

A CELTIC PROPHECY NOVELLA

# INITIATE

BY

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Can't Put It Down Books

Initiate  
A Celtic Prophecy Novella  
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*This book is dedicated to Karen Hodges Miller who encourages me to keep writing as only an editor, publisher, and friend can.*

*Be careful what you wish for. Wishes are brutal, unforgiving things. They burn your tongue the moment they're spoken and you can never take them back.— Alice Hoffman*



# CHAPTER 1

“I’m going to kill you, whoever you are!” Alex shouted as the infernal pounding on his door woke him. But first, he acknowledged with a rueful grin to himself, he would have to get up to answer it. He made no move, but looked around the bed, where he lay alone in the twisted, rumped blankets. Colleen was gone; the bedclothes had lost her warmth, but her smell lingered. He drank it in, thinking of the previous night and how the moonlight had kissed her form, shedding her in ethereal beauty as she rose above him.

“Alex, are ye in there? T’is time, aye?”

Alex groaned, recognizing the voice of his friend, Cormac, and flipped the coverings off, knowing that Cormac would break the door down to prove that Alex was in fact not in the room. He’d done it before, much to the consternation of his Alex’s brother and Mistress Fordoun.

“Shut yer geggie, ye bampot!”

Searching the floor for his discarded shirt; he pulled it over his head as he scratched his bollocks. He yanked the door open, ready to give Cormac a fist or two in the soft parts, but their friend, Jamie was with him, brandishing a bottle of whiskey in each fist, only one of which was still unopened. While they had the audacity to wake him before the cock crowed, at least they had enough sense to bring a bottle—that stayed his ire.

Cormac bullied his way into the room and swept up Alex’s breeks, throwing them at him in the same movement. “Get dressed, lad!” Clapping him on the back, “we’ve come ta get ye good an’ drunk ’afore the ceremony.”

Alex reached for the open bottle in Jamie’s hand and took a long swig. The liquor burned his throat but still he drank. *The ceremony.* Alex hadn’t forgotten. Rising through the initiate

rankings faster than anyone before, he was the first of the three friends to attain the distinction of Druid Warrior—at least he would be after the midwinter ceremony tonight. Some he knew spent their whole lives as an initiate, lacking the essential make up to move beyond. He was physically and spiritually ready; he knew the bloody history from the inception of the caste, necessary to combat the infidels' intent on the destruction of the Druid religion.

Alex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and belched. “Aye. I must be out o’ my gourd ta think this t’will be good for me.” He bent to put his pants on.

Cormac and Jamie sobered and looked at each other as if they were at a loss for words.

He felt the awkwardness instantly. “Och, didna be so daft. T’will be a’richt.” But he couldn’t even sound uplifting for long enough to get out the one measly sentence. He gulped, looking from one friend to the other. “Nay?”

Cormac and Jamie smiled, but failed in the attempt to reassure Alex. Neither of them had made such strides in the ranks, so to Alex, they looked like those who’d come to pay their last respects to a dying man. He took another long swig of the bottle, emptying it. If they wanted to get him drunk, they’d have no resistance from him. He would drown his worries and insecurities in the bottle and hopefully, by the time he came to his senses the deed would already be done and he would be the newly installed Defender of the Faith.

What had he gotten himself into?

*Defender of the Faith.*

The title held an allure for him, and it was a peaceful time, even with the spread of Christianity. He had heard of the witch hunters, the bogus trials, and the executions that were meant as a deterrent from keeping silent, turning neighbor against neighbor, and those from following the Auld Ways. The overt practice had gone underground, both literally and figuratively, much as the Druid order had after the Romans were repelled. It was quite the stratagem, and its suggestion had been attributed to Amergin. But Alex felt safe enough, because he still saw the covert offerings made to the gods in the forest on days leading up to fire feasts, and

hundreds of other small things that people did, even those who professed to being converts to Christianity, which led him to believe that try as they might, the Ways were in the blood of the people.

Defender of the Faith he'd be after tonight, and a man not entirely his own any longer. His duties would call him away from home, from Colleen, and he wasn't sure if he was okay with this. It meant that potentially he wouldn't be around if she needed him. A husband should be there. But now his duties went beyond the familial; it mattered not that he hadn't run the gamut yet. The ceremony was just a formality. Caer Iborneith and Aerten had foreseen and proclaimed his fate. He was obligated to something greater than himself, greater than his wife, their future children, and for the first time, he didn't know if he was up to the task.

Jamie looked expectantly at Alex, "Are ye ready, Alex, dae ye ken?"

As if a verbal confirmation would make it so, he found himself reciting, "Gods willing and the creek doonae rise." The adage, he had so often heard said by his own grandmother, and thus attributed to her since her passing, brought a smile to their lips.

"Granny Sinclair was a verra canny woman." Jamie said raising the bottle in her memory and taking a swig.

Alex was unexpectantly choked up, even though she had been gone for almost four years. His grandmother was wise. He could certainly use some of that wisdom now; but there was none to be had. Getting drunk was the next best thing. He'd hide his cowardice in the bottle, and maybe if the stars aligned, he'd be too far gone to put up much of a protest when it finally happened. "It doesna matter what I feel, t'is happening tonight. Fate ha' damned my soul." Alex, paced. "What I need is ta find my wife."

Cormac clapped his hand around Alex's forearm, "T'is too late. She's gone back home."

"What?" Alex ripped his arm away. "I ha' ta go after her."

Jamie and Cormac moved to block the doorway. "Ye kent this ta be the way. She cannae witness the ceremony, for her sake as well as yer own. She ties ye ta this world. Ye'll be conflicted when

ye need ta ha' yer wits about ye the most."

"Ye ken what they'd dae ta her if only ta distract ye, and then worse, when ye go ta her. She'd no' survive, but ye will, purposely, ta live out the rest o' yer days mourning her. Our gods are vengeful, mind ye."

This sobered Alex. "Who did she leave with?"

"Yer brother and a contingent o' his men. She'll be safe." Cormac informed him.

"Safe." He cocked his head, contemplating. There was something just out of reach, something that was on the edge of memory, as if he had just woken up from a stupor without his facilities, something that—

Terror paralyzed him. His mind ran through the possibilities and clutched at his heart. Seizing Jamie by the shirt, Alex brought him close, whispering, "Jamie, brother, Colleen is in danger. Take my horse, Enbarr, and ride ta intercept them. She'll need yer subtle magic 'afore the dawn. Hide them all, but if ye ha' ta choose, t'will be her, aye?" Alex shook him. "Promise me, James Liam Morgan McAllister."

"Aye, as ye wish. I'll protect her," Jamie gulped.

Alex saw he recognized the gravity of the request by Alex's use of his full given name.

Jamie clapped a hand on his shoulder, looking him square in the eye. "As if she were my own."

"And me, Alex, what ye'd ha' me dae?" Cormac asked arms folded across his chest.

Alex moved to the grimy window, turning his back to his friends. "We ha' nay choice. Ye ha' ta stay. It must look as if e'erything is proceeding as planned. One absence is easily explained ta ensure safe passage, but two, and o' such high ranking initiates, t'would cause suspicion and unwanted attention. Two, and it may bring the worse down on her head ta break me. Nay, as much as I want ye ta go, ye must stay."

"Plus, ye doonae want ta ha' that much destruction around yer wife if it came down ta a fight," added Jamie.

He turned in time to see an ugly look pass unsaid between his two friends, but wrote it off. He had no time to mediate the affront

Cormac likely took from Jamie's statement. He was correct in his assessment though. Cormac was the more powerful of the two, but people often died as a result of his use of fire magic. There was no way he'd imperil Colleen's life that way.

Jamie shook his head and stood taller. "I'll take care o' her, Alexander. We'll move undetected like a whisper in the trees."

"Go then. Time is no' our friend."

Alex watched as the door closed and listened to the retreating footsteps in silence. He heard the familiar whinny of his horse and looked down to see Jamie, astride Enbarr, stop under the tavern room's window for a moment. He put his palm to the cold glass as a farewell, but Jamie didn't look up. A flick of the reins and they were off, leaving muddy impressions in the waterlogged loam.