

A Rose in the Storm

By Brenda Joyce

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Join New York Times *bestselling author Brenda Joyce for an epic story of undying love and forbidden desire in the Highlands…*

When Rivalry Becomes Passion

With warfare blazing through Scotland, the fate of the Comyn-MacDougall legacy depends on one woman. Recently orphaned, young Margaret Comyn must secure her clan's safety through an arranged marriage. But when an enemy invasion puts her at the mercy of the notorious Wolf of Lochaber, her every loyalty—and secret want—will be challenged.

And a Kingdom Is at Stake

Legendary warrior Alexander "the Wolf" MacDonald rides with Robert Bruce to seize the throne of Scotland. But when he takes the fiery Lady Margaret prisoner, she quickly becomes far more than a valuable hostage. For the passion between them threatens to betray their families, their country…and their hearts.

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Editorial Review

Review
"As dangerous and intriguing as readers could desire. This is a tale reminiscent of genre classics, with its lush and fascinating historical details and sensuality."-RT BookReviews on Surrender

"Another first-rate Regency, featuring multidimensional protagonists and sweeping drama...Joyce's tight plot and vivid cast combine for a romance that's just about perfect."-Publishers Weekly starred review on The Perfect Bride

"Truly a stirring story with wonderfully etched characters, Joyce's latest is Regency romance at its best"-Booklist on The Perfect Bride

"Sexual tension crackles...in this sizzling, action-packed adventure."--Library Journal on Dark Seduction

About the Author

Brenda Joyce is a New York Times bestselling author of more than 50 novels and novellas, including the popular and critically acclaimed de Warenne Dynasty Saga, a series of novels set in Regency and Victorian England. She lives on a ranch in Arizona with her dogs, broodmares and the year’s current crop of foals. If she isn’t on the back of a reining horse, she can be found madly at work in her office, penning her latest romance novel.

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Loch Fyne, the Highlands—February 14, 1306

"It is too damned quiet."

Will's voice cut through the silence of the Highland afternoon, but Margaret did not hear him. Mounted beside him at the head of a column of knights, soldiers and servants, surrounded by the thick Argyll forest, she stared straight ahead.

Castle Fyne rose out of the ragged cliffs and snow-patched hills above them so abruptly that when one rode out of the forest, as they had just done, one had to blink and wonder at the sight, momentarily mistaking it for soaring black rock. But it was a centuries-old stronghold, precariously perched above the frozen loch below, its lower walls stout and thick, its northern towers and battlements jutting into the pale, winter-gray sky. The forest surrounding the loch and the castle was dusted white, and the mountains in the northwest were snowcapped.

Margaret inhaled. She was overcome with emotion—with pride.

And she thought, *Castle Fyne is mine.*

Once, it had belonged to her mother. Mary MacDougall had been born at Castle Fyne, which had been her

dowry in her marriage to William Comyn, which had filled her with great pride. For Castle Fyne was a tremendous prize. Placed on the most western reaches of Argyll, providing a gateway from the Solway Firth, surrounded by lands belonging to Clan Donald and Clan Ruari, the castle had been fought over throughout the centuries. It had been attacked many times, yet it had never once slipped from MacDougall hands.

Margaret trembled, more pride surging within her, for she had adored her mother, and now, the great keep was her dowry, and she would bring it with her in her upcoming marriage. But the anxiety that had afflicted her for the past few weeks, and during this journey, remained. Since the death of her father, she had become the ward of her powerful uncle, John Comyn, the Earl of Buchan. He had recently concluded a union for her. She was betrothed to a renowned knight whom she had never met—Sir Guy de Valence—and he was an Englishman.

"'Tis such a godforsaken place," her brother said, interrupting her thoughts. But he was glancing warily around. "I don't like this. It's too quiet. There are no birds."

She sat her mare beside Will, her only living brother. Suddenly she wondered at the silence, realizing he was right. There was no rustling of underbrush, either, made by chipmunks and squirrels, or the occasional fox or deer—there was no sound other than the jangle of bridles on their horses, and the occasional snort.

Her tension escalated. "Why is it so quiet?"

"Something has chased the game away," Will said.

Their gazes met. Her brother was eighteen—a year older than she was—and blond like their father, whom he had been named after. Margaret had been told she resembled Mary—she was petite, her hair more red than gold, her face heart-shaped.

"We should go," Will said abruptly, gathering up his reins. "Just in case there is more in the hills than wolves."

Margaret followed suit quickly, glancing up at the castle perched high above them. They would be within the safety of its walls in minutes. But before she could urge her mare forward, she recalled the castle in the springtime, with blue and purple wildflowers blooming beneath its walls. And she remembered skipping about the flowers, where a brook bubbled and deer grazed. She smiled, recalling her mother's soft voice as she called her inside. And her handsome father striding into the hall, his mantle sweeping about him, spurs jangling, her four brothers behind him, everyone exhilarated and speaking at once…

She blinked back tears. How she missed her father, her brothers and her beloved mother. How she cherished her legacy now. And how pleased Mary would be, to know that her daughter had returned to Loch Fyne.

But her mother had despised and feared the English. Her family had been at war with the English all her life, only recently coming to a truce. What would Mary think of Margaret's arranged marriage to an Englishman?

She turned to face William, discomfited by her emotions, and in so doing, glanced back at the sixty men and women in the cavalcade behind them. It had been a difficult journey, due mostly to the cold winter and the snow, and she knew that the soldiers and servants were eager to reach the castle. She had not visited the stronghold in a good ten years, and she was eager to reach its warm halls, too. But not just to revisit her few memories. She was worried about her people. Several servants had already complained of frozen fingers and toes.

She would tend them immediately, once they reached the great keep, just as she had seen her mother do.

But the anxiety that had afflicted her for the past few weeks would not go away. She could not pretend that she was not worried about her impending marriage. She meant to be grateful. She knew she was fortunate. Her uncle controlled most of the north of Scotland, his affairs were vast, and he could have simply ignored her circumstances once both her parents had passed. He could have kept her at his home, Balvenie, in some remote tower, and established his own steward at Castle Fyne. He could have sent her to Castle Bain, which William had inherited from their father. Instead, he had decided upon an advantageous political union—one that would elevate her status, as well as serve the great Comyn family.

But another pang went through her as she walked her mare forward on the narrow path leading up to the castle. Her uncle Buchan also despised the English—until this truce, he had warred against them for years. The sudden allegiance made her uneasy.

"I think Castle Fyne is beautiful," she said, hoping she sounded calm and sensible. "Even if it has come to some neglect since Mother's death." She would repair every rotten timber, every chipped stone.

"You would." William grimaced and shook his head. "You are so much like our mother."

Margaret considered that high flattery, indeed. "Mother always loved this place. If she could have resided here, and not at Bain with Father, she would have."

"Mother was a MacDougall when she married our father, and she was a MacDougall when she died," William said, somewhat impatiently. "She had a natural affinity for this land, much like you. Still, you are a Comyn first, and Bain suits you far more than this pile of rock and stone—even if we need it to defend our borders." He studied her seriously. "I still cannot fathom why you wished to come here. Buchan could have sent anyone. I could have come without you."

"When our uncle decided upon this union, I felt the need to come here. Perhaps just to see it for myself, through a woman's eyes, not a child's." She did not add that she had wanted to return to Castle Fyne ever since their mother had died a year and a half ago.

Margaret had grown up in a time of constant war. She could not even count the times the English King Edward had invaded Scotland during her lifetime, or the number of rebellions and revolts waged by men like Andrew Moray, William Wallace and Robert Bruce. Three of her brothers had died fighting the English—Roger at Falkirk, Thomas at the battle of River Cree and Donald in the massacre at Stirling Castle.

Their mother had taken a silly cold after Donald's death. The cough had gotten worse and worse, a fever had joined it, and she had never recovered. That summer, she had simply passed on.

Margaret knew their mother had lost her will to live after the death of three of her sons. And her husband had loved her so much that he had not been able to go on without her. Six weeks later, on a red- and-gold autumn day, their father had gone hunting. He had broken his neck falling from his horse while chasing a stag. Margaret believed he had been deliberately reckless—that he had not cared whether he lived or died.

"At least we are at peace now," she said into the strained silence.

"Are we?" Will asked, almost rudely. "There was no choice but to sue for peace, after the massacre at Stirling Castle. As Buchan said, we must prove our loyalty to King Edward now." His eyes blazed. "And so

he has tossed you off to an Englishman."

"It is a good alliance," Margaret pointed out. It was true her uncle Buchan had warred against King Edward for years, but during this time of truce, he wished to protect the family by forging such an allegiance.

"Oh, yes, it is an excellent alliance! You will become a part of a great English family! Sir Guy is Aymer de Valence's bastard brother, and Aymer not only has the ear of the king, he will probably be the next Lord Lieutenant of Scotland. How clever Buchan is."

"Why are you doing this, now?" she cried, shaken. "I have a duty to our family, Will, and I am Buchan's ward! Surely, you do not wish for me to object?"

"Yes, I want you to object! English soldiers killed our brothers."

Will had always had a temper. He was not the most rational of young men. "If I can serve our family in this time of peace, I intend to do so," she said. "I will hardly be the first woman to marry a rival for political reasons."

"Ah, so you finally admit that Sir Guy is a rival?"

"I am trying to do my duty, Will. There is peace in the land, now. And Sir Guy will be able to fortify and defend Castle Fyne—we will be able to keep our position here in Argyll."

He snorted. "And if you were ordered to the gallows? Would you meekly go?"

Her tension increased. Of course she would not meekly go to the gallows—and initially, she had actually considered approaching her uncle and attempting to dissuade him from this course. But no woman in her position would ever do such a thing. The notion was insane. Buchan would not care for her opinion, and he would be furious with her.

Besides, so many Scots had lost their titles and lands in the years before the recent peace, forfeited to the Crown, to be given to King Edward's allies. Buchan had not lost a single keep. Instead, he was marrying his niece to a great English knight. If a bargain had been made, it was a good one—for everyone, including herself.

"So, Meg—what will you do if after you are married, Sir Guy thinks to keep you at his estate in Liddesdale?"

Margaret felt her heart lurch. She had been born at Castle Bain in the midst of Buchan territory. Nestled amidst the great forests there, Castle Bain was her father's birthright and her home. Their family had also spent a great deal of time at Balvenie, the magnificent stronghold just to the east where Buchan so often resided.

Both of those Comyn castles were very different from Castle Fyne, but they were all as Scottish as the Highland air she was now breathing. The forests were thick and impenetrable. The mountains were craggy, peaks soaring. The lochs below were stunning in their serenity. The skies were vividly blue, and no matter the time of year, the winds were brisk and chilling.

Liddesdale was in the borderlands—it was practically the north of England. It was a flat land filled with villages, farms and pastures. Upon being knighted, Sir Guy had been awarded a manor there.

She could not imagine residing in England. She did not even wish to consider it. "I would attempt to join him when he visited Castle Fyne. In time, he will be awarded other estates, I think. Mayhap I will be allowed to attend all of his lands."

William gave her a penetrating look. "You may be a woman, Meg, and you may pretend to be dutiful, but we both know you are exactly like Mother in one single way—you are stubborn, when so moved. You will never settle in England."

Margaret flushed. She did not consider herself stubborn. She considered herself gentle and kind. "I will cross that bridge when I come to it. I have great hopes for this union."

"I think you are as angry about it as I am, and as afraid. I also think you are pretending to be pleased."

"I am pleased," she said, a bit sharply. "Why are you pressing me this way, now? June is but a few months away! I have come here to restore the keep, so it is somewhat pleasing when Sir Guy first sees it. Do you hope to dismay me?"

"No—I do not want to distress you. But I have tried to discuss this handfast several times—and you change the subject or run away. Damn it. I have many doubts about this union, and knowing you as well as I do, I know you are afraid, too." He said softly, "And we only have each other now."

He was right. If she dared be entirely honest with herself, she was worried, dismayed and afraid. But she then looked away.

"He may be English but he is a good man, and he has been knighted for his service to the king." She was echoing her uncle now. "I was told he is handsome, too." She could not smile, although she wished to. "He is eager for this union, Will, and surely that is a good sign." When he simply stared, she added, "My marriage will not change our relationship."

"Of course it will," William said flatly. "What will you do when this *peace* fails?"

Margaret tried not to allow any dread to arise. "Our uncle does not think this peace will fail," she finally said. "To make such a marriage, he must surely believe it will endure."

"No one thinks it will endure!" William cursed. "You are a pawn, Meg, so he can keep his lands, when so many of us have had our lands and titles forfeited for our so-called treason! Father would never have allowed this marriage!"

Again, William was right. "Buchan is our lord now. I do not want him to lose his lands, Will."

"Nor do I! Didn't you overhear our uncle and Red John last week, when they spent an hour cursing Edward, swearing to overthrow the English—vowing revenge for William Wallace!"

Margaret felt ill. She had been seated in a corner of the hall with Isabella, Buchan's pretty young wife, sewing. She had deliberately eavesdropped—and she had heard their every word.

How she wished she had not. The great barons of Scotland were furious with the humiliation King Edward had delivered upon them by stripping all her powers—she would now be ruled by an Englishman, an appointee of King Edward's. There were fines and taxes being levied upon every yeoman, farmer and noble.

She would now be taxed to pay for England's wars with France and the other foreign powers he battled with. He would even force the Scots to serve in his armies.

But the coup de grace had been the brutal execution of William Wallace. He had been dragged by horse, hanged, cut down while still alive, disemboweled and beheaded.

Every Scot, whether Highlander or lowlander, prince or pauper, baron or farmer, was stricken by the barbaric execution of the brave Scottish rebel. Every Scot wanted revenge.

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