt a kind of awe. He didn't move towards her, but seemed to grow bigger, brighter. When she looked down at herself to find out where the tingling was coming from, she was surprised to see herself glowing. Not a glow of a campfire or a candle, but a golden glow that seemed to come from her skin. When she glanced up at the man, the light around her grew to a ribbon and reached out for the silver threads coming from the man. This was what frightened her. If he caught her, controlled her, what would happen to the rest of Clan McCleary? In defiance, she turned and tried to run, but the silver threads only lengthened and thickened, and snared her smartly around the waist. It was at this point in her dream that she felt a quickening of her pulse, the tingling between her shoulders spreading out to warm her entire body. As she was pulled back towards the man, she struggled, though she didn't want to, knew it would be futile. And then a calmness and contentment came over her. She looked down,*

*and saw the golden glow from her body tangled with the silver light coming from the man behind her. And she knew.*

Standing next to Friend, she took a steadying breath and shut the dream firmly from her mind. Taking a step back from the horse, she whistled softly, and Friend ambled off to find some forest grass, the rest of the horses following. At another whistle, Anne crouched down and moved silently through the brush towards the fires they saw glowing in the clearing ahead. As the remaining seven members of Clan McCleary moved closer to the camp set up by the O'Connor, they had one thing in mind-steal what they could and get out with their lives.

The rabbit roasting on the spit was as good a bait as Duncan could have planned. He smiled when he thought about catching the McCleary. They were close. He knew they could not stay away. He glanced around the clearing, checking the location of his men. They were instructed to disarm the marauders, but not to cause injury. Enos and Malcolm had been instructed to fetch their ponies to limit their chance for escape. He lifted the flask of water to his lips as he casually scanned the trees surrounding the clearing. Aye, he thought. They had picked a good place to put an end to the McClearys once and for all.

Through a series of whistles, Anne sent out her companions. Three were to circle to the left of the clearing, three to the right. She would climb a tree and give signals for the location of the sentries, the food and weapons as well. She found an oak tree whose branches started about four feet from the ground. Twice that distance up the trunk was a

heavy branch which Anne thought would hold her. She stretched up to catch that branch, then braced her foot on the bottom one of the tree, and began to climb.

Once she was crouched upon the limb, she looked out over the clearing. She counted twelve soldiers. More than what she had expected. They would wait, and once the soldiers bedded down, her companions would sneak in and take what they needed. She gave three low, long whistles, not unlike that of an owl, to let her clan know that they would wait.

Duncan hesitated slightly at the hoot of the owl. He forced himself not to glance in the direction of the noise. His brows drew together as he thought back to his tutoring from the game master at Ballinderry. Aye, he was sure that there were no owls in the forest this time of year. They had moved further down into the valley because the abundance of field mice made hunting for a meal easy.

Duncan relaxed his features, and bent down to pick up a long stick to stir the coals of the fire. After spreading the remaining burning logs apart, better for them to burn down through the night, the O'Connor soldiers shuffled towards various blankets cast onto the ground around the fires. Only they knew Duncan's stirring of the coals meant that their quarry was near.

They made small talk and made a show of unbuckling their swords to lie beside their bedrolls. Duncan himself took up a sentry position by a tree some distance away from his men, yet very close to where the owl hooted. He sat down heavily, leaning his broad back against the rough bark of the tree, and stretched his long legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. With a great stretch and a yawn, he feigned drifting off to sleep.

Anne wrinkled her brows and frowned. What was he doing so far away from the fires and the others? Why had they all gone to bed at the same time? She ignored the cramping in her legs from her long wait on her perch on the branch. Something wasn't right, but she didn't know what it was. She glanced around the clearing, now set in more shadows because the blasted man had stirred the coals. She cocked her head to the side as she thought. That was it! The man had given a signal. He knew they were close.

Just as she drew a quiet breath to whistle the retreat, a rustling and the appearance of Shane, the youngest of the McCleary that she had allowed on the foray at the edge of the clearing, had the breath freezing in her throat. Nay! Surely he would be caught! That was the last thought Anne had, as one by one, the rest of her band stepped into the clearing and started to inch their way towards the fires and the spit of rabbit.

As they drew closer to the center of the clearing, quietly stepping around sleeping bodies, she knew the trap was sprung. As the so-called sleeping soldiers sprang up from the ground, throwing off their blankets in the same motion as they drew their swords from the scabbards that lay beside them. Anne had seen enough. She needed to get away if she was to have a chance to free them later.

She jumped down, ignoring the sting as her feet hit the ground. She let out a low whistle, followed by a high short note, expecting Friend to come at once. She darted as quickly as she could under the low hanging tree branches. Blast it! Where was that mare? Hurrying through the brush, she drew breath to whistle again, only to have her breath rush out in a whoosh as a forearm snaked around her and snapped her back to a solid body. For a moment, she was caught up in the dream again. No wonder her Sight

never warned her. This was the man from her dream. This was the man whom the Goddess had chosen for her. Instinct made Anne struggle anyway.

Before Duncan could contain both her arms, she landed an elbow in his side and was rewarded with a grunt and a quiet curse. No sooner had both her arms been contained than she swung back with her leg to catch him on the shin. Having had enough of the struggling captive, Duncan hooked his foot around the captive's ankle and pulled. Before Anne knew what was going to happen, the ground rushed up at her. At the last second, Duncan flipped her around so she landed on her back, the air in her lungs rushing out. Duncan knew he had only a few seconds in which to contain the captive before breath returned, so he straddled the body under him, pinning the arms on either side of the head, and using his feet to lock the captive's legs to the ground. The first thing Duncan noticed were the bones poking him on his inner thigh. The second thing he noticed was how small the wrists were that he held.