

CHAPTER 1

I loved her more than life itself. And I killed her.

I was not the man who came to snatch her away from us, nor was I the man's disgusting, servile toad-eater who lit the fire under her with such a look of glee on his face. I might as well have been, though; because I didn't stop it, I killed her just the same.

But this was a woman who couldn't be killed. Truly. You could take the life from her, but you couldn't take her from Life, for once she lived here, the world was never to be the same. Oh, just imagine a woman who is so in love with living, so in love with the break of each new dawn, so in love with her body, even so in love with the very air around her. For that's how she moved. That's how she glided through her day, that's how she danced on the hill-sides, that's how she bathed under a waterfall, that's how she slept, that's how she ate. It was like she was making love to the water, to the sky, to her nighttime dreams. And how fortunate was her food to be chosen by her—to be turned into such a life and, ultimately, such love. It was like she was making love to life—every minute of her day, every minute of her too-short life.

And I took that life from her.

Oh, did I love her. I didn't know that love could kill anyone. I thought only hate did that. But I loved her so much I killed her. When she was taken, I thought I would regret it for all of eternity.

I suppose you might want to know her name. Catriona, it was. Beautiful—just like her. Beautiful, passionate, alive Catriona. Yes, I realize that anyone on the planet and still taking breath would be alive, but Catriona put the true meaning into the word. Alive. Aye, she was here to live. She was living the idea Life had when we were first imagined into existence. Unfortunately, so many people on the planet while still taking breath are so far from alive.

I promised myself I would never let such a thing happen again. Life, give me one more chance, and I would set it aright. I would help someone else live. I would sacrifice myself. And aye, I had all those chances. Sometimes I remembered, but more often I didn't. And I'd ask for another chance, and another...and I'd be given that chance, and another. Life is very accommodating that way.

Nay, but this isn't a story about death and misfortune and having to come back to right wrongs. It's a story of life and its very celebration. It's a story of what true love really looks like.

Catriona reached her hand out, closed her eyes, and held her palm over the cluster of herbs. She hovered for a moment or two until her hand was drawn to one particular plant. She opened her eyes and smiled at the herb.

"Remember, ask permission before you take one," she instructed her sister. "They always say yes, of course, but still you must ask. You cannot take what is not given freely, or the power in it will not work. And let them tell you which one to ask. Some are more ready in the moment to be used than others, aye?"

Catriona snapped the herb and placed her hand over the break for several seconds without waiting for a response from Elspeth; there would be none. Once she felt the break in the plant would heal quickly, she placed the herb in her basket. The two women moved to the next cluster of plants where Catriona repeated the steps.

Elspeth did not talk. Ach, she seemed to understand her world around her for a few moments, here and there, but then she would retreat into her own sphere again. Picking plants on the gentle, rolling hills with her beloved older sister was one of the rare times that she was in the outer world fully, albeit silently.

"Just imagine the perfection of a world where there is a healing balm for every single thing that could ail us," Catriona smiled.

People of our village say that Elspeth chattered and babbled when she was a baby, but she stopped when her mother died. As Catriona assumed the mantle of mother in addition to being her older sister, their father retreated into himself. Elspeth never had to say a word to Catriona, because her sister always understood the meaning behind every look. We villagers did not know if that was a good thing or not, because Elspeth never had to learn to talk or communicate clearly any other way. And only Catriona really knew what she was saying.

“Want to see the colors, Elspeth?”

After her sister’s eager nod, Catriona put her hands over Elspeth’s closed eyes. She breathed from her heart into Elspeth’s heart and then allowed the energy to flow from her hands into her sister’s eyes. She slowly pulled her hands away. Elspeth kept her eyes shut, dancing with the vibrant rainbow of swirls in the suddenly glorious, enchanting world behind her eyelids.

Colors. We’d see a pale, grey-yellow winter sunset. Catriona would see it warmed by red and amber with multi-colored prisms shooting through it. We’d see ominous dark clouds overhead, and she’d see silver and blue and gold and purple. We’d see brown mud, and she’d see the colors of the flowers coming up in the spring.

The only thing we saw in myriad colors was her hair. It lit up the village! Ach, it had every color of the day’s sunshine in it—from a crimson sunrise letting us know that the rains were on their way, to the scarlet sunset, letting us know that a beautiful day was coming on the morrow. It had the golden strands of a clear, high noon and the silvery strands of the clouds rolling in. It glowed like the sun itself and waved on her head like the grasses blowing in the gentle winds. Blended together it was like a shimmering golden-red curtain or a red-hued flow of gold. It cascaded down her back to below her waist, and unlike most of the other women of the village, she did not care to tie it up and away, pinned at the neck. No, she let it blow in the breeze.

It seemed like the sun followed her around, all though the day, residing in her hair, her eyes, her being. Perhaps it kept one special ray on her, for she seemed more lit up than...well, more than anyone, really.

Neither sister had any clear memories of their mother, for she died less than a year after Elspeth was born, shortly before Catriona’s second birthday. She’d had complications in childbirth, especially since the second had come so soon after the first, from which she never recovered. Catriona did not hold this against Elspeth, but their father did. He took to hating his younger daughter, he took to his bed, and he took to his drink. The villagers would see him stumble out his door for his first time of the day when the sun was past its zenith. The crystal clear, sky-blue eyes that both of his daughters inherited became red and clouded over with despair. His once robust build and attitude became stooped and frail.

In his prime he was the leader of the village; later that title was in name only. His drink was his true leader. We let him believe he was still in charge, but the other elders made decisions, and then let him think they were his idea—“Oh, that was a great idea you had, Edward; we put it into action.” And we carried on the way we thought best.

Surely this—well, both of these things: the physical death of the one and the emotional death of the other—must have effected Catriona, but you wouldn’t have known it. Where

she learned to be this way was a mystery to us all. It was like she was tapped into some special planetary pulse, maybe a spring that delivered a special elixir. Maybe she partook of some special brew. I don't know. None knew. None could explain it.

I don't mean to imply that Catriona was a saint. It was not like that. On a bad day, and she had a few, she could let many a froward utterance fly forth from her mouth. She couldn't sing, neither, although she never let that stop her! So nay, she wasn't the high priestess of the hills or anything like that. She was just a regular woman who decided to make her life so much more than regular. A woman who took an ordinary life and decided to make it anything but.

How she learned to make that decision, we didn't know. We didn't know that anyone could make such a choice. Ours was a beautiful, yet brutal world; an abundant, yet punishing existence; a fecund, yet grueling reality. So many in our time and place chose to focus on the "yets" of that time and place, the time and place of our lives. It was beautiful, yet.... The land was rich, yet.... We had enough food (usually), yet.... We could find love, yet.... We didn't know any other way. But somehow she knew.

We'd hear her talking on the hillsides when no one was near her. "Who are you talking to?" we'd ask.

"Oh, many," was her frequent answer.

Whoever they were, they were Life's whispering of secrets to her. Many of you say in these days, "I didn't get the handbook." She received the handbook. We didn't know then that it was simply a decision she made.

What was special about her wasn't anything in particular that she said or did – only in how she was. Somehow, one would feel different after she walked by. Better. Like the day's burdens had been lifted. Like the sun was suddenly shining a little brighter and the day was more vibrant, or the moon was more silver and the night had become more mystical. Even if she was hungry, as happened often as winter was on the wane and spring had not yet arrived, her face wouldn't betray any discomfort. Even if the rains kept us all inside our tiny cottages for days, which they did on frequent occasion, she'd emerge like she'd just gone inside for a quick, refreshing nap. We didn't know what to make of it. She had some connection to....something. Even now I can't explain it. Back then it was like she had received a special message before arriving on this land, like she had a royal or papal dispensation for special privileges. Aye, she should have been born in a castle with servants to serve her meals and draw her bath. But here she was in our tiny village near the edge of civilization, where our mighty mountains met the heavens, where our mighty Scotland ended abruptly to meet the endless waters. Her little cottage was just like every other of the near two dozen little cottages in the village, but she treated it like that castle she should've been born in. Wherever she went, whatever she was doing, the land seemed to rise up to meet her.

Ach, but our land was so beautiful. I hope the kings and the popes enjoyed their lands as much as we did ours. Mountains surrounded our village, although the peaks spent much of their time cloaked by the clouds. Ah, but when the clouds lifted, oh, I don't think Heaven could have been any more beautiful than those green moun-tains, radiant emerald in the summer sunshine, amber in the other seasons, with the blue sky offering

a promise of eternity. On those clear days we would climb the highest mountain — “our mountain,” we called her — to gaze into the distance at the high cliffs crumbling into the sea, which was still a day’s walk away. A salty stickiness was delivered to us from time to time via the winds. We had nothing to compare our scenery to, only the stories of travelers passing through, but we thought none in the world would be finer than our land. Life wasn’t easy. I mean, we didn’t know any other life, but when the hunt returned nothing, when the crops failed, when winter lasted longer than it ought, we were still grateful. Aye, for our land, although not much else, we were grateful.

There was one in the village who despised her, but only one. And he despised her for the most despicable of reasons — he wanted her and couldn’t have her. She wasn’t to be had. Shane envied her — body, mind, and spirit. All of us did. We all wanted to be her, to see what it was like to live inside a person who cherished the day, who embraced the raindrops as much as the sunbeams, who embraced the night as much as the day, who embraced the darkness inside a person’s heart as much as the love and light that lives within us all.

He followed her to the hills day after day, year after year. She was always smiling, always pleasant, but never sharing of the treasure he thought he wanted from her. She did share one large treasure, though — she would successfully steer the conversation away from the darkness in his heart.

“Did you see the sliver of moon setting o’er the far mountain?”

“Nay.”

“Gives me such a full, peaceful feeling in my heart.”

He wanted the peace in his heart without having to look at the moon. Of course, looking at the moon was not what gave it to her. And she wasn’t telling him about gifts delivered by the sighting of a sliver of moon — only the possibilities that availed his own heart if he’d just allow them to.

But she smiled that brilliant smile — aye, men have killed over such smiles, even some not near as brilliant — and disappeared into her home.

“Ach, Shane,” we’d try to persuade him again and again, “you can’t possess a rainbow.”

“You can’t hold on to laughter.”

“Aye, you can perhaps capture a bird, but what you have in your hand is not the freedom and splendor that you fell in love with when it was up in the sky.”

He’d scowl at us and then disappear for hours. And then he’d follow her up the hill the next day.

We could never speak aloud who introduced Catriona to the plants and their healing properties as well as their healing energies — all things we weren’t supposed to talk about

when strangers came to the village. You just never knew who was who nor what was what. We heard agonizing stories—for instance, one time a man arrived at a village just a three-day's walk from ours and said he was a healer. That gave all the women in the town an opening to tell him their healing tales and remedies. And he had them all killed.

Those were awful times for being a woman, for being a healer, for being different, for being a person who loved God but not as the Church dictated we were supposed to love God, Life. Many of these stories were included in the history books; even more of the stories were not.

The thing we could never explain, even though we tried for years and years afterward, is why we let it happen. But anyone who tried to stop those atrocities was assumed to be guilty, too. What a choice! Try to stop them from killing your beloved and be killed....or not try to stop them and let the guilt and the dreams of what could have been kill us all in the end anyway?

But it was just one man, one man and his obsequious, oafish, dim-witted, stunted servant—a toad-swallower as you heard me refer to him earlier. In my day, at least in my days in that particular life several centuries ago, sometimes a charlatan would swallow a toad so that some professed master, a street magician, could then “save” him. You know the word as *toady* now. This young wretched man was the epitome of a toady.

We all saw the toad-swallower that way, except for Catriona. We all hated the witch hunter, except for Catriona. The whole town could have risen up against them, after all it was just two men—well, one and a half. That other strange being could hardly be called a full man. But we knew, even if these two disappeared into a nearby loch, more would come. And more after that. And....

He was the true weaver of the spell, not she, and he put us under it. The witch hunters were the ones with the real black magic. Meanwhile, witches heal. They don't kill people.

He came with the fortress of the Church right behind him. In our gentle town in the valley, far from the men who formed the church, he came with some kind of authority that we could not—well, did not—question.... for reasons that still, even when regarded from the other side of life where things oftentimes make more sense, did not make sense. Being dead doesn't mean we agree on it, over here in the afterlife—oh, no. To tell you the truth, we argue over here as much as we did over there. It's just that here we laugh about it so much more, but I can't really laugh as I'm relaying this story to you.

From this side of the veil—the other side of life from where you are—we see how fleeting and temporary life on Earth is. So taking a life isn't such an enormous deal, not in the wide spectrum of things. But it should be on your side. You cannot speak a word of hate without damning your own self. You cannot even think disparagingly of others without condemning yourself to what you're thinking about them. You certainly cannot take a life without darkening your soul. It's like life is a web, where everything is connected, all is one. And it's like life is a small pool of water: if you think of a brilliant aqua-marine, the pool turns that color; if you think of dark grey, the pool turns that color, too.

During those times the witch hunters were among those with the darkest souls of all. And the darkest souls were looking for one thing and one thing only: the ones with the light.