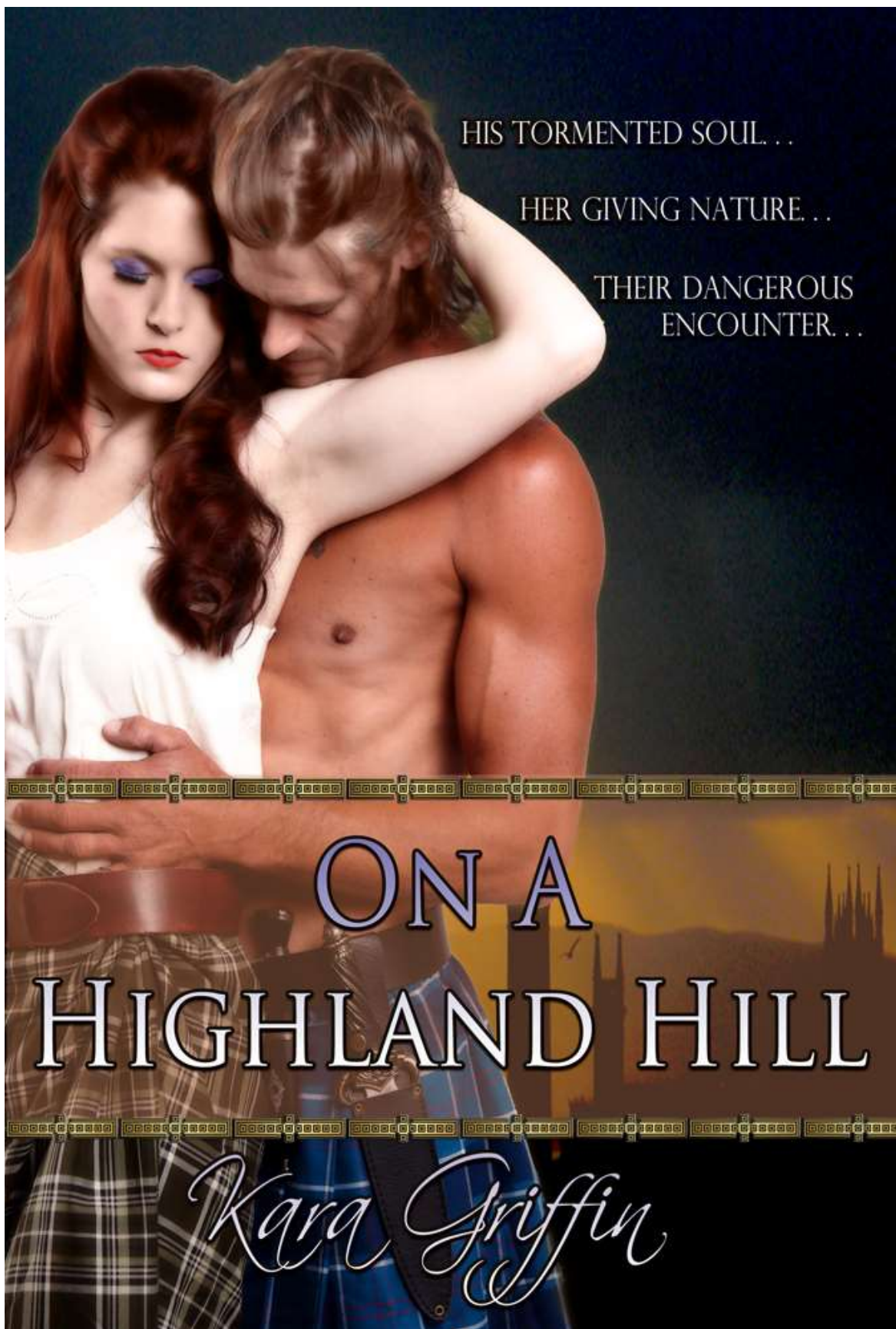




HIS TORMENTED SOUL...

HER GIVING NATURE...

THEIR DANGEROUS
ENCOUNTER...

ON A HIGHLAND HILL

Kara Griffin

ON A HIGHLAND HILL

Gunn Guardsman - Book Two

KARA GRIFFIN

ON A HIGHLAND HILL

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This book contains adult material, reader discretion advised.

DEDICATION

For one of my dearest friends, Christy Gissendaner Mann, for her
endearing support and friendship all these many years

We were just two broken souls trying to fix one another. -Ery Michaels

ON A HIGHLAND HILL

They were destined to meet, but they never expected to fall in love...

His tormented soul

Kenneth McInnish, a guardsman for the powerful Gunn Clan, is not prepared for the tender devotion from the lass his clan steals from the king. Tricked into marrying her, he makes the best of it. But it's her kisses that win him over to the fact that he might enjoy being married. Beneath Kenneth's wounded heart lies a protector. But Elisa is more than capable of taking care of herself. The only place he's sure of himself is at night when he shares the most passionate experiences of his life.

Her giving nature

Elisa always thought she'd marry the ruthless warrior who abducted her. When she finds out the truth behind her abduction and is mercifully rescued, she is forced to wed for her protection. She chooses a warrior whose soul needs saving the most. Everything she does to aid Kenneth goes awry and puts him in a worse position. Faced with the possibility of endangering his clan, she risks her own peril to save him.

Their dangerous encounter

When Kenneth learns of the trickery which caused him to marry Elisa and forces him to confront his demons, he's not sure how to proceed. She's everything he never knew he could have. As they aid those around them, can they save each other and find the love they both need and desire?

PROLOGUE

McInnish Clan Holding
Highlands, Scotland
Winter 1215

The old lady limped into the darkened cottage of the wisest woman in the clan. It was said, if anyone wanted to know anything, she was the one who foretold of certain futures. A brisk wind blew the door closed behind her and sent the cottage into obscurity. She heard the bustle of the seer, but she couldn't see well as it was too dark within.

The old lady's heart thumped madly for needed answers. She avoided coming here because she wasn't sure she wanted the disheartening news.

"Come, sit, and I shall tell all. I expected you."

She did as she was bid and noticed the glow from a small candle alit on the table near the cold hearth. Why the seer had no fire lit on such a windswept chilly night, the lady didn't discern nor would she ask. She set her misshaped stick beside her, the only crutch she would use as she had long since been unable to walk on her own.

"You come seeking answers?"

"Aye, I hope it is noble news and not ill?" As she waited, she watched with expectant nerves.

The seer became still and quiet. Her long white hair blew from unknown wind, and her glowing bright eyes looked at her with a bemused gaze. "Firstly, I shall speak of my forsooth...then I shall tell you about the McInnish. For that's why you have sought my guidance."

"I am gladdened to learn anything you say," the lady said exuberantly and hoped for good tidings.

"Sad events will happen before the one to lead the clan returns. Deaths and such woe, I see. The laird's son who you believe to be the heir will be taken from the McInnish and this world."

Her hopes dashed. "You mean...he shall die?" The lady frowned at the thought of the heir being lost to them, for they hadn't much time before her husband's demise, which was why she sought the wise guidance of the seer. Though her husband's sons were her stepsons, she cared for them and considered them her own.

"Aye, the eldest shall not exist long enough to lead the McInnish clan and shall perish before the laird, your husband. The other shall be hesitant to take his place, but a lass is the key to the younger McInnish's heart and only she will bring about the clan's forbearance of him and his acceptance of his position."

"When shall he come?" the lady asked. "We haven't much time before my dearest departs."

"Events must happen before the younger one can return. Return he shall, on a night when you least expect. He will show himself and take the mighty position as his father wills."

“I must tell my husband for he will be gladdened our clan will bode well when he departs. He shall be dispirited by this news, but at least a McInnish will lead our people. My husband won’t say he worries, but he does. I cannot allow him to meet his maker without knowing such tidings. He will at least be at peace.” The lady began to rise but slowly sat back when the seer motioned her to wait.

“The lass who comes is crucial to the McInnish’s happiness, och the lass will have help. For the Red Lady will aid her and she won’t be alone in her endeavor.”

“Is the lass to be the McInnish bride?”

The seer closed her eyes waved her hands over the candle which flickered and sent light to the farthest part of the cottage. She moaned. “Ah, the poor lass, for she only wants to be loved and needed. But the heir doesn’t want any help from anyone and prefers to be alone. She will have a hard time convincing him.”

“How long do we have?”

The seer took a deep breath and then spat on the table. She used her curved nail and scratched through the saliva before she dripped a bit of candle wax and mixed it with the liquid. She stared at it for several moments. The old lady was afraid to interrupt her thoughts and remained silent and patient.

“Events are already unfolding. Much time will pass before he comes and the clan will be destitute and sorely in need of his leadership.”

“We cannot wait that long, we could perish before his return,” the lady said dolefully, sadly realizing the woe that would befall her clan.

“You have no choice, for it will be as I foretold.”

CHAPTER ONE

MacQuarrie Clan Holding
Highlands, Scotland
Winter 1215

A cold wind whipped past the mourners as they stood beside the four gravesites. The sea's wrath at the atrocities blew the hale and encased the land with its fury. There, on a stone pedestal, lay sheathed in the finest linen, Alexander's lady. Strife over the western lands caused great skirmishes and rivalries, especially between his father King William, and Domhnall mac Raghnaill, who held the western lands. Domhnall's role in the deaths was evident in that he'd heard Alexander was on his way to parlay with him. The man was impatient and hadn't awaited the negotiations.

Though Alexander's visitation was primarily to suggest Domhnall abdicate his desire for the crown of Norway and to hold the lands to which he would be greatly rewarded. The price would be high but well worth it. Tensions rose and Alexander knew his father, the present King of Scotland, wanted peace. Alexander had even offered to be the emissary for the mission in hopes to win his father's favor. It occurred to him that Domhnall didn't much care for his father's desires and it was apparent he didn't want to take part in any discussions. Nor did he care for rewards. Domhnall didn't consider the death of the innocent a consequence of his actions, as long as the message was delivered. Indeed, it was.

"King of the Isles, my arse," Alexander muttered under his breath for the sake of anyone overhearing his thoughts. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword with such force his knuckles burned. A will to use his sword to enact retribution came as his ire increased. For this day, Domhnall became his sworn enemy.

Upon their meeting, the future king and heir to the succession of Scotland, Alexander, swore their love to be unmatched and never to be unrequited. *Mauri*. Her glistened hair, spun from the beams of sunlight, shown through the linen and caused many of the grievers to weep quieted sobs. Hers was a life taken too soon and for such an ignoble purpose. A knot of emotion rose in his throat, for the life he envisioned with her would never be.

A beautiful soul one never beheld until Mauri smiled at them with lips soft and sweet, and eyes as gentle as an early morning sunbeam. He recalled how her bright eyes showed love and tenderness. Life with Mauri would have proven to be the fairest, and she would have made him an honest, passionate king. Even at such a tender age, he realized she was the woman he was destined to be with, the woman fated to be his queen.

Alexander sighed at the thoughts which riddled his mind with pain. It wasn't to be. Why should he be honored to wed the fairest lass in the land? The anguish of that loss encased his heart and tore at his soul. His bonny lass was cut down like a boar in a slaughter, crushed to the ground by his now

cursed enemy Domhnall. The light of his life snuffed out and replaced with darkness and a merciless vengeance which would stay with him until the end of his days.

Drops of cold hard rain fell on the faces of the mourners, and yet he felt nothing but the unbearable loss of his beloved. He glanced at the other members of Mauri's burial party, that of her parents and her older brother lying on their pallets, ready to join the sacred hereafter. Her twin sister, Elisa, was fortunate to have escaped with her life. Though he knew not where she was and sent his men-at-arms to find her. And even as he looked at the mourners, he suppressed the urge to let tears fall, and his thoughts returned to his beloved. She wouldn't want him to hold such vengeance, yet he could do nothing more than atone the dastardly deed.

After the last body was placed in the ground and the last prayers spoken, the MacQuarrie clan dispersed. Alexander stood numb, content to wait until he could see Mauri no more and the last rock placed with the greatest of care atop the fresh mound of dirt.

"Your Grace, I received a missive," Thom, his man-at-arms, and closest comrade said as he approached.

"Have you received word from mac Raghnaill? How does he defend this atrocity?" Alexander stepped next to him and began the long walk up the hill to the walls of the village. The wind hampered him from taking great strides and the rain soaked his already sodden garments.

"Nay, I've word from Edinburgh. The king calls you home. You must put aside this cosh with Domhnall mac Raghnaill for now."

"My father is the reason this cosh began. If mac Raghnaill wants the coastal lands, he needs wrest them from my hands." The fury of the rift stiffened his body. "He won't have lands or the crown he covets, that I vow."

"One day, you shall wrest them back from him. All you need is an army, a large one." Thom stepped lively to keep up with the tall, angry, lord, for even though Alexander slowed his gait, his strides much longer than his. "I've been given a missive to give to you, my lord. I was concerned of what it speaks... I took the liberty and read it and it will anger you." He held out the rolled parchment and stopped, waiting to see if he'd take it.

"It is from the interloper, himself?"

Thom nodded. "I was standing by the guardsmen at the village entrance when a young lad approached with it. He ran off before I could ask him who gave it to him. Read it, my lord."

Alexander caressed the carefully written words with his eyes, disbelieving what was said.

"He says you're condemned to a life of misery for he has taken your love and the banner you boasted of. Domhnall is nothing but a bastard son of a..."

"Aye, I can read, Thom. The swine doesn't realize his error, for my love lies hither in yonder ground and breathes not. I shouldn't have mentioned Mauri, but my lips were loose with drink that night. I considered him to be a fair man, a comrade, a man of honor, yet he is not."

But Thom wouldn't let the mention of the lass go and was like a wolfhound with a soup bone, unrelenting. "Who has he taken then? If he hasn't taken your love...an unfortunate lass is being held."

"It is of no consequence to me, Thom. For no one else mattered to me as Mauri." Those words sunk in and Alexander wanted to spit to rid his mouth of the foul taste.

“What of the pinsel she sewed for you, the banner. Remember what she said? ‘In these stitches are sewn the good graces that will weave around you when you carry this banner.’ Are you not worried to lose such favor of grace now that Domhnall has taken the banner?” Tom scuffed the ground with his boot, but Alexander didn’t want to bring up such foreboding. A superstitious lot, none in Scotland would deny such fate lest they endure hardship all their days.

“It’s just a pinsel that Mauri sewed; it was a miniature one that she wanted me to keep inside my tunic. She said it would protect me. I know not how it would protect me. It couldn’t have been more than my foot’s length. I won’t hold such belief, Thom, it was foolhardy nonsense.”

Thom continued to bait him, “You test the fates? A brave man you are, my lord, aye destined to be king and yet you stare lady luck in the eyes. Mayhap Domhnall took Mauri’s sister, the fair Elisa? She wasn’t at the burial and they look much alike. Do you deem he mistook her? We should retrieve her. She is your sister-in-law.”

“Mayhap he mistook her. Was to be, she was to be my sister-in-law, Thom, but alas she is nothing to me now. Aye, Mauri would’ve been my wife after years of courtship. My father wouldn’t allow us wed for we were too young to take the oaths. You only want to retrieve her sister because she’s bonny.”

“Bonny doesn’t being to describe her. Nay, I pity the fair Elisa for she’s now likely in the hands of Domhnall.”

“I can do nothing about it at present. My father calls and I must to Edinburgh. I dread to tell him what occurred. He’ll be angry.” Alexander stopped at the gatehouse and motioned to a lad to bring his horse.

“You’ll not have your father’s favor now, my lord. The clan MacQuarrie is one of the oldest in Scotland. Domhnall killed their chieftain and his family and now holds one of its kin. The king will be more than wrath,” Thom said, with a bit of disdain in his tone.

“Domhnall will have many an enemy here in the north after what he’s done and word spreads of his misdeeds. The fool will have to live with his misfortune.”

Misfortune would be Alexander’s once he realized what he had lost.

CHAPTER TWO

*Last days of summer five years later ...
Highlands, Scotland
1220*

Many a boat lined the seaport awaiting departure. Laird Grey Gunn wasn't in a rush to take to the sea. Truth to tell, he'd rather be home in bed with his lovely wife. That thought made him wince since his wife's belly forbade him from doing what he most wanted. In a month, maybe his son would be born and once again he'd be welcomed back into his marriage bed.

His men sent a complaint in the form of glares and grumbles when he told them to unload the boats, but he didn't pay them any heed. For they'd follow his command and would stay ashore until he bade leave. After Grey gave the orders that the boats be emptied of their wares and battened down for the oncoming cold-weather season, he strode toward the hut where his guard posted, awaiting him.

They leaned against the wall as if they had nothing to occupy their time. But Grey knew they remained alert and vigilant, even though they presented the opposite visage. His guard was always ready to defend the clan and land.

"Grey, you've received a message from Alexander. He's nearly at the keep and will probably be waiting at your table when you arrive." Duff, his commander-in-arms and his closest comrade, handed him a piece of crumpled parchment.

The missive barely a few words, indicated Alexander needed his attendance.

"God Almighty, what does he want now? I have no time for the king's cosh or a melee." Grey didn't hold much fondness for the king since they'd had a disagreement. It was more of a conflict of interest since Alexander hadn't held his wife's welfare above his own crown. An event Grey swallowed without retribution.

"Well, you best make time," Colm said and joined the others in laughter over their laird's disgruntlement. His guardsmen well knew his objection of anything having to do with Alexander. They were fortunate enough to live far north, where they weren't bothered much by politics or the king's whims or unannounced visits.

Grey grumbled and turned to leave them, and unfortunately, they followed. Each one of his guardsmen had been trustworthy companions since childhood. Duff, the most formidable, at least until his marriage to his wife's friend, Cait, more often wore a smile. Most found it odd because Duff was a favored adversary on the training field and many warriors boasted of being the one who would finally defeat him. Grey would never get used to his tolerant temperament of late. He supposed a woman would bring about a change in a man, considering what happened to him when he married his beloved Bree.

Sean, James, and Colm were always good company and amusing, especially when there was a willing woman around, a brawl to revel in, or a tasty drink to appease them. Though they weren't much younger than him, it was his duty to give them a place within the clan. Grey finally conceded they could care for themselves and they didn't concern him. His wife gave him enough worry these days and always caused his unease. Only one of his guardsmen concerned him and that was Kenneth.

Kenneth's brother died and since, his friend hadn't been the same forbearing man. Greer's unfortunate death caused Kenneth to change in manner. Greer had been second-in-command and guarding Bree when he met with a foe who had a bigger sword and a quest for blood. The loss of Greer instilled great pain for all the Gunn clansmen and women, but none as great as Kenneth. His friend lost his fortitude for happiness and his easy-going spirit diminished.

As he walked along the path to the keep, Grey discerned the quiet demeanor in his friend and the scowl permanently etched on his brow. There was nothing he could do to ease his friend's mourning or anger. For Kenneth placed blame for Greer's death solely on himself. No matter what Grey told him would ease or disallow that guilt. Hell, it was his own wife whom Greer protected when he was run through with a sword. Still, Kenneth wouldn't allow Grey to take the fault.

As they neared the keep, Grey noted the king's guard dotted on the hillside. Alexander rode with many these days because there was much strife amid the lands in each direction. Damnation, Grey didn't want to be embroiled in his political matters or any cosh Alexander was involved in. Clan matters kept him busy at home, and with the birth of his first child approaching, worries.

He took the steps and entered the great hall where he saw his clanswomen and several of his lesser guardsmen had taken up vigil. Alexander, considered by many of the ladies to be handsome, drew attention wherever he traveled. With a look, Grey sent his clans people on their way and gave a quick glance of regret to Bree. She caught his look and smiled briefly before turning back to Cait.

"Alexander, I wish you'd sent word of your coming."

Upon saying his name, the tall king stood and waited for Grey to make suitable gestures to one of his ilk. A few gestures came to mind, but none would be appropriate. In fact, if he gave the gesture he'd wanted, he'd be accused of treason. Grey would rather spit on the floor than show regard for his king, and short of getting his head staked, would he ever be disrespectful. That didn't mean he had to like the man.

"Grey, I need to speak with you in private. There's much to discuss."

Grey immediately cleared the room of his guardsmen. He asked Bree to leave with the womenfolk and once the hall silenced, he sat next to Alexander and poured himself a cup of ale. Too bad the ale was watered down because he could use a bit of mind-numbness in dealing with Alexander.

"There are grave matters at hand. I need your help."

"Aye, matters are always grave, are they not?" Grey sipped his ale and waited with eagerness to hear what the king wanted. The sooner he revealed his purpose of visit, the soonest he would leave.

"I've met with Haakon and our discussion led me to believe I need to take action before all we've gained for is for naught and lost. Though Haakon is good friends with England's king, I must consider my next move carefully. That's why I'm here."

“What has Norway’s king to do with you, Your Grace? I would trust you wouldn’t aid him since he’s in league with Henry. Haven’t you sworn disloyalty to Henry or has that changed?”

Alexander grumbled something he couldn’t quite catch. The two kings often disputed over any and every issue warranted. Sometimes they made amends and sometimes they didn’t.

Grey wasn’t sure what Alexander would reveal, but now his curiosity piqued. It was well known Haakon wanted the isles to the west as the property of Norway, but Alexander considered the land Scotland’s. That alone attested to Alexander’s patience with Domhnall Mac Raghnaill, the warrior chieftain who occupied said land. Domhnall fiercely guarded the lands and kept them secure from both kings. The chieftain played both sides of the coin. A dangerous game for any involved.

“Years ago, I visited the lands to the west, and there I met a woman, she was a young lass then whom I thought to marry. Domhnall mac Raghnaill and I made an agreement that he would keep the lands from the Norway king until my father negotiated a price with him. He was to be well rewarded. Upon my father’s behest, I journeyed to secure those lands for Scotland. Domhnall agreed to await my father, but then he killed the MacQuarries...”

“Sire, what do you require of me?” Grey’s impatience wore on him. He didn’t much care about the history of whatever bothered Alexander.

Alexander pressed his back against the chair and folded his arms. He seemed reluctant to continue. “This may take a bit of explanation. The lass I wanted to wed was killed along with her family. The MacQuarries. All but her twin sister was slain. I suspected Domhnall took part and now I have reason to believe it.”

“Why would he kill your lass’ family?” Grey’s stomach clenched upon hearing the name MacQuarrie. He’d heard what happened to the chieftain and his family, and all outraged at the time. The MacQuarries were allies of many clans in the northern regions and held great wealth and power.

In a controlled tone, Alexander spoke clear yet with severity to his voice. The discussion was evidently emotional for the king. “He was sending me a message.”

“You want me to kill Domhnall mac Raghnaill?” Grey asked with a touch of sarcasm to his words. “Do you realize what you ask? He has numerous followers and supporters. It would be a difficult task, but not impossible.”

“Nay, Haakon will have Domhnall’s head for himself... Then I will have to battle with Haakon for the lands unless I can appease him. Which is why I’m here this day. I have been asked to retrieve proof that Domhnall sided with his brother to overthrow Haakon. It’s rumored that a parchment with the plan and those involved was given to Domhnall right before Mauri’s death from his brother Rory. Rory’s messenger was captured and confessed to giving a missive to Domhnall.”

Grey was astonished at what was told to him. For one thing, how would he know where this precious parchment was? And secondly, there was no way to get close enough to Domhnall to find it.

“When Domhnall killed Mauri’s family, he took her sister, Elisa. I need to find the lass in hopes she can tell me where that parchment is or if it exists. Haakon insists on proof and it’s the only way we can rid Scotland of its rubbish. Once I have proof, Haakon will abdicate his claim on those lands. It is likely he’ll kill Domhnall and we shall be free to take the land.”

Grey kept silent. This was a matter he definitely didn't want to be involved in. Given that the mac Raghnaill clan was one of the fiercest in the west. And Alexander's plan sounded too simple. There had to be more to what he stated.

"I need you to go to Domhnall's lands and search for her, bring her back here so I can question her." Then a sudden melancholy overcame Alexander, for his expression slackened and his eyes dulled. "There are reports that Mauri and Domhnall conspired behind my back. The rumors cannot be false. I'm hard-pressed to believe it because I cared for the lass. I hoped to wed her and courted her. Breaks my heart to think she cuckolded me. Yet I don't believe Mauri would be dishonorable. I know not what to think, Gunn. Elisa and she were twins, and only she would be able to speak of these matters. At the very least give me answers."

Why Grey shook his head, he wasn't sure. But with certainty, this wasn't a task he wanted to undertake regardless of Alexander's wishes. "I cannot leave my lands right now, Your Grace. Bree is expecting our first bairn and she would never forgive me if I left on such a journey."

Alexander blew out a sound of aggravation before he let a smile forth. "Ah, the wee Bree is having a babe. I'm pleased to hear that, Grey. But it shouldn't take long to retrieve the lass. A couple of weeks at best, it should take. Now that I have your agreement..."

"Agreement? I agreed to nothing," Grey practically shouted.

"Her name is Elisa. When she was young, she had fair hair and bonny green eyes. She was a slight lass, that I remember, slighter than her sister. If you go to Domhnall's lands in a pretense of wanting to discuss clan matters, you might be able to find out where she is."

"Aye, I could do that. But why not send Donal? He has a greater reputation with the clan chiefs than I do." Grey took a drink, but the taste sat foul in his mouth. The entire matter left him bitter. He'd hoped Donal Ross, one of the Highland council elders, would make a better envoy.

Alexander grunted. "Donal refuses and I have other tasks for him. You're the only man Domhnall would trust since you have the ear of many Highland chiefs. Domhnall wanted a treaty with several of the clans in this territory recently. Use it as a ruse to gain access to his lands."

"Mayhap I could find her. What if I'm unable to?"

Alexander pitched forward. "You must or all is lost. I need proof of Domhnall's misdeeds. I won't have you disregard this request. Aye, I'm asking, Grey, and not demanding or ordering you to do this favor. Don't make me plead, because I will..."

Grey sighed at the contention he'd have to do his king's will. But the mention of Elisa MacQuarrie forced his hand. "I'll leave immediately, Your Grace."

"I will visit Donal's keep and await word of your return. I wouldn't expect your lovely Bree to be hospitable since I wasn't kind to her in the past." With that Alexander rose and without a farewell, left the hall.

Grey sat in silence and considered the mission before him. Hopefully, he'd be able to find the lass and return without delay. Poor Donal would be subjected to Alexander's company until he returned. Donal Ross was a great ally and friend of a nearby clan. Their ties went back for years and Grey held the utmost respect for Laird Ross. Not only was he a friend, but he'd been chosen as his champion and protector when he'd been but a lad. He'd looked up to Donal since the day he could walk.

Donal held boundless affection for Scotland and the king and would go to any length to aid either, even if it was against Grey's interests. Grey never expected Alexander to be forthright with his confessions, especially those about the young lass he was apparently in love with. Mauri it seems, gave the king a broken heart, and worse, political problems.

A noise drew his attention to the door and he noticed his guard's return. It had been a time since they journeyed and he suspected his men wanted a bit of adventure. He considered the smiles on their faces and his assessment was more accurate than he knew.

"Duff, I'll need you to stay here and take charge. I'm to leave in the morn on a mission for Alexander. See to the clan and continue the training sessions." Grey wanted to use their downtime to train the younger Gunn warriors, and he hoped Duff would get them started.

Duff's mouth flew open and then he grinned. Aye, Duff was as shocked as he at his acceptance of any task Alexander gave him. No one could deny the king for fear that he'd be taken to Edinburgh and his life ended. What could he do? The errand wasn't that difficult. All he had to do was retrieve the lass, give her over to Alexander, and return home. A simple matter and errand, if there ever was one.

"Where are we going, Laird?" Colm asked.

"To retrieve a lass for Alexander. We're to the west, to mac Raghnaill's lands." Grey wouldn't say more because political riffs were involved in the mess.

"A lass? Whoa, did you hear that, Kenneth?" Sean jested and elbowed his upper arm.

Kenneth gave him a cross look and pushed him away with a hard shove.

Each of his men bounded toward the table when a kitchen servant brought in a tray of food. In a rush, they pushed each other to be the first to taste the delectable supper Bree made. His wife was the best cook in the highlands. Grey tensed then for she shouldn't be in the kitchens in her condition. He'd tell her so after his meeting.

His guard liked to bait each other and often teased, and lately, Kenneth was their primary target. Grey surmised they worried for Kenneth as much as he did. Their banter was a show of concern and affection. Not that his guards were affectionate by nature, they were staid, stern, and well, obstinate when called for.

Kenneth mumbled something which Grey didn't catch. Sean and James wore grins as wide as the stable doors at hearing their talents were needed. Aye, the journey would've been enough to make his guardsmen happy, but the mention of a lass instilled even greater joy. They made it their mission in life to assist any and all ladies in distress.

"I'll stay and help Duff, Laird," Kenneth said, "If I have your permission? There's no need for us all to go and Duff's been on duty for a few days..."

Grey considered it for all of two seconds. "Duff can handle things while we're away. You will either go to McInnish land and become laird as your father willed or go with us on this journey."

Kenneth glared, for the last thing his friend wanted to do was to go home. Kenneth's brother was supposed to become laird, and not he. His guilt-ridden heart wouldn't allow him to take his rightful place as laird of his clan. Grey hoped time would heal Kenneth and eventually he would call McInnish land his home and claim his birthright. Yet that hadn't happened. Until his friend accepted

his destiny, Grey sent several of his clansmen to watch over Kenneth's legacy. Something was bound to knock his hard-headed friend on his arse and bring about sense and acceptance.

"Nay, I won't go to McInnish land. I'd rather be flayed alive and thrown in a bog," Kenneth said, "I'll travel with you as you wish."

The man needed adventure and hopefully, the journey would rid Kenneth of his sullen demeanor. Grey wasn't sure how long it would take for Kenneth to get over his guilt, but no matter how long it took, he and his guardsmen would stand by him.

"Duff would be offended if I asked one of you stay to help him. All is quiet and he'll begin training the younger soldiers. You'll go, Kenneth, be ready at dawn. Now I need to break the news to Bree. Does anyone know where she is? I suppose in the kitchens, by God." He almost laughed at that question, because no one could keep track of his bonny wife even with her recent widened girth. And to be honest, he wasn't in a rush to find her neither since he'd cause her grief when he gave his well-meaning, but harsh lecture about her taking rest.

CHAPTER THREE

A pleasant day always inspired Elisa to reminisce of love. The kind of love where one's heart beat in an erratic rhythm, one's palms grew moist at the thought of holding another's hand, and one's skin flushed with warmth. How she wished she was in love. Elisa sighed dejectedly, knowing her lord would never allow such a thing. She was doomed to a lonely existence. Being a grown woman beyond marriageable age, she'd never experienced any of the joys of being in love.

Still, the beautiful day made one ponder stolen kisses, running hand and hand across a field of wildflowers or whispered words in her ear which would surely tickle. The sun shone its brilliance and the sky was a marvelous shade of blue. White puffy clouds marked the impressive sky-scape. A light breeze caressed her cheek when she lifted her face. Elisa couldn't help feeling woeful as there would be no man to declare such emotions for her.

She sat cross-legged in the tall grass and watched the villagers restlessly run about from the hill above. Something stirred the sleepy village because they weren't usually as vibrant. But she couldn't find out what happened because she promised Timmy, a young lad, she'd await him by the tallest birch tree. He'd said his pup cut his foot and was hurt. Nothing was more important to Elisa than to tend a hurt animal.

She waited a good amount of time for the lad, and now she knew why. The pup was almost larger than he. Timmy approached and held the rather large, black pup in his small arms. The sight brought forth her concern, for the lad cried and sniffled. His puffy eyes reddened and he sniffled just as he reached her. To save his embarrassment, she refrained to ask if he'd been crying. No lad his age would own to weeping.

"Don't despair, Timmy, let me see what the pup has done to himself." Elisa reached for the dog and smiled to ensure all would be well.

As she inspected the cut, the pup yelped when she gently touched the swollen limb. The sorrowful sound made her heart ache. "There, there."

The gash wasn't as large or dastardly as the pup let on. "It will take a bit of salve and we'll bandage it to keep it clean. It shouldn't take more than a day or two to start healing. Keep him inside and dry." She set about her task and took a pinch of yarrow and mixed it with a bit of wax, using her fingers to mix the two ingredients. Gently, she applied the salve and wrapped the pup's paw. Timmy took the pup from her lap, his sniffles gone and his face now smiled, although quite dirty.

"What's his name?" She rose and brushed her skirts.

"I call him Tarog. He's a fine pup, Mistress Elisa. I know he will be."

"I'm sure he'll be your champion, Timmy. Take care of him. Don't forget to keep him inside until he heals. I'll come by later and leave salve with your mama. I'm off to the manor." She waved to Timmy and hurried along, now wanting to know why the villagers lively this fine sunny afternoon.

As she passed by the water well, where many of the women stood, immersed in discussion, she stopped and smiled at them. They were kind and especially friendly toward her. All the villagers

seemed fond of her mainly because she'd helped each one of them at one time or another. Elisa passed her time helping others. There wasn't much to do in the village and she thought by helping others, she would at least make a difference and have something with which to occupy herself. It was also the only way to get the women her age to befriend her because she didn't have a husband or children to discuss, or even experience of the wifely topics she'd heard them speak of.

"What is happening? Are we to have visitors?" Elisa asked Lora, her closest friend.

"Oh, there you are. I wondered where you were. Do you not see them by the gate?" Lora's wide brown eyes alight with wonder. She'd pulled back her brown locks into a roll at the nape of her neck and she'd tied a blue ribbon around it. She looked lovely this day and Elisa smiled at her friend.

Elisa turned to spy the entrance gate to see what caused the commotion. There stood a group of tall, brawny men. "Who are they? Has Domhnall returned then?"

Elise didn't want to admit her trepidation at the news the lord returned. For all the years she'd stayed in the village, she'd seen him a handful of times and those events were somewhat fearsome. Though he'd left her alone and only spoke to her briefly, he never mentioned his true purpose for taking her and why she had to stay there.

He alluded her father gave her as a bride but Domhnall never wed her. Given she was beyond the age when a lass wedded, she concluded there had to be other reasons. Yet he'd never been forthcoming and she decided maybe it was best she not know.

Elisa was thankful he hadn't wanted to wed her for she'd rather jump from the nearest tower than marry Domhnall. Never had she thought to marry someone as foreboded as he because his main pursuit in life was warring. She didn't dare try to leave for fear he would hunt her down and perhaps hurt her.

Lora took her hand and led her to the wall nearby so they might get a closer look. "The lord said they were from the Gunn clan. He told the men to be vigilant, and they weren't to be trusted. I can see why. They appeared dominant and capable of causing trouble."

"Domhnall doesn't trust anyone. Are they here to hurt us? Shall we hide? If there's to be a raid..." Elisa couldn't agree more, because they appeared to be stronger and far more dangerous than any of the warriors who visited in the past.

Lora tilted her head but kept her gaze on the men. "I don't deem so, Elisa, for they haven't taken to their swords. And it appears Domhnall is speaking with them in a welcome manner."

Elisa waited with apprehension for something to happen because their village didn't get many visitors. Domhnall seemed on friendly terms with the warriors and he didn't like anyone. At least she didn't think so, considering the countless fracas he'd gotten into. Many times he'd sent his injured soldiers to her for tend when they'd been close by after a fray.

Lora pressed her skirts and patted her hair. "Do I look a mess?"

She laughed at her friend. "Nay, you're fine. How do I look?"

Her friend chortled and picked a piece of grass from her skirt. "Were you traipsing in the woods again? You're always off trying to save the world, Elisa. You might want to change your garments before Domhnall sees you."

Elisa laughed at that. "What does it matter? He's not interested in me, Lora. If he was don't you think he would have married me by now?"

Lora pursed her lips. "True, true. I vow none of the men here are as fetching as those men. I wouldn't mind catching one of those warriors."

Her friend always acted captivated whenever men came into the village. They didn't get many visitors and for that simple reason, any man who came was the object of the women's notice. Most of the men who lived in their sleepy village were retired warriors who no longer had the strength to go to war and were beyond their interest as far as husbands.

"Gracious, have you ever seen such tall men?" Elisa took her time gazing at the warriors, sure she'd read about such men in a tome in Domhnall's hall, although, it described a battle scene from not too long ago and their foes. The leader was quite muscular with fine strapping shoulders. He walked next to Domhnall and passed them. She surmised he must be the Gunn laird since he focused on what Domhnall was saying and seemed to be the leader. He definitely had that 'I'm-in-charge' look about him.

Next came the others, and Elisa, as with many of the clanswomen, gazed at the stealthy men with dreamy eyes. Two of the men smiled when they passed by but the last man didn't seem as amiable as the others. When she got a better view of him, she lost her ability to blink. The man had light hair and dark eyes, dark as night and somewhat mysterious. His gaze settled on her and stayed for several breathless moments. She wouldn't look away and read such woe in his stare.

He seemed severe and formidable. Yet she couldn't help but feel a little melancholy when she watched him. Was he beset with worry being there in the village? She wondered why the man exuded a downhearted manner. Elisa had the gift and ability to read people, especially those who had a heavy heart. And this man had such.

As he passed, the tartan over his shoulder fell and revealed even greater shoulders beneath the thinned cloth of his tunic, than his laird had. Elisa's eyes stayed on him and she forgot to breathe. A finer man couldn't be found in these parts. What captivated her was his face. He had dark, thick lashes and eyebrows, and a square jawline which showed strength and defiance. His face should be described as beautiful if his masculinity could be considered such. But she would never apply such words to a hardened warrior. Some lucky woman most likely claimed the man, she was sure of it. How fortunate for her.

"Let us to the manor so we can find out why they've come." Lora grabbed her hand and made her run along. "I vow I shall spill many tankards this night, hopefully not on the laps of those handsome warriors."

She laughed at Lora's jest. Her friend was now giddy at the prospect of getting closer to the men. Elisa followed her and once inside, she hurried to the kitchens to see if Margret, the cook, needed help. Domhnall insisted on having a grand manor and his home boasted of his wealth, but it still dumfounded Elisa why the kitchens were attached to the back of the residence.

Lora would serve the men and she'd stay safely hidden in the kitchens well away from any fray and especially the notice of Domhnall. She tried to spy through the kitchen entryway to see the men, but Margret blocked her view.

"I wager you were off gazing at the men, Lora, forsaking your duties again. Take this platter out to the table. My lord has guests. Hasten now, don't dally." Margret handed the tray to her and off Lora ran.

“Can I help? What shall I do?”

“How many times do I have to tell you... Domhnall doesn’t want you working in the kitchens. You’re the lady of the manor and not a kitchen serf, my sweet.” Margret scowled at her as if she intruded on her duties, but then she smiled and gave a wink.

Elisa didn’t like being regarded as the lady of the manor, because she wasn’t. And regardless of her wishes, Margret treated her as such. No one got in Margret’s way when she cooked unless they wanted to receive a scalded lecture even if she’d done so teasingly.

“Be gone, sweet, my lord wants you to attend supper this night. You’re to wash and be down before he arrives. Quickly now, be off with you. Don’t let him see you in such disarray.”

“Must I?” she mumbled to herself. Elisa didn’t wait for an answer for she knew better than to disobey Margret or Domhnall. Elisa hurried from the kitchens and took the back stairway and reached her chamber. Changing from her frock to a light green overdress, she decided on something simple and plain so she wouldn’t draw attention. After she ran a comb through her hair, she cleaned her face. All the while, she wondered why her lord would wish her to eat with them. It wasn’t her place to question him, but still, it worried her.

Maybe Domhnall wanted ladies present to ward off any misconduct by the warriors. Then she laughed to herself. If they wanted to misbehave, there didn’t seem to be anything anyone could do about it.

A bang sounded on her door and startled her. Her hand flew to her chest and she gasped a quick breath. “Come in.”

Elisa hadn’t expected Domhnall to come and see her since he had guests to attend to. She was breathless, seeing him stroll into her chamber. He stood tall, but not quite as tall as the warriors below. His hair lightened, likely from being outside during the past summer months. It still appeared a lackluster shade of brown. He’d grown facial hair and a beard dipped beneath his chin. He might be considered handsome, but Elisa knew he had a dark side and a dark heart. She’d tested that side of him once, and learned a hard lesson and bore the consequence of it.

Domhnall always dressed in plain, dark garments and never wore anything constricting. She imagined he did so because he always fought with neighbored clans or foes. Still, he presented the image of a severe, fearless warlord. He frightened her and caused a shudder to weave its way to her heart.

“I see you fare well, wee Elisa. How are you?”

She couldn’t form words but tried to answer. “Very well, My Lord. You have returned.”

He took three steps toward her. “I’m here for a short stay and wanted to ensure you were well.” Domhnall gazed at her with darkened eyes, with a look that cautioned her.

“I’m very well, My Lord.”

He now stood before her, too close, close enough to reach out to her. “I’ll ask again, have you answers for me?”

Elisa scrunched her eyes closed for a brief second and bravely answered. She wanted to step away but that would be a sign of disobedience. “Nay, My Lord, answers to what?”

“Your sister only shared her secrets with you. Surely you know where she hid the parchment. There’s no time to dawdle and I need to find it. Have you thought about it? You told me you would.”

Relieved, Elisa calmed. He’d only wanted answers about the parchment. “I thought about it, My Lord, long and hard. Mauri didn’t tell me about any such parchment. I promise. I want to give you answers and wish she’d told me.” Elisa wished with all her heart she knew more, but she didn’t. Her lord asked the same questions each time he visited her. He’d claimed her sister stole a parchment from him, one which he was inclined to get back.

Domhnall touched her cheek with his knuckles and gently stroked her. “You grow lovelier by the day. I’ve been a kind lord and left you in peace. You’ve led a good life here, have you not? Before I decide what to do with you, I must know what was written in the missive.”

Something about the way he looked at her tightened her chest. “You have been kind and I enjoy living in the village. Honestly, if I knew where the parchment was, I would tell you. What will you do with me?”

A small smile twitched at his lips. “Time dwindles. I must get answers before I leave this time, Elisa.” He pressed his hand to her hair and gripped a handful of locks tightly in his fist and brought her against him. “Else there is no reason to keep you here, is there? Do you understand my meaning? I might be willing to arrange a marriage as a reward for your acquiescence. Perhaps the parchment can be forgotten and...” Domhnall towered over her, his hooded eyes fastened on hers. He slackened his grip on her and caressed her hair. “I must consider this further.”

Elisa slunk backward once released from his hold. She smelled the scent of a horse on him. He stood too close and could easily strike her, though he’d never been forceful before. Except for the time she tried to leave, he hadn’t ever harmed her. She backed another step and nodded. He would harm her, because to her dismay, she had no answers for him. There was nothing to say to appease him.

“You might have seen company comes. I would like you to attend supper with me. I wish them to see me as a family man and not just a chieftain. They shall be amiable if I can present myself as a lesser threat. Aye, I need this alliance if I’m to retain my lands. You won’t speak to these men, Elisa. Do you understand?” His dark eyebrow rose.

“Aye, My Lord.”

“Come down when you’re ready. Don’t dally.” He left the chamber door open when he left.

Elisa stood still and tried to calm her racing heart and shaking hands. She took several composed breaths before she regained control.

Domhnall’s visits were always the same. He’d come to see how she was and inquire if she’d recalled Mauri telling her of the parchment she’d stolen from him, and then he’d leave. Something changed, for he insisted he needed information now. There was just one small problem with that. Elisa knew nothing about any parchment of Mauri’s. Her sister was secretive in the last days she’d seen her.

Why didn’t Domhnall ask her himself? Elisa wondered if she’d married Alexander as she’d said she would. Maybe Domhnall couldn’t ask Mauri, for she’d likely wedded the king and he probably

had no access to Alexander's court. Often a queen or lady of high rank was secluded at a secure sanctuary. At least Mauri was safe from Domhnall.

Many years passed since she last saw her sister and she didn't know if her betrothal occurred. She was certain Mauri married the king by now. Unfortunately, the news didn't reach them in the tiny village and when news came, the men wouldn't be forthcoming. Little was known of the happenings in Scotland, let alone, of her family.

Many times she considered writing to Mauri in hopes she might get the king to intercede on her behalf and rescue her from Domhnall's clutches. But Elisa reconsidered because Domhnall all but alluded her father gave her as a bride. The king would never involve himself in her matters, and especially not if she were actually betrothed to the man.

She'd learned long ago not to attempt to leave. The one time she tried, Domhnall apprehended her before she made any kind of progress. He threatened her life and that of her family. She was fortunate to only suffer a broken arm from his brutal attack, and she vowed never to try to leave the village again.

Elisa had to figure out a way to delay his decision of what to do with her. Something would come to her. It had to or it might well end her life. She needed to get through the evening's events, and hopefully, appease him so he would leave and buy her more time.

As she reached the lower level, she heard the gruff tones of the men speaking. Their voices echoed from the rafters since the hall wasn't crowded. Usually, many of Domhnall's men ate with him when he was in attendance. She suspected Domhnall only invited his higher-ranked clansmen to dine with him considering there were a few at the table beside the Gunns. Elisa felt awkward as if she intruded until her lord called out.

"Come, please join us, My Lady."

Elisa bent her knee in a slight curtsy, unsure what decorum dictated. She sat next to her lord and awaited his command. He didn't introduce her to the guests, which was fine with her. She contently watched the men, especially the tall, light-haired man who sat diagonally across from her. He didn't speak as the others were, and kept quiet, much like she.

With nothing of interest on her trencher, she peered at the men from the Gunn clan. The leader appeared strong and capable. He was handsome and seemed kind. Yet she sensed he would handle a fracas with ease. The light-haired man sat next to his comrade, a man who had shoulder-length dark hair. His face was as attractive as the one she'd empathized with. The dark-haired man gazed at her and caused her to redirect her attention.

Domhnall appeared at ease and he conversed with the warriors. "I hope to gain a treaty with several clans here in the north. Norway threatens us all and we must stand together if we wish to maintain and keep what is ours. There are reports Haakon attacked the western lands and gains ground."

The leader of the warriors seemed interested in what Domhnall spoke because he was the only man at the table who listened. "And what of your brother? It's rumored he wishes to go against Haakon and take his lands. If he succeeds, those you seek an alliance with will be against Scotland. I am sure this will sway them not to take your request for a treaty seriously. As much as we are isolated here, our loyalty remains with Alexander and our country."

A frown set Domhnall's face. "I can understand the hesitancy regarding my brother, but he's exiled and no threat to any. He has no army, no wealth to purchase one, and is defeated. In the past, I supported Rory, but now I have lands aplenty here. I seek to make these treaties for my interest, not his. You must assert this when you speak to the lairds."

They continued discussing the matter and the Gunn Laird spoke of Alexander and news from the south. At the mention of the king, she raised her head. Hoping to hear news of her family or her sister, she listened carefully. They only discussed Alexander's concerns of the western lands and Domhnall grew a bit amused. She'd never seen him laugh until this day.

Sadly they didn't discuss her clan or anything having to do with her sister.

Elisa used a supper dagger to push around the food on the trencher. She wasn't hungry especially given she needed to devise a way to delay Domhnall's questions. When she glanced at the table, she noticed the fair-hair man stared. In fact, most of the Gunn warriors watched her. A blush crept over her cheeks and her skin heated. All but the fair-haired man lowered their gazes. No man ever looked at her the way he did, and she wasn't sure if she liked it. Unable to keep his stare, she lowered her eyes back to the table and was thankful when Domhnall and the others rose. They left the hall; only two of the Gunn warriors stayed behind.

She was about to flee the hall when one of them spoke.

"Milady, your lord didn't introduce us. I'm Sean and this is Kenneth. We're from the Gunn clan. Are you mac Raghnaill's wife?"

She curtsied and smiled. "Nay, I'm not his wife. Welcome to our home. I'm Elisa. If you need anything, please ask. We will be happy to provide."

The men's eyes widened. She thought they might not have been welcomed in other places they visited. She understood that given their size and their intimidation. To women, they presented the greatest challenge: How to make a husband of them. To men, they presented a rivalry whether at war or otherwise.

"There's something we need—" the man named Sean said.

"Sean, it's not for us to say." Kenneth cut him off. He stepped in front of his friend and turned to give him a frown of disapproval.

Kenneth. That was the fair-hair man's name. She smiled despite feeling small in their presence. Her head barely reached their shoulders take an inch or two. Their gazes somehow didn't make her fearful, for they seemed likable. She was about to ask them what they had need of when a shout came from the doorway.

"Elisa, Elisa, come." Lora dashed into the hall and yelled for her.

She tilted her head in question and realized someone needed her. "What's wrong?"

"Margret burned her hand on a cauldron in her cottage. She's in a great deal of pain. We must hurry." Lora grabbed Elisa's medicinal satchel from where she kept it on a peg by the hearth and took her hand.

"Oh, I must go. Goodnight," she called over her shoulder and watched the men stare after her.

Kenneth shoved his friend and seemed to smile. That made Elisa lighthearted and her heart to flip. Seeing him relax even briefly did her heart good. She couldn't help worrying about others, especially when they portrayed a wounded soul as Kenneth did. Now to help another wounded soul.

Dawn crept over the hillside when Elisa walked back to the manor. Margret's wound was severe and she'd stayed the night to tend pain remedies and keep her comfortable. The cook wasn't of a pleasant nature when she ailed for she grumbled and blasphemed most of the night. Elisa's ears still burned with their sinful meaning. But she paid Margret no mind, as she was used to people's sour dispositions when they were in pain. And Margret was the worse of any she'd attended, for hardened warriors hadn't carried on even with a fiercer wound. Elisa learned long ago the sweeter she was when tending the wounded, the less surly the injured became.

The village was void of anyone moving about yet. Shadows cast the night around the huts and buildings, and the morning dew still layered the ground. It had to be an early hour. A yawn came and Elisa thought about her bed and her comfortable pillows. All she wanted was sleep. She'd take a few hours rest and then check on Margret and maybe stop and see how Timmy's pup fared.

Then she remembered she'd forgotten to leave salve with Timmy's mama. Her stock of herbs ran low too, and she'd have to trek into the woods to search for plants later this day. It was her favorite pastime and she enjoyed the solitude of the woods and the time she spent there. Somehow she would find a way to sneak out.

As she walked along, she hoped Domhnall left and she might avoid his questions. How could she tell him something she knew nothing about? She considered lying to him, then reconsidered, not wishing to put her family in danger. She should say she'd seen the parchment amongst her sister's possessions and gain peace. But Domhnall would learn of her fabrication if he didn't find it and would return to confront her.

She would have to make him understand she knew nothing even if she had to risk her safety. She'd come to the village when she was a young lass, not yet close to marriageable age, but not a child. Elisa wasn't quite sure how old she was then. But definitely young enough to have the women take her to their arms to hug her. Her family hadn't been forgotten, yet she didn't know how to get back to them or where the village was located. She often wondered if they missed her or if they cared she was gone. Years passed and along with them, all hope of her family's visit.

Dare she hope to ever leave and find a husband who would protect her, and live the life she'd dreamed of these past years? Elisa wasn't about to admit that failure, for she wouldn't be disheartened. Domhnall wouldn't allow her to leave and nor would he permit her to marry any of the villagers. Life would be the way it had been and Elisa was happy at least she made friends and had tasks to keep her busy.

As Elisa passed the stables and heard a noise within. Perhaps the stable master was up and about. He rose before many of the villagers and well at his tasks before sunrise. She wouldn't pass by without a greeting and she stepped inside the stable to search for him. One of the field horses hadn't been eating and she wanted to inquire about its welfare.

Someone grabbed her from behind and practically smothered her with a large hand. Her screams were useless and muffled against the intruder's palm. She dropped her satchel of medicinals. Elisa panicked and tried to kick her way free, but whoever detained her, held fast. Her arms and legs flailed at her abductor and struck him a few times. Even when she clamped down, the man's skin

wouldn't break and her freedom denied. No matter how much she squirmed and fought her captor wouldn't release her. Tears sprang to her eyes as she realized the danger.

Something stuck her head, making her dazed and everything turned blurry. She could barely stand on her shaky legs. Her body turned heavy and she fell like a sack to the ground. She succumbed to the darkness behind her eyes.