Surrender To the Highlander

Terri Brisbin

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Terri Brisbin

Surrender To the Highlander

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Torn between honour and desire…Innocent Margriet Gunnarsdottir carried a heavy secret. Facing a perilous journey to the wild and distant north of Scotland, she knew her safety lay in her adopted disguise – a nun's habit! But her only protector, a proud, rough-hewn Highlander, made her ache to share her crushing burden. Rurik Erengislsson had sworn to see her home unharmed.A woman promised to the service of God should be shielded and honoured – not desired! Yet Rurik was tempted beyond reason to make this beautiful waif his own.'Expertly laced with danger and sweetened with sensuality' – Booklist on TAMING THE HIGHLANDER

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Содержание

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Nothing she did escaped his gaz e.

Not a thing.

Not the way her mouth curved when she spoke.

Not the way her hand lightly touched the surface of everything as they passed by.

Not the way her voice grew husky as she whispered her prayers over meals or before sleeping.

Not a cursed or blessed thing.

Rurik closed his eyes and begged forgiveness from the Almighty. Not the many gods of his ancestors, but from the One who truly ruled the heavens and earth.

For he was a man whose body and soul lusted after a nun.

Praise for Terri Brisbin:

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Terri Brisbin is wife to one, mother of three, and dental hygienist to hundreds when not living the life of a glamorous romance author. She was born, raised and is still living in the southern New Jersey suburbs. Terri's love of history led her to write time-travel romances and historical romances set in Scotland and England. Readers are invited to visit her website for more information at www.terribrisbin.com, or contact her at PO Box 41, Berlin, NJ 08009-0041, USA.

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TAMING THE HIGHLANDER

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SURRENDER TO THE HIGHLANDER

Terri Brisbin

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This book is dedicated to two groups of women
who have supported me in the last two years
and one special person—
First, the wonderful women in the office
of Dr Linda Graziano in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.
A caring group of professionals, they are also avid
romance readers and have been asking
for Rurik's story since they first read
TAMING THE HIGHLANDER.
Linda, Patricia, Pat, Helen, Shelley, Deb and Amy—
here he is! Enjoy! (And thanks!)
And to the warm and amazingly helpful women and
avid romance readers in the Stratford, New Jersey,
office of Dr Jerome Pietras. To all of you who helped
me ease through difficult situations and appointments,
many thanks and this one's for you, too!
And this is for Melissa Endlich, my editor,
who has been a help to me more than she will ever
know over this last year. She understood
and loved Rurik as much as I did.
Saying thank you is not nearly enough.…

Chapter One

Lairig Dubh, Scotland 1356

His sword sang its death song and the sound pulsed through his soul, giving him strength and resolve. Swinging it over his head and aiming its sharpened tip down, Rurik Erengislsson allowed the Viking buried deep within him to rise as he became one, in that instant, with the messenger of death in his grip. Only his control, exerted at the last moment, kept the deathblow from being delivered to the man lying at his feet in the dirt. Raising his face to the sun, he screamed out his battle cry like a berserker of old, loud and long, until it echoed out past the buildings of the yard and even over the walls surrounding the keep of Lairig Dubh.

His opponent judiciously allowed him the moment of triumph and did not move. The sharp tip of the sword held at Connor's neck was, no doubt, part of what held him motionless, waiting for Rurik to relent. When those watching erupted into cheering, he lifted the sword away and reached down to his vanquished foe, the man he called laird.

"I was beginning to think this was the end," Connor MacLerie, Laird MacLerie and the Earl of Douran, said under his breath. "There was an expression in your eyes I did not recognize, Rurik."

The laird brushed the dirt from him and held his hand out for his own weapon, which Rurik had tossed aside during their battle. A boy ran to pick it up and bring it back to Connor.

Rurik cleared his throat and spit in the dirt. “I do not kill those I serve.”

Connor nodded at the gold armbands he now wore. The laird was an observant man. “The sword. The armbands. I suspect they are related to the visitors who stand in my hall and await your arrival there.”

“Visitors?” he asked.

Nodding to another of the lads who stood watching, he leaned over and gave him instructions before handing his blade to the boy. Facing Connor once more, he knew that an attempt at feigning surprise would not be missed and would be considered an insult by the laird, who was also his friend.

“They come looking for Rurik Erengislsson. They carry word from the Orkneys…from your father.”

The news was nothing he did not already know. Two previous visits by them had not gone unnoticed, but they returned north after being unsuccessful in their quest each time. In spite of his ability to avoid them, Rurik had not been able to cast the items they sent to him away as easily as he had their written missives.

“I know,” he said. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Rurik shrugged. “I do not wish to speak to them.”

Connor’s not-even-furtive glances over his shoulder told Rurik that the men approached from behind. Although quite capable of knocking them to the ground, he understood that Connor had welcomed them and had thus protected them with his name and hospitality. Attacking them, even if to give himself time to escape, was not possible without making the MacLerie himself an enemy. And the urge to run was growing, disconcerting him even more.

“That sword held over me in your hand tells me otherwise, Rurik.” Connor clapped him on the shoulder. “You cannot run from your past forever. ’Tis a lesson I learned and one that you should consider.” Leaning closer, he lowered his voice. “You need not repeat my mistakes to learn from them.”

That sword had been his failing. The armbands, although appealing to him, did not carry the importance of the sword. He damned his own weakness in not simply burying it when it was delivered to him. Rurik gazed over to watch the boy following his instructions on how to clean it. Giving in to the inevitable step he must take, he nodded at Connor and turned to face the two men who had dogged his every move for more than three months.

They need not remove their hoods for him to recognize two of his boyhood friends now grown. Rurik held out his hand to each in turn. Memories flashed through his thoughts reminding him of how much trouble three boys, who were all bark and no brawn, could get into when they had too much time and not enough guidance.

“Sven. Magnus.”

The hesitation lasted only a moment more, until Sven reached over and pulled him into the crushing clinch given by one friend to another. Reluctant to admit even to himself how good it felt, Rurik pulled away. Magnus’s reaction should not have surprised him, but it did and he barely missed having his wits knocked out of him by the blow when it came. The silence in the yard grew as he climbed to his feet, brushed some dirt from his breeches and began to laugh.

“Connor, come and meet these two worthless…”

They both jumped him when he turned back to the laird and he continued laughing as they all hit the ground. He held his own in the battle for a few minutes and then Rurik pushed them away, ending the fight and the uncomfortable beginning between them. Connor approached then and he introduced them in the Gaelic spoken by the clan here. When the laird invited them to seek the comforts of the hall, Rurik shook his head. He did not wish to hold the coming conversation in front of those here.

Leading the two out of the yard, through the gate and toward the village, Rurik felt the knot in his gut tighten. What kind of mistake was he making in wanting to hear their message?

He'd lied to Connor and knew the truth of it in his soul—he feared the words sent by his father. He dreaded the choices he would have to make once they were spoken. Swearing not to return to the northern islands was fine when there was no invitation, but now what would he do?

Sven and Magnus did not speak on the way to the cottage Rurik maintained here in Lairig Dubh for his use. A woman from the village watched over it when he was gone and kept it clean and stocked while he was here. Rurik smiled as he thought on the other things that the lovely Daracha provided to him during his stays. His body hardened and his mouth watered in anticipation of such things happening this night after the village quieted.

Sven and Magnus would have to sleep in the keep.

He pushed the door open and let them walk in first. Leaving the door open to allow the breezes to flow through, he pulled the few stools and chair near the small table and pointed for them to sit. Going to a storage cupboard, he took out a skin of ale and three cups. Filling them, he sat and nodded at Sven, the one who would most likely deliver the message.

"We have sought you for nigh onto three months now, Rurik. Why have you avoided us?"

"I had no interest in your words or the one who sent you," he offered, not certain he believed the excuse, but it sounded like a good one.

"And now?" Magnus asked. "Why did you want to hear it now?"

Rurik looked around the cottage and wondered himself about the reasons that drove him to avoid them for months, as they'd said, and now approach. "It was time."

Sven and Magnus snorted, almost in unison, exchanged looks and then shrugged before drinking more of their ale. The tension around them dissipated, as though now that they knew he would hear them out, they did not have to worry about his trying to leave them behind.

"He wants you to come back. He is willing to recognize you as son and heir," Sven said, not bothering with niceties.

"Heir?"

The word slipped out before Rurik could stop it. The longing tore through him and his gut tightened. Years and years of fighting it and, with one word, it won.

"He needs someone to oversee his lands in Sweden. And there's a marriage offer to be considered."

Rurik tried to fight the smile and was as successful in that battle as he had been with trying to hold back the hunger for exactly what had just been offered to him. "Marriage?"

"Come now, Rurik, you know his connections. Many would like to be linked to the son of Erengisl Sunesson. Bastard-born or not, you are an advantage to have as husband to some nobleman's daughter."

The reference to his illegitimacy stung, but he knew the truth of Sven's words. Many alliances were made through marriage and his birth would not really be an impediment to many who craved a connection to those with political or social power, or wealth. His father had all of those.

"Will you come?" Magnus asked.

Rurik held back that part of him that wished to jump at the offer. Many here depended on him and he did not wish to disappoint them. The laird was one such person, as was their uncle, who had taken him in without question and without rancor for his beginnings. Although hesitant to reveal so much about himself, Rurik knew that he must in order to make such a decision wisely.

"I will think on it, Magnus. I need time."

Sven and Magnus exchanged another look and then both of them peered around the interior of the cottage. Their plan was obvious; their distrust or suspicion palpable. They turned back to face him.

"The laird's hospitality will be extended for you both in the hall. You will have no complaints about the amount or quality of his food or the cleanliness of his keep."

He stood and waited while Sven and Magnus finished their ale. They began the walk back with him to the keep. It did not take long before women gathered along the path near his cottage. Smiling, he nodded at them as they passed. Sven and Magnus noticed them as well.

"Stay away from the virgins. The laird will take offense if you tangle with them and leave. There are enough others," Rurik said, nodding his head in the direction of several of the women with whom he'd spent time since Nara's departure, "who are willing."

Sven and Magnus now smiled at the women as they passed, nodding to one or another. Men had needs; women filled them. And when the women were willing, pleasure followed.

"One thing you should know," Rurik said in a low voice. "They believe that all men from the north are like me, if you get my meaning."

His reputation as a lover of women, and a great one at that, had been built over the years here with the MacLeries. He had shared enough nights of wine and women with Sven and Magnus to know that they would not disgrace him or their ancient heritage when it came to their treatment of women here.

Rurik and his old friends made their way to the keep, where the laird and lady provided for their comfort, and then back to the village, where the women provided them another kind of comfort.

Five days had passed since Rurik heard his father's offer and still he had made no decision. His uncle said nothing, although Rurik was certain he'd known the topic of the message. Dougal had never once spoken of what had happened to his sister, Rurik's mother, and Rurik had never asked how much he'd known. The one thing that was certain was that Dougal had taken in and provided for the son of his sister and had been his staunchest supporter in every step he took in becoming part of the Clan MacLerie.

Now, Rurik found himself hesitant to raise the issue and he turned for counsel to his friend. After the evening meal, Rurik sought out Connor's favorite place in the keep—other than his wife's bed—and found the laird there, high on the walls, observing the comings and goings in the yard.

"So, when do you leave?" Connor asked as Rurik approached.

"I have not yet decided to answer his call."

"Rurik," Connor said, slapping him on the shoulder, "you decided as soon as the words were said. Even before," he said, nodding his head at Rurik's sword. "The moment you took that sword out of hiding and used it, the deciding was done."

"I…" Rurik began but could not continue denying it.

Connor shook his head. "There is no need to deny the truth to me. And Dougal understands as well, but does not wish to talk about it with you."

Rurik did not have words to express his surprise or his gratitude for the understanding of the two people closest to him in life. Before he could embarrass himself, Connor held out his hand. "May I see the sword?"

"I would have thought you'd seen it close enough from the ground?" Rurik chided. Taunting was much safer than to speak of what he was feeling.

"'Twas clear to me when I looked in your eyes and realized the man standing over me holding death at my throat was not the Rurik I knew that you'd made your decision." Rurik slid the sword from the scabbard and held it out, hilt first, to Connor. "A beauty," he said in a voice filled with appreciation for the work of art that a weapon like this one could be. "Is it your father's then?"

"And his father's before him. I saw it hanging behind his chair in his hall when I was growing up. Five generations of warriors in his family have used this sword."

Connor stepped back and took a two-handed hold on the hilt, swinging the sword above and around his head. Rurik knew that the sword was perfectly balanced and as lethal as it was beautiful. He watched in silence as Connor moved through a few swing-and-thrust motions with it. Only another warrior could truly appreciate a weapon such as this and, clearly, Connor did.

"And now it is yours?" he asked.

"Aye, 'twould seem so."

"When do you depart?" Connor asked. Then he added quickly, "And have you told Jocelyn yet?"

Rurik shook his head. The lady had become a good friend, but she would not take well to the news that he was leaving. And he would miss her also.

"Coward!" Connor said, one of very few who could accuse him of such a thing and live to tell of it. "Very well, I will tell her after you have gone."

Rurik returned the sword to its place and nodded. There was too much for any words to convey properly, so he held out his arm to Connor.

"Laird," he said, bowing his head.

"Friend," Connor replied, taking his hand and arm in a tight grasp and shaking it. "You always have a place here with the MacLeries, Rurik. Know that always."

Rurik found his throat tight as Connor released him. With a quick nod and a turn, he walked away from the laird and toward his destiny.

Chapter Two

Convent of the Blessed Virgin Caithness, Scotland

Margriet sat on the steps leading up to the small chapel and held her hands over her ears. If another of the holy sisters began to wail, she would—God forgive her—be tempted to strangle her. Granted they were only novices and young at that, but already Sister Madeline and Sister Mary were caterwauling as loudly as she'd ever heard anyone scream. Sister Suisan had fainted again, so at least her crying had stopped.

The reverend mother, Mother Ingrid, overwhelmed at the sight of the warriors at their gates, promptly ran to the church, fell to her knees in prayer and would not respond to any questions or requests. Although Mother's manner was usually one of calm and control, Margriet guessed that when confronted with such a formidable group of outsiders anyone's calm could be disturbed. That left Margriet, as was their usual custom in recent days, in charge of the others and she was uncertain what to do.

"Lady?" a soft voice broke into her quiet cone of thoughtfulness.

Margriet looked up and realized it was Sister Sigridis and she was not whispering but shouting at her. She dropped her hands. "What is it, Sister?"

"He is calling for ye again."

"Yes, Sister. He has been doing that for two days now."

"Do ye think that mayhap ye should answer him? He sounds angrier than before."

Margriet took in a deep breath and let it out before standing. Each time the warrior yelled out her name, the youngest of the nuns began their hysterics again. Lifting her long braid and tossing it back over her shoulder, she strode off toward the main gate and… him. Tugging on the thick brown gown as she walked, she prayed he would relent this time and leave them, and her, in peace. The stubborn set of his jaw in each encounter so far told her otherwise.

Truly, if it had been in a different situation, she might find him appealing. He was certainly fit and the strength in his arms—as he banged hard enough on the wooden gate to nearly shatter it—would provide strong protection to those in his care. His head, though it appeared that his custom had been to shave it of hair, was now covered with a downy layer of pale hair. Instead of marring or softening his appearance, it both gave him a dangerous look and made her palms itch to touch it and test its softness. It was the only thing soft about him for even his deep voice made her heart pound in terror at its fierceness.

Since she was the person he sought, Margriet felt mostly irritation at his behavior and his methods of attempting to gain her compliance. Sister Sigridis dropped away from her side and stood a distance from the gate as she climbed up into the guard's tower to look over the wall.

"I asked you to stop terrifying the good sisters, sir."

The words certainly sounded brave to her ears and she waited for his response. Margriet took a small step forward so she could look down at him. The man backed away a few paces, intent on looking up at her. With the nun's habit on her, she knew he could glimpse only a small part of her face and not much more. The bulky robes covered her from feet to shoulders and the wimple and long veil covered everything else.

"And I asked Lady Margriet to present herself for escort home, Sister. One will surely follow the other," he called out to her. When he stopped shouting, his voice could be quite pleasant…for a barbarian.

"Lady Margriet has taken vows…of silence…" she answered, thinking it an excellent reason for not talking to him, "and she fears for her soul if she breaks that."

Guffaws from all the men below filled the air. Apparently the men did not think a woman capable of silence.

"Present the girl now!" He was back to yelling and banging and she feared the gate would give way soon to his strength.

"A short respite, please, sir. Let me see if I can convince her to see you," Margriet offered.

There was a buzz of conversation below among all the men there and then an answer. "An hour, good sister. You have one hour to convince the girl to speak to me or I will burn this convent to the ground and remove her myself."

She knew for a certainty the result that would occur because of his threat and her left eye and the brow above it began to twitch in anticipation. Scrunching her eye shut, she gritted her teeth the moment it began.

Loud, hysterical screaming and wailing began in the chapel and spread out as the novices there, as well as a few of the lay women, joined in the horrible chorus. The few men who worked there, tending the fields and doing the heavy labor that women could not, looked at her nervously. They could not defend the convent against this warrior's attack. Other than a few knives and a bow and quiver of arrows for hunting, they had no weapons but for some farming tools.

Margriet climbed down quickly and waved to Sister Sigridis, who shook her head. The daft girl probably thought she meant to send her out to answer his demands. "Sister, please tell the reverend mother that I will speak to this Rurik and see if I can convince him to leave me here."

"Are ye certain, lady? He might take ye by force if ye leave the safety of the walls."

Although Sister Sigridis's intention was to offer some consolation, Margriet sensed a feeling of relief in the girl at not having to speak to the man. She did not blame the sister for not wanting to do so, but she knew now that only she could work out a compromise and end this siege before it truly started.

"I am, Sister."

Margriet lifted the habit over her head and pulled the veil and wimple free, immediately sending a rush of cool air around her. Her body did not handle heat well right now and it was a relief to remove it. Tossing her extra garments to one of the servants, she thought on how she could accomplish the task. What would make the man stop his harassment and go away?

Her only communication with her father over these long years had been in writing, so Margriet decided to prepare a missive that this warrior could take with him and deliver instead of taking her.

Entering the convent through the kitchen, she shushed and soothed all those working there. Although not a nun and not officially in charge, Margriet's strong personality and innate intelligence had made it easy to "guide" the good sisters to her way of doing things here. She found that the management of people was quite enjoyable and satisfying, and knowing she was contributing to

their welfare convinced her that her presence and actions were of benefit to the religious community there. With nothing to distract her, Mother Ingrid spent more hours in prayer each day and that was something that made the woman very happy. As it did Margriet.

She opened the door to the reverend mother's chambers and searched the desk for an unused piece of vellum, or one that could be scraped and used again. Finding one, she sat and composed a letter to her father explaining how she desired to remain with the sisters in the life of a religious contemplation and prayer. Surely, he would not deny her permission to serve the Lord in such a manner?

It took nearly the full hour to complete, scraping the old ink from the vellum, carefully composing and writing her words, but once she finished and sanded the parchment, she knew it would work. Rolling it up with care, Margriet walked outside, garbed herself once more as a sister and looked around for a companion to accompany her outside the walls.

None of the sisters could be trusted to carry out her instructions in this charade, so Margriet went searching for the girl who worked in the laundry, someone who rarely spoke a word to anyone. If the warrior from the North thought Gunnar's daughter was still a girl, she would present him with a girl— one who did not speak—and she would talk for her. When the girl, Elspeth, shook her head in agreement, Margriet walked to the gate with her in tow. As she waited for Elspeth to don the other habit she'd secured, she could hear the men on the other side. Margriet paused only to gain the promise of a truce.

"Do you swear that you will take no action against Lady Margriet?" she called out to them, to him.

"Sister, you would try the patience of the very saints to whom you pray! Bring the girl out now."

Elspeth smiled at his words and Margriet suspected that others had said the same thing about her here at the convent. Still, she needed some assurance against their superior strength and weapons. Deciding that a man's vanity could work against him, she tried a different approach.

"This is a house of God, sir. Surely even a mighty warrior such as yourself would agree to a truce in the name of the Almighty."

The rude and bitter swearing that reached her even through the thick gates spoke of other interests he had, but Margriet waited in silence now. After a few minutes of fierce whispers and some laughter from the other men out there, the leader relented.

"You have your truce, Sister. Now, bring the girl out!"

His voice roared and she could hear the wailing again, so she tugged the veil lower on her face and lifted the bar from the gates. Pulling it open, she stepped out through the narrow space and Elspeth followed, head bowed as she'd told her to do.

"Lady Margriet?" he asked.

Stepping closer, he lifted the girl's chin to get a better look at her face. Damn the man! Margriet feared that Elspeth would bolt, but the girl remained at her side and allowed him his scrutiny. It was when he glanced at her and then stared that Margriet felt faint.

His eyes seemed to pierce into her very soul, so strong and intense a gaze that she tried to turn away from him and failed. He searched her face as though looking for something and then let his eyes drop over her body, in spite of the bulky robes and veil. It was as though he was touching her, running his hands over her flesh, and every inch of her felt scorched by his examination. Their eyes met and the moment stretched on and on until the men behind him coughed loudly. Finally she pulled her wits about herself and cleared her throat.

"This is the Lady Margriet Gunnarsdottir, from Kirkvaw. She has prepared this letter to explain her situation to her father. If you would be good enough to deliver it to him on your return…"

Her pride in getting the whole message out was crushed when he tore open the seal she'd placed and began to read the words there. Then he laughed out loud, the sound of it echoing through the trees surrounding them and out into the forests. Finally, he passed the parchment onto the one nearest him,

who read it and handed it back. This second man said nothing, but only shook his head as though in disbelief.

"Sirs, you scoff at something godly and spiritual that the lady wishes to do. Will you deliver it to Lord Gunnar?"

"Nay, Sister. To deliver that instead of his daughter will be a death sentence for all of us."

He dropped the letter to the ground and smashed it under his booted foot. Margriet gasped at such wastefulness and tried to recover it. The warrior grabbed her arm and lifted her back to standing. She looked at the rough hand holding her prisoner and then at his face. No one had touched her so, no one would dare touch her in this manner, but for these few moments she was only a sister standing in the way of his mission. He seemed to realize his inappropriate hold and let her go.

"Pardon, good sister," he said softly. "I will replace that which I have destroyed and make a generous donation to atone for my actions here. Once the lady leaves with us, of course." The smile at the end of his words in no way allayed her fears or detracted from his seriousness.

Margriet, who should have learned the hard lesson of male guile long ago, found herself fascinated by the way his firm lips curved as he smiled. The expression softened his features, but did not take away from the masculine angles and lines of his face. When he smiled more, it revealed a more attractive man than she would have thought possible from their meetings so far.

He towered over her in height and, as he stepped toward her now, she moved back. Realizing the true danger in such closeness, she reached out, took Elspeth's hand and tugged the girl inside the gates quickly before he could grab her himself. Leaning on the gates with all their weight, they lowered the bar and locked it. She only just dared to take a breath when his words, spoken quietly but far more dangerously then anything he'd said so far, reached her.

"Lady Margriet, I know not who that girl is, but if you do not present yourself to me, outside these gates, at sunrise, I will burn the convent to the ground."

"Sir…" she began, but she faltered as he interrupted.

"Do not think to play me for some fool again, lady. Be outside the gates at sunrise or there will be only ashes and wailing women left here when I tie you to my horse and drag you home to your father."

She shivered at his threat and looked at Elspeth, whose face had lost all color. Her gambit had failed. Although a stranger to her, she did not doubt his resolve in this. Without another word, she pulled Elspeth along with her as she ran to the chapel. Maybe Mother Ingrid's desire for seclusion and to pray all the time was a better plan than hers after all?

It took some time to calm down the sisters and the others there and more time to accept her fate. Part of her simply could not believe that he would take such drastic measures to force her out, but when Sister Sigridis reported that his men were collecting wood from the forest and making a huge pile, the truth seemed plain to see. After the years of comfort the good sisters had provided to her, she would not allow them to be hurt in her stead.

As she lay on her pallet that night and considered what few choices she had, Margriet knew that they would never ask her to leave or force her to, but her conscience would not let the matter get to that. Gliding her hands over her now-rounding belly, she thought that mayhap this was God's work after all. Finn had promised her marriage, but something had happened that forced him to leave before he could honor that promise. Surely if she accompanied these men to Kirkvaw, found him and revealed the truth of her condition to him, he would honor his words and their love.

Surely?

Margriet was certain that she'd just closed her eyes when she woke to someone shaking her roughly. Rubbing her eyes and praying that the sickness that plagued her mornings was gone, she sat up and met the very worried gazes of four of the sisters.

"What is wrong?" she asked, rising from the pallet and tugging on her low boots. Smoothing her sleep-snarled hair away from her face as she ran toward the doorway, she waited for one of them to explain.

The smell of burning wood told her more than words could. Margriet raced from the small chamber and ran to the gates. Knowing she could avoid fate no longer, she lifted the bar and tossed it to the ground. Although they stood watching, no one stopped her or tried to convince her to stay. The thickening smoke burned her eyes as she stepped outside and faced her adversary.

Five men stood with lit torches in their hands waiting on his order. A faint expression of success crossed his face and then he covered the space between them in a few long strides, reaching her before she could react. In his hands, he held not a torch but a length of rope and his threat echoed through her mind.

"Will you come willingly or do I tie you?"

Not a sound was made by any of those watching and no one moved as this Rurik waited for her answer. In that moment the blood of her ancestors pulsed through her veins, giving her a confidence she'd not known before.

"I am Margriet Gunnarsdottir and will come willingly if you guarantee the safety of those inside."

They both knew she had no choice, but he did the most unexpected thing then. Instead of gloating as most would in such a situation, he smiled at her and she could feel his pride in her decision. Respect filled his gaze, warming her from the inside out, and then he motioned to the men to put away the torches. As one, they bowed to her.

Margriet stood stunned for a moment, trying to sort out her feelings over their actions and, in a sudden burst, the uncomfortable feeling overwhelmed her. There was no time to warn any of them and she discovered that vomiting on a man's boots did not convey the emotion she was trying to show.

Or mayhap it did?

Chapter Three

Rurik felt a certain measure of satisfaction as he watched Margriet surrender to his demands, but that feeling dulled when faced with her next action. Aye, his quarry was run to ground and the task his father set for him—a test no doubt—would be completed in a short time. Her nervous reaction could be considered usual for one of the fairer sex. His boots had worn worse in the course of their use and he did not fret over them…well not too much. It would wash off.

The gates stood open now even if the occupants of the convent remained out of sight. One nun stood at the doorway to the small church and seemed to be their watchman—turning and whispering to those inside every time he or his men moved or spoke or grunted or spit. Sven and Magnus had caught on quickly and now gestured or spoke just to see the reaction the move brought. The nun did not realize yet that she was the object of their amusement. He should stop them, for making merry at the expense of these women of God was not something he should sanction. But, their manipulation was innocent fun and no one was harmed by it.

A strong breeze carried the nauseating smell to him and Rurik knew the vomit would be harder to remove if it dried into his boots. Looking around the small enclosed yard, he spied a well and walked to it. Since the lady gave no sign of an imminent arrival, he suspected there was time enough to see to it before they left on their journey. As he reached for the bucket, the approach of an old man surprised him.

"She hasna ridden much," the man blurted out with no warning.

Rurik continued his task, tossing the bucket down the well and pulling it up once it was filled. Tilting it, he let the water pour down his legs and boots, then he used one foot to scrub the mess off

the other, continuing until most of the muck was loosened. His other purpose for not responding was that he knew his silence would spur on the old man. It was not long in coming.

"She hasna left here in the years since her da sent her here," he offered. Rurik noticed the man did not stand straight but appeared wizened with many years of life.

"What has that to do with me, old man?" he asked. Finished with removing the odorous material from his boots, he tossed the bucket where he'd found it and met the man's gaze now. "Do you think I will mistreat her?"

"The daughter of Gunnar is a prize and should be treated with respect," the man replied, rising to a height Rurik would not expect possible. "Ye will answer to me for any harm done her."

The temptation to laugh filled him, but he tempered it. Both knew the man would never be able to best him in any test of skills or strength, but Rurik respected his attempts to intimidate. More interesting, the words and fervor told Rurik much about his true opponent in this confrontation—the lady Margriet.

Rurik bowed to the man and nodded. "You have my word that no harm will befall her while in my care, old man."

He peered up at Rurik, apparently considering his pledge, and then nodded with a grunt. "Ye'll do."

With all the pride of a Highland warrior, the man reached out and offered his arm. Rurik stepped over to his and clasped arms, shaking it. "What are you called, old man? And what is your place here?"

"I am called Black Iain and I tend to the flocks."

His hair may have been black at some point in his life, but Iain would be more suitably called Gray and Balding Iain now. A commotion, beginning inside the main building and spreading to the yard, interrupted any more conversation. His hand moved to his sword as Rurik turned to face the trouble. As he watched the group of women exit from the convent, he knew a sword was not necessary for this.

The weeping crowd held at its center the woman of whom they spoke. She alone did not cry or make a sound as they moved toward him. Now though, a nun's veil covered her waist-length black hair and most of her face. Her eyes, the palest blue Rurik had seen, were luminous against her pale skin, at least the skin he could see. The nun's clothing back in place, Rurik contemplated for the first time that mayhap she had truly taken her vows.

Shaking his head at the waste of it, he whistled to his men and nodded at the gate. Ceasing their antics, Sven and Magnus crossed to the gate and gathered the rest of the men together. Finally, after days of waiting, first for her acquiescence and then for her preparations, their journey would begin. Meeting her gaze over the heads of those around them, Rurik was struck by the sudden vulnerability he spied there. While secure within the convent's safety, Margriet seemed fearless. Now, when about to enter into his care, her brave face slipped and he was certain that the others were keen to it, too.

Making his way to her, he easily pushed the others out of the way and Rurik took her arm. Guiding her toward the gate, he nearly did not notice when she planted her feet and stopped moving with him. Annoyance grew once more and he turned to face her.

"No more delays, lady," he demanded. "I thought that was clear in my instructions. An hour, no more, to finish your preparations."

"Sister," she said, her lips pursed in an enticing and yet mutinous manner, at once beguiling and infuriating him for his reaction. "You may call me 'Sister.'"

Silence reigned as everyone quieted to await his response. In spite of the habit and veil, he was still not certain of her standing, but decided to give her the benefit of his doubt. "Sister, then. There are only a few more hours of daylight and I want to take advantage of every moment." *To get you as far away from here as possible and then discover your truth.*

Her next action surprised him. She stepped toward him and leaned in closer, until he had to bow his head to hear her words. “I would beg a few more minutes to say farewell to the Reverend Mother.” Margriet met his gaze and he noticed tears gathering there. “I have lived here longer than I did with my father or mother and I beg your leave to speak to her privately before departing here.”

Rurik lifted his head and looked at those who stood watching. Taking a breath in and letting it out, he fought the urge to strike out needlessly. Aye, he and his men had waited for nigh to three days while the woman before him thwarted his attempts to carry out his task. Aye, he wanted to be quit of this place and be on his—their—journey north. But, from her actions thus far, Margriet demonstrated that she clearly did not want to return to her home. Or perhaps the tone of the summons from her father or some words within it were the cause of her hesitancy. Regardless, he would rather be her escort than her warden.

Rurik took a different tact—and turned towards the chapel. “I would like to speak to your reverend mother myself. Perhaps if I assured her of your safety, you would feel less concern over this parting?”

She shook her head vehemently, making the veil wobble a bit to one side. “Nay, sir. She said that you terrify her and she wishes not to speak to you directly.”

“Make haste then, la…*Sister*. ’Tis long past our time to be on the road.”

Not wishing to give her the complete victory, Rurik turned and strode to the gate. Crossing his arms over his chest, he met the stares of his men, daring them to utter a sound. Wise men that he knew them to be, they did not. Instead they made themselves busy with the final adjustments to the pack horses.

Wise men indeed.

In a shorter time than he thought possible, the lady approached, followed by the younger woman she’d tried to pass off as herself. A chuckle nearly forced its way free as he noticed that both still dressed in habits. Rurik stepped back and allowed them to pass, watching as his men guided and assisted them onto the horses brought for their use on the trek north.

After a few more minutes while the lady’s belongings were secured to her horse, they were at last on their way.

Margriet fought the urge to look back and lost the effort. The place she’d called home and the people who had become her family when her father exiled her to Caithness grew more and more distant. Now her battle was to keep the tears that burned her eyes and throat from falling. After a final glance and a deep breath, she turned back and aimed her gaze at the road ahead.

Slipping another of the herbs into her mouth and chewing it against her stomach’s distress, she struggled to focus on her future life instead of the past. Grabbing on to the thought that this unexpected intrusion into her life might actually hasten the inevitable and that thought impossible, Margriet realized that this was the first time in so many years that she would see the world outside the convent, and see her home and the sea. The thought of crashing waves and surging water shot a burst of hope and excitement through her and she tried to smile at it. Something good would come of this chaotic beginning after all.

The sun’s light penetrated the thick canopy of trees surrounding them and fell onto the damp ground in scattered shadows. Though this part of the road was not new to her, the views of it were. As each of the men leading their group passed in and out of a sunbeam, their bodies were outlined in shimmering gold. Try as she might, she also lost the battle gawking at such male beauty.

In spite of her years of living in the convent, in spite of her previous weakness and the cost of it that was still to be paid, Margriet allowed herself the pleasure of inspecting the warriors who escorted her. At least those introduced to her.

Each one was appealing in his own way, and to a man, they’d inherited the height of the Norse warriors of long ago. Magnus, with his dark hair and eyes that made him appear mysterious and nearly dangerous, except when he smiled and the illusion disappeared. Sven, the opposite in coloring,

allowed his wheat-colored hair to fall freely down his back and she'd noticed that his eyes were the color of the blue sky at sunset.

The trees swayed in the wind and the light shifted to surround the leader of her escort. Rurik —he'd told her without telling her his family's or father's name. It was not an uncommon name in Kirkvaw or the Orkneys so there was no way to associate him with one family or another unless he revealed it. He resisted when she frowned at the lack of forthrightness and she let it go for the moment. Her father would send only a reputable, trustworthy man and there would be time enough while they rode north to ferry across the sea to her Orkney home to discover his connections. For now, she watched as he rode ahead of her, both guiding and guarding their traveling party.

Margriet's stomach trembled and her breath hitched as she remembered his strength and his closeness and, most especially, his green eyes that changed from the color of the leaves now surrounding them to the color of the emerald she remembered on the hilt of her father's battle sword. When the object of her reverie turned as though he'd heard her thoughts, she met that intense gaze and truly lost her breath.

Although certain only a moment had passed by as she stared at him across the distance, Margriet feared others had noticed her perusal. She forced her eyes from his and shifted on her mount. Such scrutiny of a man was unseemly for a nun and she must remember her disguise or it would be of little use and protection for her or Elspeth.

When she next dared to raise her eyes, Rurik still watched her. It was his turn to break the connection that stretched then and he said something to Magnus as he turned away. It seemed that she was the subject of whatever comment had been made, for Magnus moved his horse to the side of the path and allowed the rest to pass him by…until he reached her side.

"Sister," he began. He did not seem to trip over the word as his leader did. "Rurik asked if you are well enough to increase our pace. We have much distance to cover before the light fades."

"Well enough?"

"You were ill…before," Magnus stammered as many men did when confronted by a female and certain ailments. She sat up a bit taller on her horse and cleared her throat.

"Tell Rurik to fear not, I will keep pace with him."

Magnus smiled then, exposing a pleasing countenance of masculine angles and lines that framed a wide brow and strong chin. His eyes widened in what seemed to be merriment and then, after a brief nod, he rode back to Rurik. From the shared laughter and the glances, Margriet knew for certain that she'd done something untoward. She thought on her words, but could discern nothing amiss in them.

She would never understand them.

Of course, part of her problem was a lack of experience and a dreadful lapse in judgment during her only experience! One aspect about herself that Margriet had discovered was her ability to learn quickly in new situations and circumstances. This journey would give her the opportunity to learn about men and how they acted with each other and toward women they were supposed to respect. She already knew how they treated the common woman without protection.

When those in front of her and Elspeth, who was at her side, moved faster, Margriet urged her horse to follow the pace. Adjusting herself carefully so as to not scare her mount and not fall to the ground, she lowered her head and concentrated on staying seated. Oh, she'd ridden a horse before, but not on such a journey as this, with experienced warriors who looked, from their easy manner, as though they lived on horses.

The afternoon passed at an agonizingly slow pace and soon she held on to the reins with every bit of her strength. Surely, he did not mean this as retribution for obstructing his plans? When it seemed like several hours had passed and still they rode on, Margriet was ready to consider that Rurik would show no mercy now that she was in his control. Soon, as her body tightened with pain, she was ready to beg for that which he seemed unwilling or unable to give.

"Sir!" she implored in as loud a voice as she could manage. "Sir!"

Various voices carried her message forward until she heard his order called out. Every muscle in her back and legs screamed as she tried to straighten up on the paltry cushion that was failing miserably in its attempt to protect her bottom from the abuse of the ride. Her previous practice on the nearly lame pony at the convent could never have prepared her for riding this mount at this gait. Mopping her brow once more of the sweat that gathered there, Margriet lifted her head and watched as *he* made his way back to her side.

"I confess, sir," she began as she wiped her brow and face again with the edge of one sleeve, "I confess that I have no experience in traveling at such a pace and I beg you to allow me…us…a short respite."

If she had been looking away at that moment, Margriet would never have seen the look of triumph on his face at her words. Then a moment of confusion followed and he simply nodded. What had he thought she was ready to confess? His words clarified it for her.

"Lady," he said and then paused. Clearing his throat, he met her gaze and began anew. She could see his jaws clenching as he formulated his reply. "Sister, there is no need to beg. Simply ask for what you need and I will seek to fulfill your needs."

Her lovely mouth dropped open a bit and her pale-as ice eyes widened at his words. Then he observed a revealing blush creep up onto her cheeks and felt his cock harden.

Sweet Freya's tits! But she was gorgeous when agitated!

He should be asking for her forgiveness but instead his body continued to react to the momentary flash in her eyes that revealed so much to him. He'd learned to read a woman's expression long ago and hers said that *Sister* Margriet had more knowledge of the arts of love than a nun should have.

He could swear that she understood all the meanings in his words, which definitely bore more than one. From the way his men shifted on their horses, trying not to look openly at either of them, he knew they had as well. Her mouth closed and she swallowed several times; his view of her lovely neck was unfortunately obscured by the religious garb she wore. Finally she pushed words out and he hoped for another confession from her lips.

"A short rest, if you please," she said. "I can no longer feel my legs, sir," she whispered so that only he could hear. Most likely, she had not noticed the other men practically falling off their mounts to listen.

Rurik surveyed their surroundings, and considered the distance traveled and still to go before they would camp for the night, and nodded. Safety was his concern, and with the loss of several hours already, he was not truly happy about stopping now. He glanced at the other young nun and noticed her pale complexion. They were not seasoned travelers at all.

He raised his arm, signaling the men to pause. He watched as several rode off ahead and behind, taking up positions meant to guard their party from any surprises approaching them on the road. Rurik slid off his horse and handed the reins to one of the other men so that he could assist the women from theirs. He reached up to lift her from her place on the horse's back when she shook her head.

One thing he'd learned early in life was that some wanted or needed to make every situation more difficult than need be and that there was no way to change their predisposition to such an attitude. Margriet— Sister Margriet—seemed one of those very people. Rurik stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest, watching her antics as she tried to dismount on her own.

'Twas clear that her legs would not obey her commands to move. She shifted on top of the horse and he allowed her to try until her actions caused her mount to sidestep nervously. Rurik stepped closer, took hold of the reins and brought the horse under control.

Gunnar's daughter had a stubborn streak. 'Twas clear from the way she struggled to move legs that were clearly not going to move on their own. Although she glanced at her companion once or twice, she would not look at him. Stubborn and prideful.

Neither attributes were what he would expect in a true woman of God. Mayhap that was why Gunnar had exiled her here…? Had he hoped the good sisters would work or pray or beat it out of her? From what he remembered of Gunnar's daughter, and it was not much due to his age and interest in the pursuit of the fairer sex at the time, her mother had died soon after her birth or the birth of a sibling, and then she was gone.

Thinking back, the struggle for control of the Orkneys exploded about that same time and, with the uncertainty of loyalties and outcomes, Gunnar had been wise to send her south. Now with Caithness awarded to a Scottish earl's control and Erengisl of Sweden firmly in place as Earl of the Orkneys, her father thought the timing good to bring her home. More likely than not, with an eye to marrying her off.

Hah! Watching her nearly topple to the ground and still not ask for help, Rurik suspected her father would be as surprised as he about Margriet's vocation to religious life. He reached out as soon as he knew she would land on her arse in the dirt and took hold of her waist. Lifting her off the horse was no more trouble for him than if he was lifting a child. *Lifting* her was not the problem.

Letting go of her became the problem when he felt the narrowness of her waist and the flare of her hips in his grasp.

No, he thought a moment later, the true trouble was when she struggled against his hold and his hands slipped up high enough to feel the weight of her breasts against them. Margriet noticed; the flaring of her pale eyes revealed it, as did the way she stilled a moment later.

The best thing—well, the most polite thing—would be to release her immediately, but in that moment he did not want to be polite. His body reacted and his blood heated and surged through him, making him want to do that which his ancestors were known for— he wanted to take and pillage.

By Odin's Seed, he understood the legends of old! His body understood them and stood ready. And when she placed her hands on his shoulders, he nearly forgot everything.

"My thanks for your assistance, sir."

Her voice broke in to the maelstrom in his head and brought a halt to his wild thoughts. It did nothing for the heat that raged in his blood.

Rurik nodded and lowered Margriet to the ground. He felt the shakiness of her stance and waited a minute more for her to steady herself. Some distance was truly needed and he turned to help the younger woman. Unfortunately Magnus robbed him of his excuse to move from Margriet's side.

Standing this close, he heard her labored breathing as she tried to take a step. Her stubbornness won out again, for she stumbled against him as her legs gave out.

"Thor's Breath, la… Sister, let me help you," he said as he grabbed her shoulders and held her still.

She lifted her head and nodded in agreement, but anger flashed in her eyes at his aid. He released her after a few minutes and placed his arm under her hand so he could walk at her side.

"My thanks, sir," she said as she lifted her hand from his a few paces later.

Rurik watched as she waddled away from him, still unsteady but moving apurpose. He turned to find the men watching him with as much interest as he watched the woman. Not a good thing.

He nodded at one of the men to follow the women as they made their way off the path, obviously in need of privacy after several hours on the road. Never one to disregard or to ignore his own weaknesses, for they could be the death of him and those to whom he pledged loyalty, he considered why he reacted this way to a nun.

First, he did not expect Gunnar's daughter to be as old as she was—from his father's missives he thought her still a young lass.

Second, he did not expect her to be a nun—for the daughter of a man held in such high esteem and with such wealth as he knew Gunnar to have was a marriage prize and not a gift to the church. The sight of her in the religious habit stunned him.

But more than that, he never expected her to be the strong, organized, willful and beautiful woman that she was. From the first moment of resistance to her eventual surrender, Margriet proved herself a proud Daughter of the North. 'Twas obvious from their initial encounter to the last order she gave before she left it, that she ruled the convent. He counted at least fifty nuns and lay people living there and, from youngest bairn to oldest man, they all appeared well-fed and kept. Not an easy task for even the most experienced of stewards, let alone a nun.

Rurik swallowed against the tightness in his throat as he realized the basis for his weakness. Although he'd met her as a nun, his body and his senses saw only the woman under the garb. And the attraction he felt and the desire that filled his blood could only be dangerous.

As his eyes sought her figure as she disappeared behind some bushes, Rurik knew this was one weakness he could not afford.

Chapter Four

Elspeth's soft snore simply reminded Margriet that she was not asleep. Turning to her side away from the woman next to her, she barely stifled a groan as the hard ground revealed another place injured by the hours on horseback. Her hip spasmed and she tried to stretch her leg to ease it. Tempted though she was to try to walk some of the cramping away, the loud snore just outside the small tent spoke of the impossibility of doing just that. When her back joined in with its own aches, Margriet decided to try.

Since the tent was meant to give them a small measure of privacy, it stood only a few feet tall and two paces wide. Trying not to disturb Elspeth, she crawled out from under the blankets they shared and shimmied to the flap of the tent. Since they slept in their clothes, dressing was not a problem, but her hair would be.

Margriet suspected that her vanity over her hair would unravel her disguise, especially since the men and their leader had seen it when she panicked and ran from the convent with it uncovered. Women taking their vows cut off their hair before donning the veils and the presence of hers raised a suspicion about her truthfulness. And that was dangerous. After she braided and wrapped her hair, she reached into her bag and took out a woolen shawl. Draping it over her head, she peeked outside.

The man guarding the tent slept so close that she would have to step over him to get out. His loud snore, now alternating with Elspeth's gentler one, covered her movements. Her back and hips and legs screamed in pain as she crept over him and took a faltering step away…and into the one called Sven. Luckily, he grabbed her hands and helped her to stand up before she landed on the ground.

"Sister, are you well?" he asked in a soft voice. He glanced at the tent and then back to her. "It is the middle of the night and you should rest while you can."

At least he seemed to understand how inexperienced and uncomfortable she was on this journey. Not like the brute that led their group. He drove them on and on with a single-mindedness that shocked her. She was used to being in charge and the change in her circumstances was most likely the cause for her troubled state of mind. It was also the condition that kept thoughts tumbling around inside her mind and kept any hope of sleep at bay.

Sven cleared his throat, catching her attention, or rather her inattention, and she nodded her head.

"I need to walk a bit to work out some of the stiffness in my legs, if that is permitted?" she whispered back, trying to assume a meekness she did not feel. Men, she'd learned, liked women to act as though they had not a thought or plan in their heads.

Sven glanced across the camp and then back again. Their leader, Rurik, slept sitting up, wrapped in a dark cloak with his back against a tree. If Sven had not looked in that direction, Margriet certainly would never have spied him there.

Probably his intention.

When Sven held out his hand, she suspected Rurik had given some unseen signal granting his permission. Margriet leaned on Sven's muscular arm as she let him guide her away from the tent. At first, they said nothing, but as they walked a short distance from the sleeping men, she could not contain her curiosity.

"Your leader does not seem happy about taking me back to Kirkvaw," she began.

Sven snorted and then answered. "Rurik is not happy about going back to Kirkvaw."

"What do you mean, sir? Will he not be rewarded for carrying out this task for my father?"

"Aye, he will be rewarded, but not by your father." Sven leaned in closer as though to share some confidence with her, but his disclosure was halted by a voice from the dark.

"Sven, you should not speak of such personal matters with Gunnar's daughter."

Margriet jumped at both the softness and the menace in his voice. Sven merely smiled and nodded at Rurik…and walked away as though silently ordered to do so.

Leaving Margriet in the company of the one person she would rather avoid.

He held out his arm and she placed her hand there. Without a word, he led her in a circle around their camp. Each step seemed easier than the last and finally the cramping in her back and hips ceased. Rurik did not stop guiding her until she drew to a halt when they passed her tent for the third time.

"My thanks, sir," she offered quietly as they stood next to the sleeping guard. She wondered why he did not rouse or reprimand the man for sleeping through her "escape." He must read thoughts, for he answered the question she did not speak aloud.

"He is there for your comfort, not your safety. If I thought there was true danger in this area, none would sleep."

"My comfort?"

"Aye. If you have need of anything, you should tell him." 'Twas then she noticed that the man did not sleep, but watched her and Rurik from his place on the ground. But the tone of his voice drew her gaze back up to Rurik's face.

The moon's light was bright that night, making it easy to see his expression, but that did not make it easy to understand it. Margriet would be willing to swear that he jested, but nothing she'd seen so far in his company spoke of a temperament familiar with anything less than complete seriousness.

"So, I should not step over him the next time I need to walk in the night?" The guard listened to their every word, but said nothing himself.

"Nay, Sister." He shook his head. "The next time you should wake him to say farewell." The guard now made a grunt that sounded much like a stifled laugh.

Perplexed by this change in his attitude and more curious than she'd like to admit, she decided to risk asking him the same question she'd ask Sven before he interrupted.

"So, 'tis true then? You do not wish to return to Kirkvaw?"

Actually, this was only her first question—she had many, many more about him and Kirkvaw and her father. This was only the beginning.

"I would ask you the same thing, Sister. Why do you not wish to return to Kirkvaw?"

She opened her mouth to argue, but the answer she would give and the one she should give were different and not something she wished to discuss with him. And her words would reveal, she worried, more than she wished anyone to know. Again, as though he read her thoughts, he replied before she could.

"Just so, Sister. Just so."

All Margriet could do was grit her teeth to keep from saying something, and she knew that whatever she said, 'twould not be good. Accepting defeat for the moment, she skirted around the guard, who had not moved, and crept back into the tent. When she adjusted the flap, she could see

Rurik still standing outside, arms crossed over his chest, with his long cloak flowing over his broad shoulders and nearly reaching the ground.

In a low voice—one too soft for her to hear all the words exchanged—he spoke to the guard, who now did more than grunt. He spoke in the Norn of the common folk of the Orkneys and she struggled to understand. Although the lands around the convent had come under the rule of the Scottish lord Alexander de L'Ard a few years ago, Earl Erengisl was the primary sponsor of this and several other convents in Caithness. And people at his court spoke in the formal Norse of the royal court. Mother Ingrid, herself with origins from some other part of Scotland, had instructed her in the Gaelic tongue spoken here, but Margriet's talents lay in numbers and organization and not in skills with other tongues.

Rurik's words were calm and without anger and ended with a short, shared laugh, which she suspected was at her expense. When she leaned forward enough that he noticed her, Rurik, with an upward nod of his head, directed her back inside the tent. She blamed on her weariness that she did not argue or hesitate, but slipped back inside and lay down. This time her bones creaked but did not scream and she settled under the blankets as Elspeth slept on.

The sun rose earlier than it should have the next morning, or so it seemed to her, for she had only just closed her eyes when the order to break camp was shouted outside. At least she'd had the presence of mind to take the herbs she needed in the morning from her bag and place them within reach before she'd fallen asleep. Chewing them and drinking a sip of water as soon as she awakened helped calm her stomach from the ills that struck in the morn.

With no time for a lay-a-bed, Margriet prayed her stomach would settle and wished that it not repeat the occurrence of yestermorn as she folded the blankets. Taking slow, deep breaths as Cook had advised, she focused on her task and on her steps as she fought the waves of sickness welling and ebbing inside of her. If Elspeth noticed, she said nothing as they watched their tent being dismantled and packed. When handed a bowl of some kind of porridge by the man who guarded them through the night, her stomach rebelled.

Elspeth stayed close behind, thankfully waving off the men who followed, and warning in stronger a manner than she expected of the girl of the sisters' need to attend their personal needs. But when Margriet fell to her knees and emptied the meager contents of her stomach, she fell alone. The heaving continued even after its purpose was completed and it was several minutes before she sank back to sit on her heels and caught her breath.

Wiping her mouth, Margriet shuddered as the tremors calmed. The crackling of brush and leaves behind her alerted her to Elspeth's approach. Pushing up onto her feet, she turned to thank the girl for her assistance and instead found Rurik watching her from a few paces away. The hard lines of his face could have been carved from stone as he stared at her. His gaze moved over her and she could not move under his scrutiny.

"Sir?" Elspeth's voice shook, much as Margriet knew hers would if she attempted to speak at this moment.

She struggled against the strange hold she felt, one that made it difficult to breathe or to even look away from him. She reached up to make certain her wimple and veil were in place, for she feared she stood naked there in the light of day.

"Sir?" the girl asked again.

This time whatever spell had ensorcelled them dissipated and they both turned toward Elspeth…and Sven…and several of the others. Margriet took a deep breath and pulled her wits about her. Pushing past Rurik, she walked back toward the camp. When the others did not move to follow, she faced them and tried, with firm words, to distract them from the truth of the situation.

"Pray forgive my behavior, but I had great need of privacy."

Believing that the less said, the less chance of being tripped by an untruth, she turned back to the path through the trees. Silence still reigned behind her, but she continued hoping that it would be forgotten.

"And pardon us for intruding on that privacy, Sister."

Margriet nodded without turning, accepting his apology and trying to ignore the whispers that grew in loudness until she could make out a few of their words. 'Twas, however, Rurik's voice again that stopped her in her place.

"Your retching could be heard back in the camp, Sister. We feared for your well-being."

How should she handle this? His words gave her pause and the undercurrent of sarcasm confused her. Did she answer him now or should she wait until they could speak privately? Ignoring his challenge—and aye, it was one—could only cause more trouble. But what to say?

"My thanks, good sirs, for your concern and your assistance," she said as she met each of their gazes, with *his* being last. "I fear I have not traveled often nor do I travel well and 'twould seem that my body rebels against it."

He allowed her explanation to go without comment, for he was not yet certain what bothered him most about it—the need for it because of some condition of hers he knew not of, or that he thought it all a lie. Her hasty run from the camp, the sounds of retching that disturbed the quiet of the forest or the way her eyes took on a hazy look when she met his gaze. His gut liked none of those things, but the possibility that she lied intrigued him in a way he did not expect.

Rurik waved most of the men back to their duties, but he motioned to Sven and Magnus to remain. The lady's well-being must be a concern and her illness two days in a row did not bode well for their journey. They—he—could not arrive at Gunnar's house with his daughter in a cart, nearly dead from the trip. If she was to survive the journey and he to complete his task successfully, he must take her condition under consideration.

"Get your maps and meet me back in camp," he said. "I think our plans are too ambitious for Gunnar's daughter."

"At least your boots were not the target this morn," Magnus offered. "If Sister Margriet is this bad on land, how will she be during our sea voyage to the islands?"

Rurik looked one to the other and found the same grimace on both Sven and Magnus that he knew his own face wore. Still, he could recognize the problem here and forcing the woman at too quick a pace would simply lead to failure. In spite of his own delays at getting to this task, Rurik knew there was still plenty of good traveling weather before the winter's winds and storms made the sea over which they would travel nearly impassible. So, a slower journey, a few more days on the road to accommodate the most important one in their group, would not be of significance.

"Get your maps."

It took little time to review their planned path and decide how and where to break up their traveling. The convent was built at the southwestern edge of Caithness, in a place where the border shifted with each new lord. Initially, they were heading east to the coast, just south of where Caithness lands began, for the road, truly no more than a dirt path, would lead them past several small villages where they could replenish their provisions.

The northernmost Caithness lands, just before they reached the edge of the northern sea, was empty moorland, no forests to shelter beasts or plants that could feed them, so following the rivers or coast made more sense. It would take them several days more by that route, but it was still safer than traveling by sea along that section of the north coast. Fish and fowl would be available to them in and along the rivers they would follow, and more than make up for the additional days in their journey. At least, the land would be flat and not the arduous climbing needed to get out of these mountains that surrounded the convent.

After sending the men off to finish preparations for their day's journey, Rurik glanced over to see the two women sitting on a fallen tree. Although both wore the same clothing, the same garb

marking them as part of a religious community, he still could not picture Margriet as living there. The flash in her eyes, when challenged or angry, was certainly not the patient acceptance he would expect in someone who had taken vows of obedience. And the way her hips swayed as she walked. Or the waves of raven hair that he knew still tumbled around her shoulders and down her back did not speak to him of someone who would live willingly under a vow of celibacy.

Turning to look at the men around him, Rurik realized that he seemed the only one affected by her in this manner. The others spoke to her in respectful voices, never meeting her gaze for more than a moment or two, never reaching out to touch her hand, and never staring at her the way he did. All treated both of them with the respect deserved and owed to women of the cloth.

Except him.

Regardless of his efforts to accept the situation as presented to him, he saw only a vibrant young woman who was wasted on the church. But, accept it he must, for his task was simply to return her to her father and be done with her. There were plans even now being made for his future and he doubted they would include the daughter of Gunnar, even though he was the High Counselor.

Aye, and if truth be told, plans were in place for the lady as well. Not royalty, her father was a rich and powerful man in his own right and he also served the Earl of the Orkneys and, in his name, ruled there when Erengisl was at his other properties or on some mission for the king.

From what he could glean from Sven's and Magnus's words and tales, Erengisl would be leaving the Orkneys for more important things, situations within the kingdom that needed his political insight and power, and he wished to leave one of his sons in Kirkvaw, and to place the other in charge of several of their properties in the Viipuri province and their family seat in Näsby.

Watching as Margriet reached out her hand in a graceful motion and accepted a cup of ale from one of the men, he realized that their fathers were the same—neither from royal blood but both had amassed wealth and power by serving those who were. And Rurik knew that they were much the same as well, for they would both be a pawn in their fathers' larger plan. For all his ruminations he almost missed her actions at just that moment. He stepped back nearer to the trees so that his presence would not alert her that he was watching her.

Very discreetly, she reached into a pocket in her tunic and then put whatever was there in her mouth. He could almost feel her holding her breath as she chewed on *something*. And when she thought no one was looking, she poured most of the ale in her cup into Sister Elspeth's. Then, she took a small cloth square and wrapped the chunk of bread and wedge of cheese given her to break her fast in it. She covered her furtive movement by hiding the bundle in her pocket with her motion rising from her seat.

Rurik thought it interesting. She did not eat the food he provided, but hid it away for…what? Later? For someone else? Sister Elspeth ate her food, slowly and steadily, but every morsel and drop given her was consumed. She asked not for more, so he would think her contented by it. Sven called to him across their encampment and he strode over to him, pushing the questions aside to handle the more pressing needs of his duties.

A short time later, he glanced over to see the women being helped onto their horses and he caught a glimpse of the joy on her face when she noticed the extra blankets folded as padding to soften the effects of riding long hours. Her gaze moved to his without a moment's delay and he found himself once more contemplating the womanly curves of the one beneath the garb.

And as the corners of her mouth tilted up in a gentle smile, his breath stopped in his chest. But when she licked her lips and mouthed the words *many thanks*, his body shuddered and hardened so quickly he thought he'd been struck by Thor's Hammer.

He realized in that moment that this journey was fraught with dangers he'd never considered when he agreed to the task. What kind of a man would lose control over a nun?

Rurik gave the signal for everyone to mount up and, within minutes, they were moving away from the clearing and back into the forest. He allowed Sven to take the lead, preferring to lag behind and consider his irrational actions.

Lusting after a nun? Was he daft?

Mayhap too many years of loving women, for he did love women, had brought him to this? He'd loved and touched and lusted after every sort of woman since he arrived in Scotland and began his life with his uncle's people. Once awakened, his appetite grew.

In spite of the fact that his ancestors' history of going *a-viking* and taking property and women — whether willing or no'—had died long ago, he'd never bothered to correct those living under the protection of the MacLerie who still believed it. And since that reputation handed down through generations continued among them, Rurik had tried his best to live up to the expectations of those willing to be wooed.

'Twas said he rarely slept alone, but he never took a woman who did not wish to be taken and that was true. But, once her willingness was clear and consent given, there were no restraints between them.

Rurik took in a deep breath of cool, mountain air and let it out, watching the column of riders ahead of him moving down the worn path and remembering in that moment some of the best of times and the best of women in his past. A wave of sadness passed through him as Nara's image came to mind.

Regardless of his reputation and the wild stories told of his womanizing ways, when Rurik was with a woman who expected faithfulness, he was. He and Nara had been together for almost three years when his father's first call had come. Whether that was behind her leaving, he knew not. He'd shared with her alone the truth of his life with his father, and only kenned that, before his friends returned the second time, she left both him and Lairig Dubh behind to travel to her own family in a distant village.

As their time on the road passed and he allowed himself to wallow in these unfamiliar maudlin feelings, he noticed that Margriet now shifted on her mount and took something from her pocket. As she tried to adjust to the movements of the horse beneath her, the small bundle nearly went loose. Grabbing for it, she held it close and he could tell she ate it in small bites. If anyone glanced at her at that moment, they could not tell what she was doing. He knew.

He knew because nothing she did escaped his gaze.

Not a thing.

Not the way her mouth curved when she spoke.

Not the way her hand lightly touched the surface of everything she could as they passed by.

Not the way her voice grew husky as she whispered her prayers over meals or before sleeping.

Not a cursed or blessed thing.

Realizing what he did, Rurik closed his eyes and begged forgiveness from the Almighty. Not the many gods of his ancestors, but from the One who truly ruled the heavens and earth.

For he was a man whose heart missed the one woman he'd allowed himself to love even while his body lusted after a nun.

Chapter Five

Nary a hint of a breeze offering a respite from the encasing heat of the habit she'd chosen to wear passed over her. Margriet cursed her own foolishness as sweat gathered on her brow and trickled under the wimple to trace a path down her neck, between her shoulders and onto her back. This was one aspect of her disguise she'd not thought through.

She expected that the habit would offer protection from the untoward advances of the men in the traveling group, and it had. The men treated her and Elspeth with deference and respect and kept a decent distance from them. None seemed to even consider that they were not nuns. None but their leader, for she caught him watching her at the oddest moments and suspected he knew something was amiss.

Or mayhap 'twas her own guilty conscience over the matter?

Her plan made sense; even the reverend mother seemed to agree that it was sound. That was before the journey began, before they left the enclosed valley that surrounded and protected the convent and its lands with an abundance of forests and streams… and blessed shade! They'd left the valley the morning before and still crossed a piece of land that offered nothing but flat, hard ground and nothing growing save for some short bushes and ground-hugging plants.

Aye, her plan *had* made sense at the beginning. However, the heat had not been one of her concerns and she did not ever remember any of the sisters complaining of it. Yet another bit of proof that she would never be suitable for the religious life. Then, as though he sensed her unspoken acknowledgement, Rurik turned and met her gaze. The moisture increased on her face and now she could feel it trickle down between her breasts. Made worse by her hair, now tucked under her tunic to hide its length, Margriet considered that mayhap she'd chosen the wrong course of action.

Again.

As always.

She sighed and turned her eyes from his. Reaching into her sleeve, Margriet tugged a square of linen free and dabbed at the sweat that threatened to soak her if left untended. It was very difficult to attain the same attitude of unruffled calm that the nuns seemed to have, especially when the clouds cleared above and the sun offered more heat than they needed this day. Looking around for Elspeth, she noticed the girl seemed to like it even less than she did herself. Touching the cloth to her forehead, Margriet wondered if the girl would keep her silence…and their secret until the journey's end.

"Sister?"

Margriet turned to discover that Sven rode now at her side. He was the most pleasant of the men and he was always considerate of her comfort. "Have you need of something to drink?" He held out a skin and offered its contents to her.

"Many thanks, Sven," she said as she accepted it, took several swallows and then held it out to him. The water was not cold, but it refreshed her nonetheless. He passed it over to Elspeth, who partook of it as well.

"You might wish to pour some on your cloth and cool your face," he said and then the man blushed as he realized he spoke of something probably more personal than a man should to a nun. He stammered a moment or two before he got the words out. "My pardon, Sister, but your face is very red and I thought you might be…uncomfortable."

Trying to lessen his embarrassment, Margriet replied, "I thank you for such concern for my wellbeing. I would not want to waste our supply on such a selfish thing, no matter that 'twould be a welcome relief in this heat."

Fearing that her words did not sound religious enough, she added, "And I offer such suffering up in the name of Our Lord." She raised her eyes heavenward and then closed them for a moment, mimicking the gesture she'd witnessed hundreds, nay, thousands of time during her years at the convent.

Margriet did unfold the cloth and try to find a dry patch to absorb the gathering beads of sweat. She knew not of the plans for their journey, but hesitated to use their water for her own comfort. Again, the thought that she'd made a mistake crossed her mind. Sven nodded and offered the water to them again, and after each took a few sips, he urged his horse into a quicker pace than she could maintain and took his place at the front of the group.

Where *he* rode this day.

She realized she was the topic of conversation when Rurik turned to look back at her and then shared more words with Sven. Margriet had barely a few minutes to wallow in her discomfort when Sven returned to her side.

"We will reach a river soon, so you should not worry over using the water to cool your brow," he said.

Caught by her own lying words, Margriet fretted over what to do. The part of her that was melting in the heat wanted to grab up the skin and pour every drop of the remaining water over her head. But, the part of her that usually thought things through triumphed in this and she allowed him to pour a few drops on the linen, before dabbing her brow and cheeks with it.

"Many thanks for your consideration, Sven. I admit that this heat is unexpected and a trial."

He moved his horse to walk next to hers and took the water skin from her. The group still moved at the same pace, but 'twas a slower one than they'd maintained the first two days of their journey. Those days were lost in a fog, for she could only remember the misery of leaving the convent behind and the pain of traveling on the back of a horse.

Her journey to the convent all those years ago she did not remember at all, having only eight years and mourning the loss of her mother. So, having naught with which to compare, she thought this journey must surely be the worst of her life.

She waited for the man to speak and when he did not, she fell quiet, sinking back into her thoughts of the journey ahead and the repercussions of her fall from grace. Sven drifted back to a place next to Elspeth and she could hear his words as he stumbled over the correct pronunciation of the words in Elspeth's Gaelic tongue.

Looking at the rest of the men, she only then realized that they were a mix of Scots and those from her homeland in the Orkneys. Rurik, Sven, Magnus and six more sounded clearly at home with both the formal court language and that of the common people. Four of the others, as well as Elspeth, spoke only Gaelic.

Rurik was the only one who spoke all three.

Glancing ahead, she watched his silhouette as he guided the travelers along this road. Tall and muscular, both on and off his mount, he spoke little and gave few orders, yet there was no doubt that he commanded this group. Both the Scots and those from Orkney attended to his words and directions with a quiet acceptance, as one does with an acknowledged leader, much as the sisters did with the reverend mother.

The other thing she noticed about him was that he remained apart, from nearly everyone including Sven and Magnus. Those two—she glanced over at Sven, who was still speaking, or rather trying to, with Elspeth—were friends of long-standing. She could tell by their easy manner with each other. They also seemed to have some connection to Rurik, for they spent time with their heads together, plotting and planning, each day.

But what about Rurik?

As though her thoughts had spoken his name, he turned back and met her gaze. Margriet touched the linen to her face once more and looked away, unable or unwilling to face his intense scrutiny. There would be time on this journey to discover his secrets. Sven knew something about him and his reasons for overseeing her return and had referred to it while they walked in camp that first night. Before Rurik interrupted his words…

So, there were secrets here to be discovered!

As always happened when faced with a task, Margriet's mind began to swirl and plan the best way in which to accomplish it. By the time they reached the river's edge, she saw all the steps in the path to finding out who Rurik was and his reasons for taking on the mission of bringing her home.

* * *

The place chosen for their stop that night was pleasant. Looking around the area near her tent and the central fire, Margriet noticed the branches of the trees moving in the breezes that soothed her

after the heat of the day. Any relief was certainly dulled by the layers of clothing she wore, but 'twas still more comfortable than the midday sun's glaring rays when there was no shade to blunt them.

Now, sitting on a stool fashioned from the stumps of some fallen trees and eating a surprisingly well- cooked stew, Margriet watched as the men broke off into smaller groups divided, as near as she could tell, by language and origin. The Scots sat away from the fire, passing a skin of ale between them, while those from the north sat nearer.

Rurik did not eat, but paced around the camp, checking horses and supplies. Seeing an opportunity, she rose and went to the fire. Dipping the long- handled spoon in the cooking pot, she scooped out a serving of the food and carried it to where he stood now. His surprise sat plainly on his face, but he nodded and took it from her.

"You need not serve me, Sister," he said before accepting an eating spoon that she also carried to him.

"I have so little to do, sir. Other than pray, of course. And 'tis the least I can do to show my appreciation."

He ate a few more mouthfuls without saying another word. Sven walked over with a battered cup and a skin of ale, which he held out to Rurik. Handing her his bowl and spoon, she watched as he first poured some into the cup before offering it to her, while he simply opened his mouth and filled it with ale from the skin. After passing it back to Sven, Rurik took back his food and ate it in silence.

Margriet sipped from the cup as she considered which questions to ask first. If she were too aggressive, he would back away. Too soft in her approach and he would wile his way out of answers that would enlighten her about him and his past.

"Why do you not wish to escort me to my father?"

"Pardon?" he asked, stopping with his spoon halfway between the plate and his mouth.

"'Tis clear to me that you do not want this duty. Why did you agree to it then?" She lifted the cup to her lips and forced another sip, trying with all her might to remain calm and pursue her intentions to discover more about him.

She'd caught him by surprise, she could tell. His eyes widened even as his mouth stopped chewing the food in it. He tried to swallow then, but Margriet knew he would choke.

And he did.

When his breath collided with that food, he convulsed with loud coughs. The plate flew through the air as he leaned over and, with his hands on his thighs, tried to loosen the blockage from his throat. Without stopping to think, Margriet ran to his side and began pummeling him on his back.

A few minutes went by before he stopped choking and she continued delivering blows until he did. After what seemed to be ages of time had passed, he waved her off and Margriet stepped back. 'Twas then she noticed the quiet that surrounded them.

To a person, everyone in the camp stood, mouths agape, staring at them. No one moved as she adjusted her wimple back to where it should sit on her head and as she tugged her robes back in place. When she had regained her composure and her breath, for beating the warrior's back with her bare hands was hard work, she cleared her own throat and turned back to Rurik.

"Are you well now?" she asked.

"Now that I can breathe again or now that you have stopped trying to pound me into the ground?" Sarcasm laced his words and the sting of it slashed at her.

Humiliation pulsed through her body, making her heart pound in her chest and bringing the heat of embarrassment to her face. Worse, she felt the burning of tears in her eyes and her throat, forcing her to look away from him.

Why had she thought that she could face down a man, and one such as this one, and get her way? Margriet lowered her head and turned, hoping to walk quickly to some darkened corner of the camp where she could wait until the horror of her actions dissipated or at least until everyone ceased staring. She'd only taken a few steps when his voice stopped her.

“Sister, my thanks for your assistance,” he said loud enough for all to hear. Rurik watched as she stopped, unsure if she would still bolt, as the look in her eyes declared, or if she would remain. He waited and then held out his hand to her. “And my thanks for bringing me food.”

He stepped closer, though not too close, and glared over her head at those who still gawped at her, ordering their gazes away with a nod of his head. Only the little nun still watched, though hers was a look of concerned observation rather than a curious one.

Rurik had not realized his words were as harsh as they were until he saw the horror and embarrassment fill her face. ’Twas the tears he spied in the last moment before she fled that undid him. When she still did not take his hand, he bent over and picked up the cup she’d been drinking from and motioned to Sven for the skin of ale. Once filled, he offered it to her.

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