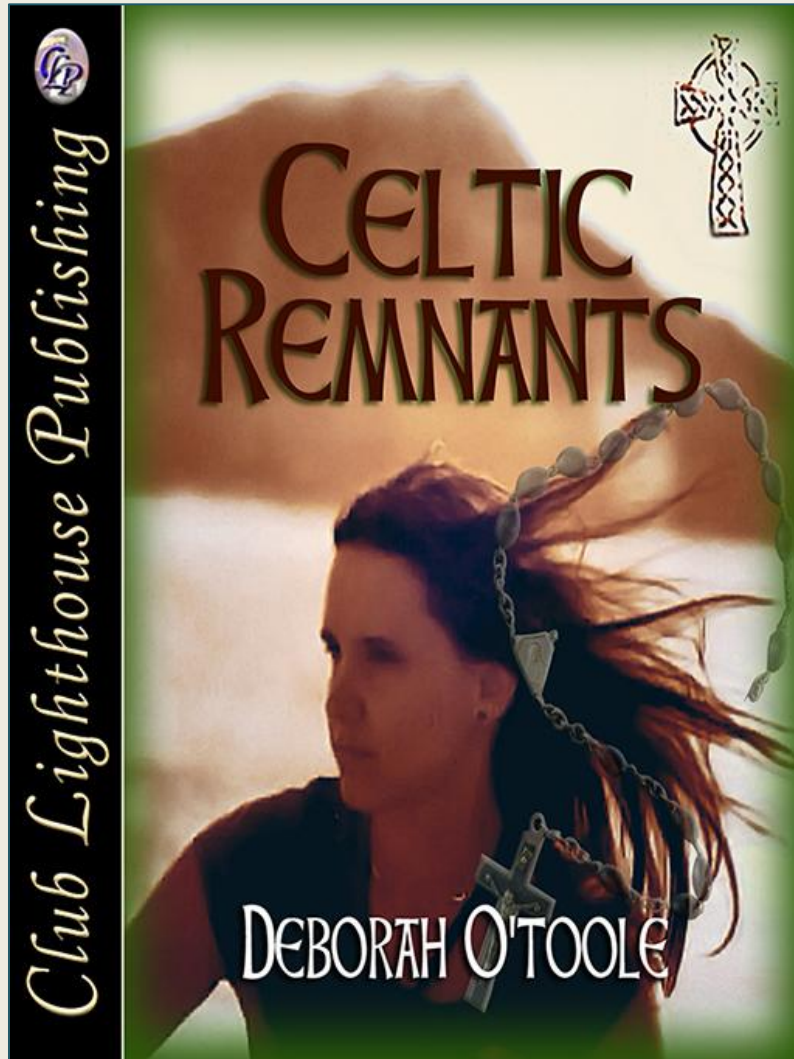


Special Holiday Excerpts from:
Celtic Remnants

By Deborah O'Toole



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ABOUT "CELTIC REMNANTS"

Celtic Remnants by Deborah O'Toole is a novel of enduring love and betrayal set in the political turbulence of Ireland, glamour of London and the wilds of Scotland.

A young girl is shaped by horrific events which change her life forever. After Ava's brother and parents are killed by British soldiers, she vows to avenge their deaths as she picks up the pieces of her shattered world.

Before she can move on, Ava falls in love with handsome nobleman David Lancaster, eldest son of a belted Earl. Their relationship ends dramatically when his family refuses to accept her. Afterward, Ava sets her life on a course of violent revenge in the name of political justice with her childhood friend, Tim O'Casey.

Unable to forget Ava, David hires a private investigator to look for her years later. When he finds her, Ava is hardened by more than a decade on the run and wants nothing to do with him. However, after being injured during an ambush in the English countryside, Ava and Tim go to David for help. He spirits them off to a remote Scottish hunting lodge to heal.

Momentarily safe amidst the rugged beauty, Ava begins to wonder if she can give up her deeply-felt political beliefs to build a normal life with David. Or will happiness forever elude them?

Can Ava relinquish her political convictions, even for love?

Celtic Remnants was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

For more, go to:

<https://deborahotoole.com/celtic/>

*Read special holiday excerpts from **Celtic Remnants** by Deborah O'Toole.*

Wounded and on the run from the law, Ava Egan holes up at a remote Scottish hunting lodge to heal during Christmas . . . Momentarily safe amidst the rugged beauty, Ava begins to wonder if she can give up her political beliefs to build a normal life with David Lancaster, son of a belted Earl and the only man she has ever loved . . .



***Celtic Remnants** was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.*

CELTIC REMNANTS: Christmas Excerpts from Chapter 17

*Christmas 1992
Pikestaff Lodge
Daviot, Scotland*

CHRISTMAS MORNING CAME with a flourish of bright sunlight, which only lasted a short time. It was quickly replaced with a fast deluge of dark clouds and heavy snow.

David awoke in his bed feeling refreshed, remembering the previous day. His room was a few doors away from Ava, but he had gone to bed without seeing her again. She had fallen asleep shortly after dinner, and although he kept peeking in on her, she never awakened. Bart teased his friend: "She'll be there in the morning, Davey. She needs rest to recover. Ava is not about to sprout wings and disappear again, heaven forbid."

Instead, David spent the better part of the evening in the company of his daughter. Bart, Tim and Siobhan joined them as well, although Sophie begged off to her room. David sensed Sophie felt the need to return to her prayers on a daily basis, but did not want to dampen the mood of the group by saying so.

Bart and Siobhan eyed each other warily for the remainder of the evening, while Tim sat morosely by the fireplace, smoking cigarettes and drinking endless cups of coffee. David coaxed Chee into playing a game of chess after he placed the board on a small table by Tim. In typical fashion, Tim offered comments as he saw fit, especially when David lost a game to Chee.

"The Irish win every time," Tim had quipped as Chee clapped her hands together in delight. "The sooner you realize it, the better I'm thinking it'll be, Locksley."

David smiled in his bed as he remembered the evening. Chee was vibrant and happy, and seemed to enjoy herself. She offered to help him put away the chess board, and then proffered her hand in a good night shake.

He rose from his bed, thinking: "*I can't wait until her handshake turns into a big hug.*" Dressing quickly in a knit-sweater and a pair of jeans, he slipped on black canvas shoes and decided to go downstairs. He glanced at his wristwatch, noting it was six o'clock.

He went directly to the kitchen and flipped on the coffee maker. The house felt cold, so he went into the drawing room to light a fire in the grate. He looked over at the Christmas tree in the corner and shook his head. They arrived at Pikestaff on such short notice the only tree he could find was located in Daviot Wood, which he felled with Tim's help yesterday afternoon. There was no time to decorate the tree or adorn it with lights, so it stood alone and naked.

He lit the fire in the grate, touching a long match to paper spills to ignite three wood logs. He walked over to the tree and noticed there were plenty of presents underneath, which amazed him. Who had time to shop for gifts? Sophie and Siobhan had gone into the

village the day before and returned with several packages, but David had no clue as to their contents. He felt himself flush a deep red: he had no presents for anyone, but in all truth there had been no time prepare. What could he possibly give Ava or Chee, anyway? He didn't know Chee well enough to be familiar with her preferences. Did she like toys? Games? Books?

"Penny for your thoughts," he heard Ava's voice from the doorway. He swung around to look at her.

His eyes widened when he saw Ava leaning against the frame of the door, one hand gripping the outer edge. Despite her pale complexion, she had managed to dress herself in a pair of beige sweat pants and a dark blue sweater. Her long hair was combed and free, and her eyes were alert and bright. She seemed to be mocking him with her gaze, with one eyebrow characteristically raised in question.

He flew to her side. "What are you doing out of bed? You shouldn't be moving around. How in the hell did you get down the stairs?"

"Very carefully," she replied dryly. "Didn't you hear me? Were you so lost in your own thoughts you didn't notice the thumping sounds I made hopping down on one leg?"

He touched her arm. "Bart will kill you. Let me carry you to a chair."

She laughed. "You'll seize any excuse to get me into your arms, won't you?"

Ignoring her comment, he bent slightly and lifted her carefully yet effortlessly into his arms. Her hands circled around his neck. She moaned as he moved toward the chair by the fireplace.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked.

"It's just the movement," she said softly. "It jars my hip, but I'm okay."

When she spoke, her breath fanned his cheek. He felt his heart flutter. She molded against him as he carried her, and he could feel the slightness of her frame. A surge of protectiveness came over David, and he marveled at it. He never thought of Ava as vulnerable or in need of help, but she was both of those things right now. He came to a stop in front of the chair, still holding her in his arms. He looked into her eyes. She returned his stare, their faces merely an inch apart.

He tilted his head and kissed her, desire for her overcoming common sense and knowledge of her possible anger. The second his lips touched hers, a thousand memories came flooding back to him, hidden and denied for twelve long years. It was as if he had never left her; kissing her was like coming home, and it thrilled him to his core. He parted her lips with his own, and began to explore her mouth. He closed his eyes naturally, although part of him knew he did so from fear of reprisal and her accusing stare.

But Ava wasn't shocked or angered by David's actions. She admitted to herself that she wanted him to kiss her. She responded in kind, placing her hands on the back of his head to pull his face closer to her. She felt like a starving woman finally being offered a feast. Ava drank of David and relished in him, having denied herself for so long, yet she cursed her weakness and then felt awe in one fell swoop.

He could sense Ava was losing her breath. Regretfully he stopped kissing her, but did not relinquish his hold on her. He was not about to let her go now.

Ava looked at him through sleepy eyes. When she spoke, her voice came as a whisper: "Are you happy now, David Lancaster?"

David chuckled as he lowered Ava into the chair. He was careful to ease her down gently. She let go of him slowly, still looking up at him. "You always manage to twist the truth," he said with humor. "*Am I happy now?* I didn't seem to notice your loud protests over the matter."

"You took me by surprise," she insisted, but her eyes were dancing.

"You had plenty of time to stop me," he declared.

She lowered her eyes, suddenly feeling very shy. "I know."

David regarded her warmly, his entire body flushed with heat. "Would you care for a cup of coffee?" he asked.

She glanced at him, a tentative smile on her face. "I'd love a cup. Remember, I only take cream."

"Yes, I know." He bent over and kissed her quickly on the mouth. "Sit tight and I'll be right back."

She raised her eyebrow at him. "I don't think I'll be running any races today," she told him sardonically. "Unless it's a one-legged arse-kicking contest."

He laughed. "You'd win hands down, my dear."

"Or arse-down," Ava muttered as David left the room to fetch coffee.

She leaned back into the chair, noticing its high-back and wide armrests. It was an antique, of course. Even in their far-flung vacation homes, the Lancaster's only had the best. Her eyes roved around the room. She smiled as she saw the Christmas tree. Chee had told her about the tree yesterday, that it had no decoration but stood proud all by itself. Chee liked the tree as it was, declaring it was "as pure as God made it."

Ava looked at the four tall windows in the room, all of which were covered by sheer curtains with heavy damask shades of dark burgundy. One of the shades was partially open, where she saw snowfall careening against the window pane. The light from the fireplace illuminated the room with a warm glow, reflecting off the table lamps and oak walls in the room. The furniture was old and overstuffed, but seemingly of good quality. It was quiet and peaceful, and for a change Ava felt her instinctive wariness diminish a notch. She closed her eyes and laid her head against the chair's backrest.

When she awakened that morning and decided to go downstairs no matter the effort, she hoped David would be there alone. And he was. She was perplexed by her softening regard for her former nemesis. Ava had been so angry with David for so long, but he had pulled through this time by bringing her and Tim to safety. Seeing David again had chipped away at her deep-seated anger. She was fed up with being in a rage over him. It was debilitating, and a waste of time. She knew she could say it was for Chee's sake, but it

wasn't the only reason. Ava had buried her feelings for David so deeply they resurfaced only because she was forced to be near him by rote of circumstance.

The tranquility of Pikestaff Lodge made Ava languid, as did the knowledge David would never betray her to the authorities. One nagging worry in the back of her mind was the possibility locals from Daviot Village might be roused to suspicion, but the lads on the "fringe" were keeping an eye on things. Ava made a mental note to somehow recompense Mike Creed and Jeff Mullen for their time at Daviot during the holidays.

"I'd give more than a penny for *your* thoughts," David said softly as he stood before her, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand.

Ava took the cup gratefully. "Thank you." She sipped the brew and smiled. "Actually, I was thinking how peaceful it is here. The solitude is lovely, and the snow falling on Christmas morning is just perfect."

He pulled over a large footstool from near the fireplace, placing it next to her. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if he could come to her room tonight, but he held himself in check. "*Let the day bring what it may,*" he thought, scolding himself. "*If I rush things now, she's apt to get nervous. You need to calm down, Locksley. Let events transpire naturally.*"

She sipped her coffee again. "Did you call your family?"

He made a show of rolling his eyes heavenward. "I telephoned Amber Court and spoke with my father. He wasn't too pleased, but that's where I left it. I told him I wouldn't be coming home for the so-called festivities. He made a bit of a ruckus, but here I am so no worries."

"What about Bart's father?" She wanted to know. "Is he upset?"

"Bart called him and broke the news. Guildford is a good egg. He knows he'll see Bart before the holiday season is over, so he didn't complain much."

"What in bloody hell are you doing out of bed?" Bart bellowed from the doorway of the drawing room, startling both David and Ava.

He stepped into the room, advancing on them. He was dressed in blue-print pajama bottoms and a white tee-shirt. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were bleary, the lower half of his jaw darkened with beard growth. He was barefoot as well, forcing David to smother a laugh. It was unlike Bart to parade around in such a manner. He was usually dressed to the nines with not a hair out of place, even when he adorned casual garb.

"I feel better," Ava defended herself. "I made it down the stairs quite well, thank you. Bart, this is Christmas morning. I wasn't about to hold court from my bed like one of your bloody queens."

Bart came to a stop in front of her chair. He still appeared disgruntled as he felt her forehead, took her pulse and looked at her eyes, holding one of her hands all the while. Ava accepted his ministrations calmly. Finally, he let go of her hand.

"Your color is better," he admitted, surprised. "How is the pain?"

"Still there, but better than yesterday," Ava replied, finishing her coffee and handing the cup to David. "I tell you, I feel fine. I won't try and do too much today. I'll just stay

downstairs while Chee opens her gifts, maybe have a bit of breakfast, and then I'll go back to bed. I promise."

Bart seemed appeased for the moment, so David spoke up: "I have to ask. Why are you looking so out of sorts, my friend?"

Bart flushed slightly. "I didn't sleep well. I kept tossing and turning. I could hear Siobhan and Sophie talking in the room next to mine."

Ava chuckled. "You're still soft on Siobhan, aren't you Quantrill?"

"Not in the least," Bart said quickly. "I simply couldn't sleep over the noise."

"My bloody hell," Siobhan said cheerfully as she walked into the room. She came to stand next to Bart, glancing at him. "We quit talking at midnight because Sophie fell asleep. How do you account for the other five hours?"

Ava started to laugh as Siobhan ribbed Bart. David allowed himself to watch the friendly interplay, warmth filling his heart. The scene reminded him of the old days when they spent the summer in Monasterboice so many years ago. Only now all four of them were older and hopefully wiser. There was a glimmer of sanguinity in David's mind that somehow Bart and Siobhan would get back together. There was nothing keeping them apart, no ugly history and certainly no recriminations.

"*Unlike Ava and me,*" David thought with a quiet sigh. "*We have so much baggage, and so much to get through.*"

* * *

CHEE WAS DELIGHTED Christmas morning. Despite the oddness of the circumstances, she couldn't remember when she'd had a better time with her mother, Siobhan, Sophie and Uncle Tim. It had nothing to do with gifts. It had to do with being family and enjoying the closeness of it. In Chee's case, she knew the peace and tranquility could be shattered at a moment's notice and her mother would be gone again.

Chee also felt surprising warmth toward David Locksley. She was prepared to dislike him - he was a *sasanach*, after all - but he was helping her mother, which alone made him shine bright in her eyes. He was awfully nice in general and *very* good looking. Chee was simply unable to resist David's charm.

The Egan family, along with Tim, Bart and David gathered in the drawing room at Pikestaff Lodge midmorning on Christmas day. The snow continued to fall heavily, so David added several more logs to the fire. Ava remained in her seat by the hearth, while Chee snuggled around her feet with a thick, multicolored comforter.

"Who gets to open a present first?" Tim asked, looking at Chee as he spoke.

She laughed. "Well, since I'm the only kid here, I suppose that would be *me*."

David chuckled at Chee's remark. She sounded so much like Ava, wording comments in the same cryptic vein without realizing it. It was uncanny, but fascinating. David

remained seated on the footstool near Ava, next to Chee. Bart couldn't resist taking a few photographs with the instant camera he purchased in Daviot Village the day before.

"The three of you make quite a picture," Bart muttered in David's ear as he handed him one of the instant pictures. David glanced down at the photograph. It depicted Ava in her chair, a light throw draped over her knees, with Chee at her feet and her head on Ava's knees. Ava's right hand rested atop Chee's head lightly, with her other hand poised on the chair's arm rest. David sat next to them on the footstool, his head turned slightly toward Ava as he gazed at her.

David nudged Ava and handed her the picture. She looked at it briefly. Then she met his eyes, where he saw slight tears forming. Despite her uncharacteristic show of emotion, he still could not read her or even attempt to guess what she was really thinking, but knew she was touched by the photograph.

Chee was opening the present from her mother. She chortled with glee when she finally saw it. She raised a leather jacket out of a box and held it up for all to see. "I've wanted one of these for *ages*," Chee exclaimed happily. "Mummy said I was too young, but this is just my size." She jumped to her feet and kissed Ava on the cheek. "Oh, thank you Mummy. I'll treasure it."

Ava regarded her daughter's shining eyes and broke into a grin. Chee was supremely happy, and it stirred her soul. "You nagged me long enough," Ava told her playfully. "Tim finally talked me into getting the jacket for you in London last autumn. He said he'd heard enough of your begging, too."

Chee giggled. "Whatever works, I always say."

Tim came over and put his arm around Chee's shoulder. "You're just like your mother," he said, pretending to be stern. "What in God's name will we be doing with *two* of you?"

"Love us twice as much," Chee responded, hugging Tim around the waist.

"And that I already do," Tim said softly.

The remainder of the gift-opening progressed rather quickly. It was unspoken among all that the holiday event and get-together was precipitated by unusual circumstances, with no one having time to shop properly for presents. Nonetheless, Ava was speechless when she opened the gift Chee made for her. It was a homemade book constructed from stiff cardboard paper, covered in needlepoint. The stitching depicted the Holy Trinity of Ireland, bathed in a milky green background. The contents of the book were in Chee's own handwriting, and related the history of Ireland as she saw it. The cover title was also stitched, and read: *My History of Éire by Shenachie Maura Egan, 1992. Given with love to my mother, Ava.*

Sophie spoke up from her place by the Christmas tree. "Chee worked on her book project for almost a year," she said proudly. "She insisted on doing everything herself."

Ava was stunned as she held the priceless gift in her hand, deeply moved by Chee's devotion. Then she set the book down on her lap and held out her arms to her daughter. Chee wrapped herself in the embrace.

Even David felt the hot seep of tears in his eyes as he looked at mother and daughter. Any doubts he may have had about Chee's happiness and well-being were completely erased in that moment.

* * *

THE DAY WAS long for Ava. She spent most of her time downstairs with Chee and David. Bart kept a close eye on her, chastising her if she attempted to move around too much. He thought it unwise she was up and about in the first place. Drawing out the day was pushing it.

By early evening, Ava was drooping and asked to be helped to her room. David volunteered, holding her elbow as she rose from the chair. When it was obvious Ava was in a lot of pain by the wince on her face and the quickening paleness of her complexion, David bent over and lifted her gently into his arms. By instinct, Ava wrapped her arms around his neck for safety. The closeness startled both of them, although each did well to hide it.

"I'll come, too," Chee said, following David from the drawing room.

Bart spoke from his place by the Christmas tree, where he was sitting on a small settee with Siobhan. "I'll be up momentarily to check on you, Ava. Please make sure she's comfortable, Davey, and I'll be right behind you."

"I can manage," David said over his shoulder.

Bart sighed, trying to be patient. "I also have to change the dressing on her wound. Would you like to take care of that, too?"

"I'll see you in a few minutes," David replied irritably. "I'll have her tucked in and ready."

"I thought so," Bart chuckled.

Ava was only half-listening to the repartee between David and Bart. She laid her head on David's shoulder, feeling quite drowsy. The rhythm of his walking was slow and gentle, and for the first time in many years she felt safe. In the space of a few weeks she had placed her entire life in his hands. She trusted him.

Her room was cool and dark when Chee flung open the door. David walked in, while Chee hurried over to the bed stand and flipped on the lamp. A dim glow flooded the room as David set Ava down on the bed gently. With obvious reluctance, she released her hold from around his neck and laid her head back onto the pillows. The relief was instant as she felt some of the pain in her hip subside.

"I'll build a fire in the grate," David said, looking down at her. She met his eyes, and smiled tremulously. "Thank you," she responded simply.

David walked over to the fireplace, while Chee began to fuss over her mother. "Let me take off your slippers," she said, tugging them from Ava's feet carefully. "I'll cover you up once Bart is done."

"Thank you, darlin," Ava said, regarding her daughter warmly. "This is quite nice, you know. You clucking over your old Mum."

"It's my turn," Chee teased her mother as she straightened out the bedspread. "Are you comfortable?"

Ava nodded. "Yes, love."

David began a fire in the grate. As he stood up to join Chee and Ava at the bed, Bart walked in.

"How are you feeling now, Ava?" Bart asked as he reached the bed. "I'm sure today has worn you out."

"I'm just tired, and a bit sore," she replied as Bart took her wrist and felt her pulse. "Otherwise I'm fine."

"You overdid it," Bart said, but only with mild disapproval. He knew the day had done wonders for Ava emotionally, so he was not about to lecture her.

"I know, doc," she sniped at him, but with a wide grin. "You're like an old woman in her dotage, you know?"

"I agree," David said as he came to the foot of the bed to watch. Chee was sitting on the end of the bed, glancing up at him with a smile in her face.

Bart looked to Chee and David. "Can the two of you go and gaze out the window for a few minutes? I need to change Ava's dressing."

Chee grabbed David's hand. "Come on. The sooner he's done, the sooner we can sit and talk with Mummy."

Ava noticed Chee's physical reach for David, but it did not surprise her. She had witnessed her daughter's affection for David all afternoon, and it was obvious she was developing a fondness for him. It warmed Ava, but scared her at the same time. She did not want Chee becoming too attached to David. It would only make it harder when it came time to leave.

David followed Chee to the window, where they stood looking out. Chee did not let go of his hand, but he didn't mind. The snow was falling lighter, and dusk was beginning to settle over Pikestaff Lodge.

Bart lifted Ava's gown and removed the dressing on her hip carefully. He looked it over, wiping it gently with a damp cloth. Ava grunted in pain as it was tender to the touch, but the look on Bart's face told her he was happy.

"It looks good," he murmured. "No sign of infection, and very little seepage."

"Thank God," she whispered. "How much longer will I have to be cooped up here?"

As Bart was bent over her, he glanced quickly in the direction of David and Chee by the window. "What's your hurry now, Ava?" he whispered. "Are you so anxious to get away

from David?" It was a point of discussion Bart had wanted to broach with Ava, even before coming to Daviot. She somehow sensed it, allowing the conversation to follow its course.

She was silent for a moment, as if she wasn't going to answer him. Then she replied, her voice so low Bart had to lean closer to hear her. "This little reunion hasn't changed anything. I still have to do what I have to do. Did you think a few days in David's company would change my mind?"

"Not exactly," Bart admitted.

"Besides, even if I *did* change my mind, it wouldn't magically erase the fact I'm wanted by the police."

"True."

"Nothing has really changed, Bart," she said softly as he changed her bandage. "It will never be different as long as conditions exist as they are. And I don't see it transforming for the better any time soon."

"I've no time to get into your politics, Ava," he said as he drew down her gown. "I'm not sure if I even understand what drives you, but I appreciate the time you've given David with Chee, even if she doesn't know who he really is. David will never forget what you have given him, however briefly."

"It's better this way," she insisted, keeping her voice low. "Trust me. Our lives are so different, and mine is definitely complicated."

"It's a life of your own making," Bart muttered, avoiding her eyes. Then he continued flatly: "I'll leave the three of you."

"Thank you," Ava replied gratefully.

To David and Chee, Bart said: "The wound looks good. Visit for a while, but don't keep Ava up too long. She needs her rest."

David and Chee returned to the foot of the bed as Bart left the room. Ava smiled from her pillows. "Visit for a bit, won't you?"

Chee needed no further encouragement. She sat on the bed next to Ava. David took the chair next to the bed. He faced Ava, crossing his legs at the ankle in front of him.

"How long can we stay here, Mummy?" Chee asked. "I know you said through the Christmas holidays and New Year, but can't we stay longer?"

Ava looked over at her daughter, the back of her head resting on the pillows. "I'm afraid not, love," she stated, her voice soft but firm. "You need to go back to school, David has his work, and you know my schedule."

Chee's face fell. "Can we ever come back?"

"Maybe someday."

"Just say the word," David spoke up. "If ever you want to holiday at Pikestaff, or just spend a weekend, let me know. The place is deserted most of the year."

"That would be fun," Chee enthused. "Like in the summer, or even over Easter." She looked at Ava. "Can we Mummy? Maybe David could come, too?"

"We'll see," Ava said, not willing to commit herself.

Chee sighed, looking down at her hands. She rested them on the bedcovers, smoothing down the rumples with one finger. After a few minutes of silence, she suddenly looked at David and asked: "What do you do for work, David? I mean, what's your job in England?"

He was startled but recovered quickly. "I'm on the committee for the Museum of London," he answered her. "I organize fundraisers and charity events to entice people to donate money to the museum. It's to help with the upkeep of the place, and to acquire new art."

Chee's eyes widened. "Wow. That sounds fun. What do you do at the fundraisers?"

"We host dinners, receptions and cocktail parties. People pay large sums of money to attend, and the money raised goes back into the museum."

Chee laughed. "That's a funny way of doing things, if I may say so."

"Oh? How?"

"Well, you have to buy the food for the dinners, right?" Chee asked, her eyes lively and twinkling.

"Yes."

"Why not save the expense and just ask people outright for their money?" Chee wanted to know, realizing her logic was sensible.

David smiled. "I wish it was that simple. Human nature works a bit differently, Chee. People want to feel like they're getting something for their money, for the most part, especially those who have a lot of it. So we put together the expensive-plate dinners, which draws folks in droves." He saw Chee's incredulous expression, so he continued: "The dinners are a small part of the whole process. Some restaurants donate their services and food for a bit of free advertising, so it all works out to benefit the museum in the long run."

"Oh, that makes sense then," Chee said, relieved. "I've wanted to join this group by the abbey that raises funds for homeless animals, but Sophie won't let me. They wash people's cars for two pounds. The money goes to the local shelter for abandoned or lost animals. Sophie says I have too much schoolwork, so I shouldn't even consider the idea."

Ava was quiet, listening to her daughter. She knew about Chee's desire to join the group in Kylemore, but the reasons Sophie had given her for not joining weren't completely true. Ava simply did not want Chee to become involved with clubs organized by other children. It was fact adults usually monitored the events, which might lead to awkward inquiries about Chee's "mother," such as her whereabouts. Ava did not want Chee to field uncomfortable questions. As careful as she was, one unguarded comment might cause problems and prompt other parents to dig deeper for answers. It simply could not be risked.

Chee yawned but tried to cover her mouth before Ava could see.

"You need to go to bed, love," Ava said predictably, while Chee groaned in protest. "I have to get some sleep, too. It's been a long day. Come on, give us a kiss good night."

Chee leaned over and kissed her mother on the cheek. Ava reached for her hand. "It's been a wonderful day, hasn't it?" she asked her daughter. "I want to thank you again for the lovely present you gave me. It's quite priceless, and I will treasure it always."

"I'm so glad you like it," Chee told her mother. "I wanted to give you something that would always remind you of me, and the history of our country."

To herself, Ava thought: "*As if I could ever forget our history. It's why our lives are in such turmoil.*" But out loud, she said: "I'll never forget, Chee, I promise."

Chee kissed her mother once more, and jumped off the bed lightly. She went over to David and curtsied in front of him mischievously. "Good night, David. Did I dip properly?"

He laughed, taking her hand. "Indeed you did." Impulsively, he leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "Sweet dreams, Shenachie Egan."

Chee hugged him quickly, and then fled from the room.

Ava laughed. "She's embarrassed that she hugged you. Children are amazing, aren't they?"

He turned to face Ava, the smile gone from his face. She could see his eyes were damp with unshed tears and it stunned her. He was truly touched by Chee.

David and Ava were finally alone, and he was not about to let time slip through his fingers again.

CELTIC REMNANTS: Christmas Excerpts from Chapter 18

*Christmas 1992
Pikestaff Lodge
Daviot, Scotland*

THE TOOL SHED on the grounds of Pikestaff Lodge was freezing cold. It was late in the evening on Christmas Day when Tim made a quick trip to check on Jeff and Mike to see how they were faring. He found Jeff alone and huddled by the door, an old blanket draped over his shoulders. The first thing Tim noticed was Jeff's hands. They looked cut in a few places, and there appeared to be remnants of blood on his knuckles.

Tim stood over Jeff, who looked up at him with a blank look on his face. Three - or was it four? - hours had passed, and Jeff had made his patrol around Pikestaff twice since apprehending Clive Bender, trading off with Mike. Bender was no longer a threat. Mike and Jeff had decided to "eliminate" the problem. Apparently, Tim did not agree.

"What do you mean, you *eliminated* Clive Bender?" Tim exploded. "Are you off your nut? Bender once worked for Locksley, and he is well known in London as a private investigator. Do you think no one will notice he just disappeared and not look into it?"

Jeff stood up, letting the blanket fall to the ground. "We discussed it, Mike and me," he defended himself. "Do you think we offed him just for the hell of it? He was bound and determined to find Ava, or traces of her, so he could get his hands on the reward money. We could have let him go, sure, but then what? If we kept him, where could we hide him? In a snow bank? Tell me, Tim, what would *you* have done?"

Tim started pacing the narrow confines of the shed. He lowered his head and closed his eyes briefly. For as long as he had been in the IMC, the thought of killing and the actual act itself had turned his insides out. Perhaps not for the sake of self-defense, but the premeditated scenario of outright murder went against his inner morality, despite the situation he found himself in. He would kill to protect Ava in a heartbeat, and he supposed that's what Jeff and Mike had done. But Tim was alarmed, and almost sick with uneasiness.

Tim stopped pacing and asked: "Where is the body?"

Jeff stared at Tim, and then let out a breath. "At the bottom of Loch Ness."

Tim narrowed his eyes. "Who the Christ took the body there?"

"I did," Jeff said weakly. "I had Bender inside the shed, and when Mike came back we talked about the situation. There was no safe alternative, O'Casey, I'm telling you. The man was a liar, and he would have said anything to save his skin. If we had let him go, or even kept him here, he would have flapped his gums the minute he was out of earshot. You know how we all trust our inner instinct - Ava, too - and both Mike and I were sensing the same things from Bender. He would have squealed, and the coppers in London would have been

on Locksley like the plague. We assumed it would eventually lead to Ava somehow, and we weren't prepared to take any chances."

Tim began pacing again. "You did the right thing," he finally said, much to Jeff's relief. "I'm sorry I blew my cork, the news was unexpected. I agree. I would have done the same had it been me. Bender was a bloody nuisance and a menace. Did you get anything out of him? Was he alone?"

"He said he was alone in Daviot. He met Pikestaff's caretaker at the pub in the village, but insisted it was just a friendly chat over a pint. I didn't believe him, and Mike also had doubts."

"We can't go roaring through the village and off anyone who might have met Bender," Tim scoffed. "We need to ride it out. If someone starts sniffing around again, we have to leave - *plain and simple*. I don't like this one bit, Bender showing up. I think we should leave anyway, but I have to let Ava decide. And I need to call Ned."

"I think so, too," Jeff replied, relieved Tim had calmed down. Whether O'Casey knew it or not, his sheer size and presence was highly intimidating.

Tim walked to the door of the shed. The wind was starting to pick up, rattling the door on the hinges. "How did you off him?" he asked quietly.

Jeff lowered his eyes. "Mike held his head by the hair, and I slit his throat. He struggled quite a bit, but"

Tim held up his hand to stop the explanation. "That's all I need to hear, thank you. And you took the body to Loch Ness? How?"

"Loch Ness is only about a mile away," Jeff said. "I wrapped the body in an old tarp, and drug it to the shore. I weighed it down with several rocks - tied them on, actually - and slipped the body into the water. It floated out about twenty feet, and then sunk."

"Did you make sure no one saw you drag the body?"

"It was still snowing, and dark. I went through areas with trees and snow-covered shrubs mostly. I saw no one. Visibility was very poor in some spots, but I was able to find my way. You know I've always been good at navigating myself."

Tim nodded. "Ned said you could find your way out of a wet burlap sack in the middle of the Irish Sea."

"It's the truth."

Tim rested his hand on the doorknob of the shack door. "Let me speak with Ava either tonight or in the morning. We have to make some decisions, and I definitely have to call Ned Fermoy."

"I'll wait to hear from you."

Tim hesitated. "Again, I'm sorry if I blew up on you at first, lad. I meant no harm."

"I know," Jeff responded. "And it's all right."

Tim smiled quickly and then was gone.

Jeff exhaled deeply. Tim O'Casey was one of the most dichotomous people he had ever known. On one hand, Tim gave the impression of being rather slow and quiet, and yet

underneath was an astute mind. He had the uncanny ability to assess situations swiftly and accurately, much like Mike Creed did. O'Casey also lived and breathed to protect Ava Egan, and he made no bones about it.

And Ava was a legend in the IMC, Jeff knew. She had devoted nearly her entire adult life to the Irish cause for independence and had done her share of selfsame protection watches for other people within the organization. Her loyalty and tenacity were unmovable, and yet her sudden coldness toward a betrayal within the ranks was just as unshakable.

Jeff would protect her life as well as he would protect his own, and Ava would do no less for him. The simple facts of the matter calmed Jeff somewhat. He huddled down on the floor again, wrapping the cold blanket around his shoulders.

He dozed fitfully as he waited for Mike Creed to return from his watch, or to hear some word from Tim O'Casey that it was time to leave Scotland.

* * *

DAVID AND AVA knew in their hearts they had arrived at a moment of clarity. The last twelve years had led to discussion and illumination. It was as inevitable as their reawakening feelings for one another.

After Chee went to bed, David remained behind deliberately. Ava's tiredness seemed to vanish as he stood at the foot of her bed, regarding her with thoughtful eyes. She returned his stare and smoothed the coverlet over her lap. She knew she did not look her best. Although her hair was combed and pulled back into a pony tail thanks to Chee, she was pale and drawn, devoid of cosmetics. At the moment, she was not concerned with vanity. It was time to talk with David. They had to clear up parts of their past together.

She patted the bed with her hand. "You might as well join me and get comfortable. I can see by the look on your face it's going to be a long night."

He hesitated. "Are you sure you're not too tired?" There was no feigned puzzlement over her remark, and she appreciated his honesty.

"I'm fine," she replied. "If I get sleepy, I'll let you know."

He made his way around to the side of the bed, sitting next to her gingerly. He faced her, his right thigh brushing against her leg. She felt the all-too familiar tingling sensation rush through her veins. Despite her years of hatred and bitterness for David, he still had the power to affect her like no other man.

"What did you do with yourself after you left Monasterboice?" Ava asked him outright. "After I told you I was pregnant?"

David did not appear shocked. He actually welcomed her question. "I returned to Oxford," he answered her. "I didn't speak to my parents for a long time after that. I refused to even acknowledge my father for well over a year. The only people I could really talk to were Bart and my grandmother Maura." He paused. "What did you do?"

"I told you, I went to Kylemore and gave birth to Chee," she said simply. She knew there was no use in hiding Chee's stationary location from David any longer. The man wasn't stupid. She sensed he guessed the truth from the get-go. "It was very hard, being alone and young like that, but Tim was with me and the nuns were superb. I also knew Chee would be safe at the abbey. When Sophie took her vows and stayed at Kylemore, it made the situation a bit more bearable."

"Where did you go after Chee was born? Was it hard to leave her?"

"Leaving Chee when she was a baby was the hardest thing I've ever done," she admitted. "I hated it, but my loathing for our circumstances was even stronger at the time. I couldn't simply take on a normal life and carry on. I could have gone back to school, or gotten a job at the Blackwater Inn and had a nice life with Chee. But my conscience wouldn't let me, nor would my rage at what happened to my parents."

"I know," he murmured. "It's the one thing I *do* understand."

"You met me right after they were killed," she agreed. "So you know a bit of how I was feeling at the time."

He nodded.

"The hatred never lessened," she continued. "It drove me, and propelled most of my choices then. As it does now."

He shook his head in wonder. "Ever since I discovered how you ended up, I've often asked myself how you came into it. I know men are commonplace in your business, but how in the world did a young girl like you gain entrance?"

"My father and brother were heavily involved for years before they died," she said. "That was my basic entrance, my chance to prove myself. Tim had no problems, of course. But as a woman - and a very young one at that - I had quite a struggle. It took me awhile, and I went through a lot of trials and tests, but I proved myself many times over. I'm sure you don't want to hear the details, but that's the gist of it."

"I never knew," David spoke, his voice sad. "It never occurred to me you would go that far. Oh hell, Ava, I was so stupid then. Do you know how many times I hated myself, how many times I grieved and tortured myself for what I did to us?"

"I hated you, too," she responded softly, her eyes glistening.

He touched her hand as it lay still on the coverlet, but she did not pull away. "Is there any way you can ever forgive me for how I treated you?" he asked plaintively.

"I forgave you a long time ago," she whispered. "I just never forgot. David, look, you can't help how you were raised. I guess I expected you to throw it all away for me. It was too much to ask of you. I didn't realize it at the time, but I do now. Believe it or not, I thought about you quite often over the years. As I grew less angry, I understood your situation. Maybe if your family had been different, if they weren't so concerned with the class and position bullshyte, your life might have been very different as well."

"I can't just blame my family," he protested. "I had a mind, a will of my own."

"You really didn't, not then," Ava said firmly.

He was going to deny it again, but he knew she was right. He simply stared at her.

"I kept track of you off and on," she spoke again. "Purely by coincidence, your family was marked by the organization around 1986. I found out by accident. Since your father was a Member of Parliament, a military commander and a belted Earl, he was a prime target. A plan was put in motion to off him at his London home. I had to talk like hell to stop the plan of operation. It was also when it became generally known you were Chee's father within the organization. You've been basically safe since."

He was amazed. "I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't."

"I suppose you won't tell me what your life entails, what you do for the IMC," he said.

"There's no point," she claimed. "Trust me, you really don't want to know."

He squeezed her hand slightly. "Do you ever think about stopping? About having a normal life?"

Ava sighed. "What's a normal life, David? Taking Chee and living in Eglinton? Watching the British soldiers brutalize our neighbors? Watching the telly and hearing about how our country is torn apart, or seeing it firsthand for ourselves?"

"Come and live with me in England."

She raised one eyebrow, sarcasm creeping into her voice. "Oh, yes, that would be the ticket to normalcy. Live amongst the enemy. Be treated as garbage by our wonderful English peers, and relegated to second-class citizens. Thank you, no."

"It would be different if you were with me," he insisted.

"No, it wouldn't. Nothing will change the fact that most Irish and English despise one another. Unless we are given back our country and a century passes so conflict's fade from active memories, it will stay just like it is. It's all about mistrust, hatred and vengeance."

"You make it sound hopeless."

"Sometimes it is."

David and Ava were silent for a moment, regarding each other. Despite their conversation - or because of it - they felt more at ease together, and not so hurried. Each one saw in the other a remnant from the past, but the strength of their feelings had only grown with the passing of time, not lessened. She thought of all the years she had harbored deep-seated anger for him, and how in the back of her mind she knew she still loved him. He realized what he had missed by not being forthright twelve years ago, but the regret was no longer tinged with desperation. The loss was not as acute now that he had met Chee and was sitting on Ava's bed, talking to her.

"Can I see Chee again?" David asked. What he truly wanted to ask was if he could see Ava again, but he refrained. He didn't want to push his luck.

"We'll play it by ear," she replied, unwilling to commit herself further. "I don't want Chee unduly disrupted. Her life is settled at Kylemore Abbey. I know she's not happy with

my long absences, and she really wants a home for the two of us, but she is fairly content. It will have to do at the moment."

"Maybe she could spend some time in London with me this summer," he said hopefully. "She could stay at my townhouse with me for a week or two, and I could show her the sights. *That* would be educational for her," he finished strongly, ignoring the warning flash in Ava's eyes.

She tempered her response: "Perhaps."

There was silence between them again, but it was a comfortable. It was a time of reckoning, and neither one of them was in much of a hurry.

"My life turned out so predictably," David finally said, with a tinge of bitterness. "I finished my education at Oxford, and then spent a year wandering around France. When I returned to London, my existence was basically mapped out for me. I was the Earl's son, the Viscount Locksley. I could envision years of utter boredom and sanctimonious hypocrisy, and I wanted to bolt. But I never did. I stayed and *stayed*, and after so many years there didn't seem much point in doing anything else. My father loved to remind me I was heir to a great Earldom, not to mention the real estate and wealth contained therein, with an automatic seat in the House of Lords as well. I think my stepmother wished I'd married into the royal family, or something close to it. While I seemingly accepted my lot as Viscount, I simply refused to be married off, or to be intimidated in the matter."

As he spoke, he held Ava's hand tighter. She understood his life, and how he lived. What else had he ever known? It was the same for her, only on the other side of the spectrum. Her life had been financially poor and violent by the nature of first her father's life as a police officer, and then by his preoccupation with the political situation in Northern Ireland. She was a product of her environment, just as David was.

"But I never stopped loving you," he spoke, his voice husky with sentiment. Ava looked at him again as he inched his way closer to her. His eyes were watery and red, and bespoke of the unshed tears and pain he was feeling. He meant what he was saying. She felt the stark emotion of it tug at her very soul. And he could see it in her own eyes.

He leaned even closer and placed his lips on Ava's tentatively, as if uncertain, but she put her hands on his shoulders to keep him steady. She responded in full to his kiss, and he felt joy rise up within him. He had dreamed about kissing her again for so many years. The embrace they shared just that morning had been the start of the rollercoaster in his mind. He had longed for her, hungered for her, even when he knew she hated him.

They stopped briefly, out of breath, regarding each other with wonder. "Despite what you may believe," she whispered, "I never stopped loving you, either. Even when I cursed you for who you were and what you did to me. I loved you through all of it, and it never diminished with the passage of time." Tears fell unbidden from Ava's eyes, but she made no attempt to stop the flow. She was human after all, and she didn't care if he knew it anymore.

David reached up and touched the tears falling onto her pale cheeks, resting his inner-palm on her jawbone. With his thumb, he slowly wiped away her tears, placing the tip of his wet digit on his lips. She watched him with fascination, and with a definite fueling of passion. Her lips parted slightly. He took the invitation without hesitation and consumed her with his kiss.

"*I am undone,*" she thought dazedly as he pressed her down carefully into the bed. "*I am lost.*" Yet she did not stop him. "*I want to be undone, and I desire to be lost in him,*" she thought again as he smoothed away tendrils of hair from her face. "*Above all else in this moment of time.*"

He was losing himself in her. Every fiber of his being ached for her as it had for no other in any place or time. He felt complete with Ava. He was a lost soul, only part of a man, but he was about to become whole again with her, and she alone had the power to unleash him. He knew if he were to die in the next instant, he would part from the earth a complete man because of her.

Their clothes came off slowly and landed on the floor beside the bed. David was ever-conscious of Ava's wounded hip. He ran his hands over her legs and torso as if to soothe her. She felt warmth rush through her stomach, and a languor filled her as if she were floating on air. She did not mind the nudity, did not even care that she was so thin her rib bones held tight to her skin, or that her knees protruded through the thin layers of flesh. He was in awe of her, and it was a cascading light which emotionally sated her.

With an effort of will, she adjusted herself so she could reach out to him and run her hands along the firmness of his back and arms, feeling the hard strength of his body. She looked up at him through the dim light of the dying fire, and saw his eyes flashing at her. He propped his arms on either side of her, raising himself slightly to keep from hurting her. She shivered from the power of his intent gaze. He lowered himself down and placed his mouth on one of her breasts. She shuddered violently from the heat and fierce pulsing.

"I want you, Ava," David spoke to her above the crashing din of their passion flames, which she could not resist. Nor did she want to. "I can't wait any more."

"We've spent a lifetime waiting," she replied, placing her hands on his shoulders. "Chee's lifetime. We don't have to wait any longer."

He positioned himself over her carefully, still braced by one strong arm. With the other arm, he reached down and parted her uninjured leg, opening her to him. She made sounds like a mewling cat as David entered her slowly. He held her able hip, and pushed deep within her. "Oh my God," he moaned as he put his face to hers, kissing her with every ounce of his long-held desire.

She was transported back into the past, returning to the place they had known the first time. And it *was* like the first time all over again. He strained to contain himself so as not to hurt her, but she thrust at him plaintively and forcefully. He met her movement with his own, and they both started to drown. A hot, fiery flame fanned over their joined bodies,

enveloping and consuming them whole. In the next instant, a cool liquid fervor took its place and washed over them.

The fire in the hearth was in embers, and so it was for David and Ava. The ash fell white, and he lay next to her, feeling as if he could never get close enough again. She was pale and translucent. Her eyes blinked as tears trickled from the corners. Her breathing steadied as he took her face in his hands.

"Never has it been like that, except with you," he mumbled against her quivering lips.

"I never thought to feel this way again," her voice broke. She opened her eyes and he flooded her vision. She did not want to move. She wanted to suspend this moment in time forever. He met her gaze as she rested her head on his hand. Melting together brought them as one, and it had changed their lives yet again. Nothing would ever be the same between them as long as they had breaths in their bodies. There was no point in fighting it any longer.

David and Ava fell asleep just as dawn began to spread its murky wreath across the highlands.

* * *

TIM HAD TO narrow his eyes when he entered Ava's bedroom just past dawn the day after Christmas. At first it was because of the dim light in the room, but secondly it was the sight he beheld when his eyes adjusted to the duskiess. He had always known in the back of his mind Ava was still in love with David Lancaster, even after all the years of bitterness and professed hatred on her part. When Tim asked her about it sporadically in the past, she had hotly denied it in defense of herself and wouldn't even allow Tim to tease her about it. Now the proof was in the pudding, so to speak, but he was still shocked beyond mere words.

He stepped closer toward the bed, and still Ava did not stir from her slumber. Her head rested on David's shoulder as he lay on his back. He was sound asleep as well, so soundly Tim could barely hear him breathing. In all the years he had known Ava, Tim knew her to be a light sleeper. She had always been awakened by the slightest noise throughout their childhood and into her time with the IMC, but not this morning.

Tim cleared his throat loudly. He hated to wake her, but it was imperative they get moving quickly.

Ava's eyes fluttered. She turned her head from David's shoulder to look at Tim. She seemed startled to see him, but made no move to extract herself from David's arms.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked groggily.

"*Faghail sinn air thoir,*" Tim replied simply, switching to Irish just in case David was feigning slumber.

Ava came fully awake. She gently pulled away from David, her eyes lingering on him briefly. With her arms, she turned her lower body so she was sitting up and facing Tim from the bed, the sheet pulled over her upper body. They spoke in Irish.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Bender came snooping," Tim snapped. "We don't know how he tracked us to Daviot, but if he managed to find us, others will. I called Ned, and he said we need to get out of Scotland right away and return to Dublin."

"What happened with Bender?" Ava pressed. "Did Jeff and Mike get a hold of him? Did they question him?"

"Yes, but they weren't able to get anything." Tim hesitated, unwilling to reveal more at the moment. Typically, she prodded him.

"What did they do with him?"

He sighed. "They removed him. That's all I can say right now, if you catch my drift. Ava, come on, we have to pull together and leave as soon as possible."

She bit her lip. She knew they had to leave, but she was torn. David was beginning to stir next to her. There was little time, but somehow she had to explain to David and Chee she was going to disappear again. She had to do it carefully, yet quickly.

"Go and wake Siobhan and Sophie," she said, almost in a whisper. "They have to leave as well, but not with us."

Tim nodded, his eyes resting on David. "*Co dha fein?*"

Ava shrugged. "I'll tell him. Now please go, Tim."

As soon as Tim left the room, David touched Ava's arm. "Tell me what?" he asked groggily. "I heard the tail-end of Tim's rude intrusion, his Irish gab. What's going on?"

She looked down at David from her position on the bed. He appeared ruffled, but happy. There was a slight smile on his lips. She felt a stab of regret as she knew her coming words would destroy his contentment. Yet she had to be honest with him. He had known their interlude in Scotland was not permanent.

"Tim and I have to leave right away," she said bluntly, wincing as his face fell. "Please don't ask me for details, because I can't give them to you. Chee has to leave as well, but she'll go separately with Siobhan and Sophie."

"Just like that?" David asked her, aghast. He pulled himself up to face her.

"If I stay much longer you can visit me in Brixton Prison," Ava replied. "I'm serious."

He leaned closer to her. "But after the night we just spent together . . ."

"What we did last night does not change the fact I'm wanted by the law," she said, trying to be patient. "Time is of the essence right now."

"You'll contact me again?"

"Yes, never fear. I'm not about to forget . . . what we did. Please, David. Help me get up."

He leapt out of the bed, his mind racing with emotions and a myriad of wild thoughts. Just hours ago they were locked in one another's arms. He did not want their time

together to come to an end. He wanted to take her and Chee and spirit them to safety under the protective guise of the Lancaster name. He knew he could pull it off, if Ava would only give him half a chance, but he also knew now was not the time to broach the subject with her.

He helped Ava move her legs so they were hanging off the side of the bed. "Please get my pants and shirt," she asked him. "The clothes are in the closet. I saw Bart hang them, if you can imagine." Trying to inject levity into the situation, she said: "Bart would make quite a ladies maid if he wasn't a doctor."

"I always thought Bart would make a good nurse," David tried to sound cheerful as he retrieved her dark trousers from the closet. He returned with the clothes, ready to help her dress. "Shouldn't you ask him for extra medication before you go?"

She glanced at him as he slid the pants up both her legs. "I can get my hands on a wide variety of medications in Ireland," she laughed. "Oh, David, if only I had the time to tell you the little details of my everyday life. I can get anything I want, within reason. Mind you, I don't take advantage of it very often, but I know where to go."

"I should have known," he muttered as she fastened the buttons on her trousers.

"I heard you," she said. "I thought you were being awfully brave."

"What else can I do?" he demanded. "Would you have me beg you to stay, or plead with you to run away with me?"

"Run away to where?" Ava scoffed as he pulled her dark blue sweater over her head. Her voice was muffled when it came forth again: "Where can the son of an Earl run away to, may I ask?"

"I have the money to go anywhere," he informed her as he pulled the sweater all the way over her head, stretching it down her torso. "We can change our names, start a new life together."

"I already have different names, remember?" she mocked him. "Why would I want another? David, money or identity is not the problem, and you know it. Please help me up."

He helped her stand slowly. "I love you Ava," he said simply. "That's all I want you to know right now." He sighed. "I'd wait for hell to freeze over rather than lose you again."

"You won't lose me again," she whispered, reaching out to touch his face. "I'll be in contact, I promise."

Before David could respond, Tim burst back into the room. "Siobhan and Sophie are packing," he informed Ava, giving David a casual but dismissive glance. "I told them to wait until this evening before they leave."

Ava nodded. "Good. I have to talk to Chee, and then we can go."

"Mike and Jeff are waiting for us outside," Tim continued.

"I have to talk to Chee," Ava snapped. "Give me five minutes, will you?"

"I'll get her," Tim said shortly. He left the room.

Ava held onto the bedpost near the foot of the bed, looking at David. He could sense she had a favor to ask him. It surprised him that he understood her silent signal. "The gift

Chee gave me," she said. "Will you keep it for me? Just for now? I can't take a lot with me at the moment, but I know you'll keep it safe."

"Of course," David said. He felt so helpless. He wanted to stop her, shake her out of her insanity and her bizarre life. Instead, he kept silent, knowing such actions would only worsen the situation.

"The book is in the drawer in the bedside table," she said. "Please take it back to London with you. As soon as I can arrange to see you again, I'll get it back."

It occurred to David he never asked Ava where she lived. Did she have a conventional flat, or did she continually travel like a vagabond? There were so many questions, but no more time in which to ask them.

She read him as well as he had read her. "I'll answer all of your questions in due course, David," she said. "Never fear. You may hear more than you care to on that auspicious occasion."

They both heard Tim out in the hallway. David went to Ava quickly, grasping her by the shoulders. "Please be careful," he implored, moving his mouth to hers. "I love you."

"I know," she mumbled against his lips.

Tim came into the room, a sleepy-eyed Chee in tow. Chee saw her mother in David's embrace, and her demeanor changed. She smiled tremulously, but then frowned when she noticed her mother was dressed. Having lived through Ava's sudden disappearances many times in the past, Chee knew the signs. Tim coming for her in a hurry should have alerted her.

"You're leaving." Chee cried as she sped across the room to her mother. David released Ava, and she enveloped Chee into her embrace.

"I'm afraid so, love," Ava told her daughter sadly. "You know how much I hate it, but I have to go."

Chee choked on a sob, burying her face in her mother's chest. She despised it when Ava had to leave her, and she wanted to cry and beg her to stay, but she knew it would only upset Ava and postpone the inevitable. Chee was aware Ava was consumed with a large amount of guilt because of her lifestyle, and although Chee played along and pretended not to know what was really going on, she *did* understand and it only served to make her own guilt that much stronger. She always refrained from referring to the truth, as it would horrify Ava to admit it to her, and would only make the situation worse than it was. Chee breathed deep of her mother, trying to get as close to her as possible.

Ava stroked the top of Chee's tousled head, tears streaming down her face. "I'll come to Kylemore in a few weeks, okay?" she said, trying to steady her voice. She gingerly extracted herself from Chee, wiping away the child's tears. "It'll go fast, you'll see."

Tim felt his heart breaking as he watched the desperate scene unfold between mother and daughter. Tim abhorred this bit of their leave-taking, as he always did. He could never quite get used to it, and he turned his head to look away. His own tears threatened to spill, but he had no intention of letting Locksley see such a display.

David felt helpless, yet again, as he saw Chee step back from her mother, trying to be brave. He wanted so much to console his own daughter, but he knew she would reproach him if he tried. They were not familiar enough, and they hadn't spent nearly enough time together. He wanted to shout his frustration out loud, but instead he stepped forward and cleared his throat.

Ava looked at him.

"Why don't you let me take Chee back to Kylemore?" David asked her. "We can catch a plane out of Edinburgh. I'll rent a car at Shannon Airport and then drive Chee and Sophie to the abbey. I can also give Siobhan a lift to Monasterboice."

Ava hesitated. Her first instinct was to deny David his request, but she had come to see him in a different light the last few days. He would not betray them, and she knew he would protect Chee with his own life if need be.

"Oh, please yes, Mummy," Chee spoke up, her voice hopeful. "It would be wonderful if David took us home. Can he, please?"

Ava nodded. "Okay. But all of you need to be especially careful"

"We know, mother," Chee stated, rolling her eyes.

David met Ava's eyes and smiled. "Chee is safe with me. I promise you that."

"Ava," Tim interjected. "We really have to go."

Ava bent down to kiss Chee. "Take care, love. I'll see you in a few weeks, okay?"

Chee hugged Ava tightly once again. With great reluctance, Ava removed herself as Tim came forward to help her. She turned to David and spoke quietly: "Thank you, David. I'll be in touch."

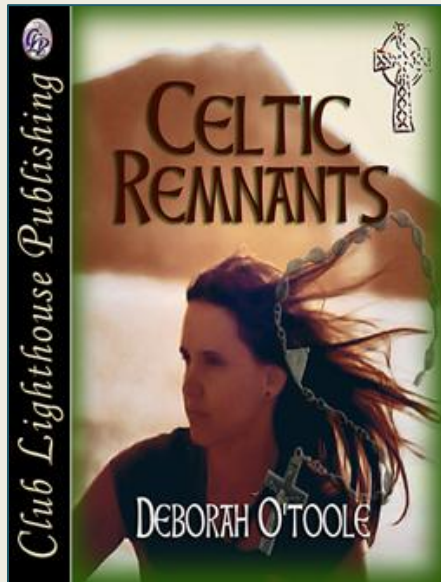
"I'll be waiting," he replied lightly, his eyes trying to soak her in.

After Ava and Tim slipped from the room, Chee ran into David's arms and began to heave great sobs. He tried to quell her anguish, and realized for the first time he was able to console his own daughter in her time of need. His heart swelled with emotion as he clutched her tightly to him. He swore in that moment he would never let Ava and Chee down, no matter what happened. They were his life now, and he would never give them up again. No matter how bizarre or strange their life might be - snatched moments of togetherness, or months on end with no contact - he would treasure each and every second. At least he would be with them, and he was willing to pay any price for all of the stolen minutes, hours and days.

David held Chee tightly, resting his cheek on top of her head gently. He closed his eyes and let his own tears fall. It was a long time before either of them roused from the comfort of their mutual embrace.

"CELTIC REMNANTS" INFORMATION

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BOOK DETAILS

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EXTRAS

***Celtic Remnants* @ Facebook:**

<https://www.facebook.com/celticremnants>

***Celtic Remnants* official website:**

<https://deborahotoole.com/celtic/>

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Deborah O'Toole is the author of *Celtic Remnants*, *The Crypt Artist*, *Glinhaven*, *In the Shadow of the King* and *Mind Sweeper*.

In addition, she writes darkly abstract poetry (*Torn Bits & Pieces*) and short-story juvenile fiction (*Short Tales Collection*), and is the author of a series of historical essays, articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and dark obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than 165 years, most of which are set against the backdrop of a magnificent seaside mansion in Maine. Books in the ten-part family saga include *Hearts in Sorrow*, *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight*, *Megan's Legacy* and *Limb of Iniquity*.

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