

*It is 1767, on the eve of the American Revolution. Jamie and Claire have landed on the shores of Charleston, South Carolina, to join the exiled Scottish Highlanders and begin a new life. Jamie, with his wife by his side and his daughter Brianna safe in the future, is determined to seek refuge in the mountains and keep his distance from a war that is not his own. But when Brianna crosses into the past in search of the father she has never seen, Jamie realizes that war spares no one—and that love is the only thing worth fighting for.*

"Gracious, you vill not how long haf eaten?" Miss Viorst peered at Brianna's empty bowl with goodwilled incredulity. About the same age as Brianna herself, she was a broad-built, placid-tempered Dutchwoman whose motherly manner made her seem a good deal older.

"Day before yesterday, I think." Brianna gratefully accepted a second helping of dumplings and broth, and yet another thick slab of salt-rising bread slathered with curls of fresh white butter. "Oh, thank you!" The food did something to fill the hollow space that yawned inside her, a small warm comfort around which to center herself.

Lizzie's fever had come on again, two days upriver. This time the attack was longer and more severe, and Brianna had been seriously afraid that Lizzie would die, right there in the middle of the Cape Fear River.

She had sat in mid-canoe for all of a day and a night, while Viorst and his partner paddled like maniacs, she alternately pouring handfuls of water over Lizzie's head and wrapping her in all the coats and blankets available, all the time praying to see the girl's small bosom rise with the nextbreath.

"If I die, will ye tell my father?" Lizzie had whispered to her in the rushing dark.

"I will, but you won't, so dinna fash yourself," Brianna said firmly. It was successful; Lizzie's frail back quivered with laughter at Brianna's attempted Scots, and a small bony hand reached up to hers, holding on until sleep loosened its grip and the fleshless fingers slipped free.

Viorst, alarmed at Lizzie's state, had taken them to the house he shared with his sister a little way below Cross Creek, carrying Lizzie's blanket-wrapped body up the dusty trail from the river to a small framed cottage. The girl's stubborn spirit had brought her through once more, but Brianna thought that the fragile flesh might not be equal to many more such demands.

She cut a dumpling in half and ate it slowly, savoring the rich warm juices of chicken and onion. She was grubby, travel-worn, starved, and exhausted, every bone in her body aching. They had made it, though. They were in Cross Creek, and tomorrow was Monday. Somewhere nearby was Jamie Fraser—and God willing, Claire as well.

She touched the leg of her breeches, and the secret pocket sewn into the seam. It was still there, the small round hardness of the talisman. Her mother was still alive. That was all that mattered.

After eating, she went once more to check on Lizzie. Hanneke Viorst was sitting by the bed darning socks. She nodded to Brianna, smiling.

"She is gut."

Looking down at the wasted, sleeping face, Brianna wouldn't have said that much. Still, the fever

was gone; a hand on Lizzie's brow came away cool and damp, and a half-empty bowl on the table nearby showed that she had managed a little nourishment.

"You vill rest, too?" Hanneke half rose, gesturing toward the trundle bed pulled out in readiness.

Brianna cast a glance of longing at the clean quilts and puffy bolster, but shook her head.

"Not yet, thank you. What I'd really like is to borrow your mule, if I might."

There was no telling where Jamie Fraser was now. Viorst had told her that River Run was a good distance from the town; he might be there, or he might be staying somewhere in Cross Creek, for convenience. She couldn't leave Lizzie long enough to ride all the way to River Run, but she did want to go into town and find the courthouse where the trial would be held tomorrow she was taking no chance of missing him by not knowing where to go.

The mule was large and elderly, but not averse to ambling along the riverbank road. He walked somewhat slower than she could have done herself, but that didn't matter; she was in no hurry, now.

Despite her tiredness, she began to feel better as she rode, her bruised, stiff body relaxing into the easy rhythm of the mule's slow gait. It was a hot, humid day, but the sky was clear and blue, and great elms and hickory trees overhung the road, cool leaves filtering the sun.

Torn between Lizzie's illness and her own painful memories, she had noticed nothing of the change in the countryside they passed. Now it was like being magically transported during sleep, waking up in a different place. She put everything else aside, determined to forget the last few days and everything in them. She was going to find Jamie Fraser.

The sandy roads, scrub-pine forests, and marshy swamps of the coast were gone, replaced by thickets of cool green, by tall, thick-trunked, canopied trees, and a soft orange dirt that darkened to black mold where the dead leaves lay matted at the edge of the road. The shrieks of gulls and terns were gone, replaced by the muted chatter of a jay, and the soft liquid song of a whippoorwill, far back in the forest.

How would it be? she wondered. She had wondered the same thing a hundred times, and a hundred times different scenes: what she would say—would he be glad to see her? She hoped so; and yet he would be a stranger. Likely he would bear no resemblance at all to the man of her imagination. With some difficulty, she fought back the memory of Laoghaire's voice: *A liar and a cheat...* Her mother hadn't thought so.

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," she murmured to herself. She had come into the town of cross creek itself; the scattered houses thickened, and the dirt track widened into a cobbled street, lined with shops and larger houses. There were people about, but it was the hottest part of the afternoon, when the air lay still and heavy on the town. Those who could be, were inside in the shade.

The road curved out, following the riverbank. A small sawmill stood by itself on a point of land, and near it, a tavern. She'd ask there, she decided. Hot as it was, she could use something to drink.

She patted the pocket of her coat, to be sure she had money. She felt instead the prickly outline of

a horse chestnut's hull, and pulled her hand away as if she'd been burned.

She felt hollow again, in spite of the food she'd eaten. Lips pressed tight together, she tethered the mule and ducked into the dark refuge of the tavern.

The room was empty save for the landlord, perched in somnolence on his stool. He roused himself at her step, and after the usual goggle of surprise at her appearance, served her beer and gave her courteous directions to the courthouse.

"Thank you." She wiped the sweat from her forehead with a coat sleeve—even inside, the heat was stifling.

"You'll have come for the trial, then?" the landlord ventured, still looking at her curiously.

"Yes—well, not really. Whose trial is it?" she asked, belatedly realizing that she had no idea.

"Oh, it'll be Fergus Fraser," the man said, as though assuming that naturally everyone knew who Fergus Fraser was. "Assault on an officer of the Crown is the charge. He'll be acquitted, though," the landlord went on matter-of-factly. "Jamie Fraser's come down from the mountain for him."

Brianna choked on her beer.

"You *know* Jamie Fraser?" she asked breathlessly, swabbing at the spilled foam on her sleeve.

The landlord's brows went up.

"Wait but a moment and you'll know him, too." He nodded at a pewter tankard full of beer, sitting on the nearby table. She hadn't noticed it when she came in. "He went out the back, just as you came in. He—hey!" He fell back with a cry of surprise as she dropped her own tankard on the floor, and shot out the back door like a bat out of hell.

The light outside was dazzling after the taproom's gloom. Brianna blinked, eyes tearing at the shafts of sun that stabbed through the shifting greens of a screen of maples. Then a movement caught her eye, below the flickering leaves.

He stood in the shade of the maples, half turned away from her, head bent in absorption. A tall man, long-legged, lean and graceful, with his shoulders broad under a white shirt. He wore a faded kilt in pale greens and browns, casually tucked up in front as he urinated against a tree.

He finished and, letting the kilt fall, turned toward the post house. He saw her then, standing there staring at him, and tensed slightly, hands half curling. Then he saw past her men's clothes, and the look of wary suspicion changed at once to surprise as he realized that she was a woman.

There was no doubt in her mind, from the first glimpse. She was at once surprised and not surprised at all; he was not quite what she had imagined—he seemed smaller, only man-sized—but his face had the lines of her own; the long, straight nose and stubborn jaw, and the slanted cat-eyes, set in a frame of solid bone.

He moved toward her out of the maples' shadow, and the sun struck his hair with a spray of copper sparks. Half-consciously she raised a hand and pushed a strand of hair back from her face, seeing

from the corner of her eye the matching gleam of thick red-gold.

"What d'ye want here, lassie?" he asked. Sharp, but not unkind. His voice was deeper than she had imagined; the Highland burr slight but distinct.

"You," she blurted. Her heart seemed to have wedged itself in her throat; she had trouble forcing any words past it.

He was close enough that she caught the faint whiff of his sweat and the fresh smell of sawn wood; there was a golden scatter of sawdust caught in the rolled sleeves of his linen shirt. His eyes narrowed with amusement as he looked her up and down, taking in her costume. One reddish eyebrow rose, and he shook his head.

"Sorry, lass," he said, with a half-smile. "I'm a marrit man."

He made to pass by, and she made a small incoherent sound, putting out a hand to stop him, but not quite daring to touch his sleeve. He stopped and looked at her more closely.

"No, I meant it; I've a wife at home, and home's not far," he said, evidently wishing to be courteous. "But—" He stopped, close enough now to take in the grubbiness of her clothes, the hole in the sleeve of her coat and the tattered ends of her stock.

"Och," he said in a different tone, and reached for the small leather purse he wore tied at his waist. "Will ye be starved, then, lass? I've money, if you must eat."

She could scarcely breathe. His eyes were dark blue, soft with kindness. Her eyes fixed on the open collar of his shirt, where the curly hairs showed, bleached gold against his sunburnt skin.

"Are you—you're Jamie Fraser, aren't you?"

He glanced sharply at her face.

"I am," he said. The wariness had returned to his face; his eyes narrowed against the sun. He glanced quickly behind him, toward the tavern, but nothing stirred in the open doorway. He took a step closer to her.

"Who asks?" he said softly. "Have you a message for me, lass?"

She felt an absurd desire to laugh welling up in her throat. Did she have a message?

"My name is Brianna," she said. He frowned, uncertain, and something flickered in his eyes. He knew it! He'd heard the name and it meant something to him. She swallowed hard, feeling her cheeks blaze as though they'd been seared by a candle flame.

"I'm your daughter," she said, her voice sounding choked to her own ears. "Brianna."

He stood stock-still, not changing expression in the slightest. He had heard her, though; he went pale, and then a deep, painful red washed up his throat and into his face, sudden as a brushfire, matching her own vivid color.

She felt a deep flash of joy at the sight, a rush through her midsection that echoed that blaze of blood, recognition of their fair-skinned kinship. Did it trouble him to blush so strongly? she wondered suddenly. Had he schooled his face to immobility, as she had learned to do, to mask that telltale surge?

Her own face felt stiff, but she gave him a tentative smile.

He blinked, and his eyes moved at last from her face, slowly taking in her appearance, and—with what seemed to her a new and horrified awareness—her height.

"My God," he croaked. "You're *huge*."

Her own blush had subsided, but now came back with a vengeance.

"And whose fault is *that*, do you think?" she snapped. She drew herself up straight and squared her shoulders, glaring. So close, at her full height, she could look him right in the eye, and did.

He jerked back, and his face did change then, mask shattering in surprise. Without it, he looked younger; underneath were shock, surprise, and a dawning expression of half-painful eagerness. "Och, no, lassie!" he exclaimed. "I didna mean it that way, at all! It's only—" He broke off, staring at her in fascination. His hand lifted, as though despite himself, and traced the air, outlining her cheek, her jaw and neck and shoulder, afraid to touch her directly.

"It's true?" he whispered. "It is you, Brianna?" He spoke her name with a queer accent—Breeanah—and she shivered at the sound.

"It's me," she said, a little huskily. She made another attempt at a smile. "Can't you tell?"

His mouth was wide and full-lipped, but not like hers; wider, a bolder shape, that seemed to hide a smile in the corners of it, even in repose. It was twitching now, not certain what to do.

"Aye," he said. "Aye, I can."

He did touch her then, his fingers drawing lightly down her face, brushing back the waves of ruddy hair from temple and ear, tracing the delicate line of her jaw. She shivered again, though his touch was noticeably warm; she could feel the heat of his palm against her cheek.

"I hadna thought of you as grown," he said, letting his hand fall reluctantly away. "I saw the pictures, but still—I had ye in my mind somehow as a wee bairn always—as my babe. I never expected..." His voice trailed off as he stared at her, the eyes like her own, deep blue and thick-lashed, wide in fascination.

"Pictures," she said, feeling breathless with happiness. "You've seen pictures of me? Mama found you, didn't she? When you said you had a wife at home—"

"Claire," he interrupted. The wide mouth had made its decision; it split into a smile that lit his eyes like the sun in the dancing tree leaves. He grabbed her arms, tight enough to startle her.

"You'll not have seen her, then? Christ, she'll be mad wi' joy!"

The thought of her mother was overwhelming. Her face cracked, and the tears she had been holding back for days spilled down her cheeks in a flood of relief, half-choking her as she laughed and cried together.

"Here, lassie, dinna weep!" he exclaimed in alarm. He let go of her arm and snatched a large, crumpled handkerchief from his sleeve. He patted tentatively at her cheeks, l