



K9 MINE

SHANNON
MACLEOD

K9 MINE

Prologue

Ireland, AD 512

Brú na Bóinne

“FIRE!”

The roar of the engulfing flames, the crashing as wooden buildings collapsed, and the chorus of panicked screams behind her began to fade as she ran—a welcome thing. Acrid black smoke choking the air burned her lungs. Her legs, unused to so much activity, screamed in protest. This dark, forbidding forest had no clear path in the hours before dawn, and her thin, shapeless gown caught the grasping hands of each branch and bramble. Her dirty, bare feet, she was sure, found every sharp thorn, splinter, and acorn littering the ground. There would be bruising later from the many falls and blows, but later would be time enough to worry about it. At this moment, she had much greater troubles.

Those poor wretches she thought of as sisters refused to flee when the opportunity presented itself. She last saw them huddling together like frightened sheep, watching their dwelling house burn with dull, despairing eyes.

“One is missing—find it!”

One deep voice rang above the chaos—Ansgar. Younger than the other druids, he had been a warrior first and still had a strong, robust body under his elder robes. Soul numbing terror made her push harder, for his chances of catching her were greater than any of the others. And he was known to be crueler than most when encountering what he considered disobedience.

While dreams of escape had been constant, the opportunities were few. Her first thought—her only plan— was to somehow reach the portal she had seen the brothers use. She knew not the sacred words to recite before entering, but made a wish that her heart’s intent would be enough. She no longer prayed to their gods; they had proven deaf to her pleas ages ago.

Faster.

The heavy lunula collar banged against her collarbones with each jarring step. The binding spell prevented removal, inflicting excruciating pain upon the wearer until released. She had ceased trying to take it off some years past but vowed to find a way once she gained her freedom or die in the attempt.

Faster, faster.

The heavy footfalls behind her drew closer as she burst into the moonlit clearing. She raced toward the stone circle in the middle of the field with a speed she never knew she possessed. Inside the ring stood a massive dolmen, dwarfing the smaller stones. She did not know their true purpose, but as the grand seasonal rituals took place here, she knew it must be a site of great power.

The forest shuddered in anger, and she glanced back in time to see the large shape explode from the line of trees. Ansgar's gaze swept around the field before coming to rest on her, and he bellowed like an enraged bull, then continued the chase.

Faster, faster, faster. Her heart slammed against her chest, fluttering like a bird's wings. She reached the first of the standing stones and scrambled to the center as his rhythmic chant reached her ears. *Raising energy, she knew. Must not let him... someone... save me...*

She dared a last glance back, but this time toward the only home she had ever known. 'I will return for you,' she vowed, 'I swear it.' With one great leap, she dove into the shimmering space beneath the table stone of the great dolmen. With no clear destination in mind and escape born of desperation as her sole intent, she tumbled headfirst into the infinite blackness.

CHAPTER 1

Modern Day

Summer in the Deep South

Corporal Travis Ewan McLean of the Cherry Grove Police Department considered himself an overall happy guy—just not today.

He groaned into the pillow as his phone's snooze alarm went off for the umpteenth time. He needed to get up, throw on some clothes, and head home. That was what he had to do. The disappointment from this trip hit him harder than usual, and he wasn't interested in getting out of the cozy, if somewhat lumpy, motel bed.

Figuring he couldn't put it off any longer, he resigned himself to getting up. He fumbled for his phone to silence the alarm but, still stalling, paused to check his messages. He went by lots of names—Trav to his friends, McLean at the precinct, and a plethora of colorful obscenities from the people he arrested. After hearing the ranting, rambling voicemail from his now ex-girlfriend, he added *coldhearted, obsessive asshole* to the list.

We are DONE, Travis. You hear me? D-O-N-E.

Disentangling himself from the sheet and throwing back the covers, he walked naked to the bathroom. Even though they had dated on and off for the last year, he wasn't too broken up about the relationship ending. Lori Ann was sweet when she wasn't all riled up, but he'd figured out quickly that the beautiful blonde was what his brothers in blue called a badge bunny—drawn to the uniform first and the man second. Still hot, though. He'd give her that. Years of collegiate tennis and beach volleyball competitions had done wondrous things for that woman's body.

He twisted the transparent plastic knob, lifted the button to turn on the shower, and dangled his hand into the spray, waiting for the water to get hot. Her demands on his time had increased over the last couple of months, and he suspected she had commitment on her mind. He snorted with amusement at the thought. *I'd rather reenlist and go back to Bagram—better odds of survival.*

He grabbed a fast shower and shaved. With one of the thin motel towels tied precariously around his lean hips, he quickly swept the modest but comfortable room, stuffing his belongings into a worn army duffel bag. Cold air conditioning hit the moisture still clinging to his exposed skin, and he hastened into his jeans and a clean polo shirt.

Heaving another deep sigh, he plopped down on the single overstuffed chair to tug on his short boots. Suddenly, the jarring ringtone of "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap" filled the small room. Travis grinned, seeing his cousin/best friend's name on the caller ID.

"Hey, cuz." He pressed *speaker* and tossed the phone onto the bed to finish getting dressed.

"Where are you?" Mike demanded without preamble. "I just went by your house."

"Motel outside Columbia off I-20. I told you I was driving up to look at puppies this weekend."

"Yeah, I forgot. You alone? Is it one of those rent-by-the-hour no-tell motels?"

Travis laughed. "Yes, I'm alone, and no, it's a fine, upstanding establishment."

"I don't hear any yapping, so I'm guessing you didn't get one. How come you didn't take Lori Ann with you?"

"Jesus. Say that again, but this time, hear yourself," he said with a snorting laugh. "She left me a screaming breakup voicemail last night."

Mike's tone changed to one of concern. "You good?"

"Oh, one hundred percent," he assured him. "She's been dropping hints lately about taking it to the next level. I've been eyeing the door for a while, but I'd rather let her think that ending it was her idea."

"You don't owe her that. She'll drag your name through the mud every chance she gets."

Travis snickered. “She won’t be the first one to try that. And you know the good girls can’t resist the challenge of setting a bad boy on the path to righteousness.” He took the phone into the bathroom and towel-dried his wet hair. “Anyway, what you got going on today?”

“We’re all going to watch the game and shoot pool at Rocket’s, wanted to see if you’re in the mood to lose some cash. And I need my wingman—the new Dispatch trainees said they’d be there,” he said, his voice taking on a teasing note.

“Hell no—if there’s money involved, I’d rather face you on the firing range than over a pool table. I know you couldn’t hit water if you fell out of a boat. You don’t practice enough.”

“Asshole—I’m getting better.” Mike laughed. “But I can still whup you on the par three.”

“You can hit a golf ball three hundred yards. I can hit a golf ball *at* three hundred yards. We are not the same.”

“Alright, you got me there. But you’re right; my pool skills are on point.”

Travis finger-combed his hair into a slightly ruffled look, tilting his head to ensure he didn’t miss any spots. “Parting a tourist from his hard-earned money isn’t a good look, Detective Reynolds. Hustling coworkers isn’t nearly as frowned upon unless it’s me. Anyway, I can’t—I’ve still got a three-hour drive to get home, and I switched shifts with Carter. My ass has to be in the seat for roll call by oh seven hundred.”

“Jesus, you patrol guys and your crack o’ dawn schedules,” Mike complained. “If you change your mind, that’s where we’ll be.”

“Make good choices. And be careful with those trainees. I saw them this week—I’d say better than half look like they’re ready to fill their plates at the badge buffet.”

“Path to righteousness. Got it.”

As a group, police officers tend to be superstitious, wearing lucky items or engaging in rituals for protection known only to them. Travis was no exception. He picked up the plain beaded chain next to his phone on the nightstand, rubbing his thumb absently over the raised letters on the dog tags. He paused to read his parents’ names before slipping it on, wearing their love as his invisible suit of armor.

I could sure use some of their insight right about now. His mother had the gift of seeing straight through to a dog’s soul, knowing at first glance which pups would find joy and purpose in working and which would be happier as couch potatoes. His dad used training techniques he had never seen before or since, and the results were nothing short of astonishing. Travis learned them all. He knew he was ready for a working dog of his own.

Lately, he had spent all his weeknights searching online and his weekends scouring every breeder east of the Mississippi for that perfect pup. He had seen hundreds but hadn't found the one he clicked with. Hence, he supposed, Lori Ann's exit.

Not much loss there, he mused. He never lacked feminine companionship, and when absent, it was by his own choice. He grinned at himself in the mirror, the dimples preserving a boyish charm in his otherwise ruggedly handsome face. *Now, who would've thought my perfect girl was a four-legged brunette?*