

The Selkie

by Susa Morgan Black

Chapter One - Summer and Sea

*I dreamed a Selkie came to me
while I was swimming in the sea.
His skin was soft and white as milk
His hair was black and fine as silk.*

*He stared at me so wonderingly
and touched my face so tenderly.
We made love so joyously,
while swimming in that moonlit sea.*

*When day came, alas I woke
and he was gone - and my heart broke.*

Moira's fingers trailed in the water of the North Atlantic coast of Scotland, as she lay on a flat rock, singing to the seals that were basking on a small rocky isle beyond the breakers. One great black seal raised his head and stared back at her with its large dark eyes. She wondered if it were the same black seal she had seen on the isle every summer vacation.

The song had come to her last summer, as she sung from the rocks to her sleek audience beyond the breakers. Back home, she had sung it for Diane. The two friends had dreamed of being a musical team since childhood. Diane could play any instrument, where Moira could sing, write music, and play the guitar and harp. As much as she loved Scotland, Moira always missed Diane during her summer vacations.

Sighing, she turned over on her back, slipping her sunglasses over her eyes. The seagulls cried above her, and ravens circled even higher up, over the rocky cliffs. Grandfather knew all about the birds and animals in this isolated part of Scotland, and Grandma knew the name and use of every plant, tree, herb and shrub.

Moira MacDonald had spent her summers with her grandparents since she was eight years old. Grandpa was a retired Army Major, from the Gordon Highland Regiment. On retirement ten years ago, he had settled in his ancestral home far in the northern Scottish highlands.

Papa had once told her that it caused quite a stir when Grandpa chose an Irish Catholic bride. It nearly cost him his career in the conservative British military. But Grandpa was a stubborn man and no one could dissuade him from marrying the young Irish girl who had captured his heart. It was from Grandma, not her dour Scots Grandfather, that Moira had learned the old stories, songs, and folk tales from both Ireland and Scotland. And it was from these tales that she derived her inspiration for her own stories, songs and poetry.

Lost in daydreams, she heard her grandfather calling to her in his soft Highland brogue.

“Moira! Trobhad a-nall! (Come over here!) It'll be dark soon, come on in before the tide takes ye!”

“Coming, Grandpa!”

She scrambled after the tall, wiry old man, through the two human-shaped boulders her grandfather called an Bodach agus Cailleach (the old man and old woman) that formed a gate between the beach and the rough hilly terrain up the

path ascending the cliff to her grandparents' home. "They were the first couple to build a home on this hill, back in the time of Saint Columba." Her grandfather had once explained to her, "and they were so pious that the good Saint told them they could ask any reward within his power to grant. The Bodach said he wished to live near the beach forever with his beloved wife. And so the Saint turned them into two stones on the beach, and there they are to this day!"

The cottage was a cozy two-story, half-timbered building, originally wattle and daub, but reinforced with more modern masonry. The thatch roof had long ago been replaced with heavy tile, and patched nearly every year after the harsh, wild winter storms.

"Get some clothes on, girl, it gets cold fast here this far north, and a bathing suit is not very warm." Grandma scolded, holding her ladle in her hand, pointed up the staircase, "You go on up now. Dinner will be ready by the time you come down." The smell of fish stew wafted after Moira, propelling her to quickly change her clothes and come down to dinner.

She changed into a warm, bulky, moss green, Irish fisherman's sweater that hid her slim figure and slipped a pair of bluejeans over her long legs and narrow hips.

"That's better" exclaimed Grandma as she set the steaming pot on the table. Moira fetched the fresh baked bread and tankards of ale and called her Grandpa, who had retired to the library and was already engrossed in a book.

The three bowed their heads and held hands across the table as Grandpa solemnly intoned the Lord's Prayer in Scots Gaelic.

*"Ar n-athair a ta air néamh
Gu naomhaichear d' ainm
Gun tigeadh do Rìoghachd
Gun deanar do thoil air an talamh
Mar a nighear ann an néamh
Tabhair dhuinn an diugh ar n-aran Laitheal
Is maith dhuinn ar fiachan
Mar a mhaitheas sinn d' ar luchd fiachan
Na leig sinn ann am buaireadh
Ach saor sinn o'n olc
Oir is leat 's an Rìoghachd
An cumhachd agus an glòir
Gu sìrruidh,
Amen."*

Grandfather cut the bread loaf and passed the thick slices around while Grandmother ladled the fish stew into steaming bowls. Moira filled their glasses with frothy ale.

"Are you going to the pub tonight, my dear?" Grandma asked her, passing her the butter.

"Yes, I'd like to. There are a lot of students there from the Gaelic college - Saint Bridget's." Moira slathered her bread with butter, tore off a piece and dipped it in the stew.

"Any you like in particular" Grandpa raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing like that, Grandpa!" Moira assured him, washing down her food with a gulp of ale, "But their classes sure sound intriguing. Bethoc gave me their catalogue. They teach all the Gaelic languages - Irish, Scots, Welsh, Manx, Cornish and Breton. They have all Celtic focused classes on history, culture, literature, folklore, political science, religion, arts and crafts, and music!"

"Are ye interested in applying?" Grandpa asked, raising both eyebrows this time.

“Well, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Now that I’ve graduated high school, I want to go to college. If I applied to Saint Bridget’s and was accepted, would you be willing to let me live with you for the next four years?”

Her grandparents looked at each other and grinned. “I can’t think of anything I’d like better.” Her grandmother took Moira’s hand in her own and squeezed. “But we’ll have to see what your parents have to say.”

“I think I may still have some influence on our son.” Grandpa said dryly, then added, “And I’d be willing to help out with the expenses if she went to school here. That should tempt Donald.”

“It’s not our son I’m worried about.” Grandma reminded him, “Asking Gwynth to give up her daughter for four years won’t be easy.”

“Aye. Well, I’m an old campaigner, and we can but try.” and Grandfather finished up his ale and rose from the table. “Let me think on it.” and he retired to his comfortable chair and took up his book and his pipe in the library.

“Think on it, indeed. It’s me will have to talk to Gwynth.” Grandma fretted. “But don’t you worry, child. If Saint Bridget’s College will accept you, that’s where you will go.”



The Wolf and Raven Pub was the only pub in the town of Craighorn. It was crowded with shop keepers, laborers, students, housewives, children, professionals and occasionally, tourists. The building itself was well over 500 years old, and looked much as it might have when originally built - thick half timbered and white wash walls, wood beamed ceiling, tiny latticed windows. Even the lighting fixtures were designed like old fashioned oil lamps. The tiny staircase that wound up to the second floor lodgings were built for people nearly half the size of the current patrons.

The walls were festooned with replicas of highland weaponry; claymores, lochabres, dirks, and round brass studded shields. Between the weapons were displayed the heraldic devices of many of the Highland clans. Moira noted her own clan, MacDonald, displayed proudly amongst the others.

Big red-headed Hamish, the proprietor, was behind the bar, washing cups, pouring ale.

“Ho, Moira! Are ye singing for us tonight, eh?” He said hopefully, eyeing her harp, “I like the piece about the Selkie ye did last night. She wrote it herself, folks!” He announced to his customers.

Moira had known Hamish all her life, since, unlike American bars, British pubs admitted the whole family, and her grandparents had taken her to the pub since she was a child. He encouraged all his more talented customers to entertain, and Moira had had her debut at the Wolf and Raven at a very early age.

“If you like, Hamish! Let me have a drink first.” and Hamish’s daughter, Bethoc, brought her a frothy ale and set it down on the ancient, marred oaken table.

“Did you ask your grandparents, then, Moira?” Bethoc paused to ask before distributing the rest of the drinks on her tray.

“Yes, and they said they’ll let me stay with them! Now the next step is to talk Mom and Dad into it.” Moira took a gulp, “Tomorrow I’m going to the administration office and get an application form. Might as well start the ball rolling.”

“Good luck!” Bethoc smiled encouragingly and moved on.

Students from the college's summer session drifted into the cozy bar, chattering noisily about the day's classes. Moira looked them over curiously, hoping to be one of them in the autumn.

She knew that many of the students were foreigners like herself, with Celtic ancestry. They were the descendants of immigrants of past centuries to North and South America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Some were scholars from all over Europe and Asia who studied linguistics, history, music or folklore. Many were from the British Isles themselves. Moira sat back, sipping her ale and enjoyed the snippets of conversation from locals and students that washed over her in waves.

"Moira" Hamish called over to her, "How about a tune?"

The stage was a worn dark oak platform in the corner of the barroom. Moira brought her Celtic lap harp and guitar on stage, and sat down on the stool, pulling the microphone closer.

"Hello, I'm Moira MacDonald, from the U.S., and I'd like to sing a few tunes my Grandmother taught me." And she spent the next forty-five minutes alternating between guitar and harp, singing her favorite ballads and merry tunes, ending with some of her own compositions. She totally captured her audience with her clear jewel-toned voice, and wide vocal range. Giving her voice a breather, she moved into ethereal Celtic harp music. The hush was so pronounced that Bethoc and Hamish took their bar orders in whispers for the duration of Moira's recital.

There was an explosion of applause and cheers when she took her bows at the end of the performance.

"That was grand!" Exclaimed Hamish handing her an ale on the house.

Several of the students motioned her over to their table.

"Hi." Moira said shyly, pulling up a stool.

"You were wonderful! Are you traveling through or do you live here?" One of the girls asked.

"I'm visiting my grandparents, but I'm applying for the fall semester at the St. Bridget's this year."

"We're students there! You'll love it! By the way, I'm Jean, this is Ralph . . . Janice . . . Stephen . . . Peter. Gang, this is Moira." Jean introduced to a chorus of "Hi's and hello's".

"I'm going to the college tomorrow to pick up an application form." Moira told them.

"Come around lunch time and join us!" Stephen grinned his appreciation at her large green eyes, long braided red hair, and appealing figure.

Moira traveled by bus to the campus of the college early the next morning. She peered out the window at the scrubby heather, broom, and gorse that dotted the glens, the shaggy highland cattle hanging precariously on the hills, and shallow boggy lakes, as she passed through the magnificent Scottish countryside.

Saint Bridget's College had taken over a World War II Army base on the coast and the bungalows were converted into classrooms. The old concrete artillery installations were still visible long after the big guns had been removed. Attempts had been made over the years to modify the stark military atmosphere by planting the trees, shrubs and wildflowers that could survive the harsh northern coastal climate.

Moira stopped in the center of the campus, noticing a small square park with a fountain and stone benches. On top of the fountain was a statue of Saint Bridget, Her arms held out in benediction. Students milled about, or occupied the benches, talking in small groups or studying by themselves. The Administrative Office faced the park on one side, and Moira took a deep breath and entered.

"Can I help you?" Asked a plump, pleasant looking, middle aged woman.

“Yes. I’m Moira MacDonald, and I’d like an application form, if you please.”

“Certainly.” She pulled a packet of sheets out and handed them to Moira. “Here you are. You can sit over there to fill them out.” She indicated a large table with several chairs near the window. “There’s a fifteen pound registration fee.”

Moira took the papers and sat down. She took her time filling out the forms, fished out the pound notes, and returned everything to the receptionist, with a silent prayer to St. Bridget for success.

“You’ll need to send for your transcripts, of course. We’ll process this when they arrive, then contact you. In the meantime, feel free to look around the campus, sit in on some of the classes, and meet the other students. Good luck, Miss MacDonald!”

“Thank you.” and Moira made her escape.

Moira wandered around the campus. It was a peaceful place, dotted with trees, bushes and wildflowers. Stone benches were scattered around, occupied by studying, gossiping or courting students. The sound of the ocean was a constant background to the buzz of conversation.

Moira noticed that many teachers held their lectures outdoors in the open spaces between the bungalows. She paused to listen to a teacher lecturing eloquently before her enraptured audience.

“Major Thomas Weir was the Commander of the Edinburgh City Guards, and was also a prominent Presbyterian lay preacher, of a notoriously puritanical branch called the Bowhead Saints. He lived with his sister, Grizel, in the West Bow area of Edinburgh. The major was a grim old fellow, and dressed in severe black clothing, with a black cloak, and he always carried a mysteriously carved blackthorn walking stick.

Rumors about the fanatical major began to circulate in Edinburgh that he was a Devil Worshipper and practiced Black Magic and Witchcraft. It was said that the blackthorn walking stick had magical properties and was a gift from the Devil Himself. Stories were told that the Major and his sister could be seen after midnight in a black coach drawn by a team of six headless horses; will-o-wisp lights were seen about his house accompanied by strange unearthly sounds; beast like shapes were said to enter and depart from his home; and a smell of brimstone followed wherever he passed.

Because of his prestigious position, the magistrates were reluctant to confront the Major, but one day, at a prayer meeting, he himself confessed to his crimes, which included Satanism, black magic, adultery, bestiality, and even incest with his sister, Grizel.

The Lord Provost sent his own doctor to examine the Major, to determine whether or not he was insane, and the doctor’s verdict was that Thomas Weir was quite sane, suffering only from a guilty conscience after years of debauchery.

The major was arrested along with his sister in 1670, tried, convicted, and at the age of 71, burned at Gallows Hill. The blackthorn walking stick was thrown in the fire after him and was said to twist and turn like a living snake to avoid the flames. His sister, Grizel was hanged, while screeching curses at the gathered mob, at Grassmarket the next day.

The Weir home in West Bow stood empty for over a century, with many reports of hauntings, strange noises, wraiths, and noxious odors emanating from the building, including the figures of Major Weir and his sister, themselves. Finally, in 1878, the building was demolished, but the legend continues to this day.”

“Is the site still haunted?” One of the students asked.

“The exact location of the old house is no longer known, but the Bowhead District is a notoriously dangerous neighborhood. It’s not an area I would visit after dark.”

The teacher sat on a flat rock, while the students surrounded her, sitting on the ground or on blankets and pillows they had brought for comfort. The instructor reminded Moira of the stories of Irish hedge teachers from her Grandmother’s

youth. These people were the remnants of the bards, who traveled from village to village telling the ancient tales in Gaelic. Their predecessors were welcome at both cottage hearths and in castle halls, and they were rewarded with the best food and ale, and often coins and jewelry. In older times still, the bards were Druid magicians with the powers of cursing and healing their listeners, powers surpassing the ruling classes. Grandmother told her that the English had outlawed these teachers in Ireland and Scotland, in an attempt to stamp out Celtic language and culture. So the shenachies hid behind hedges with their students and related the old tales, out of sight of the British magistrates.

Moira sighed with pleasure. Grandmother had often called her, "My little Bard." And like in ancient times, St. Bridget's offered courses in storytelling and music - a school for bards!

Moira recognized several students from the Wolf and Raven, totally entranced, forgetting to take notes. By the time the teacher had finished her story, it was near to lunch, and several of the students who had been at the pub last night spied her, and joined her.

"Hi" said Jean, "Did you apply?"

"Yes, the forms are in, and I only have to send for my high school transcripts. I still haven't asked my parents yet, but my grandparents are going to pressure them!"

Steve joined them and said admiringly, "If they could hear you sing, they'd take you with or without transcripts and parental approval!"

"I hope it's that easy!" Moira laughed. "My grades are good, so I expect I have a chance. The real problem is going to be talking Mother into it."

"Well, I know something you can do." Jean said mysteriously. "Follow me."

Moira followed Jean along a meandering stone path across the campus to the bottom of a rocky hill. Jean led Moira to a small stone shrine above a crude slab well, overhung by a hawthorn tree. The tree's branches held many colorful strips of fluttering cloth, pendants, bits of fruit and other mysterious articles, so that it looked like a bizarre and pagan Christmas tree.

"This is Saint Bridget's Well, and the college is named after it. The archeologists say that this well has been used by people since Neolithic times. Bridget was once a Goddess in these isles, and when the Church took over, they made of Saint of Her." Jean explained.

"Yes, my Grandmother told me of Her. She said that Bridget was a nun in Kildare, and up until the time of Henry VIII, an eternal fire was kept at Her abbey. Grandmother keeps a shrine to Her in the house."

"That's right, I remember you told me your grandmother is Irish. Well, St. Bridget is honored in Scotland, as well. Especially here in the Highlands, where Catholicism survived."

Jean knelt in front of the well and looked up at the shrine - a small niche roughly carved out of the rocky outcrop, with a small white stone carving of the Saint, Herself.

"St. Bridget is the patron saint of blacksmiths, poets and healers. There's an old pagan invocation Mrs. Burns taught us" and Jean quoted solemnly,

*"From out of the night,
She brings Holy Light.
Bridget, come to us now.*

*From out of Her forge,
Mighty weapons disgorge.
Bridget, come to us now.*

*From dark healing wells,
She sings us Her spells.
Bridget, come to us now.*

*From flowers and vines,
She spins bardic trines.
Bridget, come to us now.”*

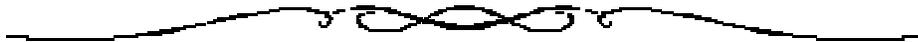
Jean rose to her feet and turned to Moira, “Now, tear off a piece of your clothing, dip it in the well and ask St. Bridget for what you want. Then tie the clootie to the branch of the tree, with all the others.”

Moira decided to use the green hair ribbon that bound her unruly auburn hair. Solemnly she dipped it into the well and mentally prayed to the Saint that she would find herself a student at St. Bridget’s College next semester.

As Moira looked into the well, she saw the wavering reflection of the statue in the water. Spellbound, Moira stared at the image. The icon seemed to come alive, smiling back at her, as if Saint Bridget, Herself, dwelt beneath the waters of the well.

Trembling, she stood up to tie the “clootie” to a low hanging branch on the hawthorn tree over the well.

“Good” Jean said approvingly. “The hawthorn tree is a fairy tree, itself. So you’ve asked both the Saint and the Fairies for help - you can’t lose!” And she laughed merrily as they returned to the campus.



“How did you like the school?” Grandfather asked her over a dinner of shepherd’s pie.

“I loved it! I’ve already made friends with some of the students. They’d heard me sing at the Wolf and Raven, and are hoping I’ll be there next semester. One of the students, Jean, took me down to the Bridget’s Well on the campus to pray to Saint Bridget that I’ll be accepted.”

“Well now, with the Saint on our side, we can’t fail. We shall call your parents tonight.” Grandma declared.

After dinner, the trio steeled themselves for the long distance call to Boston.

Grandfather got his son Donald on the phone and initiated the proposal.

“Hmmm. . .” The lined buzzed and crackled, “Well, if it’s what Moira wants, and you’re serious about your offer to help financially, I think it would be a great opportunity for her, Papa.”

“Four years?” Gwyneth’s heavy Welsh accent was clear above the buzz and crackles, “She’s just a baby, she’s barely out of high school. It’s too soon for her to move away from home!”

“Now, Gwyneth,” Grandma soothed, “Living with her grandparents is hardly moving away from home. She won’t be living on campus with a bunch of wild unruly students, she’ll be living with us.”

“I don’t know . . .”

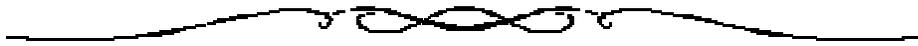
“Mother, it’s a wonderful school, and I already have friends there.” Moira implored.

“Won’t you miss Diane?”

“Sure, but she’s going to college in California - I won’t be seeing much of her for the next four years, anyway. And I’ve already made some new friends here! Mother, it’s really what I want more than anything in the world!”

There was silence at the other end of the phone. “All right, baby. If it’s that important to you. I want you to come home for semester breaks and vacations, though.”

“All right, Mama.” And with a great sigh of relief, she hung up and hugged her grandmother joyfully.



Weeks passed by at a leisurely summer pace. During the days, Moira helped her grandmother gather herbs, roots and flowers for her medicinal potions, or went sailing with her grandfather in his tiny skiff, or hiking through the hills as he pointed out various birds and tested her knowledge.

“Tell me what you see.” He said, pointing over the cliff to the wheeling birds.

“Petrels, cormorants, and over there, ravens!” She proclaimed promptly.

“Very good. You could be a naturalist if you wanted to. You have a flair for it.” Grandpa said proudly.

“Well, I want to be a singer and storyteller. But nature plays a big part on all my stories and songs, Grandpa.”

“Aye, I ken. Especially the seals. Ever since you were a wee bairn and I told you the story of our ancestor, the Chieftain of the MacDonald Clan, who married the Seal King’s daughter.”

“The Selkie Bride - that’s still my favorite story, Grandpa!” Moira admitted.

Many nights, Moira met her new friends from St. Bridget’s at the Wolf and Raven Pub. Jean MacLeod was the only native Scot, from the Isle of Skye. [SMB1] Her boyfriend, Stephen was Canadian. Janice was a New Zealander, Ralph and Peter were Australians. Sitting down with them at the Pub was like being at an international convention, with their rich mixture of accents.

“Have you heard from the school, yet?” Jean asked.

“No, but Papa had my high school transcripts sent special delivery three weeks ago. I should hear from them any day now!” Moira was excited.

“Better have your parents ship out your winter clothing.” Stephen suggested.

“As soon as I hear I’m accepted, I will.” Moira agreed.

“Miss MacDonald? This is Miss Hamilton, Saint Bridget’s Registrar. Congratulations, you have been accepted into our (Freshman - find Scottish term) class starting in September. We are starting registration next Monday, and you need to be prepared to settle with the Accounting Office at that time.”

“Thank you, Miss Hamilton! I’ll be there Monday!” Moira exclaimed. “Grandma, Grandpa - I’M IN!”