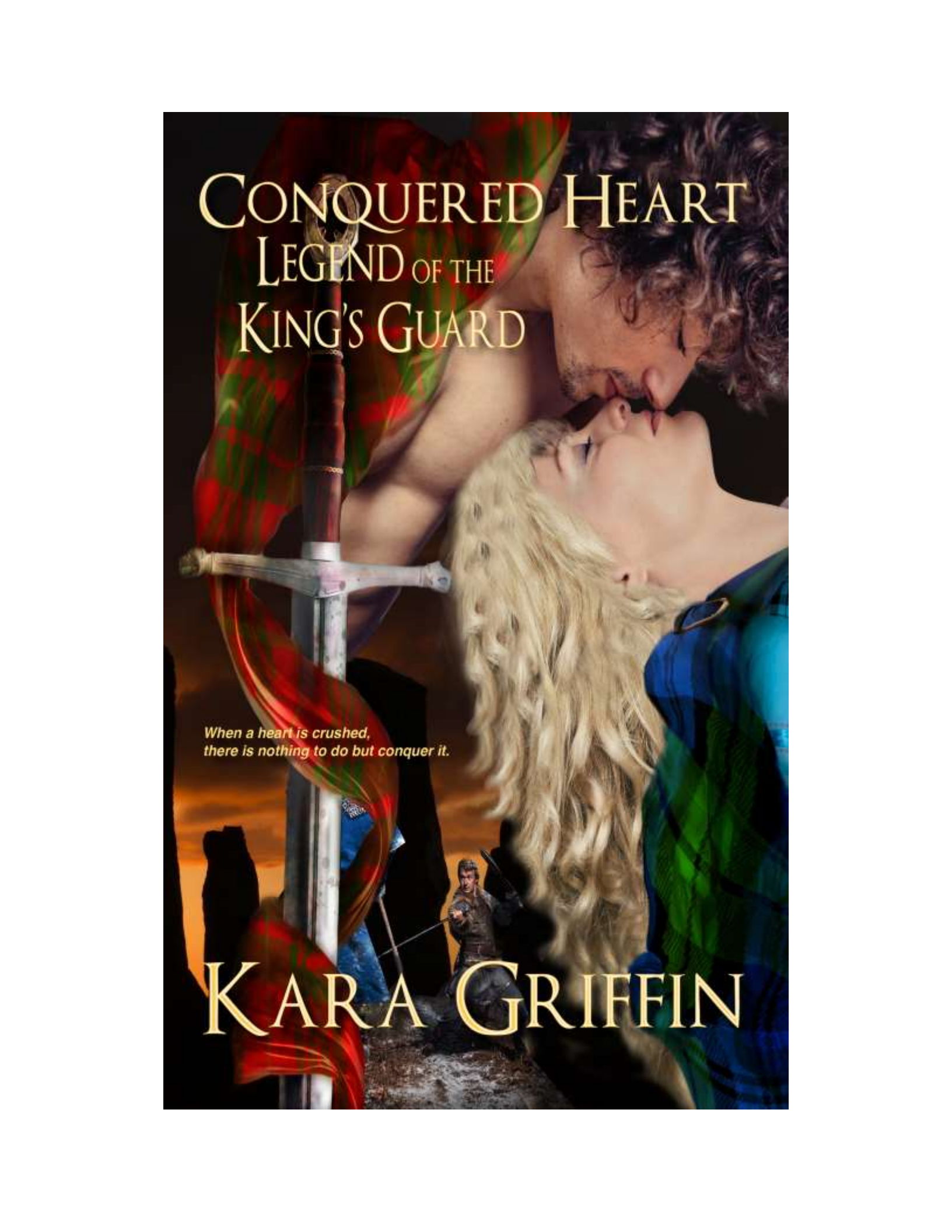




CONQUERED HEART

LEGEND OF THE KING'S GUARD

*When a heart is crushed,
there is nothing to do but conquer it.*

KARA GRIFFIN

CONQUERED HEART

Legend of the King's Guard - Book One

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This book contains adult material, reader discretion advised.

DEDICATION

To my Cameron family, especially my Grandpop (HPC).
Miss your humor, disgruntlement, and laugh.

But to see her was to love her, Love but her, and love forever.

Ae Fond Kiss - Robert Burns.

CONQUERED HEART

Legend of the King's Guard - Book One

The Legend of the King's Guard begins with CONQUERED HEART

In protecting the King of Scotland, Graeme Cameron will do whatever it takes to ensure Robert the Bruce's safety. He and his comrades become the victim of circumstance and are now exiled. As they hide, they realize others are worse off and they hire themselves out as mercenaries.

Kerrigan Campbell is desperate to find her laird and protector's son. Then she hears of the legendary king's guard and seeks to plead their aid. She runs across their leader in the midst of a battle, but he's not what she expects. When she and Graeme find an abandoned bairn, he asks her to locate its mother and in return he'll recapture her laird's son.

Graeme has challenges before him—how to keep himself and his comrades from being executed for doing their duty, aiding the sweet lass in recovering her charge, finding the bairn's mother, helping their king defeat England's army, and gaining a pardon for their involvement in the king's misdoings. There's one challenge that thwarts him though and that's *Kerrigan*. She might conquer his heart and more...

Prologue

*Clan Cameron encampment
Lochaber, Scotland
February 1304*

Killing a man and watching him die wasn't always easy. But this man deserved to meet his end by the thrust of his sword. Graeme, son of the chieftain and successor to the clan, knew he had to avenge his wife. Nothing deterred him from the sacred duty, not his father's aversion of Sorchu or the clan's acceptance of Ranall MacGilley.

Ranall lay on the ground and looked up, his expression bereft of guilt or remorse. Only the blood trickled from his mouth proved Graeme struck him through his torso. He didn't show a reaction to being put through. The grievous wound would end the miscreant's life. It was just as well since he'd be going to a dark place where the devil would consume what remained of his soul.

Harsh whispers arose behind him, but he ignored his clan's affront. Time ceased, and no one moved. Whatever happened, even if he was put to death for what they considered an atrocity, he would face it with honor.

Waiting for a man to die was even more difficult because Graeme wanted to yank his sword free and thrust it again and mayhap again. Ranall betrayed him and took his wife in a dastardly way. No man should touch a woman with anger or vengeance. His foe taunted him with threats to Sorchu, but Graeme never thought he'd act on those vows. Theirs was a long-drawn-out battle of wills and his enemy more boastful than not.

Ranall hated the fact he was in line to succeed their father. There was only one thing wrong with his credence. Ranall was a bastard and even though the clan valued him, they would never accept his succession. Albeit Ranall gained the clan's acceptance, his father wasn't swayed by the man's influence. He neither coveted him as a son nor belittled him as a bastard. Graeme was uncertain how his father felt about the man. His da wasn't an easy man to figure out, for he wasn't one to let his emotions or family ties motivate his responsibilities as laird.

The elders concerned Graeme more since they were the last word when it came to clan matters. He detested his da wouldn't stand up to the council or make decisions based on his instincts. He allowed others to rule their clan, but Graeme held no hatred for him. Regardless of how his father ruled, he was still his elder and laird.

Graeme wanted Ranall MacGilley to realize his anger when he drew his last breath. His adversary would do well to know his wrath. A vision of his lovely wife standing before Ranall with a dagger pressed to her throat tensed his resolve. He shouldn't allow the man a peaceful passing before death. Graeme closed his eyes against the image of the blade slicing Sorchu's neck and blood flowing from the gullet of her delicate skin, turning her garments crimson.

"Come away, Graeme," his cousin, Anselan said. He took his arm and tried to pull him away.

He shook his head but kept his eyes on the rabble at his feet. "Nay, I want to witness his last breath...to know he's dead."

"Your father stands yonder awaiting you. You should go to him and explain."

"He will take MacGilley's side. It matters not. I've done what's right."

"Aye, mayhap you should've gained your father's permission before you sought retribution. The council is not pleased. The wergild will be high, aye mayhap even banishment."

Regardless of the wergild, he would've done it. The price for killing a man was well worth the retribution. Graeme wanted to shout his denial at the irreverence. Heedless of their displeasure, he wouldn't wait for justice and sought his own. It was his wife MacGilley attacked, his wife the man murdered before the clan. Did they expect him to stand aside and allow the barbarism? A man was nothing if he allowed his honor to be squelched. Honor demanded he take vengeance for his wife no matter what she'd done or was said to have done.

He reached down to grab his sword, certain one more thrust would do MacGilley in, but the rattle in his breath ceased. His body stilled. It was an almost joyful moment. Their clan's war cry came to mind. He wanted with all his heart to shout the words so every person heard and knew how much he loathed the man. But feeding one's flesh to the hounds wouldn't be proper at such a moment.

Laird Cameron motioned to a man who hurried forth and covered his foe's body with a cloak. Graeme was disappointed, for he wanted his clan to view the body of the man who killed innocents and thought he was free from the rules and laws of the clan.

"The elders are angry you took matters in your own hands."

He firmed his mouth, knowing he would say something to offend. For they should be damned if they thought he would allow the miscreant to breathe another breath after this day. It was best he not respond.

"My son, Graeme, come away. We will discuss this in my tent where we can be alone."

"There is nothing to speak. You saw what he did. How he cut down a young woman before all. What could she have done to cause his ire?"

No one responded to his question. Graeme cast his gaze through the onlookers and saw his mother standing aside, her hand covered her mouth in obvious shock. There was nothing to say to appease what he'd done.

"What say you, Da, where was Sorcha's justice? You'd allow MacGilley to go unpunished. Should I bow my head to the filthy swine? I took justice, aye, for my wife, for myself, for our clan."

"You have no right to decide what the justice be. Are you laird?" His father spoke low, soft enough only he caught the words.

He stood defiantly rigid. "Nay, not yet." Graeme wanted to shout once he was laird injustices wouldn't be tolerated. He wanted them to know he wouldn't be a pushover like his laird.

"Aye and you might never be with that attitude. Come away, son, let's discuss this. Your wife cuckolded you. What Ranall did was wrong, aye, but she caused her own anguish. You risk your neck for a mere woman. Are you not abashed?"

Graeme caught the blather being spread amongst the clan, but he didn't believe the lies spoken of Sorcha. Was he a fool? Should he have avenged her? It mattered not.

“She was my wife and regardless of what she did, she didn’t deserve to be killed by him, murdered before all. If she needed punishment, it should’ve been my responsibility. I was her husband.” He spat on the ground and made certain all saw. His insolence implied and duly noted by the council.

“She was sinful and unfaithful, son. You didn’t deserve such a woman, one who took up with another. You should be glad Ranall rid you of her.”

“I should’ve embraced him? Shook his hand and gave gratitude? He deserved my blade and nothing more. Ranall forced her to accept him and would’ve stopped at nothing to have her and he did it to inflict my ire.” Graeme’s stomach churned at the thought his enemy deceived his clan into believing him trustworthy. MacGilley was far from that.

He couldn’t accept his father’s words. At one time he’d loved his wife and intended to make a good marriage. Where he went wrong, he wasn’t sure. Mayhap he’d gone off to war too often or sought entertainment with his comrades more often than he should have. Most wives accepted such traits of their husbands, and Sorcha was no different. She’d voiced no complaint.

“The elders will hold you accountable for slaying one of our clan. You won’t go unpunished for this, Graeme.”

“Let them do their will then for I’ve no regrets.”

His father motioned to two of his comrades who stepped forward and took his arms.

Graeme pulled free. “I won’t balk. Lead the way.” Acceptance of his fate would hopefully sway the elder’s decision, and even if it didn’t, he’d walk with pride to his death.

He followed the men to the pit where they kept captured enemies. Without hesitation, he jumped into the pit and peered upward at his friends. Their faces long at his situation.

Graeme stood in the center of the pit awaiting word of what was to become of him. The elders would debate for hours, probably days. Their decision would be his execution. They undoubtedly argued whether to behead or hang him. Neither death appealed.

Through the long night and the two days that followed, he heard little from his clan. Someone tossed a piece of bread at him towards the morning on the second day. None stopped by to see if he was well, to give an opinion of the matter, or to relate the happenings.

As dawn lighted the hole on the third day, voices drew close to the pit. A rope tossed down, and he took hold. When he reached the top, he saw the entire clan gathered.

Fergus, the eldest of the elders, stepped forward. “Graeme, we respect you. We respect your father, the laird. But when a man takes in his hands his own justice without the approval of the council, he must also pay the charge.”

He kept his gaze firm on Fergus as he continued his nonsensical reiteration of their rules. His end would come from the man’s lips eventually. Old Fergus dragged on with words. Many of his clansmen said the man was passionate. Graeme considered him daft and perhaps too prideful of his role within the council. He definitely wielded his power over the other elders and his father.

The elders’ role within the clan often caused contention between him and his da. Old ways were still revered by most of his clan, but what with the turmoil in the south, they needed to change their ways if they succeeded at supporting the new king.

“Most of us,” he said and motioned to the other elders, “wanted you to hang or banish you. Och your father suggested an amiable punishment. You are his only son and we cannot allow you to die—”

Laird Cameron stepped forward and cut off the elder clansman. “We follow Moray and Wallace in our fight against the English. We will send you to Robert Bruce, for he has our support in taking the crown of Scotland. You’ll stay with him for five years and do service to protect him.”

Graeme rubbed the whiskers on his chin and disbelieved the sentence. Before he might retort, his father pulled his arm.

“Come away before they change their minds. You will leave this day and shan’t be permitted on our land until your service is ended. I will send the writ to the Bruce letting him know, and you will honor our clan. When your service is finished, you’ll return and one day become laird.”

Anselan handed him a sack with his meager belongings.

Graeme flapped his hand. “I’ll have my sword.”

Anselan grinned. “Aye? Are you sure you want to take it with you? I always wanted it.”

“Hand it over.” Graeme would never leave the weapon behind. He needed it for his protection, and he cherished the sword. It belonged to his grandda who took it to the crusades. Its history long and triumphant if given what his grandda told him was true. No finer sword could be had, and he was honored when given it. His grandda had but one request that he use it on foes whose blood deserved the blade. MacGilley’s blood was worthy, and he worried not about the sword’s misuse.

He followed the men toward awaiting horses. Anselan and his brother, Ewan, mounted their steeds and waited for him.

Graeme looked into his da’s eyes. “Five years is a long time.”

His father pressed a coin into his palm. “To keep you safe.” The coin had been in their family for years and many tales told of its history.

He held fast to it. His father gave his unspoken approval and that meant much to Graeme. There were words he wanted to say, but he held silent.

“You beheld your grandda in better regard than me. He was a great laird, as you will be. Just don’t get yourself killed, son. I want your vow, and I want to see you back here.”

“I cannot promise, Da. You know how we Camerons like to fight.”

“Aye, aye. Be well, my son, until we meet here or in heaven.” His father turned and walked away. He’d never witnessed sentiment from his da.

Graeme took to his saddle and sat taller than he ever had. A sense of pride came for what he’d done. Avenging his wife and ridding his clan of the swine who plagued them. He rode next to his cousins and didn’t look back. His only thought to do his service and do it well. One day, he’d return to his beloved clan.

Chapter One

*Off the coast of Western Scotland
March 1306*

They fought for freedom. Being free meant something different to every man. To Graeme of Clan Cameron, it meant serving no man. He lived to serve his clan and that alone until the Bruce's passion swayed him. He'd done service to Lord Robert for two years and during that time he'd seen how politics affected the lairds and lesser titled men. The alliances and word of the clashes reached him.

On the windblown shores of the small island, they fled to; the men stood in a semicircle and gazed out over the far-stretched waters. Graeme never expected their leader to up and leave without notice, instruction, or farewell. They were left on the desolate island, probably for good.

Gilroy, an unkempt squire in the Bruce's militia appeared hesitant to speak.

Graeme gave him an enraged look and disbelieved the lad's gall. "When did he leave? Speak, lad, there's no reason to hold back."

"I tell you, m'lords, he left this morn by himself. Says he didn't want you to return with him. Too dangerous, he says. I'm to keep you from following. He bid you not to return to the mainland."

"Do you hear that? He means to keep us from following," Brodin chortled. "How do you propose to keep us here, Gilroy? Liam, I'll wager you the coin, if you toss young Gilroy in the water."

"That's hardly worth the bother of the coin. I'd favor it and even wager the lad can't swim. He'll sink like a stone." Liam stood still though and waited for Graeme to acknowledge the wager.

Graeme, as perturbed as he was, eased slightly at the banter between his comrades. His friends wagered the coin for the last two years. It went from one to another when the said wager was won. Whoever held it had the privilege to suggest the next wager, the coin given from one man to another. The coin was brought back from the crusades by his grandda, and the remarkable story retold to Graeme when he was a lad. The tale, he surmised when he'd grown older, was doubtless embellished. His grandda told him the coin forged an alliance between two rival chiefs who conquered their foes in the holy land. Without their truce, both chief's armies would have been desecrated.

Since Graeme joined with the Bruce for his service, he used the coin in the same manner. He hoped to achieve trust and loyalty between him and his men who were of different clans.

"Gilroy could use a bath," Heath said with no hint of jest in his voice. "I say we toss him in the water and see if he floats."

Graeme peered over the squire's head and scoffed. "The Bruce put himself in more peril than what we'd ever face by leaving us here." He turned abruptly to Gilroy. "When did he leave?"

The squire backed up and appeared apprehensive. He shifted from one foot to the other and wouldn't look them in the eyes. "It wasn't yet dawn. Still dark when the Bruce took to the waters."

All was lost. Graeme, his comrades, and even the inept young squire knew it. Robert signed his death warrant. When they'd been exiled and absconded to the island for protection after the unfortunate incident at the abbey, he never would've thought their future king would be reckless. They were supposed to take shelter until word of Robert Comyn's death dwindled. If the Bruce left them there, he must have had a good reason. Had he received a message?

Graeme poked the thin squire's chest. "What news came?"

"There was a boat in the wee hours of the morn. A messenger came and told m'lord they executed his brother-in-law. Aye, hung him in the square before all. M'lord said England's king wouldn't hang him and Edward was trying to bring him to heel for Comyn's death." Gilroy gazed at his feet as if telling him would cause his anger.

"Aye, he leaves us here?" Graeme wanted to grab the lad and shake him. He wanted answers and information and didn't want to pry them from the bugger.

"He said he would send for you once he gained the throne."

Graeme laughed and bellowed louder than he had in months. "Aye? The throne would be polished to a high shine by his arse by the time he'd come for us, but no matter." With an intentional gaze, he beheld his comrades, Liam, Heath, and Brodin. "Since the Bruce is gone, I will lead this excursion."

His comrades nodded. None would refute his right to lead since he'd trained them and was the leader of their group. Graeme trained each one in the tactics he'd become renown for. He only shared his knowledge of the strategies with his closest comrades, tactics he'd learned from his grandda. They'd each served the Bruce for one reason or another, most offenses as heinous as his own.

"What excursion? Do you propose we defy the future king?" Liam grunted his accord, even though Graeme hadn't conceded.

He ignored the men as he contemplated what they should do. "We'll need a boat to take us to the mainland. It's doubtful anyone will come to deliver messages or retrieve us."

Brodin frowned and tilted his head in disbelief. "The Bruce left us here to rot."

"More like die. The fewer people to attest to Comyn's death the better for Robert." Graeme firmed his jaw, incredulous their lord abandoned them.

"Sirs, I must go with you. Don't leave me here. I vow I won't be a problem. I'll help you and won't get in the way." Gilroy, normally staid, raised his voice.

Graeme gave a slight nod. He wouldn't leave the lad to perish on the island as their future king did to them. The lad could be tiresome though, and he'd have to warn off the men from teasing the squire. He was young and untried when it came to battle or protection. Not only was he unskilled, but he also complained and thought low of himself. That was something Graeme forbade of his comrades. Honor. *For king and country*, regardless of the sacrifice. The lad needed to learn that before he'd make a full-fledged squire or even a low-ranked soldier.

"We'll search for wood to make a raft or something we can use to get across the waters." Brodin tugged on Heath's arm and led him away.

“I’ll help unless you don’t think I can carry wood,” Gilroy said.

Graeme gave a woeful glance to the lad. “Help them.” To his remaining comrade, he said, “When we get there—”

Liam set his closed fists on his hips. “Don’t you mean if we get there? It’ll be a hard crossing for the waters are choppy and fierce this time of year.”

“Aye, if we get there, we must find James Douglas. He’ll need to know our plan.”

“Damn me, why do you want to involve the Black Douglas? He’s an ornery sort. He almost got us killed the last time we saw him. I’d trust him not. What exactly is our plan?”

“He’ll know where we can find the Bruce. Someone must protect Robert’s arse and we cannot trust the young soldiers or a rebellious army to do so.”

“After the battle at Falkirk, Robert tried reason. I think he’s through with being reasonable and means to take arms again against the English king.” Liam scoffed and struck the sandy dirt with his foot.

“This is why he needs our aid.” Graeme turned back to face the water, knowing what he was about to suggest risked their lives. Not only would they defy their future king, but they needed to avert the English king’s hangman as well.

Chapter Two

Lanarkshire, Scotland

May 1306

Being the ward to Bothwell castle's overlord should have given her privileges and often did. Kerrigan arose late in the morn to begin her day, but the noise from the courtyard drew her interest. Footsteps, numerous from the sound on the dirt path that led to the gatehouse, alerted her men-at-arms returned. She stood by the large casement, high atop the donjon, and looked out onto the courtyard. On the fourth floor at the top of the tower, she gazed past the drawbridge and moat, the road beyond which flanked with heather fields and tall grasses. The view always enthralled her, but not this day.

The spring breeze whipped her hair about her shoulders, but she didn't notice the chill in the air or the beauty of the land. She watched the soldiers as they passed under the portcullis, their dejected faces visible. Her heart wretched seeing a person carried on a cart.

"It cannot be." Her words, a harsh whisper on her lips, rushed out. She ran from the solar, through the narrow upstairs hallway, down the steep steps, and heard the disturbance of the men who brought in the body.

"Is it the laird?" She watched the litter pass. None of the soldiers answered, their gazes cast to the stone floor. She hastened to the front of the procession and stopped them. When she reached the side, she peered at the handsome face of her overlord. "Is he...dead?"

The closest soldier shook his head. "He lives, Mistress, but not for long, I fear. Best prepare yourself and the family."

"Hurry, take him to his solar."

The men did as she asked, moved past her, up the steep steps, and disappeared when they reached the landing above. Now that Laird Moray returned home with grievous wounds, Kerrigan knew her days of his protection ended. Still, she would care for the laird until his demise. Unlike his wife, Lady Euphemia, who prepared to flee the castle and would be gone before nightfall.

There were many injured knights in both England and Scotland's armies in the latest rounds of battles. Surely they retreated to their barracks to mend their wounds and tend to the injured. From the bits of information she'd gathered from the soldiers who delivered Laird Moray, England suffered countless losses, as did the Scots. Bothwell was the forfeiture, and those who claimed victory would soon come.

"Take my satchels and secure them to my horse. I shall be ready to leave shortly," the laird's wife shouted to a servant.

Kerrigan regarded Lady Euphemia from the bottom of the stairs. She was about to take them and see to the laird's injuries when the lady called.

“You...best be gone for when night comes all here will be doomed. Have a care for yourself. Tell all and make haste.”

Kerrigan scrunched her eyes in disbelief the lady couldn't remember her name. She'd lived at the castle for nearly ten years, ever since her father was killed in the battle of the Red Ford. If it wasn't for Laird Moray, her father's comrade, Kerrigan might've been killed or captured. Who knows what the knaves would've done to her? Moray rescued her, brought her to his home, and treated her like a daughter. Not only did she hold a fondness for the laird, but she owed him and before he passed to the hereafter, she'd repay his kindness.

She gazed at the laird's wife, solaced because the lady gave them caution and permission to leave. There might be kindness enmeshed in her heart. Perhaps she cared not only about herself.

“My lady, we should see to Laird Moray's wounds and offer him what comfort we can. He needs care and we cannot leave him here.”

The lady raised a chestnut-colored brow and scoffed. She waved to a servant who passed by with another satchel. “My husband despairs us. There's no time to offer comfort, lass. We're in peril if we stay a moment longer.” Her voice rose to a panicked pitch. “The English will come, and I for one, won't be here when they do. Do you not realize the danger? The servants shall flee as soon as my horse steps from this ghastly place. You should be amongst them if you are wise.”

Kerrigan wanted to shout at the woman. She held her tongue, a lesson she'd learned when dealing with the lady. Who would abandon their beloved husband on his deathbed for the sake of her own safety? Alas, she realized the woman held no adoration for Laird Moray, and nor he for her. Theirs was a marriage of political gain, a parlay that would exist no longer after this day.

“What of Andrew? You won't await him?” Kerrigan held tight to the rail of the steps and shook her head. The English took the laird's son during a siege when Moray was off warring, and his son had yet to be ransomed. She discerned her laird suspected he might never see him again, but he refused to give up hope, even though the English were known to be unkind to their captives.

“My dearest son is dead. I won't place myself in danger if he might return. It's doubtful he will.” Lady Euphemia tied the strings of her cloak. “Now hasten and be gone from this place.” She turned and left through the main entrance, with her closest servants.

Never would Kerrigan be selfless and flee with no regard for Moray. She took the steps and hastened to his chamber. In less than an hour, those within the walls would abscond to the safety of the hills, except for her laird's most trusted and devoted manservant.

“You've come, Mistress,” Finley, the old cantankerous servant, appeared cross, but the sides of his lips twitched with sympathy. “We shall send for the clergy straightaway for the last rite is needed. I must see to the keep and my lord's men and will return soon.” He closed the door behind him and left her alone with Laird Moray.

Kerrigan scrutinized the bloodied body of Andrew Moray and withheld the urge to sob. She sat beside his bed and tenderly wiped his face with a cool cloth. Annag, the aged cook, and wife to Finley, and only person to know of healing matters besides her came a few minutes later. She assessed his wounds, clucked over his body, and shook her head.

“Such a shame. My lord cannot overcome these injuries, Mistress, he'll be gone before the day is done. The Good Lord keep him. Best say your goodbyes then.”

“Aye, the cut to his waist injured his insides. There’s no way to mend him.” She sighed at her words and dejected at the thought of losing him. Kerrigan would stay by his side and tend him. When he passed, would be soon enough to consider her safety.

Her laird’s eyes opened and pain darkened the blue depths. “My bonnie lass, you’re here.”

With gentle, but shaky fingers, she brushed them over his brow and pushed back the straggly strands of his hair. “I am, Laird. My place is here by your side. Rest easy, you are home.”

“I cannot rest, sweet lass. I must gain your promise.”

“Speak not of such matters. You need to rest.” Kerrigan looked at Annag before she turned her attention back to him. “Do you have a remedy? We should ease his pain.”

Annag nodded. “I shall make one at once. It’ll take away his pain, naught more.” She turned to a nearby table and made an herbal concoction.

“I need nothing save for your pledge, Kerrigan,” the laird whispered.

How kind he’d been to her. He’d taken her in when she was but nine winters and allowed her to live in his home. She’d been the daughter of a great laird, lost in battle with another clan over insignificant matters. Her father, Laird Campbell, was a loving father, husband, and devoted overlord. How she missed her home, Innis Chonnel, and the wild countryside.

“You must allow me to speak, lass, for I need your aid.”

“Laird, save your strength.” She wiped his forehead, knowing he wouldn’t last long. The gash in his waist exuded blood. A pungent odor reeked from the wound and seeped with a purulent which thickened. No one tended him and the gash infected.

Kerrigan thought of the lord’s wife, who ran off when she saw the condition of her husband. Her own mother stood firm in the face of treachery when news of her father’s wounds reached them. She’d tended her husband until his last breath. Only it was too late to save herself and she became the pawn of her father’s enemy. Never to be seen or heard from again.

Kerrigan had to flee for their enemy; the MacDougalls neared, and would overtake her home. Her mother wouldn’t leave and demanded she and her brothers hide in the adjacent woods until help arrived. How like a Sinclair—brave, unrelenting, and selfless. She had no choice but to follow her mother’s orders. Mercifully, Laird Moray rescued her and her brothers, although, it was close because MacDougall’s army rode less than a mile from their gate. Moray’s small band of soldiers couldn’t take on the MacDougalls for they well outnumbered them. It was all he could do to get her and her brothers away. She squeezed her eyes against the memories and the thought of what her mother must’ve gone through.

Having two brothers did little to protect her for they were younger and unable to take to arms. Each of her brothers swore to fight by Laird Moray’s side when they reached their majority, and she’d lost one to warfare. Only Robert survived, and she didn’t know where to find him. He might be dead as were many of Moray’s soldiers.

“I need you to find Andrew. My lad must be saved.”

She patted his arm and hoped to calm him. “Don’t fret, Laird. We know not where he was taken or if he lives.”

"The English have him, lass. He lives. I heard tell on the battlefield. You must return him so he can reclaim Bothwell. Promise me." He grasped her arm and implored her with watery eyes. His hold weakened, and she tried to soothe him.

"I promise I shall find him. He will return to rule one day. Rest easy." Kerrigan sighed and her heart tensed. How would she, a woman, and one who had no means, do as he asked? It wasn't like her to speak falsely, but she didn't want her lord to despair on his deathbed. If she had to speak a falsehood to send him to the hereafter in good spirits, then that's what she'd do.

"If he comes, take him to the Bruce, for Robert will keep you both safe. He and your father were great comrades. I've pled for his aid should I fall in battle." Laird Moray's words trailed off and his eyes shown with tears and rolled over his whiskered cheek. His face paled, and color removed from his usual glow.

Kerrigan refrained to tell him Laird Bruce fled after allegedly killing Laird Comyn. No one knew where the Bruce went or even if he lived. Much of Scotland quailed over his absence, and now they fought over the crown. If only Comyn and Bruce rectified their differences and agreed who should be king, they might not be in the distressed situation with England.

"I will do as you ask, Laird. Worry not." She kept her expression serene, for there was naught to do to save him, his son Andrew, or their beloved castle.

"The Bruce...will return. Have no worry. When he does, you shall have Andrew in safety. Find him."

"I shall, Laird. You have my pledge." She squeezed his hand, tears threatened to fall.

"That's all I wish. Be brave, lass. One day we shall be free." His words softened and his eyes closed. Her lord's breath eased.

Kerrigan continued to sit beside him. She thought of young Andrew and what a goodly lad he'd been. If only Moray's words rang true and she found his son and kept him safe until a king was proclaimed. She was skeptical because she didn't know where the English took the lad or when Scotland's king would be coroneted.

"He's gone, Mistress," Annag said, and left the chamber.

She gazed at his motionless face. "Rest in peace, My Lord, for you deserve heaven and all its rewards." Kerrigan sat for a time. She accepted his loss, but what of the pledge she'd made him?

A short time later, Annag returned with her husband.

Finley took hold of the cover and pulled it over Laird Andrew's head. "We must wash and prepare him for burial. I've asked the clergyman to come. They'll be here shortly. You must leave for this is no place for a lass. Soldiers wait in the hall. They need attention."

"I will see to them. Thank you, Finley. What would I do without you?" She rose and took another glance at her lord's body before heading for the door. Once through the threshold, the tears she'd held back sprang forth, and she hastily wiped them away.

As she walked the hallway to the tower's hall, she considered her options. She couldn't return to Campbell land, for the MacDoughalls were ensconced within its walls, and would never welcome one of her clan's return. She couldn't stay at Bothwell, certain the English were on their way to claim their forfeiture. Kerrigan considered where she'd go, but knew not where she'd be safe. Then she

thought of her friend. Galyn worked at Rohan's hostel and mead hall, and surely, she could gain her employment. She needed means to care for herself and had not a pittance of her own.

A group of soldiers stood near the hearth. She assessed their wounds and made quick work to sew them up, for all had but slices and minor stab wounds. As she tied the last man's wrap, she admired their strength. None balked when she took the needle to their skin. Their bravery astounded her for they spoke of joining another clan's army and taking to their swords to aid the rebellious cause.

Annag set a trencher in front of her at the table where she sat. She kept her gaze on the wall ahead, unaware of the woman's regard. How far she'd plunged from her position as a daughter of the keep's laird, then to a laird's ward, and now she'd be a serving lass.

"You look as if you're leagues away."

She glanced up and noticed Annag watched her. How fair she looked with her gray-streaked hair hung about her shoulders. Her eyes faded to a light brown, and her face's lines deepened when she smiled. "Naught."

"Your mind drifts akin to a lost boat at sea, lass. Come now, tell me what troubles you." Annag caressed her face with a gesture of condolence.

"I am considering traveling to Dumfries and asking Galyn to have Rohan hire me at his hall. I need to keep us fed and housed."

"Be a serving lass? Nay, your laird would forbid it. Finley told me to give this sack." She held out a leather sack, which bulged at the bottom.

Kerrigan took it from her and peered inside. "There's enough coin to keep us housed, at least for a time, until we figure out where to go."

"Us, Mistress?"

She took hold of the old woman's hand. "Aye, us. I cannot leave you here when you've been kind to our laird and me."

Annag's shoulders slumped. "We don't want to be a burden, Mistress. We'll only slow you and mayhap put you in danger."

"You'd be in danger staying here. You've done much for me and I won't leave without you. I shan't listen to your argument."

Annag squeezed her hand and held it. "We'll be glad to stay with you. Finley told the laird he would look after you if something happened to him until the Bruce finds you. We cannot allow you to go to the wretched place and serve men of ill repute."

For the first time that day, Kerrigan found a small smile. "Putting it like that, Annag, I suppose I'd have to agree. We will find a cottage in Caerlaverock to let until we must flee. We'll need to leave the village when word comes of the English army's approach."

"Aye, we'll escape to the hills, Mistress. Have you given thought about how to find Andrew?"

She sat back in the chair and shook her head. "How can I fulfill this promise? I know not where to search for the lad. He was taken by the English and is likely held at one of their fiefs, perhaps taken to Londontown. Even if I found him, how would I rescue him from such a place?"

"The king's guard. It's all anyone can speak of in the village. It's rumored the Bruce's exiled guardsmen returned to Scotland. They aid the villagers. If you find them, you can ask for help."

“Aye, for a price, Annag, and likely a hefty one. How can I afford to pay a fee when I must use the coin for our lodging? Besides, no one knows how to find the guard, and even if I did, I fear they wouldn’t want to help me.”

“Why not? I’m sure they’ll help you fulfill your promise, you, a damsel in need.” Annag smiled and pressed her arm.

Kerrigan withheld the urge to laugh, for the old woman was deluded if she thought mercenaries would help her. Especially given she had no means for payment. Men in these uncertain times didn’t work for free. “I have no faith in the tales, and if true, I doubt my worries would give the guard the least bit of concern. Once we bury our laird, we must leave. I will pack my belongings. Is there anything I should bring?”

Annag clasped her hand. “Just yourself and a warm cloak. I shall see if I can help Finley and gather our effects and foodstuff. We’ll attend the laird’s burial and be gone before the moon rises, for we cannot wait.”

Kerrigan agreed they had no time to await the customs when burying someone of her lord’s station. They had to take care of the matter and be gone before sunset. She returned to her solar to pack what garments she owned and folded the Campbell and Moray tartans she held dear. Once she had her belongings secured, she carried her satchel and went to attend the burial.

An eerie fog rolled upon the ground as several of Moray’s men-at-arms carried his casket toward the family burial grounds. She walked behind them, next to Finley and Annag. They’d brought their possessions and would continue on when their laird was placed in the ground.

Two of Moray’s highest-ranked soldiers followed the wake. One named John called to her, “Mistress, we will escort you to wherever you are going.”

“I thank you, John. We travel to Caerlaverock. Is it out of your way? You should get back to the men.”

“We will see to your safety first, Mistress.”

She nodded and returned her attention to Annag who held onto her arm. “Such woeful events.”

“They are.”

They stood around the hole and awaited the last words from the clergyman. Kerrigan didn’t know what the future would bring. She’d lost all those she loved and held dear and was now alone.

Chapter Three

Caerlaverock's village, north of the castle, was a noisy place and a major travel route for the soldiers. The castle remained in the hands of the Scots and the garrison secured the area. She'd been in the village for a month and yet it seemed a year past since they'd buried Laird Moray. Kerrigan didn't like being close to the keep, for it was rumored the English king and his army was on the move and would soon make its way north. They'd fled Bothwell castle and its village. The English showed up a sennight after her lord's death. Few escaped with their lives when most of the cottages burned to the ground. Not much remained of her laird's beloved home from accounts.

Kerrigan walked along the trail toward the mead hall and noticed the hungry looks on the children's faces, the woeful gazes of their mothers, and the defeated look of the aged. Wars took its toll on the people. How she wished it would end. As long as the English king was interested in their land, they'd have to contend with the injustices.

When she arrived with Finley and Annag at Caerlaverock's village, they found shelter in a small cottage. The village outside the walls and moat of the castle hosted travelers and villagers alike. Most stayed a day or two before moving on to whatever destination they'd set. Along the main road, keepers of wares set their stalls and sold goods. Scents wafted as she passed, and chickens scurried across the path. Traders and thieves swindled the poor souls who knew no better. All needed to be on guard for knaves were about.

Kerrigan's stomach grumbled when she smelled freshly baked bread, which only a high-ranked soldier or someone of his ilk could afford. Soon the English king's army would ravage the village and nary would a soul travel the road if their supposition came true. There was perhaps a sennight or a fortnight before the tragedy occurred and she planned to be gone before that happened.

She hastened to the mead hall where her friend, Galyn, worked. As she entered, she noticed the clientele, the usual foreboded men who took to cups early in the day. By eve, they would have trouble walking home in their drunken state. Such matters were not her concern. The hall boasted a high ceiling where plain lanterns hung. Candlelight did little to provide light, but the windows on the right side afforded brightness when the sun shone. The great hearth warmed the space, its crackling logs diminished by the bellowed voices of the occupants. She hurried through the hall and went to the small closed-in area where servers collected foodstuff ordered by the occupants.

"There you are. I suspected you'd come this day." Galyn held four tankards and set them on a tray. She dressed in a plain overdress with a low bodice, revealing the swell of her bosom, all to gain an extra coin or two. Kerrigan had no notion her friend was endowed for she usually hid her body beneath a heavy cloak. Over her dress, she wore a cloak, which covered her shoulders and most of her body. Her dark brown hair fell loose over her shoulders and tussled by the long day she'd put in. "Come, I have news."

Kerrigan followed to the corner of the small antechamber and leaned against the wall, out of the way. Her friend looked tired. She noted the pale tinge of her skin and lackluster of her brown eyes. She clutched her arm in concern. "Do you have a malady? Are you unwell?"

Galyn shook her head and pulled away. "I'm well, just tired for I have served all day, since sunup. All have a great thirst this day. I shall take to my bed as soon as I'm able."

She took hold of her friend's hand. "The day grew hot. You should discard your cloak."

Galyn turned away before she could help her remove it. "Nay, it's not that."

"I'm sorry you have to work here. Will your father allow you to leave off? He wouldn't want you to work yourself to death. The amount of coin is not worth this." Kerrigan was thankful to Laird Moray and gladdened she needn't beg for employment at the hall.

Galyn scoffed. "He cares not. I would've made a good marriage, but that's not to be."

Her friend never spoke of the man she professed to love, except when Kerrigan found her crying. She'd hinted the knave abandoned her. Galyn refused to speak of him since or name him.

"I worry about you. Promise you'll get rest this night."

"I shall. You're kind to think of me. I'm to leave early since I opened for Rohan. I have news to speak of about what you asked..." Galyn took a cloth and dried the tankards.

"What have you heard?" Kerrigan squeezed herself against the wall when another server came into the small space, but she left soon after pouring a flagon of ale.

"The king's guard rescued four of Laird Leicester's men from the English's soldiers outside of town. They're nearby." Her excitement came in a rushed statement.

She sighed dejectedly. "When did this happen?"

"Only two nights ago. They must be in the area for word is ripe with their deeds. You should find them if you're going to gain their aid." Galyn refilled another flagon and set it on the tray.

The situation was beyond her means. There was no way to find the king's guard and employ them to find the little lord. She had no coin left or anything else with which to barter. The only thing to come to mind was she herself. Given these hard times, many women subjected themselves to nefarious activities to feed and house themselves. Kerrigan despaired she too would come to similar means.

But she never had to use her body to pay for anything. The thought of giving herself for any cause tightened her chest. Love was the only reason she'd give herself to a man. Marriage was impossible now, and mayhap she'd never find love. Still, she had nothing else to barter and might have to consider doing the inconceivable.

"Come this eve and watch for them. Maybe they'll come to the hall to drink. I'll listen for word of them. It's crowded this day and surely, they must be close. If not, you can walk me home for I'll be glad of the company." Her friend returned to her tasks as if what she said was mere conversation.

Kerrigan set her hand on Galyn's shoulder and pulled her attention back. "I am uneasy about this. How will I gain their aid?"

"Worry not. We will speak when you return and we'll devise a plan. If they come, you will do what you must." Galyn held the refilled tankards and sluggishly retreated to the hall to deliver the cups to the procurers.

She was thankful for her friend's guidance. Before she left, Kerrigan snatched a stale roll from the table and ate it as she watched the other servers in their haste to refill cups. The hall smelled of sour ale and of the foulness strewn on the floor. How wretched to be inside such a place all day. She commiserated with her friend, but she was grateful for Galyn's help. If what she said was true, Kerrigan might move forward with her plan.

God be with me this eve. If the king's guard was close, she hoped to present them with the plan. If not, she was doomed as was the wee lord.