

PREVIEW: A LIFE RECLAIMED

Prologue

September, 1571

Warring Tower

Borderlands, Scotland

Anguishing cries tore down the cold dark hallway, rending Thomas's heart in two. Ma Audrey's wails meant one thing—his father was dead. His illness had been so sudden. One day he was riding the marches and bellowing out orders to his moss-troopers and the next he had fallen ill. No one knew what caused his affliction. He awoke on a sunny morning and fell flat on his drooping face.

From there *Da's* health deteriorated with every passing day. Even with all her wise apothecary skills, Gran could not alleviate his pain or determine what had caused the illness. Her face etched with fresh suffering; she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "There is nothing more I can do. 'Twill not be long before he meets his maker."

Gran's chilling words clutched and clawed at Thomas's heart as he made his way to the tower's small chapel nestled near the spiral staircase. He removed a weathered stone from the simple alter and dragged out a worn wooden box. Carefully he raised the lid and looked at the few precious possessions he had collected when he was a young lad—a bit of cloth, an old knife, an old coin, and a stick tower. He lifted up the tower and held it to the dim chapel light. His mind sailed back to when he had made the object. It had been the year after his mother had died, when

Ma Audrey had come from London to live with them. Of course back then he called her Mistress Audrey. They were good friends and she had helped him build the sturdy tower. He smiled and gently placed the treasure back in the box.

“Being English herself,” Gran had said back then, “Mistress Audrey was an angel sent from heaven for she softened Thomas’s father’s heart and restored his faith.” Indeed, things did change after she arrived. She had become a mother to Thomas and his wee brother, Marcas. Mistress Audrey was the only mother his brother had ever known.

Thomas reached beneath his shirt and clasped the ring he wore around his neck. From far beyond, he could hear his real mother’s voice, soft and delicate. She would hum and sing him to sleep and tell him stories of great knights and mighty sultans. His fingers brushed over the raised blue stone. He’d never forget his *ma*, Edlyn Armstrong. Never.

The memory of his birth mother did not ease the growing sorrow that roiled his stomach and captured his throat. His father was dead. He shook the box. A few pebbles rolled exposing a red ribbon he had found in a stable stall long ago. Nothing inside the box revealed the meaning of his father’s mysterious words.

“My son. I am sorry. I should have been honest. You have the right to know. Look in the box.” The words plagued Thomas. There was naught here that would give a clue to their meaning.

The chapel door scrapped opened and Ma Audrey entered. “Oh, I did not know you were here.” She dabbed at her red-rimmed eyes with a soft cloth. “Your father . . .” She hiccupped a sob.

“Aye, I know.” Thomas knew he should go and see the body, but he could not bring

himself to view the gaunt skeleton his father had become. Thomas focused on his possessions, fearing his own misery would spill causing Ma Audrey more distress.

She knelt beside him and put her arm around his shoulders. “He loved you very much.” Her tear-clogged voice threatened to open the water gates in his own eyes.

“I know,” Thomas said softly, shaking the box. “He left me something, but I *canna* seem to find it? Something he wanted me to know about.”

Ma Audrey drew in a sharp breath and clutched Thomas’s shoulder until it ached. “You won’t find the answer here.”

He swiveled his head and met her gaze. “What do you mean? *Da* said to look in the box.”

“Your father was going to tell you, when you were a little older. He meant to protect you. There is another secret box.” She fell back and placed a hand against her forehead. “Please, we shall talk about this once he is buried.”

Secret box. Thomas should have honored her wishes. This was a house of mourning and he should conduct himself in a worthy manner being the new Laird of Warring Tower, but a betraying, impatient serpent twisted through his gut and wanted answers.

With his grief blinding him, Thomas stood, and wrapped his fingers into tight fists. “I am eight and ten. I am old enough. Where can this mysterious box be found?”

“Nay, Thomas. This is not the time.” Ma Audrey held out her hand for his assistance.

Instead of helping her up, he backed away, reading the fear in her eyes. “Where?” The question came out like an icy stick jabbing through his pain.

Her body sagged and her eyes pooled with fresh tears. “I love you and don’t want you to

be hurt. Not at a time like this.”

The evasive words did not calm him, more to the contrary. His spine pricked with foreboding. A tightness grew in his chest and nothing but the truth would cure what ailed him. “I want to know now. Where is the box?”

Ma Audrey shook her head as tears leaked down her cheeks. “Can you not wait?”

Her gaze pleaded, but he stood stone stiff. A ragged cry tore from her throat and Thomas almost relented.

She shook her head in defeat. “Your grandmother has it.”

For a moment her words took him aback. Why would *Da* trust Gran with such an important item and not his wife? Thomas tucked the question away and walked briskly to the door.

“Thomas. It will only add to your agony,” Ma Audrey cried. “Please wait.”

He did not break his stride as he took the spiral stairs two at a time. Without a knock, he stepped into his grandmother’s chamber. She stood, staring into the hearth’s dancing flames. Her long white hair swept over her sagging shoulders and framed her teared-etched cheeks.

With a frail hand she poked at the fire with a gnarled stick. “My son is dead. I loved him dearly.”

Briefly Thomas’s fury ebbed and he wanted to take her delicate body in his strong arms to comfort her. “Gran,” his voice cracked. “So did I.”

Her blue eyes circled by dark purple skin met his. “But you are not here to speak words of adoration for your father, are you? I heard what he said to you.”

Thomas brushed a hand through his russet hair, trying to tamp down his impulsive desire. “I need to know what my *da* meant. I need to know now and I *canna*e wait until . . . where is the box?”

“Of course you cannot. You are so much alike, and yet that is not possible, is it?”

Thomas did not understand her cryptic words nor was he in the mood to figure them out. “Please, Gran. I’ll not rest until I know.”

“You’ll not rest once you do.” She shook her head and with a heavy sigh shuffled over to a large ornate chest.

Quickly Thomas rushed to her side and assisted her in opening the lid.

She bent forward tossing gowns, veils, and shifts onto the floor until she extracted a gold-gilded case. Thomas remembered the decorative box. His father had bought it on an English and Scottish Truce Day. At the time, Thomas believed it was a gift for Ma Audrey, obviously he was wrong.

“What does it hold, Gran?” he asked quietly like an awestruck child.

“A few years back after a raid on the English went terribly wrong and many moss-troopers lost their lives, your father feared his own life could be taken before telling you the truth.”

“Why *didnae* he tell me then? Thomas reached out for the case, but Gran was quicker and pulled the box to her chest.

“You were not ready and methinks you still aren’t. But you are laird now and the truth cannot be kept from you forever.” She closed her eyes as an old torment tore across her face. “A

secret kept too long can choke the life out of those it was meant to protect. Know this, I will always protect and love you.”

Why could no one in this family ever speak plainly? Just because Warring Tower looked like it harbored ghosts did not mean that all within had to speak in shadowy language. Thomas firmly stuck out his hand. “Gran, that is for me.”

“Aye, so it is.” She gently placed the case in his hand and wrapped her fingers around his. “Everyone here loves you. No matter what you learn, we are kin. Always.”

Thomas jerked his hand away and eagerly flipped open the lid. Inside he found a folded piece of parchment protected with his father’s waxed seal. With a snap the seal broke. His fingers trembled as he hurried to open the letter. His heart hitched and raced as he took in his father’s scribbled handwriting.

“Perhaps you would like to sit down before you read,” his gran suggested, offering a chair.

“Nay,” he said gruffly, turning his attention back to the letter. The words swam before his eyes as they began to take focus.

My dearest son, if you are reading this missive then it means I am no longer alive. I meant to have this conversation with you when you were a man.”

Thomas paused, and his body heated with a mite of anger. At what age did his father deem that to be? He was a man now. Shaking off the troubling thought he continued to read.

I do not know how to put this delicately, so I will give you the truth and hope that you will understand my reasoning for not telling you when you were young. You were already born when

I met your mother. At the time, I was heavily in debt. I had lost the ownership to Warring Tower. Your departed grandfather offered me a great sum of money to buy Warring Tower back if I married his daughter.

Gavin Armstrong was not his true father? Thomas worked his mind trying to remember how things were before his mother died. His parents fought often. They hardly spent any time together. Yet never had he thought Gavin of Warring wasn't his father. Dread seeped through Thomas as he forced himself to read on.

It was not until after her death that I learned she was not your mother either.

Thomas's breath stalled. His heart sank to his belly. Nay, that cannot be true. He went back and read the line over and over again. He could feel Gran's tight gaze on him, but he dared not look up, not until he read the entire letter.

It seems your grandfather was heavily in debt also. You were brought as a bairn to his household by a clergyman from the English Tudor court. All your grandfather's debts and mine were paid by Queen Mary Tudor. Your true mother died at the block in the place of Lady Jane Grey, who was queen of England for nine days. Your mother sacrificed herself to give you a better life.

Know this, what started out as an act of greed has turned into love and devotion. I look back on the day I married Edlyn as one of the best days in my life because that is when I became your da. With all my heart, I love and consider you my true kin and heir. All I ask is that you take care of your brother in return.

My love is with you forever.

Da

Tears built up behind Thomas's eyes even as rage built up in his soul. Everyone had lied to him. His real mother died for some English queen. No one here was his real kin. He had always believed the glens, rivers, hills, and the very air of Scotland lived in his bones. He had been wrong. Not a drop of his blood had ties to this land.

He crushed the letter in his hand and fixed his gaze on Gran. Nay, not his gran, just some old woman who could not be truthful.

"Thomas, this changes nothing. I love you. We all love you. You will always be my grandson." He shifted away when she reached out to touch him.

"You are all liars!" His hand shook as he tossed the note into the hearth. The letter twisted and curled as hot embers licked and burned away his father's words. Nay, a foreigner's words.

Thomas stormed out of the room and strode to his chamber, kicking open the door. He'd go to London and seek out the truth. Perhaps find his real father. With clumsy fingers, he jammed a few articles of clothing into a sack and fixed his Jack of Plates over his shirt. The wind outside whistled as rain began to pummel the tower. Thomas grabbed his sword and dirk and secured them to his belt before heading for the staircase.

At the base of the stairs, he found the fortress of Ma Audrey and Gran, standing shoulder to shoulder. He paused, gritted his teeth and pushed through them as if they were stalks of wheat blowing in the wind.

"You are not thinking right," Ma Audrey cried, running after him, grabbing the back of

his jack. “Has not this family suffered enough this day? Your father is dead.”

Thomas stopped. Like a slow rotating wheel he turned and stared at the deceivers. “He is not my *da*. Both of you knew and not one of you thought fit to tell me.” He fought to keep his fury high as his throat constricted. “Not one of you.”

He whirled away and blinked trying to hold back his tears. He would not cry. He would not feel pity for those who held the truth from him. With quick steps, he raced out into the wet, sloppy courtyard. The wind caught his fiery hair, swirling it around his head like a red storm cloud. Behind he heard the sound of feet slapping in the mud. Their cries of remorse chased after him. Did they truly think they could stop him?

A jagged bolt of lightning split the sky, followed by a loud rumble of thunder. “Return to the tower,” he ordered. “Ye will all catch your death out here.” He glanced over his shoulder expecting to find Ma Audrey and Gran standing there. Instead he found his brother, Marcas dripping, soaking wet. His narrow shoulders shaking.

“Where ye goin’, Thomas?”

Though the lad had seen twelve summers, he was reed-thin. If the wind kept coming, he could very well be tossed about like a pile of withered leaves. Easily, Thomas scooped Marcas up into his arms and carried him to the stable. Once inside Thomas gently set the lad on his feet, brushing his wet blond locks out of his soft blue eyes.

“Ye should not be out in this.” Thomas grabbed a cloth from one of the stalls and handed it to Marcas. “Here. Wipe your face. When the rain stops return to the tower, Gran and Ma Audrey will be looking for your comfort.”

Marcas accepted the cloth, but held his gaze on Thomas. “But where are you goin’, brother?”

Thomas let out a heavy sigh and washed a hand over his face. “I *cannae* stay here anymore.”

“Why? *Da* is dead and you are laird. You are the head of the family now.” Such bold words from a lad who but a few months ago played with wooden swords and stole Cook’s chickens wishing to save their miserable necks.

“Listen to me. I am not laird, you are. ‘Tis your birthright.” Thomas looked away and readied his mount, “Gran and Ma Audrey can explain. Look after them. It is your right.”

“I *dinnae* understand. You are the eldest. You are Warring Tower’s laird.” Marcas reached out and grabbed the horse’s reigns. “*Da* was teachin’ and trainin’ you to be laird. You *cannae* be runnin’ away.”

The worry in Marcas’s eyes, made Thomas pause. Being responsible for your family, moss-troopers, and tenants would frighten even the strongest of men let alone a spindly lad. Thomas placed a hand on Marcas’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I have no claim on this land, but you do. You will be a fine laird. If you be needing help, ask Rory Maxwell, he dotes on you like a *grandda*.”

“But you are my brother. I *dinnae* want you to go.”

Tears flooded down Marcas’s cheeks and ripped opened Thomas’s heart. He pulled Marcas into a tight embrace and then removed the necklace from his neck and handed Marcas Edlyn Armstrong’s ring. “Here this is yours. Forget not your real *Ma* and remember me. We will

always be brothers.” Thomas drank in the field and stream scent that was his younger sibling, tucking it into his memory.

Releasing his brother, Thomas took his horse out to the courtyard, knowing one glance back would bring him to his knees.

Once he mounted the beast, another flash of lightening filled the dark sky. The animal reared up and threatened to unseat Thomas. Swiftly, he gained control and headed for the gate. Before crossing the threshold, his betraying eyes glanced back. Heavy drops of rain pelted Marcus’s face, covering his tears. He raised up a weak hand in farewell before dropping it to his side, running towards the gate.

“Brother, brother,” Marcus shouted.

Thomas’s gut wrenched, but he could not offer up one comforting word, not without breaking down himself. He yanked his mount around and took off down the rutted path as if all that was unholy waited for him out in the storm.