

Ransom Novel Chapter 5

Chapter Five

Gillian was having second thoughts about her rash plan. She and Alec had waited in the abandoned church for almost twenty-four hours now, and that was surely long enough for the laird to reach her, if he had been so inclined.

She felt ill and knew that if she sat down she probably wouldn't have enough strength to get back up again, and so she paced up and down the main aisle while she thought about their circumstances.

"We're going to have to leave soon," she told the little boy. "We simply cannot continue to wait."

Alec sat on a chair with his legs folded under him watching her.

"You don't look so good, Gillian. Are you sick?"

"No," she lied. "I'm just weary."

"I'm hungry."

"You just ate."

"But then I threw up."

"Yes, because you ate too fast," she replied.

She went to the back of the church, where she'd placed her cloth satchel and the basket of food her dear friends the Hathaway brothers had stolen for her. She glanced out the window and saw Henry pacing about the clearing.

"What are you staring at?" Alec asked.

"The Hathaways," she answered. "I don't know what we would have done without them. Years ago they helped me get to my uncle's home. They were very courageous. Neither one of them thought twice about helping me again. I must find a way to repay them," she added.

She handed Alec a wedge of cheese and a thick square of bread. "Please eat slowly this time."

He took a bite of the cheese and then asked, "Uncle Brodick will be here soon, won't he?"

"Remember your manners, Alec. It isn't polite to talk with a mouth full of food."

"You know what?" he asked, ignoring her criticism.

"No, what?"

"We can't leave 'cause then Uncle Brodick will be mad when he gets here and can't find us. We got to wait for him."

She sat down next to him on the chair. "We'll give him one more hour, but that's all. All right?"

He nodded. "I hate waiting."

"I do too," she admitted.

"Gillian? What are you gonna do if you can't find your sister?"

"I will find her," she countered. "I must."

"You got to find that box too," he said. "I heard the baron tell you so."

"I don't know. The box disappeared years ago."

"But you told the baron you knew where it was."

"I lied," she said. "It was all I could think of at the time to get him to leave you alone. My father gave the box to my sister to take with her. There was an accident..."

"But how come the baron wants the old box, anyway?"

"It's extremely valuable, and it's also the key to a mystery that happened a long time ago. Would you like to hear the story?"

"Is it scary?"

"A little. Do you still want to hear it?"

He eagerly nodded. "I like scary stories."

She smiled. "All right then, I'll tell you. It seems that before John was King—"

"He was a prince."

"Yes, he was, and he was madly in love with a young lady named Arianna. She was said to be very beautiful—"

"As beautiful as you?"

The question took her aback. "You think me beautiful?"

He nodded.

"Thank you, but Arianna was far more beautiful than any other lady in the kingdom. She had golden hair that shimmered in the sunlight—"

"Did she get sick and die?"

"No, she didn't get sick, but she did die."

"Did she just up and keel over the way Angus did?"

"No, she—"

"Then what happened to her?"

She laughed. "I'll get this story told much quicker if you stop interrupting me. Now then, where was I? Oh, yes, as I was saying, Prince John was smitten with the beautiful woman—"

"What does 'smitten' mean?"

"It means he was taken with her. He liked her." She rushed on when she saw he was about to interrupt her again. "She was his first true love, and he wanted to marry her. Have you ever heard of Saint Columba's box?"

He shook his head. "What is it?"

"A jeweled case that belongs to the Scots," she explained. "A long, long time ago, the sacred remains of Saint Columba were put inside the case—"

"What are 'remains'?"

"Fragments of bones," she answered. "Now, as I was saying, the remains were placed inside the box, and the Scots carried it into battle with them."

"How come they wanted to carry bones into battle?"

"They believed that having the case with them would bring them victory over their enemies."

"Did it?"

"I suppose so," she said. "The practice of carrying the box into battle is still going on. They don't take the box into every single battle, just some," she added.

"How come you know about the box?"

"My Uncle Morgan told me about it."

"I'll bet it's the Lowlanders who carry the box, not the Highlanders."

"Why do you say that?"

"'Cause Highlanders don't need a box when they fight. They always win 'cause they're stronger and meaner. You know what my Uncle Ennis says?"

"No, but I'm guessing he said something outrageous."

"He says when English soldiers see more than three Highlanders riding toward them, they drop their swords and run away like scared rabbits."

"Not all Englishmen are like the baron. Most are quite courageous," she insisted.

He wasn't interested in her defense of the English. "Aren't you going to tell me what happened to the pretty lady and King John?" After asking the question, he turned and spit on the ground.

She ignored his crude behavior and continued on with the tale. "John took a fancy to the story of the Scottish jeweled box and decided to create a legend of his own. He commissioned his artisan—"

"What does 'commissioned' mean?"

"He ordered his artisan," she qualified, "to make a beautiful jeweled box for him. John has always loved being clever and cunning, and so he also decreed that he would be the only one who knew how to open the box. The artisan took over a year to complete the design and build the box, and when it was finally finished, it was said to be quite grand. It was impossible to tell which was the top and which was the bottom, though, because there were no visible latches or keyholes. The entire exterior was covered in a series of gold strips that crisscrossed, with sapphires as blue as the sky on a sunny day and emeralds as green as—"

"Your eyes?" he eagerly guessed.

"And there were rubies too, bright red rubies—"

"As red as blood?"

"Perhaps," she allowed. "All the precious jewels were set between the golden crisscrosses. Only John knew where to press to get the box to open."

"That's not true. The man who made the box knows how to open it."

"That's exactly what John realized," she said. "And so he did a terrible thing. He ordered the artisan's death."

"Did King John"—he paused to spit again before continuing his question—"kill the pretty lady and put her bones in his box?"

"Oh, no, the box was much too small," she explained. "Besides, John only wanted a lock of Arianna's hair because he was certain she would bring him good fortune when he went into battle. He opened the box, put his jeweled dagger inside, and then ordered his squire to take the box to Lady Arianna's chamber with specific orders that she put a lock of her golden hair into his golden box."

"Then what happened?"

"Lady Arianna received the open box and the dagger from the squire. He went into her chamber and placed it on the table, then took his leave. He later told the prince that she was the only person inside the room. Not even her lady's maid was present."

"I know what happened next. She stole the box and the jeweled dagger, didn't she?"

Gillian smiled over the child's enthusiasm. "No, she didn't steal the box. According to the story, when John's squire left her chamber, he heard her lock the door. He returned later to get the box for the prince, but Lady Arianna wouldn't answer his summons. John then went to her chamber."

"Did she let him in?"

"No."

"Did she tell him to go away?"

"No," she answered. "Not a sound could be heard from the room. John has always been known for his impatience. It didn't take long for him to become very angry because she refused to answer him, and so he ordered his soldiers to break the door down. They used their hatchets. John went rushing inside and he was the one who found her. Poor Lady Arianna was lying in a pool of blood on the floor. Someone had stabbed her."

"Then did John put her bones in his box?"

"No, he didn't. Remember I told you the box was far too small to hold her bones. Besides, neither the box nor the dagger was there. They had disappeared."

"Where'd they go?"

"Ah, that's the mystery."

"Who killed the pretty lady?"

"No one knows. John ordered his soldiers to search the kingdom for the box, but it had vanished into thin air. He believes that whoever stole the box murdered his own true love. Uncle Morgan told me that every couple of years a rumor surfaces that Arianna's box has been seen, and John renews his efforts to find it. The reward he's offered is staggeringly high, but to this day it hasn't been claimed."

"You know what?"

"Yes?"

"The lady's better off dead than married to King John." After making his comment, he once again turned away from her and spit on the floor.

"Why are you doing that?"

"I got to," he replied. "Whenever we say his name, we got to spit. It's a sign of how we feel."

She was both appalled and amused at the same time. "Do you mean to tell me that everyone in the Highlands spits each time one of them says King John's name?"

"Some curse, but Mama won't let me."

"I should hope not."

"Brodick curses when he's got to say your king's name. Are you gonna tell him to stop?" After asking the question, he began to giggle.

The sound proved infectious, and she lightly tapped him on the bridge of his nose. "You are the dearest little boy," she whispered. "But you do ask the most bizarre questions."

"But will you tell Brodick to stop?" he prodded.

She rolled her eyes heavenward. "Should he ever happen to say King John's name and then curse—or spit," she added, "I would, of course, order him to stop."

He burst into laughter. "You're gonna be sorry if you try to tell him what to do. He won't like it," he said. "I wish he'd hurry up and get here."

"I do too."

"Maybe you should have sent the dagger like you were going to," he said. "How come you changed your mind?"

"If I sent Brodick the dagger he gave you, he would know the reason I wanted to see him had something to do with you, but then I worried that someone else might see the dagger, and it was simply too risky. I don't know who to trust."

"But you saw the traitor riding down the path," he reminded her. "You said you watched him from the hilltop while I was sleeping."

"Yes, I did see him, but remember what I told you? We aren't going to let anyone know about that."

"Not even Brodick?"

"No, not even Brodick."

"How much longer do we have to wait?"

She patted his hand. "I think we've waited as long as we can. He isn't going to come for us, but I don't want you to worry. We'll find another way to get you home."

"Cause you promised, right?"

"Yes, because I promised. What was I thinking? It was a foolish idea to tell that MacDonald soldier I was Brodick's bride."

"But maybe Brodick needs a bride. He might come for us."

"I should have offered him gold."

Alec snorted. "Brodick doesn't care about gold."

She smiled. "It's just as well because I don't have any."

His eyes widened. "You would lie to Uncle Brodick?"

"I lied about being his bride."

"He's gonna be angry when he gets here, but I won't let him shout at you."

"Thank you. You aren't still angry with me, are you?"

"I was," he admitted. "But now I'm not."

"You needed a bath. You were rank."

"Brodick's gonna think you're pretty, but you know what?"

"No, what?"

"He won't tell you so. Do you want him to think you're pretty?"

"Not particularly," she answered, her mind clearly on more important matters. "We can't wait any longer, Alec. We're going to have to go on alone. Finish your food, and then we'll leave."

"But if you don't want Brodick to think you're pretty, how come you put on your pretty green clothes?"

She sighed. Alec asked the most outrageous questions. Inconsequential matters seemed to be extremely important to him, and he wouldn't let up until she gave him what he considered an adequate answer.

"I put on these clothes because my other gown was dirty."

He took another bite of bread while he thought about her answer, and then said, "You know what?"

She held on to her patience. "No, what?"

"You're gonna be afraid of Brodick."

"Why do you say that?"

"Cause ladies are always afraid of him."

"Well, I won't be afraid," she insisted. "Stop talking now and finish your food."

A knock sounded on the door, and Gillian stood up just as Waldo, the older Hathaway, rushed inside.

"We've got trouble, milady," he blurted out. "The MacDonald soldier... the one I gave the message to..."

"Henley?"

He frantically nodded. "He must have told the other MacDonalds you were here, because there's over thirty of them coming across the meadow below. They're all wearing the same colors as Henley, but I didn't see him among the soldiers."

"I don't understand," she replied. "I didn't tell Henley about Alec. Why would his clan come here?"

"I'm thinking they're here to claim you, milady."

She was startled by the suggestion and shook her head. "But they can't claim me."

Waldo looked bleak and weary. "They do things different in these parts," he told her. "If they want something, they take it."

She grabbed Alec's hand and pulled him to his feet. "We're leaving now. Waldo, get your brother and meet us at the horses. Hurry."

"But, milady," Waldo protested. "There's more to the telling. There's another clan on the opposite side of the meadow riding hard toward the MacDonalds. I don't know for certain who they are, but I'm thinking they must be the Buchanans you sent for. There's nine of them."

"If it's Brodick and his soldiers, then they're pitifully outnumbered."

"Nay, milady, it's the MacDonalds I pity. I ain't never seen the like of these warriors. They're ferocious looking, and I could see by the way the MacDonalds were backing away, they fear them. If there's blood shed this day, I don't think it's going to be a Buchanan doing the bleeding. Are you certain you want to put yourself and the boy in the hands of such savages?"

She didn't know what to think, and she was in such a panic inside, her heart felt as if it might stop. "I hope it is Brodick and his men," she whispered.

Alec was struggling to get away from her so he could go outside and watch the fight, but she tightened her hold on him and wouldn't let go.

"Waldo, you and Henry should leave now before they get here. I thank you for all you've done for Alec and me. Hurry now, before you're seen."

Waldo shook his head. "My brother and I will not leave until we are assured you will fare well, milady. We'll stand guard at the door. The soldiers will have to kill us before they can get to you."

She couldn't dissuade him from what he considered a noble undertaking. As soon as he went back outside, she turned to Alec.

"Tell me what Brodick looks like," she demanded.

"He looks like Brodick," he answered.

"But what exactly does he look like?"

He shrugged. "He's big," he whispered. Then he smiled because he'd thought of something else he could add. "And old."

"Old?"

He nodded. "Terrible old," he explained.

She didn't believe him. "What color is his hair?"

"White."

"You re sure?"

He nodded. "And you know what?"

Her heart had sunk to her stomach. "No, what?"

"He doesn't hear too good."

She had to sit down. "Why didn't you tell me Brodick was an old man before I sent the message that I was his bride? The shock could have sent him to his grave." She jumped back up and pulled Alec along. "We're leaving."

"But what about the Buchanans?"

"It's apparent the other clan in the meadow isn't Brodick's. Waldo would have told me if any of the warriors had been old."

"I want to go look. I can tell you if it's the Buchanans."

Waldo opened the door and shouted, "The MacDonalds have taken off, milady, and the other clan is coming this way."

Gillian grabbed Alec by the shoulders and forced him to look at her. "I want you to hide behind that stone font until I find out who these men are. I don't want you to say a word, Alec. Promise me... please."

"But..."

"Promise me," she demanded.

"Can I come out if it's Brodick?"

"Not until I've talked to him and gained his promise that he'll help both of us."

"All right," he said. "I promise I'll be quiet."

She was so pleased to get his cooperation she kissed him on his cheek. He immediately wiped it away with the back of his hand and squirmed when she hugged him.

"You're always kissing me," he complained with a wide grin that told her he really didn't mind. "Just like my mama."

"Go hide," she said as she led him to the back of the church.

He took hold of her left arm, and she grimaced in reaction. The injury from the knife wounds still hadn't healed, and from the way it was throbbing, she knew it was infected.

Alec had seen her flinch. "You need my mama's medicine," he whispered. "Then you'd feel better."

"I'm sure I would," she replied. "Now, Alec, not one word," she cautioned. "No matter what happens, you stay put and don't make a sound. May I have the dagger Brodick gave you?"

"But it's mine."

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"I know it's yours. I would just like to borrow it," she assured him.

He handed the dagger to her, but as she turned to walk away, he whispered, "It's awful dark here."

"I'm here with you, so there isn't any need to be afraid."

"I hear them coming."

"I do too," she whispered back.

"Gillian, are you scared?"

"Yes. Now, be quiet."

She rushed down the center aisle and stood in front of the altar to wait. A moment later she heard Waldo shouting the order to halt. The command was obviously ignored because a second later the door flew open, and there in the center of the arch stood the most intimidating warrior she had ever seen. He was a towering figure with long, flaxen hair and deeply tanned skin. Barely covered, he wore only a muted plaid that didn't quite reach the tops of his knees. A wide strip of the cloth angled over his

massive and scarred chest and draped down over his left shoulder. A dirk protruded from one of his deerskin boots, but he didn't carry a sword.

The man hadn't even stepped inside the church yet, but she was already quaking in her shoes. The sheer size of him blocked out most of the sun, though streaks of golden light shone all around him, making him appear almost ethereal. She gripped the dagger behind her back, and after slipping it into the sleeve of her gown, she slowly brought her hands forward and folded them in an attempt to fool him into believing she was thoroughly composed.

The warrior stood immobile for several seconds, his gaze searching for any threat that might be lurking in the corners, and when he was convinced she was all alone, he ducked under the doorframe, stepped inside, and slammed the door shut behind him.

