

The King's Druidess

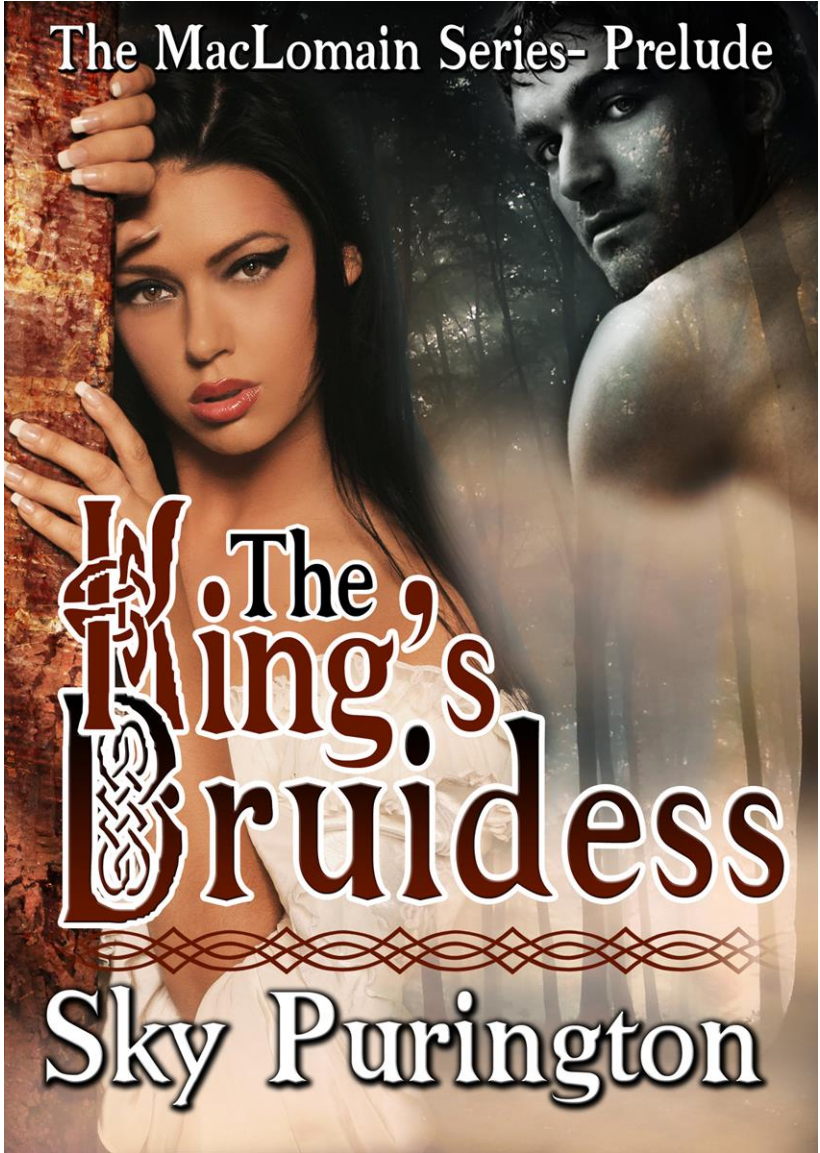


The MacLomain Series

Prelude

By

Sky Purington



The MacLomain Series- Prelude

The King's Bruidess

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Chapter One

Ireland, 487 A.D.

At long last, it's time.

She stood alone at the pinnacle of 'Eire, her face to the wind. The long white robes of her calling whipped and twisted. The cliff dropped sharply at her feet, broken and ragged until it fell into the sea hundreds of feet below. Chiomara Ruadh raised her arms in the air, flung back her head and closed her eyes.

Her voice rose above the thunder of waves. "It will be as you say, Brigit, Goddess of Divination. In the circle of stones beneath the oak, I have come, and I will wait."

Warmth folded her in bright light. Chiomara bore the slow burn of love. She smiled and lowered her arms. Her heart thrummed with anticipation. She pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and made her way down into the forest. She'd waited so very long for this eve. This that was foretold by the *others*.

The clearing was quiet where the stones stood, three sets of three. Evenly spaced and perfect in their symmetry. The oak's leaves rustled overhead, its bare roots encompassing half of the outer circle.

Chiomara walked around the stones and stood beside the ancient tree. Her back was straight and her head high as she waited. The moon burst free from a cloudbank, and she saw his face. *Goddess above, he's handsome!* He stood tall and beautiful at the edge of the tree line. She'd not seen Erc Breac, King of Dalriada for many years. He said nothing but came to her. His eyes were of the earth, deep brown and thickly lashed.

At arm's length, he stopped. "Druidess, you are even lovelier than I remember."

I wish I didn't have to abide by formalities. I wish I could tell you what I'm feeling. She touched his bare chest. His skin felt hot, as if he burned with tightly restrained energy. "Were we not still in *macdacht*, children when we last met?"

His muscles rippled, and his hand covered hers. "We were as you say, but we are grown now. And we are both led to this place at this time."

Thump. Thump. Erc's heart beat strong beneath her fingertips. His heat scorched her blood. "So we meet with one purpose."

He gently pulled back her hood. "I cannot promise you that."

Erc's fingers ran through her hair, sifted through the ebony lengths. Chiomara drifted closer and whispered, "Do they not foretell us coming together for one purpose?"

His words turned sensuous and contemplative. "They do. But what do they know of how I will feel once I've tasted you?"

Chiomara had no chance to respond before his mouth covered hers. She'd been kissed before, but this felt so very different. He felt so very different. When his tongue swooped and twisted with hers, she groaned and leaned closer. Clutching his forearms, she held on tight when he grabbed her backside and pulled her against his long, hot arousal. She skimmed her hands over his shoulders, up his neck until she buried them in his thick, dark hair.

This moment was everything. He was everything.

"Come," he murmured and pulled her into the circle of stones. Moonlight poured over him and magnified the deep violet cloak wrapped over his shoulders. "I am of the *magi* and you of the *druui*. We come into this circle to give back to the *others* what they have asked of us."

Couldn't we at least talk to one another? Say how we really feel? But no, it wasn't allowed, and they both knew it. Then again, how did she know for sure he felt more than mere obligation at this point? Though he'd implied it, she knew men said such when the lusty fever overtook. Eyes locked with his, Chiomara brought her hands to the gold clasp at her throat, released it and removed her outer cloak. She repeated his declaration. "We give back to the *others* what they have asked of us."

The stars flickered and drew in closer. The stones glowed silver, and the oak canopied them with a porous sheen of leaf. A hazy, iridescent fog surrounded them. Nothing spoke in the forest, and the wind shied away in respect.

"Come to me, Druidess of Ulster, woman of 'Erie, Chiomara Ruadh." Erc's strong hands carefully removed her gown.

Ohhhh. She loved the feeling of standing nude in front of him. The way his pupils flared and his body tensed, as though he wanted to skip the details and ravage her immediately.

She bowed her head and then held it noble. "And you me, my king of Dalriada, Erc."

Chiomara removed the symbol of his kingdom, his wide gold brooch and stepped back. Slow, as if he knew exactly how to tempt her, he unclothed. *Keep your eyes on his. Remember the gods and goddesses watch.* Their eyes held one another's and allowed the audience of spirits past to give appraisal.

At last, he commanded, "Come to me."

She flew into his arms and met his lips hungrily. Heat sizzled over her skin when his fingers trailed down her spine and curved over her backside. His heavy, eager erection pressed against her stomach.

Mists of old rolled over and muted their moans of passion. When his well-muscled arm encircled her waist and lifted, Chiomara wrapped her legs around him. She slid her arms around his neck and held on tight. Staring deep into her eyes, he slowly, inch by inch, let her slide until she felt the welcoming head of his manhood start to enter her.

Breathe. Breathe. But breathing became impossible. Chiomara gasped when with a sharp thrust he impaled her. Pain quickly shifted to pleasure as he rolled his hips upward while simultaneously rolling her hips with the sheer strength of his sturdy hands.

They knew. This moment within the Stonehenge was theirs. As free and wild as the hearts pounding within their mortal forms. As tempered and private as the desire they kept locked within.

He sunk to his knees and brought her to the ground. The soft grass beneath her back soothed her flaming skin. Braced on his elbows, Erc stared at her, and Chiomara knew he had so much to say. That they had so much to say, but couldn't.

Ever so slightly, she pulled up one knee. His eyelids lowered. He shifted his hips. She moaned. Bracing herself on her elbows, she leaned up until their lips were within inches, until their breath intermingled, until she could see the dark, turbulent center of his eyes swim with desire.

Before she could speak, he put a finger to her lips and shook his head. Chiomara flicked out her tongue and lightly ran it over his finger. Erc licked his lips and slowly thrust in and out.

A swift surge of pleasure shot up through her belly into her chest, and she fell backward. Before she could gain her bearings, he came down and thrust hard. *Ohhhh!*

The grass warmed. Light rain fell. Thunder rumbled low and eager, vibrating the ground.

She grabbed his wide shoulders and wrapped her legs high and wide, needing him closer, deeper. Erc's eyes stayed locked with hers as he moved. In. Out. In. Out. Please, Goddess, let this last forever.

Even as she thought it, her belly started to quiver. His lips thinned and his facial expression bordered on bliss. Sweat and rain soaked their skin. The sweet ache in her groin burned a slow path outward until it sped up and tiny little shivers began to ripple down her limbs.

"Chiomara," he cried and thrust one last time. The feeling of him throbbing deep inside made her explode. Little stars burst in her vision. Ecstasy took the mere ripples of pleasure and made them erupt into gushes of sweet agony.

I love you. I always have.

But these were things she wasn't allowed to voice. Words that didn't belong between a king and a Druidess.

Chiomara felt the tears trickling down her cheeks. She knew that she'd cherish this moment forever. Limp and content, she reveled in the feel of his heavy body on hers, the look in his eyes when he gazed at her, almost as if he felt the same.

Yet it could not be. Would never be.

Sighing, she allowed herself to drift into slumber, content with the fact that she'd done her duty, fulfilled her obligation.

It only seemed a few minutes passed before Chiomara awoke alone within the protective confines of the stone circle. She blinked, confused. Slippery sunlight poured off the oak above. The ocean's salt rode the wind and billowed over her clothed form.

Erc was gone. The king had left her, having fulfilled his obligation. She rolled onto her side, held her stomach and sobbed. He's gone. It's over. I looked forward to this time with him for so long...

"Chiomara."

No. I'm not ready. He can go away.

"Chiomara. Get up, lassie. You knew everything would go as it did."

"Aye." She spit out a pine needle and didn't move. "But I had hoped otherwise."

"Get up, Druidess." Bare feet filled her vision. "Now."

Sighing, she slowly sat up and grumbled, "I tire of obligations. This was too much of a test, even for me."

Fionn Mac Cumhail, mystical leader of the Fianna warriors, held out a hand. "No test is too much, especially when given by the *others*. Dry your eyes and know that you are the beginning of something very great."

Chiomara allowed Fionn to pull her to her feet. He came not golden and masculine, but in the form of an old woman. "You have done well, Druidess."

"Have I?" She refused to meet the wizened eyes and mumbled her epitaph. "Is all well with the prophets now? Are they satisfied?"

The woman's hand cupped her chin and tilted up her face. The eyes of Fionn were of the land, pure and direct. "Why are you so angry, child?"

Chiomara met her eyes. Sad eyes that knew too much. "Must you ask?"

The woman's finger caressed her cheek and turned back to that of a man's. "Know your heart and release your anger. Erc was never yours."

"He has been mine since our birth." Chiomara regretted the anger in her voice. Fionn was not to be disrespected. "Forgive me, Great One, my heart is foolish."

Tall, beautiful and very male now, Fionn nodded. "It is as you say."

Turning, she gazed around at the circle of stones that had been theirs but hours before. When she turned again, Fionn was gone. Left in his wake were three gold rings. Each hosted hands coming from different directions. They held a crowned heart which had at its center a precious stone. Chiomara fell to her knees and scooped them up. These were of the 'Eire, to stay with this land until fate unfolded. Given to her as sign of hope. A new beginning.

Chiomara tucked them in her robes and smiled softly. It was time to push emotion aside. After she found a nearby stream to bathe in, she wove her hair with dozens of braids, as was the way of the druidess. Then she continued her journey to the celebrations south. To the marriage of the king to his predestined wife.

Chapter Two

Erc, king of the Dalriada, was displeased. "Where is she who is to be my wife?"

It was Cormac, his poet, who spoke. "It is told she will arrive soon."

Humph. "Ah, yes." Erc sat back and stroked the fur of the gray wolf by his side. Though he sounded it, the king was not so eager for her appearance. "She travels far."

Cormac nodded graciously. "She does. Shall I tell of her travels when she arrives?"

Erc shrugged. "If she wishes such. Is it not mine to please my future wife?"

"I will do as you wish, then." Cormac drank from his goblet then set it aside. "The druidess, Chiomara of Ulster, has arrived. Will you receive her?"

Erc's heart flipped. The king kept his face emotionless. "Is she well rested from her journey?"

"She has been here since the morn. It is told that she is refreshed." Cormac returned to his mead.

Erc watched his man closely. "Have you still love for her, poet?"

Cormac's eyes met his. "It has been many turnings of the moon since I last saw Chiomara. I cannot say."

"Yet your ballads speak so highly of this woman." Erc closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Smart ballads. "You have made her a goddess in the eyes of man and warriors alike."

Cormac laughed. "It was not so hard. She has been at the heart of many stories throughout 'Eire and her beauty is limitless."

Erc opened his eyes. "A beauty that has no end? That speaks to me of love."

"Then love it may still be." Cormac stood. "Shall I call her forth?"

The king nodded, and Cormac left. He sat back and watched the fire burning at the heart of the massive, thatch covered abode. Two warriors remained and stood silently on either side of him. How he longed to dismiss them and have this meeting with the druidess alone; to see her face as he remembered it, beneath him and close. Free of audience and alive.

It was their magic that had brought them together. Made her his between times, when a king's obligations were set aside to appease a higher power. There was such freedom in things born of the otherworld. He ran his hand along the edge of his gilded throne and remembered the satin of her skin. The salt of her sweetened sweat when he brought her where no other man had.

Cormac reentered, came before Erc and announced her arrival. "I give you Chiomara Ruadh of Ulster, Druidess." He lowered his head and stepped back.

Erc did not miss the flush on his poet's face.

Chiomara entered and came to stand before him. Beads and ribbons of light gold were interwoven within her many braids. She wore a white gown with a rope of gold cinched around her slender waist. His breath caught at her beauty. So mesmerizing in moonlight, so blinding in firelight. She bowed low, and then stood.

With the demeanor that befitted her station, Chiomara held her head high and her shoulders back. Pale brown eyes rose to meet his. "I am honored, Erc, king of Dalriada."

Do you feel as I? Is your every thought of our moments together? He longed to stand, stride to her and wrap this woman in his arms. But he could not. "Welcome, honored Druidess, to my kingdom. I hope you fared well on your journey from Ulster."

She nodded once and smiled. "Very well, my king. My journey was without fraught and yielded only pleasure."

Erc nearly snickered but held his amusement at bay. "I am glad that pleasure found you, not peril."

Chiomara veiled her eyes beneath her thick lashes for but a moment. "Much thanks to you my king."

He did laugh at that. It was a great display of double meanings. "Will you join us at the feast this eve, Druidess?"

"If it would please you." Chiomara again met his eyes. Erc felt the power between them strengthen.

"It would. My people would be very pleased by your prayers and divination."

"Then so it shall be." The druidess lowered her head. Erc did not like her head bowed to him. "Very good."

Chiomara again raised her head and remained silent. The moment stretched until he spoke. "You are dismissed, Chiomara Ruadh of Ulster."

It was as though he had lost a limb when she turned and left.

Cormac stepped forward. "There is no one else for you to receive this eve, my king."

Erc sat back, his eyes still where she had exited. "I believe you must still love her poet."

His friend sighed. "How could I not?"

Chapter Three



Chiomara filtered through the clan of Dalriada. Past jugglers and bards and Chieftains. Fires burned against the night and flecked the wide field with dancers and magicians. A jolly woman with heavy jowls leaned forward over her cart.

"An offering of acorn bread, Druidess. May you bless my people."

Chiomara took the bread and put forth a blessing on the woman and her kin. She tore a piece from the loaf, popped it in her mouth and continued on. A man fell into step beside her. His robes were white and his eyes silver.

"Greetings Druidess, I am Taliesin, Chief of the bards to the west. I am acquainted with every tree-branch in the cave of the arch-diviner."

"Greetings to you Taliesin, I am Chiomara, faithful diviner of the Goddess Brigit." She slowed her stride to match his.

Taliesin nodded once. "I come only to you in spirit, woman of 'Eire. Beware he who approaches you with pitch eyes and stealth tongue."

She stopped to ask further what he meant, but Taliesin vanished. Chiomara closed her eyes and shuddered. She would be wise to listen to the words of a spirited bard.

"Druidess, are you well?"

Chiomara opened her eyes to the poet. "I am well Cormac. It has been too long. How do you fare?"

His hand rested lightly on her elbow, and they continued walking. "Busy, yet happy. My king's tales accrue daily."

She released a ripple of laughter and enjoyed his presence. Her beloved friend, Cormac. "This is an esteemed position you hold now. Erc must think highly of you."

His dark green eyes searched hers. "Yes. Ours is a good friendship. But what of you, Chiomara. Why have you come at this time?"

"It was at the request of Fionn." She offered him a piece of bread.

"Why would the warrior of the forest have you come?" Chiomara studied her handsome friend and found it safe to say more. "He tells me that there is a battle to be had here that I alone must fight."

Cormac led her in the direction of the great feast. "It is no small thing when such a man gives you prophecy."

She smiled to herself. Fionn was considered by most a myth. The man who blistered his finger on a salmon and pulled forth the power of the forest. And he had. His power over nature and animals was thorough. But Fionn had always been her advisor, a brother of sorts. The one who directed her from clan to clan. From story to story.

A friend who did not let her dwell on the silly whims of potential love with an unattainable king.

The druidess nodded. "So perhaps I will give you another tale."

Cormac slanted his head. "For you, Chiomara, I would take the time to recite."

She laughed. "You always have."

The poet led her forward. "Come, you will sit by my side as my guest."

Chiomara masked well her flinch. That meant she would sit near Erc. She could still smell the heated spice of his skin, the slick sweat of his muscles. It had not been easy to face him

again after their time in the circle of stones. To see him as king upon his throne with his wide shoulders proud, to see once again the man who could never be hers.

He sat regally now, much as he had before, at the head of one of many long tables. When she approached, he did something he did not have to do. He stood as she stood and sat when she sat. It did not go unnoticed by his people.

Cormac sat next to him and her beside the poet. Cormac spoke formally. "I have invited the druidess, Chiomara, as my honored guest to dine with us."

Erc's lips were sensual for that of a king. "Welcome again, Druidess, may you bless my people and the food we eat."

So she set forth her blessing, and the people ate. Chiomara did not look his way for several minutes. When she did his attention was hers. "I wish to congratulate you on your coming matrimony, my king."

Murmurs of consent filtered through the people and they resumed eating. It was now to each individual their private conversations.

Erc kept his gaze on Chiomara. "You are gracious in your presence here. How long will you stay?"

Cormac looked to his king at this question but said nothing.

How long would you have me stay? I'd stay a lifetime for you. She worked to steady the heavy thud of her heart. "As long as you and yours will have me. Perhaps a fortnight."

"You may stay with the Dalriada as long as it pleases you." Erc touched his venison at random.

Cormac interjected. "It would please me if you ceased your wandering and stayed here."

Chiomara was not surprised at the passion in the poet's voice. She measured her words and spoke carefully. "It is not for me to stay in one place too long. What stories would I give you then, friend?"

"Just one story, my Druidess. That would be enough to tell for all time." Cormac's hand brushed hers.

The king leaned forward. "Would you cease your travels, Chiomara Ruadh? Would you have your tales end with the Dalriada?"

Are you jealous? The mere thought thrilled her. People quieted beneath the urgency in Erc's voice.

Ears turned to them and waited. Chiomara set down her goblet and considered. Was he asking for Cormac or himself? The answers were different. And neither was hers to give. "I am not ready to settle. So no, my tales do not end here."

Erc sat back and studied her, his expression unreadable. "So my poet is denied for now."

She placed her hand over Cormac's and spoke softly. "So he is."

He wrapped her hand and squeezed gently. "There is naught better a friend can offer but honesty."

Chiomara sighed and picked at her food. So now Cormac knew. She could not return his love. How she wished she could. The druidess looked to Erc and understood what he had done. It had been to ease his friend's suffering, perhaps more? But there could be no more, he was to marry. And she to watch and yearn.

The feast ended, and the people made their way to the fields beyond. To festivity and celebration in honor of Erc's betrothal. Chiomara walked between the king and the poet and kept her silence. At the high fire, the men left her, and she wandered, as was her way.

A man came upon her fast, and she felt his curiosity. When he addressed her, Chiomara avoided the snakes that slithered in her soul.

"I am Eoghan Dubhdiadh, Druid of the south. I have long awaited you Chiomara Ruadh, Druidess of Ulster." He stood before her, his long dark robes a shadow against the flames.

She stood tall. "What have you with me, Druid?"

His eyes of pitch devoured her form and lust ruled his revelation. "Have you not thought of me?"

Chiomara closed her eyes to her fellow student and opened them to her enemy. "Not past those which you push upon me. Those which you rape my mind with."

Eoghan moved closer, went to touch her. "Your beauty is kindred to my own, Druidess. And your magi. Why would you shun me?"

She sidestepped his touch. "Leave me be. Our arts are different, yet you plague me."

"Our arts complement each other. Why deny such a thing? Your light to my dark." He stalked her.

"I do not yearn for you, Eoghan. Nor will I ever. Step away." Chiomara made to move, but he took her into his arms.

His voice was harsh with need. "You will not stay here. I will not allow it."

She tried to pull away, but he was too strong. "Unhand me, Druid."

Eoghan moved back as the king approached.

Erc's voice was a sharp bark through the night. "Who are you, Druid? Speak fast."

Again the people grew quiet.

Her nemesis bowed low. "I am Eoghan Dubhdiadh, Druid of the south, sent to offer blessings for you and yours."

Eoghan kept his bow low as Erc's eyes found hers.

"What say you, Druidess? Is this man a threat to you?"

It was against the laws of the Druids to speak blasphemous against one of their own. So she said to the king caught in the firelight, "He is not."

Erc's crown glowed as he narrowed his eyes at the dark man at his feet. "Rise Druid. So says Chiomara."

Eoghan rose. "May you prosper, Erc of the Dalriada."

Chiomara cursed the mercy she had shown this man. His soul crawled with darkness.

Erc came and stood beside her. "Leave us, Eoghan."

The druid nodded, turned and left.

Erc threw his wrath at her, his words seething and low. "What of this woman? Why do you defend him when I might have cut him down with my blade?"

She eyed the quiet crowd and kept her silence.

"Come," Erc whispered as he led her away from the people into the night.

Chapter Four



Erc tore his crown from his head and removed the cloak of his kingdom. He handed them to Cormac as he led her into the cover of an oak grove. The moon was no more so he flicked his wrist and drew forth his magi. Green flooded the tree trunks, and the leaves overhead encaged them.

Beyond aggravated, he said, "Tell me, Druidess. What purpose do you serve here?"

She pulled her arm free. The tiny bells interwoven in her braids tinkled at the movement. "I serve you, my king."

He sat her on a wide log and paced. "No. You served me in the stones as was foretold. Why have you come for this celebration of mine in light of such a thing? What do you seek, Chiomara?"

He caught the slight flinch of her expression. "I come only because I was called here. No more."

"By whom were you called?" He continued to pace.

"Fionn, leader of the Fianna. I can tell you no more."

He ignored the heat rising in him, the pure lust and desire he felt at her closeness.

Erc stopped and looked down at her. "An unusual creature brings you to my wedding, Druidess."

She merely nodded.

"What am I to make of this? Of you?" She blinked at his words. He fell to his knees in front of her. "It is too much for me to bear you being here, Chiomara. Why do you torment me so?"

Her hands shook as they rose to his face. "Your torment is my torment, my king."

He took her hands and held them over his cheeks. "But you will not leave? You will stay and watch me wed another woman?"

She leaned over and cradled his head. "There is no other way."

"This is wrong," he murmured. But even as he said it, Erc grabbed Chiomara and brought her down onto him. "You torture me, Druidess."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and allowed him to cradle her in his lap. "Your wife will please you."

He stroked her soft hair, inhaled her sweet smell. "No one will ever please me such as you have."

Chiomara ran her fingertip over his lips. "My touch can be replicated if you will only allow it."

Erc shook his head and kissed her finger. "No woman will be a part of me such as you are."

"You know naught what you speak of, foolish king."

He brought Chiomara to the floor of the forest and covered her. "My need for you surpasses my foolishness. Will you have me again, Druidess, or will you deny me?"

Her lips parted, but no words came forth. He filled her lack of response with his kiss. When alas he drew away, Erc asked again. "Will you have me again?"

Chiomara touched his forehead. "Is it right for our souls?"

He brought his lips to her hand, then to her delicate cheeks. He traced her jaw line and rode down her throat. She arched as he pulled her gown lower, exposing her full, rounded breasts. "I will ask you one last time. Will you have me?"

Her moan became an answer. "I will have you again."

Would he regret this later? Was he making a mistake? Looking at her, feeling her so close, he did not care. Nothing could deny him this moment. Erc moved fast and took her before she could rethink her decision, for to deny a druidess's wishes was to sacrifice everything holy.

He knelt back and pulled her with him. She still wore her gown, and its folds encased them. There existed no better feeling than pushing deep inside her, feeling her dark, forbidden heat gather and clench around his manhood. Closing his eyes, he slowly moved within her and whispered, "You are so enchanting, Chiomara."

She brushed her thumbs over his cheekbones but said nothing. Erc opened his eyes, leaned forward and suckled her nipple. Head flung back, she cried out. Eager and impatient, he guided her hips and thrust harder, faster. Her lips fell apart, and she dug her nails into his shoulders. The pleasure was so intense that the world seemed to tilt. Her wail of release made him explode. Groaning, he wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close and shook with the raw lust and power unleashed betwixt them.

How would he ever let her go?

They held each other for some time. He wished he could stay in the moment forever, within her forever. But time was not something they had. In fact, they had stolen these precious few moments.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered into her hair.

"No," she murmured and kissed the edge of his lips gently. "Never be sorry."

Chapter Five



Chiomara did not return to the feast with Erc.

She was tired and sated and more heartbroken than ever. Why had she allowed such a thing to happen once more? The Gods had not ordered it in prophecy.

As Chiomara approached her hut, a great stir rose on the dark horizon. Curious, the druidess drifted back into the crowd. The people split apart as a chariot escorted by many warriors drew close to the fire. Erc stood and waited, Cormac by his side. The king stepped forward and took the hand of the woman as she stepped down.

The poet made loud the introduction. "Welcome, Macha Gabuideach, future queen of the Dalriada."

Chiomara gasped. His bride had arrived and was very beautiful, with hair the color of spun gold. Macha bowed and then Erc brought her hand to his lips. Her spirits sunk. But of course it had to be this way.

"What is this?" Eoghan, fellow druid, and enemy, came close by her side and kept his voice low. "I see well what you hide when you look at the king."

She put some distance between them. "And do you see well what I feel when I look upon you?"

He smiled. "What think you, Chiomara, loving a man such as him?"

"You will receive no answer to that."

With a flicker of his knuckle, he brushed her cheekbone. "We will see."

Cormac, with his garb of six colors that befit a poet of his rank, turned in her direction. "Chiomara Ruadh, Druidess of Ulster, come forth."

Oh no. This is too much. Yet, she would not let her emotions rule. Such a thing had already proven disastrous. She stepped free of the people and approached. Macha Gabuideach bowed her head to Chiomara. The druidess did the same and kept her eyes from Erc. Such an uncomfortable moment.

Macha was direct. "I remember you well, Druidess, and am pleased that you are here at such a time. I have asked the poet to recite the tale that is yours in regard to my clan, my tribe."

The people gathered closer around the broad fire. Erc smiled and nodded. "We will hear the tale told of Chiomara and her *ceo druidechta*, magic fog."

Chiomara inclined her head toward the king and held her silence. Ritual could indeed be a difficult thing at times. She listened to Cormac as he brought forth his words and remembered with fondness the day he spoke of. It was many years before and she but thirteen winters. Through her Goddess, the druidess had conjured up the fog of magi to mask the warriors of the Chieftain, Palagius Gabuideach, father to Macha. It was through this mist Palagius defeated his enemy and kept his clan whole.

Cormac recited his poem well, and Chiomara closed her eyes. It was on the eve of that battle that she first met Erc Breac. That which they could not speak of when they fulfilled their prophecy. He was not king, but a virulent youth. They knew of their destiny then, that many years later they must couple within the stones. And how eager they were for such a day. Their lips first touched beneath the oak. That which would be a symbol for them, their *crann bethadh*, tree of life.

Chiomara opened her eyes and found Erc. He stared back at her, and she knew that he thought of that time between them. How young they were. Had he also fallen in love with her in those cherished few moments? It almost seemed so by the intense way in which he watched her. The hungry, almost possessive way his eyes roamed her face from afar.

His mahogany hair shimmered against the glitter of his crown as Erc gave credit to Cormac. The poet had done well. The king held his arm out to Macha, and they turned to the night and the people.

Chiomara returned to her hut. She tossed and turned until she, at last, fell into a fitful sleep. Her fire burned low when Erc came to her. She was in the place between slumber and wakefulness when his whisper filled her heart.

"I cannot be without you, Chiomara."

She opened her eyes and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Nor I you."

When his lips lowered, she savored the sweetness of them. Sugar turned quick to venom. Gasping, she pushed him away.

Erc's visage faded to be replaced by another. Eoghan. He held down her shoulders.

"You forget the power I command, my Druidess."

Chiomara turned her head and spat his taste from her mouth. "It is a poor thing, Druid, this shape-shifting to serve such a purpose."

Eoghan's fingers caressed. "There is nothing poor about the feel of your lips beneath mine. Nor the way your blood pumps so heavily through your veins."

"You know that it does not pump for you. And it never will. Release me." She struggled against him and failed.

He gripped her tightly. "I carry a stronger magi than you woman. I can make you mine."

"You have only the gift to command by body. Never my spirit."

She began to chant as did he. If there was to be war between them, she would fight hard.

"Pull free from her, Druid."

Eoghan flew from Chiomara at the soft words. No druid wished to make an enemy of Fionn.

The mystical warrior glowed as he stepped forward. His weaponry sizzled with promise. "You have invoked the Dagna's wrath this eve, Eoghan Dubhdiadh. What say you to such a thing?"

"I beg forgiveness." The druid fell to his knees.

"So we will see if the great God hears your plea."

Fionn roared. "Now leave this woman in peace."

Eoghan stumbled from the hut and left Fionn, whose form turned to that of an old woman. She sat next to Chiomara. "Are you well, my child?"

Chiomara took her hand and nodded. "I am. You have my thanks, Fionn, brother."

She leaned over and kissed Chiomara's forehead. "Have you still the three rings I left for you?"

"Yes, Great One. What purpose do they serve?"

Fionn stood and became the warrior man again. "That is not mine to tell you. Just that when the time is right, you must release them, never to be yours again."

"It will be as you say." Chiomara nodded in acknowledgment.

Fionn of the Fianna, soldier, became light and vanished.

Chiomara sighed. She felt no attachment to the rings, only to the king. Now had Fionn asked her the same question about Erc, the answer would have been entirely different.

Chapter Six



Erc, king of the Dalriada, sat upon his throne before the hundreds gathered, Chieftains and commoners alike. Cormac sat nearby. It would be he who recorded and retold this day's events by campfire across the whole of 'Eire. She who would be his wife, Macha Gabuideach, nodded in acquiesce then lowered her eyes. His crown weighed heavy on his head. Macha was not his love, nor was he hers. Theirs was a match made at birth.

The time had come.

He stood and descended the stairs to her. When he reached the last step, Erc stopped. Chiomara was here. He could feel her essence. She would watch him wed.

Her beautiful eyes found his and Erc was unable to move. *Someone, anyone, say that this marriage is wrong. Gods above, let me have Chiomara for all time.* It felt as though the whole of the world swallowed him in that moment. He knew when he had first kissed her that no other would be his love. Only Chiomara. With her she brought change. When she offered him a sad smile, Erc chose his path.

His robes billowed behind him as he stepped past Macha and raised his arms at the masses before him. His voice was deep and true. "I will marry this day my people."

Cheers arose, but he ceased them with his hand. "I will marry the druidess, Chiomara Ruadh of Ulster."

Chiomara cried out and traced a symbol in the air.

Gasps of displeasure arose as Macha bowed her head and stepped back. It was his right to dispel his marriage contract. His risk to displease his people.

"You will do no such thing, Erc Breac, for she is mine." Eoghan stepped forth. He raised his hands and chanted the *glam dichenn* curse, that which would inflict injury on his enemy.

Fury flooded Erc. "How bold you grow, Druid. Have care before you fling your words at me."

As Eoghan made symbols in the air, he retaliated. "You will not have her. Take your Macha as wife and leave me my Druidess."

The king pulled free his sword and held it high. The people gasped, for to kill a Druid was sacrilege. Blue light filled the metal and crackled from its tip. "Step down, Eoghan Dubhdiadh, or I will end your life."

The druid's grin turned feral. "And risk your soul for having murdered such as I?"

"Make no mistake. I would risk everything for Chiomara Ruadh." Erc swung his sword in a wide arch over his head. Lightning poured from its tip and nearly reached the high ceiling.

Eoghan laughed and flung forth his curse, but it was halted by the king's magi sword. Erc cared nothing about his fate, nor the magi that was his, but became the warrior he was. He spun, leaned low and drove his sword up beneath the druid's ribcage into his heart.

Silence ruled the people as their king held tight to his blade and drove it deeper until his face was within inches of the druid's. When he spoke his tone held no regret. "Be gone, Eoghan Dubhdiadh, may you travel not to the light but to the darkness that is yours."

Erc released the sword and stepped away as the man gurgled then fell to his death.

He turned and held out his hand to Chiomara. "Take my hand in yours."

Eyes round, she shook her head.

"Take my hand in yours," Erc repeated, his tone low and intense.

Hesitant, she frowned and lowered her head.

"Please," he said softly. "Be with me. Love me."

Slowly, her head rose. Would she join him? Had he gone too far? It felt like his whole world froze as he waited.

Then her eyes met his, surprisingly determined. With a quick release of anxious breath, she nodded. It seemed she understood that they took a grand first step together. When her hand found his, he pulled her small form close. "So it will be. You and I will be together. My son, who grows within your womb, will not be without his Da."

The people of Dalriada were confused and distant. Murmurs of discontent rolled through the crowd then halted. Murmurs turned to expressions of awe. For on the dais of the king's throne appeared a man. He sat astride his black horse, Acein and held his cauldron, Undri. It was Dagna, Eochaidh Ollathair, the god above all the rest, the patron of Druids.

All bowed before him, including Erc and Chiomara. When Eochaidh spoke his voice was as thunder. "Rise, King of Dalriada and Druidess."

They did as he ordered and held tight to one another as he brought forth his verdict. "Erc Breac, you are forgiven the death of Eoghan Dubhdiadh this day, for he was evil and a druid no more."

All remained silent as the god's voice deepened. "If you join today as one, Erc Breac and Chiomara Ruadh, it will be with stipulation. Such change as this must bring forth repercussion. You will give your child to the land of Scots, that known as Scotland. There he will continue the Dalriada. If you marry and do not do this, Chiomara and her son will not survive childbirth."

Eochaidh pulled forth his club and held it high. It was well known that one end of the club could heal and other slay. A bright flash of light burst from his body, and he was gone.

Erc turned to Chiomara and encased her face in his strong hands. "Do not cry, my love. We will do as is requested by the Dagna. I will give you many more sons and daughters."

Tears soaked her cheeks, and she shook her head. "I will not forfeit my first born son."

She broke from him and ran. Sad, Erc turned to his kingdom and bid them celebration though there would be no marriage this day. He found only relief in Macha and released her from their pact. She had not wanted to be queen and felt no disgrace. After all, the gods had interceded.

He did not remove his long robes or his gold crown but pursued Chiomara into the forest as the king. Erc would not lose his Druidess.

Chapter Seven

Chiomara found her way to the oak grove cut by a stream. She knelt by the water and pulled forth her *coelbreni*, omen sticks. She tossed the hazel wands inscribed with Ogham upon the bank and leaned closer to inspect them.

"What do you see, my queen?"

Chiomara breathed deeply and tried to remain calm. Of course he had come. She raised her head. "I see you, Erc. I see that we are at a crossroad."

He knelt beside her and took her chin in his hand. His lips were close and his tone that of a warrior. "I will not let you go. Please do not ask it of me."

"You must." She seized his wrist and tried to push his hand away.

Erc released her face and wrapped his arms around her waist. He molded her body to his. "I have the authority to force you to marry."

She brought her hands to his chest. "But you will not. That is not the man you are."

He ran his lips down her neck, and Chiomara's head fell back. His words were a heated whisper against her skin. "I love you Druidess, from the moment I first saw you, until the day I die. Do not do this to me. Do not do this to us."

She kissed his forehead where his soul lay. "And I love you, my king. But I will not stay with you and lose our child. There are greater things than matters of the heart."

Chiomara pulled free of him and stood. Erc rose and gazed at her, his heart in his eyes. "You are right. I will not force you. Yet when you leave, you take my soul with you, for we are as one now. You are too deep inside of me for there to be any other."

She gathered her omen sticks and met his eyes one last time. "Someday I will return, my love. And with me will be your son. You will see then that my decision was the right one."

To say this was an easy decision would be a lie. She loved him so much. Placing her hand on her belly, Chiomara nearly wept. She brought her lips to the king's one last time before she turned. As she stepped away, a wind born of the sea blew her vision from her eyes and turned the stream into a cliff high above the ocean. The very same spot she had stood before she gave herself to Erc of the Dalriada.

His arms closed around her from behind and desire rode his voice. "Why have you brought us here?"

"It was not the druidess, but I, Brigit, that brought you here."

Chiomara and Erc turned to the Goddess and started to drop to their knees. She was beautiful encased in white light. "Do not kneel before me children of love. I come to you now because yours is a love that need survive."

Erc kept his arms around Chiomara as Brigit put forth her message.

"There will be many more children made between you. Children predestined." Brigit's iridescent hand covered Chiomara's womb. "This child is meant for greatness. Through this child will come the seed which will rule well a part of the land of Scots under the name MacLomain. Through him will come powerful magi and love stories to rival what starts here."

The Goddess, Brigit, then placed her hand first on Chiomara's heart and then her forehead. "Will you cease this truism, my mortal daughter? Will you not allow your son his true destiny as foretold by the *others*?"

Chiomara felt the stirring of the seedling just started. Her son. He already embraced his fate and knew well the love she felt for him. She placed her hand over him and wept more. Her

son would be happy, as would she. He would be well protected. "I will not deny my son." She looked to Erc. "Nor my king."

"I will need the three rings that Fionn gave you for they will be at the heart of future loves. I will hold them safe until they are delivered to the man from 'Eire who is meant to carry them to the New World."

Chiomara handed Brigit the three rings.

The Goddess smiled and raised her hands to the Heavens. "So be it, Druidess. Queen of the Dalriada."

A mist of loving light surrounded Erc and Chiomara and brought them through what would have been many turns of the moon in a moment, though no time passed on Earth. Their son was born and delivered to the land of Scots through the hands of the Gods. When, alas, the mist rolled away, the king and queen stood alone on the cliff.

Their memory of the man who was their first born son stood strong within their hearts. They would cherish him always.

Erc turned her in his arms and gazed deep into her eyes. "We will start anew, you who will be my wife."

Suddenly, free of the Gods and their prophecies, Chiomara smiled with shyness. "Aye, my love, we will start anew."

Her heart felt free and unburdened.

Under the sun and over the sea, the great king of the Dalriada brought his Druidess queen to the cliff floor. He loved her with a freedom that had not been theirs before.

And they started anew.

Fate's Monolith



The MacLomain Series

Book One

By

Sky Purington

The MacLomain Series- Book 1



Prologue



Tension fastened together the muscles in her shoulders and neck. "Have you the courage to kill me?"

"Aye." The burly, filth-ridden man aimed his weapon at her and narrowed his eyes. A calloused finger twitched on the bowstring.

"You have an enemy," she stated.

His muddy glare flickered with alarm. A stranger stood at the edge of the forest. Weaponless hands clenched and stretched his knuckles white. Immune to nature's movement, a blue and green wool tartan lay still against his muscular thigh. She absorbed the moment.

Him.

Thick, woodland trunks lined in strict formation behind him, ready for battle. Noble mountains loomed beyond, majestic and proud. Lethal emerald eyes narrowed on her captor.

Then, those eyes locked with hers.

Hungry lust sizzled between them. *Thud. Thud.* Her heart beat out of control. Breath ceased. Sweat trickled down her forehead. She couldn't tear her gaze from the man across the way, those parts of him she could see for he was never whole.

Horrible with power, wind seized the land. Her hair whipped and lashed her cheeks.

"Evil." The nearby warrior muttered a prayer under his breath. He released the arrow.

Arianna! Noooooo!

Time slowed. Silence enveloped. Flung back, she landed hard on her back. She gasped for air and wrapped cold hands around the shaft protruding from her chest. Compelled, she peered down at the warm fluid trickling over her hands. Blood. Her blood.

Turning her head, she once more locked eyes with the man across the way. Enraged eyes that wouldn't let her go as he ran toward her.

A wind born of mountain rain blew against her wound. Fresh pained seized her body. The world tilted, then started to fade. Panic robbed coherent thought. Everything began to drift away.

She'd finally met her end.

Chapter One



Salem, New Hampshire 1799

Am I blind? Why can't I see? Gasping for air, Arianna struggled to tear away the arrow only to realize she held the fabric of her nightgown. She blinked rapidly and tried to control the panic. Slowly, bit by bit, the dim room surfaced.

Releasing the cloth, she fisted her hands to stop the tremors. Her body shook as she untwisted from the sweat soaked blankets. The cold hardwood floor underfoot was sweet relief. She swallowed a small sob and worked to regain composure.

A plague of the mind, the same dream/nightmare had been a constant shadow now for ten years. It followed her year after year, forever intense and evasive.

As a child, the dream of death had terrified her. Now, she only wanted to piece the man together. Flashes of broad shoulders, dark hair, and verdant eyes teased her to near insanity.

"Who are you?" The wooden walls of her bedroom gave no reply.

She shouldered into a robe and walked to the window. A bare expanse of dirt road lay empty below. Pale, gray clouds hung thin on the horizon of autumn wood line. Wind blew, and a mighty oak tree yawned and stretched. With a long armed knock, it rapped on the side of the house.

Arianna leaned her forehead against the windowpane and ran a fingertip down the cold glass. If she closed her eyes his face rose up as though he beckoned her. Needed her. But was only a figment of her imagination. Wasn't he? He had to be.

Staring down the lane, she wondered...would he someday walk up it and find her? Would she recognize him when he did? Enough! She had to stop doing this to herself. After all, it was All Hallows' Eve today.

Rolling the remaining tension from her shoulders, she turned and smiled. *The dress*. Many pricks to the fingers and inward curses flowed along the seams of the medieval gown.

Guilty of a competitive nature, she had made the twelfth century Scottish gown with this evening's festivities in mind.

"Take whatever you need and win," her uncle had urged back in July with a wink and a toss of a brown leather satchel full of coins.

The garment came to life over the months and now hung from the back of the closet door in silky, deep blue waves. The annual costume contest held at the Huntington's party would have one more masterpiece to contend with this year.

The water basin beckoned. She swept back her thick hair into a long braid and washed her face, then slipped into a white day dress.

Ahh. The sweet smell of apples drew her downstairs where Aunt Marie bustled around the kitchen. Bright red hair and wild curls struggled to defy her white cap. An apple juice stained apron clung to a comely figure. Slightly swollen, her stomach pressed against the smock where her pregnancy began to show.

"There you are." Cheer charmed Marie's words as she rushed over and gave Arianna a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I told Liam ye would be up the very minute my baking tickled yer wee bonnie nose." A chuckle bubbled forth, and pretty blue eyes flashed. Everyone knew Marie was giddy with pleasure when a Scottish brogue thickened her tongue.

"Mmm." Arianna smiled. "It smells so good down here."

"We've got our work cut out for us, lass." Happy with the challenge, Marie eyeballed the slew of food to be prepared for the evening feast. Every woman would bring a favorite dish to the event. Her aunt would arrive with at least half a wagon full of baked goods.

"The girls will awaken soon," Marie declared. "Which means we should take advantage of an empty space while we have it."

Arianna grabbed an apron and pursued Marie across the kitchen.

"There's a cup of tea on the table." Marie leaned over and carefully extracted a hearty loaf of pumpkin bread from the cast iron Dutch oven over the hearth.

"Thank you," Arianna murmured between sips, accustomed to her aunt's uncanny ability to always have the hot brew ready.

"Get to it." Marie handed her a clean griddle for muffin batter.

"I can't believe All Hallows' Eve is here already." Arianna stirred the batter full of cut apples and brown specks of cinnamon.

"Aye, the kelpies will be about tonight. I stayed up after you went to sleep last night and finished sewing the costumes for the girls..." Back turned, Marie continued to chatter.

Arianna set the pan of freshly scooped batter on the table, her thoughts adrift. Her death dream stranger haunted her. What would it feel like to touch him? The glimpse of a muscled arm and a small black braid skimming a square jaw filled her vision. She licked her lips. How would it feel to kiss him? What would he taste like? Agreeable warmth burned her cheeks. Face aflame, Arianna struggled to catch her breath.

Her aunt's voice cut through her reverie. "Lass, why are you blushing like that?"

Arianna fanned her face absently. "What?"

"Aye, you were thinking about him, you were." Marie said, pleased.

"How could you know?" Arianna replied without thinking. Not again. The minute a thought came into her head it rolled right out of her mouth. Marie couldn't know what consumed her thoughts.

"Well, it's obvious to everyone Edward has his eye on you," Marie provided. "Perhaps you've an eye for him as well."

Arianna's mind went blank. "Who?"

"Who, my arse." With a wink and a snicker, her aunt planted her hands on her hips. Arianna adjusted her expression one second too late, and Marie's eyes narrowed.

"We *are* talking about Edward." Marie cocked her head. "Aren't we?"

Arianna avoided Marie's gaze and placed scoops of batter onto the griddle. "Of course we are."

Edward was the son of Richard Huntington. He worked hard at the gristmill for his father. In due time, he would inherit the family business. Edward was everything Arianna's family could hope for her—ambitious, well educated, and smitten with their niece.

Thump. Thump. Grateful for the reprieve, she turned away when her aunt became distracted by the endless thumps from upstairs. Multiple feet pattered across the floor, then resounded in another thump. Muffled words were thrown back and forth as doors slammed.

"Get out of my way," one young voice yelled.

"I was here first," another voice retaliated and then screeched, "You spindly legged little mothball."

Before Marie made it half way across the kitchen, havoc let loose. It sounded as if two big bags of potatoes were thrown down the staircase as her daughters tried to outrun one another. As Marie reached the bottom of the staircase, Annie slammed face first into her thigh with Coira right behind her.

"How many times have I told you two not to run on the stairs?"

The children quieted under their mother's stern look. Annie, the youngest, sidled past her mother and skirted across the kitchen. She grabbed Arianna's hand and wrapped her free arm around the waistline of her nightgown.

Coira apologized to her mother. Proper, she walked as though a book balanced on her head. Back ramrod straight, she angled away from her mother. She stuck out her tongue, facial features going smooth and serene the moment Marie passed. Arianna glanced down at Annie in time to catch the same sentiment retreat back into her mouth.

"Grab yer aprons you little scoundrels." Marie issued two small aprons to her daughters and removed a kettle of porridge from the hearth for their breakfast.

As the hours ticked by on the grandfather clock, the family labored together. Arianna prepared the recipes with her aunt, Annie mixed the batter, and Coira washed any kettles, bowls or spoons they finished with.

Marie believed that the chefs should always sample their creations to ensure quality taste. Good parental cooking beliefs belied the promise of full bellies. Hence, when the hour arrived, heavy eyelids graced the children, and they went peaceably for their noontime naps.

After everything was set aside and ready for travel, Arianna decided to make the best of her free time. The barn beckoned. Liam had purchased horses for both Arianna and Marie five years earlier.

She named her horse after the Scottish loch that bordered the village of her childhood. Buckskin colored, Fyne had a black tail and a mark much like a Celtic cross on her forehead.

A whinny welcomed Arianna from the nearest stall. Fyne poked her head out and nuzzled the side of Arianna's hair. She opened the door and stepped beside the great beauty.

"Hullo, my luv." She kissed Fyne's forehead. Arianna only allowed her long abandoned Scottish brogue to erupt when she was with Fyne.

She mounted the horse and scowled at the expensive saddle on the wall. She much preferred to ride bareback. Comfortable, Arianna grabbed the thick, leather lead line attached to the halter.

The two became one as Fyne led her out the backside of the barn into the New England woodland. She let the horse take the lead. Uncle Liam would've had a fit.

"You lead the horse, the horse never leads you."

What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Trees rushed by as Fyne ran through the forest. Alive in flight, the horse skirted in and out of tree trunks. Arianna blinked against wind-spawned tears. The fresh scent of potential snow mixed with pine. A light pull on Fyne's rein slowed her gate as they drew up to her favorite spot. She swung off the horse, rewarded Fyne with a quick pat and tied her to a tree.

Arianna stood at the threshold of ancient stone formations. The town called the Stonehenge Pattee's Caves. She ducked into the largest chamber with two dark passages in the shape of a "T". Mysticism and melancholy housed here. She ran a hand along the cool, jagged wall.

Arianna stopped short. Had the ring on her finger just glowed? No. It must've been her imagination. The ring consisted of two hands coming from separate directions holding a crowned

heart at the center. Twirling it on her finger, she continued to stroll and recalled the eve she'd received the trinket. It was about a year after she and Aunt Marie had fled the Highland Clearances in Scotland. The event had left her traumatized and without parents. Luckily, her young mind had repressed whatever happened.

Regardless, she'd become a withdrawn little girl until Liam had come into their lives. His warm disposition had healed her immensely. The night before they'd set sail for America he gave her the delicate ring saying simply, "I want you to have this, lassie. It's a family heirloom from Ireland, one of only three. It is to let you know that I will treat you as one of my own. Mayhap one day, there will be more of its kind."

Since then, Arianna had cherished the piece. To her, it symbolized love and new beginnings.

Further along the woodland path, she stopped in front of a wide, spear-like monolith positioned in the ground. This was one of three placed at astrological edges of an unseen border that surrounded the original chambers. On occasion, Arianna would watch the Northeast horizon welcome the sunrise in alignment with this particular stone.

She ran her hands over the abrasive surface and stared at the slice of land beyond. Late October yearned for winter. Very little time was left. Soon, heavy drifts of snow would cake the landscape.

Lost in contemplation, her vision blurred. Unable to move, frosty air steamed and compressed around her. Total silence engulfed the area. Vibration emanated from the stone. *Oh my Lord.* It ran from her fingers, crawled up unsteady arms and massaged her center.

Trancelike, Arianna watched everything change.

The ground deep with copper leaves and drowsy trees awoke as though it were spring. Long grass sprouted and twisted a path of dark green. Arched, feathery ferns swayed, cocooned beneath a heavy canopy of lush leaves.

With a backdrop of sapphire sky, white clouds swelled, flattened on the bottom, and then spindled upward. A combination of new earth and clean spice filled the air.

"I'll find you." A masculine voice rode the warm, salty wind.

Suction fused her to the monolith.

Now loose, Arianna's braid unraveled and her long hair whipped forward. She struggled to see past the tornado of locks. A horrible roar passed over. Unable to use hands to cover her ears, she endured what sounded to be the thunderous heartthrob of an immortal god.

Then it stopped.

Dead silence.

Her hair dropped, and gravity gave loose legs ground. Instinct and reflex made Arianna grab the top of the stone. *Air! I need to breathe air!* Trying to calm herself, she took slow, deep breaths.

As quickly as it had happened, it was gone. The new grass, springtime trees, and warmth...all gone. Was she mad? She pushed away from the stone abruptly. Her knees buckled, and she fell backward landing with a heavy thump on a log.

This was all becoming too much to handle. It was one thing to dream about a man over and over again but to actually hear him? Pure insanity. She sat for several minutes until she felt calm enough to leave. The last thing she needed to do was worry her aunt and uncle.

Twenty minutes later she was heading back into the house. As she passed the swing hanging from the old oak, she gave it a push.

"That was me first order of business," Liam said. He stood in the doorway, smiling.

"Aye, you were a good uncle and still are." She leaned back to eye the two knots, which supported either rope high above. "You chose a good, sturdy branch."

He laughed. "If I recall correctly, you picked that branch, I wanted the other one."

"Thank God for good, Scottish sense," Arianna said. Back in 1791, the branch Liam had thought preferable cracked and fell one blustery morning.

"Where would I be without it?" He shook his head. "Come in lass and join us for a bit."

She followed him inside.

Liam pulled a chair away from the kitchen table. "My lady."

"Thank you." Arianna plunked into her usual chair.

"Edward Huntington stopped by while you were gone." Marie slid a cup of tea her way. "I think he's wanting to court you, lass."

She should've known he'd be by. After all, she allowed him a kiss but a day ago. "Aye, he's a nice man."

"Good catch, that lad," Liam said. "You'd do well to consider his offer."

"He's made no offer *yet*," Marie winked.

Arianna rolled her eyes. The two were determined to see her wedded. Even though she'd kissed Edward, could she really marry him? Love him? Strangely enough, she felt almost obligated to this mystery stranger who didn't even exist. The thought of committing to another man felt almost...dishonest.

"So where have you been off to love?" Marie asked Arianna. Absently, she intertwined the fingers of one hand with Liam's upon the table.

"I took a ride through the woods."

"Quite the ride Arianna, you've been gone nearly four hours."

Four hours? Impossible. A strange sensation rolled through her when she glanced out the window. She frowned. Marie was right. It was late in the day. No doubt, the lost time occurred at the monolith.

"I must have lost track of time," she explained. "I was at Pattee's caves again."

A brief flicker of tension passed between Liam and Marie. Or Arianna thought that's what she sensed. Before she had a chance to further analyze the odd exchange, Liam spoke.

"Is your costume ready to claim this year's grand prize?" Eager anticipation lit his face.

"Bloody hell right it is." She clamped a hand over her mouth at the vulgar admission.

"That's the O'Donnell spirit." Marie tore her hand from Liam's and slammed her palm on the table. Eyes round as saucers, her cheeks turned rosy with excitement.

She fought the urge to correct her aunt's choice of words. Marie may be an O'Donnell at heart, but Arianna would always be a Broun. Immediately after her aunt and uncle married, her family surname became a middle name.

Liam pushed away from the table. "We leave in a few short hours, and the sun will soon set. You ladies best have yourselves prepared." Liam kissed his wife on the mouth and his niece on the cheek. "The children are outside playing Graces. I believe I might join them for a bit."

An hour later, a wealth of baked goods were tucked into the back of the wagon, and Arianna stood at the window combing out her hair. The sun hid below the tree line. Deep orange flooded the western sky. Liam and Marie stood close together by the wagon below. Did they realize it was time to get ready?

A red and black tartan was neatly folded and placed on the large trunk at the end of the bed. She scooped it up and held it against her chest. This meager wool blanket was all that was left of

her parents. Somehow, Marie had managed to salvage the family plaid when they fled the Clearances.

She sat on the bed. What a strange day. The monolith and the odd loss of time all fought for precedence in her thoughts. Absently, she twisted a long strand of moist hair around her finger.

The room shimmered. Entranced, she marveled when nearly black hair blended with golden-red. For a brief moment, she wondered at the whiteness of her hand against such a color.

Arianna's eyelids turned heavy as she followed the dark strands inch by inch. *Oh!* Her breath caught when she met powerful green eyes.

Though unable to focus, she knew it was he.

The Scotsman from the edge of the forest sat close beside her on the bed, huge and possessive. The same blue and green tartan spread across his strong thighs and wrapped over a well-muscled shoulder. Her throat tightened. Her mouth went dry.

Arianna squinted but couldn't make him complete. How she longed to see his face. She inhaled deeply. He smelled wonderful and masculine, like spice and wood. An intoxicating combination of fresh cut cedar, pine, and new grass.

Unable to move, she felt the back of a large, tender hand touch and roam her sensitive jaw line.

Painful and urgent, an anxious heart pounded against her ribs. His bold hand fell and fingered the plaid strewn across her legs. Torment magnified the verdant intensity of those sensual eyes. His eyes, the kind designed to seduce.

A deep, beautiful Scottish brogue rumbled within his chest. "I am sorry, but you are destined to marry a MacLomain."

Though fascinated, irritation preceded all else. "Who are you to tell me whom I will marry?"

Heat stifled her. His eyes narrowed and turned such a deep shade of green one might think them black. She could see his lips, wide, not too full, but not too thin, perfect. They wore a crooked grin.

There were no more words. His arm moved fast and wrapped around her waist. Hot, hard flesh pressed against her. So close, but where was he? Why could she only see bits of him?

The physical affect he had on her was immediate. She wanted to run her fingers over his skin, feel the shape of his face, the texture of his hair. Fire, liquefied and fast, spread throughout the lower half of her body and she groaned. Clenching her thighs, the bold urge to taste his lips overwhelmed and she leaned forward.

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About the Author



Sky Purington is the bestselling author of over thirty novels and several novellas. A New Englander born and bred who recently moved to Virginia, Sky was raised hearing stories of folklore, myth, and legend. When combined with a love for nature, romance, and time-travel, elements from the stories of her youth found release in her books.

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