

A NOVEL



KATHLEEN
MORGAN



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Consuming Fire

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Then I said, I will not make mention
of Him, nor speak any more in
His name. But His word was in
mine heart as a burning fire
shut up in my bones.

Jeremiah 20:9



PROLOGUE

Flanders
MARCH 1694

SLEET poured from the sky, pelting the cobblestone streets until the rounded rocks glistened icy and black. Frigid wind rent the air, sending the half-frozen water sideways in drenching sheets. A baker's sign, its painting of a plump, golden loaf of bread with the word *Boulangerie* artfully scripted above it, swung wildly to and fro from its iron hanger. And the few souls brave—or foolish—enough to challenge the storm's ferocious onslaught soon seemed fairly recompensed, staggering along, slipping, sliding, and all but bent in half as they fought their way to their destinations.

Margaret Robertson—known to family and friends alike as Maggie—peeked between the carriage curtains for a fleeting moment more, just long enough to catch a glimpse of a street sign as the driver reined the horse-drawn conveyance to the right past another course of white limestone buildings. Then, with a sigh that was part relief and part apprehension, she let the curtains fall closed and settled back against the cushioned seat.

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song . . . Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?”

“It won't be long now, Kate,” Maggie announced, forcing her thoughts back to the moment at hand. She met her companion's inquiring gaze with a resolute one of her own. “We've just turned down the *Rue des Anglaises*. The monastery cannot be much further.”

“Aye, m’lady,” the brown-haired maidservant replied. “And glad I am of it. The English dames there are sure to have a braw fire and even a hot, bracing drink for us.” She shivered and drew her thick, woolen cloak the tighter around her thin frame. “What a cold, inhospitable place Cambrai is this time of year. Couldn’t ye have chosen a warmer clime, mayhap even Italy, to enter the nunnery, m’lady?”

Maggie smiled, inexplicably glad for any excuse to take her mind off their approaching arrival. “Truly, Kate, how much different is a day in Flanders this time of year from one in the Highlands? Why, we’ve barely been gone from Scotland two weeks, and already ye seem to have forgotten our own beastly spring storms.”

Kate chuckled, her blue eyes brightening. “Aye, likely I have, m’lady. But they were *our* storms, and they blew over *our* beloved lochs and lands, and so were far sweeter and gentler. Or leastwise,” she added with an apologetic grin, “so they were to my way of thinking.”

Aye, so they were to mine as well, Maggie thought, but there was no help for it now, leaving Scotland at any rate. Since the proscription of the Catholic faith and its attendant prohibition of houses of religion, anyone desirous of a life of deeper spirituality and vowed consecration in the Lord’s service must, of necessity, go abroad. Fortunately, though, several groups of devout women—Englishwomen—had founded monasteries in the more hospitable religious environments of France, Belgium, and Flanders.

The Monastery of Our Lady of Comfort in Cambrai had been established nearly seventy years earlier by a group of eight Englishwomen, one of whom was the great-great-granddaughter of Sir Thomas More. Devout women who followed the rule of St. Benedict, they were renowned for their holy way of life and strict adherence to worship and prayer.

“Well—” Maggie pasted an even brighter smile onto her face—“we’re both hardy Scotswomen, that we are, and will soon adapt to the Continental clime. Besides, we didn’t come here to make an easy way of it, did we? We came to follow the Lord Jesus, die to our worldly selves, and carry our cross.”

Her maid nodded her agreement. “Aye, that we did, m’lady. And glad I am to do it, truly I am.” Kate hesitated, eyeing her closely. “I

know this comes rather late in the day, so to speak, but have ye any regrets? About coming here, I mean?"

Regrets? Her friend's question gave Maggie pause. She regretted the pain she had most likely caused her father in defying him in this. She regretted having to leave Scotland, but there was no other choice. But real, heart deep regrets? There was only one—she'd never be a mother or hold her own bairns in her arms.

Maggie gave a vehement shake of her head. "Nay, Kate. I've no regrets."

With a clattering of iron-shod hooves, the carriage skidded to a halt. "*La monastère, mesdames!*" the driver shouted down to them.

She exchanged glances with Kate. Panicked excitement shot through her. It was time, the culmination of all her girlhood dreams, after what had seemed an interminable trip through the wilds of the Highlands and Borderlands, then into and through England to the port of Dover. The trip across the Strait to Calais had been equally trying, what with the rough seas and Kate ill the whole way. And then, to add the finishing touches, there had been this hired carriage ride to Cambrai in the midst of icy rain alternating with sleet and snow.

But none of that mattered now. They were here at last. In but a few minutes more, they'd be knocking at the monastery's door and asking for admittance, she as a postulant in the highborn and consequently more educated group of nuns called choir sisters, and Kate as a lay sister.

"I will extol Thee, my God, O king; and I will bless Thy name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless Thee; and I will praise Thy name for ever and ever."

The carriage door swung open, admitting yet another frigid blast of air. Maggie grabbed up her bag of meager items permitted them upon entrance to the religious life, slung the straps of the leather satchel containing her precious, wire-strung harp over her shoulder, and gave her hand to the driver. Kate followed close behind.

And then they were there, standing outside the Monastery of Our Lady of Comfort, staring up at the imposing brick edifice and its equally imposing walls. But only for a moment. In a flurry of booted feet and flapping cape, the driver scrambled back onto his

seat. Grabbing his whip, he flicked it smartly over the horses' rain-slick rumps and drove away.

There's no turning back now, Maggie thought, as if that had ever been a consideration. Nay, there'd never been any other recourse. Maggie's entrance into religious life had always been her dear, departed mither's fondest wish and, in time, had become Maggie's as well. Indeed, her father had only advanced Maggie's timetable when he had taken it into his head for her to wed the loathsome and despicable Hugh Menzies. And then, after the night of her birthday feast now a month past . . .

Fiercely, Maggie shook aside the memories that, like some horrific, nightmarish creature, crept back into her mind at every unguarded moment. It didn't matter anymore. None of it. She was here at long last, where she belonged. Where she had always been meant to be.

"M'lady?"

Kate's query pierced the roiling tumult in Maggie's head. She swung around. "Aye?" Maggie surprised even herself with how raw, how ragged her voice suddenly sounded.

"The rain, m'lady." Her maidservant lifted her gaze to the weeping skies. "We'll be wet clear through to the skin if we don't soon get inside. Were ye wanting to do the knocking at the door, or did ye wish for me to do it?"

Maggie's mouth quirked. "I'll do it. After all, it was I who set us out on this grand quest, wasn't it?"

She turned back to the imposing, oaken door. After squaring her shoulders and setting her chin, Maggie marched up the steps. Then, before any doubts or second thoughts could further undermine her resolve, she grasped the stout iron knocker and slammed it hard against the door. Once, twice, three times iron clanged against iron, and then there was nothing but the sound of rain and distant rumble of thunder.

Chill droplets splattered her cheek as the wind changed direction and assaulted her from the opposite side. Maggie set down her bag and drew the hood of her cloak yet farther forward. She inhaled an unsteady breath and looked back at Kate.

A key rattled in the lock. Hinges groaned. Her throat gone dry, Maggie turned slowly around.

Before her stood a small, wizened old woman dressed in black robes and veil, a white fillet and wimple enclosing her face, neck, and a small rounded portion of her upper chest. Her eyes were bright blue and kind, and as she caught sight of Maggie and Kate, she smiled.

"I am Sister Anselma, the portress," the nun said. "You must be our two Highland lasses. We've been so anticipating your arrival."

"Aye." Maggie nodded, trying her best to return the smile. "Aye, we are."

"And what do you ask, my child?"

For an instant, Maggie's mind went blank. She stared at the woman.

"The words, my child," Sister Anselma prodded, her gaze gentling as if in understanding. "All you've got to say are the words Lady Abbess sent to you."

Comprehension flooded Maggie. "Och, aye. The words." She cleared her throat, then spoke in a strong, clear voice. "I ask to serve God, preferring naught to the love of Christ."

The woman opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Then enter, my child. Enter and may you find all that you seek."

"One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

The words of the twenty-seventh psalm echoing in her head, Maggie, followed by Kate, walked across the threshold and into a dimly lit hallway. There, in the watery light from a leaded-glass window, stood a tall woman dressed in the same black-and-white habit. She, however, wore around her neck a large silver cross on a long, black cord.

The abbatial cross, Maggie thought. This, then, must be Dame Cicely, the abbess.

The portress held out her hand. "Give me your belongings, child. They'll be delivered to your cell."

Her cell. Maggie knew it was the monastic term for the small room that would henceforth serve as her bedchamber, but it startled her nonetheless. Her cell . . . it sounded so stark, so . . . so comfortless.

"My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God."

She handed over her bag and harp. Sister Anselma next turned to

Kate. "You'll be coming with me now, Sister Katherine. Your lady will go with the abbess."

Kate sent Maggie a farewell smile. Maggie swallowed hard, nodding in reply.

"Oh, don't look so stricken, you two." Sister Anselma gave a merry laugh. "Neither of you is going to your execution, and you'll see each other again soon enough."

Maggie managed a wan smile, then watched as Kate, Sister Anselma, and their baggage disappeared through yet another door. Maggie turned back to the abbess. The woman stood there, watching, waiting.

Sweet Lord Jesus, Maggie offered up a fervent little prayer, I come to do Your will. Help me. Strengthen me.

She forced her trembling limbs to carry her forward until she halted before the abbess. Bowing her head, Maggie sank to her knees. "I have come home at last, Mother."

"Yes, you have, my child." Dame Cicely leaned down and took her by the arm, gently pulling her back to her feet. "But let us go now to the chapter house for your formal welcome. Come. Follow me."

As Maggie lifted her gaze to the face of a woman in her middle years with rosy cheeks and a long, thin, delicately formed nose, feminine voices rose from behind the abbess. With a thrill of surprise she realized the community had been there in the shadows all along. The sounds of plainsong filled the small entry area—sweet, pure, and laden with such inexpressible beauty it brought tears to Maggie's eyes.

"Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; So shall the king greatly desire thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him . . ."

To the chanting of psalms, Maggie and Dame Cicely led the rest of the choir nuns down the hall, out the door beside the leaded window, and along a covered cloister. Though she knew she shouldn't gawk so, Maggie couldn't help but take in the monastery's inner courtyard. Small but apparently most lovingly kept, the rain-soaked patches of neatly trimmed, winter-browned grass were intersected by four flagstone paths that met in the center at a tall, intricately carved stone cross. Bordering the four covered cloisters

enclosing the courtyard were flower beds holding little at this time of year, save the occasional skeletal frames of dormant rosebushes.

It'll be so beautiful here in summer, Maggie thought. Warm, sunny, and filled with the scent of flowers. In her mind's eye she saw herself, dressed in a simpler habit and the short veil of a postulant, pausing to bend and inhale the perfume of a lush, open red rose before resuming her measured, reverent walk.

Maggie smiled softly. Yes, it would indeed be a beautiful life, spent in loving service to her Lord and Savior. And in place of the mother she had lost just six years earlier when she was but fourteen, she now had a new mother in the form of Dame Cicely. The Lord was good. So verra, verra good.

They entered another door at the end of the cloister and filed into a long room, the half-wainscoted walls lined on two opposite sides with tall, wooden chairs. The floor was handsomely inlaid, and the fine altar at one end of the room was supported on two pillars. At the other end of the room sat yet another, even taller and more ornately carved, chair. It was there the abbess now led Maggie to a small seat placed before the big chair.

"Sit, my child."

Dame Cicely indicated the smaller chair and, without a pause, walked to a table beside her own chair and took up a bowl and towel. As the rest of the community, still singing, took their places in the chairs lining the walls, the abbess knelt before the now-seated Maggie. Laying the bowl and towel on the floor, she proceeded to remove Maggie's shoes.

For a dumbstruck instant, Maggie almost pulled back her feet. The abbess . . . kneeling before *her* . . . removing *her* shoes? It made no sense. Yet somehow, Maggie knew this was part of her welcome.

The water was cool as Dame Cicely slid first one then the other of Maggie's feet into the bowl. She washed each foot with the utmost care, dried it, and placed it back to rest on her bended knees. Then, cradling both of Maggie's feet in her two palms, the abbess lifted them to her lips and kissed them.

It was too much to endure, much less comprehend. The abbess, a woman of high position and surely of equally great holiness, was humbling herself to kiss her feet!

Maggie gasped, shaking her head. “Nay,” she moaned, “I’m not worthy. . . .”

Dame Cicely put on Maggie’s stockings, then her shoes. “ ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you,’ ” she said as she worked, “ ‘the servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.’ ”

Maggie’s cheeks burned. Monastic ritual that it might be, her pride fought a bitter battle with the awakening realization that life here in this unpretentious little Benedictine monastery would turn everything she had heretofore known and lived by upside down and inside out. Once again, a wave of uncertainty, of fear even, washed over her.

How could she possibly persevere here to the end of her days? This was too foreign, too soul- and spirit-wrenching. Was she mad? She didn’t know any of these women. They weren’t her family, her people. And God . . . God suddenly seemed this huge, distant, *unfathomable* being.

Dame Cicely stood, took Maggie’s hands, and pulled her to her feet. She leaned toward her, kissing Maggie on the cheek. “Henceforth, you’ll be known as Sister Benedicta. Welcome. Welcome in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Benedicta. They had given her the religious name of Benedict, the order’s holy founder. This time the tears welled and trickled down Maggie’s cheeks.

“I . . . I’m not worthy of such an honor,” she managed to choke out. “First ye wash and kiss my feet, then name me after St. Benedict. It’s . . . it’s not . . . not at all what I expected.”

The abbess smiled tenderly. “No, it never is. But the Lord is a God of surprises, is He not? And He saves some of His most beautiful surprises for those consecrated to His service.” She wrapped her arm about Maggie’s shoulders and turned her to face the assembled community. “Just stay awhile, I pray thee, and see.”

A multitude of beaming countenances confronted her. Chubby faces. Thin, ascetic ones. Young ones. Those of more mature years. And elderly, wrinkled ones, too. All smiling. All joyous. And oh, the peace she saw in their eyes. Such deep, ineffable peace.

Maggie’s doubts slipped away. Her fears melted. *It’s good I am here, Lord, isn’t it? So verra, verra good.*

Consuming Fire

“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands,” the nuns began once more to intone.

She recognized this psalm as well. It was Psalm 100, a psalm of praise, the *Jubilate Deo*.

“Serve the Lord with gladness: come before His presence with singing.”



Flanders

AUGUST 1694

A SHOT rang out in the darkness. With a lethal sibilance, a lead ball whizzed past Adam Campbell's head. Instinctively, he dove from his horse's back, tucked, and rolled, slamming onto the damp muck of the forest floor. For the space of an inhaled breath, Adam lay there, listening, waiting.

Where were his unknown assailants? Indeed, who'd be attacking him so far from Scotland? Were they but common thugs, out to rob some unsuspecting—

A branch snapped somewhere close, to his right. Not more than ten feet behind him, someone splashed through a puddle. Adam pulled free his pistol, shoved to one knee, and twisted around.

In the faint light of a cloud-shrouded night, a man loomed over him. Adam aimed and fired. Once more lead, propelled by exploding gunpowder, sped through the darkness.

The man grunted, staggered back, and fell. Then all was bedlam. A shout of rage. A fierce war cry. The rhythmic pounding of feet as another attacker came from the left and yet another from the right.

No time to reload. Battle-honed reflexes held sway. Dirk in hand, Adam shoved to his feet. Simultaneously, another flash of fire, a loud blast. Pain ripped through his shoulder.

He stumbled, slipped in the mire of rotting leaves and vegetation, sank to his knees. The acrid stench of gunpowder filled his lungs, choking him. And the pain. It rolled through Adam in sickening waves, sending him to the very brink of oblivion.

Then voices, triumphantly muttering words that sounded like English, pierced his dizzying haze. They thought they had him. Thought they'd won.

Remorse swamped him. *Lachlan . . . I'm sorry, lad. So verra, verra sorry . . .*

His cousin's face rose before him. Adam ground his teeth against his frustration, his sense of failure. He had failed in his mission and now Lachlan would die. Die . . . and the lad innocent.

Innocent . . .

The thought infuriated Adam. Renewed rage sent the blood pulsing through his veins. His vision cleared. The mists dispersed, and renewed strength flowed through him.

"Nay," he whispered through clenched teeth, "I'll not let ye die . . . for me."

A hand snagged in his hair, wrenched back his head. With a feral snarl, Adam lunged forward, slashing out in the darkness. A scream tore from his opponent's throat—then he went silent.

The grip on his hair relaxed, fell away. Adam leaped up and grasped the man as he fell, using him as a human shield. Just in time. The other assailant fired his pistol. The ball slammed into his companion's body, the impact nearly knocking Adam over before he could regain his footing.

He shoved his now-limp burden at the other attacker. The man staggered backward but quickly recovered himself and threw the body aside. Dirk held high, Adam flung himself at him. They fell to the ground, fighting, grunting, and grappling for the upper hand.

Fire slashed across Adam's left cheek. His opponent, he realized, was equally armed with a knife and equally powerful. This'd be no easy kill.

Muscles strained against muscles. Legs entwined as they twisted and rolled back and forth across the damp, slimy ground. Breaths came now in sharp, tortured gasps, and still neither could seem to gain the advantage.

His shoulder burned fiercely. By sheer force of will, Adam shoved the pain into some distant corner of his mind. It wasn't so easy, though, to mitigate the damage the pistol shot had delivered to his body. He could feel himself weakening. Once more, the edges of his vision grayed, grew fuzzy.

Lachlan. A memory flashed through Adam's mind. Lachlan of the flaming red hair and laughing countenance. Lachlan, who was all but a brother to him. How could he fail him, heap yet one more tragedy upon the dunghill that had become his life?

With a savage growl, he summoned forth his remaining strength, managing a glancing slice to the side of the other man's neck. Hissing in pain, his opponent broke free from the grip Adam had on his knife hand. Before Adam could stop him, the man cut him deeply across the side. Adam struck him hard to the jaw.

His assailant's head jerked back. He arched stiffly, lifting Adam with him. His mouth opened in a soundless cry. Then he slumped and went still.

For long, pain-racked minutes, Adam lay there atop the now lifeless body, panting, struggling desperately to catch his breath. From somewhere far away, he heard a crack of thunder. Lightning flashed high above the trees.

The sound of rain pattering down through the leaves filled the forest. Drops of water touched Adam's cheek, rolled down his face. A sweet, savage joy filled him.

He was alive. He had prevailed. And so would Lachlan.

Adam pushed from the body he still lay upon, awkwardly climbing to his knees. His head swam. His body quivered with weakness.

The rain began to fall harder, pelting him now with large splats. Though the night had been warm, a chill coursed through him. His hand moved to his shoulder. His fingers came back slick and sticky with blood. He touched his side and gasped at the searing pain. Fresh blood drenched his fingers yet again.

He must get to a town or even some farmhouse, find help, or he might well bleed to death. He wasn't far from Cambrai, his destination. He had been a fool, though, to have pushed himself so hard and traveled into the night. In an attempt to reach Cambrai even a day earlier, he had almost not arrived there at all.

With a low whistle, Adam called for his horse. There was no answering movement, no soft nicker, no sound of approaching hooves. For the first time, despair filled him. As injured as he was, how would he ever make it on foot? Yet there appeared no other choice.

This night's battle for his life, Adam realized grimly, was far from over.

Somehow he managed to get to his feet. Somehow he found his bearings and set out in the direction of Cambrai—or so he hoped. And somehow, though he didn't know from whence the strength came, he walked on through the night.

At times, Adam wasn't certain if it was the loss of blood, or the chill his body took on in the endless rain, that contributed to the confusion and haunting scenes flashing endlessly through his mind. Yet, in a strange sense, they seemed almost a blessing, holding at bay his awareness of his agonizing wounds. The memories tormented him nonetheless, replaying again and again events that had brought him to this unfortunate place on an even more unfortunate quest. . . .

But six weeks ago, reivers had made off with five of Adam's prize black cattle. Lachlan, visiting Castle Achallader, Adam's home deep in the Highlands, had been even more eager than his cousin to set off after the thieves. Their pursuit had eventually led them out of Campbell lands and into the territory of Clan Robertson. Still, on that last night, they had finally caught up with the reivers.

Though Adam had offered to spare the lives of the cattle thieves, their leader had answered with a volley of lead that soon disintegrated into deadly, hand-to-hand combat.

"Lachlan!" In the ensuing chaos, Adam grabbed the arm of his captain and Lachlan's brother, Robert Campbell, jerking him to a halt. "Have ye seen Lachlan, lad?"

Robbie turned a face streaked with powder and blood to his laird. "Nay, m'lord. Not for a time. He set off after one of the reivers, and that's the last I've seen of him."

"The young fool!"

Adam choked back a curse. In the darkness and confusion, it was especially dangerous to separate oneself from the rest of one's clansmen. If Lachlan blundered onto several of the reivers who'd escaped into the hills . . .

"Which way did ye see him go, lad?"

Robbie pointed in the direction of a path leading up past a jagged outcropping of rocks. "That way, m'lord."

"Round up the reivers who still live and hold them until I

return.” Adam glanced at the pistol Robbie held. “Is that primed and ready?”

“Aye.” His cousin held out the pistol. “Take it. Ye may well need more than just yer own pistol.”

“If we don’t return in a half hour’s time, send some men out on our trail.” Adam took the pistol from Robbie and shoved it into his belt. Not awaiting a reply, he turned on his heel and set out.

As he drew away from the fighting, the night fell silent, the stars piercing the ebony sky with millions of tiny, glinting lights. A fresh, soothing breeze blew down from the mountains, carrying with it the scent of green grass and wildflowers. If not for the grim purpose of this night’s work, Adam could’ve almost imagined himself out for a fine summer’s eve stroll.

But, this night, whether he wished it or not, the tang of death was also strong in the air. Adam prayed that his young, headstrong cousin wouldn’t ultimately be numbered among those who died.

As he jogged along, following an ever upward climb, a faint shout caught his ear. Adam quickened his pace, traversing the narrow, twisting path as fast as he dared. Sounds of struggle reached him, of men grappling, of fists thudding repeatedly against flesh.

Climbing a steep rise, Adam topped the hill to stare down at a moonlight-bathed plateau. There, sprawled at the edge of a precipice overlooking the valley below, was Lachlan. Towering over him, a sizable rock held above his head, was Lachlan’s opponent.

Adam fired his own pistol into the air. “Stand quiet now,” he then shouted even as he tossed away the spent pistol, withdrew Robbie’s weapon, and pointed it at the reiver. “Drop yer wee rock and surrender. Ye’ve lost. Give way.”

The rock still held aloft, the man wheeled about to glare up at Adam. As he did, Lachlan apparently saw his opportunity. He lunged at the reiver, grabbing him about the legs. The man screamed in rage, turned back to Adam’s cousin, and kned him hard in the face. Then, with great force, he flung the rock at Lachlan.

Adam fired, aiming only to disable the reiver. The shot flew true, striking the man in the shoulder. It gave Lachlan the opportunity he needed. He managed to duck the rock and throw himself aside. At that instant, however, the ledge the reiver and Lachlan were on began

to weaken and tear away from solid earth. The reiver staggered backward. Backward to the very edge of the cliff.

Adam raced down the trail toward them. “Lachlan!” he cried. “Come away, lad. Come away!”

Instantly, Lachlan reacted to his cousin’s command. He climbed to his hands and knees and scooted back to solid ground. Adam reached him, pulled him farther back, then turned to the reiver—and hesitated. For a moment slowed in time, he stood there. Stood there as the ledge finally separated and fell away. Shrieking in terror the man tipped backward, teetered on the cliff’s edge, then as if in slow motion, sailed out into black nothingness.

A sudden, intense stab of pain wrenched Adam back to the present moment. He blinked, refocusing on the drenching rain and muddy road. By mountain and sea, but it had turned cold! He could barely feel his fingers, and his feet felt weighted down with blocks of lead. How much farther could it be to Cambrai? Would dawn never come?

It had been an equally long night, that night in the mountains of Robertson land. By the time Adam and Lachlan had returned to the rest of their men, taken the remaining reivers prisoner, and begun the trek back down the mountain with their now liberated cattle, it was nearly sunrise. Though they searched for a time for the body of the reiver who had fallen from the cliff—a reiver who they learned was a Robertson like all the rest—they never found him.

Someone, most likely one of his kin, *had* found him, though. Word filtered back two weeks later that he was Richard Robertson, the heir to vast lands and clan chief Walter Robertson’s only son. A few days after that, Lachlan disappeared.

It hadn’t taken long to discover his whereabouts. Walter Robertson had soon sent Adam a letter, demanding to speak with him regarding Lachlan’s alleged murder of his son. At a mutually neutral site, the two men had met.

The wily old chief quickly informed Adam that Lachlan was being held in a secret spot where Adam would never find him. And, Walter Robertson added, Lachlan would be hanged for his son’s murder, unless Adam agreed to retrieve the elder Robertson daughter—who was now heiress—from the monastery she had fled to in Flanders.

Even now, as Adam trudged painfully through water and mud so thick it sucked treacherously at his sodden boots, his impotent anger

at Walter Robertson's demands banished, at least for the moment, his abject bodily miseries. Adam could easily surmise why Robertson's daughter, Margaret, had taken leave of her father. The old man was known far and wide as a grasping, manipulative laird who cared only for furthering his own clan's power base in the region. But, be that as it may, and despite clan Campbell's greater numbers and military might that could easily be brought to bear on Robertson, Adam feared Lachlan might well die in the effort.

"He didn't kill yer son," Adam had then informed the Robertson chief in an attempt to turn the man's wrath from his young cousin. "In truth, I was the one who shot him to save Lachlan. But to spare his life, I shot him in the shoulder. In the doing, yer son lost his balance and fell when the cliff broke away. The fall was what killed him and naught more."

Hearing Adam's confession, the old man's eyes hardened until they were little more than glinting shards of obsidian. "Then more the better that I've yer precious cousin, who I hear ye love with all yer heart. I've lost my heir; I'm dying, and I need back the child who must now inherit. If ye fail in returning her to me, at least I'll go to my grave knowing I struck ye nearly as mortal a blow as ye've struck me."

Margaret Robertson.

Adam felt inside his coat for the leather-wrapped parcel containing Walter Robertson's letter to his daughter and thanked the good sense that had made him carry it, as well as the money the Robertson chief had provided for their passage home, always on his person. The letter, even more so than his own testimony, would be vital in convincing the lass to leave her holy sanctuary and return with him to Scotland. Return with him back to the dark, unhappy place that was her family's home.

To do so, however, to save Lachlan's life, Adam saw a web of deceit, dishonor, and betrayal spin out before him. Yet, by whatever means necessary, he *must* bring Maggie Robertson home.

He must.

†

A PERSISTENT fly buzzed around Maggie's head, nearly maddening her to the point of distraction. It was, she knew, most likely drawn to

the sweat beading her face and brow as she swept the stone floor of St. Anne's cloister. Even for the middle of August and so early in the morn, thanks to the rain that had ended only an hour or so ago, it was a hot, muggy day. Already, the sun beat down on her with a ferocious intensity.

Maggie's simple black dress and short cape clung damply to her. Waves of heat radiated up around her face as she worked, swinging the scraggly old wheat broom to and fro. No matter how hot it might become, though, she refused to stop and take to the shade to cool herself. Her pride, for one—though she should be ashamed to admit it much less allow it to rear its ugly head—wouldn't let her quit. And for another, she had two more of the four cloisters left to sweep between now and the next Office of Terce.

No time to rest from the heat. No time to pause even to wipe her brow. And certainly no time to waste for the sake of some annoying fly.

Still, she was blissfully happy here at Our Lady of Comfort. The days were long, beginning as they did two hours past midnight, when they all rose to chant the first Office of Vigils, followed soon thereafter by Lauds. Then at dawn, the next Office of Prime was sung. In time, Maggie had gotten used to rising in the dark to sing psalms and hear the reading of Scripture, as they all celebrated the coming end of night and the arrival of Christ, the Light of the World. And Lauds—the church's morning praise of God—was equally as beautiful and awe-inspiring.

But how could it not be? The psalms—always the heart and soul of the offices—were the prayer of God's people, expressing the full scope of their relationship with the Almighty. Each time she sang them, Maggie discovered yet another layer of rich wisdom that touched her heart and nourished her soul. And her novice mistress, Dame Ann Teresa, assured her that, no matter how long she prayed the office until the end of her days, new and inspiring insights would continually draw her closer and closer to their beloved Lord and Savior.

Indeed, each and every day was a glorious discovery—and a busy one as well. Besides the six hours in the choir stalls in chapel devoted to the primary work of praising God as consecrated monastics, there were—in addition to time for meals, mental prayer, spiritual reading, studying, and the required lessons for postulants and novices in the

novitiate—at least two hours also spent in manual labor. By the time she returned at last to her cell each night, Maggie found she had no trouble falling asleep, even on a prickly straw mattress and rough sheets.

A trickle of sweat coursed down the side of her face. Maggie gritted her teeth and swept doggedly on, finally reaching the end of the long corridor, where she paused to brush the pile of dirt and bits of leaves into a pan. After dumping that into a bucket, she headed around the corner, walked to the next cloister's farthest end, and began sweeping its dirt and debris down to where she had left the bucket and pan.

The past five months of her postulancy had sped by. If all went well, in less than a month Maggie would become a novice. Then, like all the professed sisters, she'd don the full religious garb of habit, scapular, veil, wimple, and fillet. Her veil, however, for the full year and a day of her canonical novitiate, after which she took vows for life, would be white to distinguish her from the professed choir nuns with their black veils. She would also, at her novice clothing ceremony, cut her hair short for the first time in her life.

It'd feel strange, she imagined, being shorn of her long, dark auburn hair. In her more vainglorious moments before she had come to Our Lady of Comfort, Maggie had considered her hair her greatest asset. After all, her eyes were but a boring shade of brown, the smattering of freckles she had always sported across her nose and cheeks were most unbecoming and unladylike, and she had a body that reminded her of some gangly colt. Indeed, Dame Ann Teresa was constantly reminding her to stop galloping, to shorten her strides, and to move in a more sedate, worshipful manner.

Maggie sighed and shook her head. The things she had imagined would be difficult to adapt to in religious life—all the praying, the long hours, the Spartan conditions—had been surprisingly easy to accept. Instead, it had been the disciplining of tongue and body, not to mention her pride and willfulness, that had caused her the most distressing effort. But Dame Ann Teresa had nonetheless assured her she was progressing as was to be expected, and Maggie gladly took her at her word.

She soon finished the third cloister and set off to sweep the fourth and final stone corridor. Just as Maggie dumped the last of the dirt

into the bucket, the bells calling the community to Terce tolled. Setting the bucket, pan, and broom off to one side, she wiped her face with a huge, white handkerchief she had taken from her pocket, straightened her short veil, and tucked her hands demurely beneath her cape. With downcast gaze Maggie sedately, worshipfully, but swiftly, headed for the chapel.

†

TWENTY minutes later, and as the newest member of the community, Maggie filed last of all from the chapel. To her surprise, both Dame Cicely and Dame Ann Teresa stood there, apparently awaiting her. Both bore expressions of grave concern.

The abbess signaled for Maggie to accompany them. As she obediently fell in behind the pair of swaying black habits and veils, Maggie's mind raced. What had she done wrong? Had she lingered too long over putting aside the broom, pan, and bucket, instead of immediately dropping everything to answer the call of the Lord when the bells rang? Or had someone already found fault in the job she had done sweeping? Surely there could be nothing else wrong. Or could there?

Finally, after what seemed an eternity of walking and frantic soul-searching, Dames Cicely and Ann Teresa drew up in the hallway where Maggie had first entered the monastery. The abbess was the first to speak, breaking the usual silence that traditionally permeated the day until after the supper meal.

"We've had a most unexpected and disturbing guest who has asked hospitality of us," she said in a soft, low voice. "From his speech, this man has apparently come from Scotland—most likely from the Highlands—and he demands to speak with you."

Maggie stared at Dame Cicely, her heart rate picking up its pace with each passing second. A man . . . from the Highlands. Could it be her father, brother, or even worse, that despicable Hugh Menzies? If so, she shouldn't be surprised. None of them would've been pleased with her sudden and most unexpected departure from home.

"I can think of no one who I'd wish to see from the Highlands, Lady Abbess," she replied at last, struggling to keep the rising agitation from her voice. "Did he give his name?"

“No, he did not.” Dame Cicely gave a slight shake of her head. “Indeed, he’s in a bad way—wounded, drenched to the skin, and all but delirious. We couldn’t turn him away in such sorry condition, and the lay sisters have taken him to the guest house.”

“Then mayhap it’s best if his more pressing needs are seen to first. There’s no reason for me to involve myself just yet.”

“On the contrary, Sister Benedicta.” Maggie’s novice mistress, after an affirmative nod from the abbess, spoke up at last. “Though this man’s in a very bad way, he refuses to allow anyone to treat him until he has seen and spoken with you. So, though both Lady Abbess and I are loathe to expose you just now to undue contact with the world, especially considering the circumstance under which you came to us, we cannot, in good Christian conscience and charity, ignore this man’s request. It might well be his death if we do.”

A scalding reply boiled up from deep within Maggie. *If it’s Hugh Menzies, let him die*, she thought savagely. *It’d be but a just punishment for what he tried to do. The swine. The cur!*

Yet what if, instead, the mysterious man was her father or even her brother, Richard? Could she risk their lives as easily, as gladly, as she’d risked Hugh’s in the refusing? And what if, though she couldn’t imagine who it might be, this man was someone else altogether? Someone entirely innocent of any wrongdoing against her? How Christian, how charitable, would it be not to go to him?

With a deep sigh, Maggie lowered her gaze. Shame washed over her. What kind of nun was she to refuse anyone—even Hugh—this request? She had thought in the past months that she had come to forgive him. She knew now, though, that she hadn’t. Perhaps this was her penance. Or perhaps, just perhaps, if she was ever truly to become the religious she had so long dreamt of becoming, this was but another trial she must endure and overcome.

“The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in Whom I will trust.”

Maggie lifted her gaze to meet the penetratingly unnerving one of Dame Cicely. “It’ll be as ye ask, Lady Abbess,” she choked out the words. “I’ll go—and gladly—to speak with him.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATHLEEN MORGAN is an award-winning, best-selling writer whose work includes twenty-six published novels. She lives in Colorado with her husband and son, and in her spare time she likes to quilt, garden, and play the folk harp.

Kathleen has received numerous awards for her work, including Romantic Times' Reviewer's Choice and Career Achievement awards, as well as The Literary Times award for Literary Excellence in the Field of Romantic Fiction. She was also a Romance Writers of America RITA finalist. Her previous books include the Brides of Culdee Creek series, *Child of the Mist*, *Wings of Morning*, and *Giver of Roses*.

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