



Will his pledge lead to
more than just a promise?

Kara Griffin
WARRIOR'S
Pith Trilogy
Book One
PLEDGE

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The Pith Trilogy - Book One

KARA GRIFFIN

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DEDICATION

To all fearless women who have encountered abuse.

*One word frees us of all the weight
and pain of life: that word is love.
-Sophocles*

WARRIOR'S PLEDGE

The Pith Trilogy - Book One

In a time when a pledge means everything, a Highland warrior seeks justice. But he must put his quest for vengeance aside when a lovely lass asks for his help. Colin MacKinnon promises to protect Julianna and escort her to her friend's home in Scotland. As her secrets unravel, Colin comes to care for her. There's only one thing standing in his way—her companion, a man who aspires to be a wizard. Colin must perform a bit of magic of his own or possibly risk losing her.

Julianna Bentley cannot reveal who she really is, lest it cause danger for all. Guarding her secrets and hiding in the Highlands is the only way to assure her safety. When a handsome laird offers his help, she takes him up on his offer. She must choose between them—the arrogant laird or the misguided wizard. But Julianna doesn't believe in magic and her choice might change her life's path forever.

PROLOGUE

Dover Castle, Royal Residence
August 1200

A loud clap of thunder awoke Julianna. Her eyes flew open in time to see light flicker inside the bedchamber. *Monsters.*

Being in the castle was fearsome enough without having a raging storm to make the shadows in the corners even scarier. Another flash came and caused her to pull the covers over her head. She pressed herself against the wall beside the large bed and hoped to hide from the horrible sounds. Brightness illuminated the chamber, but what scared her was the sound of the monsters' growls. Thunder came every few seconds. She looked across the chamber to her protector, Bleeth, who slept beneath a cocoon of covers.

In a panicked whisper, she called, "Bleeth, are you awake?"

He didn't budge and kept his eyes closed. With as much courage as she could muster, she decided she would nudge him, but she changed her mind when a monster shook the walls with his wrath.

She jumped when Bleeth's voice called out. "Julianna, 'tis but a storm. Go back to sleep."

"I'm scared. I want Mama." Julianna hoped he'd get her. She didn't want to find Mama herself. Mama would hold and soothe her, only she would make her feel safe.

Thunder rumbled again. Heavy rain pelted the window casement and made sounds like the angels in heaven clapped. At least that's what Mama always said it resembled. Bleeth was no help, and Julianna decided if she wanted Mama, she'd have to get her herself. The floor trembled when her feet touched the stone. The rumble scared her into stillness. Another flash came. She stared through the window casement into the night. *Monsters.*

Mist hung betwixt the trees and the eerie sight fueled her imagination. A steam-misted cloud formed into a serpent, its wide mouth would swallow her whole. With wide eyes, she decided to be brave.

"Bleeth, I'm going to Mama. There are monsters afoot."

"Go back to sleep, Julianna, you're safe." Bleeth leaned up from his pallet and reached for her hand. "I can send you to your mama." He waved his hands in the air. "Be still."

"Nay." If there was one thing that frightened her more than monsters, it was Bleeth's attempt at magic. Julianna ran to the door but took a quick glance at her bed. For a second, she almost changed her mind. She could hide beneath the covers and be safe, couldn't she? Instead, she slunk through the door with determined steps.

"Come back here." She heard Bleeth ramble. "She never listens."

Having arrived the day before, Julianna wasn't familiar with the castle. Down a long narrow corridor, the door to her mother's rooms seemed far. She worried she wouldn't reach the door before the monsters got her. Her little feet patted across the cold cobbles. Golden-framed portraits glared from the walls above. Their eyes seemed to follow her and propelled her to run faster. She reached the door and held the ornamental knob. To her relief, the massive door opened. She was safe now that Mama would hold her.

"Mama," she whispered and crossed the solar to the archway which led to the bedchamber.

Something was wrong. Mama sobbed and held her cheek.

"I cannot believe you would make a cuckold of me. I should never have married you. Who is he, one of the king's knights?" her father's voice harsh.

Julianna couldn't see him from where she stood. He sounded angry, but he always spoke harshly. She stole into a darkened recess beside the archway and watched in stunned silence. Cold tears trickled her cheeks when her father's hands clutched Mama's neck. Mama gasped for breath and struggled.

"Mama," she wailed. "Cease hurting Mama."

Her father's angry face turned toward her. Julianna had to help Mama, but she didn't know how to stop his attack. She flung herself at him and the back of her father's hand knocked her away. Her head struck the cobbled floor. Tears flowed and the blurred vision of her father's face waved before her. *Monster*. Blackness took hold and the monster receded into its depths.

CHAPTER ONE

Langton's forest, England
October 1212

Magic was a fool's deception. Julianna didn't believe in magic, or at least, she hadn't since she was young. Magic couldn't change her situation. That dream ended long ago. Then, she was willing to give into her childlike belief of fantasy and enchantment. She'd learned life held no enchantment and magic was for dreamers. If there was such a thing as magic, she would be the first to search out a wizard and beseech him to change her circumstance.

Bleeth, her longtime friend, stood nearby. She rolled her eyes heavenward at his attempt. With his hands in the air, he waved them and chanted something under his breath.

"What foolish spell are you trying to weave now?" God help her if he actually performed magic. She'd eat a full helping of bilberries, which she detested if he did.

They'd stopped to rest on their journey to her friend Sara's wedding. Langdon's holding was only a short distance away. But Julianna wanted to refresh herself and did so by the small stream they'd found during their ride. Bleeth stood beside a tree, watchful for any intruders. She dried her hands on a cloth and watched him with amusement. With all the uncertainty of the future, she always counted on Bleeth to make her laugh. Bleeth had been a part of her life since the day she was born. If it wasn't for him, she might not face what would come.

"I shall do it this time, Milady. You'll see." He waved his hands in faster motion and chanted in his native language—words she barely understood.

"I say you give it a rest, Bleeth."

He ignored her and tried to cast an unfortunate spell. Her friend boasted he would one day be held in the same esteem as Merlin. She considered Merlin to be a tale spoken around the night fire. Besides, no one had ever proven his existence.

Sticky from the midday heat, she washed away the travel dust. In her shift, she let the water cool her overheated body. Bleeth always attended her when she dressed. She thought nothing of him viewing her body and never felt awkward in his presence. He'd been put in charge of protecting her and was never far from her when she was at home.

"We'll reach Sara's soon. I cannot wait to see her. The last time I did, we were at the convent and Mother Superior punished us for sleeping late. That was the day Sara was sent home."

Bleeth ogled her as she slid the overdress over her shoulders. She wondered why he appeared cross.

"Do you have no modesty, Julianna? Must you dress openly? I'm a man with little willpower."

She thought he jested and she didn't react as she should have. "I've disrobed in your presence many times. This is not the first time you've seen my body. If you're unable to withstand your willpower, I suggest you look away."

He turned his back to her. "When a woman uncovers herself, a man has no means but to look. Are you almost ready? We've stayed overlong here."

Julianna collected her belongings. She set them inside her satchel and reached for her slippers. "I'm ready. I wonder if Sara is excited. How I miss her. She hardly wrote and the last letter only conveyed she was to be married."

"Ye miss her. You should be happy you're able to attend her wedding."

"It was fortunate I'd been visiting Auntie when I received her missive. I will be happy to see her again. Attending Sara's wedding reminds me of the betrothal my father is sure to..."

"There is time aplenty before he does. I wouldn't worry about it."

"That is true, yet I don't want to be wedded to a monster like him. I cannot stop thinking about that night for I know what I saw." The awful vision of that night was inescapable. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw her father's hands close around her mama's neck. She'd been too small to come to her mother's aid, too young to protect herself, when her father struck her. If only she'd not hit her head, she might have known the truth.

"I should have gone with you to her rooms." Bleeth turned back around and took her satchel.

Julianna detested that Bleeth blamed himself. "You were a child then, Bleeth. There's no way you could have discerned what would happen."

"I was indebted to your mother for saving me and I vowed to stay with her in repayment. She was kind and encouraged me to try my magic. I should have protected her."

She sighed and didn't want to relive the heartache. "This day is for celebration not of remembrance. Still, I find it difficult to keep the memories at bay. Not a day goes by I don't envision it in my mind. I recall the fright in Mama's eyes. She was terrified."

"I did it," Bleeth shouted and turned to show her his fete.

Julianna tried to hide her sadness. There was no way to prove the monster killed her mother. Her hope to bring him to justice was a long-lost dream. Now her worry turned to her own demise, the day her father set a betrothal for her marriage. Until then, there wasn't much she could do to sway him. Yet there was no putting it from her mind either. She had to accept the fact that one day she would belong to a monster, a man likely as wretched as her father.

"Milady, I turned a leaf into a butterfly. My magic grows stronger."

She scoffed. "You did not. The butterfly landed there when you closed your eyes." She laughed at his disheartened look. "Come, we should be on our way. I want to see Sara."

Bleeth caught the butterfly and studied it for a moment before he released it. "Is it not curious to behold a butterfly this time of year?"

"It is nature's mystery, there's no magic about it. It's but a leftover insect which has yet to die." She squinted and noticed the butterfly disappeared into thin air. He must have used trickery.

Bleeth swaggered to their horses and tied her satchel to the horse. Even if she doubted his magic, he never ceased to try.

“You’re troubled, but you must find the letters your mother hid in your chamber. Mayhap the king will—”

“King John will never help me. I cannot go to him, Bleeth. My father is well-liked by John and why should he not be? He’s given his service, and the king probably holds guilt for my mother’s death, because it happened at his castle.”

“The thought of going to John scares you, Julianna, but he might be the answer. Let’s get going. I wonder if Sara will remember me?”

She took the reins of her horse and walked toward the lane. “How could she not when you turned her face that ugly shade of blue? Promise me, no magic, Bleeth. I will not have my friend’s wedding ruined because of your...” She was about to say ineptness but it would hurt his feelings. “...skill.” She’d found the woad leaves Bleeth put in Sara’s basin that day which tainted her skin the horrid blue color. If he thought his trick would convince her of magic, he was sadly mistaken. She’d always been able to prove him wrong.

“I promise no magic. Does that make you happy?”

Turning a brilliant smile, she nodded. “Don’t be surly. You can practice again when you return home.” She patted his arm affectionately in hopes to ease his disgruntlement.

Back on her horse, she rode along silently and kept the wayward thoughts of the past to herself. After another hour’s ride, the Langton holding appeared. From the many horses on approach, and the number of people at the gate, many guests came for the wedding. Sara wrote it would be a lavish affair in honor of her marriage to the Highlander, Steven KirkConnell. From the sentiment in her letter, Sara seemed pleased with the union.

Julianna dismounted and handed the reins to Bleeth. She spotted Sara greeting guests at the entrance of her father’s keep. In her excitement, Sara ran in her haste to hug her.

“I have missed you. I’m happy you’re here.” Sara gazed beyond Julianna’s shoulder and laughed. “Oh nay, you brought Bleeth. Is he still trying magic? Nay, don’t tell me, I suppose I shall find out.”

With a wave to Bleeth, she followed Sara into the great hall. She was perfectly at ease, as often as she’d visited Sara’s home during holidays. When she didn’t visit Sara, she went to her Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Walden’s home. The thought of her dearest relatives made her homesick for a visit. If she wasn’t able to avoid going home, she might have stopped for a visit on her way back to the convent.

Julianna took a moment to assess her dearest friend. Sara’s bright red locks were braided and rolled into a tight bun, as usual, behind the nape of her neck. Her bright blue eyes peered at her with affection. Sara was a head shorter than Julianna, and she peered over her friend’s head at all the guests. The hall crowded with both Scots and English.

“There is Steven, my love.”

“Your love, aye?” Julianna laughed. The tall, light-haired man smiled broadly as he spoke to the men nearby.

He wore his attire in the typical Scot’s fashion: a soft leather vest over a tunic which ended at the tartan worn on his hips. The most impressive element, his tartan, folded neatly over his shoulder and belted. Julianna tilted her head to get a better look.

“Is he not handsome? I’m to marry him and his kisses are—”

Julianna pretended to be shocked at her friend's admission. Sara blushed and linked her arm in hers. "Come, let us get a drink. You must be thirsty after a long journey."

"Sara Langton, what did you say? I should pinch you." With a laugh, she let Sara lead her to the buttery. "He kisses you? You allow him improprieties? I should have known you would what with all the practice on your pillow."

Sara shoved her. "I did not practice on my pillow. That's not fair. There were never any boys around, what was a girl to do?"

Gazing at the men in the hall, there were certainly enough of them around now. Julianna couldn't help smiling. Sara's husband was tall, strong, and muscular. Sara would find such a man—a protector, a lover, a man who would be affectionate and caring.

"I admit he makes me want to..."

"Are you saying you want to sleep with him?" She hadn't meant to speak loudly or in such an astounded tone, but the thought of a woman subjecting herself to such was cause for concern.

"Aye, of course, Julianna. I will do my wifely duty."

"Duty. Aye, but why do you sound like you'd enjoy it?"

"Steven tells me not to worry for there's pleasure in the act. Let us not discuss this here. We're bound to disagree. Look, there's Bleeth." Sara nudged her forward.

Julianna let the discussion turn. "Oh, I meant to ask if he can stay inside the hall. I promised he wouldn't have to sleep in the stable."

"He's welcome inside if he can find room. I fear there won't be space for many in the hall this night. He might be more comfortable in the stable."

Bleeth stepped in front of them and bowed. "Lady Sara, who is this man you're to marry? Will I approve?"

Sara grinned and pointed across the room. "Steven is the tall one, and who says I need your approval?"

They laughed at the objectionable tone she'd taken.

"He looks protective, I'll give him that. That's well and good considering where you're going. I hear the Scots are barbarians. I suppose he'll do."

"Bleeth, I don't need your approval. And be quiet, I don't want to remind Julianna I'm leaving." She glared at him.

Julianna embraced her and held back tears. "You'll be far away in the Highlands of all places. Why couldn't he live near the border where I might visit you?"

Sara sighed and continued to berate Bleeth. "Must you always point out the worst, Bleeth? Julianna, don't listen to him. You'll see me again, I promise. Let us retire to my chamber so you can take rest. I'm sure the journey was tiresome. Bleeth, make yourself at home and whatever you do, don't..." she trailed off.

"Don't what, Milady?"

"Nothing. I'm sure you are thirsty, here's a cup of ale." After handing him the cup, she grabbed Julianna's hand and they fled to the upper floor.

Julianna tried to appear cheerful. She placed a smile on her face, yet her pretense was for naught. Sara noticed the worry in her eyes. They hurried through the mass of people in the upstairs hallway and stopped at Sara's chamber.

"I cannot believe I'm at your betrothal feast." Julianna rubbed her temples and sensed an oncoming headache.

"You don't fool me for a minute, Julianna." Once inside, they stood by the doorway.

She lightened the mood and asked about her intended. "Steven seems happy about marrying you. I saw his smile."

"When my da contacted him about the arrangement, Steven came directly. He remembered me from visits when I was young."

"Seems you remembered him as well?"

"Oh, aye, I did. Do you recall how I'd sneak downstairs to listen to the meetings? I only talked to him once, and that was when he put out the fire I started next to the hearth."

Julianna laughed and recalled the tale. "Hah, you set your chair on fire."

"I'd moved too close to the hearth and when the chair began smoking, I thought I was on fire."

"Maybe you were."

Noise from others inside the room drew their regard. Ladies gathered in the chamber for a respite from the celebration that would continue through the night. They sat around the chamber, and beyond them, lined tapestries and banners hung on the walls. The room's conforming mien didn't allay Julianna's headache.

"Come and sit. I have much to tell you."

Julianna sat on a cushion. "The convent is boring without you. There's no one to make me laugh or get me into trouble. I miss you."

"Mother Superior will be glad when we're both gone." Sara's smile faltered.

The headache Julianna hoped to avoid came on stronger. She tried inconspicuously to hide it, but Sara noticed.

"Ladies, please, I wish to be alone with my friend for a few minutes," Sara said. One by one the girls reluctantly left the chamber.

Julianna closed her eyes against the afternoon sun that streamed through the window casement. She didn't dare glance at Sara but could imagine her pitiful look.

"I'm sorry, they're boisterous." Sara handed her a cool cloth. "Tell me why you are forlorn? Your headache is telling. I know you well enough..."

"Travel made me weary. I'm not forlorn..." She smiled, although, half-heartedly.

Sara pursed her lips. "I don't like seeing you despondent. One day you'll find a man who will sweep you off your feet as I did. Then you'll be free of your despicable father. I wish you wouldn't worry so."

Julianna took her friend's hand. "You always make me forget my worries. But soon I must leave the convent and face him. Even now he must search for someone to foist me on. He threatens me whenever I'm at home. I should become a nun. Aye, that would solve my problem. Imagine his happiness were I to do so."

They both laughed. Sara squeezed her hand. "Mother Superior would fall to her knees if you even hinted at becoming a nun. What about Bleeth? I see how he watches you. I've always thought him a handsome devil."

"Don't jest, Sara. Bleeth is my friend and I'm not attracted to him. He's like an older loveable brother who teases me and looks out for me."

Sara laughed heartily. "You don't see him as I do. He's tall, has a slight build, but is not weak, nor fat around the middle. He's only a handful of years older than you. I adore his dark hair, so black...black as night, and his mysterious eyes."

"He's not the man I envision when I..." Julianna lowered her gaze to her lap.

"You envision a man? Do tell?"

"Nay, forget I said that. I'm certain Bleeth doesn't feel attraction. Why only this morn he teased me." She stood and paced the chamber. "Aren't you afraid of what's to come? Steven will hurt you and..." She searched Sara's brown eyes for a sign of her fear. "I cannot bear that happening to you."

"Julianna, Steven would never hurt me. I look forward to what's to come." She smiled sheepishly. "I love him with all my heart. Edwina was a lout for telling you about the marriage act. She's wrong and I'll prove it to you. Marriage is a blessing and love is magical."

Julianna kept thoughts of her stepmother to herself. "You believe that nonsense? Love is not magical, love is nonsense. At least, I will never have that kind of love when I'm married to the most horrid man."

"Have Bleeth turn him into a toad." Sara giggled at her jest.

The corners of Julianna's mouth turned. "You always make me laugh."

"You mustn't be distressed. When you marry, you'll finally be safe. You're beautiful. How could your husband not love you?"

"Sara, you are kind. Nay, I shan't marry, not now, not ever. I cannot risk it no matter how much I might love a man. There's something I haven't told you..." She tried to hide the tears in her eyes.

"Does this have something to do with your father?"

"I cannot speak of it, but one day I shall tell you. Why don't we get ready for the feast? I'll try to be merry for your sake. I care for you and only want your happiness." Julianna wouldn't divulge her secret or that she believed the monster killed her mother. No one could know about the king and what her mother had done.

"I care for you, too. Now, I have a few promises I want from you. We might not have time to talk before the ceremony tomorrow and after..."

Julianna sighed and waved her hand for her to be forthcoming. Sara's promises were usually many.

"You'll meet someone you can be happy with and find love. If you need me, find your way to the KirkConnell clan. Keep the dagger with you at all times. Promise me?"

"Very well, Sara. I promise on our friendship. But I don't like the thought of using the dagger. It makes me uncomfortable to possibly hurt someone."

"I worry about you every time you go home. Use the dagger for your protection, Julianna. I will worry if you don't."

"I promise, now can we go?"

Music filled the hall as they neared the great hall. People crowded the hall from wall to wall. In full swing of celebration, noise from the well-wishers shook the rafters. A raven squawked, provoked from his post. Julianna watched Sara dance with Steven. Her friend's dream of marrying the Highlander came true. At least someone's dreams were fulfilled. In a way, she was a little envious of Sara's life. She'd had a family who loved her and the only reason she'd been sent to the convent was her mother died. Her father was rarely at their home.

Sara waved from across the room. Julianna waved back and swore she would enjoy herself. She pushed worrying thoughts of her father aside and joined the dance. Ladies waved sheer scarves as they circled their partners. Men danced with an arm behind them, their movements practiced and elegant.

She tapped her foot to the music and forced a smile. The music stopped, and the dancers blended into the room. The next song began and Julianna was asked to dance by a man. She joined in and took someone's hand.

Women formed an outer circle around the men, who made another circle within theirs. When the music stopped, whichever woman held the white cloth dropped it in front of the man who faced her. He would retrieve the cloth and receive a kiss for his gallantry. The music began again, and another woman was given the cloth to repeat the game.

Julianna grimaced in pain. The oaf she danced with stepped on her foot. It wasn't the first time he'd done so. Her toes throbbed from his drunken missteps and he couldn't seem to stay on the gentleman's side of the line.

"I need refreshment." Julianna excused herself, but before she stepped away, the oaf took hold of her hand and forced her to stay in line. She wanted to unleash her temper, but another dancer came to her rescue. A man in a dark tartan pushed the oaf aside. The oaf crashed into a table and ended up on the floor and caused the table's occupants' outrage.

When the line stopped again, she stood in front of her rescuer, a tall, light-haired man with the bluest eyes. She didn't recall being given the cloth and lifted it in surprise. She had no choice but to drop it. Stepping forward, she placed a kiss on his cheek when he handed it back to her. Her face had to be as bright as an apple. The Highlander didn't speak during the dance, but his eyes followed her. He smiled devilishly when she returned to him. Julianna would usually be alarmed by the attention of such a man, but he seemed harmless.

Finally, the dance ended, and she took the chance to flee before the man approached. She found Bleeth near the door and gave him a reproached glance. "Where have you been?"

"You look like you could use air." Bleeth laughed when she pursed her lips. He took her arm and led her outside. They walked a good distance before stopping. "Didn't you like your dance partner? He certainly liked you. I was about to turn him into a gnat."

She frowned and hoped he'd notice. "I said absolutely no magic. You promised."

"Do you see a gnat astir?"

The mischievous gaze in his eyes made her laugh. "Thank you, Bleeth. I needed that."

"I know." He took her hand and led her around the courtyard, avoiding the carts and horses. "Did the Scot offer for you?"

“Nay, of course not.” She almost burst with laughter. Bleeth sounded jealous, but that was ridiculous. “He’s probably one of Steven’s crofters. I wonder what he would have used for barter.” She couldn’t resist teasing. “Oh, mayhap a horse, or nay, a cow. He didn’t speak, Bleeth, but he did rescue me. I suppose I should be grateful for that.”

“You, Milady, are being witty. I’m not sure I like it.”

CHAPTER TWO

Colin MacKinnon was in a surly mood and wasn't much of a reveler. He wasn't there for pleasure and was reminded of the reason for his attendance. He'd traveled a great distance to attend the meeting, which would be held in secret after the wedding. The celebration was an excuse for his presence, but truly the bride's father, Lord Richard, sided with the Scots. Richard wanted to discuss the never-ending rifts with the border lords and invited many Highland lairds to his daughter's wedding. He'd been assured his enemy, the McFie, wasn't invited.

He noticed his brother's gaze. Robin gave his attention to the ladies. Colin grinned when his brother shoved an Englishman aside. The crash resounded throughout the great hall. Dancers blocked his view of Robin's partner, but knowing his brother, she had to be a beauty.

Steven's excitement over the union seemed overzealous. His friend acted as though he'd achieved a great victory. Mayhap Sara was a prize worthy of praise, but marriage as far as Colin was concerned wouldn't much matter nor be celebrated. He was young enough to let the matter rest, but one day he'd need a woman to bear heirs. That day would come soon enough.

Being saddled with a wife wasn't a pleasant thought. Childhood memories flooded him as he watched Sara and her father. His own mother's face filled his mind. He'd never suspected her cold-hearted bearing. His da ingrained the painful lesson: a woman would break your heart and employ self-serving wiles to get her way. Steven hadn't heeded his caution and on the morrow, he'd bind himself to Sara—tightening the noose around his neck.

His brother returned to the table and picked up a cup of ale and downed it. "Did you see the lass I danced with?"

"Nay, I didn't, Robin."

"A fop forced his attention and I rescued her." Robin set the cup on the table and shoved him aside and sat on the bench.

"You're always saving a lass. Does it matter which?"

"Oh aye, it does when she's as bonny as that. Where's Brendan?"

"Off in the barracks, the only place he enjoys himself." Their youngest brother relished a fight with soldiers at whatever holding they happened to visit. Colin hoped he'd join the festivities, but he had yet to make an appearance in the hall.

"Brendan is a stupid ox, aye, he is. He should be here with the ladies. I'm enjoying myself that I am." His brother grinned and stood up and took a cup from a passing servant.

"I'm sure you are," Colin mocked. "I want to talk to Steven." He rose and scanned the room for his friend. When he turned back, his brother strolled toward the ladies. Giggles and murmurs reached his ears. Robin knew how to make the ladies happy.

Steven danced with his intended. Colin stood close by and waited for the dance to end. His friend left his future bride's side and walked toward him. Damned if he didn't look pleased. Colin

scoffed at his friend's grin and poured them a drink. He waited for Steven to take the cup he offered.

"Seems everyone is enjoying themselves," Colin said.

"Everyone, but you. Of course, I'm enjoying myself, look at her. Is she not the bonniest lady here?" Steven burst with enthusiasm and made Colin want to pity him.

"Aye, she's bonny, Steven." He glanced at his friend's betrothed and hoped she wouldn't be the type of lady his da warned him about.

"Why aren't you having a good time?"

"I'm damned well trying to," Colin said irritably.

Steven finished his drink and set his cup down. "I appreciate you putting matters aside to attend my wedding and the meeting. I know how important your feud is. But I have to ask, why in God's name did you bring your brothers?"

"They wanted to come. We're only staying a short time. The feud can wait a few days." Colin tipped his cup and savored the crisp-tasting ale. His feud with the McFies went back years, and he supposed a few days absence wouldn't matter. Avenging his da and achieving his vow meant everything. He lived for the day when his promise was fulfilled.

"I wanted to introduce you to someone, but I don't see her." Steven rose slightly and searched the room. "Mayhap she retired."

Colin punched Steven's arm. "Are you matchmaking? Never thought the day would come when the mighty KirkConnell would lower himself to such a level."

Steven cursed and then laughed. "Mayhap I am, but I thought you might be interested. She's beautiful. Aye, with bonny hair, blue eyes, attractive figure. I haven't spoken to her yet, but I wonder... How has she avoided you? Then again, I haven't seen you dance at my celebration. Aye, you're offending me, damned if you aren't."

Colin grinned. "I'm offending you? I thought about dancing, but there's no one here worthy of my attention. If this woman is as bonny as you say then how have I not noticed her?"

"That's a good question, but I was positive you'd like her."

"I didn't come here to dance with ladies, Steven. Pour me another drink." He set his cup down with a bang.

Steven did as he asked and refilled his cup. "The meeting will take place tomorrow after the hall clears. Langton assures me the English won't be aware. Mayhap something will finally be settled."

"Good, I'll leave the morning after. My men itch to continue the battle. The glorious day when the McFies are extinguished nears."

"Can you not put your feud aside and enjoy yourself until then? It's important to me. The ladies are plentiful and beautiful. You could have your pick of a dance partner."

Colin nodded. "Robin's enjoying himself and Brendan is probably beating the shit out of Langton's men. Why shouldn't I enjoy myself?"

Steven spit out the gulp of ale he'd taken. "Damn it, Colin, you best see to him. If Brendan ruins my wedding..."

Colin threw his head back and roared with laughter. His brother caused trouble and wreaked havoc wherever he traveled. He supposed he should make sure Brendan wasn't fighting. Without a

word to Steven, he left the hall and walked to the barracks just behind the main keep. As he walked along, Colin thought about his feud. After the wedding, he'd attend the meeting and then be on his way to gain vengeance in his sainted father's name.

Before he entered the barracks, he noticed a pair walking toward him. He stepped back into the shadows and watched them. A lovely lady with glorious hair walked beside the man. The pair appeared friendly and laughed easily. As they neared the hall doors, Colin couldn't help but overhear their conversation.

"You should find a lady to dance with. I'm going to retire."

"Julianna, you should rejoin the dance. The Scot will protect you."

The man released her arm, and the woman turned toward him. Colin moved back into the shadows of the stone.

"Aye, but who will protect me from him?" Their laughter mingled with the noise from inside and Colin could no longer hear them. He craned his neck and tried to get another look, but she'd disappeared through the mass of people.

He smiled to himself. *Julianna. That lass is worthy of dancing with.*

CHAPTER THREE

Held in Scottish tradition, the wedding ceremony took place on the chapel steps with flowers lining the path where the clergyman awaited the happy couple. A cold tear trickled over her cheek as Sara walked prideful to the groom. Onlookers hushed when Sara reached Steven's side. Friar MacDonald's sermon became forceful, but Julianna's mind wandered during the long mass. Bleeth nudged her, and she glanced to see Steven KirkConnell place his clan's tartan around Sara's shoulders.

Sara smiled and her eyes shone with love and happiness.

"Milady, did you hear me?"

She looked away from her friend and smiled. "Nay, Bleeth, what did you say?"

"I said the feast is this way." He pointed beyond the keep. "Let us eat."

Tables set up outside accommodated many guests. She found Sara and hugged her, offering congratulations. They sat at the head table, while Bleeth went to eat with the men. The feast began, and servants piled the tables with trenchers loaded with meat, bread, fruits, and vegetables. Julianna found her appetite nonexistent. She'd be saying farewell to Sara soon. As she toyed with her food, she stared at the Scots in their strange attire. Their garments gave them an invincible demeanor. They were a fearsome group who didn't appear to care whether they were welcome or not, given the hard looks of the Englishmen.

A strange sense came to Julianna and she stilled. Someone watched her. A familiar streak ran up her spine. She searched nearby for anyone attentive. Finding the spectator was difficult though with many present.

"Sara, someone is watching," Julianna whispered. "You know how I get when I get that sense." She rubbed her arms and hoped the chill would cease.

Her friend knew all too well about her sense and many times they'd escaped punishment. Truth be told, they usually got into trouble unless she sensed trouble, and they were able to abscond to the nearest hideaway.

"I can't see well from here, there's too many about. I'll walk around to get a better view. Stay here and I'll return."

Sara disappeared through the crowd, and she continued her lookout for the watcher. Her gaze passed a man, but there was something about him which caused her to stop on him. The man stood next to Sara's brother, Charles, but he didn't seem to look at her. From the distance, the handsome warrior intrigued her. His dark tartan fell to his knees and his stark white tunic drew her raised eye. He emitted power, and his braced muscular legs showed mighty calves.

Blushing at her shameful scrutiny, Julianna couldn't help herself. The warrior appeared like a Roman gladiator she'd seen on a tapestry once. She grew heated when she imagined how it would feel to be held in such arms. To get a closer look, she rose and slunk toward him and Charles. He

had to have a deep, sensual voice to go with that body. Lord, if Mother Superior knew she'd thought that, she'd spend a week in the chapel in prayer for her soul. Attempting to eavesdrop, she edged her way around several knights.

The warrior spoke in a low tone, but loud enough for her to hear from where she stood. A thick column stood between them.

"Steven's said she was beautiful. She is the loveliest woman here. Is she married?"

Charles bellowed. "Nay, not yet. Many want her. Who wouldn't want to touch her glorious hair? I believe she's stirred you, Laird MacKinnon."

"Mayhap a wee bit. I want to meet her. Arrange it. Someday I'll need a lady to bear my sons, and she'd do well."

Charles snorted. "You hold yourself above all others, Laird. The lady awaits me. Of course, there is the small chance Garrick will snatch her up first. He always watches her."

Julianna hung back and wondered who they talked about.

Charles kept his gaze on the children playing nearby. "Someday I hope to offer for her...but she doesn't notice me. I tried to get her attention once. Do you deem you can?"

He gave Charles a heated glance. "Do you doubt it? You and Garrick are fools... I want her."

Julianna couldn't believe their discussion became absurd. Never having knowledge men spoke casually about women, she found their conversation humorous. She almost laughed but covered her mouth with a quick hand.

The warrior turned and bumped Charles' chest. "Forget her, she's mine."

A rather large lord blocked Charles' and the man's view of her, but she was close enough to see his face. The man's voice gave her a shiver of excitement. Unaware of her inattention, she bumped into a servant and apologized.

"You jest. Why would you want her? She's an English baron's daughter, surely not tempting enough for you," Charles baited.

"She's tempting enough. Keep away from her, and I'll have a talk with Garrick, too. And Charles, I never jest." As he walked away, he bumped Charles' shoulder and left Sara's brother standing there alone.

Was the warrior interested in a lady here? She wished she'd taken time to befriend the gossiping women so she might have a better chance to find out who he spoke of.

Sara returned to the table and joined her. "I noticed no one. Where did you go?"

She hunched her shoulders. "Who are they?"

Sara giggled when she glanced where Julianna pointed. "They're Steven's friends, a neighboring clan, the MacKinnons. Aren't they fearsome? Mayhap one of them is the man to sweep you off your feet?"

Julianna's laughter caused some to pause in their speech and look at them. "Did you see the man with Charles? I listened to their conversation and—"

"You didn't. Julianna, you are quite scandalous."

"They didn't notice. They were too busy speaking about a woman here. He walked away before I figured out who he talked about."

“Hmm, I wonder who he is. If there was a warrior worthy of attention, the ladies would cluck like hens.”

“You should have seen him, I never saw a man so...”

“I have seen such a man,” Sara said, at the same time she spoke.

“...brawny,” Julianna finished.

Sara pouted, referring to her own husband then laughed at her remark about the man.

“Steven is handsome, but I’m angry with him even if he’s as large as the warrior.” Julianna leaned forward to gaze at Steven, who now sat beside Sara. His light, sandy colored hair, and blue eyes were indeed attractive, yet he couldn’t compare to the other man.

“Why are you angry with Steven? What did he do?”

“He’s taking you away.”

Sara sighed. “We knew this day would come. I’ll never be too far away from you, Julianna. We shall always be friends. I want you to be happy for me.”

“I am happy now that I’ve seen him. I shall dream of him this night.”

“I should find out who he is since he’s the only man you’ve ever shown interest in. Describe him,” Sara ordered.

“He’s tall and Scotts, with brown hair and green eyes. He wears a dark tartan, but I was too busy looking at his...” she trailed off.

“Looking at his what?”

“...his muscles. He’s strong.”

“I cannot believe you’re saying this.” Sara yanked a tress of her hair. “Let us have a walk around so you can point him out. I want to get a glimpse of the man who captured your heart.”

Captured her heart? Mayhap he had because he was the first man to cause her giddiness. Julianna considered he might have left the celebration because she couldn’t find him.

“Is that him?” Sara pointed to a Highlander.

“Nay, but I danced with him last night.”

“That’s Robin MacKinnon. He’s a handsome rogue.”

“Aye, but the other warrior is much more—”

Sara gasped. “Listen to you. You sound like the maidens who shrieked in my chamber yestereve.”

She couldn’t find the warrior the rest of the night, but her promise to be cheerful was easily fulfilled. The handsome man filled her thoughts, and she hoped to see him before she returned to the convent the next day.

Inside the crowded chamber that night, she tossed and turned. The heat from so many slumbering in the chamber made it stuffy. She left the chamber to get a bit of fresh air. When Julianna reached the bottom of the stairs, voices resonated in the great hall. There was a meeting taking place.

She crept to the archway and scrutinized the men in a heated debate. One man glanced at the stairs and she backed into the hallway. Quickly, she darted through the back exit and stubbed her toe on the step. Dancing from foot to foot, she tried to rub the pain away, but someone approached.

Dashing out the door, she ran until she reached a nearby tree and hid behind it. As she stood there, she rubbed her foot and waited. She heard no one and peeked around the oak tree. Whoever had seen her must've turned back.

Julianna left the tree and started toward the pond beyond the walls of the Langton holding. If she was a dreamer, she'd imagine she was off to meet a secret lover, but a dreamer she was not. A sound of a cracking twig came from behind her. She turned to spy if anyone was there, but it was too dark to view much of anything. Finally, she reached the pond and dipped her toe in the water and swirled it around. She sighed at the coolness of the water. With none nearby, she removed her nightrail and slipped into the water.

She floated with her back arched, making her breasts peak above the waterline. Her skin prickled when a cool breeze came. The sliver of the moon shone on her as she swam around. Julianna hummed a tune, one her aunt enjoyed when they relaxed in the evenings. An odd sense came to her, and she stood and hurried to retrieve her nightrail.

Darkness prevented her from seeing between the trees and she wasn't sure if someone was there. Once her nightrail covered her, she walked toward the keep. Julianna gasped when she bumped into someone. A large body blocked the path. To her surprise, the warrior she'd seen earlier with Charles stood in front of her.

Her eyes widened. Barely reaching the giant's shoulders, she thought him tall before, but he had to be over six feet. She wished Sara saw him, just so she could prove he existed. His brown hair fell onto his shoulders. He neither smiled nor frowned.

Absently, she fanned herself and craned her neck to peer into his eyes. They were the shade of bright spring moss, greener perhaps, from what she could tell in the dark. She lost herself in their depths until she looked lower to his mouth, then his somewhat crooked nose, firm jaw. He lifted her chin with his forefinger and returned her gaze to his. Julianna stepped backward, allowing herself to stare at his chest, where his tunic stretched tautly. Outlines of muscles beneath lured her hand, and before she considered what she was doing, she reached out to touch him.

She pressed her palm against the hardness of his chest. He was real and certainly not a figment of her imagination. The moment was tumultuous and she couldn't find a voice to speak.

His hand caressed her hair, over the damp strands that hung by her shoulder. He looked as though he'd dare do whatever he wanted. Placing his arm around her, he pulled her close.

Julianna gasped. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Tempt me? But you have. There's no reason to be sorry."

Julianna couldn't hold a single thought when he trapped her against him. With his rock-hard body pressed against hers, the indecency of it never occurred to her. He lowered his head until his lips touched hers. His warm breath felt nice against her lips. She melted in his embrace when his tongue slipped inside her mouth. He deepened the kiss, not giving her a moment to pull away. She'd never experienced anything as riveting before. The kiss became ardent, igniting her soul. Passion flowed through her as it had never before. She pulled him closer and never wanted to let go.

The warrior knew what he was doing. Julianna wasn't sure if she minded or not. Never had she been kissed as thoroughly. His hard body pressed against hers at the exact moment his hand moved to her bottom. He seemed as out of control as she was. She liked the way his mouth dominated hers

with a sense of his expertise. Her breasts, barely covered by her nightrail, crushed against his muscular chest, and sent odd sensations through her. Twinges of desire trembled inside her and made her aware of his touches and his body.

Held motionless by his strength, Julianna was overcome with panic. She'd liked the kisses, but now it had gone too far. Aware of what he intended, she forced him to release her by stepping out of his embrace.

"I don't know what came over me...to allow you to..." her whisper sounded strange. Julianna's legs trembled and she took a calming breath. Once she regained control of her thoughts, she realized the jeopardy she was in. Before she fled, he touched her face.

"Who are you? What I mean to say is... Where are you from? I already know who you are."

"Do you?" She couldn't believe the turn of their conversation. "I assure you, we have not been introduced." How should he know her unless... Was she the woman he spoke of to Charles?

"Aye, you're Lady Julianna. I could be easily enticed..." His eyes implored her with a teasing look.

"Is that so, my lord? What if I don't wish to tempt you?"

"I can be persuasive. You're a bonny lass, and I couldn't stop myself from kissing you."

"Who are you? Are you here for the wedding?"

"I'm Colin MacKinnon, and aye, I'm here for the wedding. What do you say we get the friar now and save us the trouble of finding him later?" His arms trapped her by the tree and he wouldn't let her turn.

"As much as that appeals, I do believe it's time for goodnight." She ducked under his arm and was about to run when he swung her around. She frowned at his smile. He stood too near and made her lose her thought.

"Wait, lass, I didn't mean to offend you. You're not taken, are you? Is there somewhere we can meet? I jested about the friar." He held fast and wouldn't let her withdraw.

Julianna should have been outraged by his remarks, but for some reason, she found him charming. Still, a lady should show a reaction to his behavior, shouldn't she? She swung her hand and slapped him across the cheek.

The warrior had the gall to laugh. She wasn't about to be mocked, but then again, she wasn't as brave as she'd let on. He would probably laugh harder if she were to strike him again. How had she thought an insignificant slap would affect him? He didn't even flinch.

"You dropped your weapon at the pond. Here, take it."

She gasped at the realization he'd watched her at the pond. The knave spied on her. How much had he seen? He pressed the dagger into her hand.

"You dare much to return my weapon, my lord, but I shan't use it on you and waste a good effort. I must return to the keep, please allow me to pass."

"Let me come to you tonight, I'll pleasure you like no other. I will even entice you since you are objectionable about enticing me." He pulled her close. "I want to kiss you again."

"I suppose you think I should be grateful for your offer, my lord, but I—"

His lips took possession of hers again and his hand roamed the material of her nightrail until the splendor of his palm covered her breast. She didn't have the strength to move him. Something

awakened inside her, and she wanted to feel his hard body against hers. Her hands moved over his chest, where she felt the pounding of his heart.

He overwhelmed her with his kisses, so much so she didn't think about the consequence of her actions. She needed to get away from him and the danger he presented. Julianna pinched his forearm with force. He became aware she wasn't returning his kiss.

She pulled back to reproach him. "My lord, please, you shouldn't kiss me. Now, release me." She stomped on his boot then held her foot and grimaced in pain. Somehow she maintained her balance and dignity.

Before he spoke, she fled and didn't dare look back. She didn't stop running until she reached the hall. The men in the hall continued their debate, and she slipped past them unnoticed. Once she entered the chamber, she closed the door and leaned against it. Those inside the room continued to slumber. Her heart thumped madly in her chest. Mayhap there was magic in the love act, he certainly weaved a spell over her with his kisses.