



A Fire Within ***These Highland Hills – Book 3***

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Perthshire, Scottish Highlands, May, 1568

Since she had grown from girlhood into a woman, many men had looked at Caitlin Campbell. None, though, had ever looked at her quite the way this man did. Yet, unlike the rest, his gaze wasn't filled with lust. His look went far deeper than that. Far deeper. As deep as her soul.

"He's a bold one, and no mistake," her cousin Janet Campbell muttered beside her as they walked that afternoon among the stalls of colorful wares and tantalizing foodstuffs on display at Dalmally's thrice weekly market. "Ye should find Jamie and set him on that cur. Jamie would soon have him on his knees, begging yer pardon."

For a fleeting instant, Caitlin considered then discarded that suggestion. From the looks of the dark-haired stranger, Jamie might well have his hands full attempting to bring that one to his knees.

He looked to be in his late twenties and was tall, broad of chest and shoulders. The bulk of his nondescript belted plaid did little to hide the fact he was powerfully built. His glittering blue eyes, as his gaze yet again boldly met hers, were alight with a dispassionate intelligence. An intelligence that was both chilling and, conversely, compelling.

Aye, Caitlin thought with a most unnerving thrill, Jamie would indeed have his hands full with that one. Besides, there was nothing served in starting a fight with a man solely because he chose to stare overlong at her. It wasn't the first time, after all, nor would it likely be the last.

With a final, derisive look in the tall Highlander's direction, she turned back to her cousin. "It matters not. He's hardly worth our concern. Why, he's likely just some broken man, if his threadbare plaid's any indication. And any man without a clan to call his own has problems enough."

“Aye, problems enough,” Janet said, “that mayhap he shouldn’t seek more by casting disrespectful glances at the local lasses. And, in the bargain, especially not at the clan chief’s sister.”

Caitlin laughed. “Well, he might not know that, might he?”

She drew up before a long table filled with fine woolen shawls, embroidered handkerchiefs, and sashes. “Now, let’s get back to the task at hand, shall we? I’ve a birthing day gift to buy. And we promised Jamie we’d not be at this all afternoon, like we were last time we came to market.”

Janet nodded. “Aye, I suppose ye’re right. Still, for all his dark, braw looks, I think that boorish stranger oversteps himself . . .”

Almost of its own volition, Caitlin’s gaze strayed in the direction the man had been. He was no longer staring at her but had turned his attention to another man who now stood beside him. Though tall himself, his compatriot was still half a head shorter. Red-blond of hair, he was slighter of build, with narrow shoulders and long, almost delicate fingers, and looked to be several years younger than his dark companion. Slung over one shoulder was a large leather bag that appeared to contain some triangle-shaped object.

Just then, the dark Highlander glanced her way. A piercing, steel blue gaze locked with hers. Caitlin inwardly cursed. Somehow, she had once again attracted the increasingly insufferable man’s notice.

She nearly looked away but knew it would be cowardly. It would also lead the chestnut-haired Highlander to imagine she had been intrigued by his earlier appraisal.

Instead, as if in warning, she scowled fiercely. He grinned in return.

Hot blood filled her cheeks. Why, the arrogant boor! How dare he! He was so far beneath her as to be a mere spider scuttling across the ground.

With a haughty flounce of her long, black hair, Caitlin wheeled around, grabbed the first colorful shawl that caught her eye, and pressed sufficient coin into the startled shopkeeper’s hand. “Wrap this if ye will,” she said. “It’s past time we were on our way.”

Five minutes later, the package tucked beneath her arm, Caitlin, with a bemused Janet scrambling behind her, made her way through the bustling throng of shoppers. They soon found Jamie snoring softly in the back of the small pony cart, one end of his dark blue, yellow, and green plaid slung over his face to shade his eyes. Janet shot Caitlin a mischievous glance, then grabbed the young man’s foot and gave it a tug.

“Wake up, ye lazy lad,” she cried. “M’lady Caitlin wishes to depart.”

With a snort, the robustly built Scotsman sat up and began trying to untangle his considerable bulk from the plaid that had somehow become twisted about him. Janet laughed, and even Caitlin couldn’t help a giggle. Finally, nearly as red in the face as the auburn locks that

tumbled to his shoulders, the young Highlander managed to extricate himself, tuck the remaining plaid left over from his kilt across his shoulder, and pin it in place.

“Ye could’ve given me some warning of yer return,” he groused. “I’d imagined ye’d be another hour or two, after all.”

“Och, dinna fash yerself,” Caitlin said by way of reassurance as she tossed her parcel beneath the pony cart’s seat. “We just finished early for a change. And, because of it, ye’re soon to be a free man, just as soon as we get . . .”

From around the village kirk, where Jamie had parked the cart, two tall men strode out, headed in their direction. Caitlin went still. It was the dark-haired man and his blond companion. What could they possibly want?

She looked to Janet, met her gaze. Her cousin opened her mouth to speak, but Caitlin gave her head a quick, warning shake. Janet’s mouth snapped shut.

Jamie returned from untying the pony from the tree where he had tethered it. When he finally caught sight of the two men bearing down on them, his kind, open expression didn’t change.

“Good day to ye,” the dark stranger said as he and his companion at last drew up before them. “I was told ye’re from Kilchurn. Are ye mayhap heading back that way?”

“Aye, that we are.” Jamie paused, too polite to prod with further questions.

“My friend and I wish to gain an audience with the Campbell. Might we accompany ye on the way?” Briefly, his gaze swept once again over Caitlin. “It’s a good hour’s journey, from what I’ve heard, and two more men along would offer additional protection from any outlaws or robbers.”

“As if any would dare attack the Campbell’s—”

A quick hand on the arm immediately silenced Janet.

Caitlin managed a smile as she then surreptitiously let her hand fall back to her side. “And what would be yer business with the Campbell? If ye don’t mind me asking, that is.”

Glittering eyes the color of blue silver captured hers. “Nay, I don’t mind ye asking. My friend here is a traveling bard. He thought yer chief might enjoy some song and story this night. Unless he already has a bard of his own.”

“Alas, he no longer does. Arthur Mackenzies died barely a year ago, and the Campbell has yet to find a suitable replacement. He’d likely be verra pleased to offer yer friend the hospitality of his home.” Caitlin paused and cocked her head. “But what of ye? Yer friend’s worth is apparent. What do ye have to offer the Campbell?”

Something hard and cold flashed in the tall Highlander's eyes, then just as quickly disappeared. He chuckled and gestured to the claymore, a sword as long as a man was tall, that he wore fastened to his back.

"Naught, save that I go where my friend does, providing companionship as well as protection. Bards aren't generally given to swordplay, whereas I am. Besides, the harp he carries is verra finely wrought and, hence, verra valuable."

Caitlin eyed the claymore. In times such as these, his claim to serving as an armed escort rang true. Still, there was something about him that didn't set well with her. Indeed, there was something about the dark-haired man that both attracted *and* repelled her.

Gazing up into his mesmerizing eyes, Caitlin felt like a moth drawn to a flame. A flame that possessed a promise of sanctuary and warmth, yet at the same time threatened danger.

And well it should, she fiercely reminded herself. She had known such men before—men undeniably attractive in a dark, rugged, roguish sort of way. Men who, unfortunately for any lass who fell prey to their masculine charms, knew well how to use that power over a woman. There was little honor to be found, however, in such men. If Caitlin had learned anything in the past year, she had learned that well—*painfully* well.

"Ye look able enough indeed to provide protection," she said at last, belatedly coming to the realization that everyone was waiting for her to reply. "And I suppose there's naught wrong with permitting ye and yer friend to accompany us. It'd be the hospitable thing to do, ye being strangers to Campbell lands."

The dark man exchanged a glance with his friend then, turning back to Caitlin, nodded. "Aye, that we are. Strangers to Campbell lands."

He extended his hand. "My friend's name is Kenneth Buchanan, and mine's Darach MacFarlane. Friends call me Dar. And the rest either grant me a wide berth or don't live long enough to call me aught."

Of a sudden, he grinned, and the change was devastating. It was as if the sun, which heretofore had been muted, had burst into brilliant radiance. Caitlin's pulse gave a great lurch, then quickened. It took all the willpower she possessed to grasp his hand for a quick shake.

"Well, Darach MacFarlane, my name's Caitlin Campbell, and Janet and Jamie Campbell are my friends," she forced herself to say before releasing his hand.

Turning, she made her way to the front seat of the pony cart. "Still, since I've just barely met ye, I can hardly call us friends. I'm hoping, though," she said as she settled herself on the seat, then shot a quick glance over her shoulder, "one way or another, we'll never be enemies."

"That'd be my desire as well, lass." His firm, well-molded lips quirked up at one corner. "Indeed, my most *fervent* desire."



She was a bonny lass, and no mistake, Darach thought as they walked along on one side of the pony cart. A lass who would drive most men to distraction, sending their thoughts careening off in wild, illogically hopeful directions. Directions that, ultimately, were doomed to humbling rejection and disappointment. Most men . . . but not him.

Indeed, a passionate tumble with the ebony-haired beauty with the blue-green eyes was the furthest thing from Darach's mind. He wasn't on his way to Kilchurn to seduce the local lasses or provide Niall Campbell and his ilk a pleasant interlude of story and song, even though, of necessity, such was the guise under which he must travel in order to infiltrate the stony fortress's defenses. Infiltrate and rescue his older brother from the depths of the Campbell's dungeons.

It didn't matter if Athe was innocent or guilty of the charges brought against him. It never had. Even now, Dar, who at the time hadn't been anywhere in the vicinity of the incident that had been the MacNaghtens' final undoing, wasn't certain who had truly instigated the brutal slaughter. All he knew was his father, brother, and other clansmen had managed to kill a much larger force of MacNabs in their own Hall during a feast. Killed them and now, almost a year and a half later, were still paying a horrible price.

Thanks to the act of proscription placed on them because of that fateful night, all MacNaghtens, be they man, woman, or child, were now hunted criminals. On pain of death, MacNaghtens were forbidden to wear their distinctive clan tartan or use their clan name, and must assume the name of another clan. Their lands had been seized, their weapons confiscated, and no other clan could take them in or associate with them.

Blessedly, there *were* a few clans still willing to offer them food and shelter, and to permit them to use their own clan name. The Buchanans and MacFarlanes were two of them.

Nonetheless, it stuck in Dar's craw every time he was forced to claim to be what he wasn't. Stuck in his craw to shame himself and the MacNaghtens by cowardly hiding behind the guise of another clan and its name. Stuck in his craw and burrowed deep in his soul, fueling a bitter rage against any and every man remotely responsible for the persecution that, in due course, was intended to wipe Clan MacNaghten from the face of the earth.

Niall Campbell was part and parcel of the travesty. It had been his men, after all, who had hunted down Athe in Hell's Glen, a rocky, narrow stretch of valley deep in Campbell lands between the towering peaks of Stob an Eas and Cruach nam Mult. It had been Campbell men who had brought him back to molder in Kilchurn's dungeon while awaiting sentencing and execution.

It mattered not that Niall Campbell was of the Breadalbane Campbells, a separate house of Clan Campbell, and that it had been the Argyll Campbells who had actively sought the act of proscription from the Scottish Crown. He had willingly enough joined forces when the proscription had been signed. He had willingly enough turned his back on Clan MacNaghten.

Still, Athe's rescue would be very difficult. Niall Campbell was no fool. Athe was most certainly heavily guarded, and Kilchurn was a well-fortified castle.

A frontal and far more honorable attack was impossible. Clan MacNaghten, like most of the neighboring clans, was no match for the might of even the Breadalbane Campbells. And any who dared attack Breadalbane would soon have Argyll to deal with as well.

Subterfuge and deceit were the only true weapons Dar possessed. But then, it was all any of his clan had left. There was no honor left them—the proscription had stripped that away just as surely as it had robbed them of their name, lands, and even their lives. There were no rules anymore save to win at all costs.

It was a dirty, despicable mess, to say the least, but whenever had condemned men had any options? And if innocents must suffer in the doing, Dar thought, his gaze turning to ice as the white stone towers of Kilchurn Castle finally came into view, it was no better or worse than what Clan MacNaghten had already and would continue to suffer.



It wasn't long into their trek home when Caitlin noticed the bard beginning to limp slightly. By the time they topped the final hill separating them from first view of Kilchurn, the man's steps were heavy, and he had moved close to the cart to grip its edge for support. She finally turned to Jamie, who sat between her and Janet.

"Pull up on the pony. Stop the cart."

Jamie did so immediately. "Aye? And what are ye needing?"

Caitlin glanced back at Kenneth. "Climb in. Whatever's wrong with ye, I cannot bear to watch yer pain a moment longer."

The bard shook his head. "It's naught, lass. I but stepped on a thorn last eve, and it festers a bit."

"Then more the reason to spare yer foot and not aggravate it further." She indicated the bed of the cart. "When we reach Kilchurn, I'll see to yer wound. I'm a healer, ye know."

"Nay, I didn't know that." Kenneth managed a wan smile, then looked to his companion.

The dark Highlander hesitated, then nodded. "Best ye do as she asks, lad. We'll need ye fit and hearty before we must next resume our journey."

He's the leader of the two, Caitlin thought as she watched Kenneth climb gingerly into the cart and settle himself. Not that the realization was especially surprising. Beneath Darach MacFarlane's affable if taciturn demeanor, there ran a vein of cold, hard resolve. She only wondered what he was so grimly resolute about.

Some instinct warned her that MacFarlane was a man on a mission. Problem was, the fulfillment of that mission might have unpleasant consequences for any who dared stand in his way. Yet he seemed to bear them no enmity. She supposed she should be grateful for that.

Several farm carts loaded with firewood clogged the road leading to Kilchurn's gate. The oxen pulling the wagons were notoriously slow as they traversed the slender spit of land now connecting the shore to the former island whereon the castle stood. At long last, though, they entered the outer courtyard and drew up in the south corner near the kitchen. Even as Jamie drove the pony cart into the yard, several clansmen had arrived to help unload and stack the wood near the kitchen door.

"Pull up as close to the main entrance of the keep as ye can," Caitlin instructed Jamie. "There are several empty rooms available below stairs in the servants' quarters. Janet and I can put the pony and cart away while ye and Darach carry Kenneth to one of them. I'll find ye there, just as soon as we finish and I fetch my bag of herbs and salves."

"That won't be necessary, lass," Dar was quick to say. "We needn't be imposing on ye and yer time. I can see to Kenneth's foot well enough, I'd wager."

"It's no imposition, just simple hospitality," Caitlin replied as Jamie halted the cart before the main entrance and she climbed out. "Besides, the Campbell might well be interested in having Kenneth do some harping this verra eve. The sooner we've a bard whose foot is beginning to heal, the better."

"As ye wish, lass," the big Highlander said with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "I yield to yer far better plan."

Jamie choked back a laugh. "Ye're a fast learner, laddie. She'll have her way sooner or later, at any rate."

Dar smirked. "A masterful woman, is she?"

"And why not?" Janet chose that moment to interject. "She is, after all, the Campbell's—"

"Enough, Janet." Some instinct warned Caitlin not to reveal just yet who she really was. Perhaps she was being overly wary, but something about the two strangers urged her to caution.

She took her cousin by the arm and began tugging her along. "We've chores aplenty to see to, and no time to waste on further yammering. We'll leave that, instead, to these men."

"He's verra full of himself," Janet muttered once they were out of earshot and headed into the keep. "I can't say as I care much for him."

"Aye, and ye've made that most apparent from the first moment ye saw him."

"And ye *do* care for him?" Her eyes wide with disbelief, Caitlin's compatriot halted and turned to face her. "After what David Graham did to ye, I'd have thought yer tastes had taken a turn for the better. But if ye now find that vagabond appealing—"

"He's verra braw." With an exasperated roll of her eyes, Caitlin cut her cousin off. "But just because I can admire a fine piece of man flesh doesn't mean it goes any further. I'm well aware that pretty faces and forms oft hide empty heads and hard, scheming hearts."

“Besides,” she added as she took Janet’s hand and again tugged her forward, “whatever does it matter what either of us thinks, one way or another? I’d wager Darach MacFarlane and his friend will be gone within the week.”

“Then ye’d better see to young Kenneth’s foot posthaste,” Janet said, beginning to climb the stairs leading to the second floor bedchambers. “The sooner he’s healed, the sooner we’re well rid of them.”

Aye, that we are, Caitlin thought as her cousin entered her own bedchamber and she continued down the long stone corridor. *Well rid of them, indeed.*

For already, in spite of common sense and painful experience, every time she looked at Darach MacFarlane, Caitlin’s thoughts turned to what it would be like to melt into the powerful circle of his arms and kiss those full, firm, and most sensual of lips. Thoughts she had resolved never, ever to contemplate—much less allow to become reality—again.



“Have a care with that one, Dar, or yer propensity for a comely lass will again get ye into serious trouble,” Kenneth pleaded once Jamie had taken them to a spare chamber in the dark labyrinth below ground and departed. “The task before us is difficult enough without ye complicating it by coupling with one of the Campbell’s servants.”

As he closed the thick oak door and latched it shut, Dar gave a disparaging snort. “And do ye think me so lust-driven that I’d let a bonny lass—and truth be told, that blue-eyed beauty is one of the bonniest I’ve ever laid eyes on—endanger our mission to free Athe? Hardly.”

He turned and strode over to the simple, straw-stuffed mattress he and Jamie had deposited Kenneth upon. “If the opportunity arises for a quick tryst in some private corner or leaf-shaded bower, then I’ll be the first to seize it. But aside from such a fortuitous occurrence, her only value is to provide us with whatever information might help us gain access to the dungeon and the keys to Athe’s cell.”

Kenneth settled back on his bed and sighed. “I’d hoped ye’d see it that way. Ye’ve always been a generally sensible sort, but the way ye were looking at her . . . well, I haven’t seen ye look at a lass like that in a verra long time.”

“I can admire an especially comely female, can’t I?” Dar grinned. “Tell me true. Can ye claim ye didn’t find Caitlin the bonniest lass ye’ve ever seen?”

“She’s verra bonny. I just don’t see how it’s the time or place to be paying *any* lass much attention, that’s all.”

Kenneth leaned down and pulled his clarsach from its leather bag. With a gentle, loving touch, he stroked the tautly strung wire strings.

“Now, this harp . . . I confess I can hardly keep my hands or eyes off it for verra long. But then, it’ll never betray me, or toss me aside for another, or break my heart.”

“Fine. Fine,” Dar muttered in disgust. “Ye’re right. It’s past time we drop the matter entirely. Once ye begin spouting honeyed words about yer harp, trying to discuss women with ye is already a lost cause .”

As clear, ringing notes began to rise from the bronze strings, Dar strode over to his own bed, dropped his traveling bag beside it, and lay down. Beneath the woolen blanket, the mattress gave a little atop its rope supports, but the wooden frame was sturdy and easily supported his weight. Pillowing his arms behind his head, the big Highlander settled back and closed his eyes.

There wouldn’t be much time for rest, he wagered, before Caitlin arrived to treat Kenneth’s foot. Still, after a journey that had begun before dawn, with a day that was now fast fading to sunset, even a brief respite was welcome. He needed time to sort through the myriad options that now presented themselves, ensconced as they finally were in Kilchurn Castle.

In the end, all the decisions that mattered were up to him. Kenneth was as brave and loyal as they came, but he lacked the head for complex strategies. His value in this adventure was to serve as a plausible reason to get into Kilchurn, and then as a distraction while Dar freed Athe from his prison cell. Each man, however, was vital to this plan, and Dar gave his cousin his due.

He wondered if Caitlin might be of any use in this undertaking. She claimed to be a healer. As such, she surely moved about the castle freely and had the trust of all. He’d have to tread carefully with her, though, in attempting to extract information and access to places he would never easily be able to visit himself. She was clever and quick. He had ascertained that pretty much from the start.

There was just something in those striking, turquoise blue eyes that bespoke a keen intelligence overlaid with a natural wariness. Caitlin wasn’t a woman easily misled, and it was already apparent she didn’t suffer fools easily. It was also quite evident she didn’t trust him.

Not that her suspicion disturbed Dar in the least. He had charmed women far more worldly and jaded. And Caitlin Campbell, for all her bold words and apparent confidence, was still a maiden in every sense of the word. No man of any experience could’ve missed the truth in her eyes whenever their gazes met.

Still, on further consideration, her lack of experience could well play to his advantage. Dar also knew when a woman was attracted to him, and Caitlin didn’t hide that attraction as successfully as she might have imagined. All he had to do was woo her a bit, and she would be his. With Kenneth sure to be laid up with his infected foot for at least several days, Dar now had sufficient excuse and opportunity to remain at Kilchurn.

Sufficient excuse and opportunity, as well, to lay siege to a black-haired beauty’s heart. Once he had scaled that wall, he would use her to gain access to the information he needed to free his brother. It might not be honest or honorable, but such fine aspirations had died with the act of proscription against the MacNaghtens.

Dar’s mouth quirked in black humor. If the truth were told, for him at least, such fine aspirations had died long before the act of proscription. Died when his father had refused to believe his claims of innocence and banished him from the clan, cast him out to roam the Highlands as a broken man.

It was the greatest of all ironies. An outlaw, a broken man, was now the last hope of Clan MacNaghten. Indeed, if his father had lived, he most likely would've refused Dar's aid. But his obstinate, unyielding sire hadn't survived the brutal night that had brought their clan at last to its inevitable downfall. And, like it or not, there wasn't anyone left who possessed even the remotest chance of saving his father's favorite son.

No one, save the other son. The one who had been a never-ending source of disappointment and despair.

No one, save Dar.

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