



UNBREAKABLE HEART LEGEND OF THE KING'S GUARD

*Love cannot resist
an unbreakable heart...*

KARA GRIFFIN

UNBREAKABLE HEART

Legend of the King's Guard
Book Two

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DEDICATION

To MEW for inspiring me every single day and for her fighting spirit.

Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.

~Aristotle

UNBREAKABLE HEART

Series Blurb:

In the year 1306, the king's guard was exiled for a crime they witnessed. In direct defiance, the guardsmen return to their beloved Scotland and hide amongst their enemies. All are destined for the hangman's noose or the executioner's ax if found. They survive as soldiers of fortune. If you're fortunate enough to run across them in the bonny hills and are in a predicament, they just might give aid.

Four men banded together by ill-fated circumstances, help those who need it the most and secretly aid their king. As they give themselves wholeheartedly to their daunting tasks, they each find a love that will prevail them.

Our stories continue in UNBREAKABLE HEART

Love cannot resist an unbreakable heart...

After losing the love of his life, Liam of Clan Kincaid is sent in service for what his uncle considers betrayal. He regrets the harsh words he had with his uncle, and so Liam gives himself to the battle-weary king, Robert the Bruce, and vows to mend his tarnished reputation. That would be easy if not for the lass who insists he aids her.

Makenna Mackenzie has lived through hell, her home and land taken, by the English. All she wants is to take vengeance against the man who cut off her ear and destroyed everything held dear in her heart. The only way to achieve her goal is to plead with the legendary king's guard. She wants them to train her to be a mercenary like them so she can use her sword to the fullest when she finally meets her enemy.

Neither of them ever thought to find one another since their betrothal never came to fruition. But when Makenna asks for his aid, Liam agrees with one condition—that she marry him. Makenna has conditions of her own, and they make a pact to help each other. Their agreement leads them on a dangerous mission, one of which might be the end of them both. Liam finds himself in a quandary because Makenna is not the forthright lass he deems her to be. But his UNBREAKABLE HEART can withstand her, can't it?

PROLOGUE

*Balloch Castle
West Dunbartonshire, Scotland
April 1303*

Fire swathed the entire village and nearby loch with light. High flames from many bonfires lit the sky and lent a glow to the trees and over the waters. Their celebration of the Beltane was in full swing. Liam Kincaid ran naked through the trees and caught up to the sweet vixen who teased him. Blayre fell to the grass, and he rolled next to her and captured her in his arms.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” He kissed her soft throat and trailed his mouth to her lips.

He’d taken to drink much earlier in the day. A pleasant lethargic mien came over him, and he was lulled by its effect. For days his uncle beleaguered him to take a wife. To which his father’s lands would finally be given to him. He’d waited three years for the Earl to make a decision. The lands were initially given to his mother, but when she died, they reverted back to her brother. His uncle was supposed to hold them until he reached his majority. Mormaer placed one stipulation on the covenant that Liam take a wife of his choosing before he returned to his home.

Woman after woman was set before him, and yet Liam balked. Not that he abhorred marriage or that the ladies were unacceptable. It was because his heart was already taken. Blayre besieged his heart, and he was besotted at first glance. No other woman caught his gaze since. Unbeknownst to the Earl, the lass he wanted to wed, unfortunately, was the daughter of their clan’s most hated rival, the MacDoughalls.

Away from the revelers, Liam lay back and pulled his sweetheart into his arms. “You don’t want to leave so soon, love. Come and lay with me.”

She pressed a hand on his naked chest. “I must go away. There are too many hereabout. Someone will see us. It’s too dangerous.”

“There’s always danger around us.” Liam regarded the bonny face of his lover. Her light eyes took on an unaccountable concern, for he wouldn’t allow anyone to interrupt their time together. He’d picked the spot purposely knowing none would come near the waters during the celebration. She relaxed against him, and he held her tightly. Her lips, full and lush called, and he would do nothing but spend the night kissing her.

He set his mouth on hers and felt the sweet response of her lips. His hands moved fast lest she changed her mind and reject him. Liam stroked her body, and a desirous need swelled within him. He’d never desist in wanting her. He had only been with her one other time, and it wasn’t enough. He’d never be sated nor satisfied with nothing less than the surrender of her heart and body.

As he joined his body with hers, she gasped and writhed beneath him. He kept up the gentle thrusts, mindless and unaware of the merriment beyond them. Liam patiently waited for Blayre to

culminate before he was released from the strain of holding back. He shouted his climax, and his breath harsh. Never had he experienced such utter volatile pleasure with any other lass.

"I should go, my love, before someone comes."

He held fast to her waist. "No one would dare interrupt us. Stay, for I wish to hold you a wee bit longer." Liam lay next to her and peered to the dark sky above. With the bonfires surrounding them, he barely made out the stars he knew were there. "I wish to tell my uncle of you and of our betrothal. We will confront him together and make our wishes known. He cannot refuse me."

She gasped. "Liam, we cannot. My father would never agree, and I cannot gainsay him. You ask too much of me. Besides, your uncle detests my clan and they—"

"Will you leave me and break my heart?" He pouted, knowing he had to say something to gain her agreement. "I want no other woman but you. I will wed no other but you. It's time our clans understand this." Liam cupped the softness of her bare arse. "Tell me you love me as I do you."

She opened her lips to respond but turned when riders bounded from the trees. Liam stood and helped her to rise. He pushed her behind him to hide her nakedness from the intruders.

"Och, there you be, Liam." Micheol, his cousin and the only son of Laird Lennox, the Earl, had a smirk upon his face. He whistled and more men came, all sat on their horses and awaited him. "What do you have there, a goddess, a fairy?" He bellowed with raucous laughter.

Liam hated him with the might of a thousand thorns. He was definitely a prick, and one no matter how much caution he used, his cousin still smarted him. From the day of his ill-fated arrival, Micheol taunted him, excluded him from taking part in the soldier's revelry, and made his life a living hell. It mattered not to Liam because his days were numbered at the Lennox holding.

Mormaer, the Earl, rode forward. He wore a hauberk of fur with leather bands circling his chest and arms and appeared ready for battle. Mormaer Lennox was one of the most formidable warriors in all the kingdom and he showed his might with the hard gaze he now wore.

"I sent Micheol in search of you, lad. We will journey to meet with Wallace and Moray, for they have called men to arms. We're to meet at Falkirk. Can't say I'm not pleased, for we will take arms against the damnable English. About time we squelch the English and banish them from our lands. Edward's army won't prevail much longer." He rubbed his hands together as if he brushed them away, and spat on the ground to insinuate his contempt for the enemy.

Liam retrieved his tartan from the ground and fastened it around his waist. His uncle dismounted and walked toward him. He stopped a few feet short of reaching him and scowled.

"I didn't mean to keep you, Laird."

"I see you were honoring the spring rites." He laughed and turned to peer at his men. "As we all should be, but there's a greater need presently. None of us have time for such amusements." Lord Lennox tilted his head and scrutinized Blayre. "Micheol, is this not a MacDoughall lass?"

"I believe she is, Da." Micheol dismounted and stood next to his father. "I've seen her before when we attended their laird's meeting."

"Liam, lad, why would you go against us and couple with this rabble?"

He stepped back and stood in front of Blayre. She'd dressed and looked fearful for Laird Lennox was known for his brutality. He wished he could say something to appease her fear, but decided now was the time to voice his wishes. He wouldn't hold back and would demand he be

allowed to marry Blayre and reclaim his father's lands.

"Laird, we are together. Aye, and I will ask her father for her hand."

The Earl grabbed his arm and flung him forward. Micheol rushed forth and took Blayre's arms. The awaiting men pulled their swords free. The moment was more tumultuous than Liam had considered or expected.

"You speak treasonous, lad. This is the kin of our most hated enemy. Surely you wouldn't go against us, me, your own laird and uncle. Tell me it is false, that you jest, and I shall be relieved."

"I cannot because I am serious," he said with conviction. "She's mine and I am hers."

His uncle pressed his hand on the back of his neck. He'd never seen his laird appear more perturbed. "Have I not been a giving, caring uncle? I took care of your own mother, God rest her, when your father died. Och my heart is repelled with your deceit." He threw the back of his hand and struck his head.

Liam kept to his feet and hoped to mend the situation. "Uncle, the lass has nothing to do with our riff with the MacDoughalls. She's innocent and will make a good wife. I mean no disrespect, but I care for her and want to keep her safe."

"The hell she has nothing to do with it. She's their blood kin and has hatred in her heart. Take her away, Micheol, and toss the rabble in a ditch beyond our walls."

Micheol turned and pulled Blayre along with him. She cried out and tried to free herself. Liam's blood boiled and he ran past the Earl and yanked his cousin back. "Nay, release her. You won't take her anywhere." He turned and spotted his sword on the ground, but it was too far away to retrieve in time. If he had to battle his cousin to help Blayre, he'd do so.

His uncle marched forward and unsheathed his sword. He aimed it at his chest and Liam didn't think for one second that the Earl would hold back. He knew his peril.

"The lass be gone. I won't have a MacDoughall on my land even if it's a woman. Micheol, rid my presence of her now. Return with haste for we must depart within the hour."

His cousin took the handful of men with him and left Liam alone to face his uncle's wrath. Blayre's screams dissipated the further away he'd taken her.

"I am disappointed, Liam. Of all my nephews, I thought you were the most devoted, the most trustworthy, and most loyal. Och we all make errors in judgment. Am I wrong about you? Where do your loyalties lie? Tell me why I shouldn't banish you or why I should believe ye?"

Liam kept his eyes on the Earl and spoke with confidence. "Laird, of course, my loyalty is yours. It shall always be. I'll defend you and Scotland with all that I am, but I love the lass. Can you not see reason and return her to me? Haven't you loved a woman so much that you'd do anything to win her, to protect her?"

"You've your father's passionate nature, but nay, I never have and likely never will. A woman is good for producing bairns and keeping your home. That lass is unworthy of you, Liam. The thought of your children born with her blood sickens me. I won't allow your insolence or her return. You must make a good marriage, Liam, for if you want the blood of your kin to further your line, the line of your father... I have given you a choice in your wife, but no longer."

Ire such as he never felt came upon him. Liam wanted to thrash his uncle, to hurt him as he'd done to him. He knew not what to say, and the only thought that kept coming to him was that he'd

lost his only love. The loss entrenched his heart.

“I will make the pact with my good comrade, the Mackenzie. Aye, for you will wed his oldest daughter. It will be done when we return from Falkirk, Liam, and you won’t refute me.”

“You wed her for I will not. I won’t allow you to choose my wife.” Liam stood firm in his decision. He wouldn’t back down no matter what the Earl did or said.

His uncle scowled and shoved him back. “You defy my order?”

Liam wanted to shout at the frustration that built inside him. “Aye, I defy you. Damned right I do. If I cannot have Blayre, then I shall have none. You marry the Mackenzie lass for I won’t have her.”

“I should kill you as I would any other who betrays me.” He took a step forward and grabbed his neck, the sword held tight, positioned to run him through.

Liam stood rigidly even though he had but a moment to live. “Do your will then for I’m not sorry for my choice.”

His uncle lifted his elbow as if he was about to thrust the sword. Liam didn’t flinch. Laird Lennox lowered his arm. “Alas, I promised your mother that I would see to your protection and cannot go back on my word. I shall not kill you, but I cannot allow you to stay on our lands.”

“Are you banishing me?” Incredulous at his uncle’s wrath, he resisted the urge to shout his appall.

“For a time. Mayhap you’ll learn what loyalty means in the Bruce’s service. Given time, I might have the heart to forgive you. The Bruce will teach you what it means to obey your laird.”

“I will not leave without Blayre.”

The Earl cuffed his head. “Aye you will, and you’ll forget her. Trust me, lad, this is the greatest gift I can give you. You’ll wed the Mackenzie lass as I bid when you return from your service. Makenna Mackenzie is bonny and far more worthy than that rabble you consorted with. One day you will thank me for this gift.”

Liam had no choice but to follow the Earl. He was furious about losing Blayre, but not about his banishment. One day he’d repay his uncle for his gift, and his thanks would come with his retribution. The Kincaids would consider Clan Lennox as an enemy from this day forward.

CHAPTER ONE

Dumfries, Scotland
Early March 1307

From the dark, dank mist they appeared at the top of the hill. Four men sat upon their warhorses and peered down upon Sweetheart Abbey. They could be likened to the devil's brethren, garbed in black attire, and their faces, arms, and weapons covered with oiled soot. Their camouflage aided them for they didn't want anyone to recognize them or to discern them in the day's haziness. It was best they kept their identity secret.

Liam Kincaid was the first to take the incline and kicked his horse's haunches to get him moving. Onward he rode toward the abbey where their good friend, Friar Hemm, awaited. He and his comrades dismounted and left their steeds free since they didn't plan to stay long.

"Oh, my, 'tis highly improper, lads. You cannot come inside garbed as you are ready to make war." Hemm stood between the struts of the threshold and blocked their entrance.

Liam braced his hips with his fists and grinned. "But Friar, you said it was important. We came as soon as we received word."

"Aye, he said that, didn't he?" Graeme, his good comrade, said with a chortle.

"B-but for you to c-come here dressed as if you've been w-warring... 'Tis highly improper, indeed. I cannot allow ye to come inside. This is a place of sanctuary, a holy place. God's own home. He wouldn't approve."

Brodin, the most ominous of their group, frowned. "Do you want our help or not, Friar?"

"Aye, we've traveled afar and are in need of rest." Heath leaned against the stone, his gaze as irritated, and his sigh wearisome. "We spent a fortnight in hunt of a thief. By God, that's all we seem to do of late, herding missing sheep."

Liam agreed, for lately their missions were frivolous, unimportant ventures. He'd rather take up his sword against a knave who deserved it, rather than search for petty thieves and stolen cattle.

"I must ask that you at least wash your faces before you enter. You'll scare the monks, for they don't know you as I do." The friar motioned to a young lad and said something in his ear.

Liam liked Friar Hemm because he often aided them and kept their guarded secrets. Though the friar was young, he was well-received by the Scottish nobles and clans in the area. He thought the man too pious but since that was his profession, he kept his opinion to himself. Something bothered Hemm, if his worrisome mien didn't give him away, his shifty body did. The priest couldn't seem to stand still.

The young monk returned with a bucket and cloths and said nothing as he handed them over to Hemm. Hemm held them outward. "Wash well, m'lords, and when you are done, come to my office where I shall await you." He turned hastily and left them.

Liam was the first to take the cloth. "Let us wash so we can see what bothers him. I've never

seen Hemm look so troubled.”

“Me neither,” Graeme said when he handed him the cloth. “Whatever it is, it must be grave.”

“I need to ask the friar if I can borrow one of his stable lads.” Liam dried his face with the underside of his tunic and discarded the cloth.

Brodin took the cloth from Graeme and scowled. “You’re serious about this?”

“Serious about what?” Graeme asked.

“I want to send another message to my cousin Micheol. My service ends soon, and I want to secure my father’s lands. He cannot refute me.” Liam only had one month to go before his service to Robert the Bruce ended. For five long years, he’d given his existence to the future, now king of Scotland.

“Even if you retain the lands, Liam, there’s no way you can return. We’re all bound to Robert until he gives us leave. And since we hide from Robert, the chances of him giving approval of our leave is naught but a dream. We promised to aid him in the reclaiming of Scotland. Robert hasn’t achieved his goal yet.” Heath took the cloth from Brodin and ran it over his face.

“Aye, but I want to secure the lands so when we’re freed of our vow I’ll have a place to return to. You all have homes and land, clans awaiting your homecoming. You, Graeme, are laird of the Camerons and secured your right to return and rule.”

Graeme set a hand on his shoulder. “I understand your reasons, Liam. Are you certain Micheol will return the lands to you? Since your uncle passed, he’s been downright spiteful toward you.”

Liam wasn’t certain of anything, especially since his uncle Mormaer, the Earl of Lennox, died at Falkirk. When he heard the report of his uncle’s death, he was disheartened. Their last encounter was contentious, and he’d disappointed his uncle. He’d regretted their discord and wished they hadn’t parted on unfavorable terms. “I will speak with him and find out what he intends.”

“Let us first find out what the good friar wants,” Brodin said, and pushed them aside so he could enter.

Liam followed his comrades and was the last to enter Hemm’s office. He closed the door and shifted his gaze to the priest. Hemm paced behind his desk and gave them a fleeting glance. He mumbled quietly to himself, and none caught his words.

Graeme stepped forward. “What troubles you, Friar? We’ll be happy to help you in the matter, whatever it is.”

“I’m gladdened ye came so quickly for I have the most distressing news.” The friar appeared apprehensive when he fiddled with a pile of parchments that sat on his desk. “Tis terrible business, just awful. I cannot even mouth the words.” He collected missives from the drawer and tossed the handful of parchments across his desk and fell back into his chair with a dejected sigh.

Liam leaned against the desk, as did Heath, and Brodin, curious now to know what could be so daunting. They tried to read the missives, but they were folded. None were brazen enough to take a parchment without the friar’s permission. So they waited. An uncomfortable mien set the chamber.

Graeme pulled a chair forward and sat next to the friar. “What aid do you need?”

“It’s gone, by God, what am I to do?”

His impatience wore, and Liam banged the desk. “Friar, we really need to get home. We just spent a fortnight tracking a shanty thief. We aim to get rest before we’re called to another paltry

matter.” It was the truth, for they’d taken a job to aid a nearby farmer. Although the job wasn’t well paying, they helped the farmer since they had little else to occupy them. What a deplorable way to earn a living. Liam wasn’t content with their recent excursions. Likewise, neither were his comrades.

“The friar needs our help. We will wait until he is good and ready to speak about his problem. Obviously, he’s distressed.” Graeme gave him an irritated glance and set a comforting hand on Hemm’s shoulder. “Whenever you’re ready, Friar, we’ll listen. We’re not in a rush.”

Liam nodded slightly in agreement, but if the man didn’t get on with it soon, he’d be resigned to leave and return when he was ready. Hemm looked ready to weep.

“What’s gone? Have you lost something?” Liam couldn’t help but ask since it was clear Hemm wasn’t ready to divulge his woes.

“Aye, well, I didn’t lose it. It was taken, stolen if ye can believe that. Hell’s hounds. That loggerheaded lad deserves nothing but the fires of... Oh, my, Good Lord. Now I blaspheme like a commoner. I shall need to pray for God’s forgiveness.” He made the sign of the cross and gazed at his lap.

Liam almost laughed and turned to grin at his comrades. The friar was devout, more so than any man he’d ever met. He’d never heard Hemm speak so blatantly or honestly before. The harsh words made Hemm appear more like a man rather than a God-fearing clergyman.

When he looked up, Hemm frowned. “I was bid by Robert the Bruce to keep the document pertaining to Comyn’s deceit hidden for safekeeping. I’m afraid one of my monks, a young man named Matthew, took it. For he’s gone missing and so has the parchment.”

Liam’s muscles tightened in his jaw at hearing the friar’s problem. “You mean the parchment that proved Comyn went against his and Robert’s agreement? The very reason we hide from the Bruce? The reason Robert killed Comyn?”

Hemm nodded. “Aye, that parchment, the very one that proves Robert the Bruce’s innocence in the murder of Comyn. And I cannot let the Bruce know it is gone. He’ll be wrath, definitely infuriated. What am I to do? How can I tell our king I lost the only evidence he had to prove Comyn deceived him? If he needs it to appease England’s king for his treasonous act...”

“Why would the young monk, Matthew, take it?” Heath asked.

“I know not. Perhaps he’s in league with the Comyns. They’d do whatever they must to refute Comyn’s misdeed against the Bruce and gain King Edward’s approval. I shouldn’t have trusted him inside my domain. What was I thinking? What am I to tell the Bruce? I fear he’ll be disappointed by this news. The king has quite significant issues to deal with, especially when he returns from his winter retreat.”

Liam scowled at Hemm’s distress. “If the king asks you for it delay. Give him whatever reason you can think of to dissuade him... Tell him it’s safer where you’ve hidden it.”

Brodin nudged him, and Liam raised a brow. He signaled to Heath, who pressed the back of his hand against Graeme’s shoulder. He got the message.

Graeme rose and returned the chair to the wall where it had sat when they entered. “Worry not, Friar. We’ll find this monk Matthew and the parchment and will have it returned to you at the soonest.”

“You will do this for me?”

Liam smiled at the man's astonishment. "Of course, Friar, you've helped us many times. We're pleased to do you this favor. And besides, we returned to aid our king. We'll find this Matthew and reclaim the parchment. Have no worries." He suspected the young monk was hired by, or kin to the Comyn clan. Why else would he take the parchment? Unless he spied for the English. The latter was doubtful since only a few knew of the missive's existence. Only those in Hemm's chamber at present, and the rest murdered for what they'd witnessed—Comyn's death—were privy to its contents.

Heath leaned his hip against the desk. "Robert was wrath when he learned that Comyn betrayed him. We need to find that parchment and secure it. If he means to appease King Edward, the missive might provide his clemency."

"Aye, and Comyn never denied his backstab against Robert. Of course, Robert held proof of Comyn's deceit in his hands when he murdered him." Brodin said as he leaned back against the wall.

Graeme added his insight, "I've never seen Robert's temper flare to such a degree. That he would do the unthinkable and kill his only rival to the crown..."

That night at Greyfriars Abbey crossed Liam's mind repeatedly. The events of February 10th would plague them until Robert was proclaimed the rightful ruler of Scotland. Until that happened, the war with the English would endure. Liam recalled the night he'd been called to sentry for Robert. He'd stood in the church's courtyard with the handful of men Robert had taken to the meeting as security. The Comyn clan wouldn't be trusted.

Liam often wondered if the Bruce hadn't arranged the murder of Comyn. They were supposed to seal their pact before God, but there was no love lost betwixt them. Both wanted the crown. Their swords were left outside the church, but the Bruce must've hidden a dagger within his garments. Their scuffle alerted them something happened when a large bang and grunts came from within. Then Robert rushed out and shouted that he'd killed Comyn. One of their comrades, Roger Kirkpatrick hastened inside to make certain Comyn was dead. They had to kill Comyn's uncle who waited outside the church. Seton quickly subdued him before he could run off and give the news to the Comyn clan.

Liam pressed his eyes at the remembrance of the night. He suspected the Bruce planned to murder Comyn and his ambition to remove all competition for the crown. They were witness to the dreadful deed but would support their overlord regardless of whether they thought him guilty or innocent. Robert seized the throne the only way he could, with blood on his hands.

"If only we could've interceded before Robert acted. We wouldn't have had to flee with him and been exiled. I still can't believe he left us on that isle to rot when he returned to Scotland."

Brodin scoffed. "Aye, left us there to perish, but we pledged to see him take the crown. Now that he has, we must keep his arse safe. Protecting him has and will continue to be our sole purpose, at least until he forgives us for disobeying his command."

Graeme leaned his arms on the back of the chair. "It could not be helped. But Robert will forgive us when he learns how we've aided him, and if he doesn't, so be it. At least we aid Scotland as well."

Friar Hemm continued to nod at their discussion. "You must continue to hide for your safety. How will you find the parchment if you're still in exile? I shouldn't ask this of you. 'Tis too

dangerous.”

Each of them grinned.

Liam rubbed his tired face and looked at his comrades. “We live with danger every day, Friar.” He, along with his friends, was adamant about seeing to Robert’s protection, especially during battles. There was one wee problem with that, and that was if Robert learned they’d disregarded his command to stay on the isle, they’d be held as treasonous against the crown. Robert’s temper and his authority would force him to hold them in contempt.

With their necks in the proverbial noose so to speak, they hid and kept abreast of the king’s matters from afar. Robert would eventually return from his self-imposed winter refuge and get back to the task of bringing his enemies to justice.

With all that happened in the previous years of fighting with the English king’s army and his supporters, the Bruce wanted retribution. That vengeance was called for the murders of Wallace, Moray, and the deaths of many of their comrades and allies. But most of all, it was necessary for the heinous acts taken against Robert’s family who were still held captive or murdered in the most gruesome ways.

Graeme shoved his shoulder and drew his attention. Liam caught the end of their conversation.

“We’ll go in search of Matthew, Friar. I’ll let you know any news when I can. Don’t despair. Even if the Comyns take possession of the parchment, I doubt Robert will give a shit. For he’s king and nothing will change that now. He’d be pleased to take arms against the Comyns.”

Friar Hemm gave Graeme a reproachful look. “Watch your words, Graeme Cameron. One of us must pray this day for his blasphemy. I wouldn’t want you to have to join me in the chapel.”

Heath guffawed and Brodin grinned. He too found Hemm’s comment somewhat humorous. They weren’t as devout as the friar and often said what they wanted without restraint or fear of spending time in a chapel. Hell, if Friar Hemm heard how many times they’d blasphemed in the last week, his ears would burn as red as a maiden’s.

“We must depart.” Graeme headed to the exit of the office.

Friar Hemm walked them to the stables and continually thanked them for their help.

Liam followed behind the group, his mind on his own troubles. Outside, the day declined and night crept ever forward. Dusk settled on the land and would make their ride home less daunted. Being unseen in the dark was their specialty, for they’d often covered themselves with the oiled soot to disguise themselves or be unseen in the dark. Graeme taught them the ancient ritual, along with various fighting skills of a renowned Germanic tribe his grandfather had heard about during the crusades.

At night, beside the fire, Graeme entertained them with the tales of the Ghost Warriors. They were supposedly warriors who were at one time nomads, but when the Romans invaded, they banded together to stave off the attack. The warriors moved through the deep, dark forests and were neither seen nor heard. Their skill with weaponry led to the creation of deadly weapons. To defeat their foes, they garbed themselves in dark fabric, stuck various pieces of foliage within the holes of their clothes to blend in with the woodland. With mixed soot and oil, they rubbed their skin and painted themselves to further mask themselves. The camouflage worked and the Ghost Warriors defeated the Romans. The Roman soldiers didn’t know what had massacred their army

because the Ghost Warriors appeared out of nowhere, killed, and vanished into the darkness of night in the blink of an eye.

Liam never tired of Graeme's tales and listened to them often as if he was a wee lad hearing the tales of war from the soldiers in his clan. Since the friar made them wash away their concealment, they'd at least have the cover of night to hide themselves during the ride home.

"Friar, before we go, I need to send a message to my cousin, the Earl of Lennox. Can I send one of your stable lads?" Liam took a piece of parchment from his saddlebag and wrote a quick note asking for Micheol to meet him at Caerlaverock's village. He didn't put his name to it and only signed it with: Your cousin, L.

Hemm called forth a tall lad who looked trustworthy. Liam handed him the missive and gave him instructions. Their group readied to head out, and Liam was eager to reach the caves where they'd made their home.

Along the way, he thought about his cousin and hoped he'd be willing to come and meet him. His cousin never was an affable sort and disliked him for no good reason. He'd spent most of his childhood defending himself against his cousin's threats. There was no reason for Micheol's dislike because he was heir to the Lennox holding and future chieftain to their clan. All Liam wanted was to secure his father's lands, a small fief that in no way rivaled the Lennox's. It appeared he'd have to kiss Micheol's arse to gain his family lands. Much time passed since he'd had the scuffle with his uncle over his chosen bride. As the years passed, he matured and realized a woman wasn't worth losing lands over. Given that said woman never professed to love him in return.

He hated to admit it, but his uncle was right. He'd been senseless then and regrettably, there was naught to do now but set it to right. His recklessness cost him his inheritance. Liam wished he could go back and not refute his uncle's will. If given the choice now, he would've accepted the bride his uncle chose. But it was too late, for he'd set his fate that day.

They reached the outlying area before the caves and stopped at the second hillock where they stabled their horses. For their horse's security, they didn't allow their steeds to run freely. Mainly because the warhorses cost them a good deal of coin. Once the horses were in the makeshift wooden stalls, they set about bedding them down. The young squire who was exiled with them on the isle, Robert's own squire Gilroy, stayed with them when they returned to Scotland. He usually attended to their steeds, but the lad had gone missing and they had to see to the care of their horses. Brodin took a bucket to Heath's horse's stall. Liam ignored him and finished tending to his horse.

Graeme removed the harness from his horse and scowled fiercely.

"What's wrong with you? Are you troubled by Hemm's request?"

"Nay, but I got a sense something isn't right. We should get moving, for the women expected us days earlier. I worry about Kerrigan."

Kerrigan, Graeme's wife, was a sweet-natured woman whom they cared for as if she were their own sister. He suspected Graeme worried because his wife would soon give birth to their bairn. Graeme wouldn't admit he was uneasy about the birthing and they refrained from teasing him about his impending fatherhood.

"And well you should. She is huge, Graeme. Maybe she's got two inside her." He laughed because when they'd last seen her, Kerrigan's stomach protruded as if she'd swallowed a large

boulder. His comrade didn't appreciate his jest and shoved his chest.

"For the love of God, speak not. She better be well." Graeme paled.

Liam took the saddle from his friend and tossed his chin to tell him to get going. His comrade loved his wife. Liam wouldn't declare his love for a woman again. The one woman he'd given his heart to never returned the gesture. Of course, he'd been young then, and foolish. Still, he wouldn't allow his heart to be easily swayed. He'd hardened his heart, and now with all his regrets, it was nearly unbreakable.

He, Brodin, and Heath finished settling their horses. As he exited the cave, snowflakes drifted from the sky and spotted the ground. This night, they'd be warm and wouldn't be exposed to the elements. Liam walked behind them and headed toward the cave when a cat stood in front of him. The feline stroked its body against his leg and meowed. He brushed the cat aside with his foot and strolled into the cave. He didn't see Kerrigan and suspected she must have retired for the night.

It smelled good inside their abode. Annag, the old woman who came with Kerrigan, must've made a meal. His stomach rumbled at the delicious scent permeating the cave. All they'd eaten in the past weeks was hard bread and the meat of whatever animal they'd hunted. He was gladdened to be home. That was until he noticed the look on Graeme's face when he stumbled from the antechamber.

Liam poured himself a bowl of stew and snatched a cup of warm mead. He set the bowl and cup on the table and chuckled. His humor drew Heath's and Brodin's attention.

"What gives?" Brodin asked.

"What's so humorous?" Heath asked.

He nodded at Graeme who paced near the open hearth, his hands entangled in his hair. "She's laboring. For all that is holy, I swear, she best make it through this. I'll be lost without her."

Heath set a reassured hand on his shoulder. "Graeme, she'll be well. Rest easy. Women give birth all the time and survive."

"Not all," Liam said, but then shoved a spoonful of stew in his mouth when each of his comrades scowled at him.

Heath scoffed at his blatant remark. "That reminds me, I still hold the coin. What say you we wager on the sex? Brodin? I say the bairn will be a lad."

Brodin derided with a chortle. "Nay, I promised, we all did, never to wager on anything related to Kerrigan."

Liam was ravenous; he practically shoveled the stew in his mouth. He saw the cat followed him inside and settled near the warm hearth. With little ado, he set the remains of his stew on the floor for the creature who sauntered toward him as if he were a lord.

His friends continued to tease Graeme about his imminent fatherhood, and he grinned at their conversation. He recalled them making such a promise never to wager the coin on any matter concerning Kerrigan. The coin had been brought back from the crusades from Graeme's grandfather, the same who told the legend of the Ghost Warriors, and a remarkable tale followed about the coin's legacy. It was used to sway two rival clans to join together to defeat their foes in the holy wars.

Graeme used the coin in the same way, helping to bring him, Brodin, Heath, and Liam to a

brotherhood. Yet, the day they were exiled with the Bruce secured their fate and their devotion to one another. Their brotherhood gave them what each needed, family and acceptance.

Heath held the coin from their last wager far too long, and it was time someone else took possession. His comrade never suggested a worthy proposition. Liam accepted the bet for that sole reason. They had a rule where whoever won the wager got to suggest the next and so it continued. One day, the coin would be returned to Graeme, but that wouldn't be until they gained their release from their pledge to Robert the Bruce.

Liam grinned to himself. "I'll take you up on the wager, Heath. I say Kerrigan will have a lass, aye a bonny daughter."

Graeme groaned. "God Almighty, a daughter...? What am I to do with a wee lass? I shall never make it through this night, I vow."

Heath chortled and nodded. "I accept the wager. If it's a lad, I'll get to keep the coin."

Time whittled by slowly and all remained silent in wait for word of the pending birth. Hours passed and caused their uneasiness. Barely a word passed between them during the long hours of the night. With morning light streaming through the entrance vines, the more apprehensive they became. He hoped nothing was wrong and that the bairn was taking its sweet time coming into the world.

Liam noticed the cat that had followed him inside the cave, curled up by the hearth and made himself at home. No one remarked on its presence. He'd put aside more pieces of meat he'd saved during supper and set them on the floor near the creature. The cat's purr sounded as it ate up the meal. He retook his place at the table and leaned on his elbow, content to watch the cat clean itself, as they waited for news of the birth. As tired as they were, none would seek their beds in case Graeme needed them. But his eyes grew heavy the more time passed.

Annag finally strolled from the antechamber and wiped her eyes. The old lady appeared disheveled but joyous. It was at last over. "Our Mistress is well."

Graeme strode past her and didn't wait to hear whether he had a son or daughter. Without a word, he entered the antechamber he shared with his wife.

Annag stood next to the hearth and gazed down at the sleeping feline. "Whose cat is this?" No one answered. She reached down to pet it, but it hissed at her and walked/stretched in his direction.

Liam used his foot to push him under the trestle table. He didn't want to be associated with the cat, even though it appeared the animal attached himself to him. He shouldn't have fed the beast. Now it would never leave.

"Oh, it is a cantankerous creature. Liam, ye should remove it for it's a filthy animal." Annag set about making the morning fare, hummed to herself, and was in a merry mood.

"The cat might be helpful in keeping out the mice." He laughed when Annag scoffed. Curiosity got the better of him about the bairn, and he nudged Heath. "Are you in agreement on the wager? I say he has a daughter and you say it shall be a son."

Heath grinned and removed the coin from his tunic. He flipped it in the air and caught it. "What say you, Annag? Who keeps the coin?"

She snickered and pointed to Heath. "You get to keep it, Heath."

Liam scowled for he was certain that Kerrigan would have a lass. "Come, we shall toast the

birth of Laird Cameron's heir and son." They raised their cups.

"To the wee Cameron lad."

"To the wee Cameron lad," Heath and Brodin said in unison.

CHAPTER TWO

Kinross, Scotland
Mackenzie Keep

It would be a glorious day. Makenna Mackenzie hoped her optimism would carry her through the day. The keep quieted what with most of the men having left on some excursion or another. Her uncle, the laird of the Mackenzie's, left with many of their soldiers for a meeting near the border of their land. Only a handful of younger soldiers were left to attend to the walls and sentry of the keep. She would enjoy the quiet whilst it lasted for usually, one couldn't hear a thing with all the noise the soldiers made.

She sat idly and sewed a tunic her mother bid her to mend. It was early enough in the day that most hadn't risen, but a few servants who scurried about and cleaned the great hall. Ealish, her mother's maid, stopped in the hall and set a platter of morning fare on the trestle table. Makenna glanced at her and smiled, then returned to her task. She pricked her finger on the needle and gasped and drew Ealish's attention.

"I didn't see ye, lass. Up and about early this morn, I see," Ealish said, and bowed her head.

"I am. I thought to take a few minutes to enjoy the quiet. Mother put me to tasks already."

"The cook is making a delicious pottage. I'll bring it soon."

The servant left and Makenna happily sighed at the silence. Soon her sister would rise, and the chaos would begin. Roberta was a troublesome lass and annoyed her with her constant complaints. Though Makenna loved her, Roberta was doted upon and cherished as if she was a saint. Roberta was definitely the black sheep of the family. Her sister was the opposite of her in every way. Where Roberta had the fairest hair and bonniest blue eyes, she had the brassiness red hair of their grandmother and green eyes of their father. Many remarked that she should've been born with the lively traits Roberta possessed, but Makenna didn't like mayhem or disorder. The quieter the day, the better it suited her.

Roberta had spirit, but she also bore kindhearted affection toward her. But Makenna wasn't one to envy, especially for one as beautiful as her sister. Makenna was content to sit and sew and attend her mother as a dutiful daughter should. Not Roberta, for she spent far too many hours brushing her hair and tended to her appearance. Her sister liked to ride horses, and recently she'd taken to practice archery with the village lads. If their mother found out, Roberta would be punished and likely sent to her solar for days on end.

Her mother entered the hall and spoke with a messenger. The lad handed her a parchment and bowed before he took his leave. A woeful mien crossed her mother's face when she read the missive.

"Mother, what is it? Is all well? Have you received ill news?"

"I've just received a missive from the MacDonalds. They haven't heard a word of your father."

She wiped her eyes and set the parchment on the table.

Makenna sat forward and placed the garment she worked on aside. "You contacted the MacDonalds, our own enemy? Uncle Iain will be wrath."

"I know that, daughter, but I had to do something. I need to know what happened to your father. The MacDonalds are allied with clans in the south, and I thought mayhap they might have news of him."

She sighed objectively. "You know what happened. He was taken prisoner by the English and probably executed like many of our clansmen. Da is dead."

"Have you no faith, Makenna? And don't speak such nonsense. Your father is not dead. I shan't believe that. Until his body is brought home, I shall endeavor to be faithful."

"I want to have faith, Mother, but we must face the truth. The English would not allow him to go free. He was caught with many rebel soldiers after the battle. We've heard of the deaths taking place in Londontown. Many of the rebels were hanged, some worse. He likely perished. I don't want you to hold hope when there is none." She saddened at that, but she was a pragmatist. The times were hard enough, especially on women who awaited the return of their husbands and sons.

Ealish entered the hall again and noticed her mother's sadness. "What's this, M'lady Thora? Have ye received unfavorable news?" She pointed to the parchment.

Makenna quickly told Ealish about her mother's foolishness. "If Uncle Iain finds out she contacted the MacDonald clan he will be angry with us. We must keep in his good graces if we're to keep a roof over our heads." She wanted to be wrath with her mother, but wouldn't. As much as it was foolish to contact their enemy, she understood her mother's heart ached for news—even if that news was unfavorable. Still, their laird promised to see to their protection when her father went missing, and they would do well to keep him appeased.

"Och, m'lady, the laird will find out what happened to his brother. Leave these matters to men. We shall hear news soon. And you, lass, I doubt the laird could ever be angry with you for he dotes on you as if you were his own daughter."

She smiled slightly at that because he'd been kind to her. When her uncle's wife died, he'd bid them to live in the main keep, and her mother helped to raise and rear his seven sons. Makenna was privileged to reside in the laird's lavish home instead of the small cottage they'd lived in previously. Her uncle spoiled her with gifts, kind words, and she sometimes took advantage. He called her and her sister his lasses. Though he was pleasant to them, he was most formidable toward others. None in her clan or those who lived nearby disobeyed him. Fearsome might be how she'd describe him, but since she loved him, she wouldn't put such a word to him. Still, his soldiers, other clans, and those he warred with feared him.

"There are many tasks to see to what with Roberta leaving for her wedding soon. We shall be blessed with a peaceful household once she goes. I have begun the packing of her trunks. Will you assist me, Makenna?"

"I would be pleased to, Mother, except I promised Olivia I would help her with her wedding garments. She says she can't get the seams straight. It shouldn't take me long. I'll return as quickly as I can." Makenna rose. "Have I your permission to leave?"

"Of course, my dear, enjoy the afternoon with your friend. Roberta will help pack her trunks."

We have plenty of time to attend to it before she leaves. She'll not leave until the weather warms, likely days from now."

Ealish snorted. "If we can find the wayward lass for she's already left her chamber. I'll send a lad to search for her. We shall finish the chore by the end of the day, for her groom will soon come."

Speaking of grooms disheartened Makenna. She didn't want to think woeful thoughts on such a beautiful day and hurried from the main keep. On her way to Olivia's cottage, she hastened through the courtyard and barely paid attention to the sentry and other clans people. She didn't notice the gloominess of the sky or the moisture that clung to the air.

Her dearest friend would brighten her spirits. Olivia stood inside the coop and fed the chickens. She hurried to fill a basket with eggs that had been recently laid while the mother hens busied with their feed. Makenna dodged the chicken's pecking beaks and reached her side.

"There you are. I needed to see you, for my mother and Ealish are in a mood this day. It was all I could do to get away. You said you were having trouble with your gown, something about straight seams..." Makenna laughed when her friend scoffed.

Olivia and she had been friends before they could walk and often placed on the same cover while their mothers attended to laundry. Makenna envied her goldish-brown locks and light brown eyes. Her friend often remarked that she was plain, but Makenna would give anything to have her friend's coloring. Instead, she was cursed with wretched red hair and green eyes. It didn't help that she had freckles. Of course, her uncle said she resembled a fairy and many considered her brazen and the young soldiers tried to steal kisses from her. She disliked being compared as such or approached by the lads, so she learned how to defend herself. She'd only begun her training.

"I'm gladdened you're here at last. Let us forgo the tasks for once. I want to get away and go outside the walls." Olivia set her basket of eggs outside the coop and took hold of her arm.

Makenna had no time to protest as she half-dragged her away. Her friend often made her do things she wasn't wont. She wasn't as daring as Roberta or her friend.

Olivia peeked inside the keep's entry to see if anyone walked about. "Let us hurry to the garrison."

She followed her friend and glanced behind her to make sure they weren't caught. The last thing she wanted was to get into trouble with her mother. Makenna took the stairs that led to the garrison below. She continued to walk toward the back where the underground tunnels weaved toward the hills.

Many swore the tunnels were haunted. There were bits of skeletons littering the passageways. The bones were said to be the men-at-arms who protected the keep in previous battles. She'd listened to the tales around the fires since she was wee and was always captivated by their bravery. An ancient stone cross, covered with moss and dirt, hung on the cave wall. She stopped and covered her heart, for she felt empathy toward the people who gave their lives in protection of the laird and his family. She wasn't afraid of the dead. The living—that was another matter altogether for many who lived often frightened her. As she got older, she grew out of such larks.

They slunk through the dark tunnels toward the brightness at the end of the narrowed passageway. The acrid odor and water brightened her spirits, for she always loved the scent of the

caves. Olivia, not so much for she vowed it smelled of rotten eggs and dampness.

“Come, the water is low enough. I wish to walk along the trail.”

Makenna nodded and walked behind her and slowed her gait. Usually, she wasn’t bold enough to sneak out of the keep, unless Olivia forced her to. This day, she was willing to do so, just to get away from the despair she’d seen in her mother’s eyes.

The exit of the tunnel gave way to an impressive loch where the land rose at the mouth of the underpass and kept the waters at bay. She stepped out and peered to the sky. This was her favorite place and where she often dreamt of being when she was stuck inside the keep.

Olivia took her hand and yanked her forward. They hurried to the grassy banks and she removed her boots. The ground felt cold beneath her feet, and Makenna tested the waters with her big toe. It was too cold to swim, and her disappointment came with a pout.

Olivia dipped her hand. “The water is freezing.” She pulled her cloak tightly around her. “We should return soon for I’m certain it shall snow again.”

“Not yet, we’ve only just come. I wish to be outside for a wee bit. Let us walk the trail.”

Makenna snatched her boots from the ground. She forced Olivia to follow when she took her hand again and tugged her forward.

They walked toward the hills beyond the great waters and kept going until they reached the highest summit. There, Makenna set her boots down and flopped back upon the high soft grasses.

“I’m glad you forced me to come.” She lay back and gazed at the grey clouds in the brilliant expanse above.

“I forced you to come,” Olivia said with sarcasm and laughed. “It’s the only way I can get you out of the keep. Besides, you love this place as much as I do.”

“Come, sit with me.” She patted the grass next to her.

Olivia sat and clasped her knees and gazed about the decline of the hill. “I can see the road. There looks to be men returning.”

Makenna glanced at the lane far below them. She couldn’t tell if they were her clan’s men or another’s. The men marched along the trail, but they were too far away and she didn’t recognize their colors or symbols. Some rode on horses, but most walked along in a formation. She tilted her head because their approach most unusual. Her clansmen never marched with such order.

“I hope my father returns soon. He’s been gone a long time,” Olivia said with a sigh and clasped her knees tighter. Her brown curls swayed with the breeze. “If only he allowed me to attend the gathering. I would’ve liked to see my grandparents.”

“It’s too dangerous to travel right now. Your father wants you safe. At least your father might return when mine is likely...gone forever.” Makenna didn’t want to think of the terrible news they’d received last winter. No word came of how her father fared, but it was probable he was executed like many of their clansmen. She despaired that she would never see him again or knew what befell him.

Olivia picked at the grasses beside her and remained quiet for a time. She tossed the grasses to the air and turned to face her. “I shall miss you when I leave,” she said solemnly.

Makenna set a hand on her foot. “Ah, but you will be far too busy to think of me. I envy you, Olivia, for your husband is all a lass could want.”

Her friend grinned and dipped her chin. "Has your uncle spoken of your betrothal yet? You said you'd ask him when he returned home."

She shook her head in answer. "I never got the chance. He left so hastily again, I forgot to ask him. There was an offer from the Lennox clan a few years back and Da said he settled the matter. The man's name is Kincaid that much I was able to learn. It's been years though and I doubt if the earl's nephew will come."

"With your Da's captivity, it is probable the betrothal was never finalized. You'll be an old maid by the time he comes for you. You should ask your uncle to set another betrothal."

Makenna sighed because she too wanted to settle down and have a husband like her friend and sister. Most of all, she wanted children, lots of bairns with chubby faces. "He cannot, for my Da wrote my mother and stated the betrothal was all but settled. Apparently, Da accepted a bride price, so I am to wait until he either comes for me or begs off."

Olivia scoffed. "Await forever it seems."

"I'm somewhat grateful for his delay because the Lennox's are a brutal clan. At least that is the concession of those I've asked. I will ask Uncle Iain to go to the earl and find out if the man still lives. Perhaps he's perished or ended as my father and is imprisoned."

"Oh, I hope it is not so." Olivia clasped her hand and gave it a light squeeze.

"Regardless, I must be patient." Makenna was known for her patience, especially when dealing with her hellion sister, her formidable uncle, and her forlorn mother.

Olivia guffawed. "Well, you are your uncle's favorite for he only has sons and cannot dote on them as he does you. You're blessed with God-given fortune, my friend, for your uncle is the most feared man in these parts. But when he's around you, he turns into a gentle lamb. You'll have him eating out of your hand before long and will get to choose your own husband if your betrothed is unable to keep the pact." She plucked another piece of grass and twisted it between her fingers.

Makenna chuckled. Iain Mackenzie, the laird of their clan, her father's brother, intimidated most of their clansmen. Her cousins, all males, most nearly grown teased her about her imminent nuptials. But she didn't think for one second her uncle would choose another groom if it were left to him. He'd told her there was no earnest lord, knight, or another man worth giving her hand to.

"I do wish our laird returned, for I miss him."

Olivia scoffed with a harsh laugh. "Only you would miss him. That's because he always gets you out of doing chores."

There was that, but Makenna despaired at his absence. She knew he and several other clans met to discuss the forthcoming wars with England. Once King Robert returned, he'd be anxious to reclaim Scotland. Makenna often sat unnoticed in the great hall when her uncle discussed his position and politics. She was proud he sided with King Robert for it was the most honorable thing to do.

"Your sister seems pleased with her husband."

Makenna smiled for her sister had made a good marriage. "Roberta loves her husband as well she should."

"As should we all," Olivia said.

"It is not always so," she retorted. "But you will come to love your husband given time."

Makenna envied Roberta's happiness. She should have been the first to wed being the eldest, but her sister fell in love and that was that.

"When will she leave?"

Makenna returned her attention to Olivia and pursed her lips. Her sister and dearest friend would soon abandon her and travel to their husband's lands. "Soon I suspect. Her husband should be on his way to her now that spring approaches."

Olivia pouted. "I must await the spring too before my husband comes. Roberta married to a Maclean. Can you imagine?"

She laughed because it was somewhat humorous. Roberta was definitely too spirited and sweet to be wed to such a barbarian from as far north as could be. Yet Gregor seemed kindhearted, at least when it came to Roberta. "He is handsome, I'll give him that."

"He's more than handsome. I vow I wished my betrothed had such muscles. Och, I am still pleased though even if Ager is reedy and lanky." Olivia chuffed and fell back with a sigh.

She shoved her friend's shoulder, and Olivia tossed a handful of grass at her. "At least your husband won't have a huge stomach when he is old."

"We shall see. You will wed someone as prosperous and handsome," Olivia said as she pulled her hair into a tail and twisted it to the side. "Who knows, the earl's nephew might have muscles and be fair of face."

"Or he might look like a goat. I shall find out if my errant groom ever shows up to claim me." Makenna jested about the situation, but deep down in her heart, she worried over it. At the rate she was going it was unlikely she'd ever wed.

Olivia giggled and released the blades of grass she held.

Makenna gazed at the road that led to the keep again and drew a breath. She noted the glint of swords and frowned. Something wasn't right, and unease came upon her. "Olivia... I don't deem those men on the road are our clansmen. There is turmoil in the village." She stood and set her hand above her eye to shield her eyes and scanned the area for signs of trouble. "We should return."

"We should stay here if there is trouble." She backed a few steps and turned to peer behind her as if she would flee with no regard for others. "Come with me. We will hide."

"I must return and make sure my mother and sister are unharmed."

Olivia gazed at her feet. "I will not go back. Oh, gracious, Makenna, the cottages are afire."

Her breath stilled at the sight of wafts of smoke in the air above the village. There was definitely trouble. She scowled deeply at her friend for her cowardice but understood. "Get to safety. I shall make certain my mother and Roberta flee." With a racing heart, she sprinted back to the tunnel. Admittedly, she feared what she would find, but her family was important to her and she needed to ensure they were safe.

Makenna didn't look back at her friend, but ran most of the way, even when she'd reached the mouth of the tunnel. She stopped where it ended at the keep's garrison below the living quarters and listened. Screams and yells sounded from above. With haste, she took the stairs until she reached the first floor.

The main floor of the keep, where the great hall situated below the family solar was ransacked. Banners lay shredded on the floor and tables toppled. She hurried past and took the steps until she

reached her mother's solar. Without caution, she entered.

"Mother," Makenna called, but she stopped upon seeing her mother on the floor. Blood stained her garments. Her eyes shot to her mother's maid, Ealish, who lay next to her. A mass of red soaked the back of her tunic. She gasped and was about to run to her when she heard a man's voice.

"Who have we here?"

Makenna turned and saw a light-haired man skulked toward her. His armor stained with blood, as well as the mail covering his arms. He wore soiled gloves and lifted his hands to brush back his tawny locks. Beyond him, two dark-haired men held Roberta's arms.

"Run, Makenna. Flee now." Her sister implored her with wide, frightful shadowy eyes.

But she couldn't move for fear apprehended her. The man approached and grabbed her face with pinching fingers. He moved around her and held her close. She was wont to pull away, but all she could do was stare at Roberta's terrified face.

"Your sister, I presume? Bring her here," he said and tightened his hold on her. "You two look nothing alike. One light and fair and the other bright and winsome."

Two men pushed Roberta forward and snickered, and one of his lackeys asked, "Where do ye want her, Sir Hawk?"

With his free hand, the man called Sir Hawk brushed all the items from her mother's table onto the floor. "Here."

When the men threw Roberta on the table, Makenna flung forward. Sir Hawk held fast to her cloak, and she yanked her arms and pulled free of its ties to escape him. She encircled her arms around her sister knowing she had to protect her. "Are you harmed?"

Roberta shook her head.

Sir Hawk discarded her cloak, pulled a dagger free, and yanked Roberta across the table by her foot. He gripped her overdress and cut her garments from one end to the other. "Ah, is she not lovely? She's as fair as a glowing sunrise."

The two men accompanying him cackled with laughter.

Makenna tried to pull Roberta back, but the man shoved her away. Her sister wept, and she felt her pain and humiliation all the way to her heart.

"Please, don't hurt us. Let us be."

But her plea was lost on Sir Hawk, for he grabbed her, and twisted her hair in his fist. He held her in place, against him and sneered at her sister. His dagger pressed her cheek, and Makenna stilled with fright. He continued to hold her security with his forearm beneath her breasts and his breath rasped against her face.

He whispered harsh words in her ear and caused her to keep motionless. "'Tis not you, Red, that I want right now. You'll await your turn. Tell your sister to cooperate or my dagger will inflict its worse on ye. I wish not to mar your lovely skin."

Makenna swallowed hard. "Nay, I won't tell her that, you knave. Do your will then and kill me for I will never tell my sister to submit to you."

"I can arrange that, little wren, but after I get my reward." He gripped her forcibly and settled his dagger closer to her ear. The hardness between his legs purposely pressed her thigh. "Tell her," he said sternly. "You feel my excitement, girl?"

Makenna couldn't hold back a gag.

Roberta cried out and shouted, "Please, let her be. I will cooperate. Just let her go." To her, she said, "Makenna, don't do this. All will be well." Roberta's eyes foretold a different ending to the horrible event, but she wasn't about to let her sister be used in such a way.

"There you see? Your sister has more sense than you."

"I won't allow you to hurt her." She tried to pull free, but the man held too tightly. How she wished she'd grabbed a means of protection when she'd passed through the garrison. There was nothing within reach to use against the rogue. Makenna tried to hold back her tears when Roberta's arms were taken by the two knaves who stood beyond.

Sir Hawk held her face and he tugged her earlobe. "She will cooperate and do you know why? Because if she does not, you won't live to see another day, my sweet, red wren." Before she knew what he meant, he sliced her ear. Blood flowed down her neck and upon her shoulder.

Makenna gasped, and the throb in her ear intensified and stung. As much as she wanted to cry in horror at the pain that pierced her face, she remained silent.

Roberta screamed and tried to free herself from the men's hold. "Please, don't hurt her. I will cooperate."

Sir Hawk shoved her away from him and she stumbled forward. "Take her away. Keep her below. No one touches her but me." His eyes darkened when they peered at her. "I have plans for you, my little wren. I'll take more than a quick tumble from you. You'll be mine."

The two men pulled her arms and forced her from the chamber. Makenna wouldn't make it easy for them and deadened her weight. Her feet drug behind them as they dragged her to the hall. Her loud yells and appeals caused her voice to rasp. She was bid to sit in a chair. Makenna snatched a cloth from the table and held it against her ear to stop the bleeding. She searched the chamber for a weapon, but only saw a small dagger used for supper.

Screams came from above. Her sister cried out. Her wails echoed through the keep, and Makenna's heart crushed and a throb intensified in her throat with each tormented shriek. After long minutes of anguished heart-wrenched sobs, her world stilled. The hall silenced and she no longer heard Roberta's cries.

God have mercy.

A few minutes later, Sir Hawk called from above to one of his men. "It's your turn, Alden. I'll watch," he said in a snide tone, "She's a worthy tup, but be quick for there's no time to dally." The man ran up the stairs and left his partner alone.

Makenna reached forward and snatched the supper dagger from the table before the other man returned his attention to her. He didn't notice her action and grumbled about having to await his turn.

"They'll probably kill her before I get my chance at her. Are ye disappointed, girl, that the Hawk won't share ye? Mayhap I'll give you a wee bit of pleasure before we take our leave. Would you like that?" He gyrated his hips in a lewd motion.

She refused to answer his lecherous questions. Tears flowed from her eyes, and she realized her sister wouldn't live through the torture. There was nothing she could do to save Roberta, but she'd avenge her family.

Makenna waited until an opportunity arose. She had to be patient. As much as she wanted to fling from her chair and jam the blade in the man's chest, she took a deep breath. For once in her life, she kept her temper in check and silently pled to God for his aid. Her hand gripped the cold metal of the blade.

The man walked to the window and laughed. "You should come and see this, girl, for half your village is aflame. All should be warm this night, those who still live, that is."

He stood with his back to her, and she knew she had to make her move. Makenna jumped from her chair and ran at him. She jabbed the supper dagger in his back. Before he reacted, she fled to the steps and almost fell down them as fast as she moved. At the bottom, she peered around and saw a pile of swords. She grabbed one and then continued to make her way to the tunnel. Her heart crashed madly against her chest and her breath heavy, bringing a painful stitch to her side. She ran mindlessly until she reached the exit.

Makenna's harsh breath wafted before her from the coldness settled on the land. As she fell to the ground, she clutched the sword and cried. She wept for all the misery of what happened this day. She couldn't hold back the onslaught of sobs. Her stomach threatened to expel her morning fare and she held back the will to retch.

All that she held dear was lost. Her mother...sister...Ealish...home. She wished with all her might that her uncle and cousins hadn't left the keep, for they would've been protected and the English would never have entered the walls. None of the harrows of the day would've happened. But there were no soldiers to protect them and their home was desecrated.

The night would soon come and she needed to flee the place before the knaves searched for her. She squeezed the sword handle, in awe of its weight, and ran her fingers with her other hand over the hard, cold iron. Makenna never held a weapon before. Her father forbade them its use because he wanted to raise his daughters as gently bred ladies. She wished with all her heart that he had allowed them to train, at the very least, given them enough skill for protection.

Her uncle though beheld a different view and insisted all the women in their clan take to arms. She'd begun to learn how to protect herself and her uncle showed her a few movements which would render a man in pain, but she hadn't had the nerve to try it until this day. How she regretted that. She was a coward.

The plight she'd been through caused her to tremble and she realized she had no means to keep herself warm for her cloak was still in her mother's solar. She rubbed her arms and looked up at the darkened sky, knowing she would freeze to death if she didn't find a means to keep herself warm.

Snow drifted down and blended with the smoke of the burned buildings, and grayed the landscape further. Smoke wafted through the tunnel and burned her eyes. She sniffled back her tears and the odor of burnt wood. The keep would be in a heap of rubble, her home no more.

Makenna lifted the weighty sword and marveled at the object. If it was the last thing she ever did, she would learn to wield the weapon. Sir Hawk would die, she vowed, by her hand and hers alone. It was a promise she made to God, and nothing would prevent her from seeing it through.

CHAPTER THREE

Liam wasn't much of an animal lover. He had spent little time with animals except for his warhorse. Why the feline chose him to attach himself to, was beyond him. This morning, he'd awakened to the beast's weight on his chest, and he'd bumped his head to his. Liam pushed him away, but the cat jumped back upon the bedding until finally Liam gave up and rose. The feline wasn't about to let him get more sleep. He wasn't usually an early riser, especially when he could stay abed. But with his unwanted guest, Liam ventured outside and gathered more firewood.

A gust of wind prickled the hair on his legs as it found its way beneath his tartan. He looked upward, between the trees and viewed the grayed clouds. Moisture inundated his senses, and he surmised it would soon snow. The crisp air carried by the wind would make for a day spent by the fire. At least, that's where he planned to be.

The cat followed his every step and screeched when he accidentally stepped on its paw. "Be gone, cat. Move aside or I'll step on you again." When he realized he spoke to the animal, he scoffed at the absurdity. The cat didn't take heed of his warning and he'd stepped on the creature twice more before Liam retreated back inside the cave.

Annag hummed as she was wont while she attended to the cooking pot. The scent of the sweet pottage caused his stomach to rumble. His comrades took their usual places at the large table in the center of the massive chamber. He took his time eating and assessed the mood of his friends. Graeme appeared tired, for he'd heard the bairn's wails during the night. He must not have gotten much sleep. Brodin and Heath were their usual silent selves.

"We'll need to soon head out to find the monk. It's been a week since the friar asked us to search for the parchment. The knave has a good lead on us, but we'll catch him."

Graeme pushed his bowl aside and frowned. "I am hesitant to leave Kerrigan and the wee one. 'Tis too soon. I will have to leave them when the king returns as it is."

Brodin grumbled when he'd taken the last bite of his pottage. "Regardless, Hemm's reputation is at stake. The matter is important to him, and we are duty-bound. We should begin our search immediately before the knave gets too far ahead."

"I agree with Brodin. But Graeme should stay with his wife and son. Only two of us need to go," Heath said. "He's a wayward monk. How far can he get?"

Liam hoped they had more time before the Bruce returned from his winter sojourn. There were matters to attend before they'd take up the vigil of protecting their king. One of which was gaining his cousin's accord to return his father's lands. The matter needed to be settled.

Graeme wasn't usually one to refute his duty, but since his bairn was born, Liam understood his wish to stay at the caves. His comrades considered Heath's suggestion in silence, and Liam's gaze meandered to the cat that now stretched out near the hearth. It licked its paw until a noise drew the cat's attention. The beast's back hunched, its hair stood on end, and its tail fluffed out.

Liam rose and slunk to his pallet and picked up his sword.

"What are you about?" Graeme asked.

He pointed to the cat that now growled and hissed.

"Someone is outside," he said in a low voice.

"Maybe it's another animal," Heath said.

"Maybe it's not," Brodin said and unsheathed his sword.

Liam moved first toward the entrance of the cave hidden by vines and pulled them aside. He peered out and spotted a lad who skulked toward the cave. He fisted his hand and gave the signal to his comrades that all was well.

Outside, he and his comrades surrounded the lad. Liam recognized him as one of Sweetheart Abbey's stable lads, Jimmy. "What are you about, lad?"

"Friar Hemm sent me with messages," he said and kept his gaze on the ground near them.

Liam held out his hand and bade him to give the missives. He handed the one addressed to Graeme to him and broke the seal on his. He perused the words quickly; relieved to read that Micheol agreed to meet him at Caerlaverock village and that he would arrive within a week. The timing couldn't be more perfect as a week had passed since he'd sent his request.

"I need to go to the village," he announced and turned to retreat back into the cave.

"Wait," Graeme said, and folded his missive and grew pensive. He walked around the clearing and appeared to deliberate the message he held. "Lad, return to the friar and tell him someone will come this day."

The lad hastened off as if he couldn't get away fast enough.

"What does Hemm want?" Heath asked.

"Does he ask of our progress in finding the parchment?" Brodin added. "Hemm probably believes we've found the blighter by now."

"Nay, he doesn't mention the monk. He says he needs our aid with what he calls a 'delicate matter' but with Liam leaving for the village and you two going to seek the monk... I suppose I will have to go see what Hemm wants."

"I will see to it since I'm going in that direction." Liam didn't await Graeme's acceptance of his offer. He entered the cave and reached his belongings and retrieved two daggers and stuck them in his boots. The ride to the village would be cold and snow would probably come, so he dragged his cloak over his shoulders.

Graeme followed him inside. "Are you certain, Liam? I feel badly asking you to attend to Hemm when I know you're troubled by your cousin's visit."

He hastened to the table and opened the box that contained their coins and took out a few. "I'll see Micheol first and then I'll find out what the friar wants. You two," he said to Brodin and Heath as they entered the cave, "Be safe and if you need us..."

"We know the code words and will get in touch with Hemm if we're in trouble. And of course, we have our medallions too, which we will send should we need to." Brodin tugged on the medallion he'd made. He'd carved them each one so that if they needed help, they'd only have to send it to the abbey. Each medallion inscribed with the Bruce's crest and their names etched on the backside.

Heath fiddled with the strings of his boot, the many he'd tied there which he'd made a tassel of. The habit drove Liam daft, and he scowled at him to get him to stop, but his comrade rose. "We'll

try to catch the monk's trail and will return as soon as we can. I doubt we'll be long."

Liam nodded and set off to the ossuary. He was eager to leave now and hurried to saddle his horse. In the second cave where they kept their horses, he readied and headed out. Being in the ossuary reminded him of Gilroy, the young lad/squire the Bruce had taken on when he'd found him being abused by the lad's mistress. Liam wondered what had happened to him for he wasn't one to run off without their leave.

Gilroy was pleased to be part of their group given he was exiled along with them when they fled with Robert after the unfortunate incident at Greyfriars Abbey. It wasn't the first time a squire had run off though and it wouldn't be the last. He intended to search the village again for the whereabouts of Gilroy, certain he would learn something of him, but he hadn't had time recently to do so.

Along the trail to the village, he considered what his cousin would say. Micheol didn't hold much fondness for him. Likewise, he didn't return any favor for the man was a coxcomb. As a child, his cousin often made a nuisance of himself and harassed him every chance he got. Mayhap his cousin matured and put his youthful disdain aside. Either way, Liam was uncertain who he'd deal with—the tantrum-tromping lad or the effectual earl.

When he reached the village, Liam went directly to Rohan's mead hall, confident he'd find Micheol there. Sure enough, the man sat at one of the larger tables inside with a few of the Lennox followers. Liam decided to wait before he approached Micheol and sauntered to get warm by the great hearth on the far side of the hall. Rohan greeted him with a nod, for the man was an esteemed ally in their efforts to stay hidden and he kept their secrets. He handed him a cup of warm ale, one newly batched, and Liam drank it down.

He wasn't ordinarily one to fear any man, but Micheol held his future in his hands, and he'd have to appease the sniveling swine-shit. Liam approached and stood by the table.

"Micheol, I'm surprised you came so quickly."

Micheol lifted his head and peered at him. "I expected to hear from you sooner. I suppose you want to discuss your father's lands? Join me for a drink."

But he had no time to entertain his cousin and was surprised at his offer. The last time he'd seen his cousin, he'd caused him much contention. He didn't want to be amicable toward him and wanted to take his sword from its scabbard and put it where he'd dreamt of so many times. That or at the very least intimidate him. The man was a lout through and through. If not for his actions, he wouldn't have been sent in service. And he sure as hell wouldn't have lost his love.

"I must be on my way, and I would like to discuss my father's lands now. News of your father's death reached me and I wanted to say I was sorry to learn it. I regretted our discord."

"I am sure ye did. But it is too late for regrets, cousin. About the lands, have you fulfilled your promises to my da? He bid you to five years of service to the Bruce."

"My service is nearly up, only a fortnight remains. I cannot return though until the king bids my leave regardless that my service is over."

"Why is that? Surely you can just leave and return home."

Liam couldn't speak of their treason or why he needed to continue his service. He'd give as little information as possible. "Do you not support the Bruce?"

Micheol appeared disgruntled by his insult. "Aye, and I must because it's what my da would've wanted. Still, I refuse to lose Lennox men for his cause."

"Many have sacrificed clansmen in the wars. Even if I left Robert's service, I would take arms for his cause. Scotland's freedom is at stake. I made a vow to help the king recapture Scotland, and until he does, I will continue to aid him. I would like you to keep the steward in charge until I'm able to return."

Micheol belched loudly and settled back in his chair. "Aye, many of us make sacrifices for the king's needs without recompense. I suppose I can have the steward remain in place, but there's one thing I need to know before I agree to return the lands. The betrothal? My father paid a hefty bride price to the Mackenzie for his daughter. Did you wed the lass as he instructed?"

Liam got a sour taste in his mouth at hearing the word betrothal. "We discussed it briefly before the earl sent me to service. He only bespoke of Mackenzie and making a pact with him. I didn't deem it significant now since he passed." He didn't say his uncle's name outright and hoped to insinuate he only wanted to be associated as far as business matters were concerned. His cousin had to know he wouldn't go through with the farce.

"He wanted you to marry Mackenzie's daughter. Until you do, I cannot return your father's lands."

Ire ran through his veins and his body heated. Liam wanted to take his cousin by his scrawny neck and strangle him. He took a calming breath instead. "I don't know where she is or even recall what her name is. How am I to marry her?"

"If you want your father's lands, you will find a way. When you locate the woman and wed her, come to my keep. I will then return the lands. I won't have my father's word disparaged, Liam. He wanted this union betwixt the Lennox and Mackenzies, and we must uphold his last words."

"You will see me soon then." Liam didn't know how he'd remedy the situation, but he'd think of something. The thought of approaching the Mackenzie laird unsettled him. The laird was renowned for his abruptness and intimidation. Somehow he'd have to gain the man's acceptance.

"We shall meet again, won't we? My father gave his word to the Mackenzie. You need to honor him, Liam. Find the lass and wed her." Micheol looked to his side at his comrade. "I must go."

"Wait. What is the lass' name? I don't remember him telling me." His last encounter with his uncle disconcerted him, and he couldn't remember much of what was said. He recalled their angry words, most of which were his uncle's.

"Makenna, the eldest Mackenzie daughter. Now I must be off to home for you've wasted enough of my time. Come when you have secured your marriage and our alliance." Micheol didn't wait for his acceptance and hastened away.

His cousin sent him on an unfathomable quest. Liam stood dumbfounded, for he had no way of knowing where the lass might be. And he had no time to travel to Mackenzie land in the far north to speak with her father. Damnation. How was he to handle this? What if the lass married another? Many years passed since his uncle supposedly paid the bride price. Had she awaited him all these years? What if she didn't wish to wed him?

With his vow to the king, he didn't have the wherewithal to wed. His home at present was a damp musty cave, for god's sake, and he wouldn't ask any lady to live in such a place. Once he took

possession of his father's home, he could send her there. He certainly shouldn't attend to this problem now with the king's imminent return and his pledge to his comrades. Battles and sieges would commence, and he had to do what it took to protect Robert.

He needed to put the matter from his mind since there wasn't much he could do about it at present. Eventually, he would seek his bride and convince her to marry him. Until then, he'd focus on the problems at hand—keeping his comrades safe, avoid the king's wrath and aid in the retaking of Scotland.

Liam retrieved his horse and rode toward the abbey and would find out what the 'delicate matter' was that the friar needed of him, so he could get back to the caves. On his ride there, light flakes of snow fell. He was glad he'd worn his cloak for the day seemed to get colder.

Liam reached the abbey in a short time and tethered his horse. Hemm awaited him at the entrance. "Graeme sent me. What need have you, Friar?"

The friar bade him forward, and he stepped into his domain, a sparsely furnished room with a large table that held many parchments and candles. Liam stood by and awaited the duty.

"I wouldn't trouble you with this task, except I know not what to do. There's a lad here...his name is Warren. He came last eve distraught because his da hurt his ma. I would've sent one of the brothers to fetch her, but they decipher documents for the Bishop and have no time to attend to it. I cannot leave the abbey. The poor wee lad is distraught."

"How old is the lad?"

Hemm firmed his lips and sat on the worn wooden chair by his desk. "He's a handful of years. A mite wee to traipse all the way here from the village. He walked here in the cold snow and dead of night without a cloak or warm garments. I kept him here and promised to send for his ma. He weeps for her."

Liam considered the poor lad's plight. He commiserated with him for he'd been about the same age when his father died and he'd gone in search of his uncle. He and his comrades often hired themselves out as mercenaries, and even though this task wouldn't call for such force, he had to aid the lad.

"You want me to retrieve her?"

"Aye, the lad won't cease crying for her until she comes. I bid ye to bring her back to the abbey. I shall see they are taken care of."

"What of her husband?" Liam hoped he'd be there when he arrived. He'd have a thing or two to say to the man for his dishonorable treatment of his wife and son.

Hemm dipped his chin. "As much as I believe a husband has a right to discipline his wife, he has no right to beat her without mercy. I admit I'd like to see the man reprimanded, but God will inflict his punishment on judgment day."

Liam drew a resigned breath. He and his comrades lived by the code of chivalry, knightly honor, duty... Women were never to be disrespected or mistreated. Even Brodin who wanted to murder his lover stayed his hand. In the end, his friend hadn't harmed the woman. None of them would lay a heavy hand on a lady regardless of her station, actions, or situation. The man's punishment would be inflicted this day if he had anything to say about it.

Hemm lingered by his desk and appeared apprehensive. "I ask much of you and your comrades.

I fear I cannot give you coins for performing this deed. Or for the other task, I've asked of you."

"We don't expect a payment, Friar. I will take the task." Liam noticed the relief that crossed the friar's face. They'd never accept payment from him for any deed because the man aided them time and again without being asked. Not only that, but it was the pious thing to do, helping the clergyman whenever he was troubled.

"I shall make my prayers my payment. Aye, the Good Lord's blessing will help you and your comrades prevail."

"That is all we can ask, Friar."

After Hemm gave him the details of the whereabouts of the lad's home, he set off. Before he left the stables, he visited the kitchens and scooped a pile of ash. He added oil to it and rubbed it on his face and neck. His sword and shield were still covered from their last outing, so he only needed a small bit.

Using the concealment would help keep his identity from being revealed. Since he would travel to the village, he wanted to ensure his safety and ambiguity. And the soot made him appear fearsome which would assuredly help him in the quest.

On his ride to the village, he thought of a plan to gain the husband's penance. Caerlaverock's village boasted its size even from the distance on the road that led to the gates. He walked along the lane until he reached the second cottage from the end. Snow fell heavier and dusted his shoulders. Cold seeped through his garments, but Liam disregarded it for anger heated him from within.

An old woman stood outside the door of the last cottage and emptied a bucket. She didn't appear to fear him. "Are ye the devil's reaper here to take *him*?" She slanted her head in the direction of the next cottage.

Liam lowered his chin in a nod but said nothing. Being compared to a reaper lent to his fearsome appearance. He didn't knock but pushed the door open with force. It banged against the wall.

"What the... Who the hell are you?" a man's voice came. "W-what are you?"

The husband stood at the table in the center of the cottage. He was a giant of a man, his beard heavy and covered most of his face. His shoulders wide like a bear's, and his chest large. Liam wasn't daunted by the man's size, for he'd gone against many similar foes. The bigger the knave, the harder he fell.

He gazed about the abode until his eyes fell on the woman. She hunched in a corner, and he took a step toward her. The woman slouched and raised her arm to protect herself. A look of pallid fear crossed her face. He wasn't sure how to go about appeasing her fear and hesitated in his approach.

"W-what do ye want?" the husband asked. "A-are ye the devil, for ye l-look like him?"

Liam turned back to answer him, "I am here for her."

"W-why w-would ye come for my w-wife?"

Liam turned back to the woman. He drew near with caution so he wouldn't frighten her. "Do not fear me. I will take you to your son. Can you walk?"

"She's not g-going a-anywhere," the husband's voice muffled.

He turned and took a step toward the man. Near enough to reach and grab him, Liam threw up

his hand and took hold of his burly neck. He forced him back against the wall, and held him against it, a few inches above the floor. The man's feet floundered, and his face reddened.

"You gave up your husbandly rights when you abused her." He tightened his grip and fairly choked the man. "Look at her. The poor lass cowers on the floor. That is your doing. You shall answer for your reprehensible deed." Liam released him and allowed him to fall to the floor.

The husband's pants rasped. "I'm sorry. Don't take her away." The husband sobbed.

Liam held no sympathy for him. "You need to apologize to her, not me."

"B-but she's m-my wife."

He wasn't surprised the husband wouldn't offer his wife an apology. The man considered the woman his property, naught but the means to his comforts, a slave to do his bidding. Liam was hard-pressed to inflict pain on the man, but his concern for the woman took precedence.

"Come, Mistress, I'll take you to safety, to your son." He gently grabbed her hand, helped her from the floor, and led her from the cottage. She said not a word to him but wept.

Outside, a crowd gathered and their gazes inquisitive. He kept walking until he reached the old woman who lived in the next cottage. "Will you tend her injuries? I'll have Friar Hemm send a cart for her." Liam didn't think she'd be able to ride upon his horse and nor could she walk the great distance to the abbey.

"Aye, good sir, I shall." The woman took hold of the battered mistress and helped her into her home.

Her husband ran through the door and stopped short when he saw him. He held a sword, raised high. "You w-won't be taking my wife. Be ye devil or nay."

Liam pulled his sword free. He wasn't about to let the man threaten him or anyone. Yet, he wouldn't strike first and kept his sword pointed downward. The last thing he needed was to draw attention, especially given that he and his comrades hid from the executioner. He had no choice but to face the threat. "How do you propose to stop me?" He suspected the taunt would bring out the man's anger, just what he hoped to do.

Ireful eyes bore into him. The man growled and ran at him. He yelled a ferocious guttural sound. Liam waited for him to near and when he got three feet from him, he raised his sword and deflected the strike. The man seemed possessed with his intent to kill him and he continued his attack and lifted and thrashed his sword about akin to a mad man. He could've easily raised his sword and ended the clash, but Liam didn't want the man's death on his conscience. It was best he be dealt with in an aloof manner.

Liam had enough and attacked, and used his strikes to wear the man down. After a few minutes of the tarry, the man dropped his sword. He fell to his knees and panted from his exertion. Liam wasn't winded from the exercise. He suspected the man inebriated hence his unskilled strikes.

When he spotted a man who looked to have authority, he called to him.

"You there, sir, this man has committed a crime. He needs to be taken into custody."

The man strode near and removed the hood of his cloak. His garments alluded to his station for he dressed in expensive cloth and wore a broach denoting his role within the village. The sheriff stood by and watched the commotion. "The name's Reginald Guthrie, sir. What is the charge?"

"He attacked the king's servant. You all saw him come at me with his sword." Liam was forced

to admit who he was, and he decided to use it to his benefit. They'd heard of the king's guard and the many tales being spoken certainly aided him now.

The crowd's voices rose with mutters of agreement. He faced the abusive husband. "You might rather my sword be your end than go to the gallows. I'm told no man enjoys the masters in such a place. Most would prefer to perish."

The husband spat at him and the crowd shouted expletives and condemnation.

Sir Guthrie moved closer and took the husband's arm. "I shall have him taken, Good Sir, and am happy to oblige the king's guard. Be ye always welcome in our hamlet."

A round of mirth came from the villagers. If not for the wife's wounds, he'd find the entire affair most comical.

Liam turned and faced the crowd. "Let this be a warning. If I hear of any man laying an abusive hand on their wives, I shall come for you." He took a threatening step forward.

All the villagers gasped and retreated, and then a resounded cheer arose from the women.

He left the lane and headed back to his horse. A lad stood afar and he studied him. The lad looked akin to Gilroy, their long-lost squire. It was he, and the lad skulked along the wall. He scowled and wondered what he was up to. Then he noticed the cloaked figure standing beyond him. Liam pretended to mend his horse's reins while he observed the pair.

It was indeed Gilroy and he would call out to him, but he was interested in the lad behind him. He couldn't tell if the bystander watched him or Gilroy. But he felt the lad's eyes on him. Perhaps he wanted to hire him or needed aid? Liam waited for both to gain ground before he'd act. When Gilroy reached him, he pulled his arm and held him.

"Where have you been? When we returned to the cave, we despaired something happened to you, lad." He didn't answer right off and Liam gripped his arm tighter. "You were supposed to be at the cave aiding Annag until our return."

Gilroy pressed aside the long, dirty-blond locks hung in his face. "I know, m'lord, but I had to see to something and only returned. I was on my way to the caves."

"Where did you go? What did you have to do?" Liam pulled him out of the way when a cart passed. The lad appeared unkempt, and even though it was his usual state, he thought the lad unusually filthy. He reeked of an odor Liam couldn't place.

"I was in the sheriff's gallows for he caught me stealing." Gilroy lowered his chin and seemed sorrowful at either getting caught or at his time spent in the ghastly place.

Now he recognized the smell. The gallows had a certain odor that existed nowhere else. He sighed and realized the peril the lad must've been in. "Are you harmed? Did you tell the sheriff anything about the king's guard?"

"Nay, m'lord, of course not. I wouldn't ever tell a soul about you or the others...the king's guard. I hid the coins I stole before the sheriff caught me. He didn't have any proof except the word of the English knight... That's why he released me."

Liam roared with laughter. "Lad, are you telling me that you stole from an English knight? I never figured you to be so brazen. Why'd you steal from him?"

"We ran out of coins that M'lord Graeme left us and I wanted to get foodstuff for the mistress." He kept his face down and wouldn't look him in the eye.

Liam suspected falsity, but at the moment he wanted to get the lad safely home where he would get him fed and bathed. He'd leave the questions to Graeme for he was more the leader of their group. Gilroy looked starved for all that he had thinned. "Come along, lad. I'll take you home. You'll need to account for your actions to Graeme."

He mounted his horse and hefted the lad behind him. Before he set off on the road, he tilted his head at the other lad who stood yonder, still pursuing them. "Know you of that lad there? Is he a friend of yours? He's been watching us."

Gilroy leaned to the side and looked in the direction he'd indicated. "Nay, m'lord, I don't know him. He's not a friend of mine."

"He was following you. Either that or he was watching me. Let us be gone then for I want to get home. We'll have to stop by the abbey first for I must speak with Friar Hemm." Liam kicked his horse's haunches to get him moving and disregarded the lad they'd left behind. His visit to the village wasn't a complete disappointment for he'd aided the battered woman, got himself betrothed again and found their long-lost squire.