

CHAPTER ONE

—*Dumfries, Scotland*—

When Ross MacLeod pulled the trigger and brought down the pheasant, he had no way of knowing he'd killed himself. And billions of others.

On a cold, damp day, the last day of what would be his last year, he hunted with his brother and cousin, walking the crackling, frosted field under skies of washed-out, winter blue. He felt healthy and fit, a man of sixty-four who hit the gym three times a week, and had a passion for golf (reflected in a handicap of nine).

With his twin brother, Rob, he'd built—and continued to run—a successful marketing firm based in New York and London. His wife of thirty-nine years, along with Rob's and their cousin Hugh's wives, stayed back, tucked into the charming old farmhouse.

With fires snapping in stone hearths, the kettle always on the boil, the women chose to cook and bake and fuss over the coming New Year's Eve party.

They happily passed on tromping the fields in their wellies.

The MacLeod farm, passed from father to son for more than two hundred years, spread for more than eighty hectares. Hugh loved it nearly as much as he did his wife, children, and grandchildren. From the field they crossed, distant hills rose in the east. And not that far a cry to the west rolled the Irish Sea.

The brothers and their families often traveled together, but this annual trip to the farm remained a highlight for all. As boys they'd often spent a month in the summer on the farm, running across the fields with Hugh and his brother, Duncan—dead now from the soldier's life he'd chosen. Ross and Rob, the city boys, had always thrown themselves into the farm chores assigned by their Uncle Jamie and Aunt Bess.

They'd learned to fish, to hunt, to feed chickens, and to gather eggs. They'd roamed, forests and fields, on foot and on horseback.

Often, on dark nights, they'd crept out of the house to hike to the very field they walked now, to hold secret meetings and try to raise the spirits within the little stone circle the locals called *sgiath de solas*, shield of light.

They'd never succeeded, nor had they ever chased down the haints or faeries young boys knew traveled the forests. Though on one midnight adventure, when even the air held its breath, Ross swore he'd felt a dark presence, heard its rustling wings, even smelled its foul breath.

Felt—he would always claim—that breath blow into him.

In adolescent panic, he'd stumbled in his rush to flee the circle, and scraped the heel of his hand on a stone within.

A single drop of his blood struck the ground.

As grown men, they still laughed and teased over that long-ago night, and treasured the memories.

And as grown men, they had brought their wives, then their children, back to the farm on an annual pilgrimage beginning on Boxing Day and ending on the second of January.

Their sons and their sons' wives had left only that morning for London, where they would all see in the New Year with friends—and spend another few days on business. Only Ross's daughter, Katie, who was seven months along with twins of her own, had stayed back in New York.

She planned a welcome-home dinner for her parents that was never to be.

But on that bracing last day of the year, Ross MacLeod felt as fit and joyful as the boy he'd been. He wondered at the quick shiver down his spine, at the crows circling and calling over the stone circle. But even as he shook it away, the cock pheasant, a flurry of color against the pale sky, rose in flight.

He lifted the twelve-gauge his uncle had given him for his sixteenth birthday, followed the bird's flight.

It might be that the heel of the hand he'd scraped more than fifty years before stung for an instant, throbbed an instant more.

But still . . .

He pulled the trigger.

When the shot blasted the air, the crows screamed, but didn't scatter. Instead, one broke away as if to snatch the kill. One of the men laughed as the darting black bird collided with the falling pheasant.

The dead bird struck the center of the stone circle. Its blood smeared over the frosted ground.

Rob clamped a hand on Ross's shoulder, and the three men grinned as one of Hugh's cheerful Labs raced off to retrieve the bird. "Did you see that crazy crow?"

Shaking his head, Ross laughed again. "He won't be having pheasant for dinner."

"But we will," Hugh said. "That's three for each, enough for a feast."

The men gathered their birds, and Rob pulled a selfie stick out of his pocket.

“Always prepared.”

So they posed—three men with cheeks ruddy from the cold, all with eyes a sparkling MacLeod blue—before making the pleasant hike back to the farmhouse.

Behind them, the bird’s blood, as if heated by flame, soaked through the frozen ground. And pulsed as the shield thinned, cracked.

They trooped, successful hunters, past fields of winter barley stirring in the light wind, and sheep grazing on a hillock. One of the cows Hugh kept for fattening and finishing lowed lazily.

As they walked, Ross, a contented man, thought himself blessed to end one year and start another on the farm with those he loved.

Smoke puffed from the chimneys in the sturdy stone house. As they approached, the dogs—their workday done—raced ahead to wrestle and play. The men, knowing the ropes, veered off toward a small shed.

Hugh’s Millie, a farmer’s wife and a farmer’s daughter, drew a hard line at cleaning game. So on a bench Hugh had built for that purpose, they set up to do the job themselves.

They talked idly—of the hunt, of the meal to come—as Ross took a pair of the sharp sheers to cut the wings off the pheasant. He cleaned it as his uncle had taught him, cutting close to the body. There were parts that would be used for soup, and those went into a thick plastic bag for the kitchen. Other parts into another bag for disposal.

Rob lifted a severed head, made squawking sounds. Despite himself, Ross laughed, glancing over. He nicked his thumb on a broken bone.

He muttered, “Shit,” and used his index finger to staunch the trickle of blood.

“You know to watch for that,” Hugh said with a *tsk*.

“Yeah, yeah. Blame it on goofball here.” As he peeled back the skin, the bird’s blood mixed with his.

Once the job was done, they washed the cleaned birds in icy water pumped from the well, then carried them into the house through the kitchen.

The women were gathered in the big farm kitchen with air rich from the scents of baking and warmth from the fire simmering in the hearth.

It all struck Ross as so homey—a perfect tableau—it tugged at his heart. He laid his birds on the wide kitchen counter and grabbed his wife in a circling hug that made her laugh.

“The return of the hunters.” Angie gave him a quick, smacking kiss.

Hugh’s Millie, her curly red mop bundled on top of her head, gave the pile of birds an approving nod. “Enough to roast for our feast and more to serve at the party. How about we do some pheasant and walnut pasties there. You’re fond of them, I recall, Robbie.”

He grinned, patting the belly that pudged over his belt. “Maybe I need to go out and bag a few more so there’ll be some for everyone else.”

Rob’s wife, Jayne, drilled a finger into his belly. “Since you’re going to make a pig of yourself, we’re going to put you to work.”

“That we are,” Millie agreed. “Hugh, you and the lads haul out the long table into the big parlor for the party, and use my mother’s long lace cloth. I want the good candlestands on it as well. And get the extra chairs from the closet and set them out.”

“Wherever we set them, you’ll want them moved again.”

“Then you’d best get started.” Millie eyed the birds, rubbing her hands together. “All right, ladies, let’s boot the men along and get started ourselves.”

They had their feast, a happy family group, roasted wild pheasant seasoned with tarragon, stuffed with oranges, apples, shallots,

and sage, cooked on a bed of carrots and potatoes, tomatoes. Peas and good brown bread from the oven, farm butter.

Good friends, old friends as well as family, they enjoyed the last meal of the year with two bottles of the Cristal that Ross and Angie had brought from New York just for this occasion.

A light, thin snow blew outside the windows as they cleared and washed up, all still basking in the glow, and in anticipation of the party to come.

Candles lit, fires snapping, more food—two days in the making—set out on tables. Wine and whiskey and champagne. Traditional cordials along with scones and haggis and cheeses for the Hogmanay celebration.

Some neighbors and friends came early, before midnight struck, to eat and drink and gossip, to tap toes to the music of pipes and fiddles. So the house filled with sound and song and fellowship as the old clock on the wall struck its midnight notes.

The old year died on the last chime, and the New Year was greeted with cheers, kisses, and voices raised in “Auld Lang Syne.” All this Ross hugged sentimentally to his heart with Angie tucked against his side, and his brother’s arm linked with his.

As the song ended, as glasses were raised, the front door swung open wide.

“The first-footer!” someone exclaimed.

Ross watched the door, expecting one of the Frazier boys or maybe Delroy MacGruder to step in. All dark-haired youths of good nature, as tradition required. The first to enter the house in the New Year must be so to ensure good luck.

But all that swept in was wind and the thin snow and the deep country dark.

As he stood closest, Ross walked to the door himself, looked out, stepped out. The chill running through him he attributed to the bluster of wind, and the odd, holding silence under the wind.

Air holding its breath.

Was that a rustle of wings, a long shadow—dark over dark?

With a quick shudder, Ross MacLeod stepped back in, a man who would never enjoy another feast or welcome another New Year, and so became the first-footer.

“Must not have latched it,” he said, closing the door.

Chilled still, Ross stepped over to the fire, held his hands to the flame. An old woman sat beside the fire, her shawl wrapped tight, her cane leaning against the chair. He knew her as the young Frazier boys’ great-granny.

“Can I get you a whiskey, Mrs. Frazier?”

She reached out with a thin, age-spotted hand, gripping his hand with surprising strength when he offered it. Her dark eyes bored into his.

“’Twas written so long ago most have forgot.”

“What was?”

“The shield would be broken, the fabric torn, by the blood of the Tuatha de Danann. So now the end and the grief, the strife and the fear—the beginning and the light. I ne’er thought to live for it.”

He laid a hand over hers, gentle, indulgent. Some, he knew, said she was one of the fey. Others said she was a bit doddering in the mind. But the chill stabbed again, an ice pick in the base of his spine.

“It starts with you, child of the ancients.”

Her eyes darkened, her voice deepened, sending a fresh frisson of dread down his spine.

“So now between the birth and the death of time, power rises—both the dark and the light—from the long slumber. Now begins the blood-soaked battle between them. And with the lightning and a mother’s birth pangs comes The One who wields the sword. The graves are many, with yours the first. The war is long, with no ending writ.”

Pity moved over her face as her voice thinned again, as her eyes cleared. "But there's no blame in it, and blessings will come as magicks long shadowed breathe again. There can be joy after the tears."

With a sigh she gave his hand a small squeeze. "I'd have a whiskey, and thanks for it."

"Of course."

Ross told himself it was foolish to be shaken by her nonsensical words, by those probing eyes. But he had to settle himself before he poured the whiskey for her—and another for himself.

The room hushed with anticipation at the booming knock on the door. Hugh opened it to one of the Frazier boys—Ross couldn't say which—who was greeted with applause and pleasure as he stepped in with a grin and a loaf of bread.

Though the time to bring luck had come and gone.

Still, by the time the last guests left at near to four a.m., Ross had forgotten his unease. Maybe he drank a little too much, but the night was for celebration, and he only had to stagger up to bed.

Angie slipped in beside him—nothing stopped her from cleansing off her makeup and slathering on her night cream—and sighed.

"Happy New Year, baby," she murmured.

He wrapped an arm around her in the dark. "Happy New Year, baby."

And Ross fell into sleep, into dreams about a bloody pheasant dropping to the ground inside the little stone circle, of crows with black eyes circling thick enough to block out the sun. A wolf howl of wind, of bitter cold and fierce heat. Of weeping and wailing, the bong and chime marking time rushing by.

And a sudden, terrible silence.

He woke well past midday with a banging head and queasy stomach. As he'd earned the hangover, he forced himself to get up, fumble his way into the bathroom, hunt up some aspirin in his wife's little medicine bag.

He downed four, drank two glasses of water to try to ease his scratchy throat. He tried a hot shower and, feeling a little better, dressed and went downstairs.

He went into the kitchen where the others gathered around the table for a brunch of eggs and scones and bacon and cheese. And where the smell, much less the sight, of food had his stomach doing an ungainly pitch.

“He rises,” Angie said with a smile, then tipped her head, studying his face as she brushed back her chin-swing of blond hair. “You look rough, honey.”

“You do look a bit hinky,” Millie agreed, and pushed back from the table. “Sit yourself, and I’ll get you a nice cup.”

“Glass of ginger for what ails him,” Hugh prescribed. “It’s the thing for the morning after.”

“We all knocked back more than a few.” Rob gulped his tea. “I’m feeling a little hollow myself. The food helped.”

“I’ll pass on that for now.” He took the glass of ginger ale from Millie, murmured his thanks, and sipped it carefully. “I think I’ll get some air, clear my head. And remind myself why I’m too old to drink until damn near dawn.”

“Speak for yourself.” And though he looked a little pale himself, Rob bit into a scone.

“I’m always going to be four minutes ahead of you.”

“Three minutes and forty-three seconds.”

Ross shoved his feet into wellies, pulled on a thick jacket. Thinking of his sore throat, he wrapped a scarf around his neck, put on a cap. And taking the tea Millie offered him in a thick mug, he walked out into the cold, crisp air.

He sipped the strong, scalding tea and began to walk as Bilbo, the black Lab, fell into companionable pace with him. He walked a long way, decided he felt steadier. Hangovers might be a bitch, he thought, but they didn’t last. And he wouldn’t spend his last

hours in Scotland brooding about drinking too much whiskey and wine.

A hangover couldn't spoil a bracing walk in the country with a good dog.

He found himself crossing the same field where he'd downed the last pheasant of the hunt. And approaching the small stone circle where it had fallen.

Was that its blood on the winter-pale grass under the skin of snow? Was it black?

He didn't want to go closer, didn't want to see. As he turned away, he heard a rustling.

The dog growled low in his throat as Ross turned to stare into the copse of old, gnarled trees edging the field. Something there, he thought with a fresh chill. He could hear it moving. Could hear a rustling.

Just a deer, he told himself. A deer or a fox. Maybe a hiker.

But the dog bared his teeth, and the hair on Bilbo's back stood up.

"Hello?" Ross called out, but heard only the sly rustle of movement.

"The wind," he said firmly. "Just the wind."

But knew, as the boy he'd been had known, it wasn't.

He walked back several paces, his eyes scanning the trees. "Come on, Bilbo. Come on, let's go home."

Turning, he began to stride quickly away, feeling his chest go tight. Glancing back, he saw the dog still stood stiff-legged, his fur ruffled.

"Bilbo! Come!" Ross clapped his hands together. "Now!"

The dog turned his head, and for a moment his eyes were almost feral, wild and fierce. Then he broke into a trot toward Ross, tongue happily lolling.

Ross kept up a quick stride until he reached the edge of the field. He put a hand—it shook a little—on the dog's head. "Okay, we're both idiots. We'll never speak of it."

His headache had eased a bit by the time he got back, and his

stomach seemed to have settled enough to allow him some toast with another cup of tea.

Sure the worst was over, he sat down with the other men to watch a match on TV, dozed off into fragments of dark dreams.

The nap helped, and the simple bowl of soup he had for dinner tasted like glory. He packed his bags as Angie packed hers.

“I’m going to call it an early night,” he told her. “I’m pretty ragged out.”

“You look . . . hinky.” Angie laid a hand on his cheek. “You might be a little warm.”

“I think I’ve got a cold coming on.”

With a brisk nod, she walked off to the bathroom, rummaged around. She came back with two bright green tablets and a glass of water.

“Take these and go to bed. They’re p.m. cold tablets, so they’ll help you sleep, too.”

“You think of everything.” He downed them. “Tell everybody I’ll see them in the morning.”

“Just get some sleep.”

She tucked him in, making him smile. Kissed his forehead.

“Maybe a little warm.”

“I’ll sleep it off.”

“See that you do.”

In the morning he thought he had. He couldn’t claim a hundred percent—that dull, nagging headache was back and he had loose bowels—but he ate a good breakfast of porridge and strong black coffee.

One last walk, then loading up the car got his blood moving. He hugged Millie, embraced Hugh.

“Come to New York this spring.”

“Might be we will. Our Jamie can see to things around here for a few days.”

“Tell him good-bye for us.”

“That we will. He’ll likely be home before long, but . . .”

“Plane to catch.” Rob gave his hugs.

“Oh, I’ll miss you,” Millie said as she pulled both women close. “Flysafe, be well.”

“Come see us,” Angie called out as she got into the car. “Love you!” She blew a kiss as they drove away from the MacLeod farm for the last time.

They returned the rental car, infecting the clerk and the businessman who rented it next. They infected the porter who took their bags when tips exchanged hands. By the time they reached and passed through security, the infection had passed to an easy two dozen people.

More still in the first-class lounge where they drank Bloody Marys and relived moments from the holiday.

“Time, Jayne.” Rob rose, exchanged one-arm hugs and backslaps with his brother, a squeeze and kiss on the cheek with Angie. “See you next week.”

“Keep me up on the Colridge account,” Ross told him.

“Will do. Short flight to London. If there’s anything you need to know, you’ll have it when you land in New York. Get some rest on the plane. You’re still pretty pale.”

“You look a little off yourself.”

“I’ll perk up,” Rob told him and, gripping his briefcase with one hand, gave his twin a quick salute with the other. “On the flip side, bro.”

Rob and Jayne MacLeod carried the virus to London. On the way, they passed it to passengers bound for Paris, Rome, Frankfurt, Dublin, and beyond. In Heathrow, what would come to be known as the Doom spread to passengers bound for Tokyo and Hong Kong, for Los Angeles, D.C., and Moscow.

The driver who shuttled them to their hotel, a father of four, took it home and doomed his entire family over dinner.

The desk clerk at the Dorchester cheerfully checked them in. She *felt* cheerful. After all she was leaving in the morning for a full week's holiday in Bimini.

She took the Doom with her.

That evening, over drinks and dinner with their son and daughter-in-law, their nephew and his wife, they spread death to more of the family, added it with a generous tip to the waiter.

That night, ascribing his sore throat, fatigue, and queasy stomach to a bug he'd caught from his brother—and he wasn't wrong—Rob took some NyQuil to help him sleep it off.

On the flight across the Atlantic, Ross tried to settle into a book but couldn't concentrate. He switched to music, hoping to lull himself to sleep. Beside him, Angie kicked back with a movie, a romantic comedy as light and frothy as the champagne in her glass.

Halfway across the ocean he woke with a violent coughing fit that had Angie shooting up to pat his back.

"I'll get you some water," she began, but he shook his head, holding up a hand.

He fumbled to get his seat belt off, rose to hurry to the bathroom. His hands braced on the basin, he coughed up thick yellow phlegm that seemed to burn straight out of his laboring lungs. Even as he tried to catch his breath, the coughing struck again.

He had a ridiculous flash of Ferris Bueller speculating about coughing up a lung as he hocked up more phlegm, vomited weakly.

Then a sharp, stabbing cramp barely gave him enough time to drag down his pants. Now he felt as if he shat out his intestines while sweat popped hot on his face. Dizzy with it, he pressed one hand to the wall, closed his eyes as his body brutally emptied out.

When the cramping eased, the dizziness passed, he could have wept with relief. Exhausted, he cleaned himself up, rinsed his mouth with the mouthwash provided, splashed cool water on his face. And felt better.

He studied his face in the mirror, admitted he remained a little hollow-eyed, but thought he looked a bit better as well. He decided he'd expelled whatever ugly bug had crawled inside him.

When he stepped out, the senior flight attendant cast him a concerned look. "Are you all right, Mr. MacLeod?"

"I think so." Mildly embarrassed, he covered with a wink and a joke. "Too much haggis."

She laughed obligingly, unaware she'd be just as violently ill in less than seventy-two hours.

He walked back to Angie, eased by her to the window seat.

"Are you okay, baby?"

"Yeah, yeah. I think so now."

After a critical study, she rubbed a hand over his. "Your color's better. How about some tea?"

"Maybe. Yeah."

He sipped tea, found his appetite stirred enough to try a little of the chicken and rice that was on the menu. An hour before landing, he had another bout of coughing, vomiting, and diarrhea, but judged it milder than before.

He leaned on Angie to get him through customs, passport secu-

rity, and to handle pushing the baggage cart out to where the driver from their car service waited.

“Good to see you! Let me take that, Mr. Mac.”

“Thanks, Amid.”

“How was your trip?”

“It was wonderful,” Angie said as they wove through the crowds at Kennedy. “But Ross isn’t feeling very well. He picked up a bug along the way.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We’ll get you home, quick as we can.”

For Ross the trip home passed in the blur of fatigue: through the airport to the car, loading the luggage, the airport traffic, the drive to Brooklyn and the pretty house where they’d raised two children.

Once again he let Angie handle the details, appreciating her arm around his waist as she took some of his weight while guiding him upstairs.

“Straight to bed with you.”

“I’m not going to argue, but I want a shower first. I feel . . . I need a shower.”

She helped him undress, which struck him with a wave of tenderness. He leaned his head against her breast. “What would I do without you?”

“Just try to find out.”

The shower felt like heaven, made him believe absolutely he’d gotten through the worst. When he came out and saw she’d turned down the bed and set a bottle of water, a glass of ginger ale, and his phone all on the bedside table, his eyes actually stung with tears of gratitude.

She hit the remote to lower the shades on the windows. “Drink some of that water, or the ginger ale, so you don’t get dehydrated. And if you’re not better in the morning, it’s to the doctor with you, mister.”

“Already better,” he claimed, but obeyed, downing some ginger ale before sliding blissfully into bed.

She tucked and fussed, laid a hand on his brow. “You’re definitely running a fever. I’m going to get the thermometer.”

“Later,” he said. “Give me a couple hours down first.”

“I’ll be right downstairs.”

He closed his eyes, sighed. “Just need a little sleep in my own bed.”

She went downstairs, got some chicken, along with a carcass she’d bagged, out of the freezer, began the task of running it under cool water to speed up the defrosting. She’d make a big pot of chicken soup, her cure for everything. She could use some herself, as she was dog-tired and had already sneaked a couple of meds behind Ross’s back for her own sore throat.

No need to worry him when he was feeling so low. Besides, she’d always had a tougher constitution than Ross, and would probably kick it before it took serious hold.

While she worked she put her phone on speaker and called her daughter, Katie. They chatted happily while Angie ran the cold water and made herself some tea.

“Is Dad around? I want to say hi.”

“He’s sleeping. He came down with something on New Year’s.”

“Oh no!”

“Don’t worry. I’m making chicken soup. He’ll be fine by Saturday when we come to dinner. We can’t wait to see you and Tony. Oh, Katie, I got the most adorable little outfits for the babies! Okay, a few adorable little outfits. Wait until you see. But I’ve got to go.” Talking was playing hell with her sore throat. “We’ll see you in a couple days. Now don’t come by here, Katie, and I mean it. Your dad’s probably contagious.”

“Tell him I hope he feels better, and to call me when he wakes up.”

“I will. Love you, sweetie.”

“Love you back.”

Angie switched on the kitchen TV for company, decided a glass of wine might do her more good than the tea. Into the pot with the chicken, the carcass, then a quick run upstairs to look in on her husband. Reassured, since he was snoring lightly, she went back down to peel potatoes and carrots, chop celery.

She concentrated on the task, let the bright chatter of the TV wash over her, and stubbornly ignored the headache beginning to brew behind her eyes.

If Ross felt better—and that fever he had went down—she'd let him move from the bedroom to the family room. And by God, she'd get into her own pajamas because she felt fairly crappy herself, and they'd snuggle up, eat chicken soup, and watch TV.

She went through the process of making the soup on automatic, disposing of the carcass now that it had done its work, cutting the chicken meat into generous chunks, adding the vegetables, herbs, spices, and her own chicken stock.

She turned it on low, went back upstairs, looked in on Ross again. Not wanting to disturb him, but wanting to stay close, she went into what had been her daughter's room and now served as a room for visiting grandchildren. Then dashed to the guest bath to vomit up the pasta she'd had on the plane.

“Damn it, Ross, *what* did you catch?”

She got the thermometer, turned it on, put the tip in her ear. And when it beeped stared at the readout in dismay: 101.3.

“That settles it, chicken soup on trays in bed for both of us.”

But for the moment, she took a couple of Advil, went down to pour herself a glass of ginger ale over ice. After sneaking quietly into their bedroom, she pulled out a sweatshirt and a pair of flannel pants—adding thick socks because she felt chills coming on. Back in the second bedroom she changed, lay down on the bed, pulled around her the pretty throw that had been folded at the foot of the bed, and almost immediately fell asleep.

And into dreams about black lightning and black birds, a river that ran with bubbling red water.

She woke with a jolt, her throat on fire, her head pounding. Had she heard a cry, a shout? Even as she fumbled to untangle herself from the throw, she heard a *thud*.

“Ross!” The room spun when she leaped up. Hissing out an oath, she raced to the bedroom, let out her own cry.

He was on the floor by the bed, convulsing. A pool of vomit, another of watery excrement, and she could see the blood in both.

“Oh God, God.” She ran to him, tried to turn him on his side—weren’t you supposed to do that? She didn’t know, not for sure. She grabbed his phone off the nightstand, hit nine-one-one.

“I need an ambulance. I need help. God.” She rattled off the address. “My husband, my husband. He’s having a seizure. He’s burning up, just burning up. He’s vomited. There’s blood in it.”

“Help’s on the way, ma’am.”

“Hurry. Please hurry.”