

Ransom Romantic Novel Chapter 4

Chapter Four

They didn't like the message. Four of Laird Buchanan's elite guard surrounded the young MacDonald soldier, towering over him like avenging gargoyles as he stammered out his important information while quaking in his boots. Three of the warriors were rendered speechless by the announcement. Aaron, Robert, and Liam were outraged by what they immediately surmised was trickery on Laird MacDonald's part. Everyone in the Buchanan clan knew the messenger's laird to be a sneaky, lying, son of a bitch, and therefore refused to believe a word he said. The fourth Buchanan warrior, Dylan, had the opposite reaction to the news. Though he also believed Laird MacDonald to be a sneaky, lying, son of a bitch, he was so amused and intrigued by the message he was eager to hear the details.

Aaron, the most outspoken of the Buchanan group, shook his head in denial and moved forward with the demand that the messenger repeat every word.

"'Tis as I said before," the young MacDonald soldier insisted.

"Then say it again," Aaron commanded, deliberately moving close so that the man would have to crane his head back in order to look him in the eyes. "Word for word I would hear this foul message again."

The MacDonald soldier felt like a trapped rabbit. Robert stood behind him, Dylan faced him, and Aaron and Liam pressed in against his sides. All the Buchanan warriors were at least two heads above him in height, and they could easily crush him with their weight alone.

He turned to the warrior who had made the demand, then tried to step back so that he could put a little breathing distance between them. "There is a young lady who insists that your laird come to her at once. She waits inside the boarded up church near the crossroads below the Len holding. She claims... to be..."

The dark look on the warrior's face so terrified the soldier he couldn't go on. He turned to Dylan, then stepped back in an attempt to get away from his scorching glare and bumped into the warrior named Black Robert.

"My message is for Brodick and Brodick alone," he protested.

"He is Laird Buchanan to you, pup," Liam growled.

"Yes... yes, Laird Buchanan," the soldier hastily acknowledged. "I overstep myself."

"Aye, you do," Robert muttered from behind. Dylan stepped forward to question the messenger. Brodick had already been summoned to the great hall but had not yet

arrived, and so the commander over the elite guard of Buchanan warriors decided to take charge of the questioning. He knew the MacDonald soldier was scared, and so he clasped his hands behind his back as a signal that he wouldn't harm him and impatiently waited for him to regain his composure.

"Continue with your message," Dylan demanded.

"The lady, she claims to be his bride," the frightened young man blurted out. "And she demands that your laird escort her to his home so that she may take up residence."

Robert nudged the soldier to get his attention and accidentally sent him lunging forward. He bumped into Dylan, who didn't budge an inch, quickly righted himself, and whirled around to face the warrior. "I do not lie," he insisted. "I repeat only what I was bid to say."

"What is your name?" Robert asked. He thought his question a mild one and therefore was surprised by the messenger's reaction. The young man actually paled like a frightened woman.

"Henley," he blurted out with a sigh, thankful he'd been able to remember it. "My name is Henley."

Dylan demanded Henley's attention by prodding him to turn around again. The soldier quickly obeyed the order, dizzy now from twirling about in the center of the giants. He tried to concentrate only on the Buchanan commander, but it was difficult, for the other three were deliberately pressing in on him.

"Why did the MacDonald send a boy to give us this message?" Dylan asked contemptuously.

Henley's Adam's apple bulged and wobbled as he swallowed. He didn't dare contradict the commander by arguing that he was a man, not a boy, and so he said, "My laird felt that a younger man would have a better chance of surviving your laird's temper. We have all witnessed your laird in battle and know of his remarkable strength. Many have claimed that they have seen him fell his enemy with but a flick of his wrist. We have also all heard that it is... unwise... to displease him. Laird MacDonald is not ashamed to admit that he respectfully fears your laird."

Dylan smiled. "Respectfully fears?"

Henley nodded. "My laird also said that Brodick..."

Liam shoved the messenger hard, sending him crashing into Robert. The warrior didn't flinch, but Henley felt as though he'd just run into a stone wall. He turned to Liam then, wishing with all his heart he had the nerve to suggest that if the warrior wanted to gain his attention, he simply say his name.

"Brodick is Laird Buchanan to you," Liam reminded him.

"Yes, Laird Buchanan," Henley quickly agreed.

"You were saying?" Aaron prodded.

Henley turned to his left to answer. "My laird said that Laird Buchanan is an honorable man and that he would not prey upon an unarmed man. I do not carry a weapon."

Henley was forced to whirl to the right when Dylan asked, "And does your laird also tell you that Brodick is reasonable?"

Henley knew that if he lied, the warriors would know it. "Nay, he said just the opposite," he admitted.

Dylan laughed. "Your honesty protects your hide."

Aaron spoke then, forcing the messenger to turn completely around.

"We don't kill messengers," he said.

"Unless, of course, we dislike the message." Robert grinned.

Henley turned back to address their leader once again. "There is more," he said. "I fear the rest will truly displease your laird." The quicker he got his message delivered, the quicker he could get out of their trap, and if God proved merciful, he would be well on his way home before Brodick arrived.

The laird had been summoned from the training fields below the holding and was irritated by the interruption, but when he heard that there was an urgent message, his heart leapt with hope that the news was from Iain Maitland, telling him that his son, Alec, had been found.

Gawain, another one of his trusted guards, dashed Brodick's hopes when he told him that the plaid the messenger wore was from the clan MacDonald.

The disappointment frustrated and angered him. He turned to Gawain and said, "Tomorrow we go back to the falls and search once again. Do you argue with me this time, Gawain?"

The soldier shook his head. "Nay, I know that it's futile to argue with you, Laird. Until you believe in your heart that the boy is dead, I'll continue to search as diligently as you."

"Do you believe Alec drowned?"

Gawain's sigh was weary. " 'Tis the truth I do." Brodick couldn't fault his friend for his honesty. He continued up the hill with Gawain at his side.

"His father taught Alec how to swim," he remarked.

"But if Alec hit his head on the rocks as the blood indicated, he would have been unconscious when he hit the water. Besides, even a grown man would have difficulty surviving the pounding falls."

"Neither Iain nor I believe Alec is dead."

"Laird Maitland mourns his son," Gawain said. "In time he will accept his death."

"No," Brodick argued. "Until there is a body to bury, neither one of us will accept."

"You were just appointed his champion," Gawain said. "Perhaps that is yet another reason you cannot accept. As his new protector..."

"A protector who failed," Brodick interrupted harshly. "I should have gone to the festival. I should have watched out for him. I don't even know if Iain gave Alec my dagger and if the boy knew..." He shook his head and forced himself to think about the present. "Go and take over the training. I'll join you as soon as I've heard what the MacDonald soldier has to say."

A draft blew into the great hall when the doors to the courtyard were thrown open. Henley heard the sound of Brodick's boots pounding against the stone floor and closed his eyes. His panic nearly made him faintheaded and it took a supreme act of courage to stand still and not try to run.

"The message damned well better be urgent. Where's the MacDonald soldier?" Brodick demanded as he strode into the hall.

Dylan nodded to the guards surrounding the messenger. "Move back so our laird may hear this important message," he ordered. He tried to sound serious, but knew he'd failed in that endeavor.

Brodick stood next to Dylan to face the messenger. Henley felt his shivers increase tenfold, for the two warriors were extremely daunting. The Buchanan laird was even taller than his commander. Brodick was a giant of a man, with thick bulging muscles in his shoulders and upper arms and thighs, indicating his raw, superior strength. His skin was richly bronzed, his long hair golden. His eyes bore into Henley with a gaze so intense and probing, the young soldier felt as though he were staring into the eyes of a lion who was about to have him for his supper.

Aye, he was in the lion's den, and heaven help him when he gave the rest of his message.

Dylan had terrified Henley before, but now that the commander stood next to his laird, he didn't seem quite as intimidating. In coloring, Dylan was the antithesis of Brodick,

for he was as dark as the night. In size and bulk he was equal, but his manner was less threatening.

"I would hear this urgent message," Brodick commanded.

Henley flinched. He found it impossible to hold the laird's stare, and so he cowardly looked at the tops of his boots while he repeated word for word what he had memorized.

"The lady... she bids you to come to her at the church of Saint Thomas at the crossroads below the Len holding, and the lady, she... demands... yes, demands that you escort her to your home."

Henley darted a quick glance up to judge Brodick's reaction and wished with all his heart he hadn't been so curious. The scowl on the laird's face made the blood rush to his temples, and he feared he might disgrace the MacDonald name by passing out.

"She?" Brodick asked quietly.

"Tell him," Dylan ordered.

"Your bride," Henley blurted out. "The lady, she's your bride."

"This woman claims to be my bride?"

Henley nodded. " 'Tis true."

"The hell it is," Dylan replied.

"Nay, I meant to say only that she claims... She told me to say those very words. Laird, does my message displease you?" He held his breath while he waited for an answer. He firmly believed the gossip about Brodick and therefore thought his fate rested in the laird's reaction.

"It would depend upon the woman," Aaron said. "Know you if she is comely?"

Not only did Henley dare to contradict the warrior, but he also let a flash of anger appear in his expression and his voice while he was at it. "She is not a mere woman. She is a lady, a gentle lady."

"And what is this gentle lady's name?" Robert asked.

"Buchanan," Henley answered. "She calls herself Lady Buchanan." He took a deep breath and then said, "She must be your laird's wife, for she is most fitting. I believed her to be very sincere."

"She has obviously turned your head," Aaron interjected. "But then, you are a boy, and boys are easily influenced."

Henley ignored the criticism, his attention on the laird now. "May I speak my thoughts freely and tell you all that transpired?"

Brodick granted him permission, but Dylan qualified his laird's agreement. "As long as you speak only the truth."

"Yes, only the truth," Henley promised. "I was on my way home from the Lowlands when I was intercepted by a man I took to be a farmer. His voice was that of an Englishman. I was surprised, because it is unheard of for an Englishman to walk on Highland ground without it being known and permission granted. I thought the man was most impertinent, but I soon forgave him his transgression when I heard about his noble undertaking."

"What was his noble undertaking?" Aaron asked.

"He and his brother protected the lady."

"Only two men to protect such a treasure?" Robert mocked.

Henley ignored the comment and steeled himself against the laird's temper when he told him what he considered to be the worst of the news.

"Laird, your bride is English."

Liam, the quiet one of the group, let out a roar that so startled Henley he jumped. Robert muttered a dark curse, Aaron shook his head in disgust, and Dylan couldn't quite hide his grimace. Brodick seemed to be the only one unaffected by the announcement. He raised his hand for silence and calmly bid the messenger to continue.

"I didn't know about the lady at first," Henley explained. "The Englishman told me his name was Waldo, and he invited me to share his meager supper. He explained that he had been given permission to cross the Len holding by the old laird himself and that his wife's family was distantly related to the clan. I took his explanation as truth for I couldn't think of any reason why he would lie, and because I was both weary and hungry, I accepted his invitation. He seemed a likable sort—for an Englishman. After we ate, he told me he was very curious about the clans in the north. He knew of many of them and asked me to show him in the dirt with a stick where certain clans lived."

"Which clans in particular was he interested in?" Brodick's voice had turned hard.

"He was interested in the Sinclairs and the MacPhersons," Henley said. "But he was most interested in finding out where the Maitland clan was located and also where your clan resided, Laird. Aye, he was extremely curious about the Buchanans. 'Twas peculiar now that I think about it, but the farmer seemed disappointed to see how far north the Maitland clan lived. He smiled, though, when I showed him that your holding bordered the Sinclairs' and that it was the Sinclair holding that touched a

corner of Maitland land. I should have asked him why he was so happy about this information, but I didn't."

"Did you think to ask him why he was interested in the clans?" Dylan asked.

Henley twitched over the anger in the warrior's tone. "Yes, I did ask," he answered. "Waldo told me he wanted to know who would give him permission to cross their land and who wouldn't. I told him he should turn around and go back home because none of the clans he had asked about would ever let him step on their ground."

"When did he tell you about the woman?" Aaron asked. Henley dared to correct the warrior once again. "She is a lady." Aaron rolled his eyes heavenward. "So you say," he replied. "I have yet to judge her so."

"Continue with this tale of yours," Dylan ordered.

"After I had drawn the map of the clans for Waldo, he asked me if I knew a warrior named Brodick."

"He is Laird to you," Liam snapped.

Henley quickly nodded. "I am only repeating the farmer's words to me," he rushed out. "He called your laird Brodick. I told him I did indeed know who he was asking about, and I also explained that he is called Laird Buchanan now. He asked many questions about you, Laird, but he was most interested in knowing, for a certainty, that you were... honorable. I told him that you were most honorable, and that was when he confessed his true reason for being in the Highlands. He said he was escorting your bride."

"Is that when her father's soldiers presented themselves?"

"Nay," Henley answered. "There were but two traveling with the lady, no less, no more, brothers they were, and much too old for such a duty. I searched for others, but there were none."

"What kind of father sends his daughter with but two old men to guard her?" Aaron asked.

"There were no others," Henley insisted. "Aye, they were old men, in their forties, but they were able to get her all the way to the Len holding, and that is quite a distance inside the Highlands. The brothers were very protective toward her. They wouldn't let me see her, but told me that she was inside the church. They gave me a message to relate to you, Laird, and then tried to send me on my way with the promise that you would richly reward me. I want nothing from you, though," he hastened to add, "for I have already been given my reward."

"And what was that?" Robert asked.

"I saw the lady and spoke to her. No gift could ever equal that moment."

Liam openly scoffed, but Henley ignored him. "Laugh if you wish, but you have not seen her yet, and you cannot understand."

"Tell us about her," Aaron commanded.

"She called out to me through the open window when I was leaving. I had agreed to gain permission from my laird to come to you, though in all honesty, I hoped Laird MacDonald would give the errand to another, because I had great trepidation about coming here."

"Get to the point," Dylan ordered.

The commander was curious over Brodick's reaction, for his laird hadn't said much of anything at all since the questioning had begun. He appeared to be somewhat bored by the news that an Englishwoman was claiming to be his bride.

Henley cleared his throat before continuing. "The lady, she called out to me and I leapt from my horse and rushed to the window before Waldo and his brother could stop me, as I was most curious to see her and hear what she had to say."

The messenger paused as he remembered the vivid details of that enchanting moment. His entire demeanor changed in the blink of an eye from fearful to that of a man besotted, and his voice became as smooth as honey as he recounted the meeting.

"I saw her clearly and stood close enough to touch her hand."

"And did you touch her?" Brodick asked the question in a soft, chilling tone.

Henley frantically shook his head. "Nay, I would never dare such audacity," he insisted. "Your bride has been sorely mistreated, Laird," he added. "One side of her face was bruised, her skin the color of saffron with purple marks along her jaw and cheekbone. There was still some swelling evident, and I noticed other bruises on her hands and her right arm. Her left arm was bandaged from elbow to wrist, and there were bloodstains on the white linen. I wanted to ask the gentle lady how she had come by her injuries, but the words got trapped in my throat, and I found it impossible to speak a word. I could see the pain and weariness in her eyes, her glorious green eyes so like the color of our hills in spring, and I couldn't take my gaze away from her," he admitted with a blush. "I believed in that moment that I was seeing an angel."

Henley turned to address Aaron. "You asked me if she was comely, but that word does not do Laird Buchanan's bride justice."

His face turned as red as fire as he added, "The lady... she is very beautiful... aye, she must be an angel, for I swear to you she is perfection."

Brodick hid his exasperation over the soldier's enthralled description of the Englishwoman. Angel, indeed, he thought to himself. An angel who blatantly lied.

"Did you describe the lady's perfection to your laird or any others in your clan?" Brodick asked.

"I did," Henley admitted. "But I didn't overly embellish."

"Why not?" Robert wanted to know.

Henley knew better than to turn his back on Laird Buchanan. It would be perceived as an insult, and for that reason he didn't look at Robert when he answered him. "I knew they would go and claim her for their own if they knew the full impression she had made upon me. I told my laird the truth, that two Englishmen asked me to relay a message to your laird. I told him the brothers wished to let you know that the time had come for you to go and fetch your bride. My laird was content with that much information and bid me come to you... but his commander wanted more details."

"Balcher questioned you?" Dylan asked.

"Yes," Henley answered.

"And what did you tell him?" Robert asked.

"He asked me directly if the lady was in the Highlands now, and I couldn't, and wouldn't, ever lie to him. I answered that she was. I wasn't specific, though," he admitted. "I had given my word to the lady that I would tell only you, Laird, of her exact whereabouts."

"Then you lied to Balcher?" Dylan questioned.

Henley shook his head. "No, I didn't. I told my commander that the lady was near the Len holding. I didn't mention the church."

"So even now Balcher could be on his way to steal Brodick's woman," Aaron muttered.

"I was not sworn to secrecy, and so I can tell you that without a doubt Balcher will scour the Len holding looking for the lady. Everyone in the Highlands knows how much he would like to best you, Laird, and if he can steal your bride..."

"He dares to take what belongs to us," Liam interjected, outraged by the possibility.

"If even one of the MacDonalds touches her, they will all die." Robert voiced what the others were thinking. "Is that not true?"

"Aye, it is," Liam agreed.

"I do not think you understand," Henley said. "If my clansmen see her, they will not care about your laird's wrath. They will become too besotted to think clearly."

Aaron shoved the messenger. "As you were besotted?" he asked.

"'Tis the truth I was."

"But you didn't touch her?" Dylan asked.

"I have just told your laird that I did not touch her, and I value my life too much to lie to any of you. Besides, even if she were not your laird's bride, I wouldn't have dishonored her by trying to touch her. She is the most gentle of ladies."

"Balcher won't care about honor," Robert muttered.

Dylan was annoyed. Robert and Aaron and Liam had suddenly turned into the lady's champions. "Not five minutes ago you were outraged by this message," he reminded them. "What has caused this change in attitude?"

"The MacDonalds," Robert answered.

"Specifically Balcher," Aaron interjected.

"The lady belongs to Brodick and no other shall have her," Robert decreed.

So ludicrous had the conversation become, Brodick couldn't hold back his smile. "I have not claimed her," he reminded the warriors.

"But she has claimed you, Laird," Liam argued.

"And that makes it so?" Dylan asked.

Before anyone could answer, Brodick held up his hand for silence. "I would ask one last question of this messenger, and I would like to be able to hear his answer."

"Yes, Laird?" Henley asked, shivering anew.

"You have told me that she called you to the window to speak to you, but you haven't told me what she said."

"She sent an additional message to you."

"A request?" Aaron asked.

Henley found his first smile. "Nay, 'twas not a request but an order."

"She gives me an order?" Brodick was astounded by the woman's temerity.

Henley took a deep breath, hoping it wasn't going to be his last, and then blurted out, "She commands you to hurry."