



The Saint: A Highland Guard Novel

By Monica McCarty

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Robert the Bruce consolidates lands and loyalty in a bold war for Scotland's independence, as his elite team of warriors, the Highland Guard, fight for king, country . . . and love.

Magnus MacKay is the ultimate Highlander: tough, proud, able to master any terrain and to best his enemies. Called “the Saint” for his refusal to discuss women, as well as for his cool and steady leadership, Magnus hides a painful truth. It isn't virtue or piety that keeps him silent, but a wound of love and loss that cuts so deep he cannot bear to speak of it. But when the woman who refused him is betrothed to his friend and fellow Guardsman, Magnus is tested by love's battle cry.

A wild and innocent beauty, Helen chose family duty over her desire for Magnus. Now the anger in his eyes mirrors the tormented regret in her heart. But as deadly subterfuge stalks the King and his Guard, Helen vows to right her youthful mistakes with a woman's determined spirit. Still, Magnus harbors secrets and an iron will not to weaken to temptation—or heartache—again. But as danger looms, it's the kiss not of a saint, but of a sinner, that can save them.

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Editorial Review

Review

"McCarty is a powerhouse storyteller, and this multilayered, intense novel proves it." ---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

Monica McCarty is the bestselling author of *The Viper*, *The Ranger*, *The Hawk*, and *The Chief*, the first four 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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McCarty / THE SAINT

One

Dunstaffnage Castle,

December 1308

He could do this, damn it. Magnus could withstand almost any kind of physical torture and pain. A tough bastard, they said of him. He needed to remember it.

He kept his gaze fastened on the trencher before him, concentrating on his meal and not what was going on around him. But the ham and cheese intended to break his fast stuck in his throat. Only the ale went down easily. Still, it wasn't strong enough to quiet the tumult eating him up inside. If it weren't an hour after daybreak he would have asked for whisky.

Although given the celebratory mood around him, he doubted anyone would notice if he did. The festive atmosphere reverberated from the wooden rafters laden with fragrant boughs of pine to the stone floor strewn with fresh rushes. The massive Great Hall of Dunstaffnage Castle was lit up like Beltane, with hundreds of candles and a roaring fire blazing in the fireplace behind him. But the warmth of the room couldn't penetrate the icy shell around him.

"If you keep looking like you want to murder someone, we'll have to change your name."

Magnus turned to the man seated at the trestle table beside him and shot him a warning glare. Lachlan MacRuairi had an uncanny ability to find a man's weak spot. Like the viper his war name professed him to be, he struck with deadly precision. He alone of the other members of the Highland Guard had guessed Magnus's secret, and he never wasted an opportunity to remind him of it.

“Aye,” MacRuairi said with a shake of his head. “You look decidedly unsaintly. Aren’t you supposed to be the calm and reasonable one?”

During the training for the Highland Guard, Erik MacSorley, the greatest seafarer in the Western Isles, had taken to calling him Saint in jest. Unlike the rest of them, Magnus didn’t spend his nights around the fire discussing the next woman he wanted to swiv. Nor did he lose his temper. When it had come to choosing war names to protect their identities, Saint had stuck.

“Sod off, MacRuairi.”

The impervious bastard just smiled. “We weren’t sure you were going to make it.”

Magnus had stayed away as long as he could, volunteering for any mission as long as it would keep him far from here. But he’d left Edward Bruce, the king’s brother and newly created Lord of Galloway, two days ago to join the other members of the Highland Guard at Dunstaffnage for the wedding of one of their own. The wedding of William Gordon, his best friend and partner, to Helen Sutherland.

My Helen.

Nay, not his. She’d never belonged to him. He’d only thought she had.

Three years ago he’d joined Bruce’s secret guard in the attempt to escape his memories. But fate had a cruel sense of irony. Not long after arriving, he’d learned that his new partner had been recently betrothed to Helen. The Sutherlands hadn’t lost any time in ensuring she didn’t change her mind about marrying him. Magnus had anticipated a quick betrothal; he just hadn’t anticipated it would hit so close.

For three years he’d known this day would come. He’d come to terms with it. But if it were anyone other than Gordon, Magnus would have found an excuse to stay away. Despite his appellation, self-flagellation was not something he succumbed to willingly.

“Where’s Lady Isabella?” he asked by way of a response.

MacRuairi’s mouth curved. It was still strange to see such a black-hearted bastard smile, but these past few weeks since MacRuairi had won Lady Isabella MacDuff’s freedom a second time—as well as, it seemed, her heart—the sight had become more frequent. If a bastard like MacRuairi could find love, he supposed there was hope for anyone.

Except for him.

“Helping the bride get ready,” MacRuairi replied. “She’ll be here soon enough.”

Bride. That pricked. Even knowing that MacRuairi was watching, he flinched.

The smile left MacRuairi’s face. “You should have told him. He deserves to know.”

Magnus shot an angry glare back at the man who made it hard as hell to like him—though somehow Magnus did. “Back off, Viper,” he said in a low voice. Gordon didn’t need to know anything. Helen had made her choice well before their betrothal. “There is nothing to tell.”

He pushed back from the bench, not wanting to listen to any more of MacRuairi's prodding, when he noticed a group of men entering the Hall.

Ah hell. He muttered a curse, seeing the impending disaster and knowing there wasn't a damned thing he could do to stave it off.

His partner in the Highland Guard and closest friend, William Gordon, broke into a wide smile and headed straight for him. "You made it. I was beginning to wonder."

Magnus didn't have a chance to respond. The other man he'd noticed—the one who'd provoked his reaction—prevented it.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Kenneth Sutherland demanded angrily.

Magnus held very still, but every battle instinct flared. Sutherland's hand had gone to the arming sword at his waist. The moment he moved, Magnus would be ready. MacRuairi, too, having sensed the threat, had tensed with readiness at his side.

"He's my guest, as well as my friend," Gordon said to his foster brother and soon-to-be brother-in-law—what the hell Gordon saw in the bastard, Magnus couldn't fathom. It wasn't often that the good-humored Gordon sounded angry, but there was a distinct edge of steel in his voice now.

"Your friend?" Kenneth said, aghast. "But he—"

Realizing he was about to say something about Helen, Magnus got to his feet and slammed his flagon on the table. "Leave it. What is between us has no bearing on today." He eyed his old enemy intently, and then forced himself to relax. "The feud is in the past. Just like imprudent alliances," he added, unable to resist prodding him.

The Sutherlands had aligned with the Earl of Ross and England against Robert Bruce. But after Bruce's victory over the MacDougalls at the Pass of Brander in August, the Earl of Ross had been forced to submit. The Sutherlands had reluctantly followed suit a month ago. Magnus knew Sutherland's pride must have still been smarting.

From what Gordon told him, Sutherland had acquitted himself well in battle and was considered a formidable warrior—equal to if not surpassing Donald Munro and his elder brother, William, who'd become earl on his father's death two years ago. But to Magnus's mind, Sutherland had one fatal flaw: his temper. And if the angry flush on Sutherland's face was any indication, it hadn't lost any of its volatility.

"Bastard," Sutherland growled, taking a step forward. But Gordon held him back.

The air, which only moments before had been light with celebration, was now charged with strife. Swords had been drawn, if not in fact then in spirit. In response to the threat, two sides had formed. Sutherland's men had gathered behind him and the members of the Highland Guard who'd been nearby had come to stand beside MacKay, with Gordon caught in the middle.

"Let him come, Gordon," Magnus said idly. "Mayhap the English have taught him something."

He and Sutherland were of a similar height and build, but Magnus had no doubt he could still best him in a

sword fight—or with any weapon, for that matter. It seemed that most of his youth had been spent with the purpose of besting Sutherlands. If it wasn't Munro, it was one of Helen's brothers.

Sutherland bit out a crude oath and tried to break free from Gordon's hold. He might have succeeded if a new group hadn't entered the Hall. A group not armed in leather and steel but in silk and satin.

Focused on the threat before him, Magnus hadn't seen the women approach until one woman stepped forward. "Kenneth, what's wrong? What's happening here?"

Magnus froze at the sound of her voice. The muscle slid from his limbs. For a moment he felt boneless, empty but for the fire burning in his chest. The fire that it seemed would never die.

Helen stood before him. Every bit as breathtaking as he remembered—yet different. There was nothing unconventional about her beauty now. The freckles that had once been smattered across her nose had vanished in the creamy perfection of ivory skin. The rich auburn hair that had tumbled about her shoulders in wild disarray—when it hadn't been chopped indiscriminately—had been tamed into a maidenly coronet of braids. The tiny, pixie features were no longer quirked with laughter and mischief but were soft in repose. Only her eyes—a clear crystal blue—and lips—the reddest he'd ever seen—were the same.

But it wasn't her beauty that had drawn him to her, it was the irrepressible good humor and untamed spirit that made her different from any other woman he'd ever known. A lively sprite who was as hard to catch as quicksilver.

He saw no evidence of that girl in the woman standing before him now, but it didn't change the fierceness of his response. His chest felt as if it had been put in a vise of longing.

He'd thought he was prepared, damn it. Thought he could do this. But nothing could have prepared him for the shock of seeing her after three long years. Three years of war and destruction. Three years when he didn't know whether he'd live or die. Three years of telling himself he was over her.

Three years of delusion.

Realizing that Gordon was looking at him with a frown, he quickly got himself under control, schooling his features in a blank mask. But calm deserted him.

It was then that she noticed him. He heard her gasp a dozen feet away. Her eyes widened and her face lost every bit of color. Her expression reminded him of the men he'd seen in battle after they'd taken an arrow to the gut: startled, shocked, and pained.

Instinctively, he made a move toward her, but MacRuairi held him back. Gordon was already at her side.

Gordon his friend.

Gordon her betrothed.

Gordon the man who would be her husband in a few short hours.

His stomach knifed.

“It is nothing, my lady,” Gordon said, taking her arm. “A minor misunderstanding. I believe you’ve met my friend Magnus MacKay?”

His words had shocked Helen out of her trance. “Aye, my lord.” Because she couldn’t avoid it, she turned to him. But he hadn’t missed the slight stiffening of her shoulders, as if bracing herself. For one long heartbeat their eyes met. The lance of pain through his chest stole his breath. She nodded her head in acknowledgment. “My lord.”

“My lady.” He bowed politely. Formally. Marking the distance that must now be between them. This wasn’t the Helen of his youth, but a woman who belonged to another.

Lady Isabella saved the moment from further awkwardness. She was in the group of women who’d entered the Hall with Helen and rushed forward to greet him. “Magnus, you’re back!” Grabbing hold of his elbow, she turned him back to the table. “You must tell me all that is happening in the south.” She pursed her mouth in Lachlan’s direction and gave an indignant toss of her chin. “He tells me nothing.”

MacRuairi lifted a wry brow. “That’s because I don’t want you grabbing a sword to join them.”

She reached over to give the infamous mercenary a gentle pat on the arm as if soothing a naughty child. “That’s ridiculous. I don’t have a sword.” She winked up at Magnus and whispered. “I have a bow.”

“I heard that,” MacRuairi snapped.

Magnus smiled, grateful for the distraction. But it was only temporary. He was acutely aware of the two people walking arm-in-arm down the long aisle to the dais.

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