



MacAlister's Hope (Kilmartin Glen)

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Category: Historical

Description: Kieron MacAlister has always loved Fia MacLachlan, a wee fey lass he met years ago who, with her sweet smile and surprising insight, changed his life. When he comes face-to-face with the beautiful woman she's grown into, can he convince her to change her life, too?

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Chapter One

The Highlands, 1321

Fia MacLachlan swore under her breath, then tried to remember what it was like to be ten and three. “Mairi, love,” she said to her foster sister, as Fia ground herbs together in her mortar, “you cannot learn herb lore by picking petals off of every dried flower I have in this stillroom.”

Mairi looked at her with dreamy eyes. “What?”

Fia smiled at the girl who was already taller than her, though ’twas not hard to top Fia’s petite height. Sweet Mairi, who she’d known since the day she was born, was swiftly becoming a woman. It made Fia feel old, though she was only ten and nine.

“Sweetling, you need to pay attention to this preparation.” She held the stone mortar up, illuminating it with the light from a lantern that hung down overhead so Mairi could see how powdery the dried herbs had become. “I ken you have the Lamont healing gift, but there are times herbs and prayers can serve just as well.” At least that’s what Mairi’s mum, Elena, had told Fia again and again. Fia wasn’t so sure, but she had promised to train Mairi and she would not break that promise.

“But herb lore is so tedious, and we have you for it anyway. I do not understand why I will ever need it.” She grinned at Fia then and changed the subject. “Did you see Angus smiling at me last night at the evening meal?”

“Aye,” but only because Mairi had been staring at the lad across the entire length of

the great hall for the brief time it took him to wolf down his dinner, then bolt from the hall with a pack of other boys. “Your da noticed, too.”

“That must be why Angus hurried away before I was done eating. You ken they used to call Da the Devil, aye? I think he uses that reputation to scare the lads away from me.”

“I remember.” Fia pushed the wayward strands of her pale yellow hair out of her eyes and continued to grind the herbs to an even finer powder. “I used to find him fearsome, too, until your mum showed me what a soft heart he has.”

Mairi giggled. “Aye, he does, especially for his ‘wee lasses’.”

Fia smiled, remembering how proud Mairi’s da was each time another daughter had been brought into the world. He’d held each of his three daughters in the crook of his arm within an hour of her birth, cooing and grinning at each of them while admiring their perfect little fingers and strong grips. The man was besotted with his wife and his children. Fia was, too, and enjoyed taking up her role as something between a big sister and an aunt with the girls. And now ’twas only another month or so before they all would learn if the next bairn would be another daughter, or perhaps, this time, a son.

“Do you think Da approves of Angus?” Mairi said, pulling Fia back from her wandering memories.

Fia could see hope in Mairi’s eyes. She set the mortar down on her worktable and turned to face the girl. “’Tis a bit early to be thinking of such things, is it not? Have you even spoken to the lad?”

“Aye...” she looked down at her feet. “Well, not in a few years.”

Fia reached out and tipped Mairi's chin up with her finger so the lass had to look at her. "Perhaps that is a good place to start? Talk to him. Find out if you even like the man he is becoming. After you decide for yourself, then will be the time to find out what your da and your mum think of him."

"You sound just like Mum." Mairi sighed and returned to plucking petals, watching as each one fluttered to the hard dirt floor. At this rate Fia would have no calendula for her tinctures and salves until late next spring when it bloomed again.

"I shall take that as a fine complement. Your mum is the wisest woman I know. Now, fetch me some fresh water, will you sweetling? When you bring it I shall show you how to make a proper brew, then we shall take it to your mum."

Mairi took the bucket Fia held out for her and slowly turned to leave the stillroom.

"Do not forget your task!" Fia called after the girl as she slowly walked away, humming quietly.

Fia shook her head and could not help but smile at Mairi's infatuation. She was a lucky girl, loved by her mum and her da. Safe, even now that the Lamont gift had come to her, for her parents would never let harm near any of their daughters. She was carefree and, so far at least, had never suffered loss, not even the loss of Angus's potential affections. Fia could easily be envious of Mairi, but she couldn't help but be happy that the same foster parents who had taken Fia in when she was only five, were raising such a happy brood of daughters.

And someday, not too far in the future, Mairi would turn her attention to her gift. She would work alongside her mum—the niggling thought "if Elena survived the birth" intruded into Fia's happy vision of the future—learning how to use that gift, and Fia would assist her as best she could, as she assisted Elena now.

But Fia knew she would never be as good a healer as either of them.

She shook off the melancholy thoughts. She was good at what she did and that was enough. 'Twould do no good to wish for things that could not be.

She returned to the herbs, adding a little more dried raspberry leaf to the mortar to help with the swelling all pregnant women seemed to suffer from, and efficiently ground it into power. She took a square of linen and laid it on the worktable, then carefully poured the ground herbs into the center of it. With the deftness of long habit, she pulled the corners of the linen up to form a small pouch, then wound a strand of thread about it to close it off, leaving a long tail to make it easier to remove it from the pot when 'twas finished steeping.

When she was satisfied with that one, she began again, moving faster now that she wasn't trying to teach Mairi how 'twas done. As she finished each pouch of herbs, worry tried to overcome Fia, as it always did when Elena was pregnant. Elena's pregnancies never failed to bring back Fia's memory of losing her own mum in childbirth, creating a sharp loneliness and longing deep within her heart. She could not bear the thought that she might also lose her foster-mum the same way, anymore than she could bear the thought of Mairi and her sisters suffering the same loss.

So she kept busy doing the only thing she could—preparing every brew, tincture, and salve she could think of that might ease the pregnancy and delivery of Elena's bairn. And she would train Mairi as best she could, at least that would keep the two of them busy, keeping worry at bay at least some of the time. And if something should happen to Elena... She swallowed hard. If something should happen, then she would do whatever she could for Mairi, her da, and her sisters.

Quickly Fia assembled another brew recipe, crushed the herbs efficiently, and was reaching for another square of linen when shouts from the bailey filtered into her quiet stillroom. Curious, and in need of something more distracting than her

preparations, she wiped her herb-dusty hands on her barmcloth, then untied the apron from her waist and quickly folded it. She tossed it on the end of the worktable as she made her way out of the dark undercroft and into the cloud filtered midmorning light of the bailey.

Kieron MacAlister rolled the Winter Stone in his hand. It was a smooth orb of milky crystal just small enough to conceal in his large palm. He fidgeted with it, as he often did in uncertain circumstances, as a crowd slowly gathered in the bailey of Kilmartin Castle. His cousin Tavish stood next to him, with a contingent of MacAlister warriors behind them.

A large, blond-haired, Highlander stood before the group, mute and unbudging, holding them just barely within the bailey, as if he wished to push them back through the gate tunnel and out of the castle altogether. He'd sent a lad off to find the chief while he stubbornly stood guard, even though the MacAlisters' kinship with the Lady of the castle had been established.

He could hear his kinsmen shifting behind him and knew they chafed at this delay, as did he. They had traveled hard for a day and a half to get here from their village to the south and as soon as they collected the Lamont healer, Elena, they would travel just as hard home, for their chief sorely needed her legendary healing ability.

Kieron continued rolling the stone, now warmed by his body heat, in his hand, his own conflict gnawing at him as much as the wait did. He knew gaining the services of the Lamont healer should be his only goal, but it wasn't. Fia MacLachlan had once lived here. He hadn't seen her in seven years or more but he had given thanks every day since for her brief friendship all those years ago. She was probably married with a fat bairn upon her hip by now, but still he would like to see her again, to thank her. He'd like to know that she was as content in her life as he was in his.

He also knew 'twasn't likely he'd even see her, much less have the opportunity to

Speak to her, but he could hope.

Tavish took a half step toward the silent MacLachlan warrior. Kieron could see the tension, tight in his cousin's shoulders. He knew the familiar sharp temper was building in Tavish by the slight cock of his head to the right. Tavish had reason to be agitated, but now was not the time to give it free rein. Kieron cleared his throat just loud enough to capture his cousin's attention at the same time that another large man, this one with dark hair shot through with silver, approached them. Authority wrapped about the newcomer like a royal mantle. The Highlander who held them there stepped back.

As the man drew near, Kieron recognized Symon, chief of the MacLachlans, husband to Elena, the healer they had come to fetch. The healer who had rid Symon of the madness that had plagued him so many years ago, the madness that had once caused him to be named the Devil of Kilmartin. He was older than the last time Kieron had seen him, but the years had not bowed him, nor dimmed the intellect so clear in his eyes. This was not a man who would risk his wife's life. He would not allow his wife to travel with the MacAlisters, even though they were cousins of hers, without surety of her safety, which was why they had brought ten warriors to fetch her.

Tavish stepped forward and greeted the chief with as much reserve and respect as Kieron could expect of him. Reserve did not come naturally to Tavish—action, especially the action of battle, was more to his liking. But over the last few years he had come to listen to Kieron's council when a softer touch was required, at least he often did, which was something Kieron still shook his head over now and again. The two of them had planned this meeting carefully, weighing their need for Elena's gift, her still strong connection to the Lamonts and their cousins the MacAlisters, and Symon's protective nature, in their plan.

Tavish started well, quietly and almost calmly explaining the illness that had taken their chief—the illness that no one seemed able to treat. Symon's posture was

hard—his feet spread and arms crossed over his broad chest—and he was already shaking his head when a door opened at the top of a stairway and a heavily pregnant woman with auburn hair caught in a loose braid stepped out. Her face and hair were familiar, though Kieron had only met Elena, Lady of Kilmartin Castle, and the fabled Lamont healer, once before.

Elena stopped at the top of the stair and took in the gathering in the bailey, then slowly made her way down. It was only when she reached the bottom of the stair that Kieron noticed the petite blonde awaiting her there.

His breath caught. Instantly, he knew it was Fia. She slipped her arm around Elena's waist, as if to support her, and they walked slowly toward the gathered men.

“Symon, who are these good people?” Elena called when she was halfway across the bailey. She stopped and took a deep breath, as if that were not something that came easily to her, and Kieron realized that they would not be taking Elena home with them to heal their chief. She was too far gone in her pregnancy and no man in his right mind, which Symon had been for years now, would allow his wife to travel in such a condition.

“Tavish,” Kieron said, but his friend seemed frozen looking at the women approaching, as did Symon.

Elena slowly joined them. Fia released her as Elena hooked her hand through her husband's arm and leaned heavily against him. Her other hand rested on her belly as if to safeguard the bairn that grew within. But it was Fia, taking up a spot next to and a little behind Elena, that Kieron could not keep his eyes from.

She was only a little taller than she had been when they first met, but she had gently softened from a slight, wisp of a girl into a lovely young woman. Her hair was still the palest of blonds, though no longer the white blond of a youth, and her eyes—how

had he forgotten they were the crystalline blue of a spring sky? Her glance skated over him as she seemed to assess the gathering before her, but no recognition showed. He could still see that she was the bright, curious girl he had met, from the way she quietly observed his kinsmen, but he also found a hint of worry pinching her mouth.

He could only hope it was but worry for Elena, for pregnancy was always a risk for any woman, and not something more. If he discovered it was anything more, anything he could fix, he could not stand by and let it continue, not when he owed his own happy position in life to Fia.

“They come to try to take you away from here, my love,” Symon said, his voice gruff, and every muscle poised to fight.

“And why would you wish to do that?” This she directed at Tavish with a lift of her eyebrows, but Kieron also noticed that as she rested her head against Symon’s shoulder the man relaxed, at least a little.

“My father, your cousin, chief of the MacAlisters of Kilglashan,” Tavish said, “is very ill and none have been able to help him. He will not eat, and does not sleep. He requires your gift of healing, Lady Elena.”

Kieron winced at the edge of anger that sharpened Tavish’s words, and he was not the only one to notice. Symon stiffened again, and even Fia stepped up beside Elena as if to protect her from Tavish.

“Forgive him,” Kieron said, stepping forward, carefully not looking at his cousin. He knew if any of them spoke against his wishes right now, Tavish’s fear for his father would only fuel his quick temper. But years of experience, and the plan they had put in place, told Kieron now was the time for him to act as diplomat. He and Tavish had accomplished much since they had laid the past to rest and become friends, combining their respective strengths—one a gifted warrior, the other a gifted

diplomat. "His father is gravely ill," he continued, "and we are all worried for his survival. 'Tis no death for a chief or a warrior, wasting away from pain and fever." He looked Symon in the eye. "But we can easily see that 'tis no time for Lady Elena to be traveling." Now he turned his attention to Elena. Fighting the urge to glance at Fia distracted him for a moment, but he persevered. "Perhaps you can provide some guidance for us? Our healer died not long ago and though we have several women in our village well versed in simples none have been able to help our chief."

"Fia can go with you," Elena said.

Fia's breath hitched. "Nay, I am needed here, at least until after the bairn is born and you are recovered."

Elena took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I shall be fine. The midwife can look after me."

Fia wanted to shake her head, but she nodded instead, swallowing all of her arguments for why she should stay. 'Twas her duty to do as the chief and the lady required. "I will go."

"Do you share the Lamont gift?" Tavish snapped, jerking Fia's attention back to the two men who stood closest to her and spoke for their clan.

"Nay," Fia answered with a lift of her chin, "but I am well trained as a healer."

"Fia is expert with herbs, far more than I am," Elena said. "She has a canny way of knowing which will best serve those she treats, such as I have never seen before." Elena reached out and pulled Fia close, wrapping her arm over Fia's shoulder in a gesture that had always made Fia feel safe, while at the same time Elena skewered first Tavish, then the other man, with that same motherly glare that made even grown men cower. "She is more than capable of tending your chief in his illness."

Elena's words of praise eased some of Fia's concern over leaving her foster mother when the bairn could come at any time.

"Aye, I will do all that I can for your chief, but I have one condition."

Elena tightened her grip and Symon turned to face her, irritation and concern filling his eyes. Fia wiggled free of Elena's grip and took her hand again. She smiled at Symon, knowing he could not glower at her when she did that, and indeed his gaze softened.

"I will need to return to Kilmartin within a ten day. If you cannot promise me that, then I will not go with you." She took a deep breath, unused to going against Symon or Elena's wishes, but she hoped this was enough of a compromise to keep everyone happy. Fia could feel the knots in her shoulders loosening now that she had set her own requirements on the deal.

"But she does not have your gift." The words came out as a growl from between Tavish's gritted teeth.

Fia could see the man next to him tense, as if ready to do battle, though he had not so much as gestured toward his dirk or his sword. That was when she noticed that he held something in his hand, rolling it in his palm as if he calmed himself with it. She looked up at his face carefully for the first time and realized he was familiar to her, though she could not remember from where she might know him. There was something about his eyes...nay, she could not place him.

Elena tilted her head and smiled, glancing at Fia and drawing Fia's attention back to the conversation.

"Nay, she does not have the Lamont gift," Elena agreed, "but she is very talented in her own way, and you do not have a choice. Fia can go with you to tend your

chief—your father—” she added pointedly, “and be returned here within a ten day, or you can leave here with a tincture that may or may not be what your father requires.”

Tavish started to respond, when the other man simultaneously reached out and gripped his shoulder, as if to stop him from speaking, and dropped the thing in his hand. Fia watched as a perfectly round, milky stone rolled to rest near Elena’s feet. Fia scooped it up, for Elena could not even bend over these days. She dusted the pretty stone off on her skirt, then held it out for the man but he did not take it from her.

“Do you think you can heal him, Fia?” he asked, saying her name as if he, too, remembered her, though she still could not remember why she knew him.

She looked at Tavish, holding the stone out for him to take as his companion did not seem interested in it anymore. “I do not ken,” she said, needing to be truthful with him and herself, “but I will do my best.” The palest pink whispered along the milky white ribbons within the stone, surprising her even as she heard the other man let out his breath. “But you must promise to have me back here before Elena’s time,” she said, though her eyes were still on the stone that was once again milky white, “whether your father is better or not.”

Elena plucked the stone from Fia’s hand and held it up to the pale sunlight, gazing into it with a bemused look upon her face.

“I believe she can heal him,” Elena said, still gazing into the stone, while pink once more whispered through it. Fia gasped. Elena looked at her for a moment and quirked an eyebrow as if asking if Fia had seen what Elena had. Elena lowered her hand and held the stone out to its owner with a mysterious sort of smile playing over her lips. “’Tis a beautiful stone. It reminds me of a tale I once heard about the Cailleach Bheur, the mother of winter, and a frozen tear that held the truth of her heartache. You should not be so uncareful with it.”

“Aye, my lady,” he said quietly. “I have heard that story, too.” He swallowed and smiled. “I am afraid I have a bad habit of fiddling with it and dropping it betimes,” he added, tucking the stone into a pouch at his belt. “Fia’s skills will be most appreciated.”

Tavish sucked in a loud breath.

“She will do as she says,” the other man said to him, “I am sure of it.”

Tavish said nothing for a long moment, then nodded. “Very well. If we cannot have the skill of Lady Elena, we will take Fia with us to tend my da.”

Fia and the other man winced at Tavish’s less than grateful tone.

“And return me in a ten day.” Fia narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together. She had no intention of budging from Elena’s side without this assurance.

“We promise,” the other man said when Tavish did not. “We are grateful for your help, Fia.”

“We must away immediately,” Tavish said. “There is no time to waste.”

“Not immediately,” Fia said. “Who among you is most likely to be of use in describing your chief’s ailment? I must gather whatever I might need to treat him from my stillroom.”

Tavish and the other man looked at each other. “’Twould likely be me,” the other one said. “Tavish has been occupied with the chief’s tasks since his father took ill. If we’d known you would not be able to come with us, Lady Elena, we would have brought one of the women who has been tending him.”

“Very well,” Elena said. “I shall have Annis pack some things for you, Fia. You shall need an assistant so she shall travel with you. ’Twill be good experience for her.”

Fia almost groaned aloud. Annis was competent, but she was almost as distracted by the lads as Mairi was and she seemed to think she deserved more than the life of a healer, though she took pains to conceal that particular idea from Elena. But Fia knew she could not travel alone, and at least Annis understood what Fia needed, even if she didn’t like the work.

“Make sure Mairi knows how to make the brews for me and take...” Elena looked at the man next to Tavish and for a moment he did not appear to understand what Elena waited for.

“Kieron,” Tavish said for him. “Kieron MacAlister of Kilglashan village.”

“Take Kieron,” Elena said, “with you to the stillroom.”

At his name another tendril of memory tried to open for Fia, but it was not enough. “Come with me,” she said to him as she looked about and found Mairi standing behind her. Fia took her hand and hurried toward the dark opening of the undercroft that sheltered her stillroom, leaving Kieron to follow in their wake.

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Chapter Two

That night, after a long afternoon of hard traveling, Kieron watched the women as they arranged their sleeping pallets on the far side of the fire, in the small clearing where Tavish had finally agreed to stop for the night. Their women's kinsman, Brodie of Kilmartin, made no attempt at subtlety, when he set his own saddle and belongings between the women's sleeping area and that of the MacAlister men.

Fortunately, they had pushed hard and made good time, so they would arrive at Kilglashan midday tomorrow. The chief needed Fia's help as quickly as possible, but Kieron worried, too, about his grandmother. He was her only living family and he did not like to leave her alone.

But he could do naught about that tonight.

He pulled his attention back to the clearing, assessing where any threat might come from so they would not be taken unawares. They traveled through the territories of friendly clans, but the fickle winds of politics could change an ally to an enemy in an instant and with no notice, so the MacAlisters did not take any chances. The men would sleep in shifts so someone would always be on watch.

He hoped he would find a moment to speak to Fia privately to remind her of when they met, for it was clear she did not remember. He did not ken if he should be bothered that he had been so forgettable to her, or if he should be proud that he was so changed from the lad she'd known that she did not recognize him.

Fia moved across his line of sight with an unstudied grace that seemed to come

naturally to her, drawing him in a way that surprised him. He still wanted to thank her, to discover if she was happy in her life, but now that he had seen her again he found, more than anything, he wanted to get to know her.

Annis sauntered by him slowly, blocking his view of Fia. She lowered her chin a fraction, and smiled up at him through her lashes. He shook his head, dismissing her misguided attempt to lure his interest, and sighed as he turned his attention away from both women, checking to make sure all was being taken care of as they set up camp for the night.

Not a moment later, a rumble of interested male voices came from behind him and he knew without looking that Annis was casting her net a bit wider now that he had not responded to her ploy. It took all his self-control not to turn and bark out orders to the other warriors. If they fell for the wench that was their own trouble to get free of.

“I do not ken why we had to take a wee child as a healer.” Tavish’s voice rose above the other voices around Kieron. His gaze snapped to Fia, now warming her hands by the fire, to see if she’d heard. Apparently, she had, for he saw her stiffened momentarily before taking a deep breath and angling away from him so he could not see her expression.

Kieron was about to reprimand Tavish when Annis’s girlish voice stopped him.

“‘Tis sure I am she will do her best,” the lass said quietly, though doubt was clear in her voice. Kieron turned then, only to find her sitting on a log next to Tavish, close, but not so close as to raise eyebrows. Brodie stood just behind her, glaring, and clearly poised to intervene should anyone try to move closer to his charge. Annis leaned toward Tavish, her voice still soft, but Kieron could hear her well. “But truly, compared to Elena, she is little better than anyone with a scant knowledge of herbs.”

“Elena should not have—” Tavish started, his voice once more loud in the clearing.

“Haud yer wheesht!” Kieron said, closing the distance between him and his cousin, letting his rare temper get the better of him. “Both of you.” He glared at Annis who quickly rose and moved away from them, Brodie keeping a close watch on her. “Fia is no child, Tav,” Kieron said. “She is a woman grown and Elena believes she can heal the chief, as do I. Do you doubt my counsel?”

Tavish looked down at his fists, then up at Kieron, a tightness around his eyes that spoke of the great effort he put forth not to take his frustration out on his cousin.

“Well?” Kieron asked. “For if you doubt me, then I am done helping you in this endeavor. I shall escort the women back to Kilmartin in the morning.”

“You will not.”

“Then do not say such things about a woman who has left her home and her family to help yours.”

“Why do you care what I say about her?”

Kieron could not answer truthfully without having to explain the role Fia had played in changing the course of his life, and the course of his relationship with Tavish, and that was not something he was ready to do, especially not when the lass in question did not remember him, or what she had done for him. So he went with the next most truthful thing he could say.

“Because we require her good will if you want your da to be healed. Without it she might not—“

“I would never withhold my skills from anyone in need.” Fia’s voice came from just behind him, hard with just the slightest quaver to it. “I said I would help your chief to the very best of my abilities, and I will, no matter what either of you, or Annis, or

anyone else believes about me.”

Kieron looked over his shoulder and found Fia standing there, her hands clasped tightly in front of her and not a trace of the wee lass he remembered in her stony expression.

“Your voices carry quite well,” she said. “And just so everyone here kens,” she raised her voice so the entire camp could hear her, “I never, ever, break my word, good will or no.” She speared him, then Tavish, with an icy glare. “I’ll ask that you both remember that.”

Kieron closed his eyes and counted to ten. Now, if she remembered him at all, she would believe he had turned into the same sort of man Tavish tended toward, and not the man she had told him he could be.

Fia pinched her lips together and prayed for patience as she turned her back on the men. She fetched her dinner, cold meat and bannocks Elena had sent with the company, then perched on a broad, lichen-dappled stone that stuck out of the ground near where she had spread her blankets. She tried not to watch as Kieron and his abrasive companion, Tavish, settled across the clearing with their meals, but they sat directly in her line of sight...as if that had anything to do with her inability to keep her eyes off him.

Off Kieron.

Even if she was angry with him.

Though if she was honest, her anger was more with herself than him. She hadn’t been able to stop watching him all afternoon as they traveled. He sat his horse as if he rode all the time, sitting straight yet easy in the saddle. Kieron was braw, with dark, wavy hair pulled loosely back with a leather thong from his angular face, and eyes the

bright green of the first wee leaves of spring. He was long, and leaner than most warriors, more whip-like in his build than thickly muscled, and there was a quiet steadiness to him that made his companion seem even more brash and difficult than he probably was. She had invented a caring, charming man to go with what she had seen, and when Keiron had come to her defense, his appeal had risen, for though she had long since learned to ignore the fact that she would never be the healer Elena was, as if she should aspire to anything of the sort, it still irritated when people doubted her. And he had not doubted her, not for a single moment, as if he knew her, trusted her, even before they met...until he had questioned her word with his reply to Tavish, that they “needed her good will.”

The person she had made herself believe him to be, based on nothing more than her wishes that he was so, shattered with his words. Her daydream was ruined, and it was no one’s fault but her own. The man was who he was, not who she had thought him to be.

She took a bite of the cold venison, then nibbled on a bannock, as she considered the odd feeling she’d had since she first laid eyes on Kieron. She was certain that she had met him before, though she doubted it at the same time, for she was positive she would not forget such a man. She couldn’t stop herself from glancing over where she had left him and Tavish, though she tried not to be obvious about it.

As if drawn by her thoughts, his eyes met hers and held her captive, a question in them that she couldn’t understand. He smiled, a soft smile that made the corners of his eyes crinkle. He leaned toward Tavish and said something, then rose and made his way across the clearing to her.

“Will you accept my apology?” he asked as he drew near. “I will never doubt your word, ’tis just that I did not ken how to tell Tavish why I trust you when you do not remember why yourself. May I sit with you?”

Fia stared up at him, taking the measure of the man who stood waiting patiently for her decision. He sounded sincere in his apology and in his explanation—or was it simply that she wanted to believe him so she need not be angry with him? Perhaps it was both? Her curiosity got the better of her, though she tried to set aside who she had thought he was so she could see the man he truly was.

She motioned for him to join her.

He settled next to her on the stone, close enough so the heat of his body seemed to reach out and caress her arm, then slowly ease around her, as if he embraced her. The sensation took her breath away.

“What is it that I do not remember?” she asked, hoping her voice would not betray how his nearness unsettled her, but of course it came out breathless. She rolled her eyes at herself. She might not be used to the attentions of men, but that did not mean she could not keep her mind on his words, rather than the nearness of his thigh to hers.

“Aye. You have been looking at me all afternoon as if you almost remembered me.”

“I have?” Of course she had, but she had not known he was aware of it. “I am sorry. I did not mean to be rude.”

Kieron laughed, a slow moving rumble that made her smile.

“Why are you laughing at me?” she asked now, not sure whether to laugh with him, for surely she deserved his amusement, or to be embarrassed that he had caught her.

He leaned close enough that their shoulders touched and Fia could not stop the buzz of awareness that ran through her at his seemingly unintended contact. But he did not move away.

“I am not laughing at you, but at myself. In my vanity, I thought you would remember me, but it is clear you do not. We met a long time ago, back when I was an unhappy lad and you were a wee lass. Wee Fia they called you then.”

“Some still do,” she said, but now she looked at him openly trying to imagine this confident warrior as a boy, but still she could not. “Where did we meet?”

“A summer gathering at Lamont Castle, maybe seven years ago. Elena had brought her family from Kilmartin. I remember she was pregnant that time, too.”

“With Ailish, her youngest,” Fia said, the memory of that summer coming back to her. “Nay...” She cocked her head, trying to line up a long forgotten memory with the man who sat beside her now. “It could not be you.”

“Aye.” He shifted, pulling one knee up on the stone so he could face her. “I was a pitiful lad, picked on by the likes of Tavish and his mates. Even the Lamont lads, who did not ken me, joined with him in tormenting me, and the MacLachlans as well. Hiding from them was my only choice by that time.”

“I do remember.” She was shocked that such a scrawny lad with no confidence had grown up to be so sure of himself that he would reprimand Tavish in front of his warriors...that Kieron would admonish him for doubting her. She saw the confrontation between the two men through new eyes, and realized Keiron had told her the truth when he apologized, but that did not explain... “How did you come to change all that? Clearly, you are well respected, and Tavish, for all that he is the chief’s son, seems to defer to you, to accept your counsel...and your reproofs.”

Kieron reached for her hands, his large hands completely enveloping hers. “You do not recall everything about our meeting, I see.”

Fia closed her eyes to search her memories, for his face, so near she could feel his

breath upon hers, was almost as distracting as his hands were. “I found you hiding behind a boulder very much like this one,” she said quietly. A gentle squeeze of her hands told her she was right. “You were...” she hesitated, for she did not want to embarrass him.

“I was so angry I could barely speak, and I was trying not to cry.”

She kept her eyes closed and nodded her head. “Aye. We talked a bit and I do not think I saw you again until we were leaving a few days later. You were outside the gate, still hiding from the other boys, I think.” She let her eyes drift open only to be caught in his penetrating gaze again. “You waved goodbye and you were smiling.”

“I was. But you do not seem remember the most important thing: you changed the course of my life that day. I was ten and four, scrawny, weak compared to the other lads, but you made me see that I had something they did not.”

“I did?” He smiled and she thought she could sit there in the warmth of it forever.

“You did.”

“How?”

He ran his thumbs over the backs of her hands, making it hard to focus on what he said next. “You told me that I had a mind that could parry each of their thrusts, that I was more than just a warrior in training, I was smart, wise to their ways. You pointed out that I knew when I was outnumbered, and where to hide that they would not look, and that I demonstrated great wisdom in that moment.”

She nodded, the day coming back to her quickly now. “I do remember. I had seen you several times in the few days we had been there, and every time one of the bigger lads tried to grapple with you, or corner you, or force you into a fight, you found a way

out, usually with a sharp comment that sliced at them as effectively as a sword. Symon asked me what I was giggling at once. I pointed you out and told him what you'd done. He had smiled down at me and said you were a wise man to use your wits when muscles would not suffice. I simply told you what he'd said."

"And it changed the way I thought of myself. No one else had ever said such a thing to me, only that I needed to practice my fighting skills more, or to stand up to the other lads more. After that day I no longer considered myself a weak boy, but as a wise warrior. From that day my life was no longer theirs to break. It became mine to make, and I have you to thank for that." He leaned forward and placed a sweet, lingering kiss on her cheek.

Fia's breath caught in her chest and her heart seemed to cease beating, leaving her light headed.

"I have wanted to..."

"I see the two of you have kissed and made up," Tavish startled both of them, his voice raised for all to hear. Brodie glowered at all of them from just behind the man. "But I'll not have you distracting the wee lass from her duties to my father with your kisses and promises, Kier."

"I was not—"

"He is not—" Fia said at the same time. She glared at the man across the fire, her old dislike of Tavish combined quickly with her earlier, still deserved, anger at him, making her sharper with him than she intended. "He is not distracting me, nor is he making me any promises."

Tavish laughed, ticking Fia's irritation even higher.

“Are you going to let such a wee lass defend your honor, Kieron?”

“Leave her be, Tav,” Kieron said as he stood and held a hand out to Fia to help her down, but she did not dare touch him again and let her mind once more start spinning fantasies about his touch, his voice, his... It seemed he was much the man she had imagined him to be, but it did not matter. She had a job to do, and she would not let herself be distracted by anyone, not even Kieron, no matter how enticing he might be.

She slid off the stone without his help and settled her skirts. “I will be saying goodnight,” she said to no one in particular. “You will, too, Annis,” she said to the lass who stood next to Brodie. “We’ve a busy day tomorrow and I’m sure Tavish wishes to get an early start.”

“Aye, Annis, go to your bed,” Kieron said as he crossed the small clearing. “Tavish needs his rest.” Kieron slapped his cousin on the shoulder hard enough to knock him sideways a step or two. “And he will not get it as long as he is trying to sort out which of you lasses he wishes to kiss, and which he’ll offer promises he is in no position to keep.”

Tavish let out a laugh so hard he startled several birds awake who were roosting in a tree overhead. Brodie took Annis by the upper arm and pulled her around the fire to stand near her pallet. Fia swallowed her own laugh and hurried to her blankets. Kieron’s quick-witted way of solving the problem of Tavish’s temper did remind her of the lad she had briefly known so long ago, but it still didn’t explain why he credited her, and her few words of encouragement, with his transformation when clearly he had done the work on his own.

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Chapter Three

Relief swept through Kieron as they rode into Kilglashan. Now Fia would heal the chief and all would be back to normal again. Tavish didn't stop at the stable, but rode along the winding main road, then up the motte, a small hill built by the first villagers to settle here, to the large hallhouse where the chief's family lived and that also served as a gathering place for the village as a whole on festivals and other special occasions. It was only there that his cousin called a halt and dismounted. Dropping his reins, Tavish moved quickly to Fia's mare before Kieron could, and judging by the gasp that escaped the lass, he pulled her out of her saddle before she was prepared. Kieron helped Annis down, then untied the saddlebag from Fia's horse and followed the three of them up a stair and into the hallhouse.

They crossed a large open room, then took another flight of turnstile stairs up to the bed chambers. Tavish opened his father's door without so much as a knock, startling the two women who tended the chief.

"How is he?" Tavish demanded.

"No better, lad," Margaret, the older of the women said. "The blisters continue to grow and there is naught we can do to stop them, nor to ease his pain. Where is Lady Elena?"

"Leave now," Tavish said abruptly, without even acknowledging the woman's question, then he pushed Fia forward. "Heal him."

Fia shrugged off Tavish's hand, then moved to the bedside and began examining his

father, who lay as if in a daze. Kieron had never seen their chief in such a state. Usually he was charging about, seeing that everything and everyone in the clan was well and doing their duty. He looked as if he had aged a score of years in the three days they had been away. His cheeks were hollow, his skin a sickly yellow-gray, and his left eye was sunken, though the right one was ringed by new blisters, its lid so swollen it barely opened.

At least he was not moaning as he had been when they left to fetch Elena. Except maybe that meant it was worse.

“Heal him,” Tavish demanded again, but Kieran knew him well enough to hear the edge of something deeper than worry, but not quite fear, in his voice.

“I have not seen such an affliction before,” Fia said quietly, lifting the sheet carefully to look at the chief’s naked torso. “Oh my.” Her eyes went round as she pulled the sheet away, exposing a wide swath of angry blisters wrapping from his stomach around to his back on his right side, caked with what looked like bits of herbs.

Fia froze as if she did not know what to do for the man.

“Perhaps you should have taken him to Elena.” Annis’s quiet voice filled the otherwise silent room.

Kieron glared at the girl who seemed unaware of how much her doubt-filled words could undermine Fia’s confidence. Annis reminded him vividly of his younger days when Tavish’s more pointed efforts to undermine his confidence had done their job.

“You need to leave,” Kieron said to her, unwilling to let anyone weave doubt about Fia’s ability to heal the chief in Fia or in Tavish.

“But I am here to help,” Annis said, with a childish pout.

He took a moment to calm himself, then stepped in front of both Annis and Tavish, blocking Fia from her “helper” and from Tavish’s piercing stare.

“Then be helpful,” he said, softening his voice as if he spoke to a wean. “Fetch your things and Fia’s from the horses and have one of the women show you where you will be sleeping.” He glanced over his shoulder at Fia, who was still standing perfectly still, staring at the chief’s ravaged body. “Tavish, she is just deciding what to do first, ’tis all, I am sure of it. There will be things that need your attention—other than your da—now that we are back. I will stay and make sure she has everything she needs.”

Tavish actually growled but that no longer bothered Kieron. For all that Tavish was a skilled warrior, experience had taught Kieron his cousin was more bluster than bite, most of the time.

“Go,” Tavish said to Annis, much to the lass’s apparent surprise.

“But—”

Tavish cut her off with a quick slant of his eyes in her direction. She spun without another word and left without bothering to close the door behind her.

“You, as well,” Kieron said, and was relieved when his cousin gave a sharp nod. He paused before he closed the chamber door. “Make sure she heals him, Kier. She is here because you believed her and Lady Elena.”

Kieron nodded, knowing that both women believed Fia had sufficient skill, but even he was having a hard time believing that was true, in spite of the evidence of the Winter Stone, now that he could see Fia’s doubts. He turned back to Fia and started to speak, but realized her lips were moving, as if she were speaking to herself, though he could not hear her voice. Her eyes were darting from the chief’s torso, to his face,

now badly ravaged by the strange welts, and back, all the while her lips moved. She laid a hand upon the chief's brow. She closed her eyes, her lips still whispering. Her brow furrowed deeper and deeper until suddenly her eyes popped open.

"I need—" She looked up and glanced past Kieron. "Where is Annis?"

"I sent both her and Tavish away. She was annoying me and you made Tavish very nervous when you did not respond to his demand that you heal the chief."

"His dema— Nay, he did not demand such a thing, did he?"

Kieron smiled at her. She hadn't been hesitating over treating the chief, she'd been figuring out what to do. Her concentration reminded him of his grandmother. "Aye, he did. Tell me what you need and I shall see it fetched immediately."

Fia turned her attention back to the chief. Even Kieron could tell that though he slept, his pinched, grey face spoke clearly that he was in great pain.

"I need more of whatever sleeping draught the women have given him for what I need to do will cause more pain before it begins to help. I need warm water and rags to clean him, oats— enough to fill a large pot, but not cooked—a mortar and pestle, a kettle of hot water, and my bag."

Kieron pointed at the end of the bed where he had laid her saddlebag, then went to the door, relaying Fia's requirements to the women who had been tending the chief.

"Can she help him?" one of them asked.

"I believe she can," he answered, then closed the door again, sending up a prayer that he was right.

Three days later and all Fia had accomplished was to help the chief sleep a bit with the soothing of her oatmeal poultice. His eye was so swollen the lid could not open and he complained of the pain of it even when the blisters on his torso were bearable. A willow bark brew did little to help with either the fever or the pain. She'd even had Annis make a brew of birch, and they had tried a poultice of balsam, but neither had done more to ease the man's pain than the willow and oatmeal.

Fia paced the chief's chamber, exhaustion pulling at her feet, but the need to find some solution to this affliction kept her from resting. The door opened quietly and Fia tensed. Kieron came in, followed closely by Annis with the fresh kettle of willow and birch infused with garlic she'd been sent to make more than an hour ago. Thank heaven Tavish wasn't with them. Fia did not think she could take another confrontation with that one, though she knew he would be by before much longer to push her out into the corridor and rail at her for not healing his father.

But not while Kieron was here, she realized. Tavish never berated her when Kieron was about. She took a deep breath, letting the tension of the anticipated confrontation ease out of her—for now.

"Pour a cup, Annis," she said quietly, "and set it on the table to cool. I do not want to wake him if I do not have to. 'Tis the only reprieve from the pain we can give him right now."

Annis nodded and did as she was told, another miracle created by the presence of Kieron. She did not ken why Annis was wary of Kieron, but she was grateful for it. "Will you fetch some fresh bed linens?" she asked the woman.

When Annis turned to face Fia, her mouth was set in a disgruntled line but she did not complain that she was being sent on yet another errand. The truth was, Fia could not stand the sly cuts of Annis's conversation and glances anymore. The constant doubt Annis sowed wore on Fia and she was sure she would not be able to keep a civil

tongue much longer, so she kept the woman busy and away from the chamber as much as possible.

“You should let her sit with the chief,” Kieron said when the door was closed.

“I do not trust her attention enough to do that.” Speaking those words lifted a weight from her she had not realized she carried.

“Then let me. Tell me what to do if he wakes. You can rest on the pallet over there that has yet to be used.”

She worried her lower lip, weighing her fatigue against the needs of the chief. Kieron held out a hand to her and she only hesitated a moment before reaching out and settling her palm against his. When he gently pulled her close she did not resist. He enfolded her in his embrace and laid his cheek against the top of her head. For a moment she froze, surprised to find his embrace so welcome.

“You are too tired, Fia.” He ran his big hand up and down her back, as if he soothed a bairn, and she allowed herself to relax, to rest her cheek against his broad chest, to let him hold her. “A little sleep will clear your mind and perhaps then you can discover another way to help the chief.”

Fia closed her eyes. The scent of him—the sharp scent of evergreen, the cool scent of fresh Highland air, and a spicy scent she could not name but that was his all alone—surrounded her, soothing her better than any herbal brew she might take. The slow beat of his heart against her cheek, and the comfort of his strong arms around her, revived her more than sleep could. Here was a welcome shelter from the storm of doubt and worry that she had weathered from the moment she agreed to come to Kilglashan.

“I know you can help him,” he whispered into her hair.

“Do you really?” Fia asked looking up into his brilliant green eyes. She was captured by both the care and the desire that lit them, like sun sparkling through new leaves.

“Aye, I do.”

“Why?”

Kieron stared into her eyes for a long moment, then cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, lightly, but the touch of his lips to hers lit a need inside her so fierce it took her by surprise. She rose up on her toes, laid her hands against his scratchy cheeks, and pressed her lips to his, letting all thought and all care fall away as she lost herself in the softness of his mouth. He let out a low growl and pulled her hard against him, even as she swept her tongue along the line of his lips. She did not know why she did that, but followed her instincts and was rewarded when he deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue over hers. Jolts of desire raced through her, focusing her every fiber on this moment, this man, this kiss.

A short rap on the door had them leaping apart just as Annis swung it open, her arms filled with fresh bedding. Kieron turned away, shoving his hair back from his face as he moved to a small window and peered out toward the village. Fia hoped Annis could not tell what she had interrupted, but the knowing smirk on the woman’s face dashed her optimism.

Annis used her hip to close the door with a bang, startling the chief awake. Fia wiped her sweat-damp hands on her skirt and turned her attention back to where it should be—on her patient—chiding herself for allowing her attention to be drawn away so easily.

“How are you feeling?” She asked him as she lifted a rag from the bowl of cool water on the table and wrung it out, then smoothed it against the man’s forehead and the side of his face unaffected by the blisters.

“Thirsty.”

“I have a brew for you. This one is stronger so it should help with the pain.”

The chief merely grunted as he tried to shift in his bed. A grimace, combined with a moan he tried to swallow, told her the pain still rode him. Kieron came to the bedside and helped the chief as Fia held the light sheet of the finest linen away from him so it would not pull across his skin as he moved, for even that light weight was unbearable.

“Annis, prepare another oatmeal poultice,” she said without looking at her assistant. She did not want to see the woman calculating how she could use the indiscretion she had walked in on to her best advantage. Fia put the rag down and reached for the cup. Habit had her lifting it to her nose to check the strength. She was about to help the chief drink it when she stopped and sniffed it again.

Something wasn’t right. She sipped it, let it lie on her tongue for a moment, then swallowed.

“Annis,” she turned to find the woman staring at her. “What did you put in this?”

“Only what you told me,” she answered, her lip quivering and her eyes not quite meeting Fia’s.

“Nay, you did not.” Fia poured a little of the contents of the cup into her hand, examining the color. “It looks right, but the scent is off, as if you did not use enough birch, and there is no willow in here, either, for it does not tighten the tongue.”

“I made it just as you taught me, nothing more, nothing less,” Annis said, but Fia could tell the girl lied, though she could not fathom why she would endanger the chief’s health.

“Do you wish the chief to remain ill, to be in pain?” Fia snapped quietly, not wanting the chief to hear, though even in his waking moments he seemed unaware of most of what went on around him. She stepped closer to her assistant. All her doubt, frustration, and fatigue gathered, making her words harsh and erasing any ease she had found in Kieron’s arms. “For that is what you consign him to with this!” She dumped the liquid from her hand onto the floor and the contents of the cup with it.

A lone tear trickled down Annis’s cheek, as she turned beseeching eyes to Kieron who had joined them. “I did not—”

“Surely she would not seek to hurt the chief on purpose, Fia,” he said his voice full of concern and for a moment Fia felt abandoned by her one ally here, until he gave her a quick wink. It was only then that Fia noticed he once more had the palm-sized, perfectly round milky stone in his hand, as he had the day he had come to take her away from Kilmartin. He closed the distance between himself and Annis.

“I did not want to do this, for to do so will weaken the power of this magic stone, but it seems the time has come,” he said. He balanced the stone in his palm in front of her. “Take it,” he commanded, and Annis plucked it from his hand, holding it between her thumb and forefinger as if she did not like the touch of it.

“If you place this in a bowl of water fresh from a fast-running burn just as the sun peaks over the horizon,” he continued, “and let it sit in the sun until sunset, watching over it every minute lest any animal or person drink from it, or any leaf or bug fall into it, the water will ease his pain.”

Fia started to ask why he did not use this magical stone before now, but she remembered the wink. Kieron was not abandoning her, he was aiding her in discovering the truth, though not in the way most people would go about it.

“But there is no sun today,” Annis whined, holding the stone out for Kieron to take,

but he let her hold it there between them.

“Then you must make the brew again and I will let you use the stone when there is sun. Can you make it correctly this time?”

It took all of Fia’s will not to speak against this, but she was intrigued by Kieron’s approach and let him finish with Annis.

“I made it correctly this time!” Annis said, but now she did not meet the eyes of either of them.

Fia gasped, but covered it with a cough. The stone, milky when Kieron had handed it to Annis, now had faint dark ribbons running through it, as if it had been colored by the refuse of the privies.

Kieron shook his head. “She lies.”

“Nay, I do not,” Annis said, holding the still darkly ribboned stone out and shaking it as if that would force Kieron to take it. Fia looked at the stone, then at Kieron, then back at the stone. Brown, almost black, and he said she lied as if he knew it for a truth.

“Did you use exactly what I told you, and in the exact amounts?” Fia asked, testing her theory.

“Aye,” Annis replied, holding out the still dark hued stone to Kieron who made no move to take it from her.

“Annis, you did not,” Fia said, still not sure that what she saw in the stone reflected what she thought it did. “Why?”

Annis closed her eyes for a moment, then sighed. “I spilled the willow in the fire. ’Twas all burned up before I could think what to do.” Annis scrunched up her nose, as if she smelled something rotten, clearly displeased that her lie had been uncovered.

The stone shone a faint pink now, but still a thread of brown woven through it. Pink, like when Elena and she had held it before...truth? But with a lie still woven into it?

“Why did you not get more from my supply?” Fia asked, determined to find the whole truth.

The lass swallowed hard and laced her fingers together so fiercely her knuckles turned white. “I was pouring it directly from the bag when it spilled, though I ken well ’tis not the way you like it done. I sneezed and the entire bag emptied into the fire. There is no more.”

Still pink with a thread of brown.

Fia narrowed her eyes at the girl, trying to figure out where the lie still lay. She considered the chief, and how he seemed in more pain the last few hours than he had been before. She had thought it only that his condition worsened, for it clearly had not improved, but perhaps...

“When did you burn up the willow supply?” she asked, sure now that she had found the heart of the lie.

Annis looked at her feet and spoke so softly Fia almost couldn’t hear her. “When I went to make the brew in the middle of the night.”

Pink. Clear pink.

Kieron plucked the stone from Annis’s fingers and it was once more milky. “Did she

cause the chief harm?" he asked Fia as he tucked the stone into the pouch at his belt.

"I do not think so. More pain, aye, but 'tis my fault for not checking her brews more carefully. I know better. I am sorry, Kieron."

"You are not the one to be sorry. If she had told you the truth, there would be no need to check."

"Still, I must take some of the blame. I will not let it happen again."

"Nor will I," he said. "Would you mind terribly if I had her kept under watch in the cottage you have yet to use?"

"Will she be punished?" she asked.

"If Tavish discovers her perfidy? Aye, but I think 'twould be more fitting to return her to Kilmartin and let Lady Elena mete out her punishment, do you not?"

"She will not believe either of you," Annis said, sidling toward the door.

Kieron did not turn around. "If you so much as touch that door I shall break your hand. Fia, what do you think? Turn her over to Tavish who is not known for holding his temper, or give her to Elena for judgment?"

Fia weighed her options far longer than necessary, enjoying watching Annis quake for real for a change. But she could not let the woman be harmed by Tavish, no matter how much she deserved it. "Confine her to the cottage. She shall return with me to Kilmartin and Elena will decide her punishment."

Kieron smiled at her for a moment. "'Tis more consideration than she deserves, but I am not surprised by that." He turned to Annis. "You are lucky. Fia is more forgiving

than I, but even her sentence would not hold with me if you had caused more harm to my chief than prolonging his pain, which is already more harm than the man deserves. If you had, I would happily give you over to Tavish's temper." He grabbed her none too gently by the upper arm and dragged her to the door. The pouch that held the milky stone bounced against his leg and caught Fia's attention.

"Wait." She knew the stone had turned vaguely pink when she and Elena had held it, and now it turned a sickly dark brown when Annis spoke. Kieron said she lied, and she had verified that for herself. The stone told him. A murky brown for lies. Pink for truth. She suddenly realized it was after he saw the stone turn pink, not only in her own hand, but also in Elena's, that he had assured Tavish that she could heal the MacAlister chief, as if he knew it for a truth.

Truth. If the stone knew when someone spoke the truth...

"Kieron, can you have someone else take her away?" Excitement coursed through her, dissolving all fatigue in its wake. "I need to discuss something with you."

He glared at Annis. "Aye, lass. Give me a moment to hand her off and I shall send someone to fetch more willow for you. I know my grandmum has a supply. Shall I summon someone I trust to sit with the chief so you can prepare the brew yourself?"

"Not yet," she said, turning her attention fully to her patient. "Not yet."

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Chapter Four

Kieron hurried back to the hallhouse after rounding up a guard for the disgraced Annis. He then sent a lad to Kieron's grandmother for some willow. He was anxious to get back to Fia, and not just to learn what she had in mind for the chief. In spite of the distraction of Annis's interrogation, Kieron couldn't shake the desire that had gripped him when he'd kissed her. The pull of it still shimmered through him like the northern lights, shifting and pulsing each time he thought of the taste of her, sweet like the first taste of honey mead, the warmth of her in his arms, her soft breasts pressed against his chest, the...

He had to stop lest he grab the woman and kiss her as soon as he saw her again, and that he could not do.

As soon as she had put her small, perfectly formed hand in his, he had known that she felt the same attraction he did. He grinned, well pleased with this day in spite of the discovery of Annis's deceit.

He should have acted sooner with that one. He had known there was something uncomfortable between the lass and Fia from the way Fia dealt with her—cool and to the point—unlike the way she dealt with everyone else—with smiles and warmth—but he had thought it was just one of those tiffs women got into with each other, else why would Elena have sent the lass with them? If only he had tested her with the Winter Stone sooner...

But he hadn't. At least now, thanks to Fia, Annis would be punished for her acts against the chief and for her lies. Pride rushed through him at the memory of Fia

confronting Annis when she realized the lass put the chief's recovery in danger. She was like a mother badger defending her kits, fierce and unafraid to stand between her patient and her assistant. Pouring the false brew on the floor had been a bit dramatic, but it made her point quite clear—she would not be giving anyone that brew.

He picked up his pace, jogging the rest of the way back to her side.

Moments later he burst into the chief's chamber and found Fia at the brazier that was used to both heat the room and heat water for the chief's care. She was stirring the embers under a small pot of water and had a larger bowl filled with oats ground to a fine powder ready to make a new poultice. He glanced over at the chief who was once more fitfully asleep.

"I gave him the last of the sleeping draught," Fia said, rising and moving toward the bed. The fatigue that had seemed to weigh her down earlier was gone though he had only been away for a short while, too short for her to have even napped. "It was all I could do to ease his pain for the moment."

"I've asked Margaret—one of the women who was taking care of him when we arrived—to come sit with him in a little while so you may make the brew yourself. I've sent for willow, too," he said, joining her. He wanted to take her hand in his again, but he did not.

There was something about her that was different but he could not name it.

She smiled over at him. She licked her lips and swallowed as if she were nervous. With him? Nay, for she did not drop her gaze, nor did she look embarrassed or guilty about what had passed between them. Nay, her sapphire eyes fair glowed with excitement.

"That stone—" she nodded toward the pouch at his hip "—it helps you discern if

someone lies or speaks the truth, does it not?"

Everything went quiet in his head. No one had ever known that about the Winter Stone, except the old woman who had given it to him and taught him its secrets. Everyone thought it was just an interesting bauble that he fiddled with when he was thinking hard, something he often dropped or allowed someone else to hold. No one else had ever figured out that he used it to test people's intentions. But then he had suspected Fia and Lady Elena had seen the color change that day at Kilmartin Castle, and clearly Fia had seen it change in Annis's hands. Fia was smart enough to put it all together.

"Aye, it does." He would not lie to her, ever.

"Where did you get it?" she asked, taking his hand and pulling him away from the bedside back to the brazier. She knelt there and began mixing the poultice, glancing up at him with an air of anticipation.

Kieron settled on the floor facing her, his back to the wall, his long legs stretched out, and the door directly in his line of sight. He glanced over to see if the chief still slept. The gentle rise and fall of his breaths reassured Kieron he did. Kieron did not want anyone else to hear this, for then the stone would be of no use to him. Though as he looked at the bonny lass in front of him he realized 'twas possible it had already done its job.

"There was an auld woman who wandered into the village one day, not long after you and I first met." He only now realized how close the two events were. "She was hungry, tired, and I offered her comfort with me and my grandmum the only family I have. Fortunately my grandmum was a generous soul and made the woman, Beira was her name, welcome. She was a strange woman—she traveled alone, though she was bent with age, and had only one good eye—but I was not afraid of her as the other lads and lasses of the clan were. She entertained us for several weeks, telling

wonderful fanciful stories of the people she'd met and the places she had traveled, describing the landscapes she had traveled through as lovingly as if they were her children, as if she had created them herself. I helped her resupply her medicinal herbs—taking her into the hills for those things I could not beg from the goodwives of the village. One day, as we were searching for something...I cannot remember exactly what...we came upon a standing stone set atop a small hill. I had never seen it before. She stopped and said what I can only guess was a prayer for I did not understand the language she spoke, and as she stopped, the air turned suddenly cold and a bitter wind blew up, bringing the first snow of winter with it.

“I remember she smiled at me then and said, ‘Tis time for me to leave now.’ I was surprised to find that she had brought her travel sack with her because I had not noticed it until that moment. ‘I would give you a gift before I go, young Kieron,’ she said, ‘but you must promise me to keep it safe until I return for it,’ and then she reached up to the top of her staff, and the stone seemed to leap from its place there into her hand. She told me how to use it and I have had it ever since.” He pulled the stone out of the pouch and held it between his thumb and forefinger as Annis had done before. “Tis called the Winter Stone.”

“It does remind me of winter’s swirling snows,” Fia said.

“Aye, but Beira said ‘twas a tear from the Cailleach Bheur, the mother of winter, and that because it came from her own heartbreak it reflected the hearts of anyone who held it. She also told me it would bring me to my destiny.” He looked up from the stone in his hand to the woman he had never been able to forget.

“So the pink reflects the heart?”

“Aye, if someone who holds it speaks from the heart—the truth, at least as that person believes it to be—pink will flow through the white. And if that person lies—speaks against her heart—”

“It turns a murky, almost black, brown,” Fia said. “That is how you knew Annis lied.”

“It is. ’Tis also how I knew you and Elena both believed you would be able to help the chief.”

“I only believed I would do my best to help him,” she reminded him.

“Aye, but it was spoken from your heart. Elena believed you would heal him.”

“She did. She has always believed I could do whatever I put my mind to.”

“And is she usually right?”

Fia smiled. “Aye, always as far as I can remember.” She stared at the stone as if she tried to see within it. “Have you ever seen other colors?”

“Aye, but I do not ken what they mean. Biera only told me of the pink and brown. I saw blue once, a pale purple a few times. On spring days it sometimes takes on a yellow cast, like fresh butter.”

Fia clasped her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. “May I try something with it?”

Without hesitating, he handed it to her. She quickly rose and held her hand out to him again. “Come with me. I need you to watch the stone in case I cannot see all that you see.” He gladly took her hand, relishing the feel of her palm against his as he scrambled to his feet, not needing her help, but not passing up a chance to touch her.

She led him back to the chief’s bedside and dropped his hand. She held the stone in her palm, closed her eyes and simply stood there, as if she composed herself, though

for what he knew not.

When she opened her eyes, she stared down at the stone balanced on her open palm as she began to say the names of herbs, then other things he did not recognize. With each word she spoke she paused and waited as the stone filled with light—pink sometimes, brown others, and then, suddenly a beautiful green infused the white ribbons within the stone while pale pink shadows played along its edges.

“That is the one!” She beamed over at Kieron, her face alight with wonder. “Did you see it?”

“The green and pink, aye, but I do not ken what the green means. I have never seen it before.”

She held the stone out to him. “Take it. I am done.” She bounced up on her toes as he grabbed it and gave him a quick kiss. “I know how to help the chief!”

“You do?” He returned the stone to its pouch.

“Aye. I named the things I thought would help him, along with things I knew would harm him—I needed to test my theory. In every case the herbs that would harm turned the stone that sludgy, murky brown. The herbs I knew would not harm him were pale pink, but when I hit upon a salve with several different components, the green almost overwhelmed the pink. Green is the color of new life in the spring. It is the color of wellbeing, health. It is the color of your eyes, too.” She smiled shyly at him, before her grin lit up her face again. “I am sure that is what green meant in the stone, too. Not your eyes,” she said quickly, her cheeks turning a becoming pink, “wellbeing and health.”

Kieron was stunned. Never would he have thought to use the stone in this manner, nor had he thought she had noticed his eyes. He swept her up in his arms and kissed

her soundly, but did not allow either of them to get carried away by the attraction and joy that drew them together. For now they must concentrate on the chief. He could only hope there would be time afterward to explore the growing attraction he knew they shared.

Two days later Kieron quietly pushed open the door to the chief's chamber and slipped inside, anxious to see Fia. He knew his first concern should be the chief's recovery, but in the privacy of his own thoughts, he knew he simply yearned to be in Fia's company.

The chief was lying on his back, snoring loudly, something he hadn't slept deeply enough to do in at least a fortnight. Fia slept, too, but not on the pallet. She sat on a chair leaning forward, her head cradled in her arms on the edge of the chief's bed. Kieron stood for a moment, allowing himself to just look at this petite woman who as a lass had taken her place in his affections long ago. In the space of a sennight he had come to know that she still held all the attributes of the girl he had met—a sunny disposition, a quick mind, and a smile that was as warm as the sun on a summer's day. But he had also learned that she was kind, hard working, and passionate—about her work, and when she kissed him. He could not help but grin at the memory of her kiss. He wanted more of those and if the chief was truly on the mend, then perhaps Fia might have time for Kieron to steal another one or two.

Carefully, he stepped back out into the corridor and instructed the lass who had been assigned to fetch things for Fia, to bring food for her, and broth for the chief, as well as fresh water. He crossed back to Fia and lifted her gently into his arms, then sat, cradling her in his lap. She snuggled her head under his chin and laid her hand over his heart, but did not wake.

A peacefulness Kieron had never felt drifted over him and he knew this woman, his Fia of the azure eyes and tinkling laugh, his whip-smart Fia who never failed to make him smile just to be in her company, his Fia who made his blood heat and his heart

yearn—she was his destiny. Just as Beira had told him the Winter Stone would bring him to his destiny, it had. The stone was responsible for Fia coming to Kilglashan.

He did not know how long he sat there, imagining his future with Fia by his side, making a family together, growing old together as his parents never had the chance to, but when the lassie returned with a tray piled with enough food to feed three warriors after a battle, followed by a lad carrying a bucket of water, he knew 'twas time to wake her.

“Fia-love,” he said, laying a kiss upon the crown of her head. Her soft hair tickled and made him smile. “You need to eat.” She snuggled deeper into his embrace and he could not help but hold her tighter. Perhaps he could let her sleep awhile longer. “Have a bath prepared for Mistress Fia in the next chamber,” he said to the lass. “Send word when 'tis ready.”

The girl and boy left and in between the chief's rhythmic snores, quiet once more settled in the chamber. Kieron allowed himself a little longer to enjoy the simple pleasure of having Fia in his arms. He knew, now that the chief was improving rapidly, that he must return Fia to Kilmartin soon, but not before he convinced her to wed with him. He'd had no choice but to part with her the first time they met. He'd not allow that to happen again.

Chapter Five

Fia pressed herself into the warm embrace of her bed. A familiar spicy-fresh scent wrapped around her, though she could not remember where it came from. Someone whispered her name and ran a callused hand down her arm, but she was so comfortable, so tired, she refused to rouse. Fingers twined with hers then, drawing her hand up. The softest, feather-light kiss skimmed across her knuckles, sending tendrils of desire through her sleep-fogged mind.

“Fia-love?”

The voice was close and tender, like a lover’s, in her dream. Another kiss, this time upon her forehead, just as soft. Such a lovely dream. She instinctively raised her lips to meet that kiss. Warm lips touched her own, but oh so gently.

“Fia, ’tis time to wake.” The words were whispered against her mouth, his lips never leaving hers.

His lips...

Fia opened her eyes and found herself staring into Kieron’s emerald gaze. He smiled at her and ran his palm over her cheek.

“You have slept most of the afternoon away, sweetheart. I would not wake you if ’twas not necessary, but the chief—” He nodded toward the bed and Fia gasped.

“The whole afternoon? Nay! I did not mean—“

“You did not mean what, lass?” The voice came from behind her where the MacKenzie chief was sitting up, watching them with a twinkle in his eye.

“I did not mean to shirk my duty, sir.” Fia leapt out of Kieron’s lap, suddenly aware that she did not know how she had come to be in it, but so pleased to see the chief much improved that she did not stop to question Kieron.

A quick check told her that the fever-shine was gone from his eyes—in fact, the swelling in his left eye was lessened enough that she could see both eyes now—and the grey pallor of his skin had been replaced with the beginnings of a healthy glow. And though there was still the telltale grimace when he adjusted the blanket, the pain was so much less than before, that he banished it and quickly replaced it with a genuine smile.

“How are you feeling?” she asked the chief.

“I dinna feel like dying anymore.”

Fia laughed. “An improvement to be sure!”

Kieron joined her at the bedside.

“Chief,” he said, “this is Fia MacLachlan. She is responsible for your return to health.”

Fia slanted a look at Kieron and cocked her head. “I am not entirely responsible.”

“Do not let her modesty fool you, chief.” Kieron smiled at her and took her hand. “She alone figured out how to help you.”

The chief was nodding his head as he watched them. “Then she should be rewarded,

for I thought for sure there was a fire burning through me from the inside out. I have been wounded in battle more than once, but never have I felt such pain. You are an angel, lass, and you have my thanks. What would you wish of me?"

Surprised, Fia looked from the chief to Kieron and shook her head. "Nothing," she finally said to the chief, who looked well pleased with himself, though she knew not why. "I want for nothing, except to return to my home now that you are better, and Kieron has already promised me that."

The chief raised his eyebrows. "I think you want for something beside your home. When you decide, tell Kieron. I am sure he'll be able to provide your reward." The man actually winked his good eye at Kieron. "For now," the chief continued, "I think a celebration is in order."

"You cannot—"

"I can sit in a chair as easily as I sit in this bed, can I not, healer-lass?"

"But—"

"But nothing. Kieron, tomorrow evening we celebrate. See that it happens, aye? And I promise," he reached for Fia's free hand and gave it a squeeze, "to do naught but sit and enjoy not being in pain anymore."

Fia had never felt so at home as she did standing by the chief's bed with Kieron's hand in hers. Yet guilt clogged her throat so much she could barely swallow, for she could never claim she was not loved and cared for at Kilmartin. Elena and Symon had taken her in when her mother died, raised her as one of their own, but even so, in Kilmartin she was always Wee Fia the orphan, or Wee Fia Elena's shadow. Here in Kilglashan she had no past. Here there were no expectations of who or what she was beyond her healing abilities. Here she was needed. Here she found... She looked up

at Kieron, only now aware that he was still talking to the chief.

Here she'd found love.

The feelings that had grown so swiftly in her for this man stunned her and unnerved her, for she did not know how she would be able to part from him when she returned to Kilmartin. And she must return to Kilmartin soon.

Would he stay there with her? She knew he had a grandmother who was dear to him, but she did not know what his responsibilities were towards her. She realized she really knew little of him—if his parents were alive, if he had brothers or sisters, what his position was here in Kilglashan. Was he to be Tavish's champion when Tavish became chief? Could he leave behind this place and these people to live in Kilmartin with her? Would he?

Fia knew she could not stay here, even if he wished her to. She had her own responsibilities to mind at Kilmartin. She owed her loyalty to Elena and Symon for the life and family they'd given her. Mairi was not fully trained in the art of herbs, and Elena needed Fia's help minding the younger girls and the bairn due anytime now. And Elena had come to depend upon Fia to assist her in her healings, saving the Lamont gift for those ailments most dire.

Kieron squeezed her hand, drawing her attention away from the future and back to the moment. "I promised I would return her to Kilmartin when you were well," he said to the chief, though there was a heaviness to his voice that matched her own mood. "You can show the women how to make the salve for the blisters that remain, can you not, Fia?"

She tried to smile but could only nod. Fia took a moment to gather herself, to pull herself back from the precipice of sorrow that just the thought of leaving Kieron and his village created deep in her soul. She would not waste the time she had with him

by dwelling on the future.

“I will make a batch of the salve tomorrow and show them how ’tis done.” She leaned against him, their hands still clasped together. “But for now, I would see you drink some broth, chief, then rest. I ken you feel better, but the fever and pain has taken a toll upon you that will take more than a few days to recover from.”

“I think you should take your own advice,” the chief said. “Kieron tells me you have not slept a full night since you arrived here and I can plainly see your fatigue.”

“I am fine,” she said.

“I am the MacAlister.” His voice was a determined boom in the chamber that demanded her attention. “Kieron, summon one of the women to watch over me while you make sure my healer gets a proper sleep, then I suggest you introduce her to your grandmother, unless you have already done so.”

A fond smile lit up Kieron’s face, different from the smile he gave Fia, but just as deeply felt. “Fia has not left your side from the moment she came here, except to work in the stillroom now and then. I would like her to meet my grandmum,” he said squeezing Fia’s hand in his.

“And I’m sure your granmum will be most interested to meet her,” the chief said. “Now go.”

Before Fia could speak, Kieron pulled her toward the door. “You heard the chief,” he said. “I had a bath prepared for you, then ’tis high time you slept, and I am tasked with making sure you do.” The man had the audacity to waggle his brows, drawing a smile from her, and creating a pleasant tingling under her skin, as he dragged her away.

A few hours later, Kieron watched as Fia slumbered. His heartbeat was slow and steady as a deep peacefulness filled him with a sense of wellbeing and hope for his future. He had left her alone only long enough for her to bathe and rest in the chamber next to the chief's, while he set the celebration preparation in motion and made sure Tavish knew of his father's returning health.

And then he had returned to watch over Fia.

As he'd sat there, watching her breath move in and out, admiring the charming way she rested her face in one hand while the other curled under her chin, he'd had plenty of time to mull over the paradox of his feelings about the chief's recovery. On one hand, he was relieved and happy that the chief was no longer in pain and would soon be able to resume his duties as head of the clan. On the other, he was heavy-hearted that it signaled the time for Fia to leave Kilglashan, to leave him—unless he could convince her to return once Elena had delivered her bairn.

The chief had gained Kieron an extra day with her when he proclaimed the celebration would be held on the morrow, for neither of them could leave the village until after that. But 'twas only one more day and Kieron itched to wake her, to hear her voice, and see her clear blue eyes smiling up at him. He itched to convince her to stay.

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Chapter Six

Fia rolled over on the narrow bed and blinked her eyes open. She stared at Kieron who sat on a small wooden stool across the small chamber, his back against the wall and his chin almost resting on his chest. Was she dreaming again? Nay, she thought not, but she could not remember how she had come to be asleep in Kieron's presence...again. She blinked, trying to wake up her groggy mind, and sat up as it came back to her. Her bath. A nap. But she did not think he had been in the chamber when she had crawled onto the bed.

"How long have you been watching over me?" she asked, combing her fingers through her still damp hair. The unfamiliar intimacy of having a man in her sleeping chamber as she awoke was both odd and oddly nice.

He startled, blinking his own eyes as if he, too, had been sleeping. He rubbed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"I'm not sure." His smile was replaced by a shyness she had not seen on him before, his eyes on his feet, and his hands clasped before him. "I know 'tis not proper," he said, "but..." He smiled again, the confident Kieron she'd come to know this past sennight firmly back in place. "...But I did not ken how long you'd sleep, so left the door ajar, and I waited. I guess I fell asleep, too." He rose and moved toward the door, but he did not leave. "It looks to be a little past sunrise. I should like to show you about the village if you'd like to get outside for awhile. You have not had any time to explore my home while you have been here."

"I should get back to the chief," she said as she pushed off the bed and began to brush

the wrinkles out of her gown. "I fear I am not fit company, though."

"There is a comb, and a ewer of fresh water for you." He pointed to a small table set against the wall. "Last I checked, the chief sleeps, and the women who were caring for him when you arrived are taking turns sitting with him. Even Tavish has been by to visit his da, which seemed to cheer both of them. You can check on him, and if he still sleeps, we can take a little time and I will show you my village."

The thought of spending time with Kieron without the worry of the chief hanging over them filled her with happiness, but she knew it would only increase the bond she could feel building between them. She did not want either of them to suffer when she returned to Kilmartin.

"I do not think 'tis a good idea." She moved to the small table and took up the comb, keeping her back to Kieron lest she weaken in her resolve simply by looking at the braw man. "Besides, I need to teach someone how to make the salve—"

"'Tis an excellent idea," he replied. "You have worked hard since you arrived here. A walk in the fresh air will be good for you. Besides, there is time enough for making the salve later today, aye? I've had Annis gather the supplies for you, but not to make the salve herself," he quickly added before Fia could object. "I thought perhaps some work would be appropriate after two days with nothing to do but think about what landed her in trouble. Margaret supervised her the whole time and Annis will go out today with her and several lasses to gather more willow bark for your supplies and ours. So you see, all is in hand with the chief's care and you are free to spend some time with me." His words were light, but when she looked over her shoulder at him, his lovely green eyes could only be described as hopeful. She turned back to the table, pouring a little water into the bowl set beside the ewer. She splashed the cold water on her face, dispelling the last of her fatigue with it.

"It would seem I am no longer needed." She dried her face, desperately trying to

come up with a reason she could not go with him, though she wanted to just as desperately.

“Nay, lass,” he said, turning her with a hand on her shoulder. He took her hands in his, further testing her resolve with his touch. “You are always needed.” He lifted her hands to his lips and a shiver of pleasure warmed her skin. “But when you did not name your reward,” he lowered her hands but did not let them go, “the chief instructed me to entertain you for a few hours in the hopes that a little leisure and fun might help you think of something you desire.”

She closed her eyes and tried not to think of what she most desired. She must be strong for both of them.

“I confess,” his voice went soft and he gave her hands a light squeeze, “I leapt at the chance to spend the time with you outside these walls.”

“But—”

“Enough buts, Fia. The chief commands it and we cannot decline such a wish when he has been so ill. He will think I no longer honor his position.” Kieron grinned at her and she knew he was managing her just as he managed Tavish, Annis, and anyone else who thwarted his plans. If he wasn’t managing her with a kind heart she might not take it well, but he was, and she found she did not have the strength to disappoint him, or to deny herself his company for one last day.

They quickly checked to see that the chief was well, though the snores that sounded through the thick oaken door of his chamber were a good indication that he was fine. Once Fia had conversed about his care with the woman keeping watch over him, and they had determined when they would gather to start making more of the salve, Kieron took her hand and pulled her away from her charge, down the stairs, through the hall, and down the outer stairs.

The sun was still low in the sky, making long shadows in the village. The smell of wood smoke hung in the air, and the murmurings of people starting their day drifted out from the cottages as Kieron pulled her up the lane.

The feel of his hand in hers warmed her enough to keep the morning chill from penetrating her clothes.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He grinned at her. “I want to show you my favorite place. ’Tis not far. Come on!” He tugged on her hand, urging her to run with him. He could have easily outpaced her with his long legs, but he must have shortened his stride, or slowed his steps, for she was able to keep up. Before long they left the confines of the village and headed toward a loch that she could just glimpse now and then through the trees, its mirrored surface reflecting the crisp blue of the sky.

“Are we going to run the whole way there?” she asked. Her breath was growing harsh in her throat and her lungs were beginning to burn.

Kieron immediately slowed to a walk. “I am sorry, lass. ’Tis only that we have not much time and I would spend as much time as we can where we are going.”

“You said ’twas not far, aye?”

“Not much farther, though far enough from the village that not many ever go there. I think you will agree ’tis worth the walk once you see the view.”

Fia could feel her brows arch, and she blinked her eyes rapidly as she grew suddenly nervous. A secluded spot, away from the village. She was certain she could trust Kieron to keep her safe, but she was not certain she could keep the distance she had resolved was necessary if she was not to leave here with a broken heart. Alone. With

Kieron. A shiver ran through her even as he pulled her back into a slow run.

A few minutes later he pulled her off the trail they had been following, and they climbed up a heavily wooded hillside, stepping around huge boulders, and over downed trees, until they arrived at the summit and the trees opened up to reveal the sweeping vista of the loch. Yellows and oranges of autumns' trees, and a splotch of green here and there from the determined pines, framed the crystalline surface.

Fia realized she had covered her open mouth with her hand. 'Twas possibly the most beautiful view she had ever seen.

"Do you like it? Was I right 'twas worth the effort to get here?" Kieron asked, his voice reverent. "If there was a spring up here, I would build a house so I could wake to this sight every morn."

"I would like that, too," she said. She leaned against his arm, their hands still joined as they had been since they left the chief's chamber. As she looked out over the loch she couldn't help but think about waking to this view every day with this man by her side, and what a blessing that life would be. "I would like that, too."

"Would you? Truly?"

She sighed. "I would." She slipped her hand out of his and walked closer to the edge of what she now saw was a bluff overlooking the loch. "Do you come here often?" she asked him, just as she felt him slide his arms around her waist. He pulled her back against his chest and it was only then that she realized she was chilled.

"Not much anymore," he said. "I used to come a lot when I could not take the cruelty of the other lads any longer. Now I come here when I need a bit of quiet, or just to enjoy the view."

They stood there in companionable silence for a while until Kieron said, “I do not want you to leave, Fia.”

Fia’s breath hitched. “I must. Elena’s time nears and I must be there when the bairn comes. Mairi needs more training. Her sisters need...”

“I need you,” he slowly turned her in his arms to face him. “I need you, too.” He kissed her and she could feel every reason she must leave grow hazy in her mind, even as her body heated and came alive. “I love you, Fia,” he said.

She wanted to say the same thing to him, yearned to tell him of the incredible feelings that had come upon her so suddenly, and so completely, but she would not. It was already too late to prevent heartache for either of them, but she would not let the bond between them grow even stronger by saying what had blossomed in her heart for this man.

When she did not speak, he looked down at her. “Do you not feel the same for me?”

Fia shook her head, fighting her heart with every breath she took, and Kieron looked puzzled.

“You do, lass, I know you do. I can feel it when we touch, when we look at each other, when you sleep in my arms. I can see it in your smile, and the way your eyes light up when you look at me.”

Every word he spoke was true, but still she could not let herself say them.

“Will you take me back to the village now, Kieron,” she said, pulling out of his embrace and heading back the way they had come.

He followed her down the hill letting silence fall between them like a heavy winter

blanket, and Fia knew she had hurt him, though that was the last thing she would ever want to do.

When they reached the trail, he drew up next to her. “Why do you deny it, Fia? I ken we have not known each other long, but what I feel is real. What you feel for me is real, even if you will not admit it to me.”

Fia tried to swallow, but the lump in her throat almost choked her. She stopped and looked up at Kieron, her Kieron if she could allow it.

“Can you leave here and stay in Kilmartin with me?”

“For a short time, aye, and then we can return here. I shall build us a cottage near my grandmum’s. I think you two will like each other.”

Fia shook her head. “I cannot come back here, at least not until Elena’s children are grown, Mairi trained in herb lore, the little girls, too. She and Symon have done so much for me and I will not abandon them or their family. I cannot abandon them.”

Kieron stared at her, shaking his head. “I am not asking you to—”

“Do not ask anything of me, Kieron,” she said, laying her hand on his arm. “Please, do not ask anything.” For she knew if he did, any answer she gave him would hurt someone and she could not bear that.

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Chapter Seven

That evening Kieron searched the crowded great hall for Fia, finally spying her across the hall as she danced with Brodie. The man was old enough to be her father, which was the only reason Kieron did not charge onto the floor and take her hand from his, though he doubted if she would welcome his attentions. The walk back to the village had been strained, and as soon as they had reached the outer cottages, Fia had said she could get back on her own and left him standing in the lane, watching the future he wanted with all his heart walk away.

One minute he'd been envisioning waking up every morning beside her, making a life with her, and the next she had told him it was impossible, though he could not understand why. Had he misread her feelings? He did not believe so. Was there someone in Kilmartin she was promised to? If there was, he was certain she did not love the man. She was so adamant that she could not leave Elena and her brood. He knew they were her family, but did that mean she could not find her own happiness with him?

He looked for her again. She had asked him not to push her to answer his questions this morning, and he hadn't, but now he thought that had been a poor decision. He loved her, and she either needed to tell him she did not feel the same way, or admit that she did so they could find a way to be together, and he was determined she would not leave Kilglashan until he had his answer.

"If you keep gripping the table that hard you shall surely snap it in two." Kieron's grandmother patted his hand from her place next to him on the bench. "She is a pretty wee thing."

“Do not call her wee, Grandmum. She does not like it,” he said without taking his eyes from Fia, where she whirled through the dance like the fairy some used to say she was.

“It seems you were right about Fia’s abilities as a healer.” His grandmother reached for a pitcher of ale, but Kieron grabbed it first, refilling her cup, then his. “’Tis a good thing Tavish listens to you these days.”

“’Tis because of her he does.” Kieron took a long swig of ale, forcing himself to look into the depths of his cup instead of at the lass.

“Because of Fia MacLachlan?”

“Aye.” He glanced at the old woman who had been mother, father, grandparent, friend, and mentor to him. “She is the one who made me see my way of avoiding a thrashing from Tavish and the other lads was smart, not cowardly. She is the one who told me to stand up to them by being true to my own strengths, not to compare my way to theirs, for neither was better nor worse than the other, only different.”

“So she is the one.” The serious tone that replaced the lightness of his grandmother’s voice surprised him.

“Aye, she is the one.” He could not keep himself from finding her on the dance floor once more, following her every move.

“I should thank her then.”

That surprised Kieron. “Thank her?”

“Aye, for she managed to make you strong as I never could, as all of Tavish’s thrashings never did. She turned you from a boy to a man that day, and you have had

Tavish's respect and given him good counsel ever since. You ken you will be his champion and advisor when he becomes chief, aye?"

Kieron had the urge to deny it, but knew if he held the Winter Stone it would prove him a liar. "I ken it, and I will serve him and the clan to the best of my abilities."

"As you always do, love, as you always do."

They both drank in silence for a few minutes as Kieron let his gaze continue to follow Fia through the intricate circle dance. The dark-haired Annis spun past him, and he fought the urge to lock her away again for the harm she had nearly caused. Instead he counted the moments until the music would stop and he could claim Fia's hand before she could avoid him, as she'd done so well this evening.

"Does the lass ken?" His grandmum asked quietly, but still jerking Kieron out of his almost trance-like attention.

"Ken what?"

"How you feel about her."

"How I feel?"

"Dinna play the dafty with me, Kieron. You are in love with her. How long?"

"Since first I met her," Kieron said without hesitation.

Grandmum whistled through her teeth, drawing Kieron's attention finally. Her sparse grey eyebrows were raised and the stunned expression in her eyes made Kieron laugh. It was rare he could surprise the old woman.

“I ken I am a dafty, but ’tis true,” he said. “I have loved her since I first saw her sitting upon a stone at the edge of the meadow where Tavish and the other lads had chased me. She was tiny and golden with her pale hair and big blue eyes, and her laughter was like tinkling bells. I thought perhaps she was a fairy maid come to take me away. Or maybe I fell in love with her when she told me she was laughing at the rest of the lads.”

“She is why you’ve never been much interested in the lassies here.”

Kieron nodded. None had ever compared to Fia.

“Did you ken she was at Kilmartin before you went there?”

He nodded again.

“Does she ken how you feel?” Grandmum asked again, her voice quieter and more serious now.

“I have spoken of it.”

“And the lass, does she feel the same?”

Kieron nodded. “I believe she does, but she will not say.”

“And if she did say? If she did love you, what then my laddie?”

“I do not think ’twill change aught, even if she does share my feelings. She is determined that we cannot be together, not for a long time at least. I do not want to be without her, Grandmum. Not anymore.”

“Och, lad. You get your way with most everyone here, often without them even

knowing how you do it. Are you telling me you cannot convince a lass you love that marrying you would be the best thing she ever did?"

"You are biased, Grandmum."

"Aye, but that does not make me wrong." She laughed just as the music stopped. "Go get her, my laddie. If you really love her, and you believe she loves you, do not let her go."

Kieron almost toppled the bench and his grandmother in his rush to his feet. Fortunately the dance had brought Fia to his side of the crowded hall so he was able steady his grandmother and still reach Fia before anyone else claimed the next dance. He looked back at the table, ready to apologize for his abrupt abandonment, only to find the old woman grinning and tilting her head toward the door that led out to the deserted village. Kieron smiled and nodded.

He needed to get Fia out of here, out of the crush of the clan and somewhere private. He needed to make sure she knew how he felt. He needed to know if she cared as deeply for him.

"I need to talk to you, Fia," he said. "Would you like to get some air?"

Fia hesitated for a moment, then followed him as he led her through the throng and down the outer stairs into the village. When they were clear of the noise and the light of the torches that had been set up along the main path to the hallhouse, Kieron stopped and faced her. She stood a few feet away, almost as if she was afraid to get too close to him. His heart ached at the thought she might be afraid of him.

"I do not think we have aught to say to each other, Kieron," she said.

He could see the tension that pulled her shoulders up, and pinched her face. She

started to turn away and he reached out and caught her wrist. He didn't know what to say to her, but he knew what he felt, what she felt, when they touched. He pulled her slowly into his arms, pleased when she reluctantly let him. He kissed her, coaxing her mouth to soften beneath his, hoping she would kiss him back, even if it were for the last time. Suddenly, she rose up onto her toes, deepening the kiss he'd started, and holding onto him with a ferocity he would never have expected. His heart fluttered, skipping a beat, then doubling its effort as she threaded her fingers into his hair and tilted her sweet mouth, opening for him with a need so fierce it would not be denied. He could not help but run his hands over her back and down to her backside, pressing her against him until he could barely think. She shivered, and he could not tell if it was from the passion that exploded between them, or because she was cold, but either way, they could not stay out here. He scooped her up, never breaking the kiss, and carried her to the tiny cottage that she and Annis were to have shared.

When they were inside, he let her slide down him until her feet touched the floor. He trailed kisses over her cheek and down to the hollow behind her ear, then down the pale column of her neck. He ran his hand up her side, letting his thumb just skim along the side of her breast. She turned just slightly, allowing his hand to cup her breast, as she gave a low satisfied moan. She leaned against him, creating an exquisite pressure along the length of his erection where she trapped it between their bodies.

He reached down and cupped her bottom, pulling her closer still, as she found his mouth with hers and kissed him again.

He stopped.

He stopped his hands where he caressed her backside.

He stopped their kiss.

He realized his breath came hard and fast as if he'd been running. He set her just far enough away to create a little space between them so he could try to form the words that needed to be spoken. He looked her directly in her amazingly big blue eyes and almost lost his ability to speak. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to calm his heartbeat.

"I need to say something, Fia. I dinna want you to think..."

"What is it?" she asked, her voice breathy as if she, too, was having a hard time slowing her heart.

"I need to say..." He closed his eyes again, steadying himself lest he get lost in her gaze and the sweetness of her breath upon his face, lest he divest her of her clothes and make her his this very moment. He took another long shuddering breath.

"Whatever it is, Kieron, just say it."

He opened his eyes and ran a thumb over her cheek. "I love you."

The most wistful smile he had ever seen spread over her heart-shaped face as if his words saddened her. "I know." And now it was she who closed her eyes and took a long, slow breath. "I am sorry I did not tell you earlier today." She lifted her chin and gazed up at him. "I thought it would be easier to leave you if I did not say the words, but even the few hours when I kept myself away from you this afternoon proved to me that it was too late. I love you, too," she said, laying a hand on his chest just as she had when she slept in his lap. "I always will."

"Oh, thank God," he said, pulling her into a kiss that was more fierce than loving, more claiming than coaxing by both of them.

Chapter Eight

Fia was nervous and happier than she could ever remember being. Kieron loved her and she loved him. The man made her body hum in a way she'd never experienced before just by saying her name, or looking at her, but now...this...now she was on fire and the only thing she knew was that Kieron fanned the flames higher and hotter with every touch of his lips, every caress of his hands.

"We should stop," he said, raining kisses down her neck and back up to that sensitive spot behind her ear that she had not known was there.

"Aye." She leaned her head to the side. "Aye," she said again on a sigh of pure pleasure. Neither of them ceased their explorations of each other.

Fia slid her hands up his arms, as he cupped her breasts in his hands, running his thumbs over the peaked nipples. She pressed into his hands, wondering what it would feel like to have his skin against hers. Kieron growled and Fia could not help but laugh, delighted that she inspired such a fierce response in her Highlander.

"You laugh at me, my lady?" He threaded his fingers into her hair and kissed her before she could answer. Heat gathered within her, low and needy, with every stroke of his tongue against hers.

"Aye, I laugh at you," she whispered against his lips as she unfastened the pin at his shoulder, then pulled his belt free. His plaid fell to the floor and his desire for her was hidden only by his tunic.

Shyness and curiosity warred within her. She wanted to see all of him, wanted to run her hands over his skin, wanted him to touch her in the same way, but before she could act on her desires he was loosening her gown and slipping it down her arms, to puddle at her feet, leaving her clad only in her kirtle. He lifted her into his arms again, and in three long strides laid her on the bed in the corner of the single room.

The mattress dipped as he stretched out beside her, rolling her toward him so they faced each other. He ran a hand down her side, over her hip, and back up, skimming over her breast with the lightest of touches. Shyly she reached out and mirrored his caress, sliding her hand down his side, but she did not trail her way back up as he had. She hesitated for a moment, then slid her hand between their bodies. He closed his eyes and a low throaty groan escaped him as she ran her hand over him. The heat and hardness of his desire stole her breath and pushed everything out of her mind except Kieron. Her Kieron. Instinct took over as she hooked her leg over his hip and pressed herself to him.

He slid his hand up her thigh, under her kirtle and cupped her bottom, pulling her harder against him, moving against her slowly, seducing her senses and her body until she was a haze of need, a maelstrom of desire. She pulled at his tunic, needing to touch him, needing his skin against hers as she'd never needed anything before. Quickly, he pulled the tunic over his head, then sat her up to divest her of her kirtle. They sat there, breathing hard, just looking at each other.

“You are so lovely, my Fia,” he whispered as he reached out to run the backs of his fingers over her breast and down her belly, stopping just as he reached the apex of her thighs.

“And you are the brawest man I have ever seen,” she said, mesmerized by his touch.

He pressed her back and settled himself between her thighs, kissing her and moving against her until she thought she might die from wanting him.

“Kieron, please,” she whispered. She knew what must happen next, though only from the gossip of other lasses newly bedded, but she had not understood the desire that fueled such couplings. The need to join with him, the desire to share this ultimate intimacy with the man she loved with all her heart, had her writhing beneath him. “Please, love.”

Kieron stilled and looked her in the eyes, his own filled with more tenderness than she ever thought possible, and as he kept her gaze locked with his, he slowly filled her, pausing as they both felt the tug of resistance. “’Twill hurt, love, but only for a moment.”

She nodded and he retreated, then surged into her. She gasped, but more from the incredible feeling of being one with him than from the swift flash of pain.

He stilled. “Are you all right?” His tone was worried but she could only smile up at him and hook her leg over his hip again as she tried to get even closer.

“That is not all there is to this, is it?” She smiled at him and let her instincts guide her movements.

He groaned, and kissed her, then began to move with her, into her, over and over, driving her up into heights she had never known, spinning, flying, until they both cried out their joy.

Annis watched as Kieron pulled Fia from the hall and as soon as she could, she slipped away from the gathering. Imagine, a ceilidh to celebrate Fia healing the chief. She’d probably done nothing more than let the man heal on his own, but as usual, Fia was deemed remarkable though Annis could never understand why.

Annis stood in the shadow at the top of the outer stair, letting her eyes adjust to the night, but she could not see Fia or Kieron anywhere. She started down the stair,

fuming that she had been shut away in that tiny dank cottage while the scrawny, fey Fia was deemed remarkable. It was bad enough that Fia always got whatever she wanted, with the entire MacLachlan clan doting over her every whim just because she was orphaned, as if that were something unusual. But now she'd managed the same feat with the MacAlisters, so much so that Kieron could look at no one but Fia, and men and women alike smiled fondly at her while scowling at Annis.

And why did they scowl? She had not harmed the chief. She had only failed to mention that the willow was destroyed and Fia treated her as if she had committed some terrible crime. Just once, she would like to see Fia brought low, she would like Fia to learn what it was like to have everyone look at her like she was nothing special, just another lass amongst many.

A familiar voice drifted to her from somewhere past the last of the torches. A door opened, and closed again. Annis's blood sped as she moved from shadow to shadow, sure now, at last, she would discover Fia in a less than perfect light.

At long last she would have something to hold over Fia, something that would take the light from her eyes and the smile from her lips should Elena and Symon learn of it. Something that would make Fia do whatever Annis wanted for a long time to come.

Fia lay with her head on Kieron's chest, running her fingers lightly over his skin, remembering what they had done, what they had shared, until need began to build in her again. This was exactly where she wanted to be, in Kieron's arms. Never had she felt so happy, so loved, so sure of what she wanted her future to hold.

But she could not turn her back on her family. She owed them everything, and until Kieron had walked into the bailey at Kilmartin Castle she had never imagined that her place with them might not be enough.

Guilt clawed into her heart. She loved her life at Kilmartin Castle. She had a family she loved, and who loved her. She had a calling with her herb lore, and had learned so much by working with Elena as her helper. She was comfortable there, but now she could see that she was lonely there, as well. Her heart had been lonely for the one person she was meant to share her life with only she hadn't known it.

She knew it now.

Just the thought of returning to her life at Kilmartin hollowed out her heart.

She would give anything to stay here with Kieron, to wed with him, to make a family with him. She knew she would be welcome here, not only because Kieron loved her, but because she could take her place as their healer, too.

But it was impossible, as impossible for him to come with her as for her to stay here.

Nay, this was the time they had and maybe, when Mairi was fully trained and Elena was safely done having bairns, maybe then, if Kieron had not married already, maybe then, they could be together.

"Did you hear something?" Kieron asked, his voice rumbling in his chest against her ear.

"Nay," she said, but she could not be certain she would have noticed anything while she was spiraling down into loneliness and misery.

"'Twas probably just a dog snuffling around outside for something to eat," he said, pulling her more tightly to him. "We should return to the ceilidh before anyone comes in search of us."

Fia sighed and let herself enjoy the slow beat of his heart against her cheek for a few

more minutes.

When she knew she could not put off returning to the hallhouse any longer she slipped out of his warm embrace and shivered in the chill air of the dark cottage. “’Tis time the chief returned to his chamber. I’ll not have him making himself ill again when I must return to Kilmartin.” Her kirtle lay in a heap next to the bed. She grabbed it and slid it over her head. “I cannot delay going back.” She tried to keep her voice light, but she was certain he could hear the strain in it. “Elena’s time grows near and she’ll need me.” Fia barely contained a sob as she searched for her gown, finding it near the door.

Kieron had his tunic on now but grabbed her before she could tie the laces on her gown. “Let me,” he said, taking the ribbons from her hands and tying them carefully, if a little lopsidedly. When he finished, he pulled her back into his arms and laid his cheek against the crown of her head making her feel tiny and protected in the arms of her warrior, her friend, her love.

“I do not ken how, but we will find a way to be together, love,” Kieron said. “I cannot bear the thought of being parted from you again.”

“But you are needed here and I am needed there,” she said, blinking rapidly. She refused to cry over something that could not be changed.

“Aye, ’tis true, but there must be a way.” He ran the backs of his fingers over her cheek, then kissed her sweetly. “I love you, Fia, and I will find a way for us to be together.”

Fia pressed a kiss into his palm. “I love you, too,” she said but dared not hold onto hope that he would be successful.

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Chapter Nine

Fia lay awake in the same bed she had shared with Kieron just a few hours earlier, his scent surrounding her as firmly as his arms had. As tired as she was after more than a sennight caring for the chief, Kieron's scent in her bed kept her awake, reminding her of every caress, every whispered word they had shared there. Annis slept like a stone on a pallet across the small chamber. Oddly, she had not complained at all when Fia refused to share the bed with her.

When the sky began to lighten, Fia rose, woke Annis, and packed her things quickly, anxious to see Kieron again. As she made her way from the cottage to the stable, Kieron fell into step beside her. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and hold him one last time, but she only took his hand in hers. He threaded his finger through hers, but the look in his eyes told her he wanted much more. She squeezed his hand and simply said, "Good morn."

Annis caught up with them at just that moment, walking beside Fia, and so they said nothing more. Tavish awaited them at the stable.

"My da wanted me to tell you again," he said to Fia, "that you have his thanks and gratitude for taking such good care of him." He looked down for a moment, then glanced at Kieron before looking back at Fia. "Kier was right about you. I apologize for doubting your skill. You are welcome here, you ken? Anytime. And we hope you will return here soon." Now he glared at Annis. "But do not bring that one back with you. She is not welcome."

"I thank you for that, the apology and the invitation to return. And I will promise, if I

should return, Annis will not. I do not think Elena will allow her out of Kilmartin Castle once she learns what has passed here,” Fia said. “I am sorry for bringing her this time.”

Annis started to defend herself but Fia just glared at her. “I am glad I was of service to your father, and I do hope to return here one day.”

Kieron’s grip tightened on her hand. “Very soon,” he said. “I hope.”

Before dawn even broke, Tavish stood in the lane waving at them as Kieron led the way out of Kilglashan. Fia rode behind him, followed by Annis. Brodie brought up the rear. The silence of the group made the sound of the horses loud in her ears. The birds woke with the sun, wrapping another layer of sound around the silent travelers.

She had not even tried to speak with Kieron on the journey, for anything she wanted to say she couldn’t say in front of their traveling companions. He had been just as silent, though she caught him looking back at her more than once as they traveled. When they stopped just as dusk was descending, they all set up camp, much as they had that first night out just eight days, and a lifetime, ago—the women settling their blankets near each other with the men across the way, a fire between them. Their meal was cold meat, cheese, and bannocks, but Brodie had brought a skin of whiskey with him which they shared as they ate.

Afterward Fia excused herself into the woods, hoping Kieron might follow so they could share one last private moment. When she turned to wait for him to catch up, she discovered it was Annis who followed.

“Why do you follow me?” Fia demanded. “I do not need your company to take care of my needs.” She was beyond irritated that the woman had interfered with what was probably the last time she might ever speak with Kieron alone, the last time she might kiss him goodbye. “Leave me.”

“Leave you?” Annis tilted her head as if she examined a particularly disgusting cow patty. Her arms were crossed and she leaned back on her heels just enough to add to the effect of disgust. “You think you can tell me what to do, Wee Fia of the fairy folk? Does Kieron ken you are called that?”

“You are the only one who still calls me that—and it would not matter if he did—and aye, I do think I can tell you what to do. You were sent to be my assistant and instead you sought to discredit me. You put the MacAlister’s recovery in peril.” Fia knew her voice was growing strident and that it was her remorse over parting with Kieron, tied up with guilt that she did not want to continue at Kilmartin as she had for so long, that drove her to lash out at the irritating Annis. But in truth the woman deserved a tongue-lashing. “’Tis a good thing young Mairi shows a talent for the herb lore for I will not waste any more of my time teaching you, and I shall make sure Elena sees that you are not trained by anyone else, either.”

Annis advanced on her but Fia held her ground. Annis only stopped when they were nearly nose-to-nose. “You will not tell Elena anything except that I was an exceptional assistant to you, and that I will be a better herbalist than you one day.”

“I would never—”

“You will, or I will tell Elena and Symon exactly what their precious Fia was up to with Kieron last night.” She let the threat hang in the air between them. When Fia did not respond, Annis added, “In the cottage?” She dropped her chin a fraction and looked at Fia through half-lowered lids. “I do not think they will be happy with you when they hear that you threw yourself at him, that you gave yourself to him without benefit of marriage.

“They will not like it that you are a wanton who spread her legs for a man as soon as she was out of their sight. You will no longer be the one who can do no wrong in their eyes.”

Fia blinked, swallowed, and blinked again, trying to figure out what to say, how to fix this. She loved Kieron and he loved her. They was sure they would wed if they could, and she was sure she was not the first lass to share her bed with a lad before any vows were made.

“Why?” she finally asked. “Why would you tell them any of that?”

Now Annis tried to smile, but hatred pinched her lips into something closer to a grimace. “Why? Because you are not perfect and ’tis time they knew it. ’Tis time everyone knew it.”

“No one is perfect,” Fia said carefully. “I certainly am not.”

“Nay, you are not, and now you shall learn exactly what that feels like unless you tell Elena what I told you to say. If you do that I will keep what I ken to myself. If you do not, or if you recant your glowing praise for me and my skills, I will be forced to reveal your shameful secret.” She leaned back on her heels and crossed her arms. A sneer marred what Fia had always thought was a lovely face, but now she knew for certain it masked a dark heart. “Do we have a deal?” Annis demanded.

Fia said nothing as she tried to work through all the ramifications of Annis’s threat. If Elena and Symon discovered her—she could not call it an indiscretion, for that would diminish the love that they shared—if they discovered what had transpired between Fia and Kieron she would lose the respect of the two people who were foster parents, mentors, and friends, to her. Or she could lie to them about Annis. A heavy knot formed in her belly, making her ill at the thought of lying to them, especially when Fia knew Annis would likely put other people, sick people, in danger from the woman’s lack of care and empathy for her patients.

Finally Fia nodded, grateful that she did not hold Kieron’s Winter Stone in her hand to expose her lie. She didn’t know how she would manage to walk the line between

Annis's pair of threats—her time with Kieron exposed, or seeing Annis continuing to assist with the sick and injured—but she knew she would never lie to Elena and Symon, no matter what they might think of her actions.

“Now that was not hard to do, was it?” Annis turned abruptly and headed back to the camp leaving Fia angry, uncertain, and alone.

Fia was rolling up her pallet, still trying, as she had all night long, to find an honorable way out of the trap Annis had thrown her into, when the pounding of a horse at full gallop sounded along the trail from Kilmartin.

“Fia, Annis, get back in the trees,” Brodie said.

Kieron had already drawn his claymore and stood ready to defend them. Brodie quickly joined him as Fia slipped out of the clearing where they had camped and into the deeper cover of the forest. Annis did the same, though far enough away that Fia did not have to look at her or bear the smirk that had not left the woman's face since their conversation last night.

The horseman galloped past them without slowing, but before he had gone far he pulled the horse to a harsh stop, and returned. Kieron and Brodie stood their ground even as the horseman approached.

“I seek Fia of Kilmartin!” the man called and Fia recognized the voice immediately.

She dashed out of the tree cover and ran to Kieron's side. “Jamie, what is wrong? Is it Elena?”

Jamie dismounted quickly. “Aye, 'tis the Lady. The bairn is coming but something is wrong and the midwife cannot seem to help her. Symon bade me fetch you from Kilglashan village immediately. Thank the saints you are here. Take my horse,” he

held the reins out to her, “he will be faster than your old mare and there is no time to lose.”

“Fia cannot go alone,” Kieron said, only now sheathing his sword.

“Come with me, Kieron,” Fia said as she accepted a leg up onto the big horse from Jamie. “The others can follow behind when they are ready.” But she did not wait for his answer. She gripped the horse’s mane in her hands as hard as her fear for Elena gripped her gut. Leaning low over its neck, she kicked him and they took off. All the while she whispered desperate prayers for Elena’s survival.

It wasn’t long before she heard the pounding of hoof beats coming up behind her. She glanced back only long enough to ascertain that it was Kieron, and even though her anxiety over Elena remained, there was a tiny thread of comfort sliding through it at the knowledge that he was with her.

They rode hard for Kilmartin. The horses had to slow to a quick walk as they climbed the steep path out of the glen, past great gnarled trees almost bereft of leaves now that winter was so close, and up to the top of a small ben where the castle sat overlooking the wide shallow valley. When they reached the relative flat they urged the horses back to a fast trot, Fia shouting, “Clear the way! Clear the way!” as they raced through the gate tunnel and skidded to a stop in the bailey. She leapt off the horse, dropped its reins to the ground, and ran full tilt up the stairs and into the kitchen tower, then up the interior turnstile stair to the chief’s chamber. Symon was pacing the corridor, an anxious expression on his face she had not seen since she was a tiny girl.

“How is she,” Fia asked as Symon enveloped her in a hug, then held her by her shoulders far enough away to look her in the eyes. Despair and frustration filled his gaze, but not grief.

“She lives, but it is not good, Fia. The midwife says the bairn is stuck and refuses to be born. She has tried to turn it, but there is not room.”

“Not room?”

Symon closed his eyes and sighed. “The midwife says there are twins. Fia, my Elena has been calling for you since well before dawn. No matter what happens, she will be eased to ken you are here.”

“I will do everything I can for her, Symon, I promise you that.”

“I ken it well, Imp. My Mairi is in there with her, too. Be strong for her, for both of them.”

Fia nodded, the memory of Elena’s vigil by Fia’s mother’s birthing bed slamming through her.

“When you know what you need,” Symon continued, “tell me and I will see it brought to you immediately.” He hugged her again.

Before Fia could open the door she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to find Kieron standing there. She had been so focused on Elena and Symon she had not realized that he had followed her into the tower.

“Take this,” he said, folding the pouch that held the Winter Stone into her hand. “Use it as you did for my chief. I know you can help her.”

Fia’s eyes welled at the faith he had in her. She rose up onto her toes and kissed him quickly. “My thanks,” she said quietly. “Will you wait for me? Please? I would say goodbye before you leave.” She knew her voice quavered but there was nothing to be done about that.

“I will not leave this corridor until I see you again,” he said.

She managed a smile, relieved that she did not have to say goodbye yet, then slipped into Elena’s chamber.

Chapter Ten

Kieron should never have promised Fia that he would stay in this corridor, this tiny space crowded by a large warrior sick with worry. Kieron tried not to pace. Hell, he tried not to breathe. The last thing he wanted was to draw the attention of Symon.

Ever since Fia had disappeared into Elena's chamber, the man had been stalking back and forth in front of the door. It seemed like days had passed, but Kieron knew it was more likely only a few hours. The murmuring of women's calm voices could be heard, like the cooing of doves in the cote on a summer's evening, but every now and again a cry of pain would punctuate the murmur and Symon would whirl toward the door from wherever his pacing had carried him, and stand as he did now, one palm against the door, the other fisted by his side. He rested his forehead next to his palm and Kieron could hear whispering from the man, like prayers, weaving through the women's murmurs.

A pale-haired lass of seven or eight peeked around the corner of the landing, near Kieron. Her eyes grew big as a loud guttural moan came from Elena's chamber, and Symon growled, "God's bones, make it end!"

"Is she dying?" the lass whispered to Kieron, though she did not take her eyes off Symon at the far end of the hallway. Tears trembled on her pale lashes, but she blinked rapidly as if to keep them from falling.

"Nay, lass," Kieron said, the need to comfort someone finally finding an outlet. He went down on one knee in front of her so he would seem less imposing, less scary. He took one of her tiny hands in his to draw her attention away from her chief. "My

grandmum says some bairns take a long time to come into the world, and others are quick. This one is in no hurry.” He smiled at the girl and she nodded, her eyes fixed on his now, as if he was the only safe place to look.

“I was sent to see if the MacLachlan would like a meal brought up,” she whispered with a childish lisp.

Kieron glanced back over his shoulder and found the man in question scowling at the two of them. So much for not drawing his attention.

“I think ale would be good,” he said to the lass. “I do not think he is of a mood to eat just now. Would you bring enough for me, too?” She nodded once, then she blanched as her gaze raised, fixing on something...or someone... behind Kieron. “Go quickly now. Your chief is thirsty.”

She spun without another word or look and disappeared down the stairs as if the Devil were on her heels.

“’Twould seem you have a soft heart for wee lasses with pale hair.”

Kieron rose slowly, not wishing to startle the agitated man who stood behind him. He turned.

“I do not like seeing anyone afraid,” Kieron said, keeping his voice pitched low and calm, “wee lasses or braw men.”

The man glared at him for long moments. Another groan sounded down the hall from Elena and Symon closed his eyes as if he shared the pain with his wife.

“Fia will do everything she can for your lady.”

Symon's eyes popped open. "I ken that, but Fia does not have Elena's healing gift."

Kieron bobbed his head. "But your daughter Mairi does, aye? And Fia can help her if Mairi must use it?"

"Elena will not let Mairi use it. She is afraid for her. She is afraid for Fia, too. Elena almost died trying to save her own mother in childbirth. Fia lost her mother in childbirth, too, in spite of my Elena's gift." He stabbed his fingers through his hair, pulling it harshly back from his face. "Elena is too stubborn for her own good in this."

"I think you underestimate Fia," Kieron said. "She will do whatever needs doing to help Elena."

"She will not gainsay Elena, though," Symon said as he paced back to the door.

Irritation crawled over Kieron, so he followed Symon down the corridor. "Fia will do whatever is necessary, even if that means marshaling Mairi's gift, or going against Elena's wishes."

"You do not ken that wee lassie as well as you think you do, even if she does honor you with her kiss."

"Aye, she honors me, but I still say you do not ken her true strength of will. That one will do whatever is necessary to deliver your bairns and keep your wife well."

"I think I ken the lass better after fourteen years than you do after a single sennight."

Kieron shook his head. "You ken the lass she was—small, shy, yet wise beyond her years."

Symon's attention focused on Kieron for the first time that day.

"I ken the woman she has become," Kieron finished.

"And what sort of woman is that?" Symon's voice held a lethal edge, as if he sensed just how much Kieron knew Fia, the woman, but Kieron did not hesitate.

"I have seen her overcome her doubts. I have seen her stand up to Annis's treachery."

Symon went completely still. "Treachery?" he asked. "What has that woman done?"

Kieron told the chief the whole story, glad to distract Symon, if only for a little while.

"And you brought Annis back with you?"

"Aye. Fia thought it best if Lady Elena meted out the punishment. Even in her anger, Fia saw some hope that Annis might learn to be a better person with Elena's guidance rather than Tavish's ire."

"Fetch her here."

"Fia thought Lady Elena—"

Symon cut him off with a glare and Kieron spun to fetch the wench, determined to return before Fia could find him missing, for he did not want her to think he did not keep his word. He quickly located Annis in the great hall, filling her belly with hot porridge, and flirting with a young warrior.

"You chief requires your presence," he said as he pulled her up from her bench and almost dragged her back up to the corridor to face Symon. He only wished Fia could see this. He shoved Annis ahead of him to face her chief.

Symon's eyes were narrowed, his arms crossed over his chest. Anger radiated off of him, making Kieron very glad he was not the focus of the man's wrath.

"What do you have to say for your unworthy behavior?" Symon asked.

Kieron could see Annis's back stiffen.

"Fia told you?" She mimicked the chief's posture, crossing her arms over her chest and lifting her chin. 'Twas not the reaction Kieron had expected from her. "She did not tell you everything, I wager." She glared over her shoulder at Kieron and he could tell by the satisfied glint in her eyes that something was wrong. "Did she tell you," she said as she slowly returned her attention to Symon, "that she lay like a wanton with that one?" She stabbed a thumb in his direction as Kieron's breath stopped.

Hours later, Fia knelt on one side of the bed, ready to help Elena, while Mairi knelt on the other side, holding her mum's hand in hers, pouring all the Lamont healing gift into her. The labor had taken a toll on all of them, but no one, least of all Elena, had given up.

The midwife did not look up from her position between Elena's knees, but said, "We are almost there, my lady. I think one more contraction will do the trick. Prepare yourself."

Elena responded with a loud groan as she pushed with all the strength left in her. Fia pushed upon her stomach to help, and at last the first bairn was pulled from his exhausted mother. The mid-wife quickly handed the bairn to one of her apprentices, and within minutes the second one slid free of her mother, and was handed to the second helper. Neither bairn cried, nor moved.

"Mum?" Mairi said, her voice tight but steady. "They are born."

“Just a little more, Elena. We are almost done,” Fia said quietly to the glassy-eyed woman, with as much encouragement as she could manage. “One more push.” Elena managed a weak effort and collapsed but it was enough to deliver the afterbirth.

Fia looked from Elena to where the bairns still lay silent and unmoving. “Mairi, you stay with your mum. I must see to the bairns.” Just as she said that there was a weak cry from one of the babes, and an answering murmuring from the apprentice who was cleaning him.

“What is it?” asked Mairi.

“A wee laddie,” the apprentice said, bringing the bairn to cuddle next to his mum.

“And the other,” Elena asked, her voice hoarse and weighed down with exhaustion.

“A girl,” the second apprentice said, but did not look up from where she was not-so-gently rubbing the child’s blue-tinged skin.

“She will be fine, my lady.” The midwife glanced over her shoulder to her apprentice but neither woman looked hopeful.

Fia moved to the apprentice with the baby girl. “Elena needs a brew of raspberry, thistle, and mother’s heart, to slow her bleeding,” she said to the lass who was not much older than Mairi. “Will you go to the kitchen and see it made? And tell Symon he may come in soon, that Elena is well and we are just cleaning up. Do not speak of the bairns yet.”

The girl bobbed her head, handed the cloth she had been chafing the baby with, and left. Fia quickly looked over her shoulder to make sure the midwife was attending Elena. Mairi kept watch over her new brother, one hand on him, and one in Elena’s. The tiny girl struggled to breathe, and despite the apprentice’s efforts, she was still

faintly blue and deathly still. Fia knew there was no time to waste if she was going to save this bairn. She pulled out the Winter Stone and held it over the baby. Under her breath Fia said those remedies she knew of to help the bairn, but the stone stayed stubbornly white. She searched her mind, but still found no response from the stone. The child gasped, as if she could not draw in breath, as if something was caught in her throat or her lungs. At this thought, the stone went pink, with that ribbon of bright green once more weaving through it.

Acting on instinct, Fia dropped the stone on the table and lifted the tiny body into her hands, laid the babe's chest in one hand and gently, but firmly patted her back, the infant version of a hard back pounding. Once. Twice. Thrice and the girl coughed. Another several pats and she coughed again, this time more strongly. More pats and finally she cried, weakly. She began to wave her arms about and pulled her legs up. Tears of joy ran down Fia's cheeks, and she heard Mairi tell Elena both bairns lived.

Fia kept patting the baby's back, cooing at the bairn as the wee lass's cries grew stronger and her color grew pinker. Carefully, Fia swaddled her, making sure she continued to breathe deeply, and settled her next to an exhausted, but beaming, Elena.

Chapter Eleven

A young woman Kieron did not know flew out of the chamber, pulling the door closed behind her so quickly nothing could be seen of the room inside. She stopped long enough to tell Symon that Elena was well, and he would soon be allowed in to see her, then she was gone down the corridor, leaving both men to stare at the chamber door. An angry bairn squalled, the second they had heard, accompanied by a rise in the volume of the women's voices this time.

Kieron wasn't sure what to do or to say. Symon had been furious with Annis, and had glared at Kieron, but had only banished the woman to her chamber, promising her punishment would be revealed soon. He'd turned his back on Kieron at that point and taken up his pacing again.

Symon sighed and took the decision out of Kieron's hands. "What are your intentions toward Fia?" he asked suddenly.

Kieron took a breath to steady himself.

"Do you love her, lad?" Oddly, he didn't seem angry.

"I do. I have loved her since first I met her years ago."

Symon looked surprised. "I did not ken you knew each other before she went away with you. I ask again, what are your intentions?"

"I will not ask her to abandon her responsibilities here," he swallowed before he

added, “and I cannot abandon mine at Kilglashan.”

“That is no answer. I am asking what do you want of her?”

At that question all that he and Fia had shared the night of the ceilidh flashed through his head and his body, but he did not let that stop him from looking the man in the eye so Symon could judge the truth of what Kieron was about to say.

“I love her. I cannot bear the thought of leaving her here and never seeing her again. I want her to be my wife and I would wed her this very day if there was a way to do so.”

Symon pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. “And my wee lassie, does she feel the same?”

“She does.”

Symon sighed and glanced at the still closed chamber door, the muffled sounds of women still evident, along with the fussy squalls of two new MacLachlans. “I felt...I feel, the same way about my Elena. I dinna ken what I would do if she...if I...” He looked back at Kieron. “I have never seen Fia look so sure of herself as she did when she hurried down this hall toward me. I have never once seen her turn to another man for comfort or reassurance, as she did so easily with you. I have never seen her...as the woman she has come to be.” He nodded as if he had come to a decision. “I want nothing more for Fia than for her to be happy, you ken that?”

“It is all I want for her, too, Symon.”

The chief turned his attention back to the door without another word. Kieron tried not to let his mind travel to a future that was still uncertain, though it seemed perhaps now he had reason to hope.

Suddenly the door was flung open and his Fia stood there, a smile on her tired face.

“Symon, your new son and daughter would like to meet you,” she said, wiping her forehead with the back of her wrist as she stepped back to let Symon into the room.

Kieron stayed in the corridor, wanting to drag Fia into his arms, but holding back, not wanting to interfere in this moment with her family. So he was surprised when she stepped through the doorway, pulled the door closed behind her, and melted into his arms.

Never before had he been so sure that he was exactly where he was supposed to be. He hugged her fiercely, and she responded by gripping him harder around his waist.

“We almost lost her,” she said quietly against his chest. “We would have lost her and the bairns but for Mairi...she’s so strong in her gift already. She had no fear, no concern that she might fail, as both Elena and I struggled with. She kept her mother strong enough to birth the bairns as if she had been using her gift for a lifetime.”

“And the bairns? We heard them cry.”

“I thought we had lost them, too. The laddie came round quickly but the lass...” She looked up at him, a grin on her face that he had not expected. “I used the Winter Stone, Kieron. I found a way to help her breathe because of it.” She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him, shyly at first, then more sure of herself. “Thank you,” she said at last, stepping far enough away to pull the pouch with the stone from her belt. She held it out to him. “Without it, I dinna ken if she would have lived.”

“Keep it, love,” he said. “I think auld Beira would agree that it is in better hands with you than with me.”

“But you use it all the time,” she said, still holding it between them.

“I use it for minor things, things I should be able to ascertain without it. You use it to heal. ’Tis far more important.”

She let her hand drop. “’Tis too bad we cannot simply share it.”

Kieron pulled her back into his arms, remembering that Beira had told him the stone would bring him to his destiny. He was certain the stone had worked its magic. He was certain he held his destiny in his arms. If he had to wait to make her his wife, he would do so, for as long as necessary. She would be his, as he would always be hers.

The door opened once more and Mairi stood there, looking less an uncertain girl and more a self-assured young woman than she had when he had seen her a sennight ago.

“Mum would see you both,” she said with an enigmatic smile.

“Me?” Kieron asked. “I do not need to impose...”

“Both of you,” Symon called from where he sat on the bed cradling a bairn in each arm.

Fia took Kieron’s hand and together they joined the family at the bed. “Someone should send for Stineag and Ailish,” Fia said, noting the absence of Symon and Elena’s younger girls. “They shall want to meet their new brother and sister, too.”

“Aye. Mairi,” Elena said, “will you fetch your sisters? Fia can keep watch over me and the bairns while you are away.”

Mairi didn’t look terribly happy to be sent away, but her good nature won out. She kissed her mum on the head, then ran a finger over the cheeks of her new siblings, and left the chamber.

“She is stronger, both in her gift and in her temperament, than I realized,” Elena said. “She says she felt no pain as she helped strengthen me and the bairns. I daresay she is ready to work with me, when I am recovered.” She slanted a look at Fia. “Do you not agree, sprite?”

“I have said so for some time now, so aye, I do agree.”

A look passed between Elena and Symon that Fia recognized. The two were up to something.

“I understand Annis was less than useful to you while you were amongst the MacAlisters.”

Fia blanched and looked at Kieron. “You told Symon?”

“Aye, and he has already banished her to her chamber, awaiting her punishment.”

“But,” Fia said. “But...”

“She did accuse you and Kieron of certain things,” Symon said.

In spite of her years trailing after her chief and his wife, Fia found the look on his face unreadable. She could not tell if he was angry at her behavior, or simply disappointed. Either way, she was embarrassed and could only look at her feet.

Elena patted the bed next to her, and Fia sat there, unable to look Elena in the eye, either.

“I can think of several fitting punishments,” Elena said.

“Do not punish Kieron,” Fia said, now pleading with both of them. “It was not his

fault.”

“I was not speaking of you, nor Kieron.” She gave her husband a soft smile Fia knew she saved only for him. “’Tis not as if we can condemn you for something we ourselves once did.”

Fia covered her mouth with her hand, not sure whether to be embarrassed at this admission or to find it funny.

“I am sorry I sent Annis with you, sprite. Had I known...”

“We all ken you did not intend harm, love,” Symon said, nestling their son back in the crook of Elena’s arm. Fia noted that the lad’s color was a healthy pink, and that though he slept, he sucked his lip as if he nursed.

“How much more training do you think Mairi needs in the herb lore,” Elena asked Fia.

“She is learning very quickly of late, as long as she is not distracted by the lads. Another year and she will be as knowledgeable as I am.”

“Hmm, that is too long.” Elena said, tapping a finger against her lips.

“Too long?” Fia looked from her foster mother to Symon, who had one of those silly grins on his face she had seen so often when he was cooking up a surprise for one of his lasses. “Why too long?”

“May I see that pretty stone,” Elena asked, ignoring Fia’s question completely. She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers impatiently.

Fia pulled it from the pouch she had yet to tie back on her belt and placed it in

Elena's palm. Elena held the stone out for a puzzled Symon to take from her.

"Hold it in your palm and tell them what you told me," Elena said to him

Symon looked from the stone to his wife and back, then shrugged. "I told her Kieron loves you very much, Fia, enough to keep his promises to you even when faced with the Devil of Kilmartin. I told her I believed he was a man worthy of you." A milky, but distinctly pink, ribbon of light filled the stone.

Fia had not heard that name in many years, an epithet used by many until Elena came among them. Now it made her smile as she reached for Kieron's hand.

"Kieron is brave beyond measure," she said, looking up at the man she loved with all her heart.

Symon chuckled. "He also told me that he wants to wed with you. Do you feel the same?"

"Aye, but—"

"No buts, sprite. You've said enough." Elena held her hand out and Symon poured the stone into it. Elena held it up for all to see.

"Symon and I would be very happy to see the two of you wed."

The stone turned a brilliant pink, with a shimmering deep blue weaving through it.

Fia stared at the stone. "What does that mean?"

"I do not ken, love," Kieron answered her.

“I think it means happiness,” Elena said, “for I am abidingly happy today. I think a month is long enough to wait, do you not?” she said to Fia and Kieron.

“Wait?” Fia asked.

“To be wed,” Symon said. “Elena and Mairi need you here until my love is recovered fully. ’Twill give you a little time to train Mairi some more, too, though I think we should be able to spare her now and again so she can visit you at Kilglashan when she is ready to learn more.”

“I would like to see the daughter-of-my-heart married where I was,” Elena said, “in the stone circle where first I saw my Symon. In the stone circle where we were wed.”

Fia was unable to speak around the emotions that raced through her. Symon cleared his throat and threw a pointed look at Kieron who suddenly pulled Fia to face him.

“Fia, you are my love, my destiny, my hope.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her lightly. “Will you be my wife?”

She looked back at the couple who she owed so much to. “You are sure?” she asked them.

“Dinna keep the lad waiting, imp. ’Tis cruel.”

She turned back to the man she loved with all her heart. “I will!”

Kieron whooped, startling the bairns from their sleep.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:02 am

Epilog

Kilglashan Village, 1323

“’Tis a perfect tincture, Mairi!” Fia placed the small glass bottle on the shelf above the workbench in her stillroom. “I do not think there is aught else I can teach you of herbs.”

Mairi grinned. “Mum says the same for the Lamont healing gift.”

“I do indeed,” Elena said as she walked through the wide open door, bringing the scent of spring inside with her. We’ve brought someone to see you,” she said as she shooed the toddling twins, Fia and Ranald, into the chamber on the ground floor of the hallhouse. Upon Fia’s marriage to Kieron, the MacAlister chief had insisted she take the space for her stillroom.

“Who?” Fia asked, trying to look around Elena to see out the door, though the sound of a fussy bairn gave away the answer.

“The wee princess, of course,” Kieron said as he stepped around Elena and her weans, his crying daughter on his hip. “Hope is hungry and only her mother will do,” he said as he handed their nine month old daughter into Fia’s arms.

Warmth filled Fia’s heart as she held her bairn. Kieron beamed at the two of them, as proud a da as she had ever seen, and her eyes filled with tears.

“What is it, sprite?” Elena asked quietly.

Kieron just smiled and pulled Fia close with an arm around her shoulders. “She is happy,” he said, laying a sweet kiss upon the crown of her head.

Elena looked skeptical, so Fia smiled and leaned into her husband’s embrace. “I cannot help it. I am so happy the tears just come.” Hope let out a cry of frustration as she nuzzled at her mother’s breast, stymied by her mother’s gown. “Patience, little one,” Fia said, moving to the chair she kept in the stillroom for just this reason. She quickly settled the bairn to her meal.

“‘Twould make a good name for our next one,” Kieron said as he settled onto the stone floor. Ranald and the new wee Fia immediately clambered over their uncle.

“What would?” Fia asked.

“Patience,” he said, a twinkle in his eye.

“Nay, ‘twould be too confusing since that is what I say to both of you all the time.”

“But patience is difficult for us MacAlisters,” he said, and she could tell he was trying his best to keep their secret. All at once the love she felt for him and the bairn they had made filled her heart to overflowing.

“You can tell them,” she said, laughing at the look of glee that swept over his beloved face.

Elena and Mairi were looking from one of them to the other. “Well?” Elena asked.

“We are having another bairn,” Fia and Kieron said together.

Elena and Mairi whooped so loud they startled the twins and the baby. Fia calmed Hope. Elena and Mairi each scooped up a twin, bouncing them on their hips to stop

their crying. Kieron rose from the floor and kissed his wife, and his bairn, and the joyful tears that seemed a constant in Fia's life of late once more trembled on her lashes. Fia could not imagine a better life, a better husband, or a better family, old and new, than she had.

"I think if 'tis a girl," Fia said to them all once the weans were quieted, "we should name her Joy."

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:02 am

The Devil of Kilmartin

Excerpt

Southwestern Highlands, Scotland

Spring 1307

Madness clawed at Symon MacLachlan's soul. He battled it back with every breath his burning lungs could steal. The skirl of a wounded animal burst from his parched lips. His horse broke into a gallop. Pain pounded through Symon's skull in time with the beat of the animal's hooves. His stomach lurched and dipped, threatening to empty itself. Purging, purifying wind battered his disloyal body and desperate mind.

Symon slowed the horse as he tried to grasp where he was. He glanced about at the moonlit forest searching for some clue as to why he was here. All of a sudden the trees around him bowed, as if in deference to his passing. His stomach roiled. He closed his eyes and willed the grove to right itself, willed the madness away. He swayed in the saddle and a low, feral, growl escaped him.

He would not let this blasted madness win!

Symon concentrated on the things he could feel — the warm, sweat-covered hide of the tired beast beneath him, the familiar texture of his plaid, bunched at his shoulder and about his waist, the chill wash of an early spring breeze against his fevered skin. He gathered his senses and slowly opened his eyes.

Blessedly, the trees were upright, their leaves rustling above where they belonged, silhouetted against the moon-bright sky.

It was a bloody awful way to live, never knowing when the madness would crash over him.

The horse stopped suddenly, nearly unseating him. It moved neither forward nor back, but rather danced nervously in place, shifting from one foot to another as if unsure which way to go. Symon nudged it forward, but it halted once more after only a few unwilling steps. Standing directly in their path was the dark outline of an ancient stone circle. His mount shied, snorting and shaking its head, as if denying the sight.

Symon calmed the animal, sharing its dislike for the silent, pensive circle, hunkered here at the edge of the glen. He wished to deny the sight as well. But that was impossible. He knew this cursed place. He knew the madness had led him back here.

The stones stood silently in their primeval ring as if standing in judgment of him. All the ills that had befallen his clan these past six months, even his own hated reputation, had started here, in this circle, on that fateful day of his father's death. Symon clenched his shaking hands. The past could not be changed.

But it could be faced.

It was madness to enter the circle again, but madness was his near-constant companion. What more harm could come from this place than the death of his father and the torment his life had become these past months? Symon would not let his weakness get in his way. Something had brought him here, and he was determined to face his fate. Perhaps then he would find a way free of his curse. If he did not, he would lose all that he had ever worked for in life: his position, his honor. It had already stolen his self-respect.

Symon slid from the horse. As he tied it to a tree, a hound bayed in the distance and was quickly answered by another, adding to the horse's already nervous shifting. It pulled at its lead, eyes wide, breath coming hard and fast.

"Shh," Symon said, grateful that his voice obeyed him. He scratched the horse's cheek for a moment, quieting the animal and himself.

Finally Symon took a deep breath and moved toward the accursed rocks, drawn by the circle as a lodestone draws iron. The hounds bayed again, the sound echoing off the stones, warning him away. The hair at the base of his neck prickled in response.

"'Tis only a ring of mighty rocks." The sound of his own voice, though gravelly as always after the madness, calmed him.

Determined to meet his fate, he strode between two of the tall rocky sentries and into the circle.

A bare pace within, he stopped.

Gone was the clear air of spring, nor was the remembered blood-stink of battle present in the circle. It was like walking into warm, thick water. Sounds were muffled and the smells of a moment ago, damp, boggy earth and sharp, dusty rock, were muted here, more like the memory of a smell than the actual smell itself.

Mist began to rise about his feet, swirling up from the ground, reaching out and embracing the huge moss- and lichen-clad stones. Damp wisps of reflected moonlight filled the gaps between them with a transparent wall of white moonglow.

Hounds bayed once again, closer, accompanied now by a long wailing cry. The stallion stamped the ground.

Symon remembered to breathe.

It was only a trick of the wind, that wailing. It was only the remnants of madness that made that wail sound human.

Symon rolled his shoulders, noting the weight of his claymore high against his back, and the lesser weight of his dudgeon dagger tucked at his belt. At least his affliction did not extend to leaving himself weaponless.

A branch cracked. Symon whirled in the direction of the noise. Something hurtled from the mist and threw itself at him, hitting hard enough to force the breath from him. He staggered and his arms encircled the all-too-solid form of a woman.

Long-fingered hands gripped his tunic. Leaf-tangled hair caught in the stubble on his chin even as a peacefulness he no longer believed possible washed over him. Calm, like a healing salve on weather-raw skin, pushed the lingering confusion and pain from him. He felt clear-headed, balanced, and strong as he hadn't since the madness had first come over him in this very place.

Hounds bayed just beyond the mist, and the stallion snorted its misgivings. The unearthly wailing sounded again, this time from just under his chin. The woman pushed away from him, stumbling when he released her.

Peace deserted him.

He reached for her again, grabbing a bony wrist. Peace stole up his arm and briefly fluttered in his chest. She tried to stumble backward, her eyes fixed over his shoulder.

"Help me, I beg of you!" Desperation at odds with the peace he felt colored her low voice.

His decision was made in an instant. He drew his dagger and spun in one smooth, practiced motion to face the direction she had come from.

Huge, gray wolfhounds strained at the edge of the mist-shrouded circle, slavering like the hounds of hell, but they did not enter. Symon heard scrabbling as the woman moved to the far side of the circle. There she could easily slip into the mist and away from the hounds while Symon held their attention.

The easiest thing would be to let the hounds continue their hunt, but Symon had never been one to take the easy road.

So he would dispatch the dogs, and the keeper he was sure followed them. He would dispatch them by word or by blade, it mattered not, and retrieve the woman himself. Then he would regain that momentary peace. A peace he was suddenly determined to have.

He sheathed his dagger and drew forth his claymore, feeling calmer with the massive sword in his hands. Any reprieve from his own private hell was worth a fight. Even a fight in this circle. Especially a fight in this circle.

He planted his feet, balancing his stance, his claymore at the ready. A muttered curse came out of the mist, quieting the dogs, and sending them skirting the edge of the circle. A shaggy-haired man stepped between the stones, his dagger glinting in the moonlight, his heavily bearded face cast in shadows.

"Where is she?" the stranger demanded.

The voice was almost familiar, teasing his memory as if he should know it.

Symon said nothing as he moved slowly toward the man.

"'Twas a lass ran this way. I will have her back."

Still Symon did not answer. Something about the rumble, the thick burr, not entirely of these parts, picked at him, but he couldn't call the memory forward.

"I saw her come this way." The other man's voice grew threatening. "The hounds tracked her. I'll have her back!"

Symon took in the man's stance, the way he shifted slightly foot to foot, his dagger hand swaying back and forth as if he was unsure which way Symon would come at him.

"Just point the way she went," the man said, "and I'll leave you be."

Symon took another step toward him. The stranger stepped back deeper into the shadows.

"I'm after the lass."

"You are on MacLachlan land. If you do not leave now, you will die on MacLachlan land."

"Where I die is between the devil and myself, you bloody bastard."

"As you wish," Symon said.