

Acelin

Acelin finally stopped running. He had been running for miles—through the forest, up hills and down valleys, through the meadows and around the glens. The early spring air was still cold this early in the morning and the mist was just lifting over the hills. Acelin needed to clear his mind and do some serious thinking. He leaned down, with his hands on his knees, bracing himself. His breath coming fast and deep. His legs were shaking with the strain. He thought back to the night over a year ago, when he had gone to the wedding celebration of Colleen and Rolland. He had already become friends with some of the six lairds who ruled most of Ireland. Wolf had visited the abbey often and had brought Amanda, Hope, Kelly and Maria with him a few times. Along with Colleen, these five women were healers handpicked by the five lairds to train with Amanda.

Amanda was Wolf's wife and the king's goddaughter. She was teaching the other four girls skills needed to become the most up to date healers. They would return to their clans after six months of training. The king had hopes this would help bring peace, not only between the clans, but between England and Ireland.

The abbey was two days' ride from each clan. It was called the four crossings, as each clan would go their separate ways from the abbey to get to their own lands. The king had built a hospital off the abbey and Acelin lived there. Acelin was handpicked and brought from France to instruct the five healers in minor surgery.

Fourteen Months Earlier

Rolland was holding a second wedding ceremony so Colleen could have her big wedding with all her friends in attendance. Acelin remembered how he had asked to come along so he could get to know the women he would be instructing in surgery.

Wolf picked him up, along with Father Dominic, the head priest. He could hear the girls laughing in the coach. Wolf insisted they ride into the McDonald keep, mostly because of his concern for his pregnant wife. The girls were so excited to be going to Colleen's wedding, it was hard for them to sit still. They were the first to arrive at the keep, except for Isaac, Alanna and Barbara. Barbara was Rolland's mother and Isaac was one of the five lairds who contributed the healer Kelly.

The girls ran up to Colleen's room to help with the wedding preparations while the men went to the study. Acelin followed behind, trying to fit in and unsure what was required of him, if anything.

That was when Rolland explained the problem he had with someone trying to harm Colleen. He had captured the three men who had kidnapped Colleen, in a cabin. He had talked about a plan using a decoy at the abbey but Colleen decided to be the decoy. There was still the leader of this bunch running free; no one knew who he was yet. When Erich joined them in the study, he had suggested using his niece, Hope, one of the healers. Acelin didn't understand why, and the lairds acted as if they wanted to discuss it alone amongst themselves so he excused himself and went in search of the food. Acelin had been told Colleen had someone trying to harm her but didn't know much of the details. He was a surgeon so he left the fighting and strategizing to the

lairds who had experience protecting their clansmen and women. Acelin wondered around exploring the herb gardens and the infirmary.

The next he saw any of them was at the dinner and dance. The food and ale was abundant and excellent. Living at the abbey with the bland food there, Acelin appreciated the delicious food. He went out to the dance floor and danced with many of the maids who lived in or around the keep. He was feeling more comfortable and relaxed than he had been in days. He was not used to drinking the strong ale and it made him a little slow and jollier than normal, but he was enjoying himself. When Kelly grabbed his arm and insisted he dance with her, he didn't complain. She was one of many he had danced with this night. She put her hand to her mouth as if to talk to him, and when he bent his head down to listen to her, the little brat kissed him full on the mouth and would not let go. That was when Hope came out of the study and saw what was happening.

She flew at Kelly, all the while screeching, "I hate you. I told you I loved him, and you had to try and take him. I hate you both, I hate you both."

Wolf was the first to the scene, pulling Hope away. He held onto the little wildcat as tight as he could. It took all he had not to let the squirming, screeching girl get loose.

Acelin was in shock. He picked Kelly up from the floor, shaking her. "Why did you do this? You need a severe spanking, young lady, and I am just the one to give it to you."

The anguished wail that Hope emitted broke Acelin's heart. The sound of her pain rang out in the hall. He realized too late she had read his lips.

"You would spank her and not me?" With that, all fight went out of her. She hung in Wolf's arms, sobbing, her heart broken. Wolf turned her to face him, lifting her legs and cradling her in his arms like a child, Amanda at his side.

"Take me away. I want Erich and Linda to take me away. I want to go home and never come back here," she sobbed.

Jamie strode over to Acelin and took Kelly from his grasp. "This woman will be my wife in the morning. I will punish her; you can be sure."

He had tried to talk to Hope to explain but her pain had turned to anger and she would not talk to him. He had gone to bed, sad beyond his own comprehension. The next morning, before dawn, he had left to return to the abbey alone.

Wolf had told him later that she insisted on going to Germany to train. She would be gone for a year.

Acelin didn't understand his own feelings. When he had seen Hope in Wolf's arms that night, the feelings of possessiveness had almost overpowered him. He wanted to be the one to hold her and protect her. He wanted to sooth the hurt and pain. It almost broke his heart to see her in such pain, and the jealousy knowing another man was holding this little healer almost choked him.

Acelin had decided to go to the king. He wanted a chance to explore his feelings with Hope and to see if something could come of it. He wanted to at least have a chance to apologize to her and explain what had happened. It left a bad taste in his mouth the way things had ended.

He rode to the castle and asked for an audience and a very surprised king agreed.

"What is it I can do for you, Acelin? Have you decided to return home so soon?"

"No, Your Majesty, I have come to ask permission to stay. I would like to explore my feelings for Hope, one of your healers. With the permission of you and her uncle, of course."

The king laughed out loud. "It seems my plans to unite our countries and the clans has spilled over to France. You may stay and be the surgeon at the new hospital, along with Hope, who is training in Germany at this moment. I must warn you, though, Acelin, you must have her

family's approval, and to do that, you must prove you are able to protect her. I would seek out Wolf and some of the other lairds to prepare you. You will need to prove your strength in body and character, or Erich will have none of you."

Acelin agreed to seek out Wolf. He knew he had to become a man whom Erich respected or he would not be allowed to get to know Hope better. He knew Erich had misgivings about him. He had not intended to, but he had hurt Hope. It still tore at his heart to see her so sad. He didn't know her very well but he knew she was good and kindhearted and honest. He knew she had some feelings for him. He had been so blind not to see them.

The king had even agreed to pay him a wage every month to run his hospital.

Acelin explained to the king his need to go to France and tie up his loose ends with his family before he was free to stay, and the king arranged for him to sail for home almost immediately.

Acelin agreed, saying he would be back in four months to take up his responsibilities.

He knew his mother would not mind. She was Irish herself and had always loved her homeland, insisting her husband bring her home to see her family every few years. His father was always more than happy to comply. He loved her and it was little enough to keep her happy.

He knew his father expected him to return to the French hospital and take over when he retired as surgeon there. As it turned out, it was easier to convince them this was the right move for him than he thought. His mother and father were a love match. They understood far more than he did. They gave him their blessings and exacted a promise to bring their grandchildren home to see them. They would be sure to visit him in a year, as it was nearing time for their trip to see his mother's family. He had spent a month in France with his parents, brother and sister before returning to the abbey to take up his new post.

It was late fall when he had returned. There was a chill in the air already and a promise of a long winter. He had decided to stay at Wolf's lair for the winter. He had asked Wolf to help him train and become more of an asset to the clans, and Wolf had gladly agreed, inviting him to stay for the winter and train with his men.

Wolf set his guards to training him. He left strict instructions with every one of his men not to hurt him. Wolf was not easy on him; he trained him hard but Wolf knew he had to protect his surgeon. He insisted he wear gloves to protect his hands.

At first, Acelin could barely lift the sword and was slow with the knife. Wolf's men had him on the ground and at sword point so many times, it was a standing joke.

Amanda laughed at him, telling him he was slower than her girls.

"Maybe you want to train with the girls first, before you take on the men?"

Acelin ignored her and the men, working hard every day until he could notice a difference. His agility increased, his speed, his strength. Then, finally, towards late winter, came the day that Acelin finally had someone else on the ground at sword point. He was so proud of himself when Wolf clapped him on the back and congratulated him.

Wolf had encouraged him to run to increase the strength in his legs and all his hard work had paid off. When the snows were finally melting, he had become a force to be reckoned with. He could fight hard and run for miles. His body changed, also. While not as muscular or big as the lairds or guards, he had put on muscle. He could run for miles at a time through glens and valleys and not tire. He could use a sword and knife with ease and skill.

He had become close friends with Wolf and some of the other lairds, although Erich did not hide the fact that he still did not like him. Acelin thought it was more that he was protecting Hope.

Amanda and the other healers invited him to the infirmary every chance they had to learn more from him. He had nothing but respect for their skill and surprisingly learned a few things from the girls. He still stayed far away from Kelly, not sure if he had forgiven her yet for hurting Hope.

One day, a few days before he was to leave for the abbey, on a day when the birds were starting to chirp again after a long winter and buds were just starting to show themselves, he was called to help deliver Wolf Jr., or Pup, as they called him. The first male in Wolf's family was named Wolf for many generations. It was tradition.

Amanda didn't want the confusion of calling both Wolf so they decided to call Wolf Jr. Pup. It was an easy delivery because Amanda had always taken care of herself. Acelin left the little family alone after the birth to adore their little scowling son. Wolf was so much in love with his family, and so was Amanda. Acelin couldn't help but feel jealous. That is what he wanted with his little Hope. He despaired of it ever happening. He had waited so long. The longer he waited and missed Hope, the more he was sure she was the one who was meant for him. He couldn't believe how blind he had been. He had talked to Wolf about many things and spent hours talking to him about his feelings for Hope. He had come to respect Wolf and the other lairds for their wisdom and leadership, as well as their caring for their clans.

Wolf had taken Acelin under his wing. He mentored him about many things and advised him to be patient with Hope. He thought she had the same feelings for him. Wolf had explained that Erich and Linda had protected Hope but had never let her grow up. When her parents were killed and her grandparents became too old to raise Hope, Erich and Linda had taken her in and spoiled her terribly. They had found out early on that Linda could have no children. They were both happy to hear the laughter of a little one. Hope was so small and defenseless, they became overprotective. Wolf could scarcely believe they let her go to Germany, if not for the fact they had sent three maids and her old governess with her for protection and comfort.

Wolf and Amanda decided to help Acelin as much as they could without interfering. Wolf would try to talk to Erich and explain all that Acelin had accomplished. That was a couple of months ago, and Acelin had been filling his time running and imagining when he would see Hope again.

With a deep sigh, Acelin shook his head, clearing the memories as he started walking back the way he had come. He walked through the nearby forest, stopping by the small lake not too far from the abbey. It was still frozen in spots but the ice was too thin to walk on anymore. He took a handful of clear, cold water and drank deeply. He knelt and splashed water on his face to refresh himself for the rest of his journey back, the same thought running through his head. Hope would be home in a couple of months and he would be ready for her. He would make her see how much he cared for her. He headed back to the abbey to take up his doctoring and his teaching. Spring was finally here and, soon, his Hope would be, too.

Hope

Hope had spent more than a year away from home. She had spent a year in Germany, studying with some very famous surgeons. She had worked hard, learning as much as she could. She wanted to make her family and the king proud of her. Most of all, she wanted to make Acelin proud. She didn't know why he was never far from her thoughts. She remembered the terrible night she had seen him kissing Kelly. It had hurt her so badly. She had promised herself never to let a man get close enough to hurt her again and that included Acelin. She never seemed to stop missing him. She had grown to care for him on her many trips to the abbey with Wolf and Amanda. He was so gentle and kind with all the patients, but he also would be obeyed. She felt sorry for the patients who received a good scolding from the surgeon/healer. He scolded her once for going outside without a warm enough coat on.

"You could catch a cold and then, when someone comes who needs help, you will be in bed. You must make sure to take care of yourself, first."

Hope became angry at his treatment. No one had ever scolded her before. No one had ever cared enough.

She stomped her little foot in a fit of rage. "I am a grown woman, and no one can tell me what to do."

Acelin promptly turned her around and gave her a swat on the bottom. Not enough to make her cry but enough to get her attention. It stung where he had spanked her, and she quickly began to rub her bottom.

"I would not scold you, if I did not care about you, young lady. You will wear a warmer plaid or I will give you a proper spanking. I will not see you ill."

She turned and ran to her room, rubbing her bottom all the way. That was the day she began fantasizing about a life with him. The day she became interested in a man who cared enough to take her in hand. She shook her head. She had been gone for months and wondered if Acelin was home in France by now. A sadness overcame her and made her want to cry but she busied herself with her studies. Time would tell what would happen when she returned home. She truly hoped he had waited for her.

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While in Germany, she had also learned more about her gift. She had miraculously met another empath. This other girl had explained to her how to block her feelings so she wouldn't feel the severe pain when she touched others in pain. She felt only a tingling when she was in the area. She showed how to use her gift to help find an injury by feeling the location of the pain, how to listen to the body and what the patient was thinking. She learned how to use her gift to help others. Both girls had kept their gift a secret, to protect themselves. While her friend wasn't a true psychic, Hope was. If she touched someone longer, sometimes, she could see bits and pieces of what they were thinking. Hope's skill at reading minds was limited.

She thought of her aunt and uncle. They had taken her in when she was still very young. They had realized when she was about ten or so that she had the gift of her mother. The first daughter usually had the gift. It usually didn't show up until early teens. The switch would occur suddenly. One gift for a sense, her mother lost her sense of taste but her grandmother lost her sight. Hope lost her hearing and received the gift much younger. She hid her gift well. Since she had her

hearing for those early years, it didn't take long for her to learn to read lips or body language. She could hide her hearing loss and her gift. In fact, she had hidden it for over a year.

When her uncle had any thoughts, no matter how fleeting, of spanking her for a misdeed, she could tell and would start her strategy to get out of it, whether it was tears or her big blue eyes looking sadly at him or a tale that would satisfy him. As a result, by the time she had slipped up and was found out, she was able to convince them it had just occurred. She felt shame at deceiving the people who loved her so much but it was too late to make amends for the past.

They became obsessive in their protecting her, making sure she knew not to reveal her secret, hiring a governess to teach her sign language and help with her learning. In return, Hope became hopelessly spoiled, throwing tantrums when she didn't get her own way. The stress of having her gift was almost too much to bear sometimes, and she didn't know what to do with her emotions. She threw herself into doctoring and healing until she was exhausted every night, but she was very good at it. It took a toll on her, though. Every time she touched someone in pain, she felt it. She could feel if someone was happy or sad or full of hate, like Adam, the man who had tried to hurt Colleen. She wore gloves a lot to keep from feeling other's emotions, as it became tiring. Now, thanks to her friend, she learned to block it when she needed to. It helped immensely with healing, as well as in everyday life, and no one was aware of her gift.

Her time in Germany was at an end, and it was time to either face heartache or to see if something could come from Acelin and her feelings for him. Her maids were packing her clothes, and her governess was hailing a coach to take them to the ship that would take them home. The butler ordered some boys to put her trunks onto the coach. The cook brought out a basket full of goodies to eat on the way.

She gave Hope a kiss on the cheek. "Bye, my darling, we will miss you. Come and see us again, please."

Hope waved goodbye, and they were off to the docks to begin their journey home. Again, she thought about Acelin. Had he gone back to France? Maybe she would never see him again. *No*, she decided if she had to go to France, she would. She had proven to herself she could travel wherever she wanted. She wanted to show him she was as good as he was; she was an adult now and could do as she pleased. She would show him he could never hurt her again. She smiled and promptly fell asleep.