

And some goodies for you—some free pages from the book to introduce *The Celtic Stone*:

## *The Celtic Stone*

From **chapter 6...**

Murdoch is the local gamekeeper on the Isle of Sky. He later becomes a mentor for our hero, Chris.

Murdoch normally liked cemeteries. Over time, the Atlantic storms had washed the tears from the headstones to leave the whisper of stories—stories fondly told of those who had once belonged. Among the grass tussocks and sedges, lichen-covered headstones leaned drunkenly. Given the amount of whiskey some of the islanders had consumed before they found their way under the peaty sod, it was probably entirely appropriate. Murdoch was not, however, enjoying the cemetery at the moment. Whilst the funeral of his friend, Joseph Norman, three weeks ago had been fine, this funeral was raw and full of grief. A huddle of umbrellas protected those standing by the grave. Further back, the baggy tweed jackets of the crofters steamed slightly in the still, damp air. They did not have umbrellas, and they stood in the rain, stoic and grim. None of them were strangers to an untimely death, but even so, this one was more tragic than most.

Murdoch's feet squelched in the mud as he shifted his weight. In front of him, Morag had her arm around Ruan's tiny shoulders. The boy pressed against her, his tiny face stricken with incomprehension and horror. The fact that Ruan had not yet cried concerned Murdoch. It would take both time and love to help him work his grief out. Murdoch sighed as he held the umbrella further forward, the better to protect them both.

The crofters' sympathy for the boy was almost tangible. His father had been one of them. In fact, he had been something of a leader within their tiny community. Now his boy had no parent at all, and would be fostered out—goodness knows where.

Morag, Ruan, and Murdoch formed a small knot of people who stood slightly apart from the rest of the mourners. Murdoch knew this was not just out of respect. Quite the reverse. Whilst the rough sympathy of the crofters was with young Ruan, the ancient antipathy they harbored for Morag and her family meant they kept their distance from her. Murdoch shook his head in irritation. *If yon Scots could maintain their wits as well as they could maintain their feuds, they'd be ruling the world.*

Around him, he could hear snatches of conversation. Islanders were never shy of talking whilst the preacher was speaking. Murdoch, himself a lay preacher, knew that well enough. Few preachers could hold a group of islanders silent. If the preacher came from the mainland,

as this one had, there was no chance at all. Murdoch had been asked to conduct the funeral but had declined, citing his need to attend Morag and the boy. He contented himself with watching and listening.

“We are also here, of course, to share the sorrow of those who mourn, and to offer them our love and support. Let us hear the word of Scripture, that we may all face the future with hope.”

“Is there much of him in there, then?”

“Not much. It was a very hot fire.”

“Aye, there was lots of wood when the ceiling came down on him. ‘Twas a grand pyre.”

“Eternal God, our heavenly Father, your love for us is everlasting. We acknowledge that you alone can turn the shadow of death into the brightness of the morning light.”

“The pollis and the fire engine were quick enough, considering they had to come from the other side.”

“Aye, but too late, as usual. We’d been fighting it for fifteen minutes afore they came.”

“Ach. Not that we did much good, despite there been a muckle crowd of us.”

“Aye, Magnus would have liked to have seen that. Pity he’s dead.”

“In strength and in weakness, in achievement and failure, in the brightness of joy and the darkness of despair, we remember him as one of us.” The preacher droned on.

“Ee were fixing the outboard, inside the house, then?”

“Aye, that’s the way of it. Silly blighter.”

“We now commit his body to the ground, confident that he is in the loving arms of his Lord and Savior, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“The wee mannie escaped without hurt?”

“Aye: as nimble as a ferret, that one. Slipped out the window and ran to the Daniel woman.” The crofter spat on the ground.

“Why her? Didn’t he know to keep clear?”

“I mind the laddie would run errands for her and collect the things for her potions.”

“She’s a weird one, that.”

“Ach, haud yer whist. Don’t begrudge the wain a wee bit of mithering. Lord knows he’s no’ had much.”

“Aye. It’s been an unlucky family—both parents and grandparents gone. The devil’s singled them out, right enough.”

Murdoch heard the mutterings and allowed his own thoughts to wander. *What am I to do?* He lifted his gaze to the distant mountains. Their tops were shrouded in the same gray

clouds that leached what little color there was from the sad spectacle. *Aye, storm's coming.* He glanced past the stone church out to the sea. It was choppy and fretful, as if it too was uncertain of the future.

...Hmm, what happens next?