



The Raider: A Highland Guard Novel (The Highland Guard Book 8)

By Monica McCarty

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NATIONAL BESTSELLER

After consolidating his gains against the enemy English, King Robert the Bruce of Scotland sends his best soldiers to fortify the lawless borders. These legendary warriors of the Highland Guard let nothing come before king and country—except the calling of their heart.

Of all Bruce's elite warriors, Robert "Raider" Boyd is the most formidable. A true patriot whose bare hands are a deadly weapon, Robbie is the fierce enforcer of the Guard, and his hatred of the English has been honed to a razor-sharp edge. But vengeance proves bittersweet when his enemy's beautiful sister falls into his hands and he finds himself fighting temptation—a battle he badly wants to lose.

Lady Rosalin Clifford barely recognizes the rebel prisoner she saved from execution six years ago. Though her girlish ideals for fairness have matured into a passion for justice, Rosalin believes she betrayed her brother when she helped this dangerous man escape. Now her traitorous act has come back to haunt her. But she can't deny the longing this tormented warrior ignites in her, or deny the passion that turns sworn enemies into lovers. Is the gentle love of a true English Rose enough to free Scotland's most brutal warrior from a path of vengeance—before it's too late?

Praise for Monica McCarty and *The Raider*

"McCarty's latest Highland Guard novel is a deeply moving and delightful read . . . once again proving that McCarty is a master storyteller."—*RT Book Reviews*

"Monica McCarty is an absolutely superior author! Her Highland Guard series has to be one of the absolute best Highland series out there! Fun, fast paced, fact driven and totally fantastic!"—*Bodice Rippers*

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“If you are a fan of historical romance, or any romance for that matter, you will want to not only read *The Raider*, but the entire Highland Guard series. It is just *that good!*”—*Coffee and Characters*

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“McCarty does a great job at bringing alive this tumultuous period in Scottish history and skillfully blending fact and fiction to create an unparalleled series.”—*The Good, The Bad and The Unread*

“McCarty is a master at writing Highlander romance . . . keeping her Highland Guard series fresh, with spectacularly riveting plots and fabulously romantic couples. . . . If you’ve not read this series yet, then I strongly suggest that you do.”—*Night Owl Reviews*, on *The Hunter*

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Editorial Review

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About the Author

Monica McCarty is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of numerous Scottish historical romance novels, including the Campbell series, the MacLeods of Skye series, and the Highland Guard novels. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and their two children. Visit her at monicamccarty.com.

AudioFile Earphones Award winner Antony Ferguson is a native of London, England. He is a classically trained actor and has appeared in numerous productions in London, Off-Broadway, and regional theater. As a voice actor, he has over fifty audiobooks to his credit. Antony lives in Los Angeles.

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One

Hannibal ad portas (Hannibal is at the gates)

Cranshaws, Scottish Marches, February 1312

The English would pay.

Robbie Boyd, King Robert the Bruce's authority in the Borders, stared at the blackened shell of the barn and vowed retribution.

His mouth fell in a grim line, the bitter taste of memory as acrid as the smoke burning his throat. He would never be able to see a razed barn without thinking of the one that had served as his father's funeral pyre. It had been the then seventeen-year-old Robbie's first lesson in English treachery and injustice. In the fifteen years since, he'd had many more.

But it would end. By all that was holy, he would make sure of it. No matter what it took, he would see Scotland freed of its English "overlords." No more sons would see their father's burned body hanging from the rafters, no more brothers would see their sister raped and brother executed, and no more farmers would see their farm razed and cattle stolen.

He didn't care if he had to fight for another godforsaken fifteen years, he wouldn't rest until every last English occupier fled from Scotland and the Lion—the symbol of Scotland's kingship—roared free.

Freedom was the only thing he cared about. Nothing else had mattered from the first day he'd lifted his sword to fight alongside his boyhood friend, William Wallace.

Recalling the manner of his friend's death, Robbie's jaw hardened with the steely determination born of hatred. He turned from the smoldering timbers—the latest example of English "justice"—to face the villagers who'd cautiously begun to approach the manor house.

"Who did this?" he asked, the evenness of his tone not completely masking the ominous warning underneath.

But he already knew the answer. Only one man would be bold enough to defy him. Only one man had refused to renew the truce. Only one man had sent Robbie's missive requesting a parley back in embers.

A few of the villagers looked around before the village reeve, a farmer by the name of Murdock, cautiously stepped forward. The trepidation among the villagers wasn't unusual. As one of the most feared men in the Borders—hell, in all of Christendom—Robbie was used to it. Though his notoriety served its purpose in striking fear in the enemy, it wasn't without complications. It had sure as hell made keeping his identity secret as one of the members of Bruce's Highland Guard a challenge. Eventually he knew someone was going to recognize him, even with his features hidden. He'd become too well known.

"Clifford's men, my lord," Murdock explained. "They took everything. The cattle, the grain—even the seed—before setting the barn afire."

Clifford. God's bones, I knew it! Robbie's gauntleted fists clenched at his side, rage surging through him in a powerful rush.

It wasn't often that he lost his temper. As his size and reputation alone caused hardened warriors to shake in their boots, it served no purpose.

But there were two things guaranteed to test his control: one was the English knight who stood behind him, Alex "Dragon" Seton, his unlikely partner in the Highland Guard, and the other was the English knight who'd imprisoned him six years ago and seemed to be thwarting him ever since, Sir Robert Clifford, King Edward's new Keeper of Scotland—in other words, Scotland's latest bloody overlord.

Devil take the English whoreson, Clifford would pay—for this and for old scores as yet unsettled. It was a reckoning long overdue. For six years, the bastard had eluded him, and now Clifford's defiance—his refusal to know when he'd been beaten—was threatening to ruin everything.

"Take care of it, Raider," the king had said.

Robbie had a job to do, damn it. Bruce had put him in charge of enforcing the peace in the lawless, war-torn Borders. His war name of "Raider" attested to his experience in the area. The king was counting on him to bring the English barons to heel, and no one was going to stand in his way.

When King Edward left Berwick Castle last summer, forced to abandon his war against the Scots to attend to brewing trouble with his barons, Bruce had gone on the offensive, leading a series of well-executed raids into Northern England. For the first time, the English had gotten a taste of the devastating war the Scots had been experiencing for years. The raids had not only shifted the war from the burdened Scottish countryside to England, but also served to replenish the drained royal coffers by exacting payment from the Northern English barons in exchange for a truce.

The other barons had renewed their truces, but Clifford, the new governor of Berwick Castle, refused their "offer," and was continuing to resist. His resistance could encourage others to do the same, and Robbie sure as hell wasn't going to let that happen.

Bruce would have his truce and Clifford's cooperation; Robbie would bloody well see to it.

James Douglas, one of the three other warriors who'd accompanied Robbie and Seton on this "simple, straightforward" mission (as if such a thing existed) to collect the feudal dues owed the king, muttered an expletive, echoing his thoughts a bit more crudely.

If anyone hated King Edward's new "Keeper" more than Robbie, it was Douglas. Clifford had made his name and fortune by the war in Scotland in part by laying claim to Douglas's lands.

"There is nothing left?" Douglas asked the farmer, his face growing dark with anger.

The Black Douglas hadn't earned his epithet only for the color of his hair but also for his fearsome reputation. Mistaking the source of his rage, Murdock's hands shook as he tried to explain. "Nay, my lord. They took everything. Claimed it was the cost of dealing with 'the rebels.' They would have burned the entire village if we refused. We had no choice but to give it to them. It's the same everywhere. Clifford's men raided the entire Eastern March from here to Berwick. The reeve at Duns sent a warning this morning, but it came too late."

Robbie swore. Damn the bastard to hell!

"Was anyone hurt?" Seton asked.

The farmer shook his head. "Nay, praise God. It's only the barn they destroyed—this time. But the fire was a warning. It's because they know we were dealing with Bruce that they came."

"The Bruce is your king," Robbie reminded him pointedly. In this part of Scotland, so near the English border, the people often needed it. Though Bruce had established his kingship north of the Tay, there were many in the south who reluctantly called Bruce king and whose sympathies still lay with the English.

Speaking of Scots who acted like Englishmen, Seton, whose lands in Scotland lay near here, jumped to the farmer's defense. "I'm sure Murdock meant no offense to the king. He was only pointing out the difficulty for those who live surrounded by English garrisons with no one to defend them."

Boyd looked at him sharply, not missing the implied criticism. Seton often bemoaned the "damned-if-they-do, damned-if-they-don't" situation of the people who lived so near England. But everyone had to make a choice: for England or for Scotland; there was no straddling both sides of the line. Seton still didn't understand that he couldn't live in both worlds.

"Damnation." Douglas swore in frustration. "The king is counting on that grain and cattle. What the hell is he supposed to feed his men?"

The Bruce and a good portion of his army (and the Highland Guard when they weren't on other missions) had been laying siege to Dundee Castle for the past three months. With Edward in London and the threat of war abated, Bruce's focus had shifted to clearing the entrenched English garrisons from Scotland's castles.

It was the only way the war could truly be won. All the victories and momentum of the past few years wouldn't mean shite if the English continued to occupy their castles.

And they were making progress. Linlithgow had fallen after the raids last year, and Dundee was close. But all of it would soon come to a quick end if Robbie didn't do his job. The king was without funds, and with the required hundred days of free feudal service of many of the soldiers nearly up, if the siege were to continue, they had to find coin to pay the men and food to feed them.

It wasn't much of an overstatement to say that the future of the war rested on Robbie's shoulders. And if the path to victory depended on securing protective truces from the English barons who'd raided Scotland for years, he was damned glad to do it.

"The king will have his food," Robbie said flatly. And his damned truce with Clifford.

Douglas guessed what he meant, a slow smile spreading over his dark visage. Seton did as well, but his reaction was to clench his jaw as if he wanted to argue but knew it would do no good. Maybe he'd learned something the past seven years after all.

Clifford had thrown down the gauntlet, and Robbie sure as hell wasn't going to let it go unanswered.

Murdock, however, didn't understand. "But how? There is nothing left and they will only come again. You have to do something."

Robbie leveled his gaze on the farmer. "I intend to."

"What?" the farmer asked.

He would fight fire with fire, and strike in a place his enemy could not ignore. Something rare appeared on his face when the corners of his mouth lifted in a smile. "Take it back."

Berwick Castle, English Marches, One Week Later

"It isn't fair, Aunt Rosie-lin."

Rosalin looked down at the small, upturned face, at the cherubic features twisted with hurt, disappointment, and disbelief, and felt her insides melt.

Cliff's seven-year-old daughter, Margaret, had come bursting into Rosalin's solar almost in tears a few moments ago. Rosalin tried not to show her shock at her niece's attire. The poor thing was fighting so hard not to cry, she didn't want to push her over the edge.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, she patted the space beside her. "Come sit, Margaret, and tell me what has happened."

Sensing that she'd found a pair of sympathetic ears, Margaret did as she bid, hopping up and settling in on the fluffy feather mattress next to her.

"It's Meg," she corrected, wrinkling her nose with distaste. "No one but Father calls me Margaret."

Rosalin's mouth twisted, trying not to smile. Instead, she nodded solemnly. "Forgive me, Meg."

The little girl rewarded her with a tremulous smile, and Rosalin melted a little more.

"That's all right," Meg assured her, patting her hand as if their ages were reversed. "You only just got here, and you haven't seen me since I was little."

Rosalin pretended to cough.

Meg's tiny, delicately arched brows drew together over an equally tiny nose. "Are you sickly?"

Rosalin couldn't hide that smile. "Nay, Meg. I'm perfectly hale."

The little girl studied her. "Good. Andrew is always coughing, and he isn't allowed to play outside. He's no fun."

Rosalin felt a sharp stab in her chest but tried not to let her fear show. Cliff's three-year-old son Andrew had always been frail. Though no one spoke of it, he was not expected to see beyond his childhood.

Glad that the little girl was no longer close to tears, even if she couldn't say the same, Rosalin asked, "So why don't you tell me why you are wearing breeches and a lad's surcoat?"

Meg looked down as if she'd forgotten. "John said I'd get in the way."

Rosalin didn't follow. "In the way . . . ?"

Meg gave her a little frown of impatience, as if she hadn't been paying proper attention. "Of riding lessons. Father gave John a horse for his saint's day last week, and today he begins his training with Roger and Simon. It isn't fair. John is two years younger than I am. I want to train like a knight, too. He can barely pick up the wooden sword Father gave him. How's he supposed to kill bloody Scots if he can't lift a sword?" Rosalin coughed again and made a note to tell Cliff to have care of his language around Meg. "He shouldn't have told Father when I borrowed it. No one likes a tale-teller."

Rosalin was having a hard time keeping up, so she just nodded.

The little girl's face crumpled. "Roger wouldn't let me stay, even when you can see my skirts won't get in the way. I don't want to sew with Idonia and mother. Why won't they let me train with them?"

Because you're a girl. But as it didn't seem the right time to explain the harsh truth of the sexes, Rosalin gathered the sobbing child in her arms and sighed. She understood her pain. She, too, had wanted to be with her brother—probably even more so, since he was all she had. Learning that she couldn't simply because she was a girl had been a bitter draught to swallow.

Riding, practicing swordplay, and running around outside had seemed vastly preferable to sitting inside with a needle and lute. Of course, that was much too simplistic a view of their respective roles, but at Meg's age, she had seen it the same way.

After a moment, the little girl looked up at her, her long, dark lashes framing big, blue eyes damp with tears. She might look like her pretty, dark-haired mother, but Rosalin saw Cliff's stubbornness in the firm set of her chin. "Will you talk to him?"

"Talk to whom?"

"Father. He'll listen to you. Everyone says he's never refused you anything."

Rosalin laughed. "I assure you, he's refused me plenty. I wanted to ride and practice with a sword, too."

Margaret's eyes widened to almost comical proportions. "You did?"

"Aye. And I thought it just as unfair as you when he told me no."

The smile that spread across the little girl's face was almost blinding. "You did? He did?"

Rosalin nodded, then paused for a moment to think. "What would you say if I took you on a ride tomorrow and let you practice by holding the reins?"

It clearly wasn't what Meg hoped to hear, but after a moment of disappointment, she decided to take what she could get and negotiate for better terms. Perhaps the little girl was like her aunt in that regard.

"For how long?" Meg asked.

"As long as you like."

"Where can we go?"

Rosalin paused, considering. She didn't want to venture far. "Your mother said there was a fair at Norham tomorrow. Would you like to go to that?"

Meg nodded enthusiastically and a moment later, she was running from the room, eager to lord her upcoming adventure over her siblings.

Rosalin called her back. "Meg!"

The little girl turned around questioningly.

“Wear a gown,” Rosalin said with a smile.

Meg broke out in a wide grin, nodded, and skipped away.

A few hours later, Rosalin tracked down her very busy brother to inform him of her plan. She stood outside the door of the solar while he finished with his men.

As the newly appointed governor of Berwick Castle, Cliff had taken over the royal apartments and was using one of the receiving rooms as a council chamber.

She was so proud of him. Not only had the king left him in charge of the war, making him Keeper of Scotland, he’d also appointed him governor to one of the most important castles in the Marches. The castles of Berwick in the east, Carlisle in the west, and Roxburgh in the middle formed a key defensive band across the border to prevent the Scots from invading England.

She bit her lip. At least the castles had done so until last summer. Robert Bruce’s raids into Cumbria and Northumberland had devastated the countryside, striking terror in the hearts of the English, from which they were still clearly recovering. Fear hung in the air, and the names of his fierce raiders were bandied about in terrified whispers, as if saying them aloud would conjure up the devil himself.

Douglas. Randolph. Boyd.

A sickly feeling swam over her. Don’t think of it . . .

“Two thousand pounds?” she heard Cliff say, clearly furious. “He must be mad. Send the man away. I’ll hear no more of their demands.”

Rosalin waited until the men shuffled out, and then entered.

Seeing who it was, Cliff looked up and smiled, lifting some of the weariness from his face. “Ah, Rosie, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Is everything all right?” Clearly, it wasn’t. Her brother was much changed since she’d seen him last. The war had taken its toll. He was still handsome, but he looked older than his two and thirty years. And harder.

He waved off her concern. “Nothing that can’t be handled.” He motioned for her to sit. “So what is it that you need?”

She could see him trying not to smile as she explained. By the end, he was shaking his head. “I know you told her she was too young to ride, but really, Cliff, she’s seven years old. I don’t see any good reason why a seven-year-old girl is too young and a five-year-old boy is not.”

Leaning back in his chair, Cliff studied her over the length of the big wooden table that he used as a desk. “You’ve been here two days, and she’s already found her champion? I wondered how long it would take her to find her kindred soul.”

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