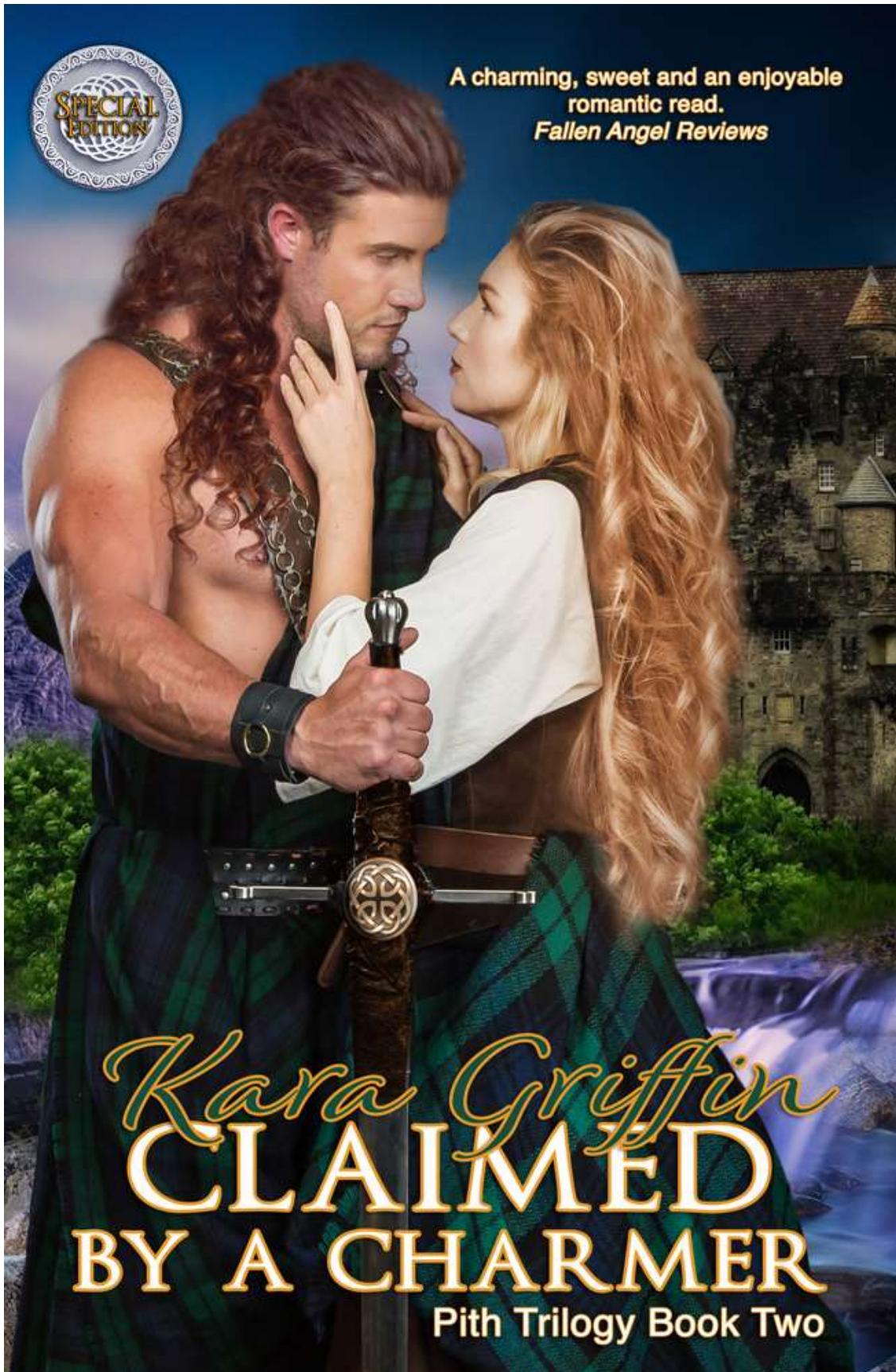




A charming, sweet and an enjoyable
romantic read.
Fallen Angel Reviews



Kara Griffin
**CLAIMED
BY A CHARMER**

Pith Trilogy Book Two

CLAIMED BY A CHARMER

The Pith Trilogy - Book Two

KARA GRIFFIN

CLAIMED BY A CHARMER

The Pith Trilogy - Book Two

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This book contains adult material, reader discretion is advised.

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DEDICATION

To those who are true friends no matter what the consequence.

Thanks also to my family, especially my daughters:
Sherri, Morgan, and Emily, who inspire me every day.

And to the readers who read the first edition,
who love Isabel and Douglas as much as I do.

Listen to your heart, for it will lead you to the person you are looking for.
~Oswald

CLAIMED BY A CHARMER

The Pith Trilogy - Book Two

Lady Isabel Calvert hides her true spirit from everyone, especially her best friend's brother, Douglas, whom she secretly admires. Isabel's older brother attempts to do the unthinkable and one night he almost succeeds. After the incident, her father's superstition nature induces him to send her to an asylum. She must escape, her only hope—Douglas Kerr. Isabel is no shrinking violet, but she intends to be the timid woman all men want in hope that Douglas will love her.

Laird Douglas Kerr is forlorn at his mission to find a wife. He was charming, wasn't he? At least that's what everyone teases him about. Douglas is asked by his sister to retrieve her friend, Isabel, the fiery, red-haired, cat-eyed, temptress he'd met when he escorted his sister home for their father's burial. When he meets the woman again, he doesn't find the hellion he believes her to be. Nay, she's a sweet, coy woman who intrigues him. As Douglas' life becomes complicated with mysterious happenings, he might also find the love he's been missing all his life. Can this dagger-wielding woman win the heart of the charmer?

PROLOGUE

Fairview Asylum
Newcastle, England
May 1217

From the distance, the compound loomed in the darkness. Nigel Calvert listened to the cries drifted into the night. He galloped to an outbuilding and handed his mount to a grubby-faced boy who led his steed away. A woman's scream pierced the obscurity. The noise drew his gaze to the shadowed window casements above. His lips curled into a smirk and he hurried inside. In his excitement, his boots clipped the ground and echoed his haste.

"I didn't think you would come."

"Why should I not, Freddy? Your offer was too tempting."

His friend, the caretaker of the asylum, Friar Frederick Whickham, roared laughter at his retort.

"Here, it's more than enough payment for the night's entertainment." Nigel sneered as he pulled a cloth sack from inside his tunic. He dumped five coins into Freddy's waiting hand.

"Have yourself a grand time. You'll find her above, beyond the first door on the right."

He nodded as he turned to leave, but Freddy stopped him.

"Aye, My Lord, she's tied up and ready for you. She just arrived early this morn. The girl's not showing yet so you won't be hindered." Freddy snickered when Nigel rounded his desk. "I believe she's worth an extra coin."

"If so, I'll drop it off on my way out."

"I expect to see you before the night ends. She's a comely girl. Aye, beguiling." Freddy grinned.

Nigel smiled, knowing he'd secured a girl to his tastes. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask..." He peered over his shoulder as he turned back. "What's the fee to have someone placed here?"

"The same as you pay for your visit, My Lord. Do you have someone you'd like to commit?" Freddy rubbed his hands together, possibly to ward off the chill in the room, or perhaps at gaining more funds, but most likely, it was his suggestion to commit someone.

"I might want to keep her here for my sole use. How much for that?" He relaxed his stance and leaned against the friar's desk.

"For you, My Lord, five gold pieces and two steeds, good ones." Freddy threw in the last hoping he would be generous.

Nigel grinned at his shrewdness. "Quite costly, Freddy, but well worth it. Done. I'm not sure when she'll arrive. It may take months before I make the arrangement."

"The asylum isn't going anywhere and neither am I. Her place will be secure. Be sure to send those horses though."

“We have an accord. I’ll send the horses in a fortnight.”

As Nigel walked the corridor to the stairs, he thought about the asylum. His friend made a handsome fortune and provided pleasure for his young comrades. Fairview Asylum, where the church offered sanctuary to those in need, had been overtaken by Freddy in less than a year. He was supposed to support the nuns in caring for the girls sent there. Instead, he arranged for unwed mothers who were no longer wanted, to be used for wanton endeavors. It was the perfect place for his commerce.

Many girls were never seen again after they’d been committed. Families embarrassed by their daughter’s state or those who sought to rid themselves of worthless daughters entrusted them to Freddy and the asylum. If the church had knowledge of the happenings at Fairview, Freddy would hang by his neck, and condemned for his sins. Who had not a sin these days?

Nigel reached the door, opened it, and peered inside the dimly lit chamber. The girl awaited and didn’t know what he had in store for her. She wouldn’t lie compliant if she had. He closed the door and regarded her.

His father would find this place highly amusing, and mayhap in time, he’d tell him about it. At present, he needed to keep it secret. If his plan to commit his sister succeeded, no one could know of this place. Isabel denied his advances, and wouldn’t let him bed her. Nigel paid little attention to her when she was a child, but she’d changed overnight into a beautiful curvy woman with much appeal. If the color of her auburn hair gave indication, she would be high-spirited. The arrangement secured Isabel’s placement and her future. He grinned at the vision in his mind—the moment she’d be at his mercy.

When Nigel finished with the girls at the asylum, he left them to their demise. He never visited the same girl twice and delighted in the imaginative ways to end their liaisons. The girl before him was a rare beauty and reminded him of his sister. Perhaps he would keep her for a time. She was beguiling enough. She whimpered and her eyes widened when he approached.

Nigel removed his dagger, and she stilled. “That’s right. You should be fearful.” He undid the ties at her wrists because he wanted her hostility. Her fear and resistance would spur his desire. The girl’s hands struck him as she fought against his advances. Nigel threw back his head and laughed. His laughter mixed with the cries of the tormented and drifted into the moonless night.

CHAPTER ONE

*Gordon Clan Holding
Dumfries, Scotland
June 1219*

“Uncle Stan, Uncle Stan, I’ve arrived.” Isabel Calvert shouted her arrival the minute she dismounted her horse. In her haste to pass the Gordon soldiers, who stood in groups near the keep, she almost knocked a woman down. The woman’s basket and contents of her clean wash tumbled to the ground. Isabel mumbled her apology and helped the woman pick up the garments. Then she ran toward the keep. She entered the hall and gazed lovingly at her longtime friend, Candace Kerr.

She dashed past her uncle and aunt, who awaited her greeting. Her green eyes flashed with relief when she threw herself in Candace’s arms and hugged her tight.

“I’m safe at last,” she said urgently.

“Isabel Calvert, I’ve been awaiting you a fortnight. What took you so long? I worried he wouldn’t let you come.”

“Candace, you wouldn’t believe what I had to go through before my father agreed.”

“Has something happened? You must tell me all, but presently, I suggest you go to Laird Gordon.” Candace shielded her mouth. “He looks shocked that you would pass him by and not give a greeting. Oh, look, he’s not smiling. You’re in trouble now, Isabel.”

Isabel turned and colored. She hurried to her uncle’s side and curtsied. He frowned and although he appeared angry, his eyes showed love. “Uncle, I’m here at last.” She smiled brightly and hoped to appease him.

“So I see, lass. I suspect it’s because Candace is here, and not because you missed us?” He laughed and hugged her to his side.

“I do love you and Aunt Mabel, and wanted to see you, too.”

“Candace’s coming had nothing to do with your sudden arrival?” Uncle Stan’s mocked laughter made her wince. “You don’t fool me, lass. It’s good to see you though. Go to your friend. She’s pestered me as usual. You both,” he raised his voice sternly, “keep out of trouble or I’ll whack your bonny bottoms.”

They laughed at his bald-faced threat because Uncle Stan would never punish either of them so harshly. Isabel grasped Candace’s arm, and they fled from the great hall to their chamber. They formed an immediate friendship when they’d been given the chamber to share, and always got into mischief, but Uncle Stan didn’t have the heart to discipline them. He allowed them to do as they pleased, and freedom from the restrictions of ladylike pursuits they endured at home.

Once inside the chamber, Isabel slammed the door closed, and turned to hug Candace again.

“Tell me, your message only said it was imperative I come. What happened?”

Isabel walked to the window and opened it and allowed the warm summer breeze to stream into the room. She undid the ties of her light-blue bliaut and fanned herself for relief from the overbearing heat. She turned and gave Candace a disheartened look.

“I’ve never been so frightened in all my days. He tried to...”

“What? Who? Nigel? What did he do?” Candace’s eyes narrowed.

“I was behind the stables practicing...when Nigel came behind me, and he...touched my...” Isabel pointed to her bosom and blushed. She lowered her eyes in deep chagrin at the thought of what he’d done.

Candace’s eyes widened, and she gasped. “He tried to touch you there? What did you do?”

“I backed away and asked him what he was doing. He said some rather wretched things, which I shan’t repeat. It was ghastly, and I was never so afeared. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You should’ve stuck your dagger in his black heart,” Candace said vehemently. “I would have.”

“Nay, I cannot kill him, even if I wanted to. He’s my brother, and Father would never forgive me if I harmed him.”

“What do you care of his forgiveness? Your father never showed you consideration or care. It’s shameful you can’t ask for his protection. How did you get away from Nigel?”

Isabel walked to a chair beside the small table between their bed-pallets, where they often played games, and settled in it. Her legs shook after the long ride. She was tired from the journey but more exhausted from her situation.

“He gripped my arm and tried to kiss me. I admit his advance frightened me, but I struggled to free myself. He said he has plans for me. I assume it is to...you know, do that.”

“Plans? Oh, Sweet Mary. Did you kick him his balls?”

“Nay, he held me firmly. His mouth touched my neck, and he said he would devise a way to have Father send me to an asylum. He said I would be his, and he would put his... Oh drat, I can’t believe I’m repeating it. It was disgusting. I nearly fainted.” Isabel hadn’t realized a tear slipped down her cheek until Candace gently wiped it away.

“He’s vulgar. You should’ve gotten ill and thrown up on him. That would make him think twice about it. What does he mean by an asylum?”

“I’m uncertain. I thought asylums were sanctuaries where the church protected you. I heard Father Matthew speak of a girl from the village who was sent to one. He assured her parents she would be well cared for. Still, I shan’t want to go there—”

Candace shook her head. “You can’t return to that fiend.”

“Nay, Nigel has Father’s support in all his endeavors. He would gain his approval to use me that way. I must stay here until Father betroths me. It’s the only thing I can think of to avoid him.” Isabel envisioned her younger brother Nathaniel’s face, his smile, always reassuring and loving. At least she had one relative who cared for her. She wanted to shield Nathaniel from their older brother, but she’d have to confide in him if she returned home, and Nigel continued his foulness.

“Oh, Isabel, how horrid for you. Nigel’s wicked to want to hurt you. I should tell my father. He would send men to—”

“Please, don’t do that, Candace. I won’t endanger Nathaniel or our people. I shall stay here and Father will forget about me. He sometimes does—forgets me.”

Candace frowned. “He very well might. Still, I would like to see you married and safe. But you are too young to take a husband. Surely your father won’t marry you off yet. He shan’t let you remain here for two years.”

“I’m six and ten, not so young to marry. Others have married at such an age. Aye, my father wouldn’t let me stay for more than a year. If he calls me home, I shall delay. I’ll tell him I have the scourge, or I’ve had visions. He’s superstitious and wouldn’t want my return.”

“I wish my brother, Douglas, was here. He would know what to do. He’s a fierce warrior who would scare Nigel’s soul to hell. Father boasts of his prowess.”

“You haven’t seen Douglas in years, Candace. You know not whether he’s noble. Mayhap he’s as wicked as Nigel.”

“Nay, he is not. Mother told me how honorable he is. She said he was the most valiant man she’s ever met besides my father.” Candace laughed and stood beside her.

“You have such blind faith in a brother you don’t even know. I wouldn’t be so trustworthy.”

Candace’s brow wrinkled. “You wouldn’t understand. I suppose I’ve been taught to trust him. You trust Nathaniel, don’t you?”

“Aye, but I have known him since the day he was born. You haven’t seen your brother, in what, ten years?” Isabel argued.

“Aye, a very long time. I hear stories about his accomplishments, and Father says one day he shall return to our clan.”

“You may be disappointed when he returns. I wouldn’t be expectant of this wondrous brother you have set him to be.”

“Father says he trains to better protect us when he becomes laird.”

“Just because he’s training to be laird doesn’t mean he will be sweet-natured or forbearing.” Isabel dropped the subject for now and moved away from her friend.

Candace clapped her hands together. “Oh, I forgot to tell you my news. Father gave his consent for me to choose my husband. I’m relieved because I thought he might betroth me to Irving Dunmore to end our clan’s feud. The Dunmore clan is our enemy, but Father assured me he never planned to do that.”

“You’re fortunate to have a father who cares.”

“It’s a good thing you use a dagger well, Isabel. You may need it to protect yourself against Nigel. I shall like you to teach me your skill.”

Isabel searched her eyes for sincerity. “If you wish to learn...but I don’t want anyone to know about my skill.”

“I want to learn. Why keep it a secret? Laird Gordon wouldn’t mind. He’d be proud of—”

“Uncle Stan won’t mind, but I wish no one to know. It isn’t something a woman does, Candace, throwing daggers like a man. It’s unladylike. Men would scoff at my attempt, or laugh their arses off.”

“That may be so. We should have Russell take us to the wood and practice there. Laird Gordon won’t know, or anyone else.”

Isabel laughed for the first time in weeks. "Uncle Stan would find out. Do you honestly believe he doesn't have us watched? After our last visit, he swore he would never leave us unattended again. Mayhap you're right, if Russell takes us, we can go."

"I'm pleased you're here, Isabel."

"Me, too, Candace. I haven't felt safe for such a long time. I had to keep my bedchamber door locked even during the day." She hugged Candace again.

"You're safe here, and we shall have a nice long visit."

Isabel nodded. The tension eased from her shoulders, and she released a sigh of relief.

"Call a bath for me, and once I'm clean, we'll go and see Aunt Mabel and Uncle Stan." Her friend left her alone, and Isabel removed her garments. She tried to put Nigel from her thoughts. For now, she didn't have to worry about his attacks or look over her shoulder every waking moment. But how much longer could she avoid him?

CHAPTER TWO

Galloway, Scotland
August 1219

The forest's tranquility should have arrested the thoughts that raced through Douglas' mind, but it did little to stifle his discontent. Douglas Kerr sat on his warhorse in deep reflection. The sun blazed down as he rode along the trail. His father's missive directed he take a wife. Morna Farley was the chosen lady. His father's command instilled his hatred for the duty, yet his father's order would be done whether he liked it or not.

Douglas ripped the missive and discerned if he contested the edict, he would forfeit his position as laird over the Kerr Clan. Morna was a beauty—if such a thing was important. He hadn't deemed it a necessary quality, although he hadn't considered taking a wife before. He arrived at her keep anxious to get the deed done. This day, he would ask for her hand as his father willed. Her acceptance would assure his future, and that of the Kerr Clan.

He entered the great hall wearing a frown and feeling repugnance at being forced. Lord Farley, her father, stood by the hearth and seemed gladdened to see him.

"Douglas, I've expected your arrival. Your father sent a message saying you'd come."

"Lord Farley, I'm here to request Morna's hand and—"

"You have it," he said readily. "I'm fond of the Kerrs, and the alliance will benefit both our clans. It's a proud day for us all."

Douglas reflected on his one and only encounter with Morna. He'd met her at the Shelmore's keep, a border clan aligned with many Highland clans, at a feast the month before. He assessed her character, and she seemed agreeable. Mayhap she would make him a good wife.

"I'd like to search her out and make the request myself, if you don't mind."

Lord Farley smiled. "Aye, as you wish. She's probably in her chamber. Go, lad, and welcome to the family." He gave direction to her chamber.

Douglas bowed, left the great hall, and took the stairs. He reached her chamber and startled when he heard men's voice through the wood. Morna was in jeopardy. Douglas threw the door open and bounded inside. His intended wife fornicated in the arms of not one, but two men. The sight of their naked, entwined bodies stopped him in his tracks. The trio hadn't heard his entrance, and their position left nothing to the imagination. She pleased one with her mouth, while the other pleased himself with his body against hers. He frowned, disbelieving his eyes, and quickly turned to leave.

He didn't stop to explain his hasty retreat to anyone. Douglas was thankful he'd requested to seek her out. If she'd been sent for, he wouldn't have found out about her promiscuousness. Morna wasn't meant to be his wife, and he would tell his father so when next he saw him.

Discharging the affair, Douglas returned to the Highlands with his cousin, Brendan MacKinnon, in tow. Morna sent him missives and implored his return, but he hadn't responded, nor had he cared what her messengers replied. The only contact he could bring himself to have with her family was to send a message to Lord Farley. He explained she wouldn't adapt to his demanding way of life. He'd softened the dismissal because Lord Farley didn't deserve the harsh words he wanted to impart.

On the trail, performing sentry duty for the MacKinnon clan, Douglas wasn't sure why he thought about Morna this day, but his reflection ceased when his cousin shouted.

"Douglas, halt." Brendan scowled at his stupidity because he hadn't paid attention to their travel. "You're going the wrong way. Where's your mind this day?"

He cursed at his inattention. "Where are we headed?"

"I thought we would stop by and see Ellic." Brendan looked at him expectantly.

"Nay, can't we go another time? I just want to get home."

"You're just sore because you didn't marry the English lass." Brendan shoved his arm in a quip and gave a half-hearted frown that resembled a smile.

Douglas shook his head. If only Brendan knew the truth of the matter. "Nay, I didn't want to marry her."

"You lie. She was too beautiful to let go so easily."

"Aye, she was bonny, but it was her character I didn't like. I suppose I'll settle for one of our sweet lassies though." Douglas laughed and tried to make light of it.

"Why would you want to be nagged by a harpy wife?" Brendan scowled.

"My father wishes me to marry before I become laird. Don't you want a wife? I'd get started on it. It'll take years to find a woman who'd put up with your surliness." Douglas laughed at his banter. His cousin wasn't one to enjoy any kind of ribbing.

"There are more important matters to consider. I'll never take a wife. I enjoy my freedom too much. Colin's out of his mind to put up with Julianna's carping—"

"He loves her. You know how he feels about her, and you care for your sister-in-law. You'll not tell me otherwise."

"Aye, of course, I do," Brendan admitted. "Though, she'd try my patience if I was married to her. You want to find a woman like her? You'll need to use that charm you're renowned for. I don't have it in me to be charming like you."

"Not if you continue to scowl all the time. You'll not even get a tumble from the loose women you visit." Douglas' jest made his cousin grin.

"Don't worry for me. I get my fair share of women."

Had Brendan sensed his quiet manner on the way home? Douglas had an easygoing manner, but he'd acted differently since their visit to the Lowlands. Brendan wasn't ordinarily one to converse on the subject of women, but he must've caused his cousin's concern by being withdrawn.

"Aye, you're right. I don't know why I'm thinking foolish thoughts."

"Because you're an arse." Brendan shoved him again and nudged his horse to gallop away.

Douglas kicked his horse's flanks. "Aye, I'm an arse, more than you know," he muttered and rose swiftly to catch up. He stopped when Brendan slowed his mount and held up his arm.

Brendan turned on his horse. "Someone comes."

Douglas couldn't see the rider in the distance and was astounded at his cousin's ability. Brendan's keen hearing picked up the sound of a horseman ahead. Douglas scanned the land and finally spotted Gilbert riding toward them.

"Douglas," Gil shouted.

"Gil, what goes?" Douglas shouted back.

Gil halted his mount when he reached their side, and his face appeared bleak. Douglas waited for him to catch his breath. He'd taken Gil under his wing for the past few years, yet he still needed more training to turn him into a fierce Kerr warrior. Gil wanted to be a scholar and always messed with herbs and medicinal potions. He liked to solve the unknown, riddles he'd called them. Of course, Douglas and Brendan teased him about it often and called him daft.

"I received word from Cedric. Your father is ill. It doesn't bode well. You've been called home."

"Has he died, Gil?" Douglas almost couldn't get the words out.

"Not yet, but he's likely to. They wouldn't have called for you if it wasn't dire. He's old and probably near his end."

"Brendan, do you want to ride along?"

"Aye, of course, I do. It's been a long time since we visited the Kerr clan."

Douglas nodded and kicked his mount into a gallop. They stirred up a trail of dust on the path. Several MacKinnon and Kerr warriors rode with him. The warrior's faces showed their somber regard for the journey. A laird was dying—a solemn occasion indeed if there ever was one.

Douglas clearly recalled the images of his mother, father, and sister, as he rode toward home. *Home*. The keep and clan was his future. He had to face it eventually.

A few hours later, Douglas approached the drawbridge of the Kerr fortress. His tension eased when he noted the posted sentry on the walls. He walked into his father's keep and disheartened at the sullen faces. He glanced about the hall for his mother. The hall hadn't changed in the last ten years. Everything remained as it always had. The wooden out-coves etched with an ancient Pict scroll design still existed on the left side. The same banners welcomed visitors. Two wolfhounds lay beside the hearth, and several ladies congregated at the other end of the hall. All seemed normal.

He strolled to his mother's side and took her hand and squeezed it in greeting. "I came as quickly as I could. Is my father still..."

"Aye, you've arrived in time." Shelagh rose and kissed his cheek. "I've missed you, Douglas. Come and rest yourself before you go to him."

He sat at the trestle table and looked fondly at her. Brendan took the seat next to him but remained quiet.

"Where's Candace? Is she well?"

"Aye, she's well, but she went to the Gordon's keep for a visit. She has a friend there and wanted to see her. With your father ailing, I thought it best she be away."

"I should go to him."

Shelagh stopped him with a touch to his arm. "Wait, he's not doing well. Try not to rile him, Douglas."

"I won't, Mother, I'm not a barbarian."

"Hah, you could have fooled me. Look at the size of you. You know how your father is, try to appease him. Mayhap you should wear the Kerr tartan?" She reached for a folded tartan that sat on a bench beside the stairway.

Douglas accepted the tartan, and as he strode the steps to the upper chambers, he replaced the MacKinnon tartan he'd worn during his extended stay amongst the clan, with the Kerr's. After he dropped the extra tartan outside the door, he pushed the door open and entered.

It was hot as purgatory and dark as night inside the chamber. Damn, his father was ailing. He wanted to deny it and hoped it seemed worse than it was and perhaps just a passing complaint. Before he made his presence known, he assessed the man. His father's hair nearly whitened now, and his skin wrinkled with age. Lying in the bed, he seemed frail, and not the strong warrior Douglas remembered. The Kerr laird aged considerably since he'd last seen him. Douglas hadn't been home in five years.

"Douglas, come." His father's voice barely reached him from across the large chamber.

He stood beside the bed. "Father?" Douglas didn't want to be affected by Thomas' state, yet he couldn't help but be so.

"I'm dying and not as a warrior should."

Douglas cringed. "You must not think such thoughts—"

"I have a few things to say before I pass. It's time you returned and took your rightful place. I shouldn't have sent you to my nephew's clan, but you received better training there."

Douglas didn't want to hear his regrets. He knew why he'd sent him away, and truth be told, he hadn't resented him for it. "Father—"

"Nay, listen, I must tell you all... I'm proud of you. You turned into a fine warrior, Douglas. We need a strong laird to protect and lead our clan. I must talk to you about..." His breath hitched, and a cough racked his chest.

Douglas grew concerned. "You need rest. I should get the healer. I'll come back later and—"

"Nay listen." His father grasped his tunic. "I had to send you away because if you remained, you would've learned all."

"Learned what?" He released his tunic from his grip.

"About our feud with the Dunmores. It began the year before you were born. Your ma didn't want to marry me, but I don't regret it. On the day we wed, Robert Dunmore abducted Marykate. When she returned, she carried you. She pled for her return to Robert, but I couldn't let her go."

Incredulous, Douglas' voice clipped, "Are you saying I'm not your son?" He leaned forward and wanted to grasp his father's tunic as he'd done. He held motionless and waited for his denial.

"Damn it, aye. After you were birthed, your mother killed herself. She's laid to rest in unholy ground, she is. Jumped off Kilbrun Ridge rather than be wed to me. Broke my heart that day. Robby didn't care for her. He told me to keep her, that she was nothing but rabble."

"I understand none of this."

"She loved Robert. I don't know how that came to be, because she was promised to me from the time she was a wee lass. I sent you away, lest you learn about it. Now I'm dying, you must know

all. Don't trust the Dunmores. Robert fueled the feud with lies, and his son, Irving, would like nothing better than to renew it."

Douglas' life whirled in his mind. His mother wasn't the woman he thought her to be and his father wasn't his father. Good God, he was a Dunmore. His stomach coiled and twisted. Ire increased with each assertion and his nose flared.

"I'm not your heir. Find someone else to care for your clan. You don't need me." He wanted to leave and never return. Douglas turned to do just that when his father stopped him with a hard voice.

"You would've been my son if your ma didn't go with Robert that day. My son!" Thomas wheezed, before he continued, "I've no one, only you, Douglas. The clan depends on you. You'll just walk away?"

"Why should I stay? I've never belonged here. Never felt I... I want to kill the Dunmores for what they've done."

"I always cared for you, Douglas. I didn't want anything to happen to you. That's why I sent you away...to the MacKinnons. It never mattered you weren't my blood son. You've always been my son in my heart."

He returned to the bedside. "You cared?" Thomas nodded. Douglas sighed. "I always thought I'd be laird of the Kerrs. I was even willing to marry that harlot, Morna, as you asked."

"You didn't marry her?"

"She's not worthy to be a Kerr. I want to stay, but if—"

"If you say she's not worthy, then I believe you. You will be laird, Douglas."

"The Dunmore clan will pay for what they've done. You've my word, Father."

"It does my old heart good to hear you call me such. I've never wanted to tell you...but, son, you deserved the truth. I was wrong to keep it from you. I don't care about the Dunmores. Don't take my feud into your heart. I need you to care for the clan. That is of more import."

His father closed his eyes. "Bring your sister home for my burial. I want my children home, and promise to take care of Shelagh. She was a good mother to you."

"Aye, I will. When do you want me to leave?"

"At all haste. When you return, I'll be gone from this realm."

"Is there no way you might improve?"

"Nay, son." He opened his bleary eyes. "My time has come. I'll face it as I must. Trust Cedric, he's a good lad and worthy of being second-in-command. I might run out and get into a battle with our enemies. I wish to die as a warrior, not in my bed like a damned Sassenach."

Douglas chuckled. "It would be just like you. I'll leave at first light to get Candace. It should only take a week, and mayhap I'll return before..." His voice trailed off when he realized his father fell into a disquieted sleep.

After he gave him a pat on the shoulder, Douglas returned to the hall to speak with his stepmother.

Shelagh was still beautiful at such a great age. As a lad, Douglas had asked her age, but she teased him and said she'd never reveal it. Her jovial mood made everyone around her lighthearted. He recalled the night when she'd told a story about having their clan's symbol inscribed on her back.

Everyone wanted to see it, but she wouldn't let them. Besides, who would etch a boar on themselves? Douglas cared for her because she was able to bring his father out of mourning his mother. Shelagh was kind and loving, the kind of woman he'd hoped for in a wife.

Knowing the truth of his mother, he wondered why his father regaled them with thoughtful memories of her. His father must have loved her a great deal. Douglas shook the thoughts away. He would retrieve his sister and return before his father passed.

When he reached the table, he took a seat next to Brendan. A fair-haired lass served him a tankard of ale. He eased his disgruntlement and downed the drink.

"My lord, I'm Rachel, should you need anything."

Douglas shook his head and dismissed her. "He's not well," he said quietly to his stepmother. "I didn't want to believe he was ill."

"I tried to make him comfortable, but he grumps to let him alone."

"He asked me to retrieve Candace. I'll leave on the morrow."

"Aye, she needs to return. She's turned into a lady and has changed much. You haven't seen her in a long time."

"Nay, I haven't. She must have been six then."

"I'm saddened by Thomas' illness. It came on suddenly, and I wasn't able to..." Shelagh wept into the palms of her hands.

Douglas hugged her, knowing how distraught she was. "Please, don't weep. It hurts me to see you distressed." He looked into her tearful faded-blue eyes.

"I try to have courage, Douglas. Honestly, the man is mule-headed. He gave up."

"I agree, but there's nothing we can do to aid him." He called across the hall, "Lass, assist my mother to her chamber."

The girl nodded and stepped forward. She took his mother's arm.

"Mother, get rest. He's worn you out." He gave her a kiss, then left to assemble men for the journey to retrieve his sister.

On his way to the garrison, he considered the events of the day. He didn't notice the lady who watched him from the window or the men who glanced at him when he passed by. Nor did he notice the serene landscape of his clan's holding. Nay, his mind was set on the tasks at hand. Aye, he would retrieve his sister and return. By God, it was now his feud with the Dunmores and he wouldn't let Thomas down. His usual smiling face now held a frown. The only thing that mattered was his honor and to gain the respect of his father's clan. He'd seek revenge and keep it in his heart. Only then would he win his clan's admiration and claim his right as laird.

In the morning, he set out to retrieve his sister with Brendan and Gil. They stopped little to rest and only took a few minutes to drink and give their horses a respite. The heat from the ground rose as the afternoon sun beat down on Douglas. Summer in full effect made him hot and irritable. The closer he got to the Gordon's, the more affected by the heat he became. He was used to the cooler climate of the higher ground and woodland of the Highlands.

He was uneasy because his father could be dead, and he'd not even know it. Douglas wanted to retrieve his sister and return home posthaste. Relief washed over him when he reached the Gordon's keep. Adjusting his eyes to the contrasting light of the hall as he entered, he searched for his sister.

Stanley Gordon approached. "Douglas, what brings you here?"

"Laird Gordon." Douglas bowed. "I'm here to retrieve Candace. Our father is dying and we must return home immediately."

Stanley's face fell. "That's sad news. I'm sorry to hear that, lad. I'll have Mabel get her ready." The stout man shouted for his wife. He directed her, and she ran to do his bidding.

"Come and rest. I see you brought the disagreeable MacKinnon with you." Stan nodded at Brendan.

"Aye, I'm to return and will take over my clan. I knew the day would come... I'm not sure how I feel about it." Douglas detested admitting such a flaw.

"Your father's a good man. You'll do him proud, lad. Oh, Scottie's concocted a new brew. You may want to see him before you leave. I'm headed out to a hunt, but will return by supper."

"I want to leave this day, right after supper." Douglas noticed Brendan nod.

Stan laughed hard and his eyes watered

Douglas thought he'd lost his mind. "What's amusing, Stan?"

"Well now, lad, it may take us that long to find your sister."

CHAPTER THREE

Their adversary sat against the tree, seemingly meditating or asleep. Isabel studied him and tried to assess his wakefulness. Scottie Gordon's hair blew from the gentle breeze, and he reached to scratch his bearded chin, yet appeared to settle back. She spied the flask of brew lying on his lap. He didn't realize she schemed to steal his flask, for if he had known, he wouldn't have kept his eyes closed. He continued to rest peacefully, with his legs stretched out, and his back against the tree.

"Is he asleep?"

"I don't know, Candace, mayhap. He must be because his eyes are closed. He's snoring now. Shhh, we must be quiet or he'll catch us." She hesitated.

Candace shoved her back. "Go on, do it."

"Very well, stand aside, but be ready to run."

Candace forced her forward. Isabel skulked toward the tree and kept her gaze on the target. She lifted her skirts and tiptoed toward Scottie. She heard her friend's laughter and turned to give her a warning glance. The noise would surely awaken him, and then he'd catch them. She rerouted her gaze and made certain none could see her intent. Gently, she bent and lifted the object from his lap. She scrunched her eyes closed when Scottie moved. He reached to scratch his beard again. Bravely, she opened her eyes and found him still slumbering. With the flask now held in her grasp, she moved away from his body. She hurried toward her friend and reached her side.

Scottie yelled, "Bring that back, lass."

Isabel's heart jumped in her chest. She gripped Candace's hand and propelled her forward. "Oh, drat, he'll catch us for certain. Hurry, Candace, run."

Scottie chased after them to get his flask back, but his aged body wasn't able to keep up with them. Isabel glimpsed his tartan fluttering, showing his bare thighs. She colored and averted her gaze to a hideout. As soon as she entered the recess in the wooden wall behind the water well, she yanked Candace inside. Scottie rounded the keep and cursed his displeasure at not finding them.

Isabel peered through the hole in the wood and he turned away. Scottie marched toward the keep. His angry stride indicated he would surely tell Uncle Stan what they'd done, but Isabel knew her uncle had gone hunting and wasn't inside. Their punishment would wait upon her uncle's return. She tugged Candace's arm, and they slunk behind the stable wall.

Isabel smiled and lifted the flask in salute to her friend. "We did it. That was easier than I thought it would be. Come, let us have a drink."

"I never had it before. Does it taste good?" Candace's eyes shone with deviled gaiety.

"Surely it's as good as wine. I want to see what's appealing about it. The men seem to like it."

They climbed to the loft above the stable and sat in a huge pile of hay. Isabel sank back in the softness, opened the flask, and sniffed it. Her nose wrinkled at the odor. She wasn't sure if she should take a swig.

"It doesn't smell terribly awful, just a bit strong. Mayhap it will taste good." She held the flask out to Candace and hoped she would try it.

Candace wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "You first."

Isabel fearlessly swigged the contents of the brew and coughed when the hot liquid rolled down her throat. The brew burned and made her eyes water. She sucked in a breath and gasped.

Candace waited for her report. "Well, how was it?"

"It burns my chest slightly, but it's not overly bad. Here, it's your turn." Isabel held the flask outward, and Candace reluctantly took the container. She lifted it to her mouth but hesitated.

"Go on," Isabel prodded. "I did it, now you must. Come now, be brave."

She lifted it and drank a sip of the liquid. "It doesn't taste bad. It's hot and warms me."

A short while later, the flask lay empty beside her. There was enough of the brew to send them to a giggling state. Isabel grinned at her friend's silliness. Candace couldn't stop laughing at the simplest things, while she became more melodramatic and serious. She stood and wobbled on her feet and threw her hand over her chest. Isabel recited a verse she'd received from an unworthy suitor who she was lucky enough to avoid.

Your hair is like the finest silk...

spun to hold my heart...

Your eyes are like jewels...

that glistens when the sun shines so.

She laughed heartily. "Is that not the worst sonnet you ever heard?"

Candace frowned and nodded. "He actually wrote such drivel?"

Isabel sank to her knees and giggled. "Aye, I thought it sweet at the time, but then after reading it, I told Russ he better take to his learning before he thinks of wooing a lady."

Candace grinned. "This drink is not so bad. It's quite nice. How do you feel?"

"I feel wonderful. We should go and steal more."

Candace rolled side to side and laughed. "Nay, we wouldn't be fortunate enough to get away twice in one day. God will surely punish us for our sins. I fear we must go to confession and pray for forgiveness."

Isabel sucked in a breath. "We committed many sins this day, thievery and...drunkenness. We must find Father Georges and beg for redemption."

"Father Georges' penance will be harsh. I would rather not."

Isabel scooped a pile of hay and threw it at her friend. "It's your fault. I shouldn't have listened to you. You always get me in trouble."

Candace threw hay back, and they began a playful fight. Isabel fell on top of Candace, knowing their laughter was likely be heard by the stable boy at his tasks below. Someone whistled, and then the sound of someone climbing the ladder stopped them. Tom, the stable boy, jumped up onto the upper landing of the loft.

They screamed.

"Ah, mi'ladies, there you are. What are you doing up here?"

Isabel fell back in laughter when Candace snorted.

"Och, I see what you been doing. Best hurry, Laird Gordon's searching for you."

Isabel huffed. They were in trouble for sure. Most likely, Scottie told on them. She grabbed her friend's hand, and they crawled to the ladder. Once they exited the stable, they ran into Aunt Mabel.

"You two look as though you've rolled around in the stable. Isabel, your uncle wants to see you both in the hall. Be quick now."

Isabel tried to think of some excuse for their behavior, but she couldn't think of any. Her friend held her hand tightly, and as they entered the hall they giggled. She stood beside the door and stopped abruptly at the sight of the warriors. Aunt Mabel told them Laird Gordon wanted to see them, but she hadn't said they had company. She tried to correct her rumpled garments. Regrettably, she and Candace couldn't do a thing about their appearance now. She smiled at her uncle, and he grinned and gave her a quick wink.

Uncle Stan said, "Candace, you have a visitor."

The other men held hard looks on their faces. She nudged Candace forward with a prod to her shoulder. Isabel eyed the man who stared at them. She knew who he was the minute she stepped before him. Who else but Candace's brother would come to see her?

"Douglas." Candace became timid.

Isabel barely heard her.

"Candace?" He frowned at them.

Candace nodded.

"I've come to return you home. We must return at all haste."

The warrior relaxed his stance and continued to peer at his sister. He leaned against the table and waited for Candace to speak.

"You've changed and have grown into a bonny woman, lass. We must leave at once."

Candace found her gumption because she finally spoke. Isabel moved closer to her friend and took her hand. "Mother said I could stay as long as I liked. I don't wish to leave. I've my friend here, and we are—"

"Father is dying, get your belongings." He spoke as though he wouldn't be questioned.

"Gracious." Candace slunk to the floor and sobbed uncontrollably.

Her brother didn't seem to know how to comfort Candace, or he wasn't willing to. Isabel knelt beside her friend and patted her shoulder.

She glared at his lack of manners. "That's no way to tell her, you've distressed her." She gave him an incredulous glance, and her brother appeared startled by her reprimand.

"Lass?"

Was he waiting for an apology? Well, she wasn't wont to give him one. Isabel's eyes flickered with anger at how upset he'd made Candace. He continued to stare, and his eyes roved from her head to her feet. She didn't appreciate being assessed so thoroughly.

After staring back for a moment, she reproached him. "You should've broken the news more gently. Are you Candace's brother?"

Isabel lowered her gaze, amazed she'd yelled at him. Whatever that brew was, definitely addled her. She shouldn't have drunk it and regretted it now. Good lord, she lost her good sense—lost it in the stables drinking the foul drink. Losing her good sense would suffice as penance, wouldn't it? At least she was able to curb her tongue and hadn't truly insulted him. Or had she?

Candace never let on how handsome her brother was. His dark honey-colored eyes pierced hers as he gauged her, and his dampened golden-brown hair made him look cross. Isabel couldn't help noticing his ruggedness or his arrogant stance. With a glare, she tried to instill her affront, but she wanted to smile. Would he ever respond? His stare made her uncomfortable.

"Aye, I'm her brother. I'll speak to her any way I please. Who are you?"

Isabel eyed him as his hard words sunk in her mind. He thought to intimidate her. "Humph." She refused to let his arrogance affect her, but affect her it did, when he took a step forward and forced her to step backward in turn. She wouldn't be afraid and boldly stepped forward again. His eyes narrowed at her haughtiness. *Warriors*. She blinked when Candace's cry drew her back, and she patted her friend's shoulder again.

"Let me take you to our chamber, you'll be all right." She pulled Candace from the floor and guided her from the hall.

Once inside the chamber they shared, Isabel sat beside her and wiped tears from her eyes. "I'll pack your belongings. I'm sorry your father is ill, Candace."

"I cannot believe he's dying. He was well when I left. Surely Douglas is mistaken."

"I shall miss you. I don't know when I'll see you again or if I'll be able to visit."

"Your father better let you visit, Isabel. I'll find a way for us to see each other again, though it may be a long while. What if Douglas insists I marry? Oh, what about my da's vow that I can choose my husband? I don't believe Douglas will make the same concession." Candace sobbed again.

Isabel placed her friend's satchel on the bench and placed garments items inside. She stopped when her friend's sobs grew in earnest. She sat beside her again and caressed her back.

"Have your mother tell him so."

"Douglas will be laird, and can do as he pleases."

Isabel pulled a strand of hay from Candace's hair then she touched her own, and smiled when she felt the brittle pieces. "If you must marry, write to me, and I'll come. You cannot wed a boorish warrior like your brother." She scoffed and was giddy, an emotion she only encountered when she was with Candace. She hoped her jest would lighten her friend's mood.

"Nay, you'll not be able to travel to the Highlands by yourself. It would be too dangerous."

"You know me. I could find my own way." Isabel placed her hands on her lap and smiled.

"I'll have Douglas come to get you. That's what I'll do."

"I don't believe he'll be in favor of it. He didn't seem to like me."

"Mother said Douglas is honorable. If I tell him I promised to come for you, he'll have to agree, won't he?"

"You're asking me? If you must marry, have someone fetch me. I'll meet the intended, and if he's not worthy, we'll remedy it."

Candace sighed. "I can always count on you. Thank you."

"I understand how much you love your father, Candace. I'm sorry he's taken ill and is dying. Were that my father was so loving."

Candace nodded slightly. "Will you be all right? I know you dread going home. Our visit was ending anyway."

"Father is sure to send for me, but I shall delay it as long as possible. I'm good at fooling him."

“Aye, you’re good at fooling everyone. I’m glad we were able to visit.”

Isabel mopped Candace’s eyes. “I shall miss you.”

“Let us ready for supper. I want to see how angry you made Douglas. Mother said he’s always charming and fun-loving, and he’s never irate. Leave it to you to ruin his mood.”

“Fun-loving? I find that hard to believe.” Isabel laughed. “Aye, this will be an interesting meal.”

They changed their gowns, and when they were presentable for company, they ventured to the hall. Isabel held Candace’s hand firmly as they walked the hallway. She wondered at her friend’s obvious fear of her brother but didn’t remark on it. Mayhap Candace was nervous because she hadn’t seen Douglas in such a long time. Even though Candace sang his praises, she didn’t really know much of his character, only what her parents had told her.

From the look of him, he certainly didn’t appear to be as fun-loving as Candace said he was. He appeared far too dangerous, too handsome, and too tempting.

Isabel wasn’t at all nervous. She looked forward to supper and seeing the handsome warrior again. Mayhap she could even get him to glare at her again.