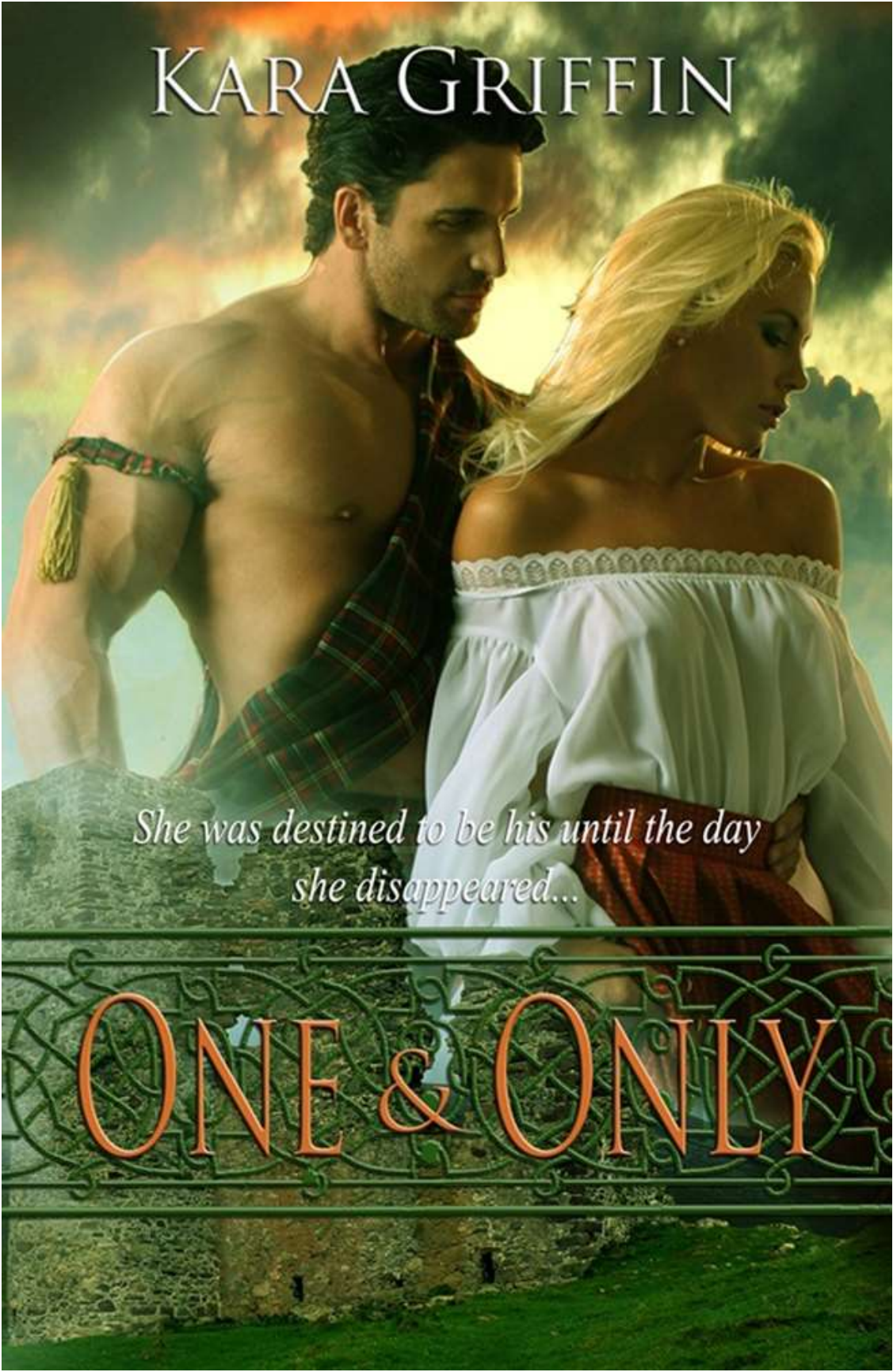


The book cover features a romantic scene between a man and a woman. The man, on the left, is shirtless and muscular, wearing a green and red plaid kilt and a matching sash. He has dark hair and is looking down at the woman. The woman, on the right, has long blonde hair and is wearing a white off-the-shoulder blouse with a lace collar and a red skirt. She is looking down and slightly away from the man. They are standing on a stone wall with a decorative metal railing. The background is a dramatic sky with orange and yellow clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The title 'ONE & ONLY' is written in large, orange, serif letters across the bottom, and the author's name 'KARA GRIFFIN' is at the top in white, serif letters.

KARA GRIFFIN

*She was destined to be his until the day
she disappeared...*

ONE & ONLY

ONE & ONLY

KARA GRIFFIN

ONE & ONLY

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This book contains adult material, reader discretion advised.

DEDICATION

For my reader friends who love Scottish warriors as much as I do. Enjoy the Gunns.

And for my family, whose never-ending support allows me to do what makes me happy.

*Love is composed of a single soul
inhabiting two bodies. -Aristotle*

ONE & ONLY

*She was destined to be his
Until the day she disappeared
Saved by the gray-eyed warrior
She is returned to her past
To a life she'd only dreamed of...*

Grey Gunn gave up hope of ever finding Albrey Mackay. He vowed never to forget the sprightly lass and reconciled his life to what all great lairds should—warring and protecting his clan. When he finds out his enemy is betrothed, he vows a bride for a bride.

Bree doesn't recollect her young years. All she knows is a betrothal has been arranged to a MacHeth follower. MacHeth is a brutal man who intends to use her as a pawn to usurp King Alexander in a feud that began twenty years prior with his father, King William. Her only chance to thwart the marriage is to barter for the protection of the Gunn Clan.

As Bree gets to know the hardened chieftain, Grey Gunn, she's astounded by the love of a clan she'd always hoped for. But is that love enough to let go all the pain of her past and begin living the life she was destined to with her One & Only?

PROLOGUE

Mackay Keep
Winter Solstice
Highlands, Scotland 1190

The bairn wouldn't be thrown out with the wash water if he had anything to do with it. He held the newborn babe in his arm and tucked his tartan around her to ward off the chill. The bairn's wails forced him to slow his mount and reposition her more securely. He hoped none who journeyed with him heard her cries because none could know what he was about to do. As he rode toward the Mackay outbuildings, he surmised he was doing the right thing. He couldn't turn back now with the holding within sight.

A man such as him had too many pressing responsibilities to care for such a wee one. He had no means to keep the babe in his home. His wife wouldn't welcome a bastard child born of a common maid and nor would he ask it of her. Although he fathered several bastards who he kept watch over, he suspected his wife would raise holy hell if he brought them home as he wanted.

With him, a score of men from various clans rode along and protected him as was his due. His goal of uniting the clans so he could concentrate on the greater mission of gaining back the northern lands Scotland had lost became difficult. There was much dissension these days. He hoped Ian Mackay welcomed those in his company, and if he did not, the guard would await him in yonder woods. He understood the alliances and treaties amongst the northern clans. Though he respected the issue against their enemies, he demanded reverence for his position. Mackay's enemies were also his allies.

A brisk wind blew and brought a cold night this winter solstice. Few celebrated outdoors and yet various fires lit the hills. Smoke from cottage hearths filled the air with the scent of cooking and peat. His guard dispersed and several guardsmen employed their protection by the outer walls. Only his closest confidants and most trusted men awaited him by the main building.

He reached the courtyard of the small holding where Ian lived and dismounted. With a silent command to his guard, he told them to be vigilant. There by the door, his longtime friend met him at the entrance.

"Your Grace, you come. Join me inside and get warm. It's biting with chill this eve." Ian Mackay stepped back and allowed him and his few followers inside.

He stepped into the great hall and welcomed the warmth from the blazing hearth. He wasn't sure how to ask Ian the favor, but his comrade was the only man he trusted with such a request.

"You travel with unsavory company." Ian waved a hand to a servant who stepped forward and offered refreshment. He then motioned to all others to vacate the hall.

“My men stay.” He nodded at the three men who stood near the entrance. Two soldiers whose duty was to see to his protection, the younger lad, employed to see to whatever tasks he set him.

With his hands full carrying the bairn, he shook his head and rejected the drink offer. “Best to keep your enemies close, Ian.”

“Aye, so you can be stabbed in the back?” Ian gestured to a chair near the hearth and sat across from him. “I don’t deem that wise, Your Grace.”

“Nay, so I can learn their secrets and know when I’m about to be set upon. I know you distrust the MacHeths and MacWilliams, Ian. I aim to give them the opportunity to prove their fealty and loyalty. And if they do not...”

Ian scratched his beard and grinned. “I doubt they will. I wouldn’t be trusting. Still, you are welcome here with whatever company you wish to attend. My entire clan is on alert. They will be watched most cautiously whilst they are on my land.”

At that moment, the bairn let out a hungry wail. He shifted the bundle in his lap and looked to Ian, unknowing how to placate the wee one.

“What have you there?”

“My bairn, a wee daughter.” He exposed the babe and gazed at the face of the angelic creature. Her shiny eyes met his and a small smile came to her tiny lips. She was lovely akin to her mama with tufts of blonde hair and eyes which would surely be as blue as the sky. He envisioned Katherine’s face, a sweeter woman never existed. How he would miss her.

“Your child? Where is her mother?”

He sighed when the bairn wailed louder and he repositioned the babe to cradle her in his arms. “Died birthing the lass. I came because I need your aid. Is there a wet nurse here?”

Ian stood and called forth a servant. “Nettie, fetch a wet nurse and tell my lady we have company. Be hasty.” He retook his seat and eyed him in stunned silence.

“Ian, I cannot stay long. I came to seek your service. I need someone to keep the lass safe. She has no one save me and I... I have much to accomplish these days. My council advises me to secure the child before news of her birth absconds and causes senseless discord. Ears are rife for such news. My wife, though she politically strengthens Scotland, wouldn’t welcome a bastard even if she is a lass. I doubt she’d care for a bairn not of her own and yet she hasn’t given me a legitimate heir.”

“I see. Aye, your wife’s family relations put you in a tedious position.” Ian spired his fingers and drew them to his mouth.

“My wife is the granddaughter of Henry and I would rather not give England cause to bring us grief at present what with having to keep our lands secure.”

“Truly, you shouldn’t trust the MacHeths or the MacWilliams, Your Grace. They scheme to recoup their lands and would oust you as sure as I am laird to the Mackays. MacWilliam covets the crown and surely will go to any length to gain it.” Ian scowled at the meaning of his words, as did he.

“His claim is null and it shall not come to pass. MacWilliam is the least of my problems. I am beset with political matters which outweigh his paltry claims.”

Ian nodded and gave him an incredulous glance as he caressed the tiny head of the babe. "She is a bonny bairn. You want me to care for her? We have many in the clan who would gladly accept her."

"Nay, I want you to keep her, claim her as your own daughter. Raise her as a Mackay. Give her the life I cannot. I want her to be loved, Ian. Her mother was a worthy woman and I owe her that much, to assure her bairn is well cared for."

"If that is your wish, Your Grace, of course. We shall be honored to call her daughter. My wife will probably shriek with joy. She cannot bear more children and with our two almost grown, she misses caring for a wee one."

"Aye, your Maudie is a good mother, Ian. Your children are healthy and happy. It's all I can hope for the wee lass. I give her to you then. Tell none she is mine. My enemies would think nothing of using the child against me. I won't have my daughter endangered." He held the babe out to his friend and felt the weight of his troubles lift from his shoulders when Ian took her.

Several ladies entered the hall. Ian handed the babe to a woman who fussed over the bairn and left hastily. He watched his daughter disappear; her cries becoming distant, and a touch of woe came to him.

"We shall care greatly for her and she shall be loved. Have no worry, Your Grace."

"I have no concern now, Ian, and I thank you. I shall reward you one day for your favor." With his child secure, he settled into a chair and snatched the drink which had been offered earlier. "Now tell me of Highland news."

CHAPTER ONE

Five years later ...

Clan Gunn Keep

Saint Swithin's Day 1201

Peace would come to the Highlands on this momentous day.

The weather was perfect, balmy even, considering how close they were to the coast. Mist usually swathed the shore with a cloak of gloom and lent itself to those who lived there. Praised be, for there shall be more of this glorious weather if his Holiness, Saint Swithin's bones were left alone. None wanted the forty days of rain henceforth if the old saint was bothered. It seemed he was left to rest in his tomb on this bright sunny day.

Joy reflected from the faces of both the Gunn and the Mackay clans. There was a time when neither clan would be seen with any member of the other. Many clansmen would rather brawl until there was enough blood or bruises to show for their effort than be seen with the enemy. This day, all strife was set aside for prosperity. Though the elders loved to war, old grudges were far too insignificant to let come between two of the most powerful clans in the Highlands. Each clan held their enemies at bay, though most lived within a stone's throw of their lands. Keeping peace was a never-ending battle and weighed heavily on King William.

The Mackays and the Gunns celebrated the joining of the two clans, uniting them in a betrothal and setting in place a long-standing truce. A truce moreover coveted by King William himself, who attended the lively celebration. His presence assured the cooperation of the Gunns and Mackays. This was the first step in gaining peace of the northern clans and bringing tranquility to the realm. The fete was a long time coming, according to the Highland Council.

If the Gunns and the Mackays came to an alliance, most of the clans would follow suit and peace would reign once more throughout the land. King William wanted all his people's devotion and support. He had enough problems with the lowlanders and didn't need to worry about those who lived a world away in the far north.

No one was certain why the war between the Gunns and the Mackays began; for it happened before many of the members were alive to witness the atrocities. Fortunately, the Gunn's land didn't border Mackay's, but they had an ally of the clan sitting between them. The Ross Clan attended the festivities to bear witness the truce came to pass.

Though other clans who weren't resigned to the joining planned and plotted against His Grace. The opposition swore one day to take matters into their own hands and refute William's right to rule. With their plan enacted, all they needed to do was cause a wee bit of dissension to bring about the cooperation of the northern clans. Only then, would they take back the crown and give it to the rightful ruler.

It was a fine day for a celebration since all honored Saint Swithin. The clans prepared for the feast, each made food to share, and set up games for the children. One child, in particular, was eager for the festivities to begin. She ran betwixt clan members and almost knocked a few off their feet in her excitement. Though the wee lass didn't understand the importance of the day's events, she was too caught up in the attention she received. They spoiled her and their future would be froth with difficulties. All accepted 'spare the rod, spoil the child' when it came to that particular lass.

Grey Gunn knew Albrey would be excited, and as was his da's directive, he was put in charge of ensuring she didn't come to harm or misbehave. Albrey Mackay just turned five summers and looked like a sweet angel, but Grey discerned the truth. She was no angel, but a fairy sent to torment him. Fairies were nuisances who caused havoc, and someone Grey's age didn't have time to be patient.

In the weeks past, he'd watched her get into mischief time and again. The sweet lass' long springy golden curls swayed as she ran to chase a stable cat and startled one of the soldier's horses. Grey had his hands full, and still, he wouldn't disobey his da's command. He'd watch over her and assure she remained safe during the celebration. It wasn't an easy task for one of only ten winters, but he'd do his best.

Grey recognized the importance of the day's event, and what Albrey meant to both clans. She was his one and only, the only woman he was destined to care for. Albrey was pretty with her long flowing hair and shining bright blue eyes. But Grey didn't take notice of such things; for a lad his age only cared about who could spit the farthest or who ran faster. Lassies were not important. Despite the fact that he had been told his duty, he would follow orders.

Though Grey's role within the Gunn clan was of most important, he would become laird one day. Everyone treated him as they'd treated all the lads within the clan. Warriors often teased the younger lads and played pranks on them, entertaining themselves at their whim. Grey wanted to run and practice swords with the other lads, but he also knew his duty. Besides, he was far better at swordplay than the rest of the lads his age and he had to put aside foolish childish wants. He might as well watch over the fairy he'd be betrothed to later this day.

Albrey chased after a baby goat who barely escaped capture by his small horns. In her pursuit, she sang in the most angelic voice: "Saint Swithin's day if thou dost rain, for forty days 'twill remain..."

If she caught the poor goat, she would ride the animal and cause a ruckus loud enough to reach the heavens. God help him then because they'd both be punished. With that, Grey ran at break-neck speed to get her to stop chasing the animal.

What he needed was a diversionary tactic. He sang the next verse: "Saint Swithin's day if thou be fair, for forty days 'twill rain no more." But the lass didn't heed him nor join in the rest of the song.

Her squeals of laughter sounded when she ran behind a tree.

"Albrey, lass, look." Grey pointed at a butterfly behind the smithy's hut. She immediately made an about-face turn and started in his direction. Now it was Grey's turn to be chased. She would never catch him because he was far too fast for a slip of lass like her.

As they ran toward the hut, Grey dropped on a patch of soft grass next to a tent and rolled to his back and laughed. Albrey wouldn't be thwarted though. As soon as she reached him, she pounced. Grey all but had the air taken from his lungs by the force of her wee body hitting his chest.

Grey pushed her off and shoved her face in the grass for a second or two, just to teach her a well-needed lesson. She squealed with laughter, but he wouldn't have mercy. Albrey tried to kick him, yet he was able to keep her from fleeing by holding her ankle.

"Och, Grey, let the lass up." His da lifted his cup and his eyes merrily watched their play. Laird Gunn, a seasoned, hardened warrior rarely appeared content. He always attended clan business and took on a serious manner. As was the case this day, his father sat with other lairds and discussed political matters.

For a moment, Grey admired the look on his da's face. Grey bore a resemblance to his da, given he had the same almost-black hair and cool gray eyes. Many a christening had been delayed because the priory had a fire when he'd been born. His eyes hadn't changed by the time they got around to christening him, and his ma said she'd chosen his name because of the color of his eyes.

One day he would be as strong as his da, a warrior who would defeat any enemy. His ma remarked how tall he'd gotten in the last months and he would soon have muscles to rival his father's. He wanted to be as strong as his da.

"You'll make the lass pee if you don't cease tickling her," came from Albrey's mama, who sat next to his own. "Albrey, are you behaving? You aren't tormenting poor Grey, are you?"

"Oh, nay, Mama, I've been good." Once her mother turned back to the adults, Albrey set her teeth on a target.

Grey smiled at his future wife's family and didn't pay her any mind. Albrey was fair-skinned like her ancestors and certainly not sweet-tempered. Her ancestors, like his, came on massive boats, bringing their people to a new land. Intent to raid and return to their homeland, most had stayed on, content to live on the lush lands of Scotland for all their days.

His lass didn't resemble her mother or father, nor her brother and sister, with their dark hair and brown eyes. It was whispered the lass bore traits of Mackay ancestors. The Mackay clan came to Scotland much around the same time the Gunns—all proud of their heritage and lineage. Oftentimes, his father would allow the man of God to read from the tome of when they first arrived on the land. Grey always envisioned the men to be mighty warriors who scared their enemies with clever tactics and the wit of force.

He attentively watched her family mingle with his own. Albrey's brother, Branford, was older and stood with the other important people attending King William. Her sister, Esmerelda, was to marry the year next and attended with her betrothed, Marvin, one of the king's favored and loyal vassals.

"Ow, lass, you bit me." He pulled his hand away and grimaced at the teeth marks on his palm. "Why'd you do that?"

"It's what you deserve, Grey Gunn." She pulled at his tartan and yanked it to take his attention away from the hurt. "I am sorry, Grey, did I truly hurt you?" She looked ready to weep.

"Nay, you could never hurt me, honey bee." Grey softened his voice to soothe her. He sat up and brought himself to his knees.

Before he knew what'd happened, something smacked him in the face. The little heathen threw food at him. He licked the sweet-tasting cream from his lips and laughed. Even at the lass' young age, she could make his stomach content. Each time she'd visited him, she brought gifts. She told him it was to tempt him to accept her, or so that's what her mama told her to say. He wasn't about to turn down a tasty gift, regardless of the fact he had no choice but to accept her. Grey had been taught to do his duty and he resigned himself that she would be his.

"What have you made, Albrey? It's tasty...mmm." He licked the sweet cream from his lips.

"Mama helped. I made you a sweet cake. Da brought powder when he came home and I know you like them."

"Is that the Gunn brat there with our lass?"

Both Albrey and Grey glanced up to see Kenneth MacHeth take the seat next to Albrey's father at the table which had been set up near their tent. Grey nodded in greeting as he'd seen his da do. He felt Albrey pressed against him and he set an arm around her back.

"All's well, honey bee. Why are you afeared?" Whenever she was afraid, she'd try to hide behind him. This wasn't the first time she'd done so. He remembered the day when she'd accidentally tripped the stable master and ran to him for protection, though it wasn't necessary. Everyone adored her and would rather be flayed with a reed than have her hurt or upset.

Her wee hands pulled his head forward. She whispered softly, and he bent further to hear. "It's the MacHeth. Aye, Grey, see his eyes... He looks at me like I did wrong."

"It's your imagination, lass. He's your father's ally and loves you as do all the Mackays, and this day so shall all the Gunns." Grey studied the tall warrior, whose face covered with a light-haired beard. Most of his features were hidden and he couldn't tell what manner of man he was.

She shook her head adamantly. "Nay, I tell you... When my da isn't looking, he's ireful. He does not like me."

"Of course he likes you. Why do you say that?"

She lowered her gaze. "He doesn't like me for he told me so." Her mouth turned and she cried softly.

"Shhh, lass, don't weep. I promise I won't let him look at you that way." Grey took hold of her hand and gave it an assured squeeze.

"Aye, what shall you do? Will you slay him for me, Grey? I'd like to see that." She giggled and moved further behind him when MacHeth glanced their way.

Grey turned around and set his hands on her small shoulders and smiled. "I'd slay him if that's what you want." She would be his wife when she grew to womanhood, and he wouldn't stand by and allow her distress.

She knocked him back when she threw herself in his arms. "Oh, Grey, I love you. You know why?"

"Nay, why, honey bee?" He pulled her wee hands from around his neck, knowing his face brightened to that of a shy maiden. Grey didn't want anyone seeing her fond affection for him, especially his friends who would tease him unrelentingly.

"You are my very own protector. But no one can protect me from him."

"Lass, have you told your da you're afeared? Mayhap he can calm your worries."

“The MacHeth is the monster beneath my bed. Oh, nay, for he told me not to tell.”

Grey frowned at her distressed tone. “Tell anyone what?”

“I’m not supposed to tell, Grey, not even you.”

He gripped her arm and held fast to the fabric of her frock and looked back at MacHeth. “Albrey, lass, tell me. I’ll be your husband one day, and you should tell me everything. You will start obeying me.”

With a tug to her arm, she freed herself. “You’re not my husband yet, Grey Gunn. I shan’t tell you.” The little mite stuck her tongue at him and proceeded to stick her thumb in her mouth. She was young and had much growing to do before he’d take her to wife. Hopefully, by then, she’d outgrow her impish behavior.

“You’re never going to obey me, are you?”

She pulled her thumb from her mouth. “Very well, he spoke ungodly words... Aye and then I heard him bespeak the secret.”

“What secret?”

“The MacHeth told me not to tell. He said he would spank me if I did. I didn’t mean to listen, Grey, really I didn’t. He spoke the words and no one was there but me. That’s when I learned...”

Grey scowled at the fear in her voice. “Learned what, lass?”

She closed her mouth and folded her arms, and shook her head.

“He hasn’t the right to direct you. You should tell your da. Will you tell him this day? Promise me.” Grey waited for her answer, and instead of appeasing him, she lay on the soft grass and sucked her thumb as though she hadn’t a care in the world.

Albrey took the opportunity to bend an arm beneath her head and close her eyes. She ignored him altogether. Grey didn’t like what their conversation alluded to, but it could be the imaginings of a little lass. Surely her father’s ally wouldn’t want to harm her. She was just a little snip of a girl, unable to hurt a fly.

Finally, he’d been given a reprieve when she drifted to sleep. Now with her parents close by, he could enjoy himself for a few minutes. As the sun began to set, the revelry intensified. This was Grey’s favorite time of day. The heat eased and the men set about their arms and tested their strength while there was still enough light to see.

He was always awed watching the men throw the cabers, go at each other with axes, and fight hand-to-hand combat. One day, he promised himself, he would be one of those men—a powerful force to be reckoned with as his father proclaimed. Until then, Grey studied their movements, noting each flick of the wrist, each tumble in the dirt, the effectiveness of using the body. War was part of their existence and the only way to protect what was theirs. Grey wished he was old enough to fight beside a warrior, though he needed more training before he’d be allowed to war.

Duff, Kenneth, Colm, Sean, and James joined him on the rise of the hill above the soldiers on the training field. Each had been friends since their swaddling years. Grey would one day give them each a place of honor within the clan. For he swore they would be his guard. Being laird, they would protect him and all or any that he commanded.

“Where’s the wee snot?” his friend Duff asked.

“Did you tie her to a tree, Grey? Hope you tied the rope nice and tight, for that lass can escape all,” Greer said and chortled.

The lads joined Greer in laughter, knowing that was exactly what Grey wanted to do all day. But Grey didn’t appreciate the jest or the insult and scowled at his friends.

“Nay, she’s resting. And don’t be calling her a snot, Duff. She will one day be your clan’s lady. Dare you affront me by insulting her?” He shoved Duff in the chest and knocked him backward on his arse. Grey wouldn’t let any of them insult Albrey, even in jest. His duty insisted her protect her honor even if he agreed with his friend’s remark.

Duff took offense to his action and jumped on him, making him fall to the ground. He rolled over Duff and punched him square in the nose. Grey tried to bloody him, but the lad was far too thickheaded to damage. The only way to rile him was to... Collecting a good bit of saliva in his mouth, Grey started to let it slide from his lips. A stream of spit wadded downward toward Duff’s face.

“Get off me, Grey. I swear if you spit on me, I’ll knock you senseless.” Duff squirmed beneath him and tried to buck him off.

Grey sucked up the stream of saliva and spit it far off. He shook his head and swept the hair away that fell across his eyes. “Aye, Duff? Get off your arse and don’t be offending Albrey. She’s just a wee lass and can’t help being a pest.”

The lads continued to watch the soldiers, their earlier fracas forgotten. After the late-afternoon sparring ended, his da and his closest ally Donal Ross found him. Laird Ross and his father had been friends for many years, and great allies of King William.

“Lad, I’ve been looking for you. Have you learned anything this day?” His da tilted his head toward the soldiers.

“Aye, Da, I’ve learned never to take your eyes off your opponent.” Grey eyed Duff.

Laird Ross chuckled low. “Good lesson, lad, to learn. Never underestimate him neither. Always be ready for anything and you shall never be defeated.”

Laird Gunn said, “That goes for all of you. Be off, Grey has duties to attend.”

His friends left and Grey stepped between his father and Laird Ross. He’d grown tall enough to look at their faces without raising his face much. His head nearly reached his father’s shoulders.

“I best get back to watching Albrey. She’s probably awakened by now.”

Laird Gunn patted his son’s shoulder. “Aye, you do your duty well watching the lass. It was honorable of you to do so all day, lad. We should get to the betrothal ceremony; all are likely in their cups by now and won’t get to enjoy the announcement.”

Laird Ross stopped him with a hand to his shoulder. “Before we do, I want to give you this.” He pulled a shiny dagger from a leather sheath. The dagger was well made and encrusted with a row of red jewels on the handle. “I give you this gift, Grey, on your betrothal day. As your champion and protector, I bid you to always protect what is yours.”

“I will, Laird Ross.” Grey was pleased with the gift and admired the sharp blade. The jewels gleamed and gave a sparkle to the handle. He slid it back inside the sheath and tucked it inside his tunic. “Thank you for giving it to me.”

“Come, we shall find the lass and shout the news afar. She’ll be a bonny lass, Grey, when she’s older. Albrey will give you fine sons with strength enough to lead our soldiers. You will be an honorable man and she deserving such.” Laird Ross clapped his shoulder.

Grey walked beside his father and stepped lively. He wanted to hear the grand gesture of what the betrothal meant, once again. When his da and Albrey’s father was given the order by King William to betroth Albrey to him, Grey was awakened in the middle of the night. They related the dictate with elation. The betrothal would allow them to ally their clans and put aside the wars and scuffles.

The only promise Albrey’s father asked of him was that their families be at peace and Albrey be safe from harm be it from him or his enemies. When asked if he could handle the task, Grey nodded and assured them he was capable, for which he received a few punches to his arms and grunts of approval.

Grey would always protect her and keep her in comforts, safe from his enemies, and he’d do his best to adore her. It’s what his da had done for his ma. His father placed his mother in highest esteem, and always told anyone who would listen that if it weren’t for her, he would be a lesser man. Laird Gunn taught his men to follow his lead and revere the women in their clan with the greatest respect. Grey received those lessons since he’d been able to walk. Without women, men would suffer. They wouldn’t have tasty meals, clean tartans, tidy homes, or children to strengthen the clan.

As Grey reached the table where his ma had sat, he frowned. Neither Lady Mackay nor his ma was there. The spot where Albrey lain unattended and the grass undisturbed. She hadn’t napped long. He should have known she would flee as soon as everyone’s backs turned. Then a twinge of guilt came upon him and he scolded himself for not checking on her sooner.

Both the Mackay and Gunn clans, as well of those attending the celebration, searched for hours. All looked for the missing lass, well into the morning light. Grey wouldn’t return to his family’s holding no matter how much his ma pleaded. He kept the search going, lighting a torch and checking most of her hiding spots.

The lass disappeared altogether. Grey grew dejected and blamed himself. Their earlier conversation came back to him and he relayed what she’d told him to his da. He envisioned her face when she’d told him of her fear. But his da didn’t put much weight in Albrey’s concern about Kenneth MacHeth.

After nearly three days in search of her, Grey finally conceded defeat. As he stood before his family’s home crestfallen, his da came outside.

“Come inside, Grey. Your ma is worried sick.”

Grey pulled the dagger from inside his tunic, given to him by Donal Ross. Fitting it symbolized his betrothal, a union that would never be. Taking hold of his tartan, he tore it from his body and ripped his tunic until he felt the chilly breeze on his uncovered chest. The air was crisp enough to bring a speckle of goosebumps to his flesh. Grey paid no attention to the effect of the night wind and looked up at his father.

“I didn’t keep my promise to Albrey. I swore to protect her. She’s lost to me forever, Da. This will always remind me of my failure.” Grey drew the pointed end of the sharp dagger over his heart, and made a decent sized slash, one that would certainly need to be stitched.

Blood gushed from the wound and all he felt was the warmth of the liquid flowing over his skin and the sting of his failure. He glanced at his da and his vision blurred.

“Grey, God Almighty. Grey!” His da roared an anguished cry as he caught Grey’s body before it fell to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

Falstone, Kingdom of England
Summer 1215

Bree turned at the sound of her friend's voice. "You're going to fall."

Perched on a high rock, she intended to jump, not fall. Even if she fell, the distance to the water wasn't great. The water reflected a mass of shiny waves from the bright sun as if jewels floated on the surface. She held her nose, scrunched her eyes closed, and plunged forth, and landed with a large splash in the cool water. Her feet touched the silky bottom of the lake where colder water chilled her toes. The lake was a welcome relief from the heat of the day.

"Rhys, come in. It's refreshing. I'm better now that I've cooled myself. It's too hot a day to stay in your leggings." Bree splashed and frolicked and hoped he would join her.

Rhyland, the current stable apprentice, had been with the Champlains since he was born. They'd grown up together and often Bree encouraged him to join her in the pursuit to escape her chores. Their manor was located in a desolate part of the country, where many didn't pass or visit. They seldom received visitors and aside from the household staff and those in the small village nearby; there weren't many friends to be had.

"But Bree, we'll get in trouble if we get caught. I should be about my work." He turned and peered toward the copse of trees which led back to the manor.

She never thought he was brave. But Bree had enough courage for them both and often forced Rhys to do things we wasn't wont to do. All he ever thought of was work. She swam to where he sat high upon the rock from where she'd jumped.

"Be not a babe. How shall we get in trouble? My lord and lady are away and shan't return for days. I'm free, Rhys. Come, please come in already. Besides, work will be there when you return." She sent a splash at him and laughed when he tried to avoid the drops of water.

Rhys didn't appreciate being called a babe. Though he was a handful of years older than she was, he'd reached the age beyond boyhood. Bree didn't take notice of his attraction until he removed his attire. Not that she wanted to take notice, but his chest formed muscles where there had been none. The braises he wore barely concealed his midsection and provoked her imagination to singe her cheeks. Hair covered parts of his body which had been bare. His legs now thick from work in the stables braced before he jumped in and sent a cascade of water at her. Bree sunk in the water and floated just below the surface. Strong arms propelled him toward her and she realized at that moment her childhood friend had become a man.

"This feels good." Rhys splashed her with a mighty blow to the water.

The wall of water hit her face, stung her eyes and nose, and caused her to cough.

“You devil.” Bree swam after him and dunked his head beneath the surface and used both hands to hold him under. When his dark head came up from the water, she looked into his rich-brown eyes and kissed him. It was a simple kiss, a girl’s kiss, but there it was. She had always wanted to do it and with his eyes glaring at her and his lips pursed, she didn’t think about it. His lips were hard and unyielding.

“Why did you go and do that?”

“You didn’t like my kiss?” Bree laughed and splashed him back before swimming to the bank. Once there, she crawled upon a flat rock and awaited him.

“Bree, you’re like a sister. A sister shouldn’t kiss her brother.” His face scrunched in dislike and sent a dismissive look her way.

“Fie, I am not your sister, Rhys. You kiss like a wet frog anyway.” Bree laughed at her jest, knowing her insult would gain another look of disdain.

Rhys joined her on the rock and stretched his muscular legs in front of him. “I could teach you a thing or two about kissing, but you are a bit young.”

“I am not too young to kiss. Why I would be married by now if my father didn’t love me so. My lord will soon pick a husband for me, Rhys. I know he will.” Affronted by his rejection, Bree made sure he was aware of her intent to marry one day.

He laughed harshly. “Aye? It’s doubtful he shall. Why would he want to send you away when he’d have to replace you?”

Bree’s chest tightened and a sudden solemnness came to her. “My father cares for me, Rhys. He only keeps me here because I am his daughter.”

“Likened to a kitchen serf, I deem. Aye, that is all you are to them. You forget yourself, Bree. You’re not a daughter but a serf in their eyes. Your lady never calls you daughter and Melinda never calls you sister.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. His words hurt and she couldn’t hold back the tears. “You are the meanest, vilest creature, Rhys. Dare you insult me?”

“I speak the truth. Bree, you’re a woman now, and still, you cook and serve them. Baron Champlain won’t allow you to take a husband. Not now, not ever. Best you forget about it.”

“Well, you shan’t take a wife either.”

“I shall when I earn my apprenticeship and my lord gives me a position. I will have the means to take a wife.” Rhys bumped her shoulder with his. “Bree, I apologize if I hurt your feelings. I didn’t mean to.” He took hold of her hand and squeezed it.

She wiped her tears away. “I know you didn’t. Do you really deem my father means to keep me as the cook forever? Will I ever be free?”

“I’ll always be here with you, Bree.”

“Someone comes.” Bree stood quickly and hastily pulled her overdress over her head while Rhys pulled on his leggings and tunic. She turned away when his bulge stuck out, which she couldn’t help noticing. The boy she’d played with no longer existed. One day he’d want to use his manly parts and that day fast approached.

“Bree, where are you?”

“Oh, it’s only Cait. Here, by the water with Rhys.” Bree continued to fasten the ties of her overdress and slipped her feet into her worn boots. “What goes? Have you come to join us in the lake? The water is cool.”

Cait burst through the column of trees and bent over, and tried to catch her breath. When her breath calmed she shouted, “Baron and my lady return. Frederick rode ahead to warn us so we might ready for their arrival. They are close. We must hurry.”

Bree’s heart sunk. She hadn’t had much freedom. The Champlain’s traveled to Berwickshire to attend the yearly festival. For weeks, many gathered to participate in the events and to trade goods. Berwickshire by the border drew clans from high and low regions. Border barons attended in support of their crofters, selling the crops and gaining funds. Bree never liked to attend the festivals. There was always too many people, too many tents, too many chores to be done.

And in this summer heat, she would’ve been forced to stay beside the fire tending to the meals. She especially disliked the smells from the festivals, all those people confined brought forth rancid odors from pottage pots, and lord knew what else. The respite from the Champlains hadn’t lasted long, and she wondered why they’d returned home so soon.

Lady Champlain insisted on going so she might purchase spices for their suppers. Likely she filled an entire trunk with items for which Bree would concoct delicious meals. Her lady would have it no other way. Lady Millie had taken her sister, Melinda, who was ten years younger. Melinda had pled to go and Bree was thankful her lord relented and allowed her to. The household was quiet and calm for the few days they’d been gone. Bree hoped they hadn’t come down with an illness.

“Why have they returned? They must’ve only spent a few days at the festival.”

“I know not, but we best return before they come. You have a lot of work to do and I must make sure their chamber is clean. Melinda is likely having fits from traveling. God save our ears.”

Bree laughed at Cait’s retort. Her sister was famous for her temper and tantrums.

As they walked home, Bree considered what she’d make to eat. Midday had only just past and a light fare would suffice, and for supper, she would make a stew of venison from the stag brought down that morning. She was wont to sing a song to make their walk more enjoyable and smiled when Cait and Rhys joined in. High tree canopies shaded them from the blazing sun, yet she felt the heat on her cheeks and realized she’d gotten a little burned.

Half an hour later, they approached the field beyond the large manor home. Bree noticed dust from the carts and horses in the distance.

“They come. Oh, we must hasten.” Picking up her skirts, Bree made a dash for the back entrance of the manor. She left Cait and Rhys behind and quickened her pace. Once inside, she stood by the door and gasped for breath, knowing she would hear a complaint from her lady. That was the last thing she needed this day. It was too hot to be bothered with a lecture.

In the great room, voices rose and Bree went to listen to determine if her parents were good-natured. She approached and stood at the opening of the room and watched as four large men entered behind Baron Champlain. Her mother retreated to the upper floor with Melinda who fussed the entire way about having to take a bath. She shouted and cried and caused Bree’s ears to ring. Poor Cait waited to attend them and would have to contend with her sister’s whining.

The Scotsmen who followed farther into the room didn't seem agreeable and had angst in their voices and on their faces. Her father appeared uncomfortable and his cheeks reddened.

"I expected you much sooner. Yet no word came. I didn't expect to receive you after all these years. By God, you have come." Her father looked downcast, but he quickly averted his gaze. "I cannot lose her, not my sweet girl. Not yet."

The messenger, a strapping lad, stepped forward. "I come from Laird MacHeth."

Four others stood with the messenger, each looking more fearsome than the next. They stood tall, formidable, and had an obstinacy about them, given the glare from their dark eyes.

Bree suspected all Highlanders bore those traits since all she'd met held a similar appearance. Her father didn't seem to take insult at their demeanor. He waved a hand and bade him hand over the message.

"I have a direct missive from our laird. I'm to repeat it word for word," the messenger said.

"So speak you then and let us hear this message."

"Our laird instructed you to ready the lass. She's to be sent with a contingent of your guard for her protection to his lands. The time has come for the revolt. MacHeth said there will be forfeiture if she is not delivered timely. She will wed in one month and you shall ready your army in support."

Bree was surprised to hear his words in English and expected the heaviness of Gaelic brogue. Yet the man-at-arms spoke English well. They didn't appear to be of the border clans and wore the attire of the northern regions. Long tartans reached their knees, and their feet were covered by leather footwear constructed into boots. They wore tunics covered by their clan's tartans, with the colors to show who they belonged to. Most had hair below the nape of their necks, except for the messenger who wore his a bit longer.

"It begins. I will send word to my king. Who is she betrothed to?"

"It is no concern of yours, Champlain. No other words were conveyed. We will take our leave. MacHeth will be waiting for the lass." The Highlanders left as vociferously as they came, whooping and hollering as they made their way through the manor and courtyard.

Her father stood with his man-at-arms. They spoke low and Bree snuck behind the buttery to listen. "I feel most guilty for what I am about to do, Johnny. I didn't realize then what I agreed to. How can I send her away?"

Baron Thomas' closest confidant nodded but spoke not a word.

"I should have refused the Highlander, but then I hadn't been in a powerful position."

"Nay, My Lord, you didn't have the backing of the king and the prosperity of such a rich fief. If the revolt is a success you shall be in greater favor with their new king."

"It matters not to me who rules Scotland, but being here by the border makes the issue a slight concern. She was so small and needed our help then. I cannot negate the pact now, Johnny. Though I wish with all my heart I could. My wife's going to be inconsolable."

Bree's chest tightened as she watched them closely, and noted the forlorn look on their faces. They spoke of her because she was the only child who lived at the fief for many years. They certainly weren't discussing Melinda, who was still in her tender years and unmarriageable yet. There was no time to ponder their discussion now, her lord and lady expected refreshment from travel.

She retreated to the kitchens and made a light fare of cheese and bread and filled a tankard with ale. She took the meal to her father's chamber and used her foot to knock at the door. Her father bid her entry with a shout and she used her hip to open the door wide enough to move inside. Bree set the tray on a table where her mother sat. She waited for her lady's command, knowing she would want something more.

"Bree, you look bright. Were you outside this day?"

She curtsied and smiled, and tried to sound amiable. "Aye, I took a long walk early this morn. Can I get you anything else, My Lady? Shall I get you a cool cloth to ease the heat?"

"Is she not the most obedient, dutiful child, Thomas?"

Her father turned from the window casement and approached. "The most of any, Millie." He had sadness in his eyes. Bree was never once reprimanded by him, and she maintained he cared for her. Were he her true father, she wouldn't have to worry about what was to come. Yet he was the only father she'd ever known.

Bree turned to leave, but Barron Thomas stopped her.

"Wait a moment, Bree. Would that we speak with you?"

"Aye, Father?" Bree's stomach flipped and a churned nervous flutter sat in her belly. She wasn't wont to hear what he would say.

"Sit, please, and listen, daughter." He motioned to her to sit in the chair next to his wife's.

Bree sat on the edge of the seat and waited. Her father paced with folded hands in front of him and glanced at the floorboards. He didn't speak for several seconds and made Bree take notice of the silence in the chamber.

"Bree, you are aware that you are not our daughter in the sense that we bore you."

"Aye, but you will always be mother and father to me." She spoke sincerely because, in truth, they were the only parents she'd ever known. It mattered not to her since they took her in and gave her a home.

"You came to us when you were young. I remember that day as if it happened yesterday. You are pure of heart. Millie and I think of you as a daughter and always will. We would hope our Melinda is as kind and true as you before she comes of age."

She couldn't speak. Never had either of them spoken such praiseworthy words to her. A knot formed in Bree's throat and she averted her gaze from Lady Champlain, who most likely wept.

"I regret I've not made a worthy match for you sooner, but such affairs have been settled. We shall miss you fiercely."

"Have I done something to displease you? You know that I—"

"Oh, nay, dearest, you could never displease us. There's been a request for your hand. It's a good match and it is time you married." Her father despaired and rubbed his forehead, a tell-tale sign he was bothered.

"I've displeased you. You mean to send me away." Tears shimmered in her eyes and her voice thickened with emotion. She tried to compose herself and took a deep breath.

Her father knelt next to her. "I have never seen you distraught and it pains me. Nay, I wish we could keep you here forever. But you must go, Bree. You'll be well protected."

"Protected? I dislike that word, My Lord. Who am I to marry?"

“You are called home to your family. They have made the arrangement. We promised to keep you safe until they came for you. The laird will tell you whom you shall marry upon your arrival. He has sent a messenger and requested the wedding be in one month. We shall prepare for your departure.”

Bree twisted her hands and fidgeting, yet reason made her unemotional. “I know not of my family. Why do they come for me now?”

“There were matters which concerned them and for your protection, you were given to us for safekeeping. Now that you reached womanhood, they’ll want you to marry someone of import, someone within their clan.”

Bree sniffed back a cry. The mention of her family brought mixed emotions. On one hand, she was nervous about meeting them, and on the other, she found herself excited about the prospect of knowing where she’d come from.

“I hoped to marry. I am most pleased, My Lord. Will you and My Lady travel with me?”

“Nay, we cannot. There’s many important matters to see to here. You will be well, Bree, a married woman. You won’t need us.”

“I shall be alone?” Her heart crushed from the pain of his words. For as long as she remembered, she disliked being alone and often felt as though she had no one. Bree wanted to sink to her knees and beg him not to send her away, but she wouldn’t demean herself in such a way. She had always thought she would marry a man who lived close to her lord and lady, someone like Rhys. The thought of marrying someone unknown worried her.

“Nay, not alone. Cait will go with you. Will that make you feel better?”

“Aye, My Lord, it does. I thank you. Will I see you again? Will I live afar?”

He took her hand and gently squeezed it. “Aye, very far. The Highlanders are unusual people. They don’t like outsiders and keep to themselves. We would not be welcomed. You’ll be one of them and therefore inaccessible to us. We are assured of your care and won’t worry for you.”

Bree inferred there was more to what he had told her. “I heard you speak to the soldiers, and I am frightened...”

“The laird wouldn’t have called for you if there was danger.” His voice rose in agitation. “I know the reason you were placed with us, Bree, until the lairds were ready... Yet I must have faith you will be safe.”

“What readiness do you speak of?”

“These are matters of men and don’t concern you.” He patted her hand.

“I’m to leave then and never return,” Bree said dejectedly.

“My Lady, please, can you not offer comfort to the girl?” he said to his wife with a bit of bite to his words.

Her mother sobbed quietly and if she dared to look at her, Bree would lose her decorum and weep as well. Seeing someone cry always brought tears to Bree’s eyes. She couldn’t help but be sorrowful when someone wept. Lady Millie’s sorrow wasn’t caused by Bree’s marriage announcement or the woe of sending a daughter away. Her sorrow was caused by her own selfishness. She’d never once comforted Bree in all the years she’d lived there, except to assure

herself of a lavish meal and food with which all others envied. If Lady Millie had adoration for her, it was certainly not because of her love of Bree, but for her talent in the kitchen.

"I shall go and ready for my departure." Bree didn't wait to be dismissed. She hastened to the door and ran down the stairs to her chamber at the back of the manor. Tears streamed her cheeks and she released her heartache.

After opening the hide cover on the window casement inside her chamber, she leaned on the stone ledge and looked at the view. The summer dusk hadn't cooled the land and still, the heat warmed the stone. Bree was fond of the manor, for it was the only home she'd ever known. As if to memorize every tree, every slope of the land, every rock, she gazed and swore never to forget where she had been raised.

How she came to be with the Champlains was unknown to her. She didn't remember where she came from or who her parents were. Accepting her fate, she never questioned it. Her earliest memory was of Cait giving her a bath in the kitchen.

Bree was sure she'd done something dreadful to have caused her family's banishment. Because of that, she vowed to be as good as she could be so she wouldn't be sent away again. Lady Champlain's acceptance came with pride when Bree showed a talent for making delicious meals. From a young age, Bree curbed any yearning for affection from her mother. She hid her carefree spirit from everyone, well except for Rhys and Cait.

As she began to pack a trunk to take with her, she realized she hadn't much in the way of belongings. The trunk was half full with two overdresses, a cloak, and three pairs of stockings, all given to her by the baron. She had no jewels or mementos, or anything of real value. Switching the trunk for a satchel, she placed the items inside.

Cait entered her room and closed the door with a quiet thud. She leaned back against it and scoffed. "I brought you food. You must be starved."

Bree glanced at her longtime friend. "I cannot eat a thing."

Cait's brown eyes softened. "You shall waste away. Come and at least eat some fruit. Verily, I don't know how you can be such a marvelous cook when you hardly taste what you make."

"If I ate everything I cooked, I'd be much rounder than I already am."

Cait set the food beside her and pressed back her long brown locks of hair. "But you have a lovely body. I see the way the men look at you. You turned into a beautiful woman."

"They don't look at me like anything. You see what you want to see." Bree giggled at her friend's comment.

"Well, I never heard such bawling in all my days. Lady Millie is beside herself weeping and carrying on. Serves her well for being selfish and cruel to you. All she keeps saying is that she will likely wither away from lack of decent food. Mayhap she should've learned to cook. It's doubtful anyone will come to fill your position."

Bree took a piece of bread and broke it in two and handed a piece to Cait. "She wasn't cruel, Cait. She was kind to let me stay here all these years. I should be grateful."

"Bah, grateful. Gracious, you deserve to be away from here. I must discuss with you what I overheard the baron speaking of. At first, they argued over your departure, but then my lady had no choice but to accept the baron's command. You received the news?"

“Aye, I’m to be wed. I fear of what’s to come, Cait. I don’t even know who I will marry, never even met him. What if he’s a toad?”

Cait laughed snidely. “If he is a toad, you could crush him with your foot. I heard the news, Bree, and I’m pleased to leave with you. Baron Thomas said he didn’t want you to be alone. He is a good man to send me along with you.”

“I never feel alone when I’m with you.”

Cait embraced her. “Do you not remember how fearful you were when you first came?”

“I do,” Bree said with a weak smile.

Her friend sat next to her and set an arm around her shoulder. “You were little. I had to coax you to come to me. You were a frightened thing. The men who brought you were quite fearsome. Baron Thomas bade me to take you to their private chamber and to stay there until they left. I did what he said and ordered a bath for you and instead took you to the kitchen.”

“I remember that. You have always been kind to me.”

“I stayed with you until Lady Millie came... I didn’t understand, Bree, and wasn’t aware of why you came to us. The baron told Lady Millie about it a few minutes ago. He made a pact with those men to keep you here until they came for you. Laird MacHeth entrusted your care to him and Baron Thomas said you would assist in unseating their king. For what reward I know not, but the baron wouldn’t do so without a form of payment. Likely for protection since they are close to the border.”

Bree didn’t recall the name of MacHeth nor of the events Cait spoke of. “I overheard my lord speaking to the Scots messengers. What you say is true. It matters not now.”

“Nay, I suppose it does not.”

“Am I related to this MacHeth? Do you deem they cared for me?”

“Whether you are related or not, remember they sent you away, Bree. Still, this man is not honorable. I would be wary. Baron Thomas said the MacHeth clan had an uprising and the old laird was killed. If this MacHeth was the man who sent you here, I worry why he now wants you returned. I wonder what this marriage brings him and why he would need you to revolt against his king.”

Her tone implied she should be afraid, and the more her friend revealed, the more fearsome she became. For as long as Bree could remember, Cait listened to her worries. She always gave sound advice too. Though she was a few marks older than she, Cait had wisdom beyond her age. If anyone knew about matters of love and men, Cait certainly did. She was promiscuous and often they shared a laugh at the situations Cait found herself. But she was intelligent on many matters too and Bree cherished her guidance.

A knock sounded at the door and she called entry.

“That will be your bath. I asked them to bring it here instead of the kitchen so we can talk privately,” Cait said. “We have much to discuss.”

A few men brought a small tub. Behind them, several more men came and poured steaming water into the basin. Rhys waited outside her chamber and entered when the men left. As tall as the doorway, he leaned against the frame and stared at her, unmoving.

“Rhys, what has your tongue?” Bree never saw him looking as glum. “I shall miss you more than anyone when I leave.” A sudden sadness came. For she’d always thought she would marry Rhys

and become his wife, bear his children, and cook for him. Childhood dreams would never come to be.

“And I shall miss you, Bree. Wish I could find a way to keep you here.”

Bree glanced at Cait who turned to look out the window. An uncomfortable mien came over them. “I wish that were so, too, Rhys.”

“Before you leave, I must tell you, Bree... I have always loved you. I would have asked for your hand when I finished my apprenticeship. Now you are lost to me.” Rhys pulled her into his embrace and kissed her. He kissed her long and with passion.

Bree had never been kissed as ardently before and if she thought the girlish kiss she gave him earlier at the lake compared, she was positively mistaken. His lips weren't unyielding now. They were soft and giving. The strangest thing happened; he stuck his tongue in her mouth and moved it around hers. She'd always dreamed of being kissed as fervently. Bree waited to see what he'd do next, but he ended the kiss too soon.

When Rhys pulled back, he looked into her eyes and nodded. “Take care, fair Bree.”

She stood dumbstruck by his kiss and before she could say a word to him, he left. Gazing at the threshold, Bree couldn't seem to make her feet move.

Cait jarred her from her reverie. “Bree, come, let us get you bathed and we can continue our discussion.”

Bree undressed and sank into the warmth of the water. She moaned when her sore muscles gave a slight throb. Woe came upon her and she couldn't hold back her sobs. “Now he tells me he loves me.”

“Ah, my poor girl, you will never forget your first love. Your father wouldn't have allowed you to marry Rhys. Barron Thomas considered him beneath your station, Bree.”

“Mayhap, still I am fond of Rhys and I shall miss him. I am worried, Cait. What if I don't find this man I'm to wed to my liking?”

“Everything will be well. I considered this matter and thought of a way you can escape this marriage. That laird is vile and you cannot marry his choice of men. Lord knows who he's marrying you to. The baron said MacHeth claimed to be family when he brought you.”

“Why would MacHeth return for me? If I am important to him, why would they have brought me here?”

“Who knows why, Bree? Whoever you are, the MacHeth Laird needs you. We were told by the baron to treat you as if you were the king's daughter when you arrived. He said you were a special girl and should be loved by all. We all thought you adorable and the baron was fond of you. He didn't reveal much to his wife about you or why you came at the time. But MacHeth aims to start a war and with you in the midst. I know not if he's your family for true. He is likely lying.”

“I don't remember my family, Cait, or the MacHeth. All I can discern is they didn't want me. I always thought I shamed them and they banished me.” The thought of war turned her stomach, but what her family had done caused more anguish.

“You could never shame anyone, Bree, especially at such a tender age. You couldn't have been more than four or five years when you came.”

Bree saddened by the talk and sunk lower in the tub. "I wish I remembered more, but I was young. I fear I was dismayed, Cait, and longed to forget."

"My poor sweeten. There's a way to thwart this MacHeth. I have it on good authority the Gunns hate the MacHeths and they would smite them any way they could."

"What has that to do with me? My father knows he's sending me to these people, and I must accept he wouldn't put me in harm's way." Once again she'd be sent away. Bree wasn't sure she could make her way as easily as she had when she came to the Champlains. Being little, she followed the rules and never spoke out of turn. Surely, that helped to win them over and kept her secure.

"You are in danger, Bree."

"I wish I could stay here where I'm safe. Truly, at least I'm loved here."

Cait scoffed. "Loved? Aye, adored for your cooking but not much else. You're nothing but a kitchen maid to the Champlain's. All you do is serve them, Bree, morn, noon, and eve. You should find your place, a place where you might be happy and loved as you should be."

"But I am happy here. I get to cook in the kitchen and no one bothers me."

"I know you enjoy cooking, Bree, but there's more to existing than cooking all day." Cait's words stung for she spoke the truth.

"I suppose I should go."

"Aye, you must, but not to MacHeth. My cousin is a Gunn. We can ask the Gunns to save you."

"I cannot risk others. Why would the Gunns care if I were to wed a MacHeth?"

"Because stealing a MacHeth's intended bride would be most insulting." Cait smiled smugly as if she had secrets Bree wasn't privy to.

Bree shook her head at the absurdity. "It's a dangerous game, Cait. The Gunns might be worse than the MacHeths. I don't want to borrow trouble."

"Trouble finds you whether you borrow it or not, Bree. Now, I have it on good authority the Gunns are a respected clan and are god-fearing. They take care of their own."

"I want to know what happened to me, Cait. I should go to the MacHeth's and find out. I should face what is to come and not be cowardly." She splashed water on her shoulders and sunk lower in the tub to rinse her hair, swishing her locks in the water. When she rose from the water, Cait reached for a cloth.

"That's not a fair idea. Those men who came...had evil about them. I say we contact the Gunns and ask them for protection."

"What makes you think they'll give me protection?"

Cait gave her a 'don't-I-know-everything' look. "They'll give it, if you had something of value to offer... You could bargain payment for the employment of their protection."

Bree rose from the tub and Cait wrapped a cover around her. "I have nothing of value, Cait, to bargain for their employ." Now chilled from the cool air on her wet skin, Bree pulled the cover tightly around her. Clean and smelling of lilac soap, she felt somewhat better, if not cooler.

"If you ask Baron Thomas, I'm sure he will send you off with a dowry of sorts."

"He's wealthy and probably would give me something to appease the laird. Do you deem he would? What should I ask for?"

“You have been akin to a dutiful daughter since the day you arrived. Baron Thomas adores you for keeping his wife appeased. Of course, he will give you a gift. The only thing that would sway the Gunns is salt.” Cait circled her. “That’s what you should request. Say it shall be a gift to your husband. Barron Thomas cannot refuse your request.”

“Why would they want salt?” Confounded by their conversation, Bree scowled.

“The Highlanders have no need for gold or other possessions. They’re simple people with little needs. But salt would help cure their meat and be of great value.”

“I could bring my herbs and spices too. The baron always brings me plenty when he returns from Londontown and the markets.”

“That would appease the Gunns. I’ll send word to Gordy this day. We will give them a location to meet us but will be discreet about wanting them to come for you. We’ll dangle the prize so to speak.” Cait nodded as if she were to be that prize.

“Hah, I’m certainly no prize, Cait. What about the soldiers? You must know I’ll be escorted. They won’t let me leave unattended with the Gunns.”

Cait laughed and took the cloth from her and dried her hair. “They’ll believe the men who come for you are the MacHeths. We must be deceitful.”

“I don’t deem hiding amongst the Gunns will keep the MacHeths away.”

Cait dropped the cloth and set an arm around her. “Who said anything about hiding?”

CHAPTER THREE

In plain sight, Grey Gunn stood at the base of the rise.

He wanted his men to see him observe their training. Their valiant effort could be seen from the distance in which he stood, too. There was much to accomplish before the mist drifted to the flat field. The young warriors had a plethora to learn before he'd take them to battle. Duff, his commander-in-arms, and his closest friend trained the lads for hours this day. Though Duff didn't have the patience which Greer possessed, he hadn't lost his fortitude yet. Greer, his third-in-command, and the most effective with a bow, never shouted at the lads. Duff needed to learn a lesson from Greer in that regard.

The day went to hell and hound when the sky darkened and thick clouds rolled in. Soon heavy rain would fall and would clear the field of its mist. But it would also make it impossible to continue the training session. Winds whipped from the sea and sent a salty taste in the air. There wasn't much time, and still, they needed to go through defensive movements. The young warriors had yet to improve in that matter. Nevertheless, they certainly boasted when it came to offensive tactics.

The new recruits only mimicked the more seasoned warriors. Perhaps he should let them train together and have his experienced warriors give the lads a taste of humility. That would take away their overconfidence. Arrogance was unimpressive when the young warriors couldn't back it up with defense on the battlefield. They had much to learn and yet he couldn't be prouder. Soon his young soldiers would be seasoned and then he would have no worry of warring with other clans.

When Duff had enough and frustration finally wore him down, he left the field and turned the lads over to Greer's capable hands. He stomped from the field and stood next to him. His scowl attested he'd indeed lost his patience. "Shall we call it a day, Laird?"

"They've been at it since early this morning and put through the basics. The sky is about to open. There'll be a brisk wind this night."

"A wee brisk wind would be welcome after this day." Duff whistled a shrill sound and called a halt to the exercises. At once, the young warriors stopped their lessons and trotted toward the incline.

As Gordy, one of his warriors-in-training passed by, Duff grabbed hold of the young lad's tunic. The lad grew to a manly height, but he didn't have the muscles of a warrior yet. His arms were a bit scrawny, definitely not strong enough to hold a worthwhile sword. Gordy shook his light brown mane of hair and his eyes bulged with a look of fright.

"Where are you off to? I told you I wanted to speak to you about your absence. You were gone for days. You have some explaining to do."

Gordy barely got the words out, "I...I asked... James gave me permission to visit my cousin. It was of import and... He said not to bother you or our laird."

Duff cuffed the side of his head. "Your laird is standing right there, lad. Have some respect."

Gordy nodded, bowed, and lowered his gaze to his feet.

James and the rest of his guard sauntered toward them and joined the circle. Each smiled and seemed interested in what was happening. Duff drew their interest when his voice rose.

“James,” Duff called, “did you give this clootie a pass to visit relatives?”

James laughed at Duff’s insult and stepped between him and Gordy. Grey thought James might be protecting the lad from Duff’s anger.

“Aye, a messenger came and said he had important news for Gordy. I allowed him to go. You and Grey were hunting and I didn’t think you’d care.”

Grey nodded. “All’s well then.”

“I’ll just take my leave.” Gordy turned but before he stepped away, Grey called him back.

Duff smiled, a rarity, still the corners of his mouth gave a slight twitch. “Where are your manners, Gordy? You don’t walk away from your laird without permission. He hasn’t given it yet.”

“I...I apologize, Laird. May I be excused now?”

“Not yet,” Duff said and blew a frustrated sigh. “Your laird wants to know what this news was and of what import it is?”

Grey raised a brow at Duff’s baiting the lad. “I can speak for myself, Duff.” He shoved his long-time friend in the chest and moved closer to Gordy, somewhat protecting him from his overbearing commander. “What is the important news, Gordy?”

Gordy swallowed hard, which went observed by all the guardsmen who stood around him. They pressed in; all waited for the lad to speak. Gordy became nervous and tried to back up a step, but Colm was behind him and shoved him forward. The lad bumped into Kenneth who shoved him in return.

“You’ll look at me when I address you, lad, not at your feet.” Grey had enough fooling around. There were clan matters to see to, and he didn’t have time to waste standing around baiting a lad, even if it entertained his guards.

His brutish guard reveled in scaring the younger lads, and hell if he wasn’t stronger and meaner than each one of them, he might have been intimidated too. They were formidable even when it hadn’t called for it. Gordy surprised him for the simple fact that he stood his ground.

“Laird, I’m not sure you’ll want to hear the news.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

Gordy impressed him when he looked him in the eyes and said, “My cousin told me that the MacHeth Laird sent for a bride.”

His guardsmen immediately spat on the ground. The name MacHeth instigated their ill-mannered disrespect. Well-deserving disrespect too, in Grey’s opinion. He didn’t know what to make of this news.

Duff took a step forward and essentially cut off any chance of Gordy’s escape. “That is news. Who is the poor lass he’s to marry? She’s probably one of the Dunmore lassies.” The Dunmore clan wasn’t greatly respected, yet they were neighbors of sorts.

Gordy’s face turned red and he appeared chagrined by their questions. The MacHeths were the most hated clan by the Gunns and the lad looked to be holding something back. Grey motioned for him to speak with a wave of his hand, beckoning him to be forthcoming.

"I was told the lass is from the border area. She is traveling to MacHeth land even now. My cousin told me she carries great wealth."

Greer hooted with laughter. "You hear that? The lass has great wealth. She is what is of value, lad. But Laird, you won't let that son-of-a-shanty have the wealth will you?"

"What say you, Laird?" Duff asked and raised an inquisitive brow.

"To what?" Grey knew exactly what Duff asked. He wouldn't let any poor lass end up with the dastardly MacHeth. She'd be going to the son of the devil who preyed on the young and innocent.

His guard stared at him and waited with expectation for him to continue. Grey took his time and assessed their faces. Duff always wanted to do something daring and was ready for the challenge. Greer and Kenneth, brothers, always wore the same expression. They smiled no matter what the situation and relished a good fight or a good woman. James, Sean, and Colm frowned, a testament they didn't like the thought of any lass in danger. Hell, half the women in the clan chased after the men. They were always available to any lass in distress or not. His guard patiently waited for him to come to a conclusion.

"Before I decide if it's worth my time and trouble, tell me, Gordy, what value does she bring besides herself?" Grey almost laughed when he noticed his guardsmen's nods.

Gordy's voice cracked on his first word. "Salt. She brings trunks of it, Laird. My cousin told me she is from a prosperous family. The lady is a—"

Duff shoved his chest. "Be what? Do you dare to insult the lady?"

"A good cook, Laird, aye. My cousin is traveling with the lady and they will take rest at the Abbey near the crossing before moving on. They have a long journey."

"Laird, you could use a good cook. Anna's cooking is atrocious." That came from Colm.

The guards laughed, but his comment didn't amuse Grey. Though he had to admit he'd hoped for a good meal at least once during the sennight. The lass' cooking was horrible. Each night he'd make excuses not to have to eat the fare. He and his guard had even taken to hide the fare so her feelings wouldn't be hurt. Truth be told, he'd rather eat bark from a tree than Anna's cooking.

"Are you smiling, Laird?" Greer asked.

"Well, damn me, I am...cheerful at the thought of not having to eat Anna's cooking. Och the thought of snatching MacHeth's bride brings me more joy."

Duff grunted. "Payback, aye, Laird? A bride for a bride?"

The men's mood instantly changed. They went from jesting and joyous to sullen and solemn. Each wore a grave face and their bodies tensed.

"We don't have proof MacHeth was involved in Albrey's disappearance." Grey grew somber too. He hadn't spoken Albrey's name in so long; it felt odd speaking it.

They had no proof Kenneth MacHeth took any part in what happened to Albrey Mackay. Yet right after her disappearance, the clan had an uprising and Kenneth declared himself laird. All Mackay followers had no choice but to submit to MacHeth or flee to the hills. Grey's own father was hard-pressed to take action since no one proved MacHeth's guilt.

To make matters worse, Albrey's family blamed the Gunns for her disappearance because she'd vanished on their land. All hope of an alliance though was out of the question. The Mackays

promised Grey a bride and never followed through. Only one person would harm the lass and that man was Kenneth MacHeth.

Grey swore he would never marry when Albrey disappeared. Deep down, he felt he'd failed in his duty. He promised to protect her and yet she had been taken. Of course, he'd been young then, certainly not old enough to protect a child. He was a child himself. But a promise was a promise though, and to him, he hadn't kept his word.

There was no trace of Albrey. Grey's father, God rest his soul, took him on a journey to search for her. They even traveled as far as England to search for her, even though his father vowed never to step foot in England.

"How much time do we have, Gordy?" Colm asked.

"You have a few days, at best. My cousin said they would travel slowly because of the trunks."

Kenneth grinned and raised his brow. "She must be a delicate lady. What I want to know, lad, is she... How bonny is she? Did you get a look at her?"

Greer and James grabbed Gordy's arms and provoked him to tell the truth.

"Aye, I saw her, but only for a few seconds when I met my cousin at the door."

"Well, what did she look like?" Duff asked.

"The smells coming from within were heavenly, Laird. It made my stomach ache to have some of her food. Never smelled anything like that before. My cousin gave me a bowl of pottage. I swear my tongue tasted heaven. Whatever she put in it, was the best thing I ever ate." Gordy kept his expression serious.

Greer smirked. "We don't want to hear about the food, Gordy. We want to know about the lady. Was she comely, shapely, did she have good sized breasts? Come, lad, details..."

"I got a peek at her and she is bonny. She has golden hair. It is long and wavy, looks like silk. But what struck me was when she turned and looked..."

All the men stood silent and stared at the lad. They hung on his every word, mouths agape. Grey was disgusted by their behavior. "And?"

"Did you blush like a wee lassie, Gordy?" Greer asked and punched Gordy's arm. "You're greener than our pastures. Did she bring you to your knees? I bet she did."

"Nay, of course not. I thought an angel was peering at me. She has the prettiest eyes I ever beheld. They are bluer than the sky. Her voice is soft and sounded like an angel's."

"Och, then she may be more valuable than salt," Kenneth said in jest.

The warriors released Gordy's arms and after bowing to him, Gordy took off. Hell, the lad hadn't even waited to be dismissed. Grey forgave him. He'd be running too if he was in Gordy's boots.

It was then that the sky opened and rain fell hard. Grey welcomed the cool rain on his skin, as did his men, who walked beside him as if it were a mere shower. The heat from the day cooled in an instant when the fat raindrops cut through the thick air.

As he ambled toward the keep, he said, "We leave at first light. Greer, you'll be left in charge whilst I'm gone. Make the preparations."

"Why me, Laird? I want to see the lady."

He raised an eyebrow in silent question of Greer's disobedience. "Do you honestly think Duff will be left behind? I trust you'll tend to things whilst we're away."

Greer accepted the position with a nod and a grunt, but he gave Duff a killing look.

He and his men reached the keep and strode inside. A foul odor came from the table and in disgust; he bade Kenneth take the food to the hounds. Certain the dogs wouldn't want such gruesome fare either. It'd be left for stray animals that happened by if they were hungry enough to risk their lives.

"I'm off, Laird, to arrange tomorrow's duties. I'll see you before you leave for any instructions," Greer said, and when Grey gave him a nod, he left the hall.

Duff joined him at the table and they discussed the route they would take. During their discussion, a woman entered the hall and asked Colm if she might have a word with the laird.

Grey overheard the woman's request and turned to see who she was. He didn't recognize her, but bid her to come to him. The woman wore her muted brown hair in a coif, covered by a strip of fabric. It was her eyes though that Grey tried to assess, but she kept them lowered.

"Laird Gunn, I don't know if you remember me... I came for the summer solstice feast a few years back. I'm from the Dunmore clan."

"Aye? Welcome. Will you take a seat and tell me why you have come?"

The child she held wiggled in her arms and wanted to be set down. When she was denied her freedom, the child wailed. A louder sound he never heard. By the grace of God, the lass quieted when the woman set her on the floor.

"I...we should have privacy for our...discussion," she said and looked at Duff.

"Duff is my second-in-command and is privy to all my business."

"Oh." The woman gazed at the rushes and mumbled, "Well, laird, we...that is, when I visited we slept together and I bore a child as a result." She blurted it out rather fast.

Grey scowled at her words and he wasn't certain he heard her correctly. He hadn't even remembered her. "Who are you and when did you say this happened?"

"Janice, Laird Gunn. You don't recall waking and making me leave your chamber? It was during the festival, here."

"Which festival?" he asked, his impatience wearing thin.

"It was during the summer solstice a few years ago. Our clan was invited to partake..."

Grey frowned and tried to recall the woman and the festival, but neither was familiar. The Dunmore clan hadn't been invited for a few years since the Dunmore's aligned with the MacHeths. Then he recalled the festival in which they'd found the barrels of brew and many drank to the point of inebriation.

He'd drunk far too much and found a woman warming his bed. Nevertheless, Grey didn't remember much more after that, except when he'd awakened during the night he was alone. At the time, he considered he'd dreamed the events of the night.

"You say the child is mine?"

"Aye, she is yours."

"You're certain?" Grey took a formidable stance and gave the woman a stern glare. Yet she didn't cower away from him.

"I hadn't been with any other around that time, Laird Gunn. I have no means to take care of her and well... I'm to marry."

Grey was sickened by the woman's attitude. The Dunmores were uncaring banshees. What kind of mother would give her child away without a thought? He looked at the wee lass when she peeked at him from behind the woman. The sprite didn't resemble him or her mother.

"You have no care for the child?"

"Nay, I do not. She is a Gunn. My husband wouldn't want another man's child in our home, especially a Gunn. I will leave her in your care."

Grey couldn't believe the woman's audacity. If anything, he'd save the child from a hellish life with such a banshee. "If that is your wish."

"Aye, it is, Laird Gunn. She's a handful, but she does have a good heart. Mind you, she cannot hear. I don't know why, but there it is. I have brought her belongings and will have them fetched."

The woman turned to leave and Grey called out to her. "What's her name?"

"Sunny, Laird Gunn, her name is Sunny. She's three summers." With that, the woman set the child in his lap and left.

Duff laughed his arse off. "Saddled with your own bastard daughter, Laird. Grey, you dog. I never knew you had a woman that night. Why didn't you say something?"

"Why would I? Christ Almighty, I don't remember being with her. I doubt she's telling the truth, but it is better the child's left here. What the hell am I going to do with a child?"

"You're asking me? I say you find womenfolk to come and care for her. There are plenty of women who would gladly volunteer."

Grey was beside himself. As he looked down at the sprite, she reminded him of another wee lass who had as much spirit. The lass raised herself upward and clasped his neck with her wee hands. She didn't make a sound, only hugged him. Her blonde curls tickled his cheek.

"Will you ask Bea and Nell to come and stay at the keep? They're free of responsibilities, having no family. But if they don't want to, find others." The two women helped prepare for the company he'd received. Bea had yet to marry. Nell's husband, Joseph, a worthy Gunn warrior, died in battle only a year prior. They didn't seem to mind serving in the laird's keep, which is why he'd thought of them in the first place. He hoped they'd be amiable because he'd leave the child in their care.

Duff left whistling a cheerful tune.

"A daughter. Figures," Grey said to himself. The wee lass backed enough to view his face and smiled. Her small teeth were shiny and bright. "Well, a daughter might not be so bad. You'll be a good lass and listen to your da." A sudden severity came to him saying those words.

He never expected to father a child and one which reminded him of Albrey at that. Though he'd been with a few women, he'd always been careful. His responsibilities were too time-consuming and he had no desire to wed and raise a family. At least, he hadn't thought of the desire since he'd been a lad when his life was destined for a different path. Had his heart hardened beyond repair?

He didn't need such a hindrance in his life, but it seemed what he wanted didn't much matter. Grey supposed he did have room in his heart for a daughter. Life was about to become far more complicated.