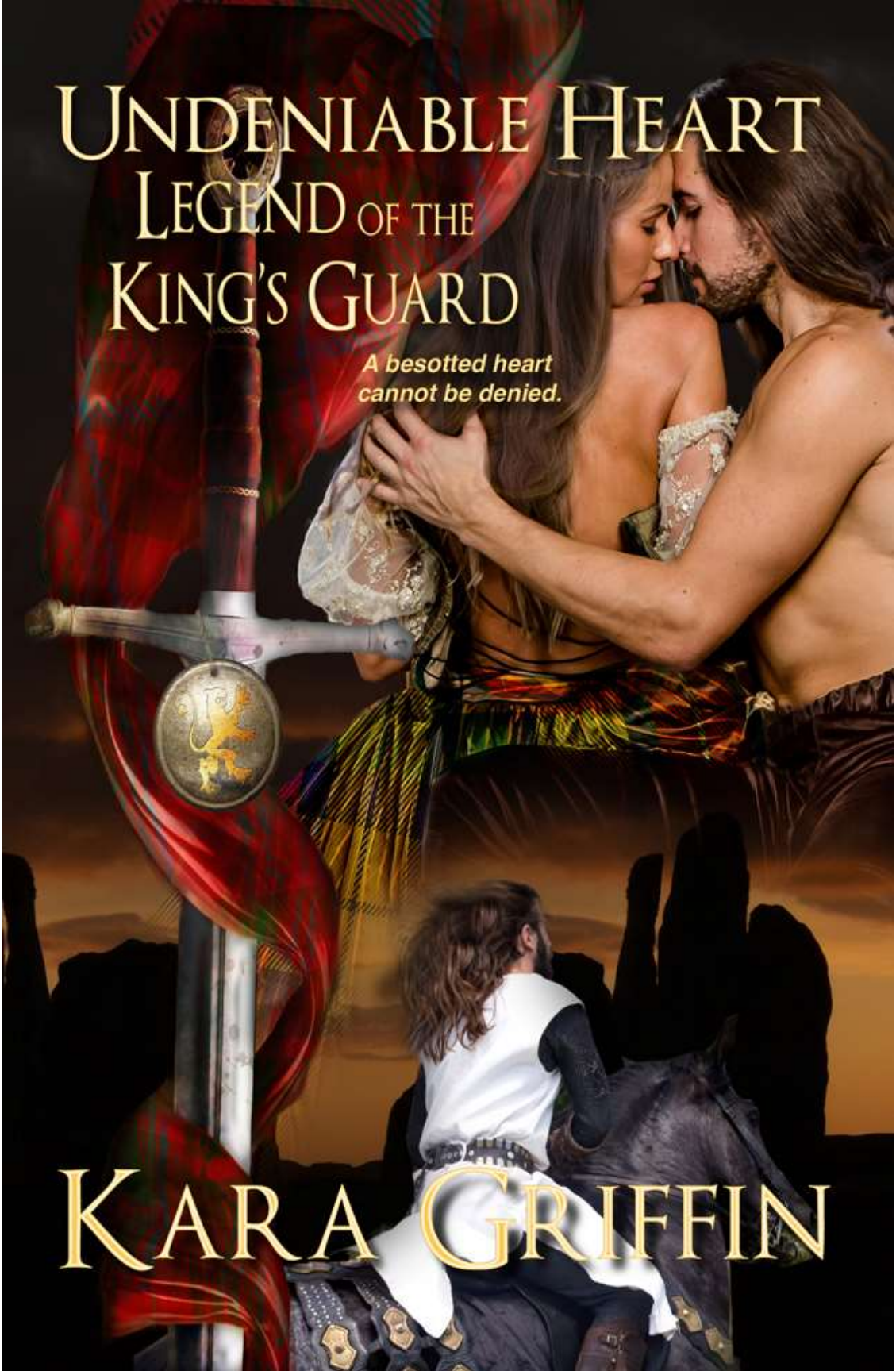




UNDENIABLE HEART

LEGEND OF THE KING'S GUARD

*A besotted heart
cannot be denied.*

KARA GRIFFIN

UNDENIABLE HEART

Legend of the King's Guard
Book Four

KARA GRIFFIN

UNDENIABLE HEART

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DEDICATION

To those in denial, love is easy if you open your heart.

Thou'll break my heart, thou bonnie bird
That sings upon the bough;
Thou minds me o' the happy days
When my false Luve was true.
The Banks Of Bonnie Doon

UNDENIABLE 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 stories continue in the series finale... UNDENIABLE HEART

Brodin Grant is sent to serve the imminent king, Robert the Bruce, after he's embroiled in a downtrodden affair, one he wishes he'd never favored. Now distrusting of women, he must aid the bonny lass who searches for the king's guard.

Dallis Buchanan never envisioned her sojourn to England would bring her and her deaf grandmother such turmoil. In the hands of one of England's most daunting warlords, she is sent to bring the renowned king's guard to their knees or to his dungeon. For her compliance, she'll gain the freedom of her grandmother and safe passage back to her clan. But there's one wee problem with this mission, and that is, the undeniable feelings she has for the blue-eyed Highland warrior.

As Scotland's wars intensify to win their freedom, Brodin loses his heart to the winsome beauty. Battles ensue, bringing about Brodin's alliance with the Buchanans. Unfortunately, it also brings him the misfortune of having to accept Dallis as his own. Their undeniable hearts cannot withstand the love that has joined them forevermore, but will it remedy the strife between them?

PROLOGUE

Village of Drumnadrochit, Scotland
August 1303

In one fell swoop, Brodin Grant released the tartan around his waist. Once disrobed, he dove into the pristine waters of the loch. He swam out a good distance and dunked his head. Beneath the tranquil water, he floated and allowed himself to revel in the quiet and serenity of the abyss. The water soothed his aching muscles and gave a respite to his restless soul.

At the behest of his uncle, Brodin took the command of their clan's soldiers. Though he was younger than most he trained, he gained the respect of his men-at-arms, older brothers, and uncles. They still tried to gain the freedom of their chieftain, Randall, his father, who was taken prisoner in the lord's year 1296, along with many other clans' leaders after the battle at Dunbar.

With the endless turmoil between Scotland and England, Brodin suspected the fighting would become intense and prolonged. Not only was he talented with the use of his sword, but he also had the benefit of being the third son of the laird. Their followers deemed him more valuable than his two elder brothers who were more politically driven than their skill at taking to arms.

Brodin came up and drew a breath before he sank again in the refreshing waters. Thoughts of Alexia came, and he grinned and sputtered the water as he surfaced. Being the youngest son, his father was least concerned with the woman he took as his wife. His eye no longer wandered, and he reasoned Alexia would make him a good wife. She was as fair to behold and as dark as he. For her hair was strewn with raven strands, as black as the devil's. He wondered if his children would have his light blue eyes or their mother's dark brown. Regardless, their children would be strikingly handsome and resilient.

It was time to settle down and bear heirs, especially if he were to go to war. Clans were called upon to support Wallace and Moray in their effort to win Scotland's freedom from England. Soon, they'd join their brethren. If his life ended, his legacy would live on in his children. With his new position within the clan, he needed to put the reveries of youth behind him and focus on his future.

Brodin dove again and exercised his arms and legs as he progressed through the water. He stood and walked farther out to where the water reached his chest. The murky bottom was soft beneath his feet, and he scooped handfuls of water to wet his chest and hair. The day grew hot with the summer at its warmest. He'd called an early end to the day's sparring and cooled off before he sought his love.

An arrow flew past him and whizzed with speed until it hit the water. Brodin hastily sunk to his shoulders to provide his head as the only target. Another arrow came and another. He realized there was only one shooter as the arrows came too slow to be more than one person taking aim. At least

his foe had a terrible aim for he missed him three times. The next arrow came, but he couldn't move fast enough to avert it, and the sleek tip pierced the flesh of his shoulder. Brodin sunk deeper in the water and pulled it free. His blood seeped and tainted the water.

His breath rasped with the pain, but he kept his growl in his throat. It hurt like a son-of-a... Someone tried to kill him of that he had no doubt. He had to get to the safety of the bank and trees. With a deep breath, he filled himself with air and swam along the shoreline until he was enough distance away from his foe. He hoped his attacker deemed he'd been struck true and no more arrows would come.

When he surfaced, he reached the low-lying branches of a tree, the only one near the bank to give him cover. He jumped from the water and skulked toward the area where the arrows had come from. He assessed the woods and knew where the knave sat. Brodin made good ground and neared the spot where he suspected his adversary took cover. He stood inland and surveyed the trees and land around him. His eyes adjusted to the dimness of the woods, and he roved his view through the mass of tree branches above until he glimpsed a light-colored tunic.

Nearer to his enemy, Brodin picked up a good-sized rock but wished it was his sword. But he'd left his garments and weapons upon the bank. He held the heavy stone firmly in hand and advanced closer to his foe.

The man held an arrow positioned in his bow, aimed at the water, and waited for him to resurface. He stood upon a branch, high in a tree a short distance from the bank. With his gaze fixed, he didn't hear his approach. Brodin aimed and used enough force to knock the man from the branch. His foe fell and landed on his back with his eyes closed.

Brodin hastened to where he'd left his garments and quickly donned them. Once he collected his possessions, he sheathed his sword and pulled a six-inch blade from its holder. With his dagger gripped tight, he returned to the man and moved him with his foot. The man groaned.

"Come now, I didn't cause you a grave injury. Awake and defend yourself." Brodin shoved him again with his foot, but the man moaned and raised his hands to his head. He opened his eyes and drew a startled breath.

"Who are you? And why did you try to kill me?" Brodin kept his dagger at the ready, but before he'd do in his foe, he wanted answers.

"I didn't...wasn't trying to kill you."

"The hell you weren't." Brodin grabbed the man's tunic and yanked him to his feet. He held his blade true, aimed at the man's heart. "I'll only ask you once more... Why did you try to kill me?"

The man stuttered in answer, "I, I, w-was waged to do so."

"Who wants me dead?" Brodin gripped him and caused him to sway on his feet. "Who paid you to kill me? I want a name. Speak it now or I'll end you."

The man's eyes widened when he shoved him back, and he sprawled on the ground. Brodin quickly stashed his dagger in the loop of his belt and yanked his sword free. He aimed the blade at the coxcomb's heart and pushed it against his tunic. With his sharp blade doing the asking, he was certain to get answers.

"I will find out regardless of your cooperation. Best speak your patron's name." He pressed the pointed tip further and pinched the fabric at his chest.

The man's panic came in gasps. "Ye promise not to kill me?"

In times like these, it was best to speak falsely. "Aye, you'll live." *...for a breath or two after I learn my enemy's name.*

"Your mistress, Mistress Sweeten, Alexia Sweeten. She offered me six coins. I'm to collect them when I return to her once I've dispatched you. Please...she gave me no choice—"

Before the man drew another breath, Brodin thrust his sword. He pushed it until he could no longer. His enemy wouldn't be able to go forth and tell what happened this day, nor would he complete his task and gain the coin he sought.

Brodin wiped the blood from the flat side of his sword on the man's garments and sheathed it in its scabbard. His life was worth a wee bit more than six coins. *Alexia*. She would pay a man to kill him? He could think of no reason why she wanted him dead. They'd been lovers for many months, and she'd never given an indication she was displeased with their arrangement.

The sprint to the village took little time. He'd find her, and she would answer for her betrayal. Outside her cottage, the sound of her laughter rose. The vixen thought he was dead. Was she jovial at that, or was there another reason she was filled with mirth? He wanted to take her by surprise and demand answers.

Brodin kicked the door open and stood in the center of the threshold. There was the woman he'd thought to love—in the arms of another. Words weren't needed, for he wouldn't bring himself to humility or ask why she abhorred him enough to have him killed. This was not the time to reason his displeasure or dejection. He removed his sword and held it, knowing his heart had turned to stone. Any love that he'd had for her died like the wilted heather when cold swathed the land.

His lover gasped at his sudden appearance. "Brodin, what are you doing...?"

He ran at her, and she and her lover vacated the bed. The man's high-pitched scream followed as he ran from the cottage and retreated to safety. Alexia fled across the chamber. Brodin's ire rose and he'd never been as angry before, so much so his nose drew in a harsh breath.

He advanced and walked with slow deliberate steps toward her.

"Will you not give me a moment to explain?" her voice a breathy whisper.

"There is no need for explanations, love. Is there not? You wanted me dead, och I'm more resilient than you deemed."

Across the chamber, as far from him as she could be, she cowered as he drew closer.

"You wanted to be rid of me? Now I shall rid myself of you." He whacked the wooden bedframe and splintered pieces of the wood.

She cried out. "Please, I shouldn't have sent him—"

"I don't want your excuses or apology, lass. I just want you to breathe your last."

"Can you not forgive me? Let me explain?" She wrapped the bed cover around her and ran farther into the cottage. "I had to...send Thomas, for my father found out about us and he swore to have you arrested. He was to question you and threatened to send me away...to a cloister. "

"It matters not. I could've handled your father, lass. There was no cause to send an assassin after me. You wanted me dead, and for that—" Brodin kept his advance slow. He reasoned all the ways he should kill her. The closer he got though, the more the reasons thwarted him. He'd lived his

life with honor and would never kill a woman regardless of her transgression. As he contemplated whether he should go through with it, she slunk next to the wall and wept.

Voices came but Brodin wouldn't move. He'd been wronged. His heart and head taunted him to take retribution. But he stilled his hand and held back.

Someone grabbed him from behind and held his arms. His weapon dropped and clanked the stone of the floor. Ten men entered the cottage and took up the space of the floor betwixt him and his *former* love.

Alexia's father stood behind him. "What say ye, Brodin, what goes here?"

"Thank God you came. He tried to kill me, Father. I know not why. He's maddened." Alexia ran to her father and wept. Her false tears would fill a bucket. "He is angry that I wouldn't do unspeakable acts with him. I'm gladdened you came when you did, Da."

Her father comforted her and glared at him. "You would harm my daughter?"

Brodin never knew Alexia to be sensational, but she'd enabled tears to flow. Her sobs reaped looks of despair amongst the men inside the cottage. He wanted to applaud her performance, for the woman was talented at her deceit.

"I tried to kill her?" He was astounded and aghast at her accusation.

Sheriff Norval Sweeten glared his affront at his daughter. "I should've sent ye to the cloister, aye the nunnery is the only place I can keep you from your sinful deeds. You shall leave at the soonest." He handed Alexia off to his comrade. "See to my lass. I will deal with the Grant."

"You will pay for this, Brodin. I swear, I will find a way to repay you. Aye, you'll look over your shoulder for the rest of your days. Please, Da, listen...I don't wish to go to the nunnery. I won't cause further strife—"

"We will discuss the matter later. Be gone, I cannot look upon you." The sheriff turned his back to her and scowled at him.

Alexia was taken away, and Brodin gave her a look of disdain as she left. The woman intended to kill him. It wasn't his fault her father thought her sinful. The lass had consorted with him and who knows who else? Brodin scoffed at his foolishness. He stood before the sheriff unable to voice the words to protest his innocence.

The stout man fingered his gray beard. "As the sheriff of this village, I must make a sentence for your crime, lad."

"I committed no crime. She sent someone to kill me. You heard her threaten me. I returned to question her and we were discussing the whys." He pulled free from the man who held him.

"Be that as ye say, you cannot go around and threaten young lassies with your sword. I shall send you off to attend the Bruce. Aye, you shall go and not return for at least five years. During that time you shall forget Alexia and the happenings of this day."

Brodin scowled, for it would take longer than five years for him to forget or forgive the treachery of her doings.

"I shall let your clan ken of your sentence. It is because of your father's good standing that I don't give ye a harsher punishment. My men will escort you to the Bruce's holding this day." Sheriff Sweeten nodded to his men. "Aye, for we cannot have you making threats on young lasses,

especially when you compromised them in the first place. I ken about your liaison with my daughter, with other women. You shall not soil our daughters again.”

He was taken into custody and dragged from the cottage. Brodin swore upon all that was holy, Alexia Sweeten would regret this day and her decision to end his life.

CHAPTER ONE

Dumfries, Scotland
January 1313

Fifteen years of war ravaged his beloved Scotland. As much as Brodin Grant wanted to admit their independence from England was at hand, he couldn't unbind his pledge to his overlord. King Robert the Bruce had his loyalty and support even though their sovereign wanted his head in a noose for what he deemed betrayal. The time to resolve the matter with his king approached, and he'd have to figure out what life had to give.

Yet, his heart would forever be plagued. Brodin realized he'd never have a wife or children. He wasn't one to dwell on such matters, for his past secured his fate. But longings of holding a wee bairn of his own tightened his chest. As he trod carefully through the cave and averted the children at play, he was happy at least to be part of his adopted clan. His fellow-guardsmen took up residence in the wilds of Dumfries in secluded caves upon their return to Scotland after their self-imposed exile. And since, many people joined their family. It was getting a mite crowded in the spacious cave they occupied, and at times, the noise level nearly unbearable.

Why children awoke so early in the morning was beyond him. They scampered about the cave, those that learned to walk, and the others sat upon a tartan on the floor. Scattered about them were many toys he'd carved for them. Brodin had a wee bit of skill with a dagger and created works of art. Not that the children appreciated his talent. With nothing other than sheer boredom to occupy him of late, he whittled and kept himself from going mad. He'd made blocks of varied sizes, wooden balls, horse figures, and woodland animals. The children seemed to enjoy the objects, and he enjoyed making them.

Brodin grumbled at being awakened but decided he might as well rise. Once the children began their day, all others would do likewise regardless of their want. He snatched a cup from the table and poured the remaining mead in the cask.

Almost ten years passed since he'd been sent to serve the Bruce as his personal guard. Back then, he was given the high honor of commanding his father's soldiers. But the unfortunate liaison with the Sweeten lass prevented him from that duty. His life changed forever that day, yet he wasn't displeased for he'd met his brethren: Graeme Cameron, Heath Fraser, and Liam Kincaid. Their alliance went beyond brotherhood. And even if he had to put up with the many children now running amok in the cave, he'd do so without complaint.

Heath's son Ethan tottered toward the makeshift hearth. A good fire blazed within and filled the upper cavern with smoke. Brodin scooped the one-year-old into his arms to prevent him from injury. "Where is your mother?"

The bairn, a blond-reddish-haired lad who resembled his father, gave him a mirthful grin.

“Hot,” he said and hoped the bairn understood.

Brodin tired of inactivity and the recent years of peace, mainly because he knew the day would come when the English king would return. He hoped his king was ready to face their main adversary. Regardless, he and his comrades would protect their beloved overlord. He smirked at his thought. Beloved was generous especially since said king wanted their heads in a noose. That forced them to stay hidden in the dank cave in the remote woodland of Dumfries.

Heath lifted his son from his lap into the air and caused the bairn to squeal. “My thanks. I couldn’t get to him in time. I’ll be gladdened when we can return to our clans.”

“Aye, or if you keep adding to our numbers, we’ll need to find a bigger cave.” Even though he’d jested, Brodin didn’t laugh. The cave was their only source of sanctuary and its location in the dense woods protected them from being found. Many sought refuge in various caves throughout the lands from the English when warranted, but theirs had become home.

Heath scoffed. “When spring comes, we should leave. The king is content with his mild raids on the English border. I doubt there will be further battles. We are not needed.”

Brodin suspected it only a matter of time before the English king retaliated. “Mayhap, but I doubt England’s king will find those raids trifling. He’s a mite busy these days with ample problems in his own lands. Nay, I say he’ll come to seek justice, eventually. More battles will come and we should be ready to face them.”

“I don’t deem so. The war is at an end. We’ve gained our independence,” Heath said and lifted Ethan higher and caused the bairn to squeal again. “Perhaps we should go to Robert and ask for his forgiveness. I grow weary of his avoidance of us.”

“It won’t be long before he remembers.”

Graeme, the chosen leader of their group, slid upon the bench and took his cup. After chugging most, he wiped his dark beard and narrowed his eyes. “Who remembers what?”

Brodin chuckled. “Our king. He’ll remember us sooner or later.”

“Aye, and we’ll deal with him then. Och, I’m all for returning home. I’m doing my damnable best not to get Kerrigan with child again.”

Heath bellowed. “A problem we all face with our own wives.”

Thankfully Brodin didn’t have a wife and such a worry didn’t concern him. He grinned at his comrade’s jest even though Graeme’s tone suggested seriousness. Kerrigan, Graeme’s wife, already bore him two children.

“I think we should meet with Robert and force him to make a decision. We cannot keep our families here in the outskirts of Dumfries for much longer. The children grow restless as do I.” Graeme finished the drink and handed the cup back to him.

Brodin didn’t have as much to lose as his comrades. They had wives, children, and clans to return to. He had two brothers and a clan, but since he’d been gone for so long, he doubted anyone would miss him if he didn’t return. There was a time when all he thought of was his homecoming. What would he do with his life when this was over? He considered it briefly. That hefty decision needed painstaking reflection. Of late, it was all he thought of.

“Perhaps Robert doesn’t consider our deed as treasonous as we’d considered. Others have done worse,” Liam said and joined the discussion. His comrade was saddled with lassies and a dominant wife who was as bonny as she was formidable. Makenna didn’t birth Liam’s first daughter, Darcy, but she considered the lass her own. Their second daughter, Ingrid, was the bonniest bairn he’d ever beheld. Liam stood by the pottage pot and scooped a bowlful for his daughter Darcy.

The pottage’s scent filled the domain and made his stomach grumble. Brodin hadn’t eaten his morning fare yet, but their discussion was of more import.

“Be a good lass and sit on the cover with the bairns. Be sure to eat all your food,” Liam said. She nodded and took the bowl from him.

“We disobeyed him. All we did was leave the isle. Nothing untoward happened as a result. None of us were captured to testify that Robert killed Comyn at Greyfriars. The matter was settled with King Edward’s death. Besides, it’s not as if we tried to usurp our king or tried to assassinate him.” Heath gave a firm nod.

“I am the only one without family and have nothing to lose. I say I go to Robert and speak our peace and gain his approval to rejoin our clans. If I don’t succeed we’ve lost nothing.”

His comrades immediately shook their heads.

Graeme set a hand on his forearm. “Nothing, but you. Just because you have no wife and children, doesn’t mean you’re unimportant or have no family. Nay, we will need to be patient.”

“I detest that we hold up here in a cold cave. If we return home, I doubt Robert will give a care.” Brodin wasn’t fearful of the king. Robert would do his will eventually, and they might as well face it. He wouldn’t fear his death, not after living so many years with the threat of it hanging over his head.

Heath said, “We’re not living here, but existing. Our women and children shouldn’t suffer because of our deeds. Robert will either execute us or pardon us. We should enjoy what life we have left and face his wrath when the time comes.”

“We have time before spring comes to consider this,” Graeme said. “Best wait until Robert returns from his winter sojourn.”

But Brodin wasn’t willing to wait. “I’d wager the coin that the king pardons us, but only if we seek him. We should do so now when Robert least expects it.” The coin he wanted to wager was Graeme’s most treasured possession, brought back from the crusades by his grandda. Graeme used it to bring about their loyalty toward one another. Whoever held the coin got to suggest the next wager. Their loyalty would’ve come regardless of the coin’s value. For years, they’d used it as a means to jest, but Brodin’s proposition of a wager wasn’t a jest at all.

“None are to accept Brodin’s wager. We’ll discuss it further and decide when the weather warms enough to travel.” Graeme didn’t wait for their response but set off to speak with his son. William grew into a fine lad and if they were home, he’d foster with one of their clans for his militia training. The lad would make a good soldier like his father, especially with his height.

Liam ran toward the vines that protected their cave from wind and harsh weather. His wee lass just learned to walk. Ingrid was sweet, but often a minx. She was about to traipse through the vines when Liam caught her. His comrade stood by the entrance and looked outside for a moment before

he returned to the table. "It's cold as hell outside and there is a few inches of snow covering the ground."

"We'll need more wood for the fire. I'll fetch it." Brodin rose and set off to see to the chore.

Makenna took Ingrid from Liam and he followed him outside.

Brodin raised his face to the sky. Only puffy clouds smattered the cerulean expanse. The day would be brisk, but at least it wouldn't snow.

Once he and Liam collected enough wood and set it near the cave entrance, he ambled to the nearby ossuary. The cave was a small gloomy place where previous ancestors rested the dead. It was as good a place as any to house their horses. At one time, they had a squire who saw to the care of their warhorses, but the lad fled and never returned. Being in the ossuary reminded him of Gilroy, the lad the Bruce rescued and bid to be their overlord's squire.

He hoped the lad found his way. Although, when they discovered he'd gone missing nearly two years ago, they were angered that he left without a by-your-leave. Gilroy often went about his way without a care of his safety, but somehow he'd always found his way back to them. Not this time. Too much time passed and Brodin didn't expect to see the lad again. He hoped Gilroy hadn't gone and got himself killed, but it appeared he might have.

Brodin tended to his horse and put away the tools they used for their care. When all was tidied, he strolled outside and hesitated to return to the cave. As he stood there in the solitude enjoying the peacefulness and quiet, he noticed a lad walking forward. He recognized the lad and waited for him to reach the last hill.

"Jimmy, what goes?" Brodin approached and searched his face for a sign of his regard. The lad was one of Rohan's lackeys who often delivered messages. Rohan owned the largest mead hall in Dumfries and he was also privy to their secrets. He'd aided them in the many years of their exile since the unfortunate night at Greyfriars when Robert did the unthinkable and killed his only rival for the crown.

Jimmy swiped his face with his sleeve. "Rohan says to come. You have visitors."

Brodin raised a brow. "Do you know who comes?"

"Nay, he says be quick about it for they won't await long." Jimmy inclined his head and backed two steps before he turned and hailed off from whence he came.

Brodin pursed his lips in wonder of who the visitors were. Who would possibly visit him? Perhaps his brothers came, and if that was so, he needed to make haste.

Liam joined him outside the ossuary and laughed at his expression. "What has you bewildered? Was that one of Rohan's lads I saw running away? Did you frighten the lad?" He guffawed as if to jest, but Brodin's scowls often kept lads from approaching him.

"Rohan says I should come. Someone awaits me at the tavern, but he doesn't name them. I'll head to the village and placate my curiosity."

"Do you want me to go along?"

He shook his head. "It's too cold to travel to the village."

Liam grumbled and shoved his shoulder with enough force to make him step back. "Are you saying I can't handle a wee bit of chill?"

Brodin laughed but sobered. "Not at all. If I wasn't called, you bet your arse I'd be in the warm cave this day instead of freezing mine off. Let Graeme know where I've gone."

"Bring back a cask or two of wine for the women. They're fond of the drink and grouse when there's nothing but the harsh brew or mead."

"Aye." Brodin agreed and readied his horse. He placed an extra tartan about his body in hopes it would keep him warm during the jaunt.

As he set out, the sky pitched and the weather changed in an instant, but that was his beloved land. One minute it was sunny with a warmth to the breeze, the next, gray and dismal. So much for a brisk sunny day. The clouds turned gloomy and concealed the expanse, and the wind gusted. Brodin hastened his pace and wanted to reach the mead hall before the snows began.

He reached the village, almost chilled to the bone from the pace of the ride and hale wind. The entrance to the hall appeared vacated, but Brodin needed to enter through the back. If whoever visited him was a foe, he wouldn't make his apprehension easy. Behind the hall, he spotted three of Rohan's lads. They moved out of his way as he entered. Stale odors permeated from the building. Besides the stale ale, those that occupied the hall added to the stench. Brodin wouldn't spend more than a few minutes in the place and didn't know how Rohan withstood it.

Inside the back room, two serving lassies smiled. He bowed his head in greeting and searched for Rohan in the large room where drink was served. At this time of day, the hall should be crowded, but the patrons were sparse. The proprietor was easy to spot for he was a stout man with a full beard and ruddy cheeks. But what caught him was the man's bellowing tone. Brodin found Rohan rested at his favorite table near the hearth along with... He stared hard at the patrons. His brothers drank and boasted about their bruises.

"Alan, Griffin... What are you doing here?" Brodin nudged Grif over and sat on the bench next to him. His brother Griffin didn't resemble him with his light hair and even lighter eyes. The bluish hue was much muted, more so than his bright eyes of their mother's.

Rohan poured him a cup of ale and scoffed. "Glad ye came hastily, Brodin. These two caused a ruckus and chased all my patrons away."

"I suppose that's where you got the black eye, Alan, and the bloody nose, Griffin?" Brodin would've taken delight in hearing the tale about the melee, but Rohan wasn't pleased about the disarray of his establishment. Given the state of the tables and the absent patrons, his brothers must've caused a fracas worthy of Rohan's missing coin.

His brothers didn't retort but grinned as if prideful at their accomplishment. Alan was the staidest of the three. He'd always been severe and never smiled except when it came to warring. He had the same hair color, almost black strands, and nearly the same shaded eyes. Yet he was formidable and never one to appreciate a jest. Leastways, Brodin and Griffin had similar tolerant dispositions until the day he was sent to serve the Bruce. Then he'd taken on the staid traits of Alan and surpassed him in his serious nature.

"Visit with your brothers and kindly send them on their way. The sooner they depart, the happier I'll be." Rohan shoved Alan out of his way and headed off to the buttery.

"What brings you here? Have you come to tell me news of home?" Brodin suspected the news wouldn't be good-natured because his brothers wouldn't have come so far unless it was dire.

“Och all is well. The fields prospered at harvest so we have plenty of stores to get us through the rest of winter.” Alan tinkered with his cup and avoided his gaze.

“Aye, and we made vast improvements to the keep. Many of the cottages are newly thatched and protected from the winter’s bluster. We haven’t received word of Da yet. He’s still held in London. I doubt the English king will release the prisoners.”

Brodin nodded for he agreed that it was unlikely any Scots prisoner would be released by the knavish English king’s son. Since King Edward’s death, his son had an abundance of issues to resolve. He was surprised they hadn’t heard of their countrymen’s executions. The new king, Edward the younger, would eventually deal with his father’s wars, and thus, decide what to do with those captured. He wouldn’t hold hope his da would be freed if he even lived through the confinement.

“You avoid speaking of the purpose of your visit. That tells me there’s something vexing you. Otherwise, you would’ve come out and said why you’ve come. Speak it.” Brodin waved his hand at Alan and hoped he’d be forthcoming. He wouldn’t dally in the village and wanted to return before darkness came.

“Well now, there is a wee bit of news that we should speak of... We’ve kept watch on Alexia Sweeten as you asked. For years she was cloistered away at the convent. Nothing of consequence to impart—”

“Good, for I vow that woman’s threats cautioned me. I trusted her not, especially when she swore to see me dead. You had a lad keep watch on the convent?”

Alan bobbed his head. “We did. Our lad, Ned, stayed there for several years and gained employment as a stable lad. He returned a fortnight ago.”

His brows drew together in confusion. “Why would he return? Did something happen to her? Tell me she hasn’t fled? I haven’t let my guard down, but there’s no way she could track me here.”

Griffin sniffed and lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry to say the lass escaped the convent. She returned to the village and killed her father. Aye, Sheriff Sweeten was murdered in his bed with an ax to his poor head. His daughter is the only suspect.”

“Damn me. She killed her father. Alexia was furious about being sent to the convent. Why after all these years would she seek her revenge?” Brodin downed the ale in his cup, certain he needed to soothe himself after receiving such dreadful news.

“A woman scorned, she is. She has a dark heart, one filled with hatred. I suppose the lass never gave up her quest to see you or her father dead. Blames ye for her father sending her away. Might be out of her head and a loon. She’s loose now, akin in the forest and probably searches for you. But there’s even more distressing news...”

Brodin didn’t like the tone of his brother’s voice. “What say you, Alan? She doesn’t know where I am, so I’m safe from her attempt. Not that it would matter. I can protect myself against her attack, should she try to harm me.”

Griffin cleared his throat and shot a quick glance at Alan. “I’m afraid she tricked the lad we had keeping watch of her. Ned must’ve overheard us discuss you, and he gave up your location. She hasn’t been seen since. The lass knows you’re here in Dumfries.”

“Aye, ye best watch your back, for if she is murderous enough to kill her own father, she’d do you in without a thought.”

Brodin sobered at that. “I’ll be cautious. Any word of King Robert? Is he still wintering up north?”

Alan set a hand on his forearm. “Aye, he is for now. We’re to meet up with the soldiers for he wants to retake Perth soon. Come the spring, I heard tell he’s headed south. He aims to take back the fiefs along the border, below Dumfries. We’ll send word when he’s on the move.”

“My thanks. I understand he made a pact with the Norway king at Inverness before the cold season. Aye, it’s good news to gain such an ally.”

“We shall see, won’t we, if the English king provokes us if our ally is agreeable or not?”

Brodin raised a brow at Griffin’s remark. He wasn’t certain the English king cared enough to put Scotland’s matters to rest. For now, they’d be content with whatever battles they might win and whatever lands they might recover. Until every last Englishman was ousted from their lands, none would be allayed.

“I need to return. If you need to reach me...”

“We ken, and shall send word to Rohan. Be safe, Brodin. All in the clan await your return. One day soon, hopefully, you will see our brethren again.”

“It’s what placates me every day.” The fabrication rolled easily off his tongue. He wasn’t certain he wanted to go home, not after such a lengthy absence. Brodin didn’t feel connected to his father’s lands or his clan regardless of his brother’s words. “Before you leave, you’ll help Rohan put the hall in order.” Brodin narrowed his eyes and gave his brother a reprimanded gaze.

“Oh, bother, we only did that to clear the hall so we could meet with you in private. Those that remain are too drunk to know their own names. But you’re right. We’ll help clean up before we leave.” Alan approached Rohan and helped him reset a bench that was knocked over in the tarry.

Griffin lowered his chin and sat back. “I worry this woman will be your end. That’s why I insisted we come in person to tell you the news.”

He firmed his lips at the serious tone of his brother’s words. “What harm could she do to me? Besides, where I live, none are privy to its location but Rohan and Friar Hemm. Worry not, Grif. She’s a puny woman.”

“Puny enough to take an ax to her father’s head. Watch your back, brother. Och, I aim to find her first so she doesn’t get to you.”

“Nay, leave her to the wolves in the woods. Don’t trouble yourself. I must get going if I want to reach home by dark. I’ll try to come home soon even if it’s for a short visit.”

“I hope you do,” Griffin said and joined Alan in clearing the tables.

Brodin watched his brothers for a moment before he retreated out the back exit. The fresh air filled his lungs and abated the stench of the mead hall. His horse whinnied when he pulled his harness and forced him from the dried patch of old grass he’d found. On his way out of the village, Brodin realized he’d forgotten the wine for the women.

He rode into the thick woods and avoided the main lane. As he made progress toward home, he considered his brothers’ uneasiness. When he’d first been sent away to join the Bruce’s service, his brothers were crestfallen. They’d always looked up to him even though both were elder and capable

of handling whatever came their way. Alan and Griffin weren't as strong in body as he, yet they were clever when it came to politics and clan matters. He hadn't always been a noble source of role model for them, but since he'd gone away, he'd sent missives and instructions on how to proceed with the soldiers. It was the only way he might look after them.

Now he had to look out for himself. Mayhap a journey was in order. He aimed to find the threat before the perilous woman found him. If Alexia Sweeten wanted him dead, she was certain to find a way or someone to do her bidding.

CHAPTER TWO

Northumberland, England
February 1313

The Buchanan tartan offered not only warmth but a bit of solace. Dallis Buchanan pulled the woven fabric tightly around her shoulders and sniffled. She missed home. For six years, she'd been held against her will. Situated on the main road, a stone's throw from Scotland, Alnwick Castle was the perfect keep to secure England's border. It was a monstrosity of a building and nowhere compared to the beauty of her beloved family's croft in the Highlands of Scotland. Alnwick's high turrets and walls protected the main keep and cottages within the stone fortification. It also kept those held captive who wanted out.

Her patience had worn threadbare. It was time to face her adversary and demand he allowed her to leave. Despaired, Dallis would plead with Sir Henry Percy for compassion. Although she likened him to a blackheart, he was a knave who cared not whom he trounced—as long as he achieved his wants. She doubted he had compassion because he'd shown none in the entirety of her captivity.

As she approached his solar, her back stiffened with resolve. She couldn't back down now when she'd worked all day to gain the courage to confront him. Dallis didn't bother to knock. She opened the door and stepped inside. Her eyes roamed the large chamber until they stopped on the man she hoped to find within. Only he wasn't alone. She backed a step and took hold of the door grip, certain she should flee.

"Wait."

She froze. Her mouth hung open seeing her dear maid Flora nearly naked in Sir Henry's bed. The poor lass must've been forced for Flora detested the man as much as she did. Dallis lowered her chin and couldn't look at them. She wanted to yell her affront at his foul deed, but now was not the time to show her displeasure. Best she stayed amiable if she might plead for her freedom. Sir Percy's footsteps sounded, and he pushed her aside.

"Go, Flora. Be gone. I need to speak with Dallis alone."

Flora scooped up her frock and ran through the doorway, but not before she gave her a guilt-ridden glance. Dallis would never hold her maid in contempt, especially when it came to a knave like Sir Henry. What he wanted, he usually took, and that included women. Yet, he would never have her. She kept her eyes averted as he took hold of his robe.

"I wouldn't consort with your maid if you agreed to my proposition."

Dallis winced. She would have agreed if doing so saved Flora from his loathsome advances. She couldn't help but hope to save whomever she could, even if it put herself in peril. And since she'd

dragged Flora across the lands to this wretched place, she felt responsible for the lass. His proposition was unreasonable and loathsome, and she wouldn't give it any consideration. Although she commiserated with poor Flora, Dallis had to keep Sir Henry at arms' distance, and from her chamber.

"I wish to be freed. There's no reason to keep me here any longer."

Sir Henry strode to his wardrobe and pulled a nightshirt over his body, and thankfully, hid his grotesque nakedness from her. Dallis kept her gaze steady on the window casement where the heavy fur kept out the winter chill. She stifled a gag because the chamber smelled odd, as if it hadn't been cleaned in a fortnight. Percy stalked her from across the room.

"Ah, but my little bloom, you haven't kept your part of our arrangement."

Dallis sighed with disbelief he still held her to their agreement. "I went to the village of Caerlaverock as agreed. I told you I could not draw the king's guard from their lair."

"Yes, so you did. But if you recall, our agreement was...you would bring me the king's guard and I, in turn, would allow you and your grandmother safe passage home."

Dallis fisted her hands at her side. "I wish to see her."

"When you do my bidding, I might be amiable to allow a short visit."

She'd hoped the vile man would give a care for her aged grandmother. What had she expected, that he would treat her with respect, kindness, or empathy? Instead, he placed her gran in the dank dungeon, and there, she would remain until Dallis completed the task. Her heart hurt when she envisioned the dear aged woman in such drab, cold quarters.

Dallis failed once to bring the king's guard to him, and her chest tightened at the thought of trying again. If not for her gran, Dallis would've absconded with haste to Buchanan lands. It would have taken weeks to get home on foot, and her grandmother would've likely been killed before she might have sent someone to save her. She couldn't leave her sweet grandmother in the hands of that villainous blighter.

"You returned empty-handed with none of the king's guard in sight. Bring them or you will stay here, as will your grandmother, until I find it necessary to let you go."

She turned and found him standing nearby. His face scowled in obvious displeasure. The man was near two scores and not handsome in the slightest. His hair disheveled, and his beard untended. The man's nightshirt was untidy, but he wasn't known for his cleanliness. Sir Henry Percy was more of warfare and abducting wee lassies and old women from the border to do his ill-bidding. The man wasn't one with a kind heart, but one who preyed on those who would secure his position with the new king, the young Edward.

He was a war-hardened soldier, one of the elder King Edward's favored commanders. With King Edward's death, Sir Henry's favor waned. Edward's son wasn't fond of his father's vassals because of the waste of their wealth on wars. Now England was disarrayed, and Dallis was caught in Percy's plot to further his position with the new king.

Dallis turned away and pretended to warm her hands by the small hearth. "You sent me on an impossible errand. Why can you not send your soldiers to apprehend them? I am but a mere woman with no means to secure them."

Percy's chuckle sounded behind her. "I will not risk my men on such a foolish mission. Besides, a mere woman has more power than she might deem. Aye, a beautiful woman who shall captivate the guard and have them do her will with little effort."

"Sir, you give me too much praise for I doubt that." Dallis lowered her chin, dejected.

"You were bid to do a duty and have failed. I must take the king's guard either captive or dead to his majesty if I'm to win his trust and favor," his words spoken in a hushed tone as if he detested to admit his quest.

"England's politics do not concern me." Dallis had only come to the land of their enemy for her gran's sake. Lady Buchanan wanted to pay her respects to her dead brother, King Edward. With none to restrict her, Dallis promised her gran she would see her brother one last time. Getting into England had been easy, it was the leaving that thwarted them.

On their return to Scotland, Percy apprehended them and they'd been imprisoned in his keep since. His soldiers outnumbered the handful of Buchanan men she'd brought as an escort. Dallis was forlorn at what had happened to the poor men. They certainly didn't end as she had, ensconced within the knave's keep, held against her will. Likely the soldiers were killed. The thought of their deaths because they protected her and her gran sat mournfully in her chest.

"Nay, but your grandmother matters, does she not? She is most important to you."

Dallis sighed. "You know she does. I was unable to find the guard and I fear with winter's effects most have gone to ground. I waited almost three months in that village and heard not one word before...when I last went... Are you certain your spies deem them close?"

Percy fisted his hands. "My men keep watch at the abbey nearby and say rumors spread of the guard's deeds. They must be there, in the area."

She spoke softly and held her hands out to the flame, still chilled. "None would claim to know of them or them being in the area. The mead hall owner told me to await if I wished, but he said not if he knew of them or where I might find them. None would help me."

"How unfortunate for you." Percy mocked her with a pout and turned to leave but must've changed his mind and returned to her side. He stepped nearer, close enough to touch her.

Dallis tried to get out of his reach and moved closer to the fire. Flames flickered and heated her skin and she feared she might set herself aflame as close as she stood. The awful English garb he forced her to wear would ignite and she along with it. Dallis stepped back and bumped into him. She suspected he was ireful at her incompetence, and that he would strike her as he was wont to do when he was angry.

He'd gained her compliance in the search for the king's guard, but she'd never been biddable in the way he'd hoped. He offered her comforts and indulgences if she shared his bed. That was the last place she'd ever agree to spend a night, even if it meant her security. She scrunched her eyes in abhorrence when his hairy knuckles caressed her cheek.

Percy's breath heated her face for he stood too close. "My bloom, I must bring them to justice. Only you shall help me attain them. If Scotland's king doesn't have his renowned guard protecting him, then he might not prevail when we take to the battlefield again. My sovereign demands it and I aim to have it so."

She curtsied and lowered her gaze. Her voice cracked and the emotion of her situation thickened her throat, "My lord, I don't know where they are. Will you not have mercy? My grandmother is aged. She has a few years remaining. I need to get her home to Buchanan land. You promised we'd be freed if I took the journey for you, which I have."

"Ah, but you didn't succeed, little bloom." He gripped her neck and yanked her forward. "God Above, I wouldst look upon you and be content for all my days. You remind me of a dark crimson rose, vibrant with spirit. Yet you have the resolve of its thorns. Your beauty evokes an unchivalrous manner of me. Will you not reconsider my offer?" His hand trailed the length of her arm.

Fortunately, her tartan kept him from touching her skin. "You are married, My Lord, and I will not lie with you. I told you so—"

He pressed his body closer, and his hand stopped on her shoulder and squeezed. "I shall release your grandmother if you do as you're told. My dungeons are formidable. Unless you want to perish there as well and never see your beloved homeland again. I suggest you keep your word and return to Dumfries. You cannot fail. Return not until you've found the guard and bring them here."

"But it's winter, My Lord, and there's no one about to ask. Even if I were to find them, how do you propose I gain their escort here?"

"You're a beautiful, intelligent woman. I'm certain you'll think of something. Use your wiles, girl, do whatever it takes. If you won't give your body to me, you might consider offering yourself for the wellbeing of your dear grandmother." He flung her away. "You will return to that village when the weather turns. You will find the guard, and you'll have them come to me, one way or another."

"May I see my gran? I should like to stay with her...until I leave. I worry about her."

He waved a hand. "Go. It matters not to me, but you will leave posthaste to get the deed done. Enjoy what time you have with her, because I shall send you away soon, and you shan't return until you have the guard in tow."

Dallis rushed from the hall and took the steps below. Her breath came quick and hard at being in Percy's presence. By her faith, at least he didn't force her to his will. There was somewhat of nobility about him, if very little. Through the corridors and down the two flights of steps she ran and stopped at the posted guard. "Is my grandmother within? I am given leave to stay with her."

The guard nodded and used a key to unlock the heavy door. He opened it for her and she rushed inside. The door banged behind her and the lock secured. Dallis approached the bed where her grandmother lay. She reached out to touch her face and she startled.

Dallis held her face and smiled to assure her she was well. When her gran saw it was she and not a guard, she relaxed. It was too dark to see clearly. Dallis returned to the door and knocked. The guard opened the door.

"Good sir, we need items. Please bring us candles, wood, covers, and food. Sir Percy wouldn't want me to come down with a malady. I have yet to attend to his bidding. Have mercy, please. My gran is aged and it's cold in here."

The guard flinched at her words. "I shall bring you what I can."

She thanked him and he closed the door again. Dallis paced the chamber and prayed the man would help her. Nearly an hour passed before he returned.

He opened the door and signaled to her. "She asked to join you here."

Flora pushed past him and rushed to her embrace. Dallis held her and calmed the poor weeping lass. The guard left again and locked them inside the chamber.

"Mistress... I—" She broke into a mass of heart-wrenched sobs.

"Shhh, there's no need to speak of the matter, Flora. Are you hurt?" Dallis pressed a hand over the light-brown waves of her hair to soothe her.

Flora's brown eyes shimmered with tears. "Nay, he's never hurt me, only does..."

She tightened her embrace on the lass. "I'm sorry sweet lass. I should've protected you. If I agreed to be his mistress, you wouldn't have been subjected to his will."

"Mistress, I was protecting you."

"I could've handled him, Flora. But I am grateful to you. Still, I hold myself responsible for you." Dallis continued to hold her and dismayed at how to ease the lass.

"I'm...fearful."

Dallis detested the sorrowful tone of her maid's voice. She too was fearful, especially now that she had to go forth again to search for the king's guard. "I shall get us out of here, Flora. That I promise. Somehow we will reach home."

"I am with child, Milady. He doesn't know. You must help me."

Dallis pulled back, startled by her admission. "How long do you have?"

"A few months at most. What am I going to do?" Flora cried harder and her tears fell earnestly. "I cannot have my bairn here. He'll take it away. I won't give up my bairn."

"You are going to be a mother. We will help you when the time comes. Worry not. Sit next to Gran, for I hear the guard returning."

Footsteps sounded closer and then the jingle of keys. The heavy door opened and the guard stepped through the threshold. "I'm to bring ye to the upper chambers. Come along, ladies."

Dallis took hold of her gran's arm and helped her through the threshold. Flora followed. They traipsed to the solar on the second floor just down the hallway from the lord's chamber. Inside, she found a much more comfortable lodging.

"How did you persuade Sir Percy to let us...?"

"He told me you should have whatever you wished for in comfort, except for your freedom whilst he is away. My lord is merciful."

She disagreed but nodded. "Where has Sir Percy gone?"

"Londontown, Mistress, to meet with the nobles. He'll return within a fortnight. The kitchens are preparing your supper and I shall bring it shortly. The chamber has been warmed."

She thanked him again and set about the chamber to light the array of candles and add more logs to the hearth. Now that the chamber was light enough she could communicate with her gran. The dear lady sat on the edge of the bed with her gaze on her lap. Dallis pulled a cover from the bed and set it around her shoulders. Most couldn't understand her gran's speech for it slurred and she sometimes stuttered. Lady Buchanan was born deaf and heard not a sound in her entire life.

Dallis took her hand and spoke slowly, and moved her lips deliberately so her gran could watch her mouth and discern what she said. "I have missed you, Gran."

"My dear, I worried about you. Why can we not leave?"

She sighed. "Sir Percy wants me to bring the king's guard here. Until I do we are confined."

Her gran wiped at her eyes. "I am sorry, lass. 'Tis my fault we are here."

Dallis sat beside her and set an arm around her frail shoulder. "Nay, I promise I shall gain our freedom. Worry not."

"If I did not come to see Edward..."

"I understand, Gran, that you needed to reach him before he was laid to rest. He was your brother. You grieved."

Her grandmother scoffed. "Grieved, nay. I wanted to make sure he was dead."

Dallis smiled for her gran was always blunt. When her grandmother received news of Edward's battles against Scotland, and how he'd used his power to overrule, she cursed him. Her gran had been wedded to a Buchanan when she was but eleven years and cast away to what her family deemed the barbarians of the north. Dallis laughed on many occasions at her gran's passionate tirades and of her dislike for her brother. Obviously, her gran hadn't been jesting.

"We will stay here until I complete the task and then I shall take you home."

Gran nodded. "My bonny lass. I fear for you."

Dallis feared for herself too. For years, the tales of the king's guard's gallantry spread far and wide. The help they'd provided throughout the years of war, benefited those who paid for the service, but she'd also heard they often aided without recompense. The stories spread like wildfire and were only tales though, and she didn't believe such men existed. In this day, not many would go to such lengths to aid another. It was claimed the guard often protected without thought of their safety or compensation.

Why would they help her? Even if she gained their trust, she'd have to deceive them to free her grandmother. Dallis never had to do such a heinous deed to bring the guard to their deaths. She prayed each day in hopes to find a way out of the tarry, but to no avail. It was either their lives or her and her gran's.

Gran took hold of her chin and lifted it. "Ye worry, lass. I see it in your eyes. The Buchanan's will come for us."

But she understood they wouldn't. Her clan knew not where they were. They thought she'd gone to Westminster, not the wilderness of Northumberland. None were privy to the fact that Percy apprehended her and her grandmother. All the Buchanan escorts were killed, and no witness escaped to return home to speak of what came of them. Of that, she was certain. There'd be no rescue from her clansmen.

She stared into her gran's hopeful blue eyes and nodded, though her family would never see them again unless she somehow gained their release. "Have you seen the lad? Where he was taken?"

Her gran shook her head. "Oh, the poor wee laddie. We must help him."

Dallis stood and pressed her hands on the small of her aching back. "I must find him first. He will tell me how I can reach the king's guard."

When they'd newly arrived, Dallis was taken to the hall where a lad was being questioned. At first, she thought he was Percy's son, but he wore garments of the Scots, not the English. And his speech verily gave him away. She despaired and considered Percy had the poor lad killed. Why wouldn't he? He'd gained answers from torturing the poor lad and found out where the king's guard

lived. The poor lad told how they stayed close to Dumfries and often visited the village near Caerlaverock. If the lad lived, she might be able to gain his help in finding the guard.

To herself, she said, "I hope by being kind, he'll offer to tell me about them. The more I know, the better I will fare. I'm to deceive them and it appalls me, but I must succeed."

"I shall go to the kitchens and see if I might hear a word of him."

She nodded to Flora. "Be cautious of who you ask."

Flora curtseyed and fled the chamber.

Dallis left her grandmother's side when a servant lad brought food. She hoped to befriend him and smiled. But he hastened from the chamber without a word. So much for asking for help from those within Alnwick.

When Percy sent her on the wretched mission almost two years before, Dallis tried to send missives to her family, four in all, but none likely reached her clan. If the knave had spies entrenched in the local abbey, he probably had them trail her as well. After the debacle in search of the guard, she returned empty-handed, all to ensure her gran fared well.

Dallis spent the next fortnight trying to find someone to get a message to her family. But the men at Alnwick were loyal to Percy. Once she left to seek the guard again, she'd find another way to send for help. Besides pondering a way to send missives, she dealt with her gran's forlorn mood, Flora's weeping, and her hope to win over the guard. She needed answers to her questions about the lad and Sir Percy. Day after day, she toiled with nothing to occupy her thoughts but the mission and their freedom.

A knock came and Dallis assisted her gran to a chair before she called out.

"Mistress, we received a message from Sir Percy. He's been detained in London and won't return for some time. We're to provide for you until he comes."

"How long will he be?" She approached the man and waited. His gaze roamed the chamber, to her grandmother and Flora, and back to her.

"He did not say. You are free to roam the grounds and have access to the keep's hall. There shall be no communications, and of course, you will have guards with you at all times. My lord wrote you should await your journey until his return." He retreated before she could ask any further questions and left the door to the chamber ajar.

Dallis sat upon the bed, bewildered and defeated. Why would Percy give her limited freedom? She knew well why. He wanted her in his bed and hoped to win her favor. She scoffed aloud and swore by all that was holy she'd never willingly give herself to Percy. If only his wife hadn't resided in Londontown. She might have won her sympathy and gained her aid. But it was for naught because his wife kept her distance from him.

Gran joined her and took her hand. "What's wrong?"

"We are to stay here. I am sorry, Gran, I am unable to free us." Dallis's shoulders slumped. She was loathed to admit at least his absence delayed her sojourn to find the king's guard. Who knew when Percy would return? Yet, his delay also detained them further.

Her grandmother caressed her hair and said nothing, but her eyes shone with woeful tears.

In the next few days that followed, she explored the castle. In search of the lad they'd seen when they first arrived, she finally had to ask the commander where he was.

"Mistress? I cannot tell you that."

"Why not? He is of no threat to me, you, or Sir Percy. Let me see him. I might gain valuable information from him, which may help when your lord returns and I'm off again on the errand."

The commander pursed his lips, set his elbow in his hand and seemed to ponder her request. "I suppose it would be beneficial. I'll have him brought to you."

Dallis walked the length of the great hall three times before the lad was brought. The soldiers tossed him upon the floor as if he was rabble. She scrunched her eyes and scolded them with unspoken words. Once they vacated and stood sentry outside the doorway, she knelt beside him.

"Oh, you poor lad. Come, sit in the chair and I'll tend to your injuries." Dallis helped him to sit near the fire. "They've harmed you." Gran set a bowl of water beside her and she took a cloth and wiped his face. "I'm Dallis Buchanan, and this is my grandmother, Lady Katherine Buchanan, and my maid, Flora." She motioned to them and indicated who was who.

The lad bowed his head. "I am Gilroy, M'lady."

"I'm sorry they hurt you." As she cleaned him up, she told him of Percy's demands. He appeared to commiserate with her. By the time she finished, she had his wounds tended, garbed in clean attire, and his stomach filled.

"You must go to the guard, M'lady. They'll help you."

"What if they don't? I fear Percy won't let my gran go free. And if I do bring the guard as he commands, Percy will capture them and use them as barter with King Edward."

Gilroy shook his head. "Nay, for the guard be too smart for the likes of Percy. Not me, for I was rash and fell into his trap at the abbey. Och now my comrades are in trouble. You must warn them, M'lady."

"Tell me what to do." Dallis leaned forward and waited.

"You need to find Brodin Grant. He is the only guardsman unattached, but he is honorable and trustworthy. You have nothing to fear from him. If you send a message as his betrothed, he'll be sure to come to you. It will alert him to use caution."

"I detest using such trickery, but if it's the only way..."

"Aye, he'll be curious who would dare make such a falsity. Once he sets eyes on you... You're bonny and he'll be gladdened to aid you. Rohan, the mead hall owner, knows how to reach him. Insist he sends for Brodin. Make certain you don't go to the abbey. Percy's men are there. You need to tell Brodin what Percy plans and..."

When he didn't continue, she took his hand and encouraged him to speak. "And what, Gilroy? Please, I need as much information as you can tell me."

"Tell Brodin what befell me. They'll be looking for me. Tell them I am sorry I let them down." Gilroy's eyes filled with tears. "I shall never see them again and I owe them. There are sacks of coins in the ossuary. Tell Brodin where to find them. Be sure to tell him it is my repayment for their kindness." Tears streamed his cheeks. "They always looked after me, even though they didn't want to."

Her heart ached for him, for the lad despaired at what he'd done. "You shall tell them yourself when I bring the king's guard here and they rescue us."

Gilroy shook his head. "Nay, M'lady, I shan't see them again."

"What do you mean? Surely you don't think Percy will kill you?" Dallis scowled at the suggestion.

"Aye, it's likely. I won't give him the information he seeks. His patience with me will end and so shall I. He is merciless, M'lady, and cares not what happens to others. The codpiece will question me again when he returns, and I won't tell him what he wants to know. I will meet my death with valor."

She wiped his face and nodded. Dallis swiped a tear away and suspected he was right. Percy would kill him. There wasn't much she could do to help him. "I will relate your words to the king's guard, Gilroy. That is my promise. I worry if I only bring one of the guards, Percy will be wrath."

"Worry not, M'lady. If Brodin comes, the others will follow."

"Very well. I will think about this plan of yours, Gilroy."

Dallis's heart tensed. Gilroy had more faith in his brethren than she did. She'd have no choice but to betray the king's guard. There was no gaining their aid. She would have to do the unthinkable and bring them to Percy. As much as she'd held guilt, she knew what she had to do.

Gran, Flora, and now Gilroy, needed her to save them. How in God's Good Grace would she do that? Yet, she'd find a way. Somehow, she would get her gran from this wretched place, save Flora from the vile hands of Sir Percy, and if she had any luck at all, she'd shield Gilroy too. She wanted to weep, but she was far too angry.

CHAPTER THREE

For months his wrath intensified. Brodin lay back upon the grassy slope by the stream bank. He wore a tartan about his hips and his chest bared, and the sun shone upon him. It did little to ease the ireful thoughts that ran through his mind. After the overzealous practice at arms, he threw his sword on the ground and marched away. If only the stream offered a cooling of his temper, but the water was too warm to affect his heated mien. How many times did he have to argue his position? Yet his decision went on deaf ears. None would agree to let him seek a meeting with the king.

“We are all disturbed,” Graeme said as he approached and sat beside him. “Do you deem I want my son and daughter raised here? Nay, I want to take them home where they might be protected behind my walls. But until we speak with Robert, we’re all beholden.”

“Damn Robert to hell. I say we give up this pursuit. We’ve done our duty, hell, and gave him more years than what we should have, what we were bidden to give.”

Liam sat on the other side of him and tossed his sword to the ground next to him. “I agree with Brodin. My Makenna is expecting another bairn, and I’d rather she be on my land when the bairn comes. We should end this now.”

“Trying for that son, aye?” Brodin said in jest and shoved his friend’s shoulder.

“I will have a son. This bairn must be a son,” Liam said with a touch of hopefulness to his voice.

Congratulations came in the form of their usual laudatory way by pounding on their comrade’s back until he said enough.

For years, they’d done their duty and protected their king without his knowing. If Robert found them, he’d be bound to hold them in contempt for disobeying his command to stay on the isle. Such a treasonous act, according to their king, wouldn’t be disregarded. They would’ve already been executed if the Bruce hadn’t had other, more pressing matters to attend to—the incessant wars with England.

Their guilt at treason would assuredly call for punishment. That was if their king apprehended them. They’d been able to avoid capture, except for Liam’s unfortunate incident where he’d been imprisoned. Their comrade was beaten to nary an inch of his life. If it wasn’t for Makenna’s rescue, their comrade would exist no longer.

Brodin considered what would’ve happened had they stayed on the isle and not returned to Scotland. Many lives would’ve been affected, namely said king who they protected time and again. Not only did they protect the king, but they also helped many who had not the means to protect themselves. Yet all that they endured: protecting their king without his knowledge, being away from their clans, having to stay hidden in the cave, forcing their wives and children to isolation...all done in respect and loyalty of their oath to their king.

He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and abated the tiredness of those thoughts. Their oath to Robert was heartfelt, likewise, was their vow to each other. None of them would endanger another, at least not if they could help it. But Brodin thought the risk worthy, especially if it ended with their freedom. And if it didn't, so be it.

Heath walked past them and dove into the water and made an enormous splash. When he came up, he sauntered toward them. "Lillia and I want to expand our family, but she insists we wait until we can return to Fraser land."

"We have only one sack of coins remaining. Once that's gone, what will we do? None are seeking our aid."

Graeme muttered a curse. "We still have the matter of the good king Galdus's relics to find."

Liam chortled. "But you told the caretaker of his tomb that we wouldn't take his coin."

Brodin knew they should've taken the recompense the caretaker offered. They'd been bid to find the relics looted from the ancient tomb, but as of yet, the items hadn't turned up. Their good friend, and friar to Sweetheart Abbey, had his lads and monks in search of the objects. Once found, they hoped to get a description of the knaves who dared to loot the king's tomb. He doubted they'd ever find the objects or the miscreants.

"Regardless, there's none to employ us. Even our vow to protect Robert has gone by the wayside. James sees to him now, as do others. Our king does not need us." Brodin sat back and stretched his arms behind him. James Douglas was a ruthless soldier and closer to Robert the Bruce than anyone, and their sovereign's most trusted knight. Though they respected their comrade, they didn't trust him. James would do whatever was necessary to secure Robert's monarchy even if that meant defaming his comrades or putting their lives at risk.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't return to our homes." Liam snatched a handful of grass and tossed it near his feet.

"Do you think this is home? It is not. You all have families, aye, your clans to return to."

Graeme set a hand on his shoulder. "If we return to our lands, Robert will hear of it and he will come for us. I will not endanger my clan, let alone my wife and bairns. I'll not have you endanger your clans. It's bad enough that our wives refuse to leave us. Robert will punish our families and probably execute us. I will not have Scotland in more turmoil because of our plight. Better we settle the matter before we go off to our homes."

Brodin growled low in his throat. "I offered to gain his accord, but you resisted my plan. We should have James set a meeting with Robert. We will tell him all, let him judge us and if he is forgiving, we can return home and might gain peace."

"Peace, what I wouldn't give to have it. But if Robert is not forgiving, our lives will be ended. Och, I want this over regardless of the king's decision. We're not living, but wafting away in misery here."

Brodin glanced at Liam and nodded. "If the king executes us, so be it. Are we all in agreement?" His comrades nodded, except Graeme. "I will go to the village and find a lad to take a message to James to set the meeting."

"I say this is a foolish venture, but go and don't be long," Graeme said.

"I'll return on the morrow." Brodin picked his sword up from where Liam tossed it. He took no time to pull on a tunic, grab a few more weapons, and readied his horse.

Along the trail to Caerlaverock's village, Brodin considered the conversation he'd had with his comrades. James Douglas had been their only ally in the years they'd been in exile and their only connection to the Bruce. Last they heard, King Robert invaded northern England with a band of men, James's barbarian followers most likely led the incursion. Surely the king returned to Scotland by now.

Hopefully, he would find James and relate their request for a meeting. Rohan might know where to find James, but he could also send a lad to Friar Hemm. Hemm always kept abreast of the king's movements, and he'd be able to get a message to James.

Brodin wanted to go to Sweetheart Abbey and speak with the friar, but the English still took sanctuary on the grounds, there was naught he could do but keep his distance. The fact that the English stayed on, for many months now, baffled him. Surely they had a lord they served. Why would they stay at the abbey for such a long period of time?

The village bustled with people in the late afternoon and drew those who purchased wares and of those who sold them. He tethered his horse to a tree behind the mead hall and slunk through the back entrance.

A lad held a long ladle at his lips and snuck a wee bit of ale. Brodin chuckled when he hastily dropped the spoon and backed a step. "S-sir...I wasn't...stealing..."

"I won't tell your secret. Get Rohan and be quick about it."

The lad ran off and Brodin leaned against the table and folded his arms in wait.

A commotion came from the main hall and shouts from Rohan breaking up a brawl. Many men often fought over insignificant matters of late. Tempers flared at the inactivity since most didn't have much to occupy them. The fracas ended in a short time, and a moment later, his comrade appeared.

The stout man grinned and fingered his bushy beard. "Och, 'tis you, Brodin. My lad told me someone awaited."

"What was the scuffle about?" The ideal of a brawl within the hall held appeal, for it would relieve him of his frustration. That being he hadn't used his sword or any fighting tactic in months, short of training with the king's guard.

Rohan laughed. "It was nothing much of import. If I'd known ye were here, I would've let you tend to the men. But aye, I tossed them right quick out the front door. I'm gladdened you came, for I was about to send for you."

"I need to find James Douglas. Have you seen him? Has he been in the village?"

His comrade took the ladle from the ale barrel and set it aside. "I haven't seen James for many months. Last I was told, he and the king's rebels headed south to England. I don't deem they've returned for most of the soldiers partake here, and I've seen nary a soul of them."

Brodin breathed a frustrated sigh. "I need you to send one of your lads to Friar Hemm with a message."

Rohan nodded. "I'll get one of my lads to take it." He went to the door that led to the large mead hall, whistled a shrill sound, and motioned to someone. At once the tall lad, Jimmy, appeared. "Jimmy will take your message and is trustworthy."

Brodin found a piece of parchment and hastily wrote to ask James to come to them. James knew where they hid and had visited them on rare occasions, some not so favorable events. Once he came, the course would be set into motion to end their banishment. Brodin handed the missive to the lad. "This is for Friar Hemm's eyes only. Be quick about it. I'll wait here in case he has a reply."

Jimmy nodded and took the parchment and set out the back entrance.

"Now that that business is done, I need to tell you about..." Rohan turned and fiddled with a wooden tray. "I was going to send for you."

"What is it?" Brodin dunked a cup in the ale barrel and drank. "Rohan? What's bothering you? It isn't like you to be evasive."

"The lass...ah, the woman who came long ago seeking the guard, she's here again and bid me to send for you. She says she's your betrothed." Rohan snickered but sobered a moment later. "Since when are you betrothed?"

Brodin pulled away from the table and chortled in disbelief. "My betrothed? She's here? When did she return?" He suspected Alexia Sweeten would one day come for him, and now that he'd face her, he was unsure what he'd do. His vengeance had dissipated and he no longer hated her. Yet he needed to act with caution for she certainly retained her hatred for him, given what his brothers bespoke on their last visit.

"The woman came three days past. She is truly a beauty to behold. I had to put the lass in my quarters for there were two brawls over her, and my lads got no work done—not with her regal presence in the tavern. I wish you'd see to her for I cannot have the lass here. She is troubled for I seen it in her eyes. Is she really your betrothed? If she is, I'd say ye were a fortunate man."

Brodin laughed. "Fortunate, my arse, I'd say I am doomed. It sounds like she's caused you grief and I'm sorry for it. But nay, I'm betrothed to no one. She speaks falsely. Last she was here, she was looking for the king's guard. Has she said what she wants of us?" His suspicions that Alexia had found him were accountable, yet she didn't know he was one of the king's guard. Why would she ask for them if she only sought him? And now with her return, she purposely lied about their betrothal.

Rohan shook his head. "I thought the woman English, for she's garbed richly as if she's attending the king's court. But glory be, the lass's speech is as bonny as a Scottish fairy's. If ye want to see her, she's in my chamber above. Take the back stairs."

He finished his ale and set the cup on the table. "I will find out what she wants. If the lad returns..."

"Worry not, I'll see to Jimmy, and get the friar's reply. Ye might want to prepare yourself." Rohan cackled and turned to set the lid on the ale barrel.

Brodin scoffed. "I won't be affected by her. Obviously, she's bewitched you."

"Oh, she has indeed. And I vow you'll be besotted by her as well. Ye might want to wait a wee bit because my lads just took bathwater—" Rohan bellowed in laughter as he left him rambling to himself.

Brodin wasn't about to wait. He hurried outside and took the wooden stairs to Rohan's living quarters above. With cautious steps, he guarded himself against an attack. Alexia's wrath warranted his vigilance. He reached the door and decided against knocking. Using his foot, he forced the door open and stood in the center of the threshold.

A gasp came and a woman stood with her back to him. All he envisioned was her naked backside. When she turned, he all but lost his breath. She stood defiantly in a tub full of water, arms at her side, in full view of him. That is until she shrieked and hastily grabbed a drying cloth. Brodin was affected alright, and if he didn't feel his blood rushing to the nether parts of his body, he'd sworn he might have been done in.

"Have you no chivalry? A man of morals would avert his eyes." She commanded him in the most alluring voice, yet she sounded somewhat authoritative.

He wanted to laugh outright but kept himself from doing so. "Aye? A woman of morals would hide herself from a man's eyes."

"You are trespassing here. It is you who should turn away. You dare insult me by standing there gawking?" The affront in her eyes was blatant with her glare and the firm grip she had on the cover wrapped around her naked body.

Brodin thought her a mite courageous, perhaps a bit prideful. He raked his eyes over her again to ensure himself there was no threat. A jest that because there was only one reason he wouldn't avert his eyes. She was incredibly bonny and definitely not Alexia. "I dare whatever I like. Who are you and what do you want of the king's guard?"

She stepped out of the tub and into a dusty beam of light. Brodin couldn't get a good view of her, but he wouldn't move from the door until he discerned there was no danger.

"It's about time you came. I waited for you...before for months and I could only return now. Why did you not come when I first sent for you?" She sounded irritated and properly scolded him.

Brodin maintained his stance in the doorway. "I do no one's bidding. Answer my question, lass. I'll have a name and why you seek the king's guard."

"I am seeking Brodin Grant of the king's guard. Where might I find him?"

The woman pulled a gown over her body, unfortunately, and hid her gloriousness from him. If he wasn't on guard, he might be besotted. She had fearlessness about her. And lord, she was something to behold. He'd never seen her before, of that he was certain because he would never forget such beauty. He raised a brow when she stepped forward and stopped a foot from him.

Her dark tresses cascaded in a dripping mass down her back. The dark, scrutinizing depths of her eyes didn't cower from his stare. Her face was bonny with rich-brown eyes and deeply flushed lips. The woman slightly resembled Alexia in coloring, but she was definitely not the harridan from his past. She met his gaze and kept it. Brodin didn't want the moment to end, but when she reached inside her bodice, he grabbed hold of her wrist and yanked her against him.

"Are you here to kill me?"

She gasped and shook her head.

"Why do you say you're my betrothed? I am promised to no woman." He wasn't one to trust anyone, be they man or woman. She reached for something, likely a dagger with which she'd assuredly pierce his heart. Yet the lass needed no dagger to pierce his heart given his reaction to her.

He hadn't felt the restlessness or the rush of his blood in a good long time. His heart thrummed ferociously, but he wasn't certain why.

"You're him? Brodin Grant?"

He quickly searched her for weapons, and patted the fabric of her gown, but felt none within her garments. What he found was a curvaceous woman, one that verily affected him. His breath quickened, and he discerned he needed to calm the hell down.

He released her, and she stepped backward. "I am Brodin. Why do you seek me? Has Alexia sent you to do her dark deed—?" He couldn't take his gaze from hers. She captivated him with her attractive eyes, bonny face, and her courageous spirit. The woman stood straight, her shoulders back, unwavering even though she had to be somewhat afraid. He intimidated most with just a glare. She showed it not, and he was impressed by her bravery.

She pressed her hand on her bodice and pulled out a medallion, one he'd made. He recognized the wooden pendant instantly and discerned the Bruce's crest he'd etched on the front. Brodin had made one for each of his closest consorts in case they ever needed aid. All they had to do was send it to Friar Hemm who would inform his comrades. It was their way to send for help without divulging who requested it or why. None could be too careful given they were wanted men.

The lass pressed the pendant in his hand, and he closed his fist around the wooden object. Her gentle touch stunned him. Brodin yanked his hand away and briefly averted his eyes. He turned the pendant over and scrutinized the name etched on the back and returned his gaze to her.

"I know not of any Alexia. I was told to give you this."

"Where did you get this?"

"A lad called Gilroy gave it to me and bid me to—"

He gripped her arm. "What have you done with him?"

She raised her brows and then scowled. "You're hurting me. I've done nothing—"

He loosened his grip. "Are you his mother?" God, he hoped not.

"Nay. He's a wee bit old to be my child. I came across him in England."

Brodin glowered. Gilroy was in England? How in God's grace did he end up there? A hundred questions came to him at once, but he asked the most important. "Is he harmed?"

"When I last saw him he was hurt, but he still lived. I fear not for long. Brodin, if you will give me time to explain—?"

"Why don't you begin with your name?" He gripped her upper arms to keep her from fleeing. She knew where Gilroy was. What troubled him was her fear of the lad not living long. Who had him and why would they want to kill the lad?

"I am Dallis of Clan Buchanan."

Brodin fingered the embellished sleeve of her gown. "Why are you garbed in English attire? No Scottish lass would be caught dead in such garments."

"If it will please you, I shall remove the gown."

Brodin found his first smile. "Aye, it will please me very much. I detest all things English. Remove it. And then, you'll tell me why a Buchanan lass was in England, how you found Gilroy, and why you sought me."

What she did next surprised him. His breath ceased and he kept his scowl fixed for the lass was brazen. He wanted to smile for an aura of pleasantness swept over him, even though she shocked him.

She turned to face away from him, pulled the heavy gown over her head, and flung it to the floor. "Are you happy now?"

"I'm getting there." Brodin roamed his eyes over her lovely body. The lass was undeniably beautiful. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her—kiss her until the morn. The thought of spending the night in her arms, touching her, and kissing her, caused a groan to reach his throat. Instead of suggesting his desire, he took a calming breath and settled himself. "I've many questions—"

"I'm certain you do." She wrapped herself in a great length of tartan and turned to face him. "You need to be patient."

Her voice was bonny, like the softest breeze blowing through a meadow. Brodin shook his head, disturbed by his inane thoughts and his reaction to her. How easily she ensnared him. "No one tells me to be patient. I want answers and I'm unwilling to wait for them. And if you want to keep breath in that bonny throat of yours, you best start talking."

She stepped forward and crossed her arms over her chest. "You don't frighten me. I've dealt with worse sorts than you, most recently I might add. I need you to rescue my grandmother."

Tears came to Brodin's eyes for he'd never laughed so hard in his entire life. "Your grandmother? What of Gilroy?"

"Oh, him too, and of course, my maid Flora. You see, I was abducted by Sir Henry Percy of Alnwick. He will not release my grandmother or my maid. I don't know why Gilroy was there, but surely you wish to rescue the poor lad."

Brodin raised a brow. "I do wish it. So to draw me out, you told Rohan that I was your betrothed?" The understanding of her scheme hit him, and he reasoned it out quickly in his mind.

"That is correct. The last time I came to the village, no one would own to knowing the king's guard. I had to...speak a wee lie if I was going to get you to come. And I see it has worked."

"Our fee for such a mission is hefty. Have you coin to pay?" Brodin stood with his legs braced, his arms relaxed by his side. The woman flustered. She fumbled her hands and averted her eyes. He found it ironic that she'd stand up to him, and yet, grew uncomfortable over the haggle of payment. "You have no coin with which to pay?"

"None. Sir Percy took all our belongings. I have no coin. Since you mean to rescue your friend...Gilroy... I ask that you save my grandmother and maid. You will have my eternal gratitude."

Brodin chuckled. "I do not require gratitude, but what you speak is true. I shall retrieve Gilroy from this Percy, and if I'm inclined, I will rescue your grandmother and your maid."

"We need to leave at the soonest. I must dress in the English garb for Percy took all my garments and bid me to dress like an English lady. You will have to bear it." She retrieved the discarded gown and hastily pulled it over her body.

A giant boulder couldn't have knocked him over for as still as he stood, watching her. He almost groaned when the fabric slid over the firmness of her breasts. "You will await me here until I

can fetch my comrades.” Brodin turned to leave, but she stopped him with a grip of his forearm. He swiveled on his foot and took hold of her waist.

“There’s no time. Please, we must leave now and travel with haste.” She stepped from his embrace and turned to collect the discarded covering.

The urgency in her voice caused him to consider her request. He didn’t think it wise to travel with the woman alone to an unknown location. “Where is this place we’re going?”

“A castle called Alnwick, by the English border in Northumberland.”

“Meet me at the back of the mead hall in five minutes.” Brodin left her and returned to the storeroom behind the hall. He motioned to Rohan in the great room.

“That was a quick visit.” Rohan bellowed. “I didn’t expect to see ye until sunrise.”

“We will leave at once. Send one of your lads to Graeme with this.” He tossed the medallion to him. “It’s Gilroy’s. I’ve found out where he went. Relate that I’ve gone to fetch him at Alnwick in Northumberland. I’ll return as quickly as I can.”

“Aye, I’ll send someone right away. Look after your arse, Brodin.”

He nodded and set off to meet the lass. A good ten minutes passed before she ambled down the back stairs. She thrust her satchel at him and hefted herself upon his horse. In all his life, Brodin was never at a loss for words, but at that moment, he didn’t know what to say. He fastened her bag to the horse and mounted. The sun was at their backs as they progressed easterly toward the border.

“It shall take at least two days to reach Alnwick if you travel fast.”

“Fast is the only way I ride.” He kicked his horse’s haunches and headed south. Two days in her glorious company. Yet Brodin focused on the ride and the fact that he would face an unknown adversary when they arrived. He was all for fighting and lived to use his sword arm. With so many at risk though, he needed a plan of attack. He had to set his mind on how to infiltrate the castle without being noticed—not be captivated by the lovely lass sitting before him.

Brodin tried to keep a few inches of space between him and Dallis, but the woman kept leaning against him. He finally gave up his gallantry and settled his arms around her waist. She spoke little on their journey, and yet, he sensed uneasiness about her.

He swore not to give a care for the lass. His heart had been guarded in the years since his liaison with Alexia ended badly. Instead of focusing on her, he turned his attention to listen for foes, to watch the lane ahead, and to reason a sound plan. But with each time she moved, he found himself drawn closer to her. He failed miserably to stay disconnected.

By nightfall, he was certain of one thing... Dallis Buchanan was beginning to matter to him.