



What a Lass Wants: A Claimed By the Highlander Novel

By Rowan Keats

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Claimed by the Highlander Novels

“A rich, exciting new voice in Scottish historical romance!”—Monica McCarty, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Raider*

“Intense and sensual.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Lyrical writing...and a strong cast of characters.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Rowan Keats is the author of *To Kiss a Kilted Warrior*, *Taming a Wild Scot* and *When a Laird Takes a Lady*. She graduated from the University of Ottawa with an Honours degree in Business. She worked as a banker, stock broker, and marketing director before returning to her true calling: writing. Born to a French-Canadian father and a Scottish-Danish mother, she has centuries of rich history to draw from when penning her romantic tales of days gone by. She currently lives in Central Canada with her family

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PRAISE FOR THE CLAIMED BY THE HIGHLANDER NOVELS

ALSO BY ROWAN KEATS

SIGNET ECLIPSE

Chapter 1

Cambuskenneth Abbey
Near Stirling Castle
October 1286

Caitrina de Montfort scurried down the darkened corridor of the abbey, a candlestick gripped tightly in one hand and a bowl of lemon brined herring in the other. The queen had awoken in the middle of the night with a fierce desire to eat fish. Given that Her Grace was only weeks away from birthing the future king of Scotland, Caitrina had happily volunteered to fulfill her request. But the timing was inconvenient. And a wee bit disquieting. The graceful stone columns and carved oak crucifixes she admired by daylight were havens for eerie shadows at this hour.

A shiver ran down her spine as she passed an unlit archway.

The circle of light cast by her flickering candle barely held the gloom at bay. Perhaps it would have been wiser to rouse one of the maids. The chambers provided to visiting nobles were in a separate tower of the abbey, more than a scream away from the sleeping quarters of the Augustinian monks . . .

Caitrina grimaced and slowed her pace to a more ladylike walk. *Dear lord*. Why did she insist on letting her foolish imaginings give wings to her feet? What reason would she have to scream? Monks lived here. These were hallowed halls.

She climbed the stairs to the third level, where a single, brave torch fought—and lost—a battle against the shadows. The dim outlines of several arched doorways were discernible along the corridor, but little else.

The queen's quarters were at the far end—a grand set of rooms that included an antechamber, a stone hearth, and a large platform bed. Just beyond the iron-studded door ahead, a pair of armed soldiers faithfully stood guard, protecting the queen and the half dozen women who served her.

Safety was a mere twenty paces away.

She stepped forward.

A faint smile was curling her lips when a hand snaked out of the dark. Big and brutal, it grabbed her by the throat and slammed her against the stone wall. She attempted to shriek, but the only sound that escaped her lips was a strangled whisper. Her candlestick toppled to the wooden floor and the flame was snuffed as it rolled, leaving her in the dead of night with a hot-breathed monster.

Heart pounding, Caitrina squeezed her eyes shut.

“You,” growled the monster, “try my patience.”

She recognized the voice, but it was no less monstrous for its familiarity. It belonged to Giric the Bear—henchman and loyal knave to Edward Longshanks, the King of England. Even with her eyes closed, she could see his large, misshapen left ear and the puckered scar some failed assassin had drawn upon his cheek.

“Every move the queen makes must be reported.”

A flush of shame seared her cheeks. Did he think she could forget, even for one moment, the horrid task demanded of her? Caitrina attempted to respond, but his hand was still too tight, still choking. Impossible.

Hearing her sputter, he eased his hold, and a sweet rush of air filled her chest. He leaned in close, his breath thick with ale and rot. “If the queen shares a meal with the abbot, you tell me. If she eats haggis instead of venison, you tell me. And if she chooses not to return to Stirling Castle for the evening, *you tell me*. Every move. Am I clear?”

“’Twas a belated decision,” Caitrina said hoarsely. Miraculously, she had managed to hold on to the bowl of fish, and she cradled it to her chest. A flimsy barrier, to be sure, but a strange comfort nonetheless. “She felt poorly.”

“Were she already confined, as a woman of her station ought to be, such discomfort could have been avoided.”

“And had her husband not perished on the eve of her birthday,” Caitrina responded, “she might well be resting at Kinghorn instead of seeking out every holy monk in the land. But she is convinced the unfortunate timing of Alexander’s death is an ill omen, and she fears for the soul of her unborn child.”

Giric snorted. “She’s a madwoman. All the more reason I should know what she is about.”

The insult chafed her already raw conscience. “I’m in service to the queen. I cannot be sending a messenger every hour.”

“It is King Edward you must please, not that French bitch.” Something feather soft slid along her cheek. “Honor the bargain you struck with him. Find a way to make him happy.”

Caitrina grimaced. Bargain? That made it sound as if she’d had a choice. “I have given him every insight into the queen’s affairs that I am privy to. My only lapse has been this delay.”

“A delay that might have had serious consequences.” Giric tucked the soft object into the neckline of Caitrina’s gown. “Fail him, and the king will make good on his promise to brand you and your sister as traitors to the crown.”

A vision of her sister sprang into Caitrina’s mind—the last time they’d seen each other, at Dunfermline Abbey in early April. The day after King Alexander’s state funeral. She would never forget the bewildered expression on Marsailli’s young face as Edward and his soldiers escorted her off to Uxbridge Priory. Nine years separated the two girls in age, and Marsailli had not understood that when a king offers his protection, he cannot be denied. Even when that protection was merely a mask of kindness. “I have not failed.”

The hand about her neck tightened again. “I will be the judge of your success,” he snarled. “Not you. Make your reports with more diligence, or you will not enjoy the consequences.”

Her family had been stripped of land, wealth, and title, but noble blood still coursed through Caitrina’s veins—her grandfather had been the Earl of Leicester and her grandmother had been the daughter of a king. Allowing Giric to believe she was without power would be a mistake. She opened her eyes. The henchman’s face was only inches away, and she could vaguely behold the rippled flesh of his scar. “I am cousin to the queen. Punish me without just cause and I’ll see you hang for it.”

The Bear chuckled in her ear. “You and your sister are the spawn of an excommunicated murderer. Who do you imagine will leap to your defense?”

His words sparked a bitter fire in Caitrina’s chest, and she struggled against his hold. “He was *not* a murderer. My father simply did what honor demanded. He avenged his kin.”

“There was no cause for vengeance. Your uncle and grandfather died on a battlefield. Henry of Almain had his throat cut in a church.”

“You paint Henry as an innocent,” she said. “But he was not. He stole Leicester’s colors and then slaughtered every man who flocked to his banner.”

“King Edward does not tell the tale the same way.”

“Of course not. Henry was obeying Edward’s orders!”

Giric’s thumb pressed deeply into her throat. “Your father’s sins are not worthy of debate,” he snarled. “All that matters is the babe. Do as I say, or your sister will pay the price. Understand?”

Caitrina's desire to argue vanished along with her air. She understood the stakes all too well. Spying on her cousin upset her, but imagining the life Marsailli would live if they were branded as traitors made her physically ill. Their father had died a penniless pauper in some unknown land. She could not allow Marsailli to endure the same fate. She nodded.

"Is the birth imminent?"

She shook her head.

Giric eased his hold again. "The midwife in my employ suggests it could be any time in the next month. I must know the moment she is confined."

Caitrina's gut knotted. What need would Giric have for a midwife? She had been spying on the queen for several months and she had long known King Edward's interest lay in the bairn—the future monarch of Scotland. But what was the king's ultimate intent? "The monks have offered the queen the hospitality of their fine manor at Clackmannan. We travel there on the morrow."

"Good."

"I assume that once the bairn is born, Marsailli will be free to leave the priory and take up residence with me in the queen's household?"

A short silence followed her question.

Finally, he released her and stepped back. "She will be free to depart once your task is complete."

"And when is that?"

"After you snatch the babe and bring it to me."

"What?" Caitrina stared at his murky outline in horror, her stomach heaving. Steal her cousin's babe? The only child Yolande would ever have with her now dead husband? "No word was ever said about stealing the bairn. I was asked to spy, nothing more. I cannot do such a thing."

"Did you truly believe a bit of spying would be enough to earn you forgiveness for your father's evil deed?" the Bear jeered. "Surely you are not so witless as that."

Head spinning, Caitrina slumped against the stone wall. If not witless, then certainly naive. It all made a sick sort of sense now—why King Edward had approached her personally at the funeral, why the meeting had occurred in an abandoned bothy behind the abbey, and why he had taken her sister into his care. This had been their plan all along. Her sister was more than a simple prisoner. She was the means by which King Edward would bring a proud and independent nation to its knees.

"Is my sister safe?"

"Well enough . . . for now. She is no longer at the priory. She is here in Scotland, with me."

Caitrina died a little at his words. It had been dreadful enough imagining her sister alone with a group of strange nuns. But with Giric? God only knew what horrors Marsailli was enduring at this mongrel's hands. At ten and five, her sister had developed into a willowy beauty with a gentle soul. She would not fare well under abuse. Not that Edward Longshanks spared a thought for the lives of innocent young lasses—he cared only for his own plans.

And those plans included hammering the Scots into submission in any way he could. He'd revealed his true colors in his negotiations with Caitrina, openly deriding his neighbors to the north. But she'd never imagined he would stoop so low as to steal Yolande's bairn. *Dear lord.* "Kidnapping the heir to the throne of Scotland will be no easy feat."

"You are cousin to the queen," he reminded her.

"Cousin or no," she protested, "what you ask is impossible. The bairn will never be alone."

"Find a way," he said softly. "Or lose everything you value."

Then he took another step back and disappeared into the darkness.

As his footsteps faded and silence took over the corridor, the stiffness in Caitrina's shoulders eased. Echoes of the Bear's threats still rang in her ears, but she darted for the big oak door at the end of the corridor with the bowl of herring clasped to her bosom like a stolen treasure. She'd been gone far too long. The queen would be weak from hunger.

Inside the antechamber, the two armed guards draped in red and gold tabards stood silent and purposeful, completely unaware of the incident in the corridor. Not that they would have come to her defense had they known—they were members of the royal garde du corps. They would die before leaving the queen's side.

She pushed on the inner doors and entered.

A waft of soft heat from the fire greeted her. Five ladies-in-waiting, clad only in their white linen night rails and silk slippers, were loosely gathered around the huge platform bed in the center of the room, chatting in quiet undertones.

Gisele de Noyon, the mistress of the robes, scurried to her side. She snatched the fish from Caitrina's hands, irritation evident in the deep creases on her brow. "*Mon dieu!* You lazy wench. Did you stop to stare at the moon? Martine was right. I should have sent a maid."

"The kitchens are on the far side of the abbey," Caitrina reminded her.

But she need not have bothered. Gisele had already spun about and sailed for the bed. The heavy velvet draperies hung open on one side, revealing the young queen, reclined upon a sea of embroidered pillows. A broad smile spread across Yolande's face as she spied the fish, and she eagerly accepted a silver spoon with which to eat. She had the spoon poised above the bowl, about to partake, when she suddenly lifted her gaze and stared across the room.

"Caitrina," she called. "Come."

The informal summons earned Caitrina a glare from Gisele. Ladies-in-waiting were typically addressed by their titles, and the queen rarely strayed from that etiquette. Except with her cousin.

Avoiding the censure in Gisele's eyes, Caitrina crossed to the bed with as much speed as decorum would allow and curtsied. "How may I serve you, Your Grace?"

"Lady Gisele has assured me that no food would be brought to me without being tasted," Yolande said, gently caressing her mounded belly with her free hand. "But I need to hear that assurance from your own lips. For the sake of my prince."

Her fears were not groundless. Some months before, a fiend had attempted to poison the queen and her unborn child—and very nearly succeeded. “You have my word,” said Caitrina. “I woke the cook, and he tasted the fish himself, right before my eyes.”

Satisfied, the queen’s spoon dipped into the bowl and scooped up a small portion of the flaky fish. It went into her mouth, and Yolande’s eyes closed briefly as she savored her midnight meal. “Perfect,” she murmured after the mouthful was consumed. Then she emptied the bowl in a series of delicate but eager bites.

Gisele removed the bowl to a side table and one of the other ladies offered the queen a lavender-scented cloth to wipe her lips. Now replete, the queen laid her head back. “I wish to rest.”

Caitrina was about to step away when the queen’s eyes popped open and she grabbed Caitrina’s hand. “Tomorrow, we will talk, my little cousin. You have been a true comfort to me these past months since my Alexander’s death.”

“I live to serve you, Your Grace.”

“We will require a lady of the nursery,” the queen said, her eyelids drooping. “Someone who will put the needs of the new prince above all else. You have proven your loyalty time and again, and I can think of none better to entrust my babe and his future.”

Caitrina felt, rather than saw, the stabbing glance from Gisele. “Would you not wish to appoint a woman with more experience, Your Grace? A woman with children of her own?”

“Nay,” the queen said, allowing her eyes to close on a soft sigh. “An unwed woman is best. The lady of the nursery should have no other claims on her attention.” She released Caitrina’s hand. “But we will speak more on this tomorrow.”

Bowing deeply, Caitrina stepped back.

The other ladies closed in, tucking the sheets around the queen and lowering the drapes.

Lady of the nursery. How incredible. She’d never imagined the queen would honor her with such an appointment. Especially now. If Yolande had any inkling of the conversation in the corridor, she’d have Caitrina wrapped in chains and thrown into the dungeon. And rightly so. Disloyalty and treason should never be rewarded, no matter how fine the intentions were.

With her heart beating a heavy march, Caitrina reached into the neckline of her gown and pulled out the feather-soft item Giric had tucked there. It was a lock of hair, bound with a piece of hemp. Gleaming, nut-brown hair, with a slight curl. Caitrina’s breath caught in her throat.

Marsailli’s hair.

It had been hacked roughly from her sister’s head, the shorn edges uneven and varied in length—a rather obvious threat: steal the bairn, or your sister will suffer. Giric probably intended the hair to be a mild warning, but the sight of it stabbed Caitrina deep in the chest. It was one thing to shear a man’s hair, but a woman’s? Giric might just as well have laid Marsailli’s cheek open with a blow or broken her nose. Her sister’s beauty would be marred for some time to come.

Giric was truly a monster.

And he now had control over her sweet, innocent Marsailli.

Caitrina lifted her gaze to the queen's bed. The ladies-in-waiting were blowing out candles and returning to their pallets. As fearful as she was to defy the Bear, the time had come for action. She could not allow Marsailli to remain in that wretch's clutches. Nor could she bring herself to steal Yolande's precious babe.

Nay.

She must find her sister and determine some way to outwit Giric.

* * *

As Bran MacLean urged his mount over the ridge and down into the glen, he stole a glance over his shoulder. Rolling hills of brown grass and faded purple heather filled his gaze. No visible sign of pursuit. But that didn't mean they weren't there. The band of MacCurrans on his tail were very determined. And skilled. They had successfully navigated his every effort to shake them thus far, and he'd be a fool to assume he'd lost them.

The night before, under the light of a full moon, he'd caught a glimpse of their camp about a league distant. In the hours since, they would surely have gained ground.

He bent lower over the horse's neck as the mighty beast galloped down the hill, the wind whipping its mane into his eyes. In hindsight, stealing this charger had been an error. He had allowed its worth to blind him. Aye, it was a magnificent animal with a deep chest and heavily muscled legs, but it was bred for war, not speed. The MacCurrans had given chase on fleet-footed coursers.

Any hope of reaching Edinburgh ahead of the MacCurrans and disappearing among its familiar streets had been dashed. They would catch him long before he reached the city. A new destination was in order. Stirling, perhaps. It was nearly as large and crowded as Edinburgh. But could he reach the walls before the MacCurrans ran him down?

He spared another glance over his shoulder.

A flash of white at the crest of the ridge sent a shot of ice water through his veins. They were almost atop him. He was about to lose the treasure in his pouch . . . and quite possibly his life. Unless he did something bold and unexpected.

With a tug on the reins, he veered south toward the heavy forest that hid the Black Devon Burn from view. He entered the woods at full canter, ducking to avoid low-hanging tree branches. Aware that his mount was weary and eager for water, he urged the horse toward the stream with his heels, then untied his pouch from the saddle and waited for the right moment. It came upon him swiftly—a moss-covered fallen log to the right. He dove off the horse, hitting the ground so hard he could barely draw breath. But that served him well. He had no sooner rolled into the musty lee of the fallen tree than his eager pursuers thundered past, following the hoofprints his mount had left in the loam.

Bran leapt to his feet, aching from head to toe.

He had only a few minutes to save his skin. Once the MacCurrans caught sight of his riderless horse, they'd swiftly backtrack. The village of Clackmannan lay a short distance west. The manor was held by the holy monks of Cambuskenneth, and with any luck, he'd find sanctuary there.

Tossing his satchel over his shoulder, he wended his way through the bracken, taking care not to bend the

withering fern fronds in his direction. When he reached the burn, he waded through the water for thirty paces. A temporary measure at best. The MacCurrans were Highlanders—they would soon pick up his track. He reached the bounds of the forest and found himself at the edge of a fallow field. Across the field lay the small village, and beyond that, the dark stone walls of the manor. But 'twas not the sleepy town he'd expected.

A large party had arrived at the manor house; at least twenty horses, two carriages, and several carts piled high with goods stood in the close. A crowd of villagers had gathered to watch the servants unload. Bran swiftly scanned the scene, his gaze halting when he reached the banner held by a young soldier—a split shield: gold with three red lions rampant on one side, azure with three argent fleurs-de-lis on the other.

The arms of Yolande, the dowager queen of Scotland.

Bran smiled.

A busy scene would serve him well. Where there were many hands in the work, there was also confusion, and confusion almost always brought opportunity. His best chance of eluding the MacCurrans would be to hide where they least expected to find him: in the thick of the queen's retinue. His gaze lifted to the top floor of the manor house. But it would not be easy to gull the sort of men who surrounded a queen.

He opened his pouch and stared at the silver and sapphire crown within.

Then again, nothing worth having ever came easy.

He circled around the village and approached the manor from the north, where activity was the greatest. Head low, stride purposeful, he headed directly for the caravan of carts. To blend into a royal household, he would need finer garments than the simple lèine he currently wore. With a swagger that suggested he was exactly where he belonged, he sauntered up to a cart stacked with personal effects, seized a brass-banded chest, and hefted it over his shoulder. Then he did precisely what the other carters were doing—headed for the interior of the manor house.

But as he passed the seneschal and his clerk, who stood at the wide-open gate guiding the unloading, he was hailed. "You there," the seneschal said. "Halt."

Bran paused, keeping his head bowed. The seneschal must not get a good look at his face.

"Who told you to gather that chest?"

An excellent question. For which he had no truthful answer. "One of the queen's ladies," he lied. "She feared that some of their clothing had gone astray."

"Nonsense," the seneschal said. "I accounted for all of the queen's chests myself. This one belongs to Chevalier Francois, who will be occupying a chamber on the second *étage*. Third door on the left. Take it there immediately."

"Aye," he said, nodding.

Bran mounted the stairs, but did not stop on the second floor. He climbed to the third level and ducked into the first empty chamber he found. Then he set the chest down, closed the door, and rummaged through the contents. Unfortunately, Chevalier Francois must be a knight overly fond of rich food. Everything inside was too large for him.

Abandoning the chest, he left the room and made his way back down the stairs, merging with the other servants returning to the carts.

“Did ye lay eyes upon the queen?” the heavyset carter in front of him asked of another.

“Aye,” his friend replied. “But only a wee look. She and her ladies went straight to their rooms.”

“Is it true she’s got the face of an angel?”

The other man snorted. “I canna say. All I noted was her swollen belly.”

“A shame Marshal Finlay is off to his cousin’s wedding in Oban.” The stockier man strode to the cart and hauled a chest atop his shoulders. “He’ll be right fashed to learn he’s had a royal guest.”

“He’ll have chance enough to pay his respects when he returns.”

“Aye?”

“Aye. Fearchar says the abbot will play host to Her Grace until the bairn is born.”

Bran selected another well-appointed chest and repeated his effort. It took him three tries to locate the attire he was seeking—simple, elegant tunics crafted of the finest wool and light linen sarks that drifted over his skin like warm water. Dressing swiftly, he exchanged his lèine for a dove gray tunic and a black belt.

The chest gave up several other useful items—two additional tunics, one blue and one green, and a hooded cloak, all of which he stuffed into his satchel. Near the bottom, he found a pair of soft leather gloves—just the sort a man of means would use for riding. He tucked those into his belt.

Now came the difficult part.

Carving out his place.

Having spent the better part of a lifetime observing the wealthy in order to rob them, he knew a great deal about looking the part of a noble. But successfully playing a role, even for as short a time as he intended to remain in Clackmannan, would require more than just the right look. It would require him to think swiftly, act without hesitation, and dance the very fine line between truth and lie.

Descending the stairs, Bran waited just inside the manor until the seneschal and his clerk were engrossed in deciding the fate of two more items from the carts, and then he slipped past the pair and headed for the stables. Once inside the dim confines of a horse stall, he donned the cloak and tied his satchel to one of the saddles slung over the stall walls.

As he applied dirt from the stable floor to the hem of his cloak to acquire a well-traveled look, a one-eyed tabby cat entered the stall, her belly heavy with a litter of soon-to-be-born kittens. She rubbed her body against his legs with an arched back and a plaintive mewl.

“Hey there, lassie,” he said, crouching to scratch the cat under the chin. The tabby was leaner than he would expect a village cat to be, so he dipped a hand into the small purse at his belt and found his last piece of dried herring. He offered it to the cat in the palm of his hand and waited patiently as she nibbled. Not that he could afford to wait much longer. The MacCurrans would descend upon the village forthwith.

Standing in the shadowy interior of the stables, Bran eyed the seneschal. Thin faced and heavily browed, he

was poring over his clerk's list with an unrelenting frown. A man with a ruthless attention to detail, it would seem.

Bran glanced down.

Was he missing anything? Cloak, gloves, dirk, purse. All good. His boots were a wee bit shabby, but if he properly held the seneschal's attention, that shouldn't be a problem. He spread his hands. Och, *there* was the hole in his plan. Jewels. A well-born man would wear at least one ring. Digging into his leather purse, he found one of the other items he'd filched at the MacCurran wedding. A gold ring set with a small ruby.

He slid it over his middle finger. Perfect.

He stepped into the sunlight and marched toward the manor house.

"Where is the master carter?" he demanded as he approached. "Someone must collect my satchel."

The seneschal looked up, frowning. "And who might you be, sir?"

Bran met his gaze easily. "Giles Gordon, marshal of Feldrinny. Feldrinny is a liege estate to Cambuskenneth, bordering the abbey to the west. Abbot Michael insisted that I journey to Clackmannan in Marshal Finlay's absence to ensure all is well tended for the queen's sojourn. It is the marshal's deepest regret that he be absent at this time, but we shall do everything in our power to ensure the queen's comfort."

The seneschal stared at him, hard.

The wool cloak was lightweight, but it still brought a flush of heat to Bran's cheeks. He wasn't accustomed to wearing so much clothing, even on a cool autumn day. But he ignored the discomfort, facing the seneschal with a slight sneer. "And you, sir?"

"Roger de Capelin, the queen's seneschal."

Bran nodded. "Excellent. Have someone collect my satchel from the stables. I got word only this morning that Her Grace would be confined here and, by necessity, I left without my man."

Then, without waiting for de Capelin's response, he entered the manor.

"I wish to see the constable, Clackmannan's seneschal, and the priest," he said loudly to those going about their business in the great hall. "Immediately."

"Brother Torquil and Seneschal Amos accompanied Marshal Findlay to Oban."

Excellent. The fewer people he had to convince, the better. "Fetch me the constable and the seneschal's clerk, then."

The trick to a good ruse was to mix as many truths with the lies as possible. Feldrinny was indeed an estate belonging to the monks at Cambuskenneth. He knew that because his father had once been the marshal to Laird MacLean, who held the land bordering Cambuskenneth to the northwest. Of course, his information was twenty years old, dating back to the years before his da stole from the laird and was banished in disgrace. But surely things had not changed much in that time?

"I understand Marshal Finlay's seneschal and the priest traveled with him to Oban," Bran said to Dougal, the constable, when he appeared. A big, brawny man with long red hair and a wiry beard.

“Aye.” The constable’s tight, distrustful face eased with Bran’s command of the facts.

“Did they leave you with the keys?”

“Aye.”

“And what of the supplies? Do we have good measure of the foodstuffs on hand? Can we provide for the queen in the manner she deserves?”

Dougal shook his head. “We’ve no venison, and birds we have on hook will not last long with forty additional mouths to feed.”

“Organize a hunt, then,” Bran said. “And have our cook speak with the queen’s cook about Her Grace’s preferences.”

“Marshal Gordon?”

Bran looked up. A young lad had come in through the big front door, his hair disheveled and smudges of dung upon his lèine. “What is it?”

“There are three men in the close. MacCurrans, they claim. They say they’re on the hunt for a thief. They spied him traveling in this direction and they wish to search the grounds.”

Bran tossed a look at the constable. “Do you know these MacCurrans?”

“Nay.”

Proper etiquette dictated he greet the visitors—but that would spell disaster. “I must see to the queen’s needs. Check their credentials and, if all is satisfactory, have your men-at-arms offer all due assistance to these lads. We cannot have a thief at large while the queen is in residence.”

Dougal nodded and departed.

Bran tasked the clerk with reviewing the accounts to ensure they had sufficient coin to weather a lengthy stay by the queen, and then climbed the stairs to the third floor. He knocked upon the door to the queen’s rooms and was greeted at the door by a dour-looking woman in a white headdress. “Giles Gordon, milady. The marshal. I respectfully request an audience with the most senior of the queen’s ladies.”

“Lady Gisele is tending to Her Grace.”

He nodded. “Please inform her that for the moment all travel beyond the manor walls is curtailed. There is a thief on the loose. My constable and a contingent of our soldiers are on the hunt for the cretin, but until he is found, no one leaves the safety of the manor.”

She nodded and withdrew.

Pleased with himself, Bran went in search of a room to claim as his own. Forbidding travel would ensure word of his arrival in Clackmannan did not get back to the monks. Now all he had to do was avoid the MacCurrans until their search of the grounds was complete, give them a day to move on, and then he could steal a horse and head back toward Edinburgh.

* * *

Caitrina stared at the very plump Lady Etienne with a sinking feeling in her gut. “We’re not permitted to leave the manor? Not even to take a ride accompanied by soldiers?”

“*Non.*” Etienne scowled at her embroidery needle, which was buried awkwardly in the linen backing close to the wooden frame. “Why do you care?”

Normally she wouldn’t. But Giric was out there in the woods somewhere, holding her sister captive. And Caitrina needed to find them. “When the new prince is born, I will be tending to his care night and day. Until then, I would like to enjoy the waning days of autumn.”

“It will take them no more than a day or two to find the thief.”

To the other ladies-in-waiting, a day or two meant nothing. Another silk lily sewn onto their samplers, perhaps. To Marsailli, it could mean another shorn lock of hair . . . or worse. “Two days is too many. I wish to be outside. The air is crisp and bright.”

Etienne shrugged. “Only a heathen raised in this godforsaken land would think thus.”

Caitrina ignored the slight. They actually forgave her father for his crimes. He had been a French nobleman bent on avenging his family honor. But her mother had been a Scot, and to the other ladies, that meant she was a lesser being. “Who is this man who decreed we stay locked inside?”

“The marshal. A man sent by the monks to ensure we are well cared for.”

Lifting the hem of her blue satin bliaut, Caitrina made for the door. “I will speak with him.”

“What right have you to interfere?” asked Etienne. “You are a commoner.”

The barb stung and Caitrina wilted a little, but she still halted and spun around. Her mother had suffered greatly when she was stripped of her title, and she had been forced to beg her cousin, the Earl of Atholl, for a place in his household. But what happened to them could happen to anyone. And she was still the queen’s cousin. “I am a lady of the queen’s court, as are you. I have every right.”

Etienne had no response to that.

Caitrina left the room with her head high and descended the stairs into the great hall. “Where is the marshal?” she asked a passing gillie.

He pointed to a tall figure standing before the hearth. The marshal was younger than she’d expected, a stalwart fellow with a full head of dark gold hair and a strong, beardless chin. He was also handsome. And something of a charmer. The slow smile he gave the serving girl who brought him a fresh horn of ale bordered on inappropriate.

“Marshal,” she said, crossing the room.

He faced her as she approached, his deep brown eyes taking a brazen inventory of her every feature, from the tip of her beaded slippers to the top of her braided hair. Then he offered her a short bow. “Good day to you, Lady . . . ?”

“Lady Caitrina.”

“How might I aid you?”

"I fear this decision to contain us might be a bit rash."

His eyebrows lifted. "Are you aware, my lady, that there is a thief on the loose?"

"I am aware," she acknowledged, trying not to look him right in the eye. My goodness, the man was as forward as the devil. "But one thief is hardly an army of invaders. I cannot see any risk in riding with a proper escort."

"I disagree."

Caitrina cut short her study of his broad chest—which filled the fine wool of his gray surcote to perfection—and shot him a frown. His dismissal of her opinion was cavalier. "Really? Why?"

He seemed surprised that she would question his decision—his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared a bit—but he addressed her comment without rancor. "The lads who hunt this fellow say he's both dangerous and sly. Willing to go to any lengths to get what he wants. To ride outside the manor walls with such a maligner nearby would be an invitation to misfortune."

That certainly did not sound like any man she would care to encounter. But she could not allow anyone to stop her from finding Marsailli. Dangerous or no. "Give me four men. Surely even the slyest of thieves cannot best four armed soldiers."

"Nay."

Caitrina stiffened. "Are you refusing to give me the men?"

"Return to your rooms," he said. "There'll be no riding today."

Had she truly thought this man a charmer? He was a cad. "You cannot simply dismiss my request."

"I can, and I have. My duty is to keep all within these walls safe, and I'll not abandon that duty to please a lass." He smiled. "Even as bonnie a lass as you."

Caitrina glared at him. Did he really think a smile would appease her? The wretch had no idea how dire her circumstances were—nor could she confess the reality in an effort to sway him.

"And if I choose to take a horse and leave of my own accord?"

The smile left his eyes. "It would be an error to test the bounds of my good nature, Lady Caitrina."

All hint of gentleness had vanished, leaving a hard, intense man whom she had no difficulty imagining hauling her up the narrow steps of the keep and locking her in her rooms. "The queen will hear of this, sir."

He shrugged. "Share my edict with anyone you must."

Teeth on edge, she gave the marshal one last bitter stare, and then turned on her heel. Damn the man. And damn the thief who'd chosen this direction in which to travel. Between the two of them, they had ruined everything.

She mounted the stairs to the third floor. But she could not be so easily stymied. If riding out the front gate was out of the question, then she'd find another way to search the forest.

Chapter 2

Once Lady Caitrina had disappeared into the stairwell, Bran released the breath he'd been holding. A very determined lass, that one. He'd fully expected to have to drag her up the stairs, kicking and screaming like a wildcat. But apparently, ladies-in-waiting didn't resort to such antics.

He gave the lady a reasonable lead, then followed her up the stairs.

The queen had appropriated Marshal Finlay's rooms, so the seneschal had offered Bran a smaller room at the opposite end of the third-floor corridor. Any room would do, frankly. He'd be here only a night or two. All he needed was a wee bit of privacy . . .

He opened the door to his chamber.

The young lad bent over a small oak chest by the window abruptly straightened. "Marshal! My apologies. I thought to be done afore you returned."

"What in the bloody blazes of hell are you doing?" demanded Bran. His satchel lay at the young man's feet, the contents open to view. The fine wool of the two purloined tunics spilled out onto the plank flooring.

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