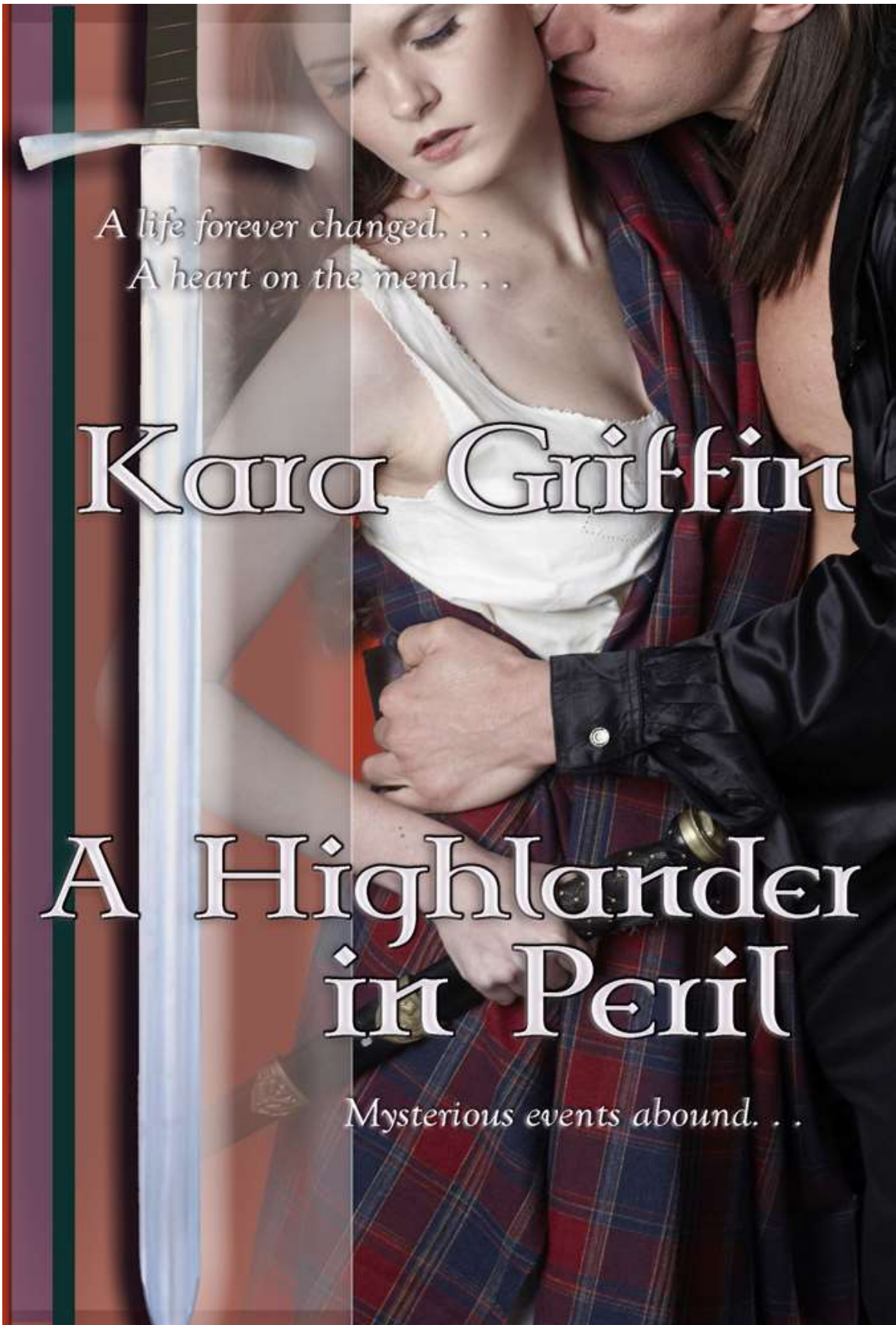




*A life forever changed. . .
A heart on the mend. . .*

Kara Griffin

A Highlander in Peril

Mysterious events abound. . .

HIGHLANDER IN PERIL

Gunn Guardsman - Book Three

KARA GRIFFIN

A HIGHLANDER IN PERIL

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This book contains adult material, reader discretion advised.

DEDICATION

To the man I'm most comfortable with, my dear husband.
Thank you for twenty-five years of joy, love, and protection.

Happily ever after is not a fairy tale—it's a choice. -Fawn Weaver

A HIGHLANDER IN PERIL

A life forever changed

A heart on the mend

Mysterious events abound

To receive his family's fortune, Sean Gunn must wed the lady thrust upon him by his dying uncle. As a Gunn clan protector and guardsman, he's honor-bound to accept his uncle's legacy and the woman whose voice alone affects more than his heart.

Lady Frances Jordan never thought to feel the stirrings of love since she'd lost her husband, but Sean Gunn's irresistible manner and handsomeness is just what she needs to move on with her life. He awakens her desire with his passionate kisses and romantic gestures.

When many a lady goes missing near the border of Scotland and England, Sean is determined to find out who the knave is. Frances becomes the target of the would-be attacker and needs the aid of the Gunn protector. Can Sean keep his lady safe and embroil himself in border politics to ferret out the assailant?

PROLOGUE

Border region, Selkirkshire, Scotland
January 1223

His craving was about to be sated. He'd kept his fervor at bay but now lust sent its anxious tremble through his body for he hadn't had a woman in many months. Duty and travel kept him from his desires, and now that he'd returned, he would appease his longing.

For more than a fortnight, he'd courted the lady, and she like the others didn't meet with his expectation. He'd sent gifts, poems, and sweet gestures, in hopes to win her favor. Alas, the declarations did little to sway her heart. It mattered not, because he would have her one way or another.

The selfish women dismissed his affections without care of his feelings, and his desires turned from the deepest love to the dark yearning now coursing through his blood. He would do anything to possess them. Why did they deny him? Was he not as handsome as the young lords they chased after? Was he not in a powerful position, having the ear of the king himself? There wasn't a single thing that should have caused their aversion of him and yet...

"Set her there on the log. Careful now, don't muddle her hair. Place her hands and legs as I instructed. She's perfection."

His brother, whom he paid handsomely to guard his secrets, did as he bade. He gave his brother no choice but to assist, for his life would be ended were he to refute his orders.

Once his brother set the lady on the log and positioned her arms over her abdomen and crossed her legs, he turned to him for further instruction. "Do you wish me to stay?"

"I will handle the matter from here. You may leave. Speak of this to no one."

"I won't." Without dispute, his brother left the dense woods.

Now alone, he could do his will. He stood in the silent frozen forest and gazed at her tranquil form. A light snow drifted through the sparse branches overhead and the cold flakes hit his face. Her dressing was impeccable, and for a brief moment, he thought she might be cold. The silk fabric of her gown did little to protect her against the elements. She would feel nothing for she wasn't asleep.

Before he would take his pleasure, he pressed a hefty-bloomed crimson rose between her dainty fingers. Joy came when he beheld her lifeless body, lying in wait, holding the precious reminder of her rejection. With a light caress to her dewy lips, he tasted the thorn apple powder he'd put in her wine. He'd been prepared for her rejection and made his plans. How easy she made it for him. Within an hour, she was akin to a lamb being caught by the fox. He enjoyed watching the poison weave its spell upon her, taking her soul from her once spry body, and ending once and for all her aversion of him.

He ambled around the log, content to ogle her, and wished he hadn't had to end their liaison so soon. The chase always gratified him and when he no longer enjoyed the game, there was only one way to ensure she remained his. Though he'd spent a good amount of time courting her, he suspected her abhorrence. Like the others, she pretended fondness when she had her heart set on another.

As if the lady responded, he ceased his amble and gazed at her. "How dare you dangle such a glorious prize before me and expect to throw me over as though I'm nothing?"

He caressed her hair and slowly moved his hands over her breast and down her body. "You're remorseful? Ah, dearest, it's too late for regrets, my love."

He knelt and ripped the rose from her grasp and held the fragile blossom in his hand. With a whiff of the bloom's fragrance, he sighed and gently set it aside. "Why couldn't you appreciate my gifts? You'll never receive adoring sentiments from another. Evermore, you shall be mine."

CHAPTER ONE

Maidens Castle, Edinburgh, Scotland
Four months later, April 1223

Many ladies enjoyed being in court attending to the queen and taking part in the lively gatherings. Such gaiety to be amongst the revelers: men and women from prominent clans in Scotland. Lady Frances Jordan wasn't like most ladies. She preferred to sit inside a stuffy, dust-filled solar, reading old tomes, and dreaming of taking to the sea on an adventure like the old Norsemen. Life had a peculiar way to make one do things they didn't wish to do.

She'd been in Edinburgh for six months at the behest of her guardian, Lord William of the Hume clan whom she called uncle. He'd been an endeared father-figure since her papa died ten years ago. Frances considered writing to him to beg leave. Lord William wanted her to have experiences, he'd said, and she agreed to make the most of it. But it wasn't where she longed to be, and she only suffered through it for him.

How she missed her husband and the simple life of a country wife. Almost five years passed since Robert's accident, and yet, it felt as though he was taken only a short time ago. How she wished to go home and be away from town. How she missed Ermintrude, her sweet winsome lass and her fairy-like face. Her daughter would soon forget her if she didn't return soon.

While she readied for the night's entertainment, she stopped brushing her hair and glanced at the hateful missive she received along with the vile package. The missive bore dreadful, odious words. When she received the box tied with the lovely ruby-encrusted ribbon, she thought a man was interested in her. She changed her mind after she'd opened it.

Once again, she looked inside the box in disbelief. There sat a dozen roses, blackened and decomposed. They'd been crimson, the color of blood. The odor of mold reached her nose, and she rubbed the smell away, quickly closing the box. Who would send her such a horrid gift?

Someone at court jested with her, and yet, she'd received several missives, all which daunted her. If the gift was in jest, the giver took it too far. Frances shook away the foreboded feelings and hurried to the great hall where many already gathered. What bothered her most about being at the castle was someone stalked her. As she tried to shake the terrible sensation of being watched, the queen appeared at the small dance arranged for the night's festivity.

After her entrance, Joan sat on the dais alone. Frances made friends with the young queen and turned into her confidant. Joan wed Alexander at the early age of ten and one. Still, she and her husband were sociable even if they hadn't yet consummated their marriage. It was said the king and queen formed an alliance to gain political prowess and appease King Henry, Joan's brother. England's king tired of Scotland's interference and because he wanted to keep the lands his father,

King John, entailed to Alexander, Henry made the union. How unfortunate to wed for political gain and not love.

Frances approached the dais and sat in the chair next to the queen after she'd been bid to. With a smile, she hoped a friendly greeting would appease Joan because she didn't look jovial. Many discerned Joan's moods and kept their distance, as did she when it was warranted.

"I'm gladdened you came to join me," Joan said, behind her palm. "You're the only lady I trust here."

Frances scooted her chair closer. "I waited for you."

"Have they said anything untoward? Shall I punish them?" Joan giggled a girlish tone. "I should have Alexander wed them to the most atrocious men in Scotland. I declare I know a few."

Frances laughed even though she considered Joan didn't jest. "That would suit them well. I haven't talked to them this eve. I abhor being with them and only came because I hoped you would be here. And here you are."

"If not for you, Frances, I'd be bored with these silly ladies attending me. All they talk of are lords and other unmentionables." Joan's lip curled in a pout.

"Most of the ladies don't enjoy my company, nor I theirs. I find them trifling and mischievous. Their catty behavior irritates me because they act as if they have decorum."

Queen Joan snorted in retort.

Frances heard their hushed whispers about nights spent with certain lords, and how they compared one lord to another, and of their lewd sexual acts. She envied their pursuits but never had a romantic liaison to compare.

Joan guffawed and leaned close. "They act in a shameful manner. Their behavior doesn't go unnoticed and I've heard of their activities. I care not because they don't have an interesting mind amongst them."

Frances didn't want to judge the ladies, but she couldn't help it. Around her, they presented the image they were above anyone and she should do well to befriend them. They were the last women she wanted to be associated with. If there was one thing Frances liked about the young queen it was she'd been educated and they had thought-provoked discussions. Joan spoke in a becoming manner even though she should act like the young ladies in their company.

"I suspect that's true, Your Grace. I shall write to Lord William to ask if I might return. Surely enough time passed to placate him."

"Not long enough to placate me. I understand your heart is elsewhere. I've given you leave as you wish." Joan twisted a strand of her hair, a ringlet which came free, between her fingers. She gazed at the crowd, slouched back on her velvet-lined chair. And yet, Frances knew her entire focus was on her. "I understand why you wish to leave, but I shall be saddened to see you go."

"I shan't wish to leave you, Your Grace, but there's more calling me home than willing me to stay." Frances placed a gentle smile on her face.

"Are you certain you cannot find a husband here in Edinburgh? None gained your notice? Not even Armstrong? All the ladies want him, and he has an eye for you."

Frances wanted to laugh, but she wouldn't be disrespectful. "Adam Armstrong has many ladies chasing him. He's not a husband I would seek. I vow I'd have to compete with him on my attire and I dislike fashion."

Joan gazed at her and assessed the garments she'd chosen for the dance. "What you speak is the truth. You've no fashion sense, Frances. I should take you under my wing and have you attend me when I choose my dressing."

She laughed. "You're always ensconced for hours. I'd rather spend my time doing something interesting than selecting fabrics and matching laces and furs." Frances' eyes widened when she realized she might have insulted her.

Before Joan countered, the handsome devil, Adam Armstrong made his appearance. The ladies shrieked and acted as if he was a miraculous man, drawing their attention. Adam strutted into the hall in the cocksure way of his. He dressed impeccably in rich, pristine ermine furs over his blue silken tunic and breeches made of the finest gray woolens. Everything coordinated to make him appear larger. His garments definitely compensated for something, but Frances hadn't figured out what.

Frances returned her attention to the queen. "Speak of the devil."

"If I didn't promise Alexander he had my heart, I deem he'd throw Armstrong from the court. Look at the way he walks around as if he's lord here. Mayhap I should have Alexander toss him."

Frances chuckled under her breath. "I'd love to see that, Joan. He's arrogant and wants every woman to fall at his feet."

"But not you," Joan said with a wink.

"Certainly not me. Although, I deem that's why he's interested in me. I'm not like the other ladies who simper after him. Maybe I shouldn't present a challenge. I admit he's handsome."

Joan gasped as if an idea came to her. "Why shan't you wed him? If you do, he'll leave you in the country, and he'll be here in Edinburgh in support of Alexander. You might see him once or twice a year."

Frances' heart dejected speaking of marriage. She'd been wedded to a man whose only interest was business, and although it was a good sensible marriage, she'd been lonely. Her heart held more love for Robert than he held for her. Still, he'd been a noble husband. Sadly, she couldn't give her heart to another. She missed Robert even with his inattention. Life would've been different had he lived.

"That appeals, not having to deal with a husband but once or twice a year." Frances almost snickered at the thought but held in her appall. Lord William would never approve of the betrothal. Adam was second son, his position not nearly enough to covet a marriage. Although Adam's brother was aged and the line of succession was bound to gift the title to him.

"Armstrong is interested. Lord William would approve if I asked him, and once I speak to Alexander..." Joan smiled with shining eyes. "Adam has become a noble friend to my husband."

Frances plucked an invisible piece of lint from her sleeve and considered it. "I wouldn't want to wed such a man. How could I ever be what he wants?" She wasn't in the same league as Adam Armstrong. And, she wasn't wont to wed anyone. Her heart hardened at the thought of loving someone again. The queen wouldn't take no for an answer, and she made light of her wishes.

Armstrong approached and bowed. "My lady, Joan, Your Grace. It's pleasing to see you this eve. How does King Alexander do? Well, I hope. I await his return as I'm sure you do."

Frances heard the king was away on business but refrained to ask about it. She didn't want to overstep her bounds with the queen.

Joan gave a curt nod. "Master Armstrong, the king is well. Good of you to join us this eve. All the ladies are excited you're here."

Adam bowed again and when he rose, a dark curl covered his eye. He tossed his head and grinned. "There's only one lady who draws my attention. My hope is she's excited to see me." He raised his eyes to glance at her, and Frances lowered her gaze to her lap. His eyes undressed her and they darkened with passion. Definitely, a look with a spark of bedevilment.

Frances was about to rise and curtsy as was appropriate in court, but he waved his hand. The lady he spoke of was she, and now that he'd come, Frances wished to be away. She didn't like the way he watched her or how his eyes followed her around the hall. His attention would better be spent on the simpering ladies who vied for it.

"I hope you'll dance with me, Lady Frances. You look lovely this eve." Adam smiled in his devilish way, the crease in his cheek deepened.

He was definitely a cock in bright plumage, and one she needed to be wary of. Frances knew he spoke falsely because she didn't look lovely. She was invisible in the chamber full of fashionably-dressed ladies, exactly as she intended.

Never would she tell her true opinion of the man, and she admitted only to herself, he daunted her. She detested his attention and wished his eyes gazed elsewhere. Though she jested with Joan, he didn't appeal.

"I look forward to it, Master Armstrong," she said in her most appeased voice.

His eyes downcast and he noticed a scuff on his boot, and immediately set off to correct the blemish. The man was self-obsessed; more than any other she ever met. Frances scoffed under her breath.

Joan leaned forward. "You're a fortunate woman to have such a man take notice of you. I shall ask Alexander when next I see him if he'll agree to the match."

Frances nodded slightly because she wouldn't disagree with the young queen. None knew how to deal with her yet. For one thing, Joan had only been queen for about a year. And secondly, none discerned how much influence she had with the king. For all Joan had to say was 'I want that man for one of my attendant ladies' and it would be done.

She was doomed. Frances sat back and tried to put Adam Armstrong and Joan's desires from her mind. The ladies took to a dance which didn't involve the men. Several lords meandered near the ale barrels and stood on the side to watch and wait until they might rejoin the ladies. They appeared like hawks flying overhead spying mice or a morsel to swoop down upon and ravage. How she hated being in court.

A shadow appeared to their left and blocked the candlelight from the wall of small candles nearby. Frances looked up to see Lord Lombard stand before them.

"Your Grace," he said and bowed low before Joan.

The queen smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "Lord Lombard, I hadn't heard you were in residence. Have you come for a stay? My husband is in Londontown and not present. I fear if you've business to attend, you'll need to await his return."

Frances' shoulders tensed, for he didn't appear well. His eyes dulled and his aged face long. An instant concern came because she worried for his daughter, Winifred, her esteemed friend. Lord Lombard's land bordered Lord William's, and she and Winifred shared confidences.

One of those confidences was the rumor Lord Lombard searched for a new wife. He was far too old, in her opinion, to want to wed again, and Frances couldn't imagine being married to such a horrid man.

Only last week Frances sent another missive to Winifred, but she hadn't received a reply. For a month she'd corresponded and hadn't heard a word. It was unlike her friend, not to reply.

"Is Winifred unwell?" Frances sat forward, ready to jump to her feet.

Lord Lombard ignored her question. "I have no business with the king. Your Grace, I've come to seek aid. My daughter has been missing for a fortnight, mayhap longer. Alas, I've been away and I'm not sure how long she's been gone. We've searched everywhere. I ask you to send men to help search the woods."

An awful twinge tightened her chest. "Winifred is missing?"

"It's not like her to be absent from our keep and she didn't leave word of travel. The servants haven't seen her in weeks. I thought mayhap she came here, to see you, Lady Frances, but the steward said she hasn't come."

"I shall ask the chamberlain to send men if you deem it will help." The queen leaned forward and took the lord's hand, her empathy with the look of worry.

Frances' heart tightened. Her friend would never leave without informing her father or the household servants. "I wondered why she hadn't replied to my missives. Lord Lombard, has Winifred received missives, gifts, or the sort?"

His eyes shadowed with unease. "Nay, there were no gifts left by suitors of late, but what has that to do with her missing? She's reached marriageable age."

"Has anyone come to call?" Frances couldn't shake the thought something dreadful happened to her friend, and she suspected foulness.

"Not to my knowledge. I await your men, Your Grace. If they can come at the soonest?"

"Of course, My Lord, I'll take care of the matter right away." She released his hand and rose to set off.

"I don't want you to worry, Lady Frances. Her disappearance is likely a misunderstanding. She probably visits friends and perchance forgot to leave word."

Frances considered that, and because she didn't wish to upset the lord, she nodded. She wouldn't disallow something similar happened, although her stomach tensed. Winifred wasn't one to leave without a word though. She was the most courteous person Frances befriended and the most kindhearted.

"I will write Lord William to ask he send men to help search. Please, send word when you find her. I'll worry until you do."

"I shall, Lady Frances. Good eve." Lord Lombard strolled off.

She watched him until he exited through the large doors of the hall. Frances couldn't help her reservation. Winifred alluded her father had a dark presence about him. If he'd harmed her, then why would he seek aid? Maybe it was his way to avoid suspicion?

As the night wore on, Frances bided her time until she might retire. The drawback to staying in the castle was she had to share a chamber with six other ladies. Most gossiped and spent nights away from their chamber. Frances would never tell on the ladies because it was none of her affair who they slept with. And the ladies entrusted her with their confidences. She wouldn't betray them.

After she said goodnight to the queen, she absconded the hall, the music followed as she left. Frances took the stairs to the upper floors until she reached the third level. In the hallway, she noticed Adam spoke with someone. She didn't recognize who he was as he loomed in the shadows.

Frances stopped in her tracks. Men were forbidden on the upper floors where the ladies lived. She wondered how they passed the guard posted at the steps. Apprehension furrowed her brow, and she considered sounding an alarm. Yet she wouldn't do so because she didn't want to get involved. There were many underhanded dealings within the castle.

She reached her chamber and was about to enter when Adam called. "My lady, are you to bed?"

"Aye, I bid you goodnight."

"Attend me, Lady Frances. Why do you retire? You didn't dance with me. The night is early." He took her arm and led her to the steps.

She pulled away. "I apologize, but my head aches. I must retire. Thank you for the offer of the dance. I'm sure you'll have plenty of ladies who will be honored to replace me."

Before he replied, she entered her chamber and closed the door. She leaned against it and prayed he wouldn't be forthright and enter. That would be unmannerly. His footsteps retreated to the stairs, and Frances breathed a sigh of relief.

She sat at the desk and began her message. Lord William would understand why she wanted to return home. The image of it came to mind, and she missed the view from the barbican, the open land, and breezes from the meandering fields. Now that spring arrived, she'd miss the fields bloomed with the first wildflowers of the season.

Frances hastily wrote she would no longer stay in Edinburgh. She would've written she was unwell, but she didn't want to worry Lord William. He was a sweet, kindly man, and always had her best interest at heart. Instead, she indicated her service ended, which it had. The queen gave her permission to return home. She added the news of Winifred's disappearance and implored him to send aid.

When she finished her missive, she tucked it within her belongings and would ask someone to deliver it on the morrow. She settled in bed and in her prayers, she begged for God's protection of Winifred, and she thanked Him for saving her from Adam Armstrong. Frances thought he might have spoken to Joan for she sang his praises a little too much. Frances didn't want to involve the queen in her romantic relations or be involved in a political fracas. If she was forced to, she would wed the man for the sake of peace in the country, and save her neck.

Throughout the night, the ladies entered and left the chamber. Their noisy conversations kept her awake, as well as their snickers and laughter. She put a pillow over her head to block the noise but her efforts were futile.

With the day soon to appear, Frances rose and dressed in a plain gray overdress, with a long-sleeved white tunic underneath. She pulled her hair back and tied it in a coif. Frances was a no-nonsense kind of person. She liked plain garments and didn't like to draw attention. If the queen got her wish, and she wed Armstrong, it would be difficult to stand next to him. He always dressed in overt colors.

Frances made her way to the morning room and ate. She rushed to the castle's offices to have her missive taken to Lord William. Once she accomplished her task, she strolled in the gardens the queen favored. The king gave Joan a substantial allowance, and part of it she used for its purpose.

Frances ambled along and enjoyed the fresh air. Most of the court already awoke and also took an early stroll. She stopped to sit upon a stone bench and tried not to worry. That was easier said than done. She wrung her hands at the thoughts of her plight with the queen's wish to wed her off, Winifred's disappearance, and her hope to see Ermintrude. The sooner she left the better.

Joan followed by her attendants, walked along the path, and noticed her. The queen bid her attendants continue and only two guardsmen stood nearby. She sat on the stone bench next to her.

"It's a lovely morn, is it not?"

"I enjoy being out this early, Your Grace. I'm surprised to see you. Were you not at the dance until late in the eve?" Frances pressed her skirts closer and moved a few inches to make room.

"I left shortly after you. I hope Alexander returns soon, and I confess, I want to see what all the bother is about."

Frances wouldn't laugh because the queen was serious in her tone. "By bother, I assume you mean sex. Be patient, Joan. He's probably wary since you're young. He likely wants to ensure you enjoy it. I wouldn't be hasty."

Joan giggled, and Frances reminded herself she was young. Being in a position, the queen wanted to ensure her place in the king's household. The only way to do that was to bear an heir. Many men married lassies far too young to take to the marriage bed. Frances admired the king for his gallant behavior. Most men wouldn't give a care to the age of their wife and expected the duty regardless of their tender years.

"Have you seen handsome Armstrong this day? I saw him earlier and thought mayhap you met him for a secret rendezvous?" The queen turned and removed the ribbon Frances used in her hair. "This bothers me. Frances, you should take better care with your hair. I shall fix it," Joan said and began to redo the coif.

"I haven't seen him and I'd never meet anyone for a secret anything." Frances laughed. "I wrote to Lord William in hopes he'll send an escort. I only just took the missive to the office for delivery. I'm anxious to return home."

"Oh, blighter it, your hair is unruly. I cannot get it to twist correctly. We can still make the arrangement with Armstrong. I shall ask Alexander when he returns from Londontown. He meets with Henry again." Joan pouted. "I wanted to go, for I miss my brother and hoped for a visitation. I detest not knowing what they conspire."

It was rumored the queen and her brother, the king of England, were close. That was another reason she tried to be cautious around Joan. The lady was used to getting her way and she used her resources to affect those around her. If Joan disliked someone, she had the means to make their life

difficult or nonexistent. Frances was glad they'd formed a friendship. Joan repositioned her head and finished the twist she'd done. She wound the tie around and it was tighter and wouldn't fall out. Yet Frances would certainly have an ache in her head by suppertime as tight as it was wound.

"I shall be glad of your assistance." Frances wouldn't disagree and tried to appear eager.

A servant came along and stopped before them. "My Lady," he said and handed a missive to her. "This arrived last eve with an emissary, but it was too late to deliver it."

Frances took it and thanked him. She held the missive, fearful it would be filled with the vile hateful words as the others were. The seal on the outside was her uncle's. A worried frown came. She hadn't expected word from him.

"Who is it from?"

"Lord William." Frances opened the missive. Her heart tightened with each word. "Oh, I must leave at once." She stood, ready to run forth. "My lord has taken ill and it appears he may die. The healer suggested he take care of final business, and he bid me to hasten home."

"Oh, Frances, I'm sorry. Come, I shall help you ready."

"I couldn't ask that, Joan. I thank you for your friendship. I shall pack and leave this day if I have your permission."

Joan took her arm and led her away. "Of course you do. And humor me, Fran, I'm trying to sneak away from the attendants."

Frances nodded, but her thoughts were on her beloved Lord William. She worried and hoped she'd make it home before he passed. There were considerable questions raised, and likewise, much she wanted to say to him.

CHAPTER TWO

Gunn Clan *Highlands, Scotland*

Sean Gunn was a quiet sort. Most discerned that about him and didn't expect him to be forthright. Yet many were boisterous at the celebration, teasing and jesting. His friends wouldn't test the bounds of his humor, for when he was in a mood none jested with him.

The Gunn clan held their annual spring festival and celebrated the end of the planting season. The farmers were invited with their families to join in the festivities. Many looked forward to the merriment, but he was distracted.

Peace reigned in the Highlands. Except for the minor skirmishes amongst the Highland clans, little caused concern. The king attended to the country in Edinburgh, took a young wife, and saw to political matters with England and France. That made most in the northern region gladdened because they didn't want to be bothered with the king's plights which often had nothing to do with them. The Gunn clan's rapport with the king was tedious since their laird didn't hold a fondness for their sovereign.

Sean sat beside his comrades, James, Duff, and Colm, awaiting their laird, Grey Gunn, his cousin. They wouldn't partake of the drink until their chieftain joined them. Their main role within the clan was to protect the laird, his family, and the clan when necessary. Impatience wore on them, but they wouldn't disregard their duties and take to revelry until they were permitted.

Grey finished the task of welcomes and greetings to those who attended and came to sit with them. Sean filled his cup with the brew they kept for certain celebrations. The harsh drink usually sent them to bed much earlier than they would like. And it often awoke them earlier too with a sore head and stomach. But it made them feel good while drinking it.

Sean kept his gaze on the women who stood nearby. By the end of the night, he'd be sure to have one of them between the bed and himself, with his tartan their only attire. Aline, the lass he'd spent the most time with of late, watched him, and he raised a brow. The silent message was received, given the widened smile on her lovely lips. She was curvaceous and feminine in her face and manners. Their unspoken agreement made him smile too, and he'd find her later when he finished drinking.

A smirk came because it had been at least a fortnight since he'd had a woman. Duties kept him from entertainments lately. Now that Grey settled down, the guard could as well. The past weeks kept them trekking through their land to visit outer lying farms, ensuring the crops were ready, and the farmers needed no help.

At this time of year, Grey usually planned a trading mission and would have the boats readied. They longed for the sea and the adventure of new places to trade and the wealth it brought. The

difficult winter made travel impossible and many of the boats needed repair. Their laird didn't seem to mind and appeared to want to stay home this spring. The Gunn clan made its prosperity through trading, but this year they would rely on their own food supply to sustain them.

"What has you grinning?" James asked.

He inclined his head toward the women. James turned and let out a bellow. The women giggled and spoke amongst themselves, but Sean knew what they discussed. It was likely the same thoughts he'd had.

"I already made plans for after," James said and flashed a grin.

Sean chuckled, for his guardsmen brothers were much alike. They liked their fights challenging, their women soft, and their drink hard. He'd been friends with Grey long before he became laird. Sean was about seven or eight when they'd been put in the same group for training. Even before that, he'd lived at the main keep, and he and his laird were more like brothers for they'd been raised together.

Sean was melancholy, thinking of the time when they'd first met. He hadn't been born on Gunn land and arrived with his parents when he was a wee lad at the age of two. In the early days, his mother kept him tied to her skirts, and he didn't know he had cousins and kin.

Duff, the oldest in the group, was Grey's commander-in-arms because he was the roughest and most intimidating. Duff wed and didn't spend much time with them lately. That was well and good since he was dubious.

Then there was Greer who died while protecting their laird's lady, Bree, from a foe. Greer's brother, Kenneth, his closest comrade, married a few years back to the MacQuarrie lass and moved back home. Kenneth was laird of the McInnish clan and too busy to visit. The only time Sean saw his friend was when he'd been given the duty to relay messages to the McInnish clan. The duty was too infrequent for his liking.

"Sean, you're being quiet this night. What has you engrossed in thought? Here, have more drink," Grey said and filled his cup to almost overflow.

"My thanks," he said and drank a quick sip to keep it from spilling over the rim. The liquid trailed heat to his chest and warmed him. "I thought about when we first met."

Grey grinned and lifted his cup in tribute. "Aye, I remember it well. Soon after, we began training. We all tried to best each other back then. Seems we fought at least five times a day."

"Probably more. None of us could take Duff though. I vow he was born with skin of steel and wood in his head."

Grey spit out the sip of brew he'd taken and laughed. "Duff, Sean meant it as a compliment, not an insult. Stand down."

Duff stood and glared, his burly arms rose with his large fists flexing. "Aye? Keep your compliments to yourself, Sean, or I'll give you a fist to quiet your mouth."

Sean's shoulders shook with laughter. "Oh, have a drink and cease being surly. I meant it as praise."

"There's no need to praise me. There's a reason why I'm surly. Cait won't let me near my bed and cosh if she doesn't soon..." Duff mumbled an expletive and stalked off to find his wife.

Sean would have laughed at Duff's lack of confidence, but he wasn't a good sort when it came to jests. Duff's wife was close to giving birth, and it surely caused his concern, emotions he wasn't wont to display. They'd all have to deal with Duff's abrasiveness until his bairn was born. Sean sure as hell hoped it'd be soon.

Grey raised his cup. "He's churlish lately, but he has no reason to worry. Cait will be well. It's strange what with Kenneth gone. I miss him too, and he made me miss Greer less."

"Remember how overwrought he was when Elisa gave birth? I vow no man ever succumbed to irrational thoughts as Kenneth." Sean stayed by his friend's side throughout the emotional ordeal and he'd considered beating Kenneth into unconsciousness to end his torment.

Grey chuckled under his breath. "Kenneth didn't deem his wee wife would birth such a large bairn. I confess she worried me, too. I should've known she'd bear him a son."

"She boasted she would have a lass. I wagered with Kenneth and lost all my coin from trading that year."

Grey chugged his brew. "Serves you right. I asked him to visit for the celebration, but he has his own fields and clan to see to. It would've been good to see him. Now with Kenneth gone our numbers are lacking."

Sean felt the same way. It wasn't the same without Greer and Kenneth. "We knew one day we'd go our separate ways."

"I didn't. I always thought you would all stay here, except for Greer, since he was destined to be the laird of his clan. And since he died, and Kenneth had to become laird... I'd give anything to be back on the training field at the age of seven when bruises were our only concern."

"Were that we could go back." Sean didn't like change, and it bothered him that something in his gut told him more was coming.

"Duff is concerned about the lack of guardsmen in the keep now. I must do something soon."

"It's only James, Colm and me, now, Grey. You should take on new guardsmen. With your bairns growing, they'll need protection." His laird's family's protection weighed on him, and he'd meant to discuss the issue with Grey.

Grey lifted his cup again. "Aye, my children never stay in the same place for long. I admit I lost them twice today. Don't speak of it to Bree, she'd have my arse."

"None of us can keep track of them. They have your wife's nature, too full of vigor. May they grow anchors on their feet as they sprout." Sean saluted his assertion and spilled his drink on purpose.

"I agreed to have Gordy train with Duff. We'll see how it goes. There are others I'm considering to add to the guard."

Sean glanced at the young warrior, Gordy, who sat at another table. Although he was a Gunn soldier, he had to mature, as well as gain more experience. But the lad showed courage when he protected Grey's wife a few years back, when on a mission for the king.

Colm nudged him, "Sean, I'm going to marry Kelsi."

"Kelsi McInnish?" He frowned even though Colm was interested in Kenneth's sister. But he didn't know it was serious. Yet, now that he thought about it, Colm went to Kenneth's clan more often lately and always the first to volunteer to deliver news or messages.

“A toast then, to Colm and Kelsi. May they live long and have many bairns.” Sean raised his cup again and the drink began to take effect on his sullen mien.

James gulped down his drink. “I see Sarah looking at me. I vow I’ll get no sleep this night.” He flashed a grin before he left the table.

Colm stood and tossed his empty cup on the table. “I’m to bed. I’ve got an early ride tomorrow. In the morn, I’ll stop in before I leave in case you have any messages. I’ll return with news from Kenneth and the McInnish clan in a few days, Laird.”

Gray inclined his head before he tossed it back and drank down the rest of his brew.

Sean tilted his head, a gesture of farewell. He now sat alone with Grey. The night darkened many a path and the clan quieted. The rest went off, and Sean should seek his bed as well. The drink made his head spin.

“What’s bothering you?” Grey asked. “You’ve been brooding all day. Every time I looked at you, you wore a scowl. We’re at a celebration. You might want to enjoy it.”

“Nothing’s wrong. Can’t a man sit and reflect without everyone believing something is wrong?” But something bothered him, and Sean couldn’t reason it.

“I know you, and this mood is unusual.”

“Mayhap you’re right. I get a sense a change is about to occur. I detest change, but it’s coming and we should prepare.” Sean set his cup down and shrugged his shoulder.

“Nothing will change, Sean. The drink is going to your head.” Grey laughed when he punched his arm and made him spill a good amount of brew.

“It’s been too peaceful. Something is bound to stir things up.” Sean looked to where the women stood and noticed they left. It was probably for the best since he wasn’t good company. The last thing he wanted was to leave a woman dissatisfied with his presence.

He left his laird when Bree came and handed Grey one of his children. Sean adored his laird’s children and doted on them. The twins had been born two years before and at an age where they conversed even if it was one word at a time. The only problem was they had to watch what they said around them lest they be scolded by their lady.

Sean found his way to the garrison and his bed. He stripped and preferred to sleep unclothed, especially when the weather warmed. He lay upon his bunk and listened to the snores of the other men and tried to reason why he got a strange sense. All evening something nagged him.

The night drug on and Sean lay awake, tossing and turning, and the strong brew did little to lull him. His thoughts returned to his friends. They reached an age where one should move on to the next stage of life. Sean liked his life the way it was, simple. He was pleased Kenneth, Duff, and Colm found wives and started families of their own. He wasn’t ready to tie himself to one woman, and definitely not ready to be a father.

Sean didn’t have to worry about responsibilities. His days were spent guarding and his nights free to do as he pleased. He only answered to Grey as well it should be. Mayhap boredom caused his irrational thoughts?

Morning came and with it the dulled light of dawn, there would be no sleep for him. After he donned his garments, he walked toward the sea, a short distance from the Gunn keep, where he’d take a quick swim. Other clansmen had the same idea and swam in the depths. The scent of the sea

engulfed his senses. Sean stripped and swam out, reveling in the refreshing chilly water which took the sleep from his body and mind. The hefty waves gave him a good workout and exerted him. When he'd had enough, he joined the other men on the sandy shore and redressed.

The men went off to attend to their training duties, and Sean started off for the hall. A morning feast would cover the table and he didn't want to miss out. His laird's wife made the most delicious foodstuffs, and the guardsmen always welcomed at the table.

He waved to a few of the clansmen as he made his way and saw the remnants of the celebration being cleared away. Several fire pits still erected. By noon no one would be able to tell they'd had a celebration.

The hall was noisy when he entered. Grey's children ran around the large hall and played with the small sacks brought as gifts the last time they went trading. One of the heavy sacks flew at him, and he caught it and tossed it back to the lad named after his cousin, Greer. The wee lad even resembled his cousin with his lanky body and dark hair, but his sister the opposite. Grace's light hair and profound blue eyes would indeed cause Grey troubles later when she reached marriageable age. Thankfully that wouldn't happen for many years to come.

Then he spotted Sunny, the winsome lass. Her curly hair stuck out, for she must have retreated from her bed. He smiled and waved to her. She belonged to Greer, but because he had no means to care for a bairn, Grey and Bree raised her. His cousin's daughter now stood as high as his shoulders.

Sean took his seat at the table and noticed the look of pain on Grey's face.

"Imbibe a wee too much last eve?" he asked in jest.

"Nay, I only had one cup of brew. It's not that." Grey scowled at the parchment he held and didn't elaborate.

"Then why do you appear cross?" Sean didn't like the look his friend wore and it concerned him. There were only a handful of times when he'd seen that expression—none of them ever good.

"I received a missive bearing disheartening news." Grey set the parchment on the table and pressed his fingers against his temples.

"What troubles you?"

Duff and Colm entered the hall and distracted him when they shoved each other so they might sit in the best seat, the one in front of the tray of sweet cakes. Sean poured himself a cup of ale and grinned at the banter between his friends.

"Let go, you blighter," Duff said and tried to pull Colm from the table. "Or by God, I'll break your arm."

"I was here first. Find another seat." Colm grunted at the strain of trying to thwart Duff.

They continued to bicker over who entered first and who should have the right to sit in the prime location. As they fought, James arrived and took the seat from them. Duff tried to pry him out of it but to no avail. James held onto the heavy table. Duff and Colm lost out and Sean chuckled at their displeasure.

"If you've no messages to relay to the McInnish, Laird, I'll be on my way."

Grey didn't reply and kept his gaze on the parchment.

Colm grabbed a hunk of bread and with a wave, he headed for the door.

"I've news which concerns you, Sean," Grey said sternly, calling his attention, and to his wife, he said, "Take the children upstairs."

All ceased talking and looked at their laird, given the severity of his voice. Bree gave him a sorrowful gaze and ushered the children to the upper floor.

The hall emptied except for Grey and the guardsmen. He waited for him to continue, but his laird didn't seem to want to reveal the news.

Sean's interest piqued because he didn't like the tone Grey used or the demeanor he presented. "Me? What concerns me?"

"Lord William, the Hume, wrote to you. I took the liberty and read the missive."

Sean hadn't heard the name in a long time. "Why would he write to me? I haven't seen the man since I was wee when my mother visited him." He had a minor remembrance of it since he'd only been about five.

Speaking of the event made him think of his parents who died from sickness after his father returned from a trading mission, shortly after the visit to the border. Several Gunn men and their families succumbed that year. He'd been fortunate to have Grey's father, the laird at the time, and his uncle, take him in and raise him as one of his own.

James said, "Is Lord William your mother's brother, the one who banished her from his clan?"

Sean nodded. "Aye, the one and the same. He lives by the border and is probably an English supporter. I'll have nothing to do with the Sassenach."

"We don't know that, Sean. Many by the border support either side when there is benefit or cause," Grey said and waved the missive. "Hume sides with Scotland, always has."

"My mother and he had a falling out when he didn't approve of her marriage. Why would he contact me?" He took a large spoonful of pottage and added it to his bowl. The scent waffled to his nose, and he wanted to taste it, for certain Bree spiced to perfection.

"I deem you might want to read this." Grey pushed the parchment toward him. "He sent it a few months ago and it now reached you. Seems the messenger had trouble crossing our neighbor's lands and reverted the long way around."

"The messenger should've thrown it in the fire and saved himself the time and trouble. I've no interest in reading it." Sean frowned at the parchment as though it were poisonous.

Grey pounded his fist on the table. "He went through the trouble to get a message to you, the least you can do is read it. Cosh you're a stubborn arse."

"Give me the goddammed thing." Sean swiped it from the table and read:

Nephew, I behoove you. Attend me at the soonest for I have urgent, grave matters, dear lad, and must speak with you. Please come as soon as you can arrange it. There is much we need to discuss. Yours—William Hume

Sean stiffened when he read the words. He scowled fiercely enough to set the parchment on fire. His heated gaze then looked to Grey, hoping he would explain why a man he hadn't seen since he was barely out of swaddling clothes would want to see him.

"Will you go?" James asked.

"Hell no."

"You should, Sean. Hume is an important man and has influence with the king and English court. Mayhap he needs your help."

His scowl grew fiercer. "My help? Why would I want to help him? After what he did to my mother, he dare asks me to attend him? I care not he influences the king or attends the bloody English court. None of that matters. He should ask someone who gives a cosh for aid."

No one spoke and Sean dismissed the conversation. The last thing he wanted was to get involved with the Hume clan. He had no cause or need to reinsert himself in their clan, he had his own. The Gunns were more important to him and the only family he needed or wanted. His loyalty was already taken.

Sean refilled his bowl with the delicious pottage Bree made and spooned in mouthfuls. As hungry as he was, he'd likely eat three bowls before he left to attend his duty.

"There's no reason you shouldn't at least meet him," Grey said.

"You won't let this go, will you?" Sean finished the pottage, sated and felt much better. His stomach groaned from the brew he'd drunk the night before. And now his head thrashed, but it wasn't caused by the drink.

"I won't need you for a time. There's nothing happening here. I'll have Duff send the most seasoned guardsmen to the keep to add to our protection if that's your concern? Besides, I need to assign additional guards and give you, James and Colm time off."

"It's a concern and I'm glad you're considering it. Still, it doesn't make me feel right leaving you here with inadequate protection. I've my duties and nothing will detain me from them." Sean needed to come up with an excuse.

"I give you leave. Find out what the man wants." Grey leaned forward and tried to intimidate him with a look that meant he should take heed. "I met Hume a few times at council meetings by the border. He looked to be a fair man. From our discussions, he led me to believe he supports our king. Even so, he's your only family, Sean. You cannot dismiss this without a thought."

"He's not my family and I sure as hell can." Sean was about to rise when James stopped him.

"What if I go with you? You don't need us, Grey, and Sean might need support on the journey. We'll go, see what he wants, and return within a week, a fortnight at most."

Sean wanted to protest, but Grey stood and said, "Then it's settled. You'll leave on the morrow. That's an order."

He'd be dejected to leave his beloved home, but there was nothing he could do. Sean wasn't one to blatantly scoff at or ignore a command.

CHAPTER THREE

Frances rode through the village adjacent to the lands where she lived and wished her homecoming was more jubilant. She loved the old castle and the eccentric servants her uncle employed. This was definitely not the joyous return she envisioned. The villagers closed their windows and none attended their daily tasks. At this time of day, the village bustled with people selling and buying wares. Forlornly, she wondered if her uncle succumbed, and the villagers already mourned. She hoped not, because she dearly wanted to say goodbye, and hoped she made it in time.

After the long ride on the lane, the dank, foreboding castle came into view. Her heart swelled with love. Even though it was old and drafty, she cherished it. Within minutes, she would find out if the news was devastating.

As she passed through the gate, she noticed the courtyard and buildings along the trail to the castle vacant. Except for the guardsmen posted at the gatehouse and in the bailey, all hid. Frances left her palfrey at the door. The guard would bring her satchel and other belongings inside.

"My lady, I'll take care of unpacking. Go to him," Jacob, the keep's steward, said.

She nodded and was thankful he delivered the message in Edinburgh. With Jacob along on the journey home, she needn't worry about her security.

"Thank you, Jacob, and for your protection."

Frances hastily entered the castle and listened to the ominous silence. The castle windows, what little there were, covered with fabrics. A darkened abode met her, and she stood wary to move forward. The old castle's musty scent engulfed her. She listened for sounds, but none came. Frances took the stairs and the old wood creaked beneath each step.

Outside her uncle's chamber door, she waited and drew an apprehensive breath. Determined, she opened the door and found the healer and two nuns from a nearby abbey who stood at his bedside. When she approached, she expected to find him barely hanging on to life.

William yanked the cup from the healer and tossed it aside to the floor. "I won't drink the wretched remedy. I must have my mind clear. Ah, Fancy, you arrived. Come closer, dearest. The rest of you leave. Be gone, ye vile women."

Frances wanted to smile, for her uncle's brashness was still there beneath his demeanor. The three women left the chamber hastily and quietly closed the door.

"You shouldn't be unkind, Uncle, they're trying to help you."

"Bah, trying to help me meet my maker before I'm ready."

"What ails you? You don't look as though you're dying. Did you speak a falsehood?" Frances leaned closer to get a better look and tested his head for fever. His head was cool to the touch.

"When have I ever told a falsehood? I'm dying. I told the healer I had a wee bit of life left in me and business to tend to. She wants me drugged with cowbane and unconscious. Nay, I say. I'll stay awake until the end."

She tucked the covers around him and refrained from smiling. "Can I get you anything? What can I do to make you comfortable?"

He patted the bedside. "Sit, for I've something to say."

She did as he requested and sat on the edge of the bed. "What's so important? I'm gladdened you called me home. I sent a missive to you only yestermorn asking for an escort. The queen released me of my duty. I tired of Edinburgh."

"I suspected as much, lass. You didn't want to go, but I'm happy you did. The queen bid you to serve her...and we couldn't gainsay her. Besides, you only existed here and didn't live. You've been like a daughter, Fancy." He took her hand and gently squeezed it. "Your father, my good comrade, would've been proud of you."

She sensed the weakness of his fingers and noticed his dull eyes. Lord William always was spry and had bright eyes. He loved life and often teased her and called her Fancy. She'd never heard such an endearment before, but he'd said he called her that because she was elegant. He'd compared her to a graceful hall which gleamed with candles and the finest household items.

Frances laughed at his comparison, for she was vastly the opposite. She was plain, and no way resembled anything as grand. But William said she wasn't plain and wasn't unnoticeable. She was Fancy.

"You always become melancholy when you speak of my father. I don't want you to be. You'll tire yourself. If you're not dying, we can speak on the morrow. I shall tuck you in for a rest." She kissed his forehead and was about to exit his chamber, but he took hold of her wrist.

"Nay, Fancy, please stay. Now that you're home, we should speak. I've betrothed you."

She gasped, surprised by his declaration. "You have? To whom?" Several men's names came instantly to mind, and she held her breath hoping not to hear any of them.

"I don't want you to be alone after I die. I know how you feel about marriage after what happened to your beloved Robert, but you can't be alone. You cannot be unprotected."

"I still miss him," she said forlornly.

Her uncle gave a gentle smile. "You miss the idea of him. Och, you must move on, lass. There are other fine men who would make a good husband. I vow you'll find your betrothed handsome and worthy, a more honorable man doesn't exist."

"I'm accustomed to being alone now and it doesn't bother me." Frances enjoyed the freedom of not having to answer to a husband, even if she had to follow her uncle's orders. Everyone's ministrations were to wed her off.

"I cannot be at peace until I know you're safe and cared for."

His words sunk her heart. Putting it like that, how could she not see reason? She nodded firmly and conceded to his will. "Why didn't you write and tell me this? You never keep secrets."

"I didn't want you to dwell on it. If I'd told you, would you have returned hastily?"

She shrugged her shoulder in answer. "Mayhap not. I jest, Uncle, for I would've returned. Ermintrude is here."

"Your sweet daughter missed you and has grown. Have you seen her?"

Frances raised her brows. "Nay, I came here first. Cease dawdling, Uncle, and tell me who I'm betrothed to. I'm beginning to think you're delaying the telling."

"I wrote to him months ago and surely he's received my missive by now. My hope is he arrives before I meet my maker. If not, it shall still be done..."

"Uncle, please." Frances swore her heart stopped in wait of his answer.

"He's my nephew. You shall wed into the family as your father and I always hoped."

"You never spoke of this." She wondered if he was being deceitful.

"We made plans to betroth the two of you when you were bairns, but with what happened... I didn't deem he would agree and so I betrothed you to Robert. What a blunder that turned out to be." William closed his eyes, his breath slowed and harshened.

Frances touched his face, his prickly whiskers growing since he'd been bedridden. "I wouldn't say blunder, for it gave me Ermintrude. You never mentioned a nephew. Is he a good man?"

William opened his eyes and nodded. "He is. We're estranged, but I saw him a few times. He's grown into a fine man. I fear I've done him wrong, Fancy, and I couldn't make the wrong right until now."

"Why is he angry with you? What did you do to cause his disdain? I cannot fathom it because you're a kindhearted man." Frances didn't like where the conversation headed.

"He may be angry, och I hope to set it right. I'll only speak of my ill-deed with him, lass. I've corresponded with the Gunn chieftain about him for years. His laird knew I would eventually send for him. Sean is honorable, strong, and devoted."

She exhaled a garish breath. "All that? You speak highly of him, but you don't mention kind or caring."

"A finer man you couldn't find. I want you to wed him. It is my dying wish, Fancy. You won't disappoint me, will you, lass?" His eyes grew dark and implored her.

She wanted to protest, but her uncle had never been wrong in his assessment of others. If he thought the man worthy, then she believed him. "I don't wish to disappoint you, Uncle. Shall I meet him before the wedding? Am I dishonoring Robert?"

"Robert wouldn't want you to be unhappy. You've mourned him longer than you should, aye longer than convention. You're young and should be wedded." William tried to clasp her hand, but he weakened. "I hope he comes soon, Fancy. You'll wed as soon as he arrives. It must be done hastily and in secret. None can be told until I depart." He gasped and took an uneasy breath.

"You're upset. I won't have you worrying yourself. You rest and we'll speak of this again." She patted the cover and touched his face in farewell.

"I am tired, lass. Aye, let me rest for a wee bit. Promise to come this eve."

"We'll dine together and continue our discussion. I'll return later." She left him to his slumber.

Outside his chamber, the healer and nuns awaited. They reentered the room with her nod. She was glad to have them watch over him even though the healer was known to be antiquated when it came to healing methods.

Frances couldn't wait to see Ermintrude and hastened to the end of the hall. She threw open the door to the nursery and spotted her on the floor playing with a small white cat.

"My heart."

"Momma, you're here." Ermintrude ran and threw herself in her arms.

Frances barely caught her with the force of her hug. She breathed in the scent of her sweet bairn and rocked her. "I missed you."

"I have a cat."

She knelt on the floor, content to hold the wee lass in her arms. With a pet to the cat's head, she heard her daughter's giggle. "So I see."

"Her name's Libby. Uncle William gave her to me."

Frances wiped a happy tear from her face. Joy came at being reunited with her child. Her fingers stroked the long sable tresses falling at her daughter's back. "You must've been a good lass for him to give you a cat."

"Oh, aye, Momma. I was good. You're home." She set her small arms around her neck and hugged her tight.

"I am."

Ermintrude sniffled. "Are you going away again?"

"Oh nay, my heart, I'm here to stay."

She picked up her cat and held it in an awkward position, beneath its forearms. "Promise?"

"I promise. Now, I must change for supper. I will come before."

Her daughter's focus caught by the cat that bounded to the other side of the chamber when it was freed. There was no way to compete with a lively cat to hold a four-year-old's attention.

Frances nodded to Alice, the young maid who oversaw the nursery. The tall lanky lass was the daughter of Stephen and Maddie, who also worked at the keep and village. Stephen was the village miller and made the best garments, and his wife, Maddie, the keep's cook.

Alice appeared older than when she'd last seen her. Her eyes bluer and her dark, almost black hair, longer. She was a striking lass, and probably had the village lads vying for her hand.

"Alice, thank you for taking good care of Ermintrude. She looks well."

"Oh, I was happy to, My Lady. She's grown, hasn't she? I've let out her garments twice since you left."

She nodded. "I believe she has. You're getting big, Ermintrude, and likely outgrowing your garments daily. Soon, you'll be a lady."

Ermintrude snickered. "Aye, then I can wear gowns like you and Alice."

"You certainly will. I must go and will return soon." Frances closed the door behind her and stood in the hallway, tears gathered in her eyes.

Some of the tears were happy but most sad. She wondered if Robert would have loved their child. Would he have minded a daughter or would he have been disappointed? She couldn't bear to think of him and shook the despondent thoughts away.

She reached her chamber and after closing the door, she gazed lovingly at her surroundings. The room was her domain, the place she was safest, and the place where she could be herself and do as she pleased.

"It's good to be home," she said aloud.

She released a relieved sigh and began unpacking her satchel. When she received the rest of her belongings, she noticed a satchel which didn't belong to her. It was made of black leather and looked to be sturdy and of fine craftsmanship. She considered one of the guardsmen must have

delivered it to her chamber by mistake. With that thought, she carried it to the lower level and found Davy, the castle's main caretaker, and explained what happened.

The man nearly blind from age probably didn't realize it wasn't hers. But he cackled a laugh and pointed to a guard who rode with her. "Not my responsibility, My Lady, to bring baggage to your chamber."

She could've laughed at Davy's disgruntlement, for he was a cantankerous old man. "You there," she said to a young guard walking by, "Someone delivered this to my chamber by mistake."

The young lad shook the hair out of his eyes. "Nay, My Lady, none of us use satchels except for Master Jacob and I saw him take his. It was with your belongings."

"That's strange," she said and thanked him.

Frances returned to her chamber and hesitated to open it. After receiving the harsh messages with reprehensible words, and then the box with the dead flowers... Surely she shouldn't open it. But Frances wasn't a coward, and she thought she could probably figure out who it belonged to.

She turned the clasp on the top and opened it. An awful smell wafted from within, but she opened the satchel wider. A white garment lay inside. She pulled it out and gasped. It was a nightrail, her nightrail. She recognized it because she'd sewn a blue velvet bow on the neckline. As she held it up, blood smeared over the front. In shock and horror, she dropped it and ran from the chamber.

Frances took the secret passageway at the end of the hallway to the door of the barbican. She stood by the wall encasing the walkway and breathed deeply. The wind whipped fiercely upon the high wall and lashed her hair from its ties.

Whenever she missed Robert or needed to settle herself, she retreated to the walkway by the crenellation and instantly calmed. It was as though he was with her. Her harsh breath and rapid heartbeat came under control, and she sat on a bench where she had a good view of the rolling hills.

Why would someone be cruel? What kind of message was that? Did someone want to kill her? She wouldn't believe that, but the scary thought was they'd gotten in her chamber and touched her belongings. Frances hadn't taken the nightrail when she went to Edinburgh. Whoever wanted to harm or frighten her was inside her chamber when she wasn't there. Then a frightening thought came. Could they get inside the keep when she was there?

Gazing at the rolling fields, she discerned two men on horses riding over the last hill. She stood and watched them for a few moments.

My betrothed.

"Oh, Robert, I hope you forgive me. But I'm tired of being alone. I'm frightened." Frances would have accepted any man her uncle recommended even if she balked at marriage.

A woman was open for a harsh life if unwed, and she didn't want that for her and Ermintrude. If her uncle was dying, she needed security. Her uncle was a good judge of character, and besides, now she would write to the queen and have her put the absurdity of marrying Adam Armstrong from her agenda.

Once she calmed, Frances left the walkway and reentered her chamber, and picked the nightrail up and set it inside the satchel. She found the messages sent to her. As she held them, she tried to reason why someone would do such a thing. She'd hurt no one, and she certainly didn't have enemies. The missives were despicable in that they called her blasphemous names. They weren't

signed and nor did they indicate why the person was wrath. Frances placed the pieces of parchment inside the satchel and took the small box she'd received the dead flowers in and set them inside too. She hid the satchel in her wardrobe, behind a large cover she used during winter months.

She should've burned everything in the hearth. For unknown reasons, she wanted to hold on to the items should she ever need them. With the horrid things out of sight, she'd put them from her thoughts.

Frances calmed, undressed from her traveling garments, and sat on the bed. The day exhausted her. To begin with, she'd had to accept her uncle's illness, and learned of her betrothal. And what with Winifred missing... Those matters were far more worrisome than someone's cruel jests.