

# CHILDREN OF THE MIST

A REBECCA CONNOLLY THRILLER

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In memory of Stephen Wilkie, the big guy



The mist made ghosts of the trees.

It draped itself over and around the woodland like a lover, enveloping the trunks, branches and pine bristles in a dewy embrace and brushing Fergus MacGregor's face like a phantom kiss. He sat on the recumbent log – *his* log it had once been in his mind, now it was *theirs*, his and Shona's – and listened for the first sound of her approach, but heard nothing yet. No matter, he had arrived purposely early for he loved these moments alone in this part of the old Scotland where the modern world, marked by the road along the loch side, did not intrude. It was by no means a busy road, although it had its moments in the summer months, but it was a roaring motorway compared to the silent calm of the forest, where the only regular sound was the breeze wafting through the branches. Not this day, though, for to all intents and purposes the world itself had fallen silent.

He glanced at his watch. She was still not late, and even though he relished his time alone in the Black Wood, the thrill of anticipation he always felt when he was about to see her, to hold her, just to be with her, fluttered in his stomach. He loved these trees, he loved these paths, this mist, and the wildlife he had seen and wished to see, but, when it came down to it, he loved her more.

Which is why he was here, for he couldn't leave without saying goodbye to the place that had been his sanctuary for so

many years, the place that had given him comfort, that had helped him find himself when life seemed intent on keeping that true self hidden. He knew he had to leave, much as it pained him. He knew it would pain others – his mother, his brother. He was unsure about his father because he had not shown much caring lately, and Fergus suspected there was a slim chance of him showing any after he was gone. The simple truth was that they, he and Shona, had to leave. They couldn't stay here, not the way things were between their parents. Sooner or later the stresses of whatever bad blood lay between them would rip them apart. It had already begun. She had been warned off, as had he, but they had defied the orders, knowing that love can act as a vaccine against the viral effects of hatred. But they also knew it can be weakened. They had agreed that, if they were to have a future, they had to leave this valley, even though it was their home.

He thought he saw something move, just on the periphery of his vision, a dark disturbance in the grey, but when he focused he saw only the mist and the shades of the trees. A deer, perhaps, navigating the dense undergrowth. He held his breath, listened for the faint sound of its movement, but heard nothing.

He smiled. Perhaps he had glimpsed one of the phantoms of the woodland's wild past, when the MacGregors roamed this land. He had often imagined them moving silently through this old forest, perhaps even among these very trees, hunting for game to bring down, cattle to steal, men to rob or food to feed their families, their very name banned by an angry king, manipulated by powerful men with designs of their own. And here, in the wild fastness of the Highlands, they joined those others who had been put to the horn – made outlaws, for one reason or another – and became wraiths who could appear from the mist and vanish back into it when their deeds were done. Children of the Mist, Sir Walter Scott called them, and they have been known thus since. As a boy, he had been held

enraptured as his grandmother and father told him the history of their family name. That was when his father was different, of course. Fergus had been so fascinated by the stories that he had set out to learn as much as he could about his clan kin of Rannoch.

And now, as he sat on the log, he felt them there with him, watching him – their flesh, their clothing, their weapons all part of the mist and, by extension, part of him. Would they understand what he was doing, he wondered? Would they, too, condemn him for his love, as his father seemed to? Would they disapprove of him turning his back on family and home? Or would those MacGregors of the past understand everyone has a right to happiness, and that Shona was his conduit to that? He scanned the greyness around him, hoping to catch a flash of plaid or a clink of metal against harness, but if the Children of the Mist were present in the thin place between the past and the present, the physical and the ethereal, they kept their own counsel on the matter.

His watch told him it was time, and he thrust the past from his mind to focus on the pathway leading to the road, for that was the direction from which Shona would come, and that was the future. The flattened trail, still hard from the frost, petered out in the gloom. He felt anticipation rise further as he watched avidly for the first sight of her.

At last, a shadow formed in the mist. But the smile that had widened on his lips died when he saw that the person approaching was not Shona. A glare eclipsed the joy that had thrilled his blood as he moved to intercept the newcomer.

His voice was harsh as he said, 'What are you doing here?'