

To Sleep
with Stones

A Hollystone Mystery

WL Hawkin



To Sleep with Stones
Hollystone Mysteries (Book Two)
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To Jackie,

Without you, I might never have seen the Ballymeanoch Standing Stones. Thank you for Scotland, much laughter, and a lifetime of friendship.

Also by WL Hawkin

To Charm a Killer (Hollystone Mysteries, Book One)

Summer Solstice

Sorcha found it in the mud—a green-tinged, tangled mess. She pried it from beneath a thin flat stone with tenderness and a trowel; while Dylan watched, so entranced he could not breathe. When she popped the trowel back in the faded caddy, she wore tied around her waist, Dylan inhaled at last.

Peeling off one glove and then the other, she let them fall. As Sorcha cradled the object in her palm, her green eyes flickered as if it was speaking to her, and Dylan’s mind flared again. Did she share his gift? When Dylan McBride touched a stone, it revealed its secrets. Perhaps, Sorcha had a talent for psychometry? Imagine holding a golden torque in your hand and seeing its tale unfold in cinematic brilliance. Imagine knowing whose neck it adorned, where all it had travelled, and how many lives it had saved, or snuffed out.

Squatting, she dipped her treasure in a bucket of water and cleansed it with her bare fingers. Sorcha O’Hallorhan was a renegade archaeologist who didn’t always follow procedure or stick to the grid. Dylan usually admired that, but today it gave him shivers.

Kai Roskilde was there too. He stamped his foot like a nervous horse and shone the torch. “Gold,” he murmured, with sly elation, and Dylan cringed, knowing he was considering the cash that could be made from the sale of such an artifact on the black market.

“Thank you, god,” said Sorcha, cupping it to her breast. It was just an expression—the only god she worshipped was fame. Sorcha O’Hallorhan was searching for archaeological connections between the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, where they currently stood, and a land twenty-five hundred miles southeast.

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Egypt. This artifact was quite possibly the connecting cord; the evidence she needed to prove a legend real and grasp that fame.

“Is it—” asked Dylan.

“Aye lads.” She fondled the turquoise beads. “Faience. Just like the beads that adorned the golden collar of King Tut. I knew we’d find her.” She was Meritaten, eldest daughter of Egyptian king, Akhenaten and his queen, Nefertiti. It was the stuff of story, and to prove it true would change the way the world viewed prehistory.

Kai reached out his large rough hand. He wanted to hold it.

But Sorcha drew back, slipped it in her vest pocket and began to climb the rope ladder.

They’d dug down nearly eighteen feet into a pre-Celtic holy well because Sorcha had a theory. People offered gifts to the guardians of holy wells; and sometimes too, they used them to hide things. At this depth, the team had already travelled back in time three millenniums, and unearthed a scattering of bronze axe heads, obsidian arrowheads, jet beads and pottery shards; the skull of an extinct great auk with its long curved bill still intact; the shed antlers of a stag; and sadly, a malformed infant. But that was nothing compared to this.

Kai followed her up the ladder, his nose way too close for Dylan’s liking. Sorcha O’Hallorhan was the site boss, about to claim her PhD in archaeology, but Kai Roskilde was charged with old Viking blood and bent on booty. He’d have her, and anything she found, any way he could.

“Dylan, don’t you want to see it?” called Sorcha, her voice fading as she skipped towards the artifact tent to examine her prize.

“Aye. I’m coming,” said Dylan, rubbing his muscles into something pliant. He’d blown his right knee playing rugby, and it was aching something fierce. But when he reached for the rope ladder, it jumped high, right up and out of the pit.

He heard Kai’s crazy cackle and glanced up—could see the sneer above the blond frizzled beard, and just make out the long scar that split his right cheek from temple to chin. It was a

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switchblade; a souvenir from a bar fight in Eastside London. He'd killed the man in revenge and walked away, so he said. Logic told Dylan that was shite, but there was something malevolent lurking beneath those watery blue eyes that gave it perverse possibility, and he did not wish to try the man on.

"Very funny. Now toss her down." Dylan sniffed and rubbed his nose. "Kai, come on."

But Kai was gone, and Dylan was left standing in the cold Argyll muck, cursing his decision to join this summer dig. He leaned back against the mucky shaft and steamed. The faint clatter of camp filtered down as people shuffled and settled into Sunday breakfast. Kai would return, but only when he was damn good and ready; when he'd made his point, and embarrassed him in front of Sorcha. Dylan could wait him out. He'd done it before.

What was he doing here? He could be anywhere in the world. Christ. He'd turned down a field school in Greece to come here, to come *home*.

Argyll sprawls along the south-west coast of Scotland in the Inner Hebrides. Once the prehistoric centre of the region, Kilmartin Glen is rife with chambered cairns, standing stone circles, and mysterious cup and ring marks—over one hundred and fifty documented prehistoric monuments. Dylan spent his youth here, walking the paths of his ancestors and living with his grandfather in Tarbert, a fishing village on the shore of Loch Fyne. Not some boy's cup of tea perhaps, but Dylan was not just *any* boy. It was here he'd first heard the stones speak, and it was *those* voices that called him home.

But, as time wore on, he was aching for a strong cup of tea; something warm to wrap his fingers around. He heard scuffling, and was just about to call out when Kelly Mackeras popped his head over the edge. Fine-featured and clean-shaven, Kelly looked like a kid.

"Dylan McBride. What are you doing down there all by yourself?"

"Kai," said Dylan.

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Knowing only too well the misery that Viking caused around camp, Kelly rolled his eyes. “Heads up,” he yelled, and flung down the rope ladder.

“Do you believe in karma?” Dylan asked, as he crawled out of the pit.

“Aye, some days.”

“Big lug,” he muttered, brushing the dirt from his khaki pants.

“You know *why* he picks on you, don’t you, McBride?”

As they followed the bacon and coffee trail, Dylan’s belly growled. “Because he’s a giant arsehole?”

“Aye, sure, but that’s not why. It’s because *she* likes you.”

“Who?”

“Sorcha, you daftie.”

“No way.” A woman like her? Sorcha was a stunner. An Irish lioness with bright green eyes flecked in gold, skin like vanilla cream, and a mane of curly red hair that fell past her voluptuous breasts. Just thinking about her made him hard.

“Oh, aye. She wants you and he wants her. So, mind,” Kelly said, punching his shoulder. “That bastard could sack a city single-handed.”

Dylan rolled his eyes in agreement. “Thanks for this, man. But, how did you know—”

“Sorcha sent me,” he said, elbowing Dylan in the ribs.

Dylan gasped. “Do you really think—”

Kelly noticed his bulging khakis, and chuckled. “Oh, aye, McBride. She’ll soon drain the blood from your sweet apple cheeks.”

“But, it’s no good,” Dylan mumbled, shaking his head. Of course, he wanted her. Who wouldn’t? She was bonnie and dead brilliant. But it would never work. Kai Roskilde spent nights in her tent whenever she left the flap ajar. Plus, she was his boss, the kind of archaeologist he dreamed of becoming, and that was not a thing to mess with. Rumour had it, that her mother was an archaeology prof; a lesbian, who’d slept with her most handsome

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and promising male students, only long enough to conceive a child.

But there were worse things than antagonizing Kai Roskilde or ruining a career. Dylan knew that if he so much as kissed Sorcha O'Hallorhan, he'd fall in love, and that would be the end of him. The only use Sorcha had for men was to feed her lust, and he wanted to be more than mere fodder for a woman; however pleasurable that might be. Hell, he was still recovering from Maggie Taylor, a Canadian girl who'd taken him for her own magical ride last fall.

"Nah. Even if you're right, I couldn't—"

"She's watching you," Kelly said.

Sure enough, when Dylan glanced her way, she waved him over, flashing an open smile of bright white teeth, and he flushed, knowing he'd been bit.

"Just don't fall in love, McBride. And watch your back."



"Remind you of anyone?" asked Kelly, gesturing to a great jolly Viking statue by the snugs.

"Aye, but that one's a damn site more amiable than his cousin," said Dylan.

The lads were belly up to the Irish bar in Oban, and the black stuff was flowing freely at Sorcha's expense. She'd taken the whole crew out for a Friday night piss-up to celebrate her dawn discovery. Oban was an hour's drive. They usually ended up somewhere close, but she'd insisted on an Irish night to honour her victory. Murphy's was packed with locals and splattered with summer tourists, as the season was just beginning. A decent Celtic band rocked the stage. Sorcha was tossing back whiskey shots like water, and Dylan figured that he and Kelly would be hoisting her home—that's if Kai didn't get to her first.

Sorcha caught him watching, and danced her way across the black and white tiles. Taking this as his cue to disappear, Dylan picked up his pint and bolted up the stairs. He planned to avoid

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any interactions by taking refuge in the cool quiet of the beer garden. Liquored to the gills, she'd get distracted before she ever made it that far.

Spying an empty table in a far corner, that was reasonably concealed by plants, Dylan hunkered down. As he sipped his pint, he stared up at the sky. It was a grand night, June twentieth, the eve of Summer Solstice. He couldn't believe six months had passed since Winter Solstice, when he'd watched the sun rise and gilt the six-thousand-year-old burial chamber at Newgrange in Ireland. Estrada had been there with his mate, Michael, and he'd been there with Maggie.

Though they were different in many ways, Dylan missed Estrada more than anyone else. Estrada was a brilliant magician and a good mate. Last year, a maniac turned his life inside out, and Dylan feared he was broken still.

Dylan stared at the stars. Those same stars shone over British Columbia where the coven would celebrate the solstice. He hoped that Estrada was with them at Buntzen Lake. Estrada was their high priest, a key player in their ceremonies, and without him, the magic would not be the same. He hoped that their high priestess, Sensara, had forgiven Estrada for loving someone else so soon after loving her.

Of course, the folks here didn't know that Dylan was involved in Wicca. It wasn't the kind of thing people shared on a dig. They didn't know that he belonged to a coven in Canada called Hollystone, that he practiced his solitary magic when they were sleeping in their tents, or that he talked with stones.

Dylan must have drifted off staring at the waning moon because he didn't know that Sorcha was there until she draped herself around his shoulders and brushed her whiskey-stained lips across the back of his bare neck.



Summer Solstice at Buntzen Lake. Inhaling, Estrada absorbed the resinous smoke that swirled from the braziers. Frankincense and

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myrrh. Fit for a king. Fit for a god. Estrada felt him kick. *The Green Man*. Awakened, the summer god within his soul was desperate to dance.

As Daphne and Raine led him into the circle blindfolded, damp sand clung to the soles of his bare feet and stuck between his toes. Estrada heard their voices blend with the others in a slow chant of syllabic triplets—“Helios, Apollo. Hail our Lord, the Green Man.” Rising in pitch, quickening in rhythm; it drove the witches as they began to dance.

Naked, but for a kilt of ferns, a scarf of hanging ivy, and a crown of oak leaves, Estrada stood before the bonfire; the front of his body toasted by flames; his back prickling in the cool night air. Laughing and chanting, they raced around him, raising power in their passionate frenzy, and filling him with power too, until Sensara signalled a halt, and their panting merged with the sough and songs of the lakeside night.

Estrada felt her move behind him—Sensara, his high priestess—sensed her energy blending with his own, could smell her and taste her—cedar and blood orange and, surprisingly, cinnamon. Had she finally forgiven him enough to wear cinnamon, his favourite spice? The tips of her fingers brushed his hair as she untied the silken blindfold. Did touching him rekindle intimate memories for her, as it did for him? Or had she buried their affair in some cold dark coffin?

As she stood before him and spoke the ritual words, Estrada stared into her dark almond eyes.

“Blessed Be, Green Man,” she said. “We welcome you. Celebrate with us this Summer Solstice when the sun reigns longest and brightest. It is *your* time.”

“The time of the Green Man,” echoed Daphne, Sylvia, and Raine.

“We honour you in all your guises.” Lifting a large crystal bowl with both hands, Sensara offered it to him. “Join us in drinking the elixir of the sun. We have prepared it especially for you.”

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Cupping his palms over hers, Estrada held the bowl to his lips and swallowed the sweet fiery elixir. Sparkling wine cut with Cointreau and absinthe, it swirled with strawberry slices and bright yellow blossoms. Protocol demanded he take only a sip, but the Green Man was a passionate god who soaked up liquor like summer rain. And, then there was Sensara. He absorbed her glamour along with the potion.

Draped in a flowing saffron gown, she wore a garland of the same bright yellow flowers around her loose black hair; blossoms of St. John's Wort. Estrada tried to hold her gaze. He wanted her to see him in his godly guise. But she broke away and focussed on the bowl, refusing to share this moment they had shared so many times before. Had her love turned to hate? Or worse still, indifference?

Truly, all Estrada craved was her friendship—a relationship with Sensara was far too constricting for a man like him—but even that door remained closed since their brief entanglement eight months before.

Behind her, standing in *their* circle, was Sensara's new man, Yasu. He caught Estrada's glare, and sneered. Why had she brought *him* here to ridicule their sacred rites? This was no place for skeptics. Did she want him to see what he must accept to be her partner? Or was it something more? Did she intend for Yasu to replace him as her high priest? Estrada tilted the bowl higher and gulped.

"Save some for the rest of us," said Sensara.

Having finally caught her attention, Estrada grasped her hands firmly and guzzled half the bowl. Then, he held it to her lips. Sensara feigned a sip. She drank only on rare occasions, hated to let her guard down.

Estrada released her hands and stood watching as she carried the bowl around the circle, offering each witch a sip of the Green Man's nectar.

Estrada appraised Yasu. What did Sensara see in him? A small Japanese man, he looked enough like her to be her brother.

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When she offered Yasu the elixir, he leaned back and wrinkled his nose. Surely she knew that Yasu could never take his place?

As the blessed wine had not been completely consumed, Sensara returned to Estrada and held out the bowl. He took it, tipped it, and drained it. After handing her the empty bowl, he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm, and howled at the moon. Hearing giggling behind him, Estrada winked and bowed. Their rituals were not meant to be stern or grim. They conjured for power, but also for pleasure, and he was, after all, the Green Man of the Wood.

Ignoring him, Sensara turned to the altar, where the ritual tools were laid out. Festooned in candles and draped in golden scarves, it shone like summer. She picked up a golden dagger, and turned to face him. Estrada knew what was coming, had played this role a half dozen summer nights—though perhaps not quite so vividly.

“Green Man, we hold this vigil in your honour. For all the plant life growing on our planet we ask healing and sustenance. Without our partners, the plants, we cannot survive. Our forests are in peril. We ask that all humanity take into their hearts and minds the desire to protect our trees, flowers, fungi, and all sentient beings.”

“Protect them,” came the echo.

Circling him, Sensara stroked the knife lightly with her fingertips. “We understand that an offering must be made, for there is no life without death; no resurrection without decay. For all life, we thank you Green Man, and bless you for your sacrifice. The blood you spill this night will nourish the life to come.”

“Blessed be the Green Man,” came the echo.

“Let my blood nourish the soil,” said Estrada.

Then, standing before him, Sensara plunged the knife into his heart. At the faint borders of his consciousness, he heard Yasu cry out. Perhaps she’d prepared him for their theatrics. Perhaps not.

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Collapsing to his knees, Estrada clutched the knife at his breast. The stage blood slithered down his belly and pooled in the sand.

“So mote it be,” he whispered, and falling sideways, hit the ground hard, as a lone owl cut the silence with her screech.

The women covered him with a sheet. The stage knife and greenery were removed. Then, Daphne knelt by his head. He felt her hands against his scalp as she attached his headdress. Limbs hampered by liquor, he laid there for a very long time, entranced by the sound of the earth’s heart beating in his ear.

“All hail the Horned God, Cernunnos. Rise, Dark Lord. Rise, and join us in the dance.”

This was Estrada’s cue. The Green Man was slain, but his twin, the Horned God, who ruled the second half of the year, must rise in his place. And yet, he could not rise.

Leaning down, Sensara whispered, “Going for an Oscar, Estrada?”

In his stupor, Estrada realized that if he did not rise as Cernunnos, the Horned God—if he ruined the ceremony—his fate was sealed. Slowly, he pushed his drunken body up from the sand. He couldn’t remember the scripted lines, but it did not matter.

Standing naked before Sensara, he took a deep breath and allowed the god to speak. “I rise from the sleepy darkness of the earth. From this day until Winter Solstice may all sentient beings find love and joy under my reign.” Tossing his head, he felt the deer antlers move as if they were part of his skull. “Dance! Celebrate my resurrection with a dance.”

“Dance, dance, dance,” they chanted, as the sun rose over the mountains like a great golden orb. Daphne and Raine pounded their frame drums to set the beat. Moved by their rhythmic thunder, Estrada jumped into the circle and joined them. It was good to dance with his family on the beach this summer night, and it had been a very long time since he’d felt good.

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“Cernunnos, Cernunnos.” His name resounded as they leapt and twisted around the bonfire.

Blood coursed through his body, empowering, hardening, every muscle.

“Cernunnos, Cernunnos.”

Swaying with the beating drums, he yelled, “I am The Horned God. I am alive.”

The women hoisted their long skirts and leapt over the bonfire. Daphne was the first to wrench the flower garland from her hair and toss it into the flames. She held up her fingers stained with the blood of St. John’s Wort, whooped, and danced on. Raine followed her, then Sylvia, and finally Sensara.

Estrada regarded the sway of Sensara’s hips, remembering the slight curves beneath the saffron gown. He wanted to chase her down and throw her to the ground; rip off that flimsy fabric, and remind her how good it feels to love a god. Grasping Sylvia’s outstretched hand, he swung her around, and then reached out to clutch Sensara. But, in that moment, Sensara linked arms with Yasu, and they jumped the fire together.

Ripping off the antler headdress, Estrada yowled; then hurled it into the sand, and ran.

Somehow, he found his Harley on the street. Drunk and desperate, he pulled on a pair of black leather pants and a vest he kept stashed in the panniers. Let her have Yasu. She’d find out soon enough that no one could replace him. Estrada turned the key and kick-started the bike. Let her feel what it was like to be without him.