

## CHAPTER 1



Fiona Kincaid Hubert lay dying. Her daughter Ariya knelt by her side, clutching her hand as she valiantly held back her tears. “Daughter, listen to me. Your uncle is an evil man. I believe he killed your father. He is your father’s stepbrother. He is not blood kin. He was always envious of your father’s inheritance and I fear he will use you to claim it. When I die he plans to marry you, daughter, for your land, for it will all pass to you when I am gone. You must not let that happen!”

Ariya was stunned. She never knew he was not her father’s true brother though now she understood the looks he gave her that made her skin crawl.

“Before my passing you must be gone from here.” Her voice grew weak as she spoke, her illness sapping her strength.

“But Mother, where will I go?”

“You will go to my father’s people, the Kincaids. They will help you. Your grandfather, if he still lives, will find you a good and honorable husband who is strong enough to protect you.”

“But what if he doesn’t live? What then, Mother?” Anguish thickened her voice.

“They will still protect you for you are a Kincaid. Ariya, go to

my chest. You will find my tartan wrapped around a box. Bring it to me.”

Ariya did as she was told and found her mother’s colors, blue, gray and red, wrapped tightly around a hard object. Fiona’s hands shook too much to unwrap the tartan, so Ariya did it for her. Yards of wool unwound to reveal a long slim box made of oak with inlays of ash and maple. At her mother’s nod, she opened the box to reveal a dagger. It was sheathed in leather. An intricate crest decorated the handle and when she pulled it out she saw it was wickedly sharp.

“The plaid and the dagger will act as identification. Show it to Laird Kincaid. He will recognize it and know you speak the truth.” Ariya sheathed the dagger, but another worry gripped her.

“Mother how will I go there? I have never left our land before. How will I find them?”

“You must be clever, daughter. Go north. They live by Greagan Firth where the Kincaid name is well known to all. You will disguise yourself as a boy and you will leave this very night.” At Ariya’s frantic denial Fiona smiled and told her, “Yes, you will. You are my greatest love and my greatest joy, but you must leave me now. You are strong, Ariya, and brave. Think of it as a grand adventure and don’t cry. My love will be with you. Go, daughter. Gather only what you can carry and go tonight, when it is dark. Go on foot for it will make it easier to hide.”

“I love you, Mother. I will miss you so.” She dried her tears on her mother’s plaid then gathered it up in her arms and rose from the floor. She kissed her mother’s forehead then, with one last lingering look, she left her chamber.

It was dusk already and if she was to go tonight she needed to prepare. Finding clothes was easy. Making herself look less feminine was more difficult. Her breasts had to be bound with a long strip of linen. Her long fall of chestnut hair would have to be hidden. Realizing the heavy mass of it would be impossible to conceal she knew there was only one thing to do. She used her mother’s dagger and hacked it off.

She tossed it all into the fire and watched it burn. The smell was awful. She coughed and waved her hand in front of her face as she rushed to open the window. Once the air had cleared enough, she packed the plaid, a spare chemise, a flint for starting a fire, a small sewing kit her father had gifted her with shortly before his death, and the few coins she had collected over the years, into a satchel. The dagger she wore on her belt.

She waited for full darkness, then for the sounds of drink induced merriment from her uncle and his cronies to die down, then made her way silently from the castle using one of the passageways to escape the high walls.

She exited from a cave in the side of a hill into the welcome moonlight. Tears fell in a steady stream from her eyes. Her grief nearly overwhelmed her. But she would honor her mother's request and find her grandfather.



SHE TRAVELED NORTH. When it got cold, she wrapped her mother's plaid around her and continued on. She found a stream and drank her fill. She began to feel hungry after a while and realized she had forgotten to pack any food. She continued on.

Near midafternoon the next day, exhaustion finally caught up to her. She found a protected hollow and lay down. Covering herself with the wool blanket and concealing herself with leaves, she slept until darkness fell once more. She continued on and, when she found a small village, she used some coin to buy a loaf of bread, boiled eggs and some smoked pork that would travel well. She spoke to no one and kept her cap pulled down to hide her face. The language sounded strange to her and she wondered if she had made it into Scotland yet. Being afraid to ask any one, she could only continue traveling north.

The third day she was discovered. She nearly stumbled upon the raiding party, so silent they moved like shadows through the trees.

She managed to hide beneath a bush, praying all the while to not be discovered.

“The MacDonnells said a foreigner was trespassing through our land, Iain. We’ll find him and demand to know what business he has, then bring him before our laird. No English can pass without being found. Search by the river, they will need to drink sometime.”

Now she knew she was in Scotland at least, but she could not let them find her. It would be a disaster if anyone discovered she was female. She might be a sheltered innocent, but she knew what men would do if they found her. She had heard tales of treachery and warnings of the consequences of being found alone and unprotected.

She hid until they were gone then sneaked away, barely daring to breathe until she had crested a small hill, putting it between her and her pursuers. She was congratulating herself on her cleverness when she heard a voice.

“Well, well, what have we here? Men! I found the scoundrel!”

Ariya’s arm was grabbed painfully tight and she remembered the dagger. Pulling it from the sheath, she sliced across the arm holding her and managed to break free. She ran away as fast as she could, ducking beneath low branches and leaping like a deer over stones and fallen trees. She could hear the sound of pursuit and felt panic clawing at her as she went.

A blinding pain hit her back and she tumbled forward, falling hard on the rough forest floor. Before she could scramble to her feet, she felt rough hands grabbing her and hauling her to her feet.

“Who are ya, lad, and why do you think to trespass on our land?”

She said a silent prayer to her maker that they still thought her a boy. She lowered her voice to sound more boyish when she answered them. “My name is Adam. I am looking for my grandfather. He is Laird Kincaid of the highlands and he is very powerful and won’t want his only grandson harmed.”

“Och, not a laddie, but a lass.”

Damn! That didn't last long. She pulled her dagger and stared defiantly at the man she believed to be the leader.

"Never you mind that. Will you lead me to the Kincaid, or let me pass?"

He did not look impressed. His grin spoke volumes of what he thought of her demands.

"You want to know what we do to trespassers on our land, *lassie*."

The men began to press in on her and she felt terror like she had never known before. Hands groped for her bound breasts. They pulled at her clothes and she screamed as they forced her to the ground. She tried to fight, but there were so many of them, and they had taken her dagger. She felt her trousers loosen and screamed again and renewed her struggle for freedom. Through her terror she heard a deep masculine voice asking, "Really? What kind o' men need six to satisfy one woman?"