



The Ranger: A Highland Guard Novel

By Monica McCarty

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Chosen to help Robert the Bruce in his quest to free Scotland from English rule and claim his crown, the legendary team of warriors known as the Highland Guard battles on.

Embedded deep behind enemy lines, Arthur “Ranger” Campbell is prized for his razor-sharp senses and his ability to blend into the shadows. But when Arthur infiltrates the clan of the chieftain who murdered his father, his heart is locked on revenge. Inside he faces unexpected resistance from the sweetest of obstacles—a honey-haired siren who is his enemy’s daughter.

Intrigued by this ruggedly handsome newcomer to her father’s forces, the vivacious, enchanting Anna MacDougall is a woman whose skill at uncovering deception rivals Arthur’s own. Though yearning for a quiet life with a good man to love, Anna is drawn to this mysterious knight whose eyes devour her but whose words push her away. As danger, treachery, and the threat of looming war draw them closer into each other’s arms, a warrior made of steel must make a choice from the heart: love or revenge.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Monica McCarty is the bestselling author of *The Hawk* and *The Chief*, the first two books in the Highland Guard series, the Highlander trilogy (*Highlander Untamed*, *Highlander Unmasked*, and *Highlander Unchained*), and the Campbell trilogy (*Highland Warrior*, *Highland Outlaw*, and *Highland Scoundrel*). Her interest in the Scottish clan system began in the most unlikely of places: a comparative legal history course at Stanford Law School. After a short but enjoyable stint as an attorney, she realized that her career as a lawyer set against her husband's transitory life as a professional baseball player was not exactly a match made in heaven. So she traded in her legal briefs for Scottish historical romances with sexy alpha heroes. Monica McCarty lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband and their two children.

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One

Dunstaffnage Castle, Argyll, Scotland, May 24, 1308

Please, let him be dead. Please, let it finally be over.

Anna MacDougall set her basket down and knelt at her father's feet, praying to hear the news that would put an end to the war that had marked every day of her life.

Literally.

Anna had been born on a momentous day in the history of Scotland: the nineteenth of March, the year of Our Lord twelve hundred eighty-six. The very day that King Alexander III had ignored the advice of his men and raced to Kinghorn in Fife on a stormy night to be with his young bride—sliding off a cliff and falling to his death on the way. The king's lust had left his country without a direct heir to the throne, resulting in twenty-two years of war and strife to determine who should wear its crown.

At one time there had been fourteen competitors for the throne. But the true battle had always been between the Balliol-Comyn faction and the Bruces. When Robert Bruce took matters into his own hands two years ago and killed his chief competitor, John "The Red" Comyn—her father's cousin—he'd made a blood enemy of the MacDougalls forever. Only their MacDonald kinsmen were despised as much as Robert Bruce. Bruce's actions had forced the MacDougalls into an uneasy alliance with England.

Even Edward Plantagenet was better than having a Bruce on the throne.

And it was Bruce's death that she prayed for now. Ever since word had arrived that in the middle of his campaign north he'd taken to his sickbed with a mysterious illness, she'd prayed for the ailment to claim him. For nature to vanquish their enemy. Of course, it was a terrible sin to pray for a man's death. Any man's death. Even a murderous scourge like Robert Bruce. The nuns at the abbey would be horrified.

But she didn't care. Not if it meant the end to this bloody, godforsaken war. The war that already had claimed her brother and fiancé, and had taken its toll not only on her aging grandfather, Alexander MacDougall, Lord of Argyll, but also on his son—her father, John MacDougall, Lord of Lorn.

Her father had barely recovered from the most recent bout of chest pains. She didn't know how much more he could take. Bruce's recent success had only made it worse. Her father hated to lose.

It was hard to believe that a little over a year ago "King Hood" had been on the run with only a handful of supporters, his cause all but lost. But the fugitive king had returned and, thanks in large part to the death of Edward I of England, resurrected his bid for Scotland's throne.

So sinful or not, she prayed for the death of their enemy. She would gladly do the penance for her wicked thoughts if it meant protecting her father and clan from the man who would see them destroyed.

Besides, as the nuns had told her countless times before, she'd never been destined for the life of a nun anyway. She sang too much. Laughed too much. And most importantly, had never been as devoted to God as she was to her family.

Anna studied her father's face, gauging it for any reaction, as he tore open the missive and read. In his anxiousness, he hadn't even bothered to call for his clerk. She'd been fortunate to find him alone in his solar, having just finished a council with his men. Her mother, usually found anxiously fussing at his side, had gone to the garden to oversee the picking of herbs for a new tincture suggested by the priest to help clear the boggiess from her father's lungs.

She could tell right away that the news was not good. A dangerous flush reddened his well-lined face, his eyes grew bright as if with fever, and his mouth fell in a thin white line. It was a look that struck fear in the hearts of the most hardened of warriors, but in Anna it only provoked concern. She knew the loving father beneath the gruff warrior's exterior.

She clutched the arm of the thronelike chair upon which he sat, the carving biting into her palm. "What is it, Father? What's happened?"

His gaze lifted to hers. She felt a flash of fear, seeing the rising anger. Her father's apoplectic rage had always been a terrifying sight—rivaling the infamous Angevin temper of the Plantagenet kings of England—but never more so than after his attack. Anger is what had caused the pains in his arm and chest last time. Pains that had frozen him, cut off his breath, and put him in bed for nearly two months.

He crumpled the parchment in a ball in his fist. "Buchan has fled. The Comyns have been defeated."

She blinked. It took her a moment to comprehend what he'd said as it seemed impossible. John Comyn, the Earl of Buchan—kinsman to John Comyn the murdered Lord of Badenoch—was one of the most powerful men in Scotland.

"But how?" she asked. "Bruce was hovering near death."

Her father had always encouraged his children to ask questions. He deplored ignorance, even in women, which was why he'd insisted that all his daughters be educated at the convent. But seeing his face flame and body stiffen with rage, she almost wished her question back.

"Even from his sickbed the scourge manages miracles," he said disgustedly. "The people already think him some kind of hero—like the bloody second coming of Arthur and Camelot. Buchan had the bastard pinned near Inverurie, but his men faltered when they saw 'The Bruce' at the head of the army." He slammed his fist down on the table beside him, sending wine sloshing from his goblet. "The Comyns ran like cowards at the

sight of a sick man being carried into battle. They fled from a damned invalid!”

His face turned so red that the veins in his temples started to bulge.

Fear clutched her chest. Not because she feared his anger, but because of the danger to his health. She fought back the tears that sprang to her eyes. Her fiercely proud father would see her tears as a sign that she thought him weak. He was a powerful warrior, not a man who needed to be coddled.

But this war was killing him as surely as a slow poison. If she could just get him through this trouble with Bruce, everything would be all right. Why couldn't the false king have just succumbed to illness the way he was supposed to? This would all be over.

She had to calm him. Instead of using tears and pleas, she took his hand and forced a teasing smile to her face. “You'd better not let Mother hear you talk like that around me. You know she blames you for my 'unmaidenly' vocabulary.” For a moment she feared her words had not penetrated, but slowly the haze of anger started to dissipate. When he finally looked at her as if he really saw her, she added innocently, “Perhaps I should I call for her?”

He let out a sharp bark of laughter, muddled by the heaviness in his lungs. “Don't you dare. She'll force another one of those revolting potions down my throat. Lord knows your mother means well, but she would drive a saint to perdition with her constant worrying.” He shook his head, giving her a fond look that told her he knew exactly what she had done. “You've nothing to fear, you know. I'm perfectly hale.” His eyes narrowed. “But you are a shrewd lass, Annie-love. More like me than any of the others. Haven't I always told you so?”

Anna dimpled with pleasure at the compliment. “Yes, Father.”

He continued as if she hadn't responded. “Since the day you toddled into my solar with your thumb in your mouth, took one look at the battle map, and moved our men to the perfect place to attack.”

She laughed, having no memory of the day but having heard the story many times before. “I thought the carved figures were toys,” she said.

“Ah, but your instincts were pure.” He sighed. “But I fear it will not be so simple this time. Buchan writes that he will seek refuge in England. With the Comyns defeated, the usurper will turn to us.”

Us? She swallowed hard. Dread settled over her. “But what about the truce?”

Months ago, when Bruce had first started his march north, he'd turned his eye briefly to battling the men of Argyll, threatening them by land and by sea. Her father, ill and undermanned, had agreed to a truce—as had the Earl of Ross to their north. She'd hoped the truce would mean an end to the fighting.

“It expires on the Ides of August. The day after, we can expect to see the fiend at our gate. He's chased off the MacDowells in Galloway, and with the Comyns gone . . .” Her father frowned his disgust again.

Sensing a return of his anger, she reminded him, “The Earl of Buchan has never been a good battle commander. You've said so many times before. King Hood would not have been so lucky against you, which is no doubt why he sought a truce in the first place. Dal Righ is still too fresh in his memory.”

Her father fingered the chunky silver brooch he wore at his neck. The large oval crystal surrounded by tiny pearls was a talisman of just how close he'd come to capturing the fugitive king. They'd had Bruce in their grasp—literally—the brooch coming off in the struggle.

She could tell by the hint of a smile around his mouth that her words had pleased him. “You’re right, but our previous victory will not stop him this time. We’re all that’s left between him and the crown.”

“But what of the Earl of Ross?” she said. “Surely, he will fight with us?”

Her father’s mouth tightened. “Ross cannot be counted on. He will be reluctant to leave his lands unprotected. But I will try to persuade him that we must join forces to defeat King Hood once and for all.”

There was nothing reproachful in her father’s manner, but Anna felt a twinge of guilt nonetheless. Persuading Ross might have been made easier if she’d accepted the proposal of his son Hugh last year.

“I will call my barons and knights and send word to Edward requesting aid. He is not half the king that his father was, but perhaps Comyn’s defeat will finally force him to see the imperative of sending more men north.”

But he didn’t sound hopeful. Anna knew as well as her father not to expect much help from Edward II. The new English king had too many troubles of his own to worry about Scotland. Though English soldiers were still garrisoned in many key castles around Scotland—especially along the borders—Edward had recalled many of his commanders, including Aymer de Valence, the new Earl of Pembroke.

She bit her lip. “And if help does not arrive?”

She knew better than to ask her father whether he would submit. He would see them all dead before he kneeled to a Bruce. “To Conquer or Die.” The MacDougall motto lived strong in her father.

Users Review

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