

FEARLESS HEART
LEGEND OF THE
KING'S GUARD

A fearless heart knows no bounds.

KARA GRIFFIN

FEARLESS HEART

Legend of the King's Guard
Book Three

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DEDICATION

To SLWK you've always been fearless.
May you always be brave and love with your whole heart.

Gie me love in her I court,
Love to love makes a' the sport.
Love For Love, William Congreve

FEARLESS HEART

Series Blurb:

In the year 1306, the king's guard is 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 bonnie 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, each finds a love that prevails them.

Our story continues in FEARLESS HEART...

Heath Fraser is sent in service to the passionate king, Robert the Bruce. His past transgression against his clan cannot be undone, but he aims to prove his courage. Not only does he hope his clan forgives his lack of valor, but he doesn't take death lightly. To account for those he's killed, he keeps a tally to ensure his entrance into Heaven when his days end.

Lillia Hunter has been infatuated with Heath since she was wee. When he is sent away, she despairs she will never see him again. Now she is in dire trouble. Her father plans to betroth her to a man who lives far from her home. That wouldn't bother her except the reasoning behind it. She's the daughter of King Alexander, and those that can, plan to use her to oust King Robert. Lillia has no desire to rule Scotland and is pleased with the current king. To thwart the king's foes, she goes on a quest to find the king's guard. Only they can save her from the danger she faces.

Old feelings return when Lillia runs into Heath. She cannot help but be ensnared by his handsomeness and chivalry. Only Heath can keep her from the perilous hands of her enemies. She must maintain a FEARLESS HEART, one that will hopefully lead to a love she always dreamed of.

Prologue

*Neidpath Castle, Fortification of Clan Fraser
Peebleshire, Scotland
July 1303*

He would not give his life. Judgment would be passed, but Heath Fraser wouldn't balk at his punishment for he'd committed a transgression so great his father would probably never forgive him. Simon, the laird of their clan and his father, swore fealty to King Edward, and for his oath, he had to aid the ruthless English king in his pursuits in Aquitaine.

Heath wasn't of like mind and detested his clan gave fealty to the English king. He did everything he thought of to sway his father not to journey to a war that bore little to their existence. Yet, they participated in the fight to retake the lands the English king lost. During the fray, Heath was captured along with his comrades and subjected to torture. After his escape, he tried to seek a way to aid his clansmen, but his recapture most definite, and all he could do was flee with his life.

His cowardice was now called into question, and he reasoned what he'd done wasn't because of fearfulness. He would've gone into the stronghold with his sword raised high if there was any possibility to save his kinsmen. He stood before his father and the clan elders in anticipation of the reprimand. Heath explained his position, but it didn't seem to be accepted given the glares of affront on their faces.

"You say you tried to rescue your clansmen. If ye did, where are they? I see them not."

He took a breath before he reiterated his justification, "I searched for someone to help me, but the Flemish well patrolled the area. I couldn't get close to the fortification to rescue them because they'd increased their sentry. There was no opportunity to save them. I didn't want to leave them behind and escaped with my life."

His father raised both bushy eyebrows, aghast at his words. "Your life? You're standing before us whole and sound. Do ye not realize what you did, lad?"

He nodded, but wouldn't speak the treasonous words.

"Did ye even kill one man during the battle?"

Unfortunately, he had, and Heath disheartened at that because he detested the carnage of men for purposes which would affect none. "What would you have me do? The wergild is not worth my soul. I did what I had to do."

"Aye, you speak of the price of a man's death? What about a man's cowardice which is more sinful than taking a life? Many die in battle. Do you deem their bravery will doom their souls to hell? Och, ye always were too passionate about this matter. And so I too do what I must, so does your clan. You cannot go unpunished for leaving your comrades to their peril, Heath, and I'm sorry to say—"

His Uncle Andrew approached. "Ye should banish him, Simon. Aye, send the coward away. We shouldn't have to look upon the treasonous swine." He spat upon the ground and added insolence to his view.

Heath lowered his head in shame of his uncle's harsh words. He never expected such a severe punishment. If that's what they wanted, then he would have no choice but to abscond and never to set foot upon his ancestral land again. The thought of leaving his home unsettled him.

When his father remained quiet, he heard the rushed murmurs of his clansmen taking sides. All was not lost. He waited for the sentence and would abide by whatever punishment they decided upon, even if he disagreed. Heath wasn't a coward and if there was a way to prove it, let it be with his acceptance of his chastisement.

His father held up his hand and called for silence. "Heath, you are my son, my only remaining son. I will not banish you but must make ye understand you cannot leave our men behind in battle, especially when you are only intent to save your own hide. We are expected to set the example and lead, not flee. I will send ye off to do service with the Bruce. Aye, for Robert has asked for men to attend him whilst he fights for the crown to serve as his guard. With him, you shall learn what it means to protect and defend. I bid you to discover what loyalty and honor mean, lad."

Heath bowed his head in acceptance. "I will attend mass before I go."

His father shook his head. "Prayer won't help ye, not now. The matter is settled. If ye wish to attend mass, you should do so on your journey. For you will not spend another minute on this land. I will call you home when your service is up, but I doubt that will be for many a year. I shall keep communication with the Bruce, and when he gives ye leave, we will accept your return."

His uncle stood beside his father, arms set across his chest, and asserted his view. "Be it for five years at least. I deem that'll be a good amount of time for the lad to learn his way."

Heath tensed at the thought of the years ahead of him. Much could happen in such a vast amount of time. What with the scuffles against the English by the borders, and Scotland's turmoil now with the English king, there was little he would do to aid his clan. Whatever happened, he'd pledge his fealty to the Bruce and would give himself wholeheartedly to the cause.

He inclined his head and walked away, for there was nothing left to say. On his way to the settlement, he ran into Lillia Hunter, a lass who trailed after him whenever he happened to be home. She was most pleasing and kind of heart, and a bonnier lass he never beheld. But she wasn't meant for him and he wouldn't have false hope to ever wed her. Her clan, the Hunters, was a great ally of the Frasers. Their alliance was well-placed for many a year and no marriages were needed to secure their friendship and further support. A fortunate man would win her hand.

She pressed her lovely blonde locks behind her shoulder as she stepped beside him. "Heath, here, take this. There's a sack of foodstuff to keep you until you reach Lord Robert."

"My thanks, lass." He couldn't take his gaze from her beautiful blue eyes.

Lillia took his arm and prevented him from walking forward. "Heath, I won't believe what they're saying about your cowardice. You're the bravest man I know. You must prove them wrong." She pressed against him in a comforting embrace.

Heath closed his eyes briefly, solaced by her kind words and the allay of her body against his. He kissed her soft cheek and smiled. "Would that it be so easy. Your faith gladdens me, lass, but it is unfounded. I admit my fault and accept the banishment."

She wiped at her eyes. "I don't accept that. You did what you had to do. This is all your uncle's doing. He influences your father to stand against you."

"There's nothing to be done for it. My father made his decision. I must go." He continued to hold her in a hug, unwilling to let her go. The thought of never seeing her again brought woe to his heart. Yet, he wouldn't aspire to win her hand or entertain the thought of a future with her.

"I shall await you, Heath. Five years is not so long a time. You'll come back to me."

He tossed his head in rejection of her plea. "In war it is eternity. I likely won't see you again. You'll be long married by the time I return with a few bairns on your hips."

She scoffed and released him. "Not if I can help it. Take care of yourself and find me when you are released from your service. We shall see each other again."

He clasped her hand and squeezed it. "And you, sweet lass, be well."

Heath pulled his hand free and walked away with sadness in his heart. Not only did his supposed transgression bother him but also the thought that he'd never wed a woman as comely or sweet as Lillia. His life existed for naught but war, much to his dejection, and there was little to be gained with dreams of settling down with a winsome woman. There was no sense to wish for something that would never come to fruition. But he envisioned her as his wife, his wee ones on her hip, her lovely smile lightening him. The past year was full of regrets and one of which was Lillia.

He ambled to the great keep and collected his belongings. When he reached the Bruce, it was likely he'd be embroiled in the fight to help secure Robert's throne. Not only that but the freedom of Scotland from its heinous neighbor, the English. Word was rife about the scuffles and frays of those who instigated a rebellion. Passionate tales of Wallace and Moray's battles reached far and wide. Now was the time to support a new king, a man who would stop at nothing to attain their beloved lands.

Absolution for his sins during the battles would not be granted this day, but he hoped to gain such on his travels to the Bruce. It went against all his beliefs to kill. The commandments were ingrained within his soul—the sin of murder most grievous. He detested to sin against God's commands, but in life sometimes a man had no choice. It was either kill or be killed. War was often made for senseless reasons, and for causes that unsettled him. Lands, wealth, and entitlement were coveted by those who ruled. Those who had little or no say in such matters were used to enrich the rulers. Heath sighed at his thoughts.

Life had a way to put a man in his place. If only he might make penance for his vile deeds. There was a way for him to account for his sins. In the Bruce's quest to win Scotland's freedom, killing a man was a necessary evil and one that brought dismay to Heath's heart. He had no choice but to take arms against Scotland's enemies. War did that to a man, forced him to go against his beliefs and enact heinous debaucheries. As he walked along to the garrison, he thought about how many men's lives he'd taken. Since he'd engaged in battles, he had killed but ten men, the rest he'd inflicted with non-life-threatening injuries.

He reached his bunk and grabbed the sack which held his belongings. With haste, he tossed in his garments and smaller weapons. He noticed a rolled ball of wool that unraveled from his tartan and used his dagger to make ten strings from it. Before he left the garrison and collected his steed, he tied the strings to his boot.

Heath wouldn't remove a string unless he'd saved someone from certain death. If it was the last thing he'd do, he would keep track of his transgressions and make them right before he met his end. His end might come sooner than expected if he served Robert the Bruce, for the man was passionate in his quest to retain Scotland's crown.

Chapter One

*Sweetheart Abbey
Dumfries, Scotland
Late August 1309*

His heart's desire was within reach. Heath Fraser wanted to put behind him all the turmoil of the last few years: war, treason, family disseverment, deception, and most of all, the dishonor of his faith. Soon, he might win the king's forgiveness and move forward with his plan. Robert the Bruce, he and his comrade's overlord, would be hard to sway to reason. It was a dastardly charge against them, but they had committed treason when they disobeyed Robert's command. For years, they put aside their angst for what their king did at Greyfriars and protected him—unbeknownst to Robert. They couldn't get caught for if their king found them, they'd be tried for treason. Damned Robert's temper. If only he understood the lengths they resorted to, to secure his crown and his safety.

Heath dismounted his steed and handed the reins to an abbey stable lad. Sweetheart Abbey was of great solace to him. It comforted him to be there, but there had to be a woeful reason the friar sent for them. Friar Hemm, their good ally, kept their secrets and protected them from being found by any who would gladly hand them over to their king.

Graeme Cameron, the leader of their guard, finished tending his horse and turned to face him. "What make you of this, Heath? Friar Hemm didn't indicate what was of import."

He shrugged his shoulder in answer and awaited his comrades, Brodin and Liam. The four of them banded together and were more akin to brothers than comrades-in-arms. When all were ready, they headed for the main building of the grey-stoned sanctuary.

As usual, Friar Hemm greeted them before they knocked on the massive wooden door. How he knew they arrived impressed him. "Ah, ye came. I'm relieved for I have a grave matter to speak of."

Graeme grinned. "All your matters are grave, Friar, but of course we came as soon as we received your message. Has something happened?"

Hemm didn't answer but motioned them forward. "Come and we shall speak of it."

Heath led the way to the friar's offices. He noticed right off the clergyman added chairs to his small domain. There was a chair for each of them. Usually, they stood around his desk and sent glares or mirthful gazes at whatever news the friar delivered. Often, the friar was their only source to find out what their king was up to or what battles were planned. This day, it appeared the news was foreboding for Hemm averted his eyes. He didn't wear a smile or even a wee grin.

When all sat, Heath leaned forward. "Friar, we're on our way to Ayr to find Gilroy and must make haste. We shouldn't dally. If you'll speak your news so we can—"

"Our young squire is missing again," Brodin said with a touch of ire to his voice. "We need to find him before the king does. And when we do, I'm going to thrash the wee buggar until his arse is as crimson as the Bruce's tartan."

“Are you saying the lad’s gone to the king’s autumn festival?” Friar Hemm’s brows rose, his voice pitched.

“Aye,” Liam said, “And we’re eager to find him before he’s found and tortured for information. The lad doesn’t ken his peril.”

Hemm sighed. “He certainly is in danger for the Bruce will recognize him. Your squire is young and foolish. Do you deem the king will pardon you soon?”

Graeme shook his head. “’Tis unlikely for we heard King Robert is more concerned with continuing his parliamentary meetings. I doubt we’re significant enough to matter to him now that he’s regaining the kingdom.”

Liam leaned back in his chair. “Better he attends to the country than searches for us.”

Heath, along with his three comrades, found themselves in a dire situation. He thought back to when they traveled with the Bruce on the night of his unfortunate deed—when Robert had killed his only rival to the crown. Robert the Bruce was betrayed by Robert Comyn and took matters into his own hands. At the time, heated emotions instigated the Bruce’s deed. He’d killed Comyn near the high altar at Greyfriars Abbey with the thrust of his dagger. What’s worse, he’d done it on Palm Sunday of all days, one of the most sacred of days. They’d fled with Robert and kept him safe, for if they were caught by the Comyns or the English, it was unlikely there would be justice. The English king sided with the Comyns and he would’ve been pleased to have one less enemy.

When the Bruce returned to Scotland after their imposed exile, he bid Heath and his comrades to stay on the isle where they’d hidden. But he and his brethren took a sworn oath to protect the Bruce no matter what the cost. That oath wasn’t taken lightly. Even if it meant their deaths, they returned to the mainland and took up secretly protecting the now King of Scotland.

With their defiance, also came the threat that the king would set an example by them for their disobedience of his order. They’d be sentenced to execution for treason against the king, their lives no more. In the meantime, Heath continued to abide by his pledge to see the Bruce succeed in the quest to retake Scotland. One day, they would be relieved of their duty and mayhap pardoned. He hoped that day came soon. But they needed to find their errant squire, for the lad the Bruce saved and bid as his squire, was exiled with them. If Robert found him, he’d assuredly question the lad.

It was bad enough that their king had put a price on their heads when Liam was caught and sentenced to execution. Fortunately, Liam’s wife rescued him from Stirling’s dungeons. Even though they’d learned the king rescinded the price for their capture, they couldn’t chance being caught. With their squire’s negligent behavior, all they’d sacrificed was now in peril.

“Gilroy risks more than his own neck by going to the king’s festival. All want to know our whereabouts. We must keep hidden and if the lad is tortured, he’d surely give our location away. When I get my hands on him...”

Heath grinned at Liam. Their affront at the lad’s misdeed was warranted. Each had their reasons for not wanting to hail off to find him. Heath hoped to take on a few more jobs. Being a mercenary paid well, and he needed the coin, especially if he was to go forth with his plan once he could get back to his life. Even miniscule jobs offered a wee bit of coin, which assuredly would help once they were free to return to their lives.

Liam recently wed and with his newfound family, wanted to stay close to the caves they had made their home. Likewise, Graeme wanted to ensure his family was safe. Brodin, like he, was free of commitments and relished any employment where they might put to good use the skills they'd attained in recent years, namely their sword arms.

He tensed at the friar's delay but kept his voice free of irritation. "Friar, what news have you? We should leave at the soonest to search for the lad."

Friar Hemm ran a hand through the short strands of his muddy-brown hair and scoffed. "I received a missive from James..."

Heath shared a daunted look with each of his comrades. James Douglas was their only ally and connection to the Bruce's movements. But he was formidable and untrustworthy. The man was likened to a savage warrior, one who cared not who lived or died—as long as he prospered. "And why do you sound despaired by this? Does his message bode ill news? Is the king in danger?"

Hemm shook his head and fiddled with the hem of his sleeve. "He'll tell you himself. He arrived shortly after his missive. I've sent one of his lads to awaken him."

Graeme bellowed in laughter. "Are you saying James Douglas is sleeping within the abbey?"

It wasn't at all like James to sleep inside or take a bed within the abbey. And James would never admit to appreciating the comforts Hemm offered to travelers. Heath found the idea of his comrade, comfortably in slumber, humorous and grinned.

Their surly comrade bounded into the friar's office before the friar replied. His face beheld his typical eternal glare and he opened his mouth to speak his disgruntlement at being awakened. But when he saw them, James muttered a curse and closed the door. "I'm gladdened to see you, relieved more like. What the hell took you so long?"

Hemm frowned and gave a stern, silent warning at James's blasphemy.

Heath laughed, as did the rest of the guard at the friar's scold. "Did I hear the friar aright? You were sleeping? In a bed? Inside the abbey? Is this the same warrior who burned down his fief rather than let the English occupy it?"

James grumbled and shoved Liam out of his seat. "Aye, jest if you want, but I deserve a wee bit of comfort for I've slept on the hard ground for the past fortnight. Hell, for the past few fortnights. Listen, I come with distressing news. It's about Robert."

Heath folded his arms and waited. When James hesitated, he sat forward and shoved his shoulder. "Get on with the telling, James. We're in a hurry."

"You ken I have lads entrenched within a few of the Comyn holdings... One of my emissaries told me he overheard a plot to overthrow Robert."

He wasn't surprised to learn of such news because the Comyns would do anything to oust King Robert. It wouldn't be the first time or the last that they tried to usurp him. They continually plotted against Scotland's king. "And how do they plan to do this?"

"You remember Alexander's wife... Yolande had a bairn after our sovereign perished, but unfortunately, the babe died during birth. Some speculate the bairn lives and Scotland's guardians took possession of the babe to keep it safe from those who wished to ill-use the king's successor."

Graeme whistled low. "And now the babe is old enough to put on the throne?"

“Aye. I ken not whether the child was a lad or lass, but the Comyns seems to know the identity of the child. They are in haste to abduct the child and be its advisors so they can rule the kingdom by proxy.”

“Christ Almighty, that child is in great danger if the Comyns succeed.” Brodin rubbed his eyes and face until he pressed back the dark strands of his hair. He looked as put out as the rest of them.

“Not only is the child in danger, but our king is as well, and Scotland too, for if they find Alexander’s heir, the child will have rites to the kingdom. Most would support the claim regardless of the Comyn’s involvement.” James sighed outright at his dejection.

“Does Robert ken their plan? Have you told him?” Graeme asked.

“Nay, I have not spoken to him yet. I rode swiftly to get here to enlist your aid. I was hoping you could find the child before the Comyns, and bring him to me so I can have Robert put Alexander’s bairn in his safety. The Bruce would do right by the child.”

Heath detested hearing such news. If Alexander’s kin lived, the row over the monarchy would continue with much more strife. Too many vied for the kingdom as it was. Yet Alexander’s relation would have the first right to rule. Would that matter to the Bruce? If anything, the Bruce was devoted to their former king. He would give his fealty to the rightful leader, whoever it was, even if that meant he had to give up the crown to do so.

He folded his arms and peered at his comrades. “Alexander’s child would be safer in Robert’s custody than the Comyns. If the Bruce bends a knee to a new heir, it’d be best he takes on the role of advisor. Do you have any knowledge where the child might be?”

“None at all. All I ken is the Comyns have set out to different locales to search for the child. My lads followed discretely of course.” James threw his legs upon the friar’s desk, to which he received a harsh reprimand. The friar didn’t speak a word but showed his affront with another frown. James removed his legs and sat forward, his dark, almost soulless eyes beseeched them. “Will you aid me in this task? There are no others I trust to handle this matter, more than you.”

Graeme spoke up, “We should for we promised to see to Robert’s succession and this would definitely impact his sovereignty. Och, we’re on our way to Ayr to search for Gilroy. He’s gone absent again. We’ll keep our ears and eyes open during the journey. If we catch any news, we’ll let you ken. If you find out where we might look for the king’s child, send us a message, and we’ll head out directly.”

“I need to relay this news to Robert. He should hear of this trouble from me. If my lads gather more details, I’ll definitely send word. You will retrieve the child when we find out where he or she is?” James asserted his view with a bow to his head.

Heath rose, he didn’t want to waste any more time discussing the matter. “We will. But now we must go. Enjoy your rest, James. Mayhap Friar Hemm will tuck you in.” He motioned to his comrades and each of them departed the friar’s office.

James followed and yelled as he trailed them, “Aye, I should shove my fist in your mouth, Heath, for you jest. I cannot rest now. Damnation, I must see the king and impart this troubling news.”

He and his comrades disregarded James’s disgruntlement. Although James had good reason to worry, there wasn’t much they could do about it until they found the child. They left the abbey and

journeyed swiftly on the road that led to Hunter's land where the king's autumn festival was being held. Heath insisted they rest the horses but once during the ride. His warhorse tossed his head in objection at the constant ride and he noticed the harness began to wear. He mended it as best he could, but would have to replace it at the soonest. Once he'd seen to the care of his animal, they set out again.

On the road to Kilbride, they crossed a large meadow and noticed a man sleeping in the field. Heath glanced across the vast meadow and chuckled to himself. The man slept bare arsed and took no care for his safety. He sidled next to Graeme and pointed toward the man.

"What make you of that?" Graeme asked.

Heath turned his gaze to the high brush along the meadow and noticed thicker stalks swayed in the breeze. A huge beastie of a boar burst through the grasses and ran straight at the sleeping man. He twisted around and plucked an arrow from his saddlebag and set it in his bow. Heath kicked his horse's flanks and bounded toward the vile animal. Just as the boar reached the man, the man sat up and crawled backward, and tried to escape the inevitable horns and sharp fangs.

Heath aimed and released the arrow. The boar's combat call screeched and echoed through the field. His arrow struck the animal in the neck and it ran two more steps before it fell to the ground and lay unmoving. He reached the man and dismounted.

"Glory be, ye saved me arse."

"You didn't smell it coming? It reeks." Heath plucked his arrow free and pivoted to return to his horse. No wonder he hadn't smelled the boar, the man reeked of a stench of the like he'd never experienced. Likely, he hadn't bathed in possibly years or perhaps ever. He chuckled to himself for it was probable he sniffed the man's odor and not the boar's.

"Wait, you've my thanks. The name's Angus...Angus Sinclair." He threw out his arm and greeted him with a grunt.

Heath didn't want to touch the man, but wouldn't affront him. He grabbed hold of the man's arm and helped him up. "The name's Heath Fraser."

"Who are those men? Friends of yours?" Angus motioned to his comrades.

"Aye, we're passing through. Enjoy your supper for there's enough meat to feed you for days." Heath turned and signaled to his comrades that all was well. They sat on their horses across the field and awaited him with astounding gazes.

"Won't ye join me for supper? As you say there's enough meat for you and your friends." Angus kept his eyes fastened on his comrades far afield.

"We must be off." Heath turned but Angus stopped him.

"My clansmen left me here to burn in the morn sun. I'll wring their necks bloody when I catch up to them. I owe ye, friend. If ever I can repay you for saving me, you only have to name the price." Angus reached for his garments and tucked them beneath his arm. He took hold of the boar's leg with his free hand and stomped off into the high brush.

Heath mounted his horse and laughed for Angus's bare arse was his last view of the man. What's more, the man was a hulking beast of a giant, covered with dark hair on most of his body. He resembled a boar and somewhat reminded him of his uncle Andrew. A thought occurred to him,

and Heath chortled, for he more reminded him of a bear, a great bulky, hair covered, and smelly bear.

With his redemption of the Sinclair, there was only one thing he needed to do before he rejoined his comrades. Heath lifted his foot and untied the tassel and removed a string. Each string represented a man's life he'd taken. With his promise to repent; he'd only remove a string when he'd saved another from certain death. It was one less killing he needed to account for. After he retied the tassel, he held the threads in his fingers and hoped to one day remove them all.

They set off again and reached the festival by midmorning the next day. As they approached the grounds, Heath peered ahead and noted the many flags and banners that flew atop the tents that littered the vast pastures. Smoke wafted from the countless cooking fires, and the scent of various animals roasting permeated the air. It was enough to make him nauseous for most reeked of charred animal hides. His view returned to the revelers, and he lowered his chin.

Too many eyes and ears abounded over the grounds at the king's autumn festival. Heath rode beside Brodin and quietly assessed those around him. With the hood of his cloak pulled down low, a shadow darkened his face. His clan was an ally of the Hunter clan, and he was well known by many. He couldn't chance being recognized, for it might lead him to the executioner's ax or the hangman's noose, neither of which appealed.

Unfortunately, they needed to cover themselves with the soot and oil they usually used when they traveled outside of their domain. Graeme's grandfather spoke of an ancient warrior clan, the *Ghost Warriors*, who used the tactic of covering themselves to hide from their enemies. The concealment aided them and kept them from being recognized on many occasions. Only now that they traveled to the festival, they couldn't attend covered as though they were going into battle. It would be more of a hindrance than a help. Still, Heath detested being exposed to all those who would view him.

"Do you deem the king will come? You'd think with his prior meeting with parliament, he'd be too busy to attend such events." Brodin sidled next to him and had been quiet until now.

"He risks his safety by coming here. Mayhap we should keep watch if he shows. He might need our protection." Heath slowed his mount and moved closer to his comrade, lest they be heard for ears were ripe for any word of the king regardless of its implication. When they received news that the king met with parliament, they were relieved. The king made tremendous progress in retaking Scotland. Robert's progress with the country aided them because they were one step closer in their desire to leave off their duty and return to their homes. That was if said king forgave them.

"We're far south. I would consider he wouldn't want to travel this far below Stirling. Even with King Edward's death, we have yet to discern what his son will do. Most of the English have abandoned the northern lands." Brodin sat lax upon his horse, unaffected by the many around them. His carelessness often was a thorn of contention between the guardsmen, mostly because he thought himself indomitable.

Heath nudged his horse toward the corral that was set up for visitors. "He's taken back most of the lands north of the Tay. Surely that will aid in his retaking the southern lands."

"Mayhap, and with James's aid, it shouldn't be too difficult. One look from him and the English will flee for their lives." Liam chuckled at his jest, but it wasn't much of a quip. Most feared James

Douglas since his ambushes were legendary; the warrior was relentless in all manner of pursuits. And his reputation for the necessary brutality preceded him.

Heath grinned because James was indeed formidable enough to retake many a besieged fortification, and with little effort. Additionally, their comrade was brash and unreasonable effectuating a terror to those he opposed. James had boasted on more than one occasion that he was one hell of a battle weapon. “Robert should still guard his safety even with James’s support.”

Brodin dismounted his horse and led the steed by the reins. “Let us rest the horses and get on with this task. Damned blighter best be found and quickly.”

Heath sighed at the mission. “Aye, let us find the troublesome lad before his neck ends up in a noose. I cannot believe he went astray again.”

Graeme maintained a low tone, “I tire of his foolery. I’m resigned to let him fend on his own even if we must relocate. Perhaps we should let him go on his way.”

He agreed, but they needed to find him to make certain he hadn’t given away their location. “He’s in as much peril as we are if he’s found. And before the king calls for his execution, he’ll be tortured. Gilroy would babble akin to a fast-moving brook, for he’d have no choice.” Heath shook his head at the thought, for the lad would surely give away their location under duress. There was no time to relocate to another area. They were *all* in a dire situation. Gilroy needed to be found at the soonest—at least before he was spotted by the king.

With the autumn festival at the height of attendance, many traveled afar to Hunter’s lands. Heath tended to his horse and kept watch for anyone he knew. He didn’t want to be recognized, for eyes cast everywhere. The Hunters were a friendly clan to his, and he knew the laird, his wife, and children, and had grown up with the two eldest sons. Laird Hunter and his father allied many years before and since became close friends.

Of their five children, his favorite was the only lass. *Lillia*. One of the last times he’d seen her, she was up to her knees in a bog and begged for his aid. If only he’d used caution, because the lass was intent to have him covered in the muck too, and he landed face-first in the bog. He grinned at the remembrance, for her brothers often played tricks on her, and she on him. Then he recalled her last words to him. She always had faith in him, undeserved faith, which disheartened him. Lillia had likely married and bore a few bairns by now. Her face came to mind, and he grinned. How lovely she was.

“What has you grinning?” Brodin finished tending to his horse and awaited him.

He patted his warhorse’s neck and couldn’t cease the smile that came upon him. “Nothing but frivolous pondering. Thinking about my past.”

“It must be a pleasant memory for I’ve never seen you smile so. Has it to do with a woman?”

“Cease this nonsense and let us go onward to find Gilroy,” Graeme said and led the way toward the makeshift village.

He was gladdened at not having to answer Brodin. Heath kept his life private as much as he could and only told his comrades bits of his life before his service to the Bruce. “There are many here, it might take a wee bit to find him. I’ll wager the coin I find him first.” He held out the coin they used in wagers. The ancient coin secretly brought back from the crusades by their comrade,

Graeme's grandfather, and a remarkable tale was told of its use. Laird Cameron used the coin to bring together two rival clans. In doing so, they defeated the enemy forces.

Graeme often told stories of his grandfather's feats. He used the coin to bring them together in comradery, and yet, even without the coin, they would have stuck by one another. Especially given they were exiled together and now secretly aided the king. The most intriguing of the tales was that of the Knights Templar. Heath was captivated by their duty and honor and swore one day to become one of the notorious order. He'd give his life to the faith, as he'd always wanted.

Heath left the corral and ambled next to his comrades. Someone dashed at them, a young lad, and he kept coming. He held out his hand and stopped the lad from running into him. The lad almost fell backward but righted himself.

"Whoa there, lad. Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

The lad tried to break free of his hold, but Heath held firm.

"I was told to give you this." He shoved a parchment in his hand and jerked his arm free.

Before Heath asked him who sent the message, the lad fled.

"What do you make of that?" Brodin asked.

"I don't ken. Strange. No one knows we're here except Friar Hemm." He opened the parchment and read the short line—

Come to my tent. Laird Fraser, Da.

"What does it say?" Graeme reached out to grasp the missive from him, but he crumbled it in his hand before he did so.

"It's from my father. He wants to see me."

"Aye, go. We'll keep searching for Gilroy and if I find him before you, you owe me the coin. We'll meet at the corral," Brodin said.

Heath nodded, but then stopped him. "If you find Gilroy, get him out of here and to safety. I'll meet you back at the caves."

Graeme, Brodin, and Liam headed off in different directions. He didn't want his comrades to get caught should they have to wait for each other. It was best they separate in their search of the lad and leave straight off if they found him.

On his way to his father's tent, he pulled his hood lower, because many of the people gathered near the ale barrels. He passed as quickly as he could and kept going until he reached the outskirts of the festival. There, many a tent erected for the travelers' rest. His clan's tent wasn't hard to spot for they'd set a banner above which waved in the early afternoon breeze.

How he missed beholding the image of the buck on the banner he'd held dear his entire life. Their war cry 'I am ready' came to mind, and he laughed, for he wasn't ready to see his father. It had been at least three years, not since the battle at Methven, since they had spoken. When he'd last seen him, their rejoin was verily agreeable. And yet, Heath approached with caution.

It wasn't that he distrusted his father—it was more that he trusted no one in these uncertain times. Two sentries stood guard outside the tent. He stopped before them and recognized two of his clan's favored soldiers. John and Lagan were the most trustworthy and seasoned guardsmen of their clan. At least his father took precautions.

“Heath, ‘tis good you came. Ye look well. Your father bids you to enter.” John bowed his head and waved his hand toward the opening.

But he hesitated. He wasn’t sure who else was within and he didn’t want to be recognized by any of the Bruce’s followers. Earlier in the year, the king put a price on their heads when Liam was found and tortured. Fortunately, Liam’s wife Makenna rescued him from Stirling’s dungeons and the king’s decree of execution. Heath and his comrades were listed as treasonous against Robert. Even though the king decided to negate the price, and soon after he retracted the order. Regardless, they couldn’t take the chance that someone wouldn’t want to apprehend them. The situation forced them to take caution wherever they traveled.

Lagan stepped aside and motioned for him to go in with a flap of his hand. “It’s safe. None are inside but Laird Fraser. He’s alone. We’re to ensure none enter whilst ye are here.”

He gave a firm nod and entered. Inside the darkened tent, only one candle flamed to lighten the abode. He found his father bent over a parchment near the candle. His light hair appeared grayer now and his bright eyes more faded. The wisps of his hair and beard unruly as if he’d stood on a windy mountainous peak. In his younger years, Laird Fraser was a fit warrior. Proud and strong. And now, not so with the way he leaned over the table and peered at the missive.

“Why do you keep it so dark?”

His father turned at the sound of his voice. “Heath, my son, you’ve received my missive. It does these old eyes good to see you. Come, come.”

He laughed. “You might see me and the parchment better if you lit a few more candles.”

His father scoffed. “The brightness hurts my eyes.”

“Have you received unfavorable news?” He pointed to the parchment.

Laird Fraser shrugged his shoulder. “All news is ill-boding these days. Come and sit with me. I am gladdened you came. It has been too long, my son, since I’ve seen ye.”

He did as bidden and sat in the chair across from his. “How did you ken I was here?”

“Even if my eyesight is poor, I still have eyes about. Lagan saw ye by the corral. He knew it was you for you much resemble me in my younger years. I wanted to find out how you’ve been faring.”

He took the cup offered and drank a sip of warm wine. It tasted sweet, much more so than the strong ale his father usually preferred. “Ah, you’re drinking wine these days?”

“I fear my stomach cannot handle ale any longer. Are ye well? You look strong.”

“I am well enough, Da. We continue to hide from the king but have heard he might consider pardoning us. We await word, but won’t test his mood.”

“That is good news. Mayhap you will be able to return home then. I fear I will depart and will be called by His Grace, the Good Lord, before you come back to me. If that happens...”

“Da, you’re not that old. Cease such talk. You have many a year to live before that happens.” Heath raised his cup but didn’t drink when his father adamantly shook his head.

“Nay, listen to me, son. I regret that I sent you off with the Bruce. My brother insisted, and as always, I followed his lead. I should have done what I wanted...and brushed the matter aside as I wanted. I ken you didn’t intend to leave our men unaided in France. Roderick was responsible for his men, not you. He was your elder. I never should’ve listened to the talk of those who were against

you. I regret my compliance with King Edward's call to arms. We never should've assisted him in the wars in France."

Heath took hold of his father's arm. "Da, it matters not now. All that is past and there's no sense in regretting it. I am glad you believe me and that you side with the Scots and not the English. I only wish Roderick wasn't captured. You've heard no word?" His brother's capture was the one thing that plagued him. If only he'd been able to secure his escape, but unless he put himself in grave peril, there was nothing to do to aid him.

"None, but we continue our communication. And I have nothing to barter that the French want in trade for him besides coin. Bah, the choices and mistakes of a young laird led me astray. I shouldn't have sided with Edward back then. I wish that you return soon for we've had trouble. The MacKintoshs continue to vex us. They raided our lands and stole much of our winter stores. I've sent several of our clansmen after them, but they lost their trail. I hesitate to step foot upon their land. It may well bring us significant losses. I will not put my clansmen in a dire situation unless it is called for."

Heath leaned back, dismayed by the news. With his father's report, he was torn between doing his duty and following his heart. On the one hand, he should return home and help his father rule their clan and defend their clans' people against their enemy. On the other hand, he wanted to join with the Scots Templars and use his fighting talents for righteousness.

"When ye return, you will help me bring the MacKintoshs to heel."

Graciously, his father didn't require a response. Heath didn't know how to tell him of his desire to join the order of the Templars. In hearing how Graeme's grandfather aided the Templars, he too wanted to give himself to their order. It was better to fight in the name of God than for any other reason. He'd have to speak of his wishes once he was freed of his service to the Bruce. Likely, his father would abhor his decision and refuse to allow his pursuit.

Heath dared not broach the subject now. "Our feud with the MacKintoshs goes way back and will likely continue. Send out more sentries to keep watch on our land."

"I have done so. What brings you to the king's festival? I wouldn't deem you would come since you're determined on keeping unseen."

He finished the warm wine, content by its effect. "We search for our missing squire. He was heard to say he was coming here."

"Ah, lads will often take off when not watched. Have you visited Laird Hunter?"

"I have not and only just arrived. I don't want my presence known, so I doubt I shall see him. How are the Hunters?" Heath crossed his ankles, relaxed by his father's mollifying mood. It wasn't usually the case, for he never sat back and conversed with him. Not even when he was a wee lad.

"Aylmer is one of my oldest friends. I ken him well and I say there is something troubling afoot here. He hasn't come to greet me and there must be a disconcerting matter he's dealing with. Otherwise, he would've come by now."

"Why don't you go to Laird Hunter? I'm sure he'll be glad for your help if he's beset with troubles. I should go, for I aim to find the missing lad before the day is through."

Laird Fraser bellowed a laugh. "Don't be too hard on the lad. Remember what it was like to be young and spirited. Before ye leave, Heath, I want you to ken... I am proud of you, son. You

remind me of myself when I was a robust capable young man out to save the land and fight for what was right. Always side with the righteous and you shall always triumph. Remember that. Keep my words within your heart.”

He rose and helped his father to stand by throwing a hand down. It was unlike him to be expressive or fervent with his words, but Heath appreciated his candor. His father appeared weakened, but he was aged. He tried to discern his age, but it was impossible. No longer was he the spry warrior who boasted his ability at foiling any foe. Mayhap he didn’t have long to exist. Did he suspect death would come? Heath resisted asking.

The scuffles with the MacKintoshs concerned him and Heath turned before he reached the exit of the tent. “Da, if you need me...if the shanty MacKintoshs become too difficult to deal with...send word. Send the message to Friar Hemm at Sweetheart Abbey. He knows how to reach me.”

“I will, son, if need be. Och the MacKintoshs will always be a thorn in our backsides, eh?”

“Is Ma well? I forgot to ask after her?” Heath stood near him and noticed his height surpassed his da’s. It struck him unaccountable because his father had always stood taller than he.

“She is well. The woman will outlive me, I trust, for she always harps after me to take better care of myself. I let her grumble for it makes her happy. When ye can, you should travel north and see her for she would like that. I should visit with Aylmer now.”

“Tell her I miss her and will visit when I can. Be well, Da. I shall see you soon.” He embraced his father, clapped him on the shoulder, and contented by their brief visitation. Their conversation wasn’t as contentious as he’d thought it might be.

Heath left the tent and gave his clansmen a wave and continued with his search of the lad. On the far fields, men tested their strength in various feats of games. Men stood in line to lift the large cabers. Two large tree trunks sat on the field, not too far from where they were thrown. Likely, someone would outdo the attempts for the cabers weren’t tossed far enough to win the day.

Children ran amid the lanes and waved pennants. Their laughter lightened him. He wished to be a child again with no care of significant matters akin to war, his soul’s redemption, or the longing of family life.

The afternoon gave to revelry, and many sat around with cups of various drink. How he wished he had nothing more to occupy himself, but life was not as amiable at the present. His life existed only to protect the king, to keep his comrades safe, and to ensure he kept accurate accounts of those he killed. He gazed at the tassel hung from his boot and suspected he might have to add to the numbers if the war with the MacKintoshs ensued.

Chapter Two

A great crowd came for the king's autumn festival. All within the clan were excited at the prospect the king would attend the gathering. The king's imminent presence caused a furor of activity for many wanted to make his stay as complacent as possible. Lillia Hunter finished her chores and chose her best overdress for the occasion. In her rush to get outside, she ran a comb through her hair and pulled on her softest slippers. She was on her way out of the keep when her father stopped her.

"Lass, you are to stay within the keep."

She turned on her heel and noticed the deep frown of his eyes. "But why? I should like to join the entertainments, Da."

Her father, Laird Aylmer Hunter, wasn't one to refute or make demands of. He held up his hand and shook his head. "You are forbidden to leave the keep. Do you question your laird?"

"No, Da, but—"

"Go to your solar and stay there," his tone suggested she not argue.

Lillia turned and marched up the stairs with as much forcefulness as she could muster, effectively letting him know of her displeasure. She entered her bedchamber and closed the door, utterly defeated. She'd worked hard for the past days to help her mother and those within the clan ready for the event. And now, she wasn't allowed to attend? As she stood by the window casement, she looked out at the festival revelry, and couldn't help but be seethed with ire.

Her view of the courtyard gave her an idea of how to escape the chamber. Yet climbing down a rope would be risky, and she wasn't certain it would be worth her neck. Besides that, the courtyard now filled with people, and she would be noticed. If only her father left the fief. She'd have to keep watch and wait until he did so and then abscond outside.

Were her brothers at home, she might get them on her side and vie for her father's permission to join the festivities. Hamish and Gawin no longer lived at the main keep. They were married, and unfortunately, not concerned with her paltry plights. Being the middle of five siblings boded ill for her because her father doted on his sons. She was a meaningless, insignificant daughter. Where they were given the freedom to do as they wanted, she was forbidden and made to stay in the keep. How unfair was he? Her shoulders slumped with the dejection of being a female.

The falsehood almost made her smile for as much as she sometimes detested being a woman, there were benefits. Lillia leaned on her elbow and watched midday pass. She wouldn't stay ireful with her father. He was a kind man and even though he teased her and said she vexed him at every turn, he did so with a grin. There had to be a good reason he wouldn't let her attend the festival. She wished she knew what that reason was.

As she stood by the window casement feeling quite sorry for herself, her two younger brothers burst into the bedchamber. Their yells were enough to rattle the walls. Miles and Macon drew their makeshift swords and swung them high. They surrounded her and she tried to grab hold of one, but the other tripped her and she ended up on the floor.

“You two will be the death of me. Why are you not at the festival?”

Macon gripped his wooden sword and pouted. “Father won’t let us. He said we were too young. We’re not, are we?”

“Perhaps a wee bit.” She commiserated with them. Being twins of seven winters, the two hardly resembled each other. One had dark hair, Miles, and the lighter-haired, Macon. Though they were alike in many ways, Miles was a mite heavier in body, and Macon slightly taller. Lillia adored the lads, but they were often troublesome and caused chaos wherever they ventured. Like her older brothers, they too liked to play tricks on her or anyone for that matter. Their banter often got them sent to their chamber.

“I’m sorry father won’t let you attend. If you were guarded, you’d be safe. Did you suggest he send the sentry with you? He wouldn’t say nay then.”

“Nay,” Macon shouted. “We should’ve suggested that.”

“We shall go and suggest it now,” Miles said. “Come, brother, onward.” He raised his wooden sword and ambled from the chamber.

The two of them departed the chamber with as much noise and vigor and ran down the long hall to their parent’s solar. Lillia followed, for if her brothers might attend the festival, she might as well if she had a guard. Outside the door of her parent’s bedchamber, she waited and listened. Her father grumbled at the lad’s suggestion, but her mother cheerfully agreed. Her mother was easier to persuade to reason than their father. She usually gave in when they pleaded with her.

“That is a wonderful suggestion, Macon. I don’t see why you can’t attend with a guard.” Her mother held his chin and laughed when he pulled away. “They are wee lads out for merriment, husband. Will you not concede and allow them to attend? They’re excited.”

He grumbled. “They’ll soon begin their training. I suppose they are old enough to attend. Very well, dearest, but they will not flee from their guards. I want their pledge to remain with the guard at all times.”

The two lads nodded heartily and rushed from the chamber, all but running as if their father would change his mind and call them back. They left the door ajar, and she peeked inside.

“Be sure to take two guards with you, lads. Return to the keep before dark,” her mother yelled after them. “Don’t make us search for you.”

Lillia was about to enter and make the same suggestion, but her father’s tone stopped her.

“I ken not what to do, my love. We must send the lass away.”

She pressed her nose to the door and listened.

“But must we marry Lillia to a clan so far away? She’s my only daughter. The Sinclairs are remote and we shall never see our fair daughter again.”

He sat on the bed next to her mother and clasped her hand. “It is the only way I can keep her safe. Even now, there are those who will come to seize her. We cannot let that happen. I love the lass if she was my own. I pledged to the guardians we would keep her safe.”

Lillia covered her mouth in shock at what she’d heard. She realized they spoke about her. Who would come to seize her? Lord above, he would try to betroth her again. She’d done her best to stay unattached, and even after her father introduced her to several men, she refused them all. With her oath to her own heart, she vowed she wouldn’t wed anyone but the man she’d given her heart to

when she was a young lass. It had been almost five years since she'd seen him, and she despaired he would ever return.

Her parent's discussion redrew her attention.

"At least with the Sinclairs she will be well protected. I will not have the lass in danger regardless of our desire to keep her with us. My spies tell me the Comyns openly discussed the possibility of Queen Yolande's bairn surviving, and of their plan to use the lass to unseat Robert."

Lillia's heart heaved. They would send her away? And more disturbing, she wasn't their child? Astounded by her parent's discussion, she held tight to the door frame. Could she be the queen's child? All heard how the queen gave birth to King Alexander's babe after he died. It was bespoken that she birthed a dead bairn. Were the rumors a falsehood?

"All believe the queen lost the bairn. Why would the Comyns care if the queen's child survived?" Her mother pulled the fabric of a tunic she mended to her chest.

"My dear, the child would be a direct descendant of King Alexander's. That child would then be in line to rule the kingdom since there are no legitimate male heirs. I thought she was safe since the guardians who witnessed the event are all dead. The Bruce is the rightful ruler, and he's gone to great lengths to secure our kingdom. If anyone finds out about her birth, she'll be used as a pawn to oust King Robert. We cannot let that happen, Gillian. Please agree with me, for I will be disheartened if ye don't."

"I suppose I must agree with you. Very well, Aylmer. Have the Sinclairs arrived? Will you make the betrothal this day? Even now there might be Comyns or their supporters attending the festival. She might be endangered and should leave at the soonest."

Her father ran his hands through his light hair and over his face. "Aye, which is why I have forbidden her to leave the keep. The Sinclairs arrived before noon. I will meet with them shortly to settle the agreement and have the priest fetched. You may want to ensure Lillia is readied for she will depart with them when they leave the festival."

Her mother wiped at her eyes and nodded. "How am I to say farewell to my only daughter?"

Lillia bolted down the hallway and closed the door to her chamber. She secured the latch so none would enter. Her heart beat frantically. She'd be wedded to one of the Sinclairs? That's why he wouldn't allow her to leave the keep. What did he mean about *used as a pawn* and *the king will be ousted*? Would those who searched for her truly put her on the throne? She wasn't about to sit around and await the terrible news. Lillia pulled a tartan over her shoulders, opened the door quietly, and bounded down the steps.

She left the keep and practically ran through the mass of people who stood in the center of the courtyard. Never in her life had she wanted to flee from her home. She'd never intently disobeyed her father either, until this day. Lillia wanted to be gone, to be as far away as possible. She certainly didn't want to be wedded to a Sinclair. Likewise, she didn't want to be put on the throne. And she most definitely didn't want to be apprehended by the Comyns.

As she reached the cottages near the back of the keep, she slowed her pace and tried to control her breath. The mad dash sent a rush of warmth through her and she couldn't calm. Several of her friends, most married women, sat together and enjoyed their midday meal. She took the open spot

on the bench next to Hilde, a beautiful lady who married her brother Gawin. Susannah sat across from her. She wedded her brother Hamish.

“Lillia, we wondered where you were and expected you earlier. Here,” Hilde said and handed her nephew over.

She held the bairn and smiled. There was nothing akin to a baby to brighten one’s spirit no matter how down one was. Lillia adored her nephews and nieces. Thomas was the youngest and newly born. She set a light kiss on his head. “He sleeps.”

“Aye and don’t jostle him or I’ll never finish my supper.” Hilde piled her trencher and sat back with a contented smile.

Lillia needed aid and thought of her brothers. Surely they would get her to safety. “Where are Gawin and Hamish?”

Hilde grumbled and swallowed her food before she answered, “They’re likely besotted by now. Aye, they took to drink earlier in the day and have caroused with the other clansmen. I fear we may have to put our husbands to bed this night.”

“Aye, if they can walk home.” Susannah laughed at something Maudie whispered in her ear. Maudie, Susannah’s sister, was shy and often spoke low when the ladies met for entertainment.

Hilde poked her arm. “What’s wrong with you? I can tell when you are bothered? You’re never this quiet. Has the cat got your tongue?”

Lillia shrugged her shoulder. She wouldn’t speak of what she’d learned this day and the apparent trouble she was in. “Nothing really. Tell me what you were discussing before I came? Obviously, Susannah finds it humorous. What did I miss?”

Hilde choked on a piece of meat she’d just stuck in her mouth. After she swallowed and drank a sip of water, she grinned. “Our discussion was comical, but not for your ears. You’re too young to hear of such romantic pursuits. It involves marital duties.”

She raised a brow. “Oh? I’m certain my ears can handle such a discussion. What say you? What marital duties? Do you mean those in the bedchamber? Mother told me all and was descriptive. She says there’s nothing to fear. Besides, I’m well past the marriage age.”

Susannah chuckled. “You certainly are. It’s about time you took a husband. Hilde told us that Gawin wanted her to use her mouth to—”

Hilde smacked her hand over Susanna’s mouth. “Gracious be, Sus. Speak not of that. Lillia is young and hasn’t coupled yet. She shouldn’t know of such things. Besides, her husband should be the one to tell her what is done in the bedchamber.” She turned away and hid her blush.

Susannah giggled and touched her arm. “My dearest sister, we spoke of things beneath the covers, but mostly we debated about how many times it takes...coupling to... Well, that is...”

“For goodness sake, Susannah, the cat has your tongue this day too, doesn’t it? She means to say we think you can only couple with your husband three times before he begets you with a child. Aye, so if you wish to remain free of bairns, don’t allow your husband to prickle the kitty...any more than twice in a short amount of time.” Hilde’s words were fervent and solemn. “I shouldn’t have allowed Gawin to touch me, but he’s so handsome I fear I’d never refuse him.”

Lillia scrunched her eyes at the term ‘prickle the kitty’ for it was the humorous phrase they’d used when referring to making love. “This is what you’ve been discussing? Good Lord, you should

be ashamed of yourselves. I need to go before it gets dark and my mother sends someone to fetch me.” She handed her wee nephew back to his mother. “I shall see you later... I...I must leave.” Lillia swallowed a sob, certain she would weep at the thought of leaving her home and never seeing them again. She hastened away before they asked what had upset her.

Her friends were delightful, and she was gladdened they never excluded her from their marital discussions, although, they tried to on many occasions. Now that she would marry, she wanted to remember all their discussions. The last was definitely of interest because she certainly didn’t want children right away. Lillia wanted to ensure her and her husband’s relations prospered before they added anyone to the mix.

Oh Lord Above. Why did she think nonsensical thoughts? Who cared? Right now she was in danger. Forget a husband...begetting children... How was she going to go through with the marriage to a Sinclair? What about her vow to her heart? She couldn’t renounce what was in her heart, and the likelihood of her loving another didn’t seem possible.

Should she thwart the marriage? The possibility that she’d ever see her love again was doubtful since he’d been gone for numerous years. For Lillia love was too important to cast aside. Many women wedded men whom they did not love. Obviously, her father thought she’d be safer with the Sinclairs. Perhaps she should obey and marry the man. Her friend’s discussion would definitely be considered if she went through with the betrothal.

She ambled through the festival grounds with nowhere to go in sight. With her father’s declaration, she realized this would be her last night on Hunter land. It might be the last night she’d be with her family. Despair came upon her thinking such, but being a dutiful daughter, she had to follow her father’s dictate. She always knew he’d choose her husband even if she’d rejected a handful of suitors already. But why, oh why, did he have to live so far away?

Lillia stopped by a large bonfire that lit the center of the courtyard and felt the heat from the high flames on her face. The sky was light enough to see everyone within the square, but dusk would soon send its shadows. She would eventually find her way inside and deal with the consequences of fleeing the keep.

And her impending betrothal.

Around her strangers jested and their celebration jubilantly rose. She didn’t recognize most of the people and didn’t see any of her family. As she walked past the gatehouse, she waved to the sentry but retreated away from the keep. She needed a quiet place to think and to consider the ramifications of staying or leaving. A chill came upon her and she pulled her tartan around her shoulders.

Lillia wasn’t one to imagine things, but for some strange reason, she felt someone watched her. Her hair stood on end and her breath quickened. She gawked behind her, certain she was being followed. With her father’s comments about the guardian and her birthright, an odd sense overcame her. Two men dressed in dark garments followed. Their stride intently kept up with her pace. Her steps hastened, and she peered ahead and searched for someone to rescue her.

A man perused her from a nearby cottage. Lillia glanced at him and her heart practically leapt from her chest. She realized who he was, and a sob constricted her throat. God was looking out for

her. His face set hard with a frown, but she had no time to tell him the cause of her abruptness. She ran at him, pulled his arm, and yanked him around the corner of the cottage.

“Lillia, it is you. What are you about?”

She threw her body against his and embraced him and used his large figure to hide hers. Excitement and fear prickled her skin. She never expected to see him again, but he returned. All the words she’d thought to say to him suddenly escaped her. All she wanted and needed at that moment was for him to do what she’d dreamed of... “Heath, kiss me.”

Chapter Three

Before Heath responded to her ardent request, she set her lips upon his. He returned the sensual kiss with all his being and pressed her body against the cottage thatch. Her soft curves melded to him and her tongue timidly coaxed his to return the touch. There was something oddly desirous in her kiss, and more than that, his response which undoubtedly confused him. Her fingers meshed in his hair, and she pushed back the hood of his cloak. He weakened at the knees and set his hands on her hips. Heath continued to caress her mouth, and the sound of a soft moan reverberated his tongue. A yearning to have her snuck upon him.

He quickly pulled away. Heath gazed into her eyes and tried to understand what passed between them. She peered at him with desire mingled with fear. He didn't like it one wee bit, her desire nor her fear. Lillia turned and glanced around the cottage and returned her gaze to him.

"They're gone."

"Who is gone?" He kept her from leaving and took hold of her wrist. Many questions hit him at once. Who were the two men who followed her? Why she pulled him around the cottage? And most importantly, why had she kissed him?

"No one." She smiled and touched his face, the light caress allayed him. "It was naught but a few suitors I was trying to avoid. It's been many a year, Heath, since I saw you. I assume you're here for the autumn festival?"

"Something akin. And lass, I can tell when you speak a falsehood. Those men were following you. They were intent to reach you. Are you in danger?" He kept a serious gaze on her so she wouldn't mistake his concern.

She shook her head, and her bonny blonde waves cascaded over her shoulder. "Nay, not at all. Don't make it out to be more than it is. You're as handsome as I remember. Although, your hair is much darker and longer, and my, but you are verily taller than I remembered." She gazed at him and her fingers pressed his arm but there was something in her touch that gave him unease.

"I was little more than a lad when I last saw you." He searched her face for honesty, but since she insisted she was safe, he relaxed. "You've turned into a beautiful woman, Lillia. Aye, no longer the willful lass?"

Lillia laughed a sound as light and sweet as a Dunnock sparrow on a spring morning. "I haven't been willful since I was wee. Where have you been? When I last saw you, your father sent you away but I didn't listen to what they alleged... Have you returned?"

He raised a brow. "You should believe what was told. I am in service to the king. And nay, I haven't returned. Tell me what had you running and why you demanded I kiss you?" Heath almost groaned aloud when he noticed the glisten of her lips. He wanted to kiss her again, truth be told, for much longer and with much more passion. But Lillia was like a sister to him. They'd spent most of their childhood teasing and chasing one another. He shouldn't consider her in any sort of romantic notion. Then why did his heart tense when he saw her? And why did it clash madly when she'd kissed him?

"I told you, Heath, two suitors set to gain a kiss from me, but I thwarted them thanks to you."

"Aye, you thwarted them all right. Do your brothers ken you're out here alone? Do you make a habit of traipsing off without protection? There are many strangers here. I'm surprised your father didn't bid you to stay in the keep." The more he thought about her lack of care, the more ireful he became. "You should return home before something happens to—"

"My da forbade me to leave the keep. But I worked hard to prepare for the festival and wanted to enjoy it. I shall return home soon, but before I go... I..." She set her arms around him and hugged him close. "I've missed you, Heath. Tell me of your travels and your life with the Bruce? Will you not walk with me a bit before I return?"

"I shouldn't, but I will if only to make sure you are safe. As to my life as Robert's guard... I can only say that it's been eventful." He should leave, but everything within Heath told him to stay. At least for a short while until he was assured she'd returned to the keep. He walked next to Lillia and continued to watch her. She was as lovely as he remembered. Her sunshine hair flowed freely. Her brown eyes sparkled with flecks of light and as golden as a new batch of honey. Not only was she beautiful, but she still had the winsome spirit he recollected. Lord how he'd missed her.

They rounded a copse of trees, and Heath recognized where she'd led him—where they'd spent many a warm summer's day—by the stream where they swam and caroused. Against his wishes, he kept his distance with a respectable foot between them. Getting close to her would only cause his heart to war with his mind. His heart clamored, and his mind rebelled.

She slipped on a patch of wet leaves and ended up in his arms. Heath held her longer than was necessary to rectify her. Lillia felt right in his arms as if she belonged there. And yet, he berated himself for thinking such thoughts. With a newfound view of her, he resisted lowering his mouth to hers. It took great will not to kiss her, especially because her sweet lips parted and she eyed him curiously.

"You're still gawkish. Aye, you always were." He couldn't hold back the grin that came, for she'd always made him merry.

Her bonny eyes crinkled with mirth. "I am not clumsy, at least not anymore."

"You always walked into things and caused mishaps around you." He grinned at the remembrance. "You need to be more alert."

"I'm always alert." She released him and pressed her hands over her garments.

"Aye? Then you are aware there is a man following us?"

"There is? Where? Are you certain?" She turned and peered at the surrounding trees. "I see no one."

"We must've lost him when I veered you around the large crag. You ken, the one we used to jump from when we were children."

"Do you know who he is?" Her eyes widened, and he was positive now she feared the follower.

"Nay." Heath wondered if someone followed him and not her. Perhaps someone recognized him and was intent to apprehend him. But then why would she be fearful? He took a moment to survey their surroundings and listened intently for sounds, but no one was near enough, not even a small animal. "Worry not, Lillia, I'm alert enough for the both of us."

"You, Heath Fraser, are being boastful, and always were."

Assured he'd lost the follower, Heath eased. "Mayhap I boast a wee bit. Let us sit and take rest. Tell me about your life. Surely you're married by now. Have you children?" He'd rather continue kissing her but needed something to occupy him so he wouldn't do as he was wont. The thought that she'd married displeased him.

"There's not much to speak of. I'd rather talk about you. Do you recall when you first kissed me on the night all the fireflies surrounded the stream?"

Heath remembered that night as if it were yesterday. It was their first and only kiss until this day. The magical night rivaled this one. He sat and leaned against a tree and gazed at the flowing waters beyond them. His hand set against the hilt of his dagger fastened to his leg. If danger neared, he'd be ready to face it.

"It was the night of the summer solstice celebration."

He trained his ears again to notice any unusual sounds around them, and hearing none, he motioned for her to sit next to him. "I don't recall this night you speak of. I do remember you always followed me and your brothers and often got us into trouble."

Lillia sat next to him and stretched out her legs. She took the hem of her skirt in hand and tossed it to ensure her legs were modestly covered. "That's because you never took me with you and I had to sneak around. This night reminds me of it for it was dusk and the night air warm. You kissed me when my brothers climbed the willows and chased out the fireflies. It was magical with all their wee lights around us. I shall never forget it."

It was indeed a night to remember but Heath wouldn't own to such triviality. It was best he refute her because he didn't want to cause her harm or hurt. Lillia Hunter wasn't a lass he should consort with no matter how much his heart protested. He had too much respect for her father and brothers to woo her without their permission.

"You didn't answer, have you married?" His tone both surprised him and caused her to gasp. "I only ask in case your husband is searching for you. Mayhap he was the man who followed us." Heath raised his knee and leaned his arm on it as he peered at her.

"He wasn't. What I mean to say is that I am not married. My da intends to betroth me and I shall soon leave. I won't see you again, will I?" her tone suggested he'd wounded her which was not his intent.

"Likely not because I only planned to stay this day."

"Why did you come, for the festival?" She removed a piece of grass that found its way onto his tartan.

He shifted the material to cover his thigh and grinned. "I am searching for my missing squire and heard he came to...enjoy the festivities."

"I fear there isn't much fanfare for it appears the king hasn't come."

"How do you ken the king hasn't come?" Heath was pleased to hear that because Gilroy was safe enough for now.

She folded her hands and kept her eyes faceted on him. "The gate's watchmen would have sounded the bells. They practiced days in advance to get the melody right. The bells didn't toll and haven't all day. He hasn't come. My father will be disappointed for he'd spent a fortune in purchase of enough food and such for the king's entourage."

“It’s probably better he hasn’t come.” Heath felt eased talking with Lillia. It was as if they’ve never been separated. “Are you joyful of your betrothal?”

She moved closer, and her long leg flanked his. He gritted his teeth against taking her in his arms and kissing the breath from her.

“I am uncertain if joyful is an appropriate word. But I should obey my father and wed the man, shouldn’t I? I always thought...that is, I gave my heart to—”

Lest he be the one to give her ideas, he said, “We should all obey our fathers.” Heath was gladdened he wasn’t a woman. The fairer sex had much more restrictions placed on them than men. Women moreover were subjugated and had to follow a man’s dictate their entire lives, first their fathers and then their husbands. If he ever married, not that he planned to, he’d never force his wife to follow his directives.

Lillia turned and with her face an inch from his, she smiled. “I am disheartened you don’t remember our first kiss. Let me remind you.” She set her hands on his shoulders, tugged him forward, and her lips pressed against his.

Heath groaned in delight at the softness settled against his mouth. Everything told him to push her away, to invoke gallantry—everything but his heart. He clasped her in his embrace and pulled her toward him until he felt the swell of her bosom pressed against his chest. Their kiss continued in a mindless mix of sensual desire and extreme lust. Heath had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her. His hand caressed her back and his breath harsh. If he wasn’t careful, he’d delve his hand beneath her skirts to see if she longed to have him there.

He surely wanted to join his body with hers and he was certain he’d die a little if he didn’t. Lillia pressed her hands over his abdomen and kept up the torture until she reached his chest. His muscles flinched at the sensitive touches, and before his desire got the better of him, he dislodged his mouth.

Heath took a moment to compose himself and his breath slowed. She affected him far more than he should allow, and yet... “I’m sorry, lass, I don’t remember our first kiss being so...intense.”

Lillia smoothed her thumb across his bottom lip. “I’m sorry I can never be yours.” her voice whispered the sweet declaration.

Heath wanted to tell her it wasn’t true, but he wouldn’t deceive them both. He could never be hers either. The noise of a breaking twig sounded a little way off and he stood and forced Lillia against the tree.

“I hear someone. Stay here.” He pulled his dagger free of its scabbard strapped to his leg and set out to find the intruder. In a tight grip, he held the blade at the ready. With the lightest steps, he ambled toward the sound he’d caught. But no one was there.

When he turned back to Lillia, she yelled out. The intruder held her and tried to pull her back by yanking her with his arm tucked beneath her ribs. Before he could get to her, she bit the man’s forearm and gained her release. Heath took aim and hurled his dagger at the assailant with such force it entered to the hilt. The man gripped the dagger embedded in his midsection and took several steps before he fell to the ground.

Heath reached Lillia and took her in his arms. He looked down to ensure the knave was dead. His aim was true and struck the man’s torso. Considering the knave lay still and blood poured from his mouth, the attacker breathed no more.

“Are you sure you aren’t married?” Heath held her close. She shook in his arms and fear darkened the depths of her eyes. “I’d say he was a jealous lover.” He tried to make light of the situation, but it didn’t seem to help. She held on to him with a death-grip.

“I never saw him before.”

“He wasn’t one of your suitors?”

“Nay, I know him not. Hold me, Heath. I’m still shaking.”

Heath did so and calmed her with his large hand on the small of her back. Her fright hastened her breath. “The danger has passed. You should be well enough now.”

“Can I not enjoy being held by you for a few more minutes as I am wont?” She lifted her chin and smiled up at him, but then pouted.

He moved his knuckles to the softness of her cheek and leaned forward. Heath found himself grinning at her jest even though he wanted to shout in conflict at the attack. His Lillia was as blunt as ever and he set a chaste kiss on her lips. Her fearfulness was but a ruse. “If I had my way, I’d never let you go.”

“But you must, mustn’t you?”

“I serve the Bruce and Scotland. I must uphold my duty to the king and country. Some duties keep me away for long periods... I won’t allow unreasonable thoughts of a wife or family...”

“You need not explain. I understand you have a dangerous undertaking. My father intends to betroth me, remember. This night in fact, to a faraway clan.”

He held her face between his rough palms and peered at the softest brown eyes he ever beheld. “I explain because if things were different, I would surely make you mine.”

Lillia reached down and plucked his dagger from the assailant’s stomach. “I believe this is yours. It’s too fine a dagger to leave behind. I should get back before my father sends out a search. We should go.”

“You need to tell your father about this attack. I don’t like that the knave was after you, sweetness. Promise me, you’ll tell him of it so he can send out more sentries and ensure no other threats are intended.” He wanted her assurance, but she didn’t promise until he squeezed her arm. At that moment, he was apt to stare into her honey-colored eyes and let them mesmerize him as they’d done when he was a lad.

“If it will please you, then I shall tell my father. But I’m certain it was just a ruffian set out for a kiss or some silly nonsense. You worry too much, Heath.”

Worry which was warranted, he surmised. As fearful as she pretended to be a moment ago, a courageous spirit overtook her. Their return to the keep enmeshed in silence. There were many things he wanted to say to her, but it was best he keep the words behind his teeth. He wasn’t wrong in his reasoning. His life had no room for a wife regardless of how fetching and winsome she was. Near the keep, he forced her to release his hand. “Be well, fairest Lillia. Make sure your husband treats you well.”

“If he doesn’t, I shall come and find you.”

“And what would you have me do, sweetness?” Heath chuckled at the silliness of her tone.

“Why, kill him of course.” She laughed and leaned against him. “I jest. Be safe, Heath. It was pleasant seeing you again. I hope many years don’t go by before you visit again.” She kissed his cheek, turned and hastened into the keep.

Heath watched the entrance until she disappeared. The lass had changed little since he’d last seen her. She caused a riot of emotions to riddle him senseless. It was always the case with Lillia, for he supposed he’d been besotted by her since the day he’d met her.

He shook off the encounter and glanced around at those who meandered around the courtyard. Many revelers departed for the tents and such for the night’s rest. Little moon offered light, and he’d never find Gilroy in the darkness. He hoped his comrades made better progress.