



1182



A.V. Arms



Chapter 10

September 14, 1182, Ravenshill

Marina looked at the man sitting across from her and cringed. She was still not convinced this wasn't some kind of joke. One that was getting older by the minute. She could not fathom having to lie beneath him for the rest of her days. She cringed at the thought of being touched by him.

Her hunger had fled when he began to eat. She could see why he was so fat. He gorged himself, stuffing it as fast as his short chunky fingers would allow. He was unmindful of the food stuck in his unkempt beard. The juices of the meat and gravy from the meal slickened the man's brown facial hair darkening it while lightening the gray.

It wasn't the man's size. She had met many a handsome man with extra flesh. She could perhaps excuse his horrid table manners but what she could not deal with was the man's smell. He smelled like sweat and a long unwashed body across the table. She could even smell the fat he ate in large quantities seeping from his pores.

The way he looked at her made her skin crawl. She knew she would puke the first time he climbed on top of her. she wanted to run away, but this was an arrangement her father needed. Bolivar Escarra was from a long line of successful merchants. But their wealth was fading as more and more ships took to the seas, and the world opened more and more with each step of man. But her father had a way of turning it around with Scotland's precious stones. He had his supplier brokering from numerous mines and excavations to move the jewels south. Only the roads from Scotland to England were treacherous with the terrain and the robbers who waited for their opportunities.

Bolivar needed a powerful border lord to marry his daughter with the understanding his men would protect his merchandise once across the border. The only one who could do this was Baron Greer Elliot. The arrangements were made, and Marina accepted the union out of duty. At least, she had before she laid eyes on him and smelled his stench. Now Marina wanted to run. She would return to Suffolk after meeting her future husband. But that would be only to gather her things.

She thought of home, yearned for it, and could not return to it soon enough. Marina had to wonder if her father had even met Lord Greer. She knew he likely did, and it did not matter his daughter's discomfort. The shipping and merchant industry had always been her father's focus. She did not see her father often and never knew her mother, who died when Marina was an infant. She was raised in her father's extensive

household, but it was still the home she knew and was safe in. She would never feel safe with this man in his small keep.

The meal ended after a century of watching the man gorge and belch. When she stood and excused herself, Greer stood and forced a kiss on her cheek. She scrubbed the grease and stench of his breath from her skin as she all but ran from the lord's hall.

Marina's confidence was not bolstered when she reached the women's quarters a level above the lord's hall. Her servants Nola and Diera waited for her there. Raised and educated in Suffolk, Marina had little contact with children her own age. When she voiced her loneliness to her father and asked to be fostered somewhere, she might gain some friends he had refused. She knew it was because he could not be bothered by her. Any arrangements such as that would take time from his businesses. So instead, he brought her Nola and Diera and presented them to her as if they were puppies. The three had been together since they were seven. Now they prepared to watch her marry at the age of fifteen.

The first thing she heard as she crossed beneath the tapestry separating the chamber was Diera crying. Marina would have rolled her eyes at her emotional friend but she herself felt like crying. She knew her friend did not cry because she would be married. It was because of who she was marrying. They had talked and dreamed about what Baron Greer would be like. Their minds could have never allowed them to conjure the man who had greeted them upon arrival. His unkempt appearance was shocking, and his age was more than twice Marina's.

"Stop that," Nola snapped at the crying girl.

"It's okay," Marina said softly, sitting on the edge of the small bed. "Perhaps we all need to take a moment to have a good cry."

"We need to walk," Nola declared with a clap of her hands. But unfortunately, her enthusiasm was far more than what the suggestion warranted.

Diera stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

Marina sighed. "Yes, I guess it would not hurt. Perhaps to the river."

They had crossed the river at the bridge and climbed the hill that Ravenshill was perched on when first coming to the keep. Marina had not glimpsed it since from behind the walls.

"I will get an escort," Nola said and moved toward the door.

"It is fine," Marina said, waving her off. "It is not far," Marina said with a sigh and stood. "Besides, I can do without the company of men at the moment."

Diera looked frightened, but Nola nodded quickly, and the girls left the room.

The current was slow, and the sound of the water running across rocks and lapping leisurely at the bank was soothing. Marina closed her eyes and raised her face to the cloud-covered sky. She drew in long, steadying breaths as she tried to bolster herself that this would not be as bad as she thought.

An elbow to her arm brought Marina to attention.

"What has brought you, girls, here?" the woman asked. A basket sat at her feet, and she waited for the girls to clear her path so she could reach the river.

The girls parted, and the woman picked up the basket and proceeded, and they fell in behind her.

"We had to get air," Nola declared.

The woman smiled at them, sitting the basket down at the river's edge. "You are the one who is to marry our lord?" the woman asked.

"I am," Marina replied, feeling sick to her stomach.

"It is a shame it is not a Kirkham sitting upon that hill. My father claimed they were a fair lot and governed this land well, unlike these greedy Elliots.

"Kirkhams?" Diera asked.

"Greer's father and his traitorous ways brought them here and killed the Kirkham baron and his family." The woman's voice dropped as if afraid she would be overheard. "Our people say the youngest son got away in the siege that killed the rest of his family."

The woman laughed and shrugged. "It is just as likely a fairytale made out of hope we will one day be rid of Greer."

"If this tale was true," Nola began, "where would he be?"

"Oh, I would imagine he was taken north. But that was decades ago. This son would likely be old enough to have found his grave. He was only a child. Some claim he had not been born, lost in his mother's womb as she starved."

"How could we find out if it's the truth?"

"There is no way to find out the truth. It has been too long. All are gone who lived then."



Chapter 2

April 29, 1182, London, England

“Those sheep are not worth sixpence. I will not pay you half a crown,” Kendric told the man for the dozenth time.

“They both are bred,” the farmer insisted. “I swear it.”

“I am not likely to take your word,” Kendric began. “Furthermore, I am not a farmer. I buy them, and I butcher them. I do not raise them.”

“Two shillings,” the farmer tried to negotiate.

“Those sheep are the poorest that has come to me for some time.”

Sometimes Kendric would embellish such things to get a farmer to lower his price, but on this farmer’s sheep, it was no exaggeration. They were skin and bones and having been sheered, it was apparent there was no meat to be cut off them.

“One shilling, sixpence,” the farmer tried again.

Kendric drew in a long breath. “I will give you sixpence for the both of them.”

“That’s robbery,” the man exclaimed.

“Take it or leave it.”

“My family has to eat.”

Kendric scowled at the man. He did not know the man personally, but he was a drunkard. Everything about the man told Kendric this. From the gray wrinkled skin to the bloodshot eyes and the smell of his breath. If this man had a family, he would likely drink up the money before it reached them. Kendric waited, and finally, the man acquiesced.

“Put them in the corral, then we’ll settle up.” The man grumbled as he obeyed.

Kendric entered the office across the way from the killing shed. Some farmer would come in today and pay him at least six shillings a piece so he could have his money doubled. Probably before the man could drink his part of the sale.

Dario darted out of the shed just as Kendric reached the office door. “Taking this to Francis in the market,” the boy said as he dashed down the street with a bundle of wrapped meat in his hands.

Business was good. After growing up in his drunk father’s shadow, Kendric decided to work for his own money and not share it with his father to drink. More often than not, William Kirkham drank while his son had no food. If not for the tavern proprietor Ferguson. He was closer to calling that man a father than William. When his

father learned it was Kendric's intent to withhold his money, he beat him, and Kendric left and never looked back.

Work could be found if a person was willing to work odd hours and had a strong back. One such job was for a London butcher. Kendric slaughtered and transported the meat to the Stocks Market near Walbrook river for a few months. Then the owner became ill and died, leaving his business to his one employee, Kendric. That had been two years before, and at eighteen, he had grown the company moving it from a butcher that was often accused of selling rancid meat to a shop known for its fresh meat. No one accused Kendric of selling lousy meat, which his customers appreciated well.

Until recently, he did all the butchering himself, from the kill to selling it at one of the stalls at the market. But there came a choice to continue as he was or grow and hire people to help. He chose to hire and never looked back. Demand outweighed supply, and farmers knew he paid a premium price for their animals. That is until they came to him looking like those two sheep.

One of the cows let out a moo in protest at the cramped corral. Kendric hurriedly gave the farmer his sixpence and went to the cow. A feast was being held at Westminster tonight, for what Kendric did not know, nor did he care. The castle butchers could not handle the guest list alone, apparently, and Kendric's reputation got him the work to butcher two cows for the feast. He led the cow into the shed and began his gruesome task.



Chapter 3

Marina was unsure how she had come to make the choice she had. But she was beginning to feel panic. She and Nathan had been gone from Ravenshill a long time. Her wedding would be held in a week, and the bride was expected to be there. But she had disappeared two months before on a wild quest to find the Kirkham heir, that may or may not exist.

“I think we should be returning soon. I think if the man existed, he must be dead,” Marina said. Each day that passed made her more nervous.

“It is not William we look for, but his son.”

“How do you know he has a son?”

“My father saw him in the tavern when he saw William.”

“Why didn’t your father bring him then if he was so committed to the Kirkhams.”

“He said William would be no better than Greer. But he said there could be hope in his son. But the son was too young then.”

Nathan had overheard Marina’s questions about the Kirkhams. Though the Elliots did not want to speak the name, the household servants and villagers often spoke of life under the Kirkhams. The Elliots came from their own lands, and Ravenshill was merely a piece of property with resources to be used and people to abuse.

Nathan’s father had been a part of the forces that took Ravenshill for Greer Elliot. He was also one of the men tasked with finding William. But somewhere in the years following the siege, Nathan decided the Kirkhams needed back in power at Ravenshill. The love of his life, now his wife, lived in Kielder, and the abuse and poverty prevalent in the village were unsettling. No one but Nathan and now Nathan’s wife knew he laid eyes on the Kirkham heir. When he found him, he knew he would take William back to Ravenshill and place him back at lord. But William was a drunkard, as his father described him. Marina understood Ravenshill didn’t need a drunkard, but it could be no worse than Greer.

“So, what’s the son’s name?”

“That I do not know.”

Marina paused her step to turn and look at Nathan. “You do not know?”

“I do not.”

An exasperated sigh left Marina. “We are going back to Ravenshill. I do not want to marry Greer, but I do not want to marry an angry Greer if I miss the wedding.”

“Fine,” Nathan said. “But when you are lying beneath that pig, think of the young man who is out there somewhere that could have made a better husband and guardian of Ravenshill.

“That’s not fair to put that on me.”

“Not fair,” Nathan said, drawing up as if he’d been slapped. “It’s not fair that the Elliots are at Ravenshill. It’s not fair that the guards there think every man and woman of Kielder is theirs to kill or abuse. But, unfortunately, it is only a matter of time before it is. Lizette and I will be gone before then.”

“Gone?”

“Yes, Marina. Why would I stay? The one person that can change it all refuses to go one step further.”

“But how many taverns have we searched.”

“Apparently, not enough since we have not found him.” Then Nathan gestured toward a building with its lopsided door and a sign announcing it as simply A Tavern.

“A Tavern?” Marina asked. “You said your father found him in a tavern in London. Could he have meant that itself was the name of that tavern?”

“I’m willing to go in and find out. Stay here.”

Marina looked around herself, unsure of standing on the street alone, but nodded. She told herself this would be the last place they searched for William Kirkham. But she knew they still had a day to find him and make it back to Ravenshill on time. So they owed themselves another day.

Marina was beginning to worry for Nathan’s safety after a long time passed, and he did not return. She often thought she should go in and check on him, but he had warned her that any tavern would be dangerous for her. But she had convinced herself it was what had to be done when the door opened, and Nathan hurried out.

“Let’s go,” Nathan said without explanation as his long legs carried him down the street.

“Did you find anything?” Marina asked, hesitating.

“Maybe,” Nathan replied. “Now, come on before we are too late.”

“Too late?” Marina asked.

“Yes, now come on.”

They wound their way through the streets on a path she was convinced Nathan did not know.

“Here it is,” Nathan announced, stopping abruptly as he stared up at a building announcing it to be the Butcher Block.

“Where are we?”

“Standing outside Kendric Kirkham’s place of business.”

“Kendric?”

“The son,” Nathan said proudly, looking at her with a smile. “Unmarried.”

Marina’s nerves spiked. If they had found him, she wondered what kind of man he was. Was he like Greer or his father? She admonished herself because she knew Kendric was his own man, and she had to have faith he was a good man and would want Ravenshill back.



Chapter 4

Kendric's knife sliced quickly into the cow's meat. He worked his way around the tenderloin. It would be for the fifty-three-year-old King Henry and his highest nobles. He knew this was an essential gathering of Henry's lords because he was trying to quell uprisings from his son Richard. Providing delicacies like beef tenderloin to the richest of his guests could go a long way in gaining their support.

He worked the tenderloin loose and dropped it into the bucket with the first. A throat cleared from the open doorway behind him.

Kendric swung around with his knife in hand and saw a tall man blocking the light from the outside.

"Are you Kendric Kirkham?"

Kendric stiffened at the question. It was no secret who he was to all who walked the streets or worked in the palace. As a matter of fact, he was well known in London thanks to his quality and safe meats. That this man did not know made him wary.

"I see," the man said, taking a step back. "Might I have a word Master Kirkham?" the man said.

Kendric thought of refusing him, but he suspected the man would come into the shed to speak with him. The hut was confining, hot, and, at the moment, covered in blood from the day's slaughter. He almost laid the knife down but thought better of it. He was not a fighter, but he knew how to use a knife, and he hoped that would be enough if this man meant trouble.

Stepping out into the dropping sun, he immediately saw the man standing alone in his lot, save for a tiny woman, perhaps a child. She was of an age it could go either way.

"This is Madame Marina Escarra. She wishes to speak to you."

Marina looked pale as her eyes scanned him from head to toe. He would give a small fortune to know what she was thinking behind her wide eyes of the blood that coated him, clinging to his hands and the wicked knife he still held.

She recovered from whatever shock she experienced. Kendric watched her gather her courage with a swallow and straightening her spine. "I understand you are the son of William Kirkham."

Kendric scowled. "If it's a debt he was owing, he died years ago. You'll get nothing from me."

"No," she said. He noticed how gentle her voice was, soothing and quiet. "I have come about Ravenshill."

Kendric felt a jolt of surprise shoot through him. He had heard the name last when his father ranted about taking it back the evening he passed away. No one could drink like his father, boast or gamble like him. That finally killed him, but it saved him from the slow death of consumption. Fear filled him because he remembered how his father claimed the Elliots still hunted him to kill him. He told Kendric many times he was safe because Kendric was a bastard of his mother's, and when he took back Ravenshill, he would sire himself a proper son. But no one knew he was not William Kirkham's son, not even Ferguson, though it was something Kendric wanted to yell from the rooftops. But the only thing worse than being William Kendric's son was being a whore's bastard.

"I am to marry Greer Elliot." Kendric almost staggered hearing the name Elliot. Kendric thought his father's ravings were disjointed and confused from his years of drinking.

While Kendric tried to think of a response, Marina licked her lips and rushed on. "But I do not care to marry him," she said.

The woman stopped because he decided he did not want to think of her as a girl. If she was to marry, she must have already flowered.

"We want you to take it back," the big man cut the silence that had fallen.

"Take back what?" Kendric asked stupidly, trying to sort all the information.

"Ravenshill."

Another silence fell, heavier as the two looked at him expectantly. "Ravenshill exists?" The man looked annoyed, and Marina panicked.

"Your father was the last surviving Kirkham from the siege twenty-six years ago."

"That was just a fairytale of my father's," Kendric replied.

"No. No one knows how he disappeared, but his body was never found. The Elliots wanted no survivors and tasked my father with finding William. The keep and its village Kielder had suffered greatly, so my father decided he would not kill William but place him back as a baron. But when he found William, he did not like what he saw. But you were there."

"My father has been dead for years."

"You were very young. Too young to take on the responsibility of what you would face taking back your birthright."

Kendric almost spoke up but held his tongue before the words spilled out.

Marina spoke again, "My father is a merchant who arranged my marriage to the Baron of Ravenshill. A business deal for safe passage and a depot for the goods my father carries back and forth across the border. But I do not want the marriage with Greer, but I do not wish to let my father down. So I have come to find you. You're heir to the title, so the king is unlikely to get involved. If you are baron, my father can still have his agreement."

"You wish to marry me, a stranger, standing before you covered in blood, over this Elliot?"

Marina raised her head as if it pained her to say the following words. "You are young and handsome enough. Greer is neither of those things. Whatever your shortcomings, I have only to look upon you as we couple. The thought of Greer makes me gag."

Kendric could not stop smiling. He raised a hand to wipe it from his face, but the blood on his hands stopped him.

“Think of your children. They will be heirs as you are.”

Something passed through Kendric’s eyes. So fleeting, she wondered if she saw it. Did she just see fear?

“Your children?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied.

His eyes left hers and slowly trailed down her. He took his time, making her uncomfortable because she feared he would find her lacking.

After an eternity of holding her breath, his eyes slide from her, “Okay.”

He did not look at her for her reaction.

“And where shall you be while I fight for our home?” His eyes found hers again when he asked the question.

“At your side.”



Chapter 5

Marina had to wonder if she was making a mistake. This man would not stop grinning like some kind of imbecile. She could overlook the blood of his trade. The deep blue of his eyes made that nearly invisible. And she was not completely honest when she said he was handsome enough to do. He was attractive enough to be an ass; perhaps she would not care as long as she could look at his strong features. She knew these thoughts were born of desperation not to lie beneath Greer.

“I am sure this Elliot will not give up Ravenshill just because I arrive at his door.”

“No, he will not,” the man said solemnly. “It will have to be taken by force.”

Kendric laughed, “I am no fighter.”

“Neither is Greer, but he has men to fight. So we will get you fighting men.”

“Fighting men? You both are crazy.” Kendric turned to walk away when Marina shot forward and grabbed his arm.

“Please, Kendric,” she said, knowing her plea made her sound like a child. “Would a barony not be better than this?”

The fool looked around himself as if it was something he would have to contemplate. “Not if I might die in the taking of it.”

Could she overlook cowardice for handsome, she wondered.

“I have men who will fight for a Kirkham,” Nathan said. That surprised Marina.

“I am not the only one in fear for our families.”

“How many men?” Kendric asked. For the first time, it seemed like he was considering taking Ravenshill.

Nathan shrugged. “I will not know until there is a Kirkham for Ravenshill.”

“It might be that I could get men, too,” Kendric said, which surprised Marina more.

“I have helped the soldiers here, specifically their families and children. I am generous when I feel a man and his family deserve it.”

A piece of Marina relaxed at that revelation. He was not coldhearted and did not sound like he was a coward.

“They can repay me with their service, and then I will reward them with property.” Kendric looked from Nathan to her. “Is that not how it is done?”

Marina smiled, “That is indeed how it is done.”

“We must set out early the day after tomorrow,” Nathan said. “I trust you can have your affairs settled then.”

“I will, and I will have men ready.”



Chapter 6

Ravenshill was not what he thought it would be. He wasn't sure what he expected, but it wasn't this tiny three-story tower with battlements atop it and a curtain wall surrounding it. Perhaps he had pictured something grander than the one tower. But, at the same time, it was a beautiful sight. After his initial surprise, he almost felt himself salivating for what he wanted and was ready to have.

The plan was simple enough. However, after Nathan told him his ten men were too few in size to take Ravenshill by force, and not knowing how many soldiers inside were ready to turn on Greer, they came up with a different plan. When Marina returned, she would walk into Ravenshill as if she had not been away for nefarious reasons. She would present Kendric and his men as gifts for Ravenshill's garrison, which she and Nathan left to gather as a surprise for the wedding.

Upon sight, Kendric did not like Greer. He was a loathsome-looking creature with his beady eyes and sour nature. He could see why Marina shuddered at the thought of bedding him. Outside, the walls were pitch black, with the overhanging clouds threatening to drown the wedding the following day. He placed his hands on the crenelated wall protecting the wall walk, looking out onto a darkness that hid what would soon be his. His father would roll over in his grave to see his son on the wall of the Ravenshill he always claimed he would take back.

They only had one night to prepare their plan, for the wedding was set for the following afternoon. But unfortunately, despite Kendric's men and the trustworthy ones Nathan recruited, they still had only about half of what the garrison held, which was packed due to the visitors to the keep for the celebration.

The time was nearing when the men would start moving into action. Not just any men, but his men. His heart pounded at the prospect. It was a heady feeling to be able to raise an army, small as it was.

He saw the light come to life in the hall and knew the men were moving into position. Kendric quietly descended the steps into the bailey. He strolled across the bridge leading into the tower. He ascended the steps two levels. A door did not bar his way, only a tapestry as he stepped onto the second level. He paused, and drawing his knife, he slipped behind the tapestry and moved in the darkness to the bed. He was the one who knew best how to kill and how to make it quick, and he would use the same knowledge from the animals to Greer.

The fat man snored loudly. It was over before Greer was fully awake. A hand over the mouth, a quick stab deep into the man's neck, and the blood geyser out of him. He heard his men as they took control of the castle. He remained in Greer's chamber until Marina appeared at the door.

"It is yours, Kendric Kirkham."

"Is that all?" Kendric asked. It seemed too easy.

Marina shrugged. "the rest of the Elliots will come when they hear of this. We will have our men gathered and be ready for them."

"A siege?" Kendric asked.

"No, not a siege. We will wait at the bridge and defend it. If we are pushed all the way back to the keep, there will not be enough of us to withstand a siege of any capacity."

Kendric drew in a long breath. "alright then."

"It would also help keep Ravenshill secure if you were to go ahead and gather taxes to send to the crown with the notice you are at his disposal. To prove this, send him six hundred men. Greer sent five hundred to defend against his son Richard. He will be grateful for the extra men and the taxes. We will also send notice you upheld the contract between myself and the Baron of Ravenshill and were wed. Then, with any questions answered to problems the king might have, he will not contend the take-back of a Kirkham. If so, he will have to back up and punish the Elliots for taking it in the first place."

Kendric felt as if he had a headache coming on. He didn't know how to collect taxes or get five hundred men to King Henry.

Marina must have sensed his overwhelmed mind. "I will help you, and we will find people we can trust to do these things for you."

Kendric nodded.

"Now, the pressing matter is our marriage. The priest is ready to perform the ceremony tomorrow, but more Elliots will arrive by then. So we'll have the priest marry us tonight so that by the time they arrive, Ravenshill and the bride will be out of reach."

Kendric drew in a long, steady breath. The first task would be the most pleasant. The rest of the tasks could wait until tomorrow after he had married and bedded the woman who would be the Baronness of Ravenshill, his wife.