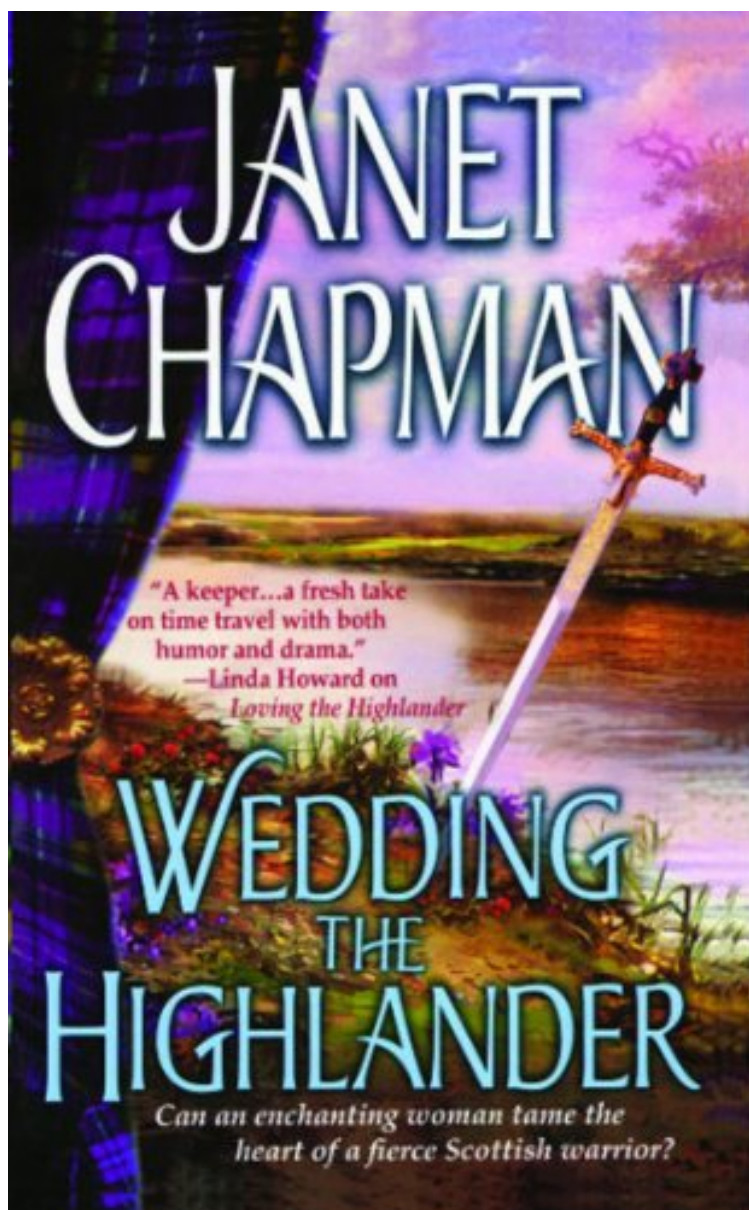


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Wedding the Highlander



Par Janet Chapman
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Chapter One Pine Creek, Maine, October 22

A shout woke him as he spiraled through the horrific void, twisting and clawing to find something of substance to hold on to. But there was only blinding white light and the terror of knowing his fate was beyond his control. Michael MacBain opened his eyes, held himself perfectly still, and listened to the silence broken only by his own labored breathing. He slowly sat up and scrubbed the sweat from his face, then untangled his legs from the sheet, threw back the cover, and stood. He walked to the window, lowered the top sash, and took slow, metered breaths of the crisp October air, letting it wash over his quivering muscles. A full two minutes passed before his heart finally calmed and his head cleared. Michael sighed into the night. All was right with the world, he decided as he stared into the darkness; the moon-washed mountains still cast their shadow over his farm, the stars still shone from the heavens, his house stood peaceful. And his son, Robbie, was safe in his bed, and John was sleeping downstairs. Michael scrubbed his face again with tired impatience. The dreams were becoming more detailed. And far more frequent. They started with Maura -- with her funeral. In the dream, Michael would see himself crouched on the hillside, hidden from the MacKeages, watching them bury his woman outside the fence that separated the sinners from the decent. Ian MacKeage was placing his daughter in unhallowed ground. And as they covered Maura with unholy dirt and the dream progressed, Michael would relive the anger and utter impotency he had felt that day. She hadn't killed herself -- she'd wandered onto the rotten ice of the loch by mistake because of the snowstorm. She'd been coming to him, running away from her clan to get married, so their child would be born with the blessing of the church. And from there, the dream would change to his confrontation with Ian MacKeage that fateful day eight hundred years ago. Michael's feelings of heartbreak had been compounded by Ian's harsh reprisals. Michael had walked away, unable to reason with Maura's father. Aye, it was then he had decided to go to war. The dream would shift rapidly, this time to a glen not far from the MacKeage keep. Greylen, Ian, Morgan, and Callum MacKeage were on their way home from talks with the MacDonalds, looking smug in their success at gaining the other clan's aid against the MacBains. And so Michael and his five warriors had attacked -- and his dream turned into a nightmare hellish enough to curdle a warrior's blood. The storm descended upon them without warning. The sounds of battle turned into a frenzy of shouting men, screaming horses, and deafening thunder. A godless wind came first, roaring down from the heavens, uprooting trees, and churning up dust that clogged their throats. Lightning sizzled through the air, and the rain started, ruthlessly pounding against them. And the last thing Michael remembered seeing was a small, aged man standing on the bluff above them, watching in horror. Sometimes -- if he were lucky -- he'd wake up then. His own scream of terror was enough to jolt him from the nightmare, and he'd find himself in his bed, in the twenty-first century, safe but no closer to understanding how ten men and their warhorses could be hurtled forward eight hundred years through time. Nor, even after living in this modern world for twelve years now, was he any closer to understanding why. But sometimes he didn't wake up, and the nightmare continued, settling back into a less violent but just as disturbing dream, with him standing on the summit of TarStone Mountain, at sunrise on Summer Solstice eight years ago. In the dream, Michael was casting the ashes of Mary Sutter, Robbie's mother, onto the gentle breeze, watching it carry her away. He was holding their infant son in his arms, surrounded by the MacKeage warriors who shared his fate, Mary's sister, Grace, and Mary's six half brothers. The priest, Daar, was there as well -- the same man he had seen on the bluff in the storm eight hundred years ago. Michael rubbed his now dry chest and looked toward TarStone Mountain. Daar was actually a druid named Pendar. He lived halfway up TarStone now, hiding behind his priest's robes and neighborly smile. The four MacKeage warriors were also his neighbors, their ancient war superseded by their need to survive in this modern time. The blood tie of the eight-year-old boy sleeping down the hall now bound them together. Greylen's wife, Grace Sutter MacKeage, was Robbie's aunt. And to the man, the old druid included, Robbie's happiness came first. Michael continued staring out the window, but his focus suddenly shifted to the soft footsteps coming into his room, and he waited until Robbie was about to pounce before he spoke. "Ya best be heavily armed, son," he said softly, still not turning around. "And prepared for the consequences." The footsteps stopped. Michael looked over his shoulder and smiled at the boy standing three paces away, his hands on his naked hips and a scowl on his young face. "A noble warrior does not use a weapon on an unarmed man," Robbie countered, obviously insulted. His scowl suddenly changed to a diabolical smile as he raised his hands and wiggled his fingers. "It was a tickle attack I was

planning. "Michael closed the window, picked up his pants, and put them on. He faced his son as he slipped into his shirt. "How about you get dressed instead," he suggested, "and we head for the summit now?" "Now?" Robbie echoed, lowering his hands back to his hips and looking at the clock by Michael's bed. "But it's only two in the morning." Michael reached into the top drawer of his bureau for socks. "We might make it by sunrise," he offered. Never one to need an excuse for an adventure, Robbie clapped his hands. "Can we bring the swords?" he asked. "Aye," Michael agreed as he sat on the bed to put on his socks. "Dress warm, and bring our packs when you come downstairs. I'll put together some food to take with us and leave John a note." Robbie was out the door and running down the hall before Michael could finish giving his orders. Michael stood up and tossed the sheet back over the mattress, which was still damp with his sweat. His shout must have awakened Robbie. And being far too astute for his age, the boy had known his father was dreaming again and had tried to distract him with a tickle attack. Michael stared at the rumped bed. This was the third time he'd had the dream in the last six weeks. Before that, he'd relived the horror only occasionally. It wasn't the dream itself that disturbed him but more its escalating frequency. Michael walked back to the window, rested his arms on the top sash, and stared at TarStone. Were the dreams a precursor to something? The nightmare retold his past, not his future. Was another vision about to be added to the sequence? More importantly, did he hold the power to control the outcome this time? He'd made a new life for himself here and now had a son to guide into manhood. Nothing must come between him and Robbie, not an aging wizard and most especially not the magic. "Come on, Papa. I'm dressed, and you haven't even packed anything yet," Robbie said from the doorway. "I want to be on the summit by sunrise." Michael gathered up his sweater from the back of a chair and walked into the hall, gently prodding his son ahead of him. "Do we ride or walk?" he asked. "Walk," Robbie quickly answered, skipping down the stairs, the empty packs slapping against the banister. "Stomper is too old to wake up this early, and Feather's too lazy." Robbie stopped at the bottom, looked up at Michael, and said in a lowered voice so he wouldn't wake up John, "I'm not up to fighting that stubborn pony this morning. Besides, he doesn't like my sword. I think it pokes him when I'm riding." "How about the four-wheeler?" Michael asked, his voice also hushed. Robbie shook his head. "Too noisy. We won't see any of the night animals." Michael gave his son a nudge toward the kitchen. "You write the note for John and fill our packs. I'll get our swords." "Can I use Robert's sword?" Robbie asked. Michael lifted a brow. "You're too tired to fight with Feather but willing to hike to the summit of TarStone carrying Robert's sword?" The boy thought hard on that prospect, then slowly shook his head. "Nope. It's too heavy." He suddenly brightened. "You could carry both." After another nudge to get him moving toward the kitchen, Michael turned and headed to the library. "Nay, son. A warrior carries his own weapon," he said over his shoulder. Michael continued into the library, came to a stop in front of the hearth, and studied the three swords hanging over the mantel. Two of them were as long as the hearth was wide and flanked a smaller sword designed for a much younger hand. He reached up and took down Robbie's weapon, feeling the balance as he ran one finger along the smooth length of the blade. He'd had it made especially for Robbie and had given it to the boy on his fourth birthday. Robbie's aunt Grace had been appalled. The MacKeage men had been impressed. Well, except for Greylen. Laird MacKeage had taken on a yearning, almost pained expression as he'd held the small weapon and looked at his three young daughters. Robbie had immediately named his sword Thunderer, which was a loose translation of what Michael called his own sword, and had rushed outside to battle the bushes. Since then, with both amazement and a great deal of pride, Michael had been teaching Robbie the skills of a warrior. Learning to wield a sword was only a small part of his lessons, but it was the most enjoyable part for Robbie. The boy was unbelievably capable, in charge not only of his young mind but of his quickly growing muscles as well. With the confidence of youth backed by an unusually keen intelligence, Robbie was fast on his way to becoming a remarkable adult. Still, Michael was not willing to relax when it came to his son. Nor did he trust this new life and new land, even after twelve years, for he knew from experience how quickly it could change. And that was why, as he guided his son into manhood, Michael also kept a tight rein on himself. He minded his own business, ran his Christmas tree farm with a strong and careful hand, and stayed friendly but guarded from the community of Pine Creek. He took care of John Bigelow, the original owner of the farm, and tried to soothe the old man's pain at losing his wife of fifty-seven years. They all missed Ellen, especially Robbie. She'd been a surrogate grandmother to the boy, and the three of them were finding it difficult to cope with their bachelor lives since Ellen had died two months ago. He was going to have to give in, he supposed, and hire a housekeeper before they got stomach rot from all the burnt food they'd been eating. Michael reached for Tirneanaiche, wrapped his fist around the hilt of the sword, and took it off the wall. He closed his eyes and sighed at the familiar

weight of the weapon that had been an extension of his right arm for the greater part of his life. For the last twelve years, he'd felt naked without it strapped to his back, and now he spent his time cleaning the dust off Tirneanaiche instead of his enemy's blood. He looked up at the mantel again, at Robert MacBain's sword.

The old warrior had not been able to adjust to the twenty-first century and had chased thunderstorms in the hopes of returning home. Michael's grip tightened on Tirneanaiche at the memory of his old friend's death ten years ago, on the highlands of northern Nova Scotia; desolate and desperate, only the two of them remained of the original six-man war party. Robert had died instantly from the bolt of lightning that had traveled down his sword and into his body. He hadn't made it home, and Michael could only hope the old warrior had finally found peace. "You're in an odd mood this morning, Papa," Robbie said from the doorway. "Aunt Grace says if something is bothering me, I should talk about it. That talking will make it better." He moved into the library, his now full pack slung over his shoulders, and stared up at Michael with concerned, deep gray eyes. "You could tell me about your dream, and that might help." Michael set Tirneanaiche on the overstuffed chair and settled Robbie's sword into the sheath sewn into his pack, making sure the hilt didn't impair his movement. He smoothed down Robbie's hair, lifted the boy's face to his, and smiled. "I dreamed that I was standing on TarStone, holding you, as we said good-bye to your mother eight years ago," he told him, deciding a half-truth was better than an outright lie. "It must be this hike we had planned that made me dream of Mary." Robbie wrapped his young arms around Michael's waist and hugged him tightly. "We don't have to go, Papa." "Aye, we do," Michael said softly, hugging him back. "We're both needing to visit Mary's favorite place." "No, Papa," Robbie said, pulling back to look up at Michael. "Mama's favorite place was in your arms." Feeling like a sledgehammer had just hit his chest, Michael hugged Robbie against him so the boy wouldn't see how hard his words had landed. "Can you keep a secret, Papa?" Robbie said into his shirt. "I can." "I have a new pet." "What sort of pet?" "A snowy owl." Michael looked down at his son and raised an eyebrow. "And just how long have you had this dangerous pet?" "She came to me on my birthday, last January." "She?" Robbie nodded, completely unaware of Michael's concern. "I call her Mary," he whispered. The sledgehammer struck again, this time almost doubling him over. "Mary? You named your pet after your mother?" "Aye," Robbie said, nodding. "I was wishing real hard for my mama on my birthday, but I got an owl instead. So I named her Mary." Michael stepped away and picked up his sword. He slowly digested the news, thinking about an eight-year-old's imagination and an owl's propensity to be drawn to the child. "Why haven't I seen this owl?" he asked, looking back at Robbie. "Where do you meet with your pet?" Robbie pointed out the east window of the library. "There. On TarStone. When I ride my pony, Mary likes to follow me." And now that his secret was out, Robbie rushed to tell his tale. "She glides through the forest like the wind, Papa, on silent wings. And she's a good hunter. She catches rabbits and shares them with me." Robbie scrunched up his face. "Mary won't eat the rabbit, though, when I burn it." Michael took a step back, more awed than concerned. Since Grace had placed his son in his arms eight and a half years ago, he and Robbie had walked these woods, camped, fished, hunted, and cooked their dinners over an open fire. He had not been aware, however, that his son was in the habit of cooking his own dinners. Or that he'd made a pet of a snowy owl. Michael turned Robbie and urged him toward the kitchen. "Do you have your knife?" he asked, deciding to wait until they were hiking up TarStone to explore the subject of Robbie's pet more closely. His son reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded jackknife, holding it up for Michael to see. "When can I have a big one like yours?" he asked. "When I decide you should." "I could have a straight blade and keep it in my boot like you do." "No, you can't. A folding knife is safest," Michael instructed, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his own knife. "The one in my boot is a weapon, Robbie. The knives we carry in our pockets are tools." "And a warrior doesn't even need a knife to survive in the wilderness," Robbie quoted by rote, tucking his knife back into his pocket as they headed through the kitchen and out onto the porch. "Papa, are you going to die?" Michael softly closed the door behind them with a slightly shaking hand, careful not to show how much Robbie's innocent question unnerved him. He slipped his own pack onto his back, adjusted Tirneanaiche so that the hilt sat just behind his left shoulder, and walked down the steps. He was not surprised by the question. Since Ellen's passing, the boy had been full of questions about death, and Michael had found himself at a loss for answers more often than not. "I am going to die," he finally said, keeping his tone even. "But not today. Nor tomorrow. I'm a warrior, Robbie. And it's my duty to live long enough to guide you into manhood." "And will I be a warrior when I grow up?" Michael headed toward the upper field, setting a brisk pace. "Yes and no," he answered honestly. "You will have a warrior's knowledge and skill and the heart of a Highlander, but you will live here and help me run our Christmas tree farm when I grow too old to do it myself." "Grampy's sons didn't stay and help him," Robbie countered, falling into step

beside him. "But I won't leave you," he promised, taking Michael's hand as he looked up with sincere gray eyes. "And I won't die before you do." Michael nodded. "Aye. You'll not die first," he thickly agreed. "Maybe...maybe you should get yourself some more sons," Robbie whispered, letting go of Michael's hand so he could adjust the straps on his pack. He looked up. "Just in case I do die." "That will not happen," Michael growled, stopping and turning Robbie to face him. "And babes are not pulled from thin air. I would need a wife in order to get these sons." "You got me without a wife." Michael frowned. How had this conversation turned from death to sex? "I was trying to marry your mother," he explained. "And if Mary had lived, we probably would have had more bairns. But things don't always work out the way we would like, Robbie. Sometimes life interferes with our plans." "Then why don't you just find another woman to marry?" Michael started walking again, weaving his way through the rows of Christmas trees until they came to the woods. "A man doesn't decide he wants to get married and then simply pick the first available female. A man and a woman need to love each other first." "Like Aunt Grace and Uncle Grey." "Aye," Michael said softly. "Like Grace and Grey. And Callum and Charlotte, and Morgan and Sadie. A bond must be formed first, and love must grow from there." "But you can't form a bond with a woman, Papa, if you don't never try." Robbie looked up, his eyes shining in the moonlight with the mischief of a boy on a mission. "And because Gram Ellen is gone, it's my duty to speak for her. And she says you need to go on dates." "And my answer to you is the same as it's been to Ellen for eight years. I don't want a wife." "Because your heart is broken, Papa. But Gram Ellen always said the right woman could mend it." Robbie stepped over a log in the path, then turned and walked backward as he continued. "And I can help." "How?" Michael asked with wearing patience, moving past his son to take the lead. It appeared this recurring discussion had not ended with Ellen Bigelow's death. Apparently, his son was taking up her cause. Along with Grace MacKeage. What was it with women that they couldn't stand to see a man remain single? "I've already started, Papa." "How?" Michael repeated, his patience turning to wariness. "Has it something to do with all the time you've been spending at Gu Brth with Grace this last month?" "Aye," Robbie said. "Aunt Grace helped me place an ad on the Internet." Michael stopped walking. "What sort of ad?" he asked, staring at the moonlit forest in front of them, wondering if his son and Grace had advertised on one of those sites for lonely singles. "An ad for a tenant," Robbie clarified. "I'm going to rent my house." Michael didn't know whether to laugh with relief or shout with surprise. "You're wanting to rent your mother's home?" he asked softly, turning to face his son. "Why?" "Because it shouldn't sit empty. A home needs to be lived in. It needs to be alive." Michael actually could hear Grace's words coming from Robbie's mouth. "It will be lived in," he snapped. "When you grow up and get married." "But that's too far away. The house needs to be alive now. When I go there, it's terribly quiet, Papa. And lonely. It needs to be needed." Michael turned and started walking again, taking long strides that made Robbie have to jog to keep up. "It's a house, son, made of wood and glass and stone. It doesn't have feelings." Robbie tugged on Michael's pack to get him to slow down. "It does too, Papa. I can feel the loneliness when I visit." Michael narrowed his eyes on the path ahead. "Explain to me how renting your mother's home has anything to do with finding me a wife." "Because I'm going to rent it to a special woman. And she'll fix your broken heart, you'll get married, and I'll get a new mama and some baby brothers." Michael stopped walking again. He took the boy by the shoulders and hunkered down until they were face to face. "You do not shop for a wife on the Internet," he said softly. "Nor for a mother. When we get back tonight, you and I are going to see Grace and have her remove the ad. You do not want strangers living in your mother's home." "No, Papa! It's too late. I already have it narrowed down to three women." Michael didn't shout, he roared. He straightened and turned and started walking back home. Goddammit. Aunt or not, Grace MacKeage had overstepped her boundaries -- again. Robbie ran to catch up but bumped into his father's back when Michael suddenly ducked to avoid being hit by a white blur of feathers. The owl's silent approach changed to an angry whistle as it lifted one wing and turned toward them again. Michael grabbed Robbie and threw them both to the ground as he rolled to tuck his son beneath him. The owl landed on a fallen log just three feet away, and Michael found himself staring into the yellow-gold eyes of a predator. A fist punched him in the ribs as his son squirmed to get free. "Mary!" Robbie shouted, scrambling to his knees. He knelt between the owl and Michael. "Don't be afraid, Papa. Mary won't hurt us." Michael had lost the woman of his heart almost nine years ago, and hearing her name still tightened his chest. He sat up and pulled Robbie onto his lap, away from the bird, and stared at the snowy. The owl stared back, its huge eyes unblinking in the moonlight, its beak slightly open as it chattered in a high-pitched rattle. Talons, more than an inch long, clung to the moss-covered log. The bird stood nearly two feet tall, and, as if it wanted Michael to complete his inspection, it stepped to the side and opened its wings to an impressive

span of nearly five feet. A very lethal, very efficient predator. His son's pet. Which Robbie had named for his mother. "Mary, you stop that," Robbie scolded. "This is my papa." The snowy owl folded its wings, ducked its head, and changed its rattle to a gentle chatter. "Isn't she the prettiest thing you've ever seen, Papa?" "Aye," Michael quietly agreed. And she was. The owl's sleek white feathers ended in solid black tips that appeared like lace over the snowy's entire body. Her face was a heart-shaped disk of solid white, with large, crisp yellow eyes encircled by thick black lines that might have been drawn by a heavy pencil. Strong legs ran into broad toes, completely covered with white down that ended where the powerful, sharp talons began. A magnificently packaged predator. "It's okay, Papa. Mary just heard your roar and thought I was in danger. See, she's calm now," Robbie said, holding his hand toward the bird. Michael grabbed Robbie's outstretched hand and held it safely against the boy's belly. "Have ya touched her, Robbie? When you visit each other, do you get close to...to Mary?" "Aye, Papa. She likes to sit on my shoulder when I ride my pony. I can whistle, and she'll come to me." "And she's never clawed you?" "Nay. She's very careful." Robbie stood up, found his pack, and settled it back over his shoulders. "Come on, Papa. Mary wants to join us on our hike to the summit. She can help us decide." "Decide what?" "Which woman I'll rent the house to." Michael rubbed his hands over his face. They were back to finding him a wife. Clearly a product of the mother he'd never known, Robbie could give stubborn lessons to a mule. The boy would be relentless now that he had decided on a course of action. Michael stood up and once more headed toward the summit of TarStone Mountain. "Then we'll continue our trip," he agreed. "And spend the day discussing your need to rent your house to a stranger." The snowy took flight and silently glided through the forest ahead of them, as if knowing their destination. Michael inhaled the smell of the night woods as the fallen leaves crunched beneath their feet. It was nearing the end of October, and the land was preparing itself for another winter -- just as he must do soon. Ellen Bigelow's death, coming suddenly but peacefully in the night while she slept, would make their upcoming Christmas season all that more difficult. Ellen had been the driving force of the Christmas tree farm. Even last year, at the age of eighty-three, the woman often had shamed the men with her energy. Ellen had been able to put unbelievable meals on the table three times a day, make wreaths, hand out saws so the customers could cut their own trees, sell decorations, dispense cider and doughnuts she made every morning, and still have time to keep up with the town gossip. Michael had spent the last ten years, since coming to Pine Creek and buying the Bigelow farm, in awe of the woman. "Papa, are you upset that I named my pet Mary?" "Nay, son. Mary's a good name for such a fine pet." "But you are upset that I want to rent my house." "It's not so much your wish to see the house lived in," Michael clarified. "It's the fact that you've set your hopes on finding this special woman to rent it to. What happens if she turns out to be a disappointment?" "She won't," Robbie said with all the confidence of an eight-year-old. "I'll be real careful when I choose. Aunt Grace is helping me write e-mail letters to them." Michael snorted, letting his son know what he thought of Grace's contribution to his insane plan. "And just who is going to be the landlord to your tenant?" he asked. "When the water heater breaks or the furnace quits, are you going to make the repairs?" "Nay, Papa. You are." "I see. I would bet that was your aunt's idea as well." "Nay, it was mine." "Well, if I get called to the house at two in the morning, know that I intend to wake you up and take ya with me. If you're wanting to be a landlord, young man, you're going to have to carry the responsibility." "Does that mean I can rent Mama's house, then?" "Wouldn't ya rather find a family to live there? And get yourself a new playmate out of this endeavor?" "I don't need a playmate nearly as much as you need a wife, Papa." Robbie stopped and looked up into Michael's eyes again. "She's going to make you smile." Michael messed his son's hair and then pushed him forward along the trail. "Tell me about the three women you've found." "Not until later, during breakfast. But I will give you a hint about one of them. Carla is a widow with three children." Robbie turned and wiggled his eyebrows. "She must be nice, if some man loved her enough to marry her. And with Carla, we would both get something. You'll get a wife, and I'll get new playmates." "And where is this Carla from?" "Florida." Michael snorted again. "Are ya not worried she won't like our winters?" "I do have that worry, Papa." Robbie was quiet for several minutes as he strode ahead. "Maybe I should cross Carla off the list," he said without turning around. "So that leaves only two. What of them?" "But there might be more," Robbie countered. "I haven't been able to check my e-mail for two days." "E-mail. Internet ads. Choosing a tenant before meeting her. What a different world his son was growing up in, compared with Michael's own childhood eight hundred years ago." "Do you want to go to Gu Brth with me tomorrow and check my e-mail?" Robbie asked as he ducked under a bent maple sapling. "Nay, Robbie. I will leave that craziness up to you and Grace. I need to start preparing for the Christmas season and for the snow that'll be coming soon. And I'll have to keep John busy as well, keep his mind off his

loss." "Grampy won't go to Hawaii and live with his son, will he?" Robbie asked. Michael was about to respond, but his chest suddenly tightened again. A prickle of cold ran up his spine and raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Robbie's pet -- the owl his son called Mary -- had just glided past them again through the forest. The snowy landed on a branch in front of them, and damn if the air around the bird did not glow with the warmth of a gentle blue light. The same blue light Michael sometimes saw in Robbie's room when he checked on his son before going to bed himself. The same blue light he had seen on West Shoulder Ridge eight years ago when the dridh's magic had saved Grace MacKeage. The exact same blue of Mary Sutter's beautiful eyes. Copyright 2003 by Janet Chapman Prsentation de l'diteur A runaway beauty finds love in the brawny arms of a handsome stranger. Talented surgeon Libby Hart is fleeing to Pine Creek, Maine, when her car spins out of control and crashes into a pond. She is rescued by Michael MacBain, a medieval highlander trapped in the modern world by a wizard's spell. Wounded in love once before by a modern woman, Michael wants nothing to do with Libby, but he can't resist the intense desire she stirs within him. Can this proud warrior pledge his heart to a woman whose secret threatens to change their lives forever?