



## **Child of the Mist** ***These Highland Hills – Book 1***

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### **April, 1564    Castle Gregor, Western Perthshire, Scotland**

Anne MacGregor paused on the castle parapet walk, gathering her long woman's plaid about her. Swirling vapors blanketed the winter-browned land, filling the low hollows and rills, curling restlessly about the trees to spread ever onward in an eerie sea of fog. She smiled and turned to the man beside her.

“Fortunately, the mists are heavy this day. It'll cover our going and, hopefully, my return as well.” Anne motioned toward the stout rope dangling over the side. “Come, Donald. Lead on.”

Wordlessly, the young, shabbily clad Scotsman scrambled over and down the wall, then held the rope taut as Anne nimbly followed. They hurried into the enshrouding whiteness. Until they were well out of earshot of the clansmen walking guard on the fortress battlements, their journey was swift and silent.

Grasping his long, gnarled walking stick, Donald plowed through the dense mists as if he saw through them, his steps sure and bold from years of traversing the beloved terrain. Anne, not quite so certain, kept close company, her large leather bag of herb powders, potions, and salves clutched tightly at her side. Clan MacGregor might be nicknamed the “Children of the Mist”, but one false step in the frequently impenetrable whiteness could still be dangerous, if not actually fatal.

Her thoughts raced ahead, planning the childbirth preparations. It was Fiona's first, and Donald's young wife was frightened half to death. Only the promise Anne would attend her had calmed the girl's fears.

Though barely eighteen, Anne MacGregor was already renowned for her skills in the healing arts. Both noble and poor alike called for her in their hour of need and, unstintingly, she gave to one and all. *Aye, one and all*, Anne mused with a fleeting twinge of pain, *and still the cruel tales about me persist*.

“I'm grateful, ma'am.” Donald slowed his steps to hers. “I know yer father forbade ye to leave the castle. If it wasn't my Fiona's time, I'd have never asked . . .”

A pang of guilt shot through Anne. Alastair MacGregor, clan chief and doting sire, had always given her free rein. Still, though she well understood his motives for now forbidding her to leave the castle, it couldn't be helped. At least not this time.

She had made a vow to Fiona long before the cattle raids had started up again, and was honor bound to keep it. The word of a MacGregor was sacred. Marauding Campbell reivers or no, she'd see it through. Her father would understand, if there were ever need to tell him.

Anne smiled up at her companion. “Dinna fash yerself, my friend. It isn't yer fault the savage Campbells roam our lands. Life must go on in spite of them, though I fear they'll never let up until they've stolen every bit of MacGregor holdings—the thieving, heartless knaves!”

“Knaves?” Donald's lips twitched. “Och, that's too kind a word for the likes of them. And most especially for that young Campbell heir.” He shot her a worried glance. “I only wish ye'd worn yer short sword. A bodice knife is nigh useless against an armed warrior. And they don't call him the Wolf of Cruachan without reason. Why, he's the most bloodthirsty, murderous—”

“Don't speak of him!” A sudden chill coursed through Anne. Instinctively, she touched the small, sheathed dagger nestled between her breasts. It was enough to be out, virtually defenseless in such dangerous times, without having Donald dwell on the most feared Campbell of all.

Her pace quickened. “Time's short and Fiona needs us. We've more important things to concern us than some churlish Campbells. Besides, they haven't raided MacGregor lands in over a fortnight. Surely we've naught to fear on such an early morn.”

“Aye, ma'am.” Her sturdy companion glanced uneasily about him. “As ye say. There's naught to fear.”

#

“That's it. That's my girl,” Anne said, gripping Fiona's hand in hers. “Ye're a braw, braw lassie and will soon have yer sweet babe. Are the pains still strong? Then take a breath and push again.”

Fiona glanced up, a weak, trusting smile lighting her face. “Aye. A sweet babe,” she whispered. Then, tensing, she bore down with all her might. The contractions soon passed and she fell back, exhausted.

Anne lifted a cup to the girl's lips. “Drink a bit more, lassie. The raspberry leaf tea will hasten yer birthing.”

The brew was obediently sipped before Fiona fell into a deep slumber. It wouldn't be long before the next pains came, Anne knew, but until then rest was the best thing for a laboring mother.

She looked about her. It was long past darkness, the day having come and gone. She hunched her shoulders in an effort to ease the ache of hours spent crouched beside Fiona, then tucked an errant strand of russet-colored hair behind her ear. Glancing down at the young peasant woman, she sighed. Dear, frightened, trusting Fiona.

Wearily, she scanned the shabby little croft house. Despite Fiona's untiring efforts, the thatch-and-clay dwelling was little more than a hovel. *What a life to bring a wee babe into. The only bed a mound of peat covered with a coarse blanket, the air so smoke-laden one can hardly draw a breath without choking.*

*If only there were more we could do for our people.* The thought stirred anew the old, angry frustration. Her father tried, but the years of endless feuding had worn him down. The MacGregors were no match for the cursed Campbells—never had been—and still their enemies persisted.

Her hands balled into tight little fists. Would they never cease until they had stolen all her clan possessed? If there were but a way to stop them . . .

Fiona stirred, a sleepy grimace twisting her face. *The pains, Anne thought. They come again.*

A damp blast of air swirled through the tiny cottage. She glanced up. Donald walked in, his arms laden with squares of dried peat to stoke the small hearth fire. At that instant Fiona moaned, her eyes snapping open in sudden anguish.

“Blessed Saints! I . . . I . . . The babe!”

Anne scooted down to check her, then looked up at Donald. “It's time. Come. Help me.”

She motioned toward Fiona's head. “Hold her, talk to her while I—”

A scream of terror, followed immediately by others, pierced the night air. Rough, angry voices mingled with frantic cries. The staccato rhythm of hoof beats pounded through the village. A hoarse shout of “Cruachan!” rose from the tumult of noise, slicing through the thin walls to the three people within.

At the dreaded war cry, Anne and Donald's gazes met. The Campbells were back and raiding the village.

Donald rose. “I must help defend our people.”

“And what good would it do?” Anne bluntly demanded. “If they mean to murder us, we've no chance. Mayhap they'll be satisfied with the animals. Stay, Donald. No matter what happens, ye're more use here than outside.”

Indecision flickered in the young peasant's eyes, then he sighed his acquiescence. “Ye're right. If I'm to die, I first want to see my wee one.”

The minutes passed as they worked, Donald encouraging his wife while Anne struggled with the slowly emerging infant. Her heart leaped to her throat when the head appeared, the cord tight about the neck. It was vital the babe be free of the choking noose as quickly as possible, but nothing Anne did hastened the emergence of the shoulders, which suddenly seemed too large for easy passage.

Sweat beaded her brow as she struggled with the difficult birth, praying to God to help her as she encouraged the straining mother. At last the shoulders slipped free. The babe was born.

The tiny girl child lay there, unmoving, her body blue and lifeless. Frantically, Anne worked to tie and cut the cord, then gently rubbed the infant dry. The babe remained silent.

Anne's gaze lifted to the two anxious parents. "I . . . I can't . . ." She stopped, mesmerized by their pleading expressions. She was all they had.

In an instant slowed in time Anne harked back to the day Fiona had first revealed her pregnancy, of the look of joy and anticipation on the young woman's face, of her eager plans. They had so little, Fiona and Donald, but they were rich in generosity and love. Of that, they had an abundance, for each other and for their babe.

She had to do something.

Anne turned back to the limp little form. Her gaze scanned the tiny, perfectly shaped girl. *Dear Lord Jesus*, she silently implored. *Help me. I beg ye. Show me what to do.*

Anne leaned closer, her own breath wafting over the babe. A sudden impulse filled her. Dared she share the life-sustaining air from her own body? Dare she even try? Yet, dare she not?

She lifted the little girl and, as if compelled by some force beyond her, settled her mouth over that of the baby. Tentatively at first, then more confidently when she saw the tiny chest rise with each breath, she blew small puffs into the infant. At first nothing happened, the only sound her own panting breaths mingling with the ragged rasps of the two parents. Then, after what seemed an eternity, the babe gasped, then choked, uttering a strangled cry.

The sound, weak at first, grew in strength until it filled the small croft house. And with each shuddering, indignant little breath, the joy, the immense satisfaction, grew within Anne. She lifted her gaze to Fiona and Donald, eager to share their happiness. But their glances, bright with terror, were no longer directed at her.

Anne whirled, steeling herself for the sight she knew must lie behind her. She could never have prepared herself, however, for the look of unmitigated revulsion on the face of the tartan-clad man standing in the doorway. Gleaming with a half-mad light, he riveted the full force of his stare upon her.

#

"Witch! Vile, devil-worshipping witch!"

The man with the crazed eyes shoved Anne forward, sending her sprawling in the dirt outside the croft house. She tried climbing to her feet but, with her hands now bound behind her and the hindrance of her long skirt, she slipped and fell again. Her thick hair tumbled loose, falling about her face and into her eyes.

Anne fought to catch her breath. The nightmare dogging all her waking moments had finally come to pass. The vicious rumors, the unkind tales about her healing skills, had found her at last.

She was to die—condemned as a witch.

Flinging back her hair, she stared up into a dozen hostile, torch-lit faces. Campbell men. Anne's breath caught in her throat. In their eyes gleamed superstitious fear—and an absolute certainty of death.

The injustice of it all welled up within her, mingling with her fierce MacGregor pride. From somewhere, from some place buried deep within, a blazing anger burst forth.

Anne glared at them, and for an instant she thought she saw the raiders quail. Good. If they feared her for the powers they imagined she possessed, so be it. She had naught to lose.

“Be gone, ye cowardly, thieving knaves!”

She climbed to her feet, noting, from the corner of her eye, a large form—another Campbell?—edge into her line of vision. It was of little concern, one man more or less. She turned the full force of her gaze on the clansmen already facing her.

Anne threw back her shoulders and stood there, defiantly proud. “Ye trespass at yer risk, for this village is mine. Do ye imagine binding my hands will save ye? Think again, Campbells, fools and cowards that ye be!”

A low, angry growl rumbled through the men. Anne knew she had stung their fierce Highland pride by questioning their courage. She also knew she was playing a dangerous game threatening them with powers she didn't possess. Their affronted dignity might yet override their fear of witches, inciting them to attack her in a mindless rage. Yet if the man with the crazed eyes was their leader, she was already as good as dead.

“Come forward, any who dare face me,” she cried. “I grow impatient with yer girlish fears.” Slowly, she surveyed each man. “Och now, my wee laddies, won't even one of ye step forward?”

The Campbell with the strange look in his eyes made a hesitant movement in her direction. He withdrew his sword from its scabbard. All gazes, Anne's included, turned to him.

“Aye?” Her hands clenched until her nails scored her palms, but she managed to maintain her air of feigned indifference. “And what does this wee bairn think he can do against me?” She laughed. “Is he the best of ye then?”

The man leaped forward, his eyes blazing with an insane rage. Before Anne could dodge him he was upon her, roughly grabbing her by the hair to force her to her knees, his sword hand arcing high above his head.

*Och, sweet Jesus, I'm going to die!* Anguish squeezed her heart. Nevermore to see the beloved heath bloom on the hills. Nevermore to gaze upon the snow-capped peaks of MacGregor land. Nevermore to feel the warmth of her father's arms . . .

“Enough, Hugh!” a deep-timbred voice cut through the air.

The man hesitated, his hand twisting painfully in Anne's hair. For an instant, she thought he'd strike her anyway. Then slowly, blessedly, his grip loosened. With one last, vicious kick that sent her sprawling into the dirt, he stepped away. She heard the rasp of metal as he resheathed his sword, then the tread of another's footsteps moving toward her.

Anne struggled to rise, but the sharp pain in her side kept her gasping on her knees. Tossing the hair from her eyes, she satisfied herself with gazing up at the two men now standing before her.

His hand still gripping his sword hilt, Hugh glared at another tall Campbell, also wrapped in a belted plaid. The bulk of the fabric, forming both kilt and mantle, only added to the other man's imposing size and aura of power. As Anne's glance scathingly raked over him, a realization flashed through her. *He* was the raiding party's leader.

He looked to be in his early thirties, with thick, gleaming black hair that just grazed his shoulders. His nose was straight, his jaw square and stubborn, and his full, firm lips had a cynical twist as he quietly listened to his compatriot's rantings. His eyes, when his glance briefly followed Hugh's gesture in her direction, flashed tawny-brown, intense, and coldly assessing.

Once more, anger filled her. The villain, the rogue! How dare he look at her as if she were some piece of vermin, because he was Campbell and she MacGregor! She opened her mouth to berate him, then thought better of it.

“My orders haven't changed,” he was calmly saying. “No MacGregor will suffer unless they raise a hand against us. We came for their livestock and naught more.”

“And ye're a fool if ye let this witch live,” Hugh spat, drawing near so none but the three of them could hear. “Ye know the law demands her death. Will ye go against it?”

“Hold yer tongue, man!” His leader's voice slashed through the air. “Ye cut close in calling me a fool. Cousin or no, if ye utter one word more—”

At the ominous tone, the color drained from Hugh's face. “I-I meant no offense.” He began to back away. “Do what ye want with the witch. It's on yer soul, not mine.”

The dark-haired leader watched him go, then turned to where Anne was still kneeling on the ground. He pulled her to her feet.

For a long moment they faced each other. His cool gaze seemed not to miss anything, from her tousled hair and defiant stare, to the torn and dirty dress. A strange, indefinable light flickered momentarily in the brown depths, then died.

His hand moved to her breasts. For the space of a sharply inhaled breath, Anne thought he meant to ravish her right there before his men. Then he withdrew her bodice knife.

“Turn. Give me yer hands.”

The order was brusque, emotionless. Anne obeyed. It wasn't the time to argue or curse him for being a Campbell. She had barely escaped death, and the tone of his voice warned that his patience had worn thin. Cold metal touched her as he cut through her bonds. Then she was free.

Anne glanced down to rub her hands. “I'll not be thanking the likes of ye, for it'll never make up for what ye've done here.” She looked up at him. “Nonetheless, I owe ye a debt.”

His mouth quirked. “A debt? Between Campbell and MacGregor? I think not, lassie. There can never be aught between us but the deepest enmity.”

He flipped the knife in his hand and offered it back to her, handle first. Wordlessly, she accepted it, then watched him turn and walk away. His long, muscular legs, bare beneath his kilt, swiftly carried him to the black stallion waiting nearby. In one, agile leap he mounted, then reined his horse about to look at her.

“Though I admire yer spirit, ye're an impertinent, foolish wench to taunt my men. Mark me well. I didn't spare ye because I feared ye, for I don't believe in witches. But if our paths ever cross again, think twice before opening yer mouth. We Campbells don't take kindly to disrespect—especially from MacGregors.”

With a wave of his hand, he signaled his men forward. Out of the village they rode, driving the stolen MacGregor stock before them.

Her knife still clasped in her hand Anne watched them go, filled with such a powerful yet helpless rage that she momentarily forgot everything she had ever learned at her mother's knees of Christian love and forgiveness. *Curse ye foul Campbells! Curse yer thieving, heartless ways!* she silently screamed at their retreating backs. *And, most of all, curse the dark, arrogant man who leads ye!*

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Alastair MacGregor reread the missive one last time, then crushed it in his fist and threw it onto the fire. Recalling the scribbled words, a fierce emotion flared in his breast. Was it possible? Dare he hope for a way to end the feud before MacGregor pride was irretrievably broken, ground into dust beneath Campbell heels?

Yet as dearly as he yearned for peace, dared he believe, dared he trust, the man whom he awaited even now—a hated Campbell, assured, just this once, safe passage through Castle Gregor? How

could anyone trust a clan that so blithely instigated a vicious feud during the happy occasion of a marriage feast, refusing to see any side but their own?

He shook his head despairingly. Nay, it wasn't likely any good would come of this night's meeting, yet what else—

A fist rapped at the door. MacGregor wheeled about, paused to stare at the portal, then, squaring his shoulders, strode resolutely toward it. A man, shrouded in a rain-soaked MacGregor tartan, was shown in.

Alastair shut the door and bolted it behind him. He walked to a small table that held a whiskey decanter and several cups, then glanced over his shoulder. “Do ye fancy a dram of the potents to chase the chill from yer bones?”

“Aye, that I do.”

He poured a liberal dose into two cups, then as an afterthought sweetened his with a splash more. Tonight of all nights, he'd need every bit of courage he could muster.

The two men sipped their drinks silently, allowing Alastair a moment more to assess his visitor. The MacGregor tartan had been his idea. He wanted no one to suspect what was afoot. His guest's face, however, was difficult to make out. Despite the fire's warmth, the man seemed reluctant to remove the plaid from his head and shoulders.

*He doesn't wish his identity known .*

The realization sent an inexplicable chill down Alastair's spine. He was a cool one, and no mistake. Whatever he was up to, the man didn't care to be implicated.

Suddenly, MacGregor wanted this night's meeting done with as quickly as possible. He cleared his throat. “Yer letter spoke of an offer. A plan to end the feuding between Clan Campbell and the Children of the Mist. What exactly might that be?”

“The Campbell's ailing and won't last the summer. With a new chief comes new policies—and an end to the feud.”

“And do I look that big a fool? Niall Campbell will never end a feud his father began. If ye've come to offer me hope the Wolf will go against his sire, ye can leave the way ye came and be making it quick!”

“And who was saying Niall Campbell will be the next chief?”

Alastair tilted his head to study the man before him. “He's tanist and the chosen successor. Short of an untimely death . . .”

Teeth gleamed in the mantle's shadow. “Aye, an untimely death. Niall leads many raids on yer lands. If ye were to know in advance when and where he'd strike, ye could set yer own men



there. Niall's band is always small. Outnumber them and ye could kill them all—Niall included. Then the Campbell would be forced to choose a new chief.”

“And who might that be?”

“Someone sure to see my way of things.”

There was a finality in the man's voice that brooked no further discussion. Alastair decided not to pursue it. It didn't matter anyway. Any choice but the Wolf of Cruachan was bound to be an improvement. But what if the offer led MacGregors into a trap?

“Why should I trust ye?” He strode back to the whiskey table and poured them both another dram. “What assurance do I have ye'll not betray me and mine?” He returned and handed the visitor his cup.

The man shrugged. “My word. The word of a Campbell, to be sure, but then, what's there to lose? If I fail ye, are ye any worse than ye were before? Take it or leave it.”

MacGregor emptied his cup. The fiery liquid seared a hot trail down his throat, spreading rippling fingers of warmth throughout his chest. It calmed him a bit, allowing him the opportunity to sort through his jumbled thoughts.

*Take it or leave it.* Had it come to this then, when a MacGregor was forced to accept whatever leavings a Campbell threw his way? Ah, what a bitter draught to swallow! Yet swallow it he must if his clan were to survive. *One thing is for certain*, Alastair vowed with a fierce determination. *Before I'm done with him, Niall Campbell will rue his birthing day.*

He sighed. “Tell me when the Wolf plans his next raid. As ye said, any chief would be better than he. Help me capture him, and yer troubles will be over.”

“I want him dead, MacGregor.”

Alastair's bitter laugh cut through the air. “Och, he'll die, and no mistake. Just how and when I leave to my own pleasure.”

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