



The Recruit: A Highland Guard Novel (The Highland Guard Book 6)

By Monica McCarty

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RITA Finalist for Historical Romance

Scotland's King Robert the Bruce is retaking his kingdom from the invading English. To win, he'll need all the grit and courage of his elite band of warriors, the Highland Guard, men who fight without fear and love without limits.

Fiery, aggressive, and bold, Kenneth Sutherland is a true champion—skilled with any weapon and driven to win. Now Kenneth is ready for his greatest challenge: joining Robert the Bruce's secret army to fight among the elite. Kenneth's best chance to attain that honor is by winning the Highland Games. Focused and prepared for victory, he is caught off guard by a lovely wisp of a woman—and a stolen moment of wicked seduction. Her innocent arousal and her shameless hunger fire his blood. He will win his place in the guard—and in Mary of Mar's bed.

The ruggedly handsome hero-in-the-making stirs a heart that should know better. Mary vows that her surrender will be sport only—no promises, no heartbreak, just one night of incredible passion. Nothing, she swears, will persuade her to give up her hard-wrought independence and put her fate in the hands of another powerful man. But with every gentle touch and heart-pounding kiss, Kenneth makes her want more. Now Mary wants his heart. But is this determined champion willing to surrender everything for love?

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

"The sixth book in the highly regarded Highland Guard series is filled with believable characters, intense emotions and a fast-paced intricate plot seamlessly interwoven with romance and plenty of historical detail."
---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

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

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One

July 1309

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumberland, English Marches

Mary handed the merchant the bundle that represented nearly three hundred hours of work and waited patiently as he examined the various purses, ribbons, and coifs with the same painstaking attention to detail he'd given the first time she'd brought him goods to sell nearly three years ago.

When he was finished, the old man crossed his arms and gave her a forbidding frown. "You did all this in four weeks? You had best have a team of faeries helping you at night, milady, because you promised me you were going to slow down this month."

"I shall slow down next month," she assured him. "After the harvest fair."

"And what about Michaelmas?" he said, reminding her of the large fair in September.

She smiled at the scowling man. He was doing his best to look imposing, but with his portly physique and kind, grandfatherly face, he wasn't having much success. "After Michaelmas I shall be so slothful I will have to buy an indulgence from Father Andrew or my soul will be in immortal danger."

He tried to hold his scowl, but a bark of laughter escaped. He shook his head as a doting father might at a naughty child. "I should like to see it."

He handed her the bag of coin they'd agreed upon.

She thanked him and tucked it into the purse she wore tied at her waist, enjoying the weight that dragged it down.

One dark, bushy eyebrow peppered with long strands of gray arched speculatively. “You wouldn’t need to work so hard if you agreed to take one of the requests I’ve had for your work. Fine opus anglicanum embroidery like this is wasted on these peasants.”

He said it with such disgust, Mary tried not to laugh. The customers who frequented his booth were not peasants but the burgeoning merchant class—people like him—who were helping to make Newcastle-upon-Tyne an important town.

The markets and fairs such as the one today were some of the best north of London. And John Bureford’s booth, full of fine textiles and accessories, was one of the most popular. In an hour, it would be crowded with eager young women seeking the latest fashions from London and the Continent.

He picked up one of the ribbons, a plush ruby velvet on which she’d embroidered a vine-and-leaf motif in gold thread. “Even on these they notice. The ladies of the town are vying to be the first to secure your talents for a surcote or a wall hanging. Even the hem of a shirt might satisfy them. Let me arrange it; you could name your price.”

She stilled, a flash of her old fear returning. Her voiced dropped automatically to a whisper. “You did not tell them?”

He looked affronted. “I do not understand your wish for secrecy, milady, but I honor our agreement. No one needs to know it is you. But are you sure you won’t consider a few select items?”

Mary shook her head. Preserving her privacy was worth more to her than the extra coin. Three years ago she’d been left on her own, frighteningly ill-prepared to deal with her new circumstances, with no more than a handful of pounds to her name. She could have gone to the king as others in her position were forced to do, but she feared drawing attention to herself. She knew the fastest way to find herself in another political marriage was to put demands on the royal coffers. She might have gone to Sir Adam—indeed, he’d offered to help—but she did not want to be beholden to him for more than she already was.

With the rents from the castle barely earning enough to pay the servants and keep her and her solitary attendant fed, she knew that she had to think of something. What would Janet do? She asked herself that often, as she began the daunting prospect of fending for herself.

As a sheltered young noblewoman with little education and few talents, her options were decidedly limited. About the only thing she knew how to do was sew. She and her sister had shared a skill with the needle, and though it held painful memories for her, she began to embroider small items like ribbons, coifs, and eventually purses—things that would not draw attention to the craftswoman.

Unfortunately, that part of her plan had not worked as well as she’d hoped and her “trinkets” had attracted attention. She, however, had not. Edward the son didn’t seem to possess the same hatred toward her husband and the “Scot traitors” as his royal sire, and so far the new king had left her alone. She intended to keep it that way.

“I have all that I need,” Mary said, surprised to realize that it was true.

It would have been easy to fall apart after losing her sister and husband, having her son taken away again, and finding herself a virtual prisoner in an enemy land. A bittersweet smile played on her mouth. No doubt Janet would have fought against her velvet chains and railed against the injustice every step of the way. But Mary had always been the more pragmatic of the two, coping with the way things were, not the way she wished them to be. She didn't waste time bemoaning things she could not change. The early disappointments of her marriage had prepared her for that.

Although her search for her sister had yielded frustratingly little, and her visits with her son were heartbreakingly few, she'd made a life for herself in England. A quiet, peaceful life, free from the destruction of war.

The constant danger that had been so much a part of her life with Atholl was gone, as was the hurt of being married to a man who barely noticed her. Without them, she felt as if a weight she didn't know she'd been carrying had been lifted off her shoulders. For the first time in her life she didn't have a father or a husband to control her actions, or her sister to protect her, and her confidence in her own decisions had grown. She discovered that independence suited her; she quite liked being on her own.

The days had taken on a predictable rhythm. She tended her duties as the lady of the castle, worked on her embroidery every extra hour she could find, and kept to herself. She'd made the best of her situation and found herself if not happy, at least content. About the only things she could wish for were news of Janet and more time with her son, and she hoped Sir Adam would have good news for her on the latter soon.

She didn't need to draw more attention to herself by taking on the additional work.

The merchant looked at her as if she'd blasphemed. "Need? Who speaks of need? One can never have enough coin. How am I ever to make a tradeswoman out of you if you talk like that?"

His outrage made her laugh.

The old man smiled back at her. "It is good to see you smile, milady. You are too young to hide yourself behind those dark clothes." She was only six and twenty, but she looked ten years older. Or at least she tried to. He grimaced. "And that veil." He held up one of her ribbons. "You make these beautiful things for others and will not wear them yourself. Tell me this time you will let me find you something colorful to wear—"

Mary stopped him. "Not today, Master Bureford."

The drabness of her clothing, like her working too hard, had become a familiar refrain between them. But as everything else, her appearance was designed to draw little attention. How easily pretty could become plain. Black, shapeless clothing, thick veils and unflattering wimples in dark colors at odds with her coloring, long hours before the candlelight that cut into her sleep, and perhaps most of all the gauntness that pinched and sharpened her normally soft features. Half-starved sparrow. She recalled her sister's words with a wistful smile. If Janet were here, she'd put a pile of tarts in front of her and not let her up from the table until she'd gained two stone.

Mary could see the old man wanted to argue, but their difference in rank held him back. As the daughter of an earl and widow of another—even one hanged for treason—she was still a noblewoman.

"I should be leaving," she said, suddenly aware of the time. Dawn had given way to morning, and there were already people milling around the booths.

It was going to be another beautiful day. She'd come to quite love the north of England in the summer. The lush verdant countryside wasn't that different from the northeast of Scotland where she'd grown up at Kildrummy Castle. She pushed aside the pang before it could form. She didn't think of her life then. It was easier.

"Wait," he said. "I have something for you."

Before she could object, he ducked into the canvas tent that he'd set up behind the table, leaving her alone to watch his goods. She could hear him muttering as he tossed things around behind her and smiled. How he found anything in all those trunks and crates, she didn't know.

Unconsciously, her gaze scanned the crowds for a golden-blond head attached to a woman of middling height. She wondered whether she would ever be able to go where a crowd was gathered and not look for her sister—and not feel the resulting twinge of disappointment when she didn't find her. Sir Adam begged her to stop. She was only torturing herself, he said. But even if her searches had yielded nothing, Mary couldn't accept that her sister was gone. She would know . . . wouldn't she?

She turned at a sound, seeing that a mother with two small children had come up to examine a tray of colorful ribbons on the opposite side of the table. From their clothing, she could see that they did not possess the wealth of Bureford's typical customers. She guessed the woman to be the wife of one of the farmers. She was clearly exhausted. She held one child in her arms—a babe of about six months—and another by the hand, a little girl of three or four who was staring at the ribbons as if they were a stack of gold. When the child reached for one, her mother pulled her back. "Nay, Beth. Do not touch."

All of a sudden another little girl peeked out from behind her skirts and wrapped her chubby little fist around a handful of the ribbons. Before the mother could stop her, she turned and darted off into the crowd.

The young woman shouted after her in a panic. "Meggie, no!" Seeing Mary standing there and obviously assuming she was the merchant, she shoved the baby in her arms and put the little girl's hand in hers. "I'm sorry. I'll fetch them back for you."

It had happened so fast, it took her a moment to realize she was now holding two children. Mary didn't know who was more shocked, she or the children. Both the baby and the little girl were staring at her with wide eyes, as if they couldn't quite decide whether to cry.

She felt a small twinge in her chest. She remembered so precious little of those few months she'd had with David after he was born, but that look was one of them. It had terrified her. The baby had terrified her. She'd been scared of him crying, of every sound he'd made in his sleep, of how to hold him, of whether he was getting enough to eat from the wet nurse.

Users Review

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