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Highland Storms

Written by Christina Courtenay

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Highland Storms

Christina Courtenay

Sequel to Trade Winds

First two chapters ...

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Chapter One
Rosyth House, Scotland, August 1754

Marsaili Buchanan was pulled back from the brink of sleep by the soft growling of her deerhound, Liath. It started as a low rumble inside the big dog's chest and throat, and grew in volume while the animal raised his head and stared fixedly at the door. Since Liath was snuggled around Marsaili's feet, the vibrations could be felt all the way up her legs. Her heart skipped a beat as she held her breath, waiting to see who was coming up the stairs to her tower room this time.

'They never give up, do they, boy,' she whispered and sat up, putting her palm on Liath's flat skull. She felt the rumbling more strongly there and stroked the dog's wiry neck, keeping her hand near his collar in case she needed to hold him back. It was a distinct possibility.

She'd been plagued with night-time suitors like this for a while now, even though she never encouraged any of the men in the household or on the estate. Her face and figure seemed to inspire lust in any male between the ages of fifteen and fifty, no matter how much she covered it up. She silently cursed fate for giving her this dubious blessing. It brought her nothing but trouble.

The latch moved softly. Since it was well-oiled and silent, Marsaili wouldn't have heard it if she hadn't been forewarned. The door didn't open though, the bar she'd had installed recently saw to that. The latch dropped with a clink and she heard a snort of frustration. This was followed by a muted thud, presumably a shoulder pushing against the door. When this didn't produce the desired result either, a man's voice muttered an oath. A harder shove which made the wooden planks quiver seemed to conclude the assault. Marsaili bit her lip hard to keep from making a sound.

‘Marsaili? It’s me, Colin.’ The whisper was clearly audible and seemed to hang in the air for a moment.

Marsaili almost gasped out loud. That was one voice she’d never thought to hear outside her door. She’d believed Colin Seton, the estate manager, too proud to go sneaking around at night.

‘Mr Seton? What’s the matter?’ she asked, trying to sound as if she’d just been woken up. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘Come now, girl, you know why I’m here. You’ve been holding out for long enough, it’s time you were rewarded.’

His voice was slightly louder, but still low. Marsaili didn’t know why he bothered trying to keep it down. Her room was at the top of one of the towers of Rosyth House and there was no one immediately below her at the moment. He must be aware of this.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she sat up straighter, glaring in the direction of the door. *‘Holding out for what? Him? How on earth did he reach that conclusion?’* She just wanted to be left alone, not be importuned by a widower old enough to be her father.

‘The finest looking woman in all the Highlands deserves only the best. Can’t blame you for setting your sights high. Let me in now, you can trust me to look after you right.’

Rage bubbled up inside Marsaili’s throat and threatened to choke her. The words she longed to hurl at Seton were so stacked up, she couldn’t spit them out. All that escaped her was a noise of frustration, but Liath felt her wrath and gave voice to it on her behalf. His growling grew into a crescendo of menace that reverberated around the small room.

‘Marsaili?’

She managed to control her vocal chords at last. ‘Please leave, Mr Seton and I’ll forget we ever had this conversation. I’m sorry, but you’ve misunderstood.’

‘Eh? You’re just being stubborn now and you know it. No need to be coy, you’ve made your point.’ His voice was beginning to sound strained, as if he was keeping his temper in check, but only just.

Marsaili didn’t know what to reply. She didn’t want to antagonise the man, but on the other hand she had to make him understand she wasn’t available to anyone. As if to emphasise her thoughts, Liath gave a short bark, and although she couldn’t see him, Marsaili knew he was probably baring his fangs as well. She felt her heart beating harder, the sound of her pulse almost drowning out the dog’s noise inside her ears. She took a deep breath. ‘I meant what I said. Anyone who wants to court me can do so in daylight.’ *Not that it would do them any good since I don’t want any of them.*

‘Who said anything about courting? Your mother –’

She cut him off abruptly. ‘What my mother chose to do was up to her. It has nothing to do with me and I’ll live my life as I see fit. I’m a respectable woman.’

‘Rubbish! You’re no better than you should be. Hoity-toity by-blow of a –’

‘Mr Seton! You’ve said enough.’ Marsaili was shaking with fury, but was determined not to enter into a lengthy argument with him.

Seton cursed long and fluently. Finally, he hissed, ‘That dog isn’t allowed in the house, you know. I’ll see it’s put where it belongs from now on, in the stables.’

‘You can’t! I have the mistress’s express permission to keep him in here. The dog stays,’ she said firmly, trying not to let her voice tremble the way the rest of her body was doing. It was true after all, but would he leave it at that? She waited again, holding Liath’s collar in a tight grip, while Seton made up his mind.

The door was stout, but she knew Seton was both strong

and determined. Fortunately, so was Liath. Marsaili was reluctant to let the dog loose on anyone because she'd seen what those powerful jaws could do, but if she was cornered, she'd have no other choice.

'We'll just see about that,' Seton snarled before giving the door a vicious kick. Soon after, she heard footsteps disappearing down the stairwell. She breathed a sigh of relief and threw her arms around the dog's neck, burying her face in the shaggy fur.

'Thank you, Liath, good boy. You're the best.' He licked her hand in acknowledgement of this tribute and leaned against her until her limbs stopped shaking.

They'd won this time, but Marsaili knew that from now on she'd have to be on her guard at all times, both for herself and for Liath. There was no saying what Seton would do and now he'd put all his cards on the table, there was no going back. He wasn't the type to give up easily and she'd probably wounded his pride. He would use every means at his disposal to have his way.

Well, she'd be ready for him. *Just let him try!*

Chapter Two

Gothenburg, August 1754

‘Brice, are you awake?’

‘Hmm?’ Brice Kinross lifted his head from the pillow and blinked, wondering for a moment where he was. The small movement was enough to make him wince and he swiftly registered all the signs of a monumental hangover. Before he closed his eyes again, he had time to notice that he was in his own bed, probably for the first time in a week. He had no idea how he’d got there. Not that it mattered.

Nothing mattered any more.

His father, Killian, knocked once more on the bedroom door and Brice gritted his teeth against the pain this caused. ‘Come in,’ he muttered, his voice hoarse as though he’d done too much shouting the night before. He half remembered raucous singing and guessed that he’d joined in, perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

Killian entered quietly, as if he knew his son’s head was too delicate to withstand even the smallest of sounds. He went straight to the window and opened it wide, then pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat down. ‘Smells like a taproom in here,’ he said with a smile. ‘I’m surprised you actually made it into bed. I expected to find you curled up on the floor next to the chamber pot.’

Brice was still too befuddled to reply to such teasing, so he stayed silent.

‘I reckoned you must have drunk the town dry by now, so perhaps you’re ready to listen to a proposition?’ Killian’s smile turned into a more serious expression.

‘Uhm, what kind?’ Brice struggled into a sitting position,

then groaned and put up his hands to cradle his aching skull. At the same time he tried to disentangle himself from the covers. It was August and as hot as it ever became in Sweden and since he'd apparently slept with the windows closed, the linen material was sticking to him in a most uncomfortable way. The sheets weren't too fragrant either. Or perhaps that was him? He made a face.

Killian pulled a hip flask out of his pocket and held it out. 'Here, hair of the dog, but it's the last drop of anything stronger than tea you're having this week. Understand me? This has got to stop.'

Brice grimaced as the liquid burned a path down his throat. Normally his Scottish-born father preferred whisky, so Brice was surprised to find the flask contained *brännvin*, the pure spirit favoured by the Swedes. Although this particular one was flavoured with herbs, it was still vile so early in the day. He shuddered and gulped down a sudden bout of nausea.

'It's none of your business if I want to have a night on the town with my friends,' he began, but Killian cut him off.

'A night, is it? More like an entire week. Enough is enough, don't you think?'

Brice had already reached this conclusion for himself, but that didn't mean he wanted to be lectured like a naughty schoolboy. He was nearly twenty-two, not twelve. 'It's my choice,' he reiterated. And if anyone had cause to drown their sorrows, he did, he added to himself.

'Maybe so, but it doesn't change anything.' Killian's voice was gentle, but firm.

Brice clenched his fists around the sheet as the memories came flooding back again. No amount of drinking could lessen the pain of betrayal. 'I trusted Jamie,' he said. 'My own brother. With his looks and charm he could have had any girl in the country, but he had to take the only one I wanted. The one he

knew was spoken for. Why? And as for her ...'

He couldn't find the words to express how he felt about Elisabet now.

Brice had been in love with her for as long as he could remember. There had never been any doubt in his mind she was the woman he was going to marry. She had the kind of beauty that seemed almost unreal, her features delicate and perfect in every way like those of some other-worldly creature. Although young boys don't normally notice such things, he'd been bewitched from an early age. Since she was four years younger than him, however, he'd had to wait for her to grow up, but he didn't mind. It gave him the opportunity to try and make something of himself before settling down and he wanted her to have the best he could provide.

Obviously, it wasn't enough and I waited too long.

'You've made your point and believe me, I'm not much happier with your brother than you are,' Killian told him. 'I thought better of Jamie, but accidents happen and he's paid the price now. You should pity him, rather than waste your energy on useless anger.'

'Pity him? When he's married the most beautiful girl in all of Sweden? *My* girl. You can't mean that.' Brice handed back the flask, his stomach curdling at the mere thought of any more. It only deadened the pain for a few hours anyway, but then the agony returned tenfold afterwards.

'I'm perfectly serious. You may think Elisabet is the loveliest girl on earth, but I doubt Jamie would agree with you. He was nowhere near ready to settle down with her or anyone else and he doesn't love her. To him she was just like all the others. The difference is, he's now stuck with her for life, whereas you're free. Free to find someone else, someone better.'

Brice made an angry noise, but Killian raised his voice. 'Look at me, Brice. Even you must realise that if she didn't want you enough to wait, then she wasn't the girl for you. Any marriage with her would have been one-sided. Is it what you want? Being shackled to a woman who doesn't love you?'

Brice knew his father was right about that as well, but he wasn't ready to admit it yet. Perhaps he never would be. 'No, but she did until Jamie decided to have her,' he muttered. 'No girl can resist him when he puts his mind to it.'

'Rubbish. Besides, Jamie swore to me he never deliberately tried to entice her and I believe him.'

'Right. That must be why she's with child then.' Brice felt his mouth set in a mulish line. His father could believe what he liked, he'd never convince Brice of Jamie's innocence.

I should never have gone to China again, he thought, knuckling his eyes as if it would take away both the tiredness and the image of Elisabet with Jamie, which seemed to be burned onto his eyelids. *But I did it for her!*

He'd been barely eighteen when he sailed to Canton for the first time on board one of the Swedish East India Company's ships. It was both the worst and most wonderful thing he'd ever experienced. On the one hand, eighteen months of hard work and having to endure one of the toughest journeys imaginable. On the other, the joy of seeing strange sights he'd only ever dreamed of, plus enormous gains on his share of the cargo. And so he'd set out for a second time, hoping it would give him enough capital of his own to ask Elisabet to be his wife.

It had, but he shouldn't have bothered.

Killian sighed. 'Whatever the case, you have to face facts. Elisabet wasn't the right one, which means your soul mate is yet to be discovered. Trust me, you won't find her at the bottom of a keg of ale or barrel of wine. You're young, you

have plenty of time.'

'Soul mate? There's no such thing,' Brice scoffed.

'Yes, there is. I used to be like Jamie until I found your mother. I thought women were just put on God's earth for my enjoyment, never anything else. I was wrong. Luckily for me, I realised it before it was too late. Now you have the chance to look for yours.'

Brice knew he and his five siblings were lucky in that their parents were prepared to allow them to choose their future spouses for themselves, but at the moment he wasn't in the mood to feel grateful.

'And how do you suggest I go about it? Join the riveting social scene here in Gothenburg?' Brice knew he was being overly sarcastic, but he couldn't help it. He wasn't sure he was ready to face the reality of his situation. He still wanted to forget.

'No, that's not at all what I had in mind. I think it's time you went to Scotland to take up your birthright.'

'*My what?*' Brice sat up straight and stared at his father, then drew in a sharp breath when the sudden movement jolted his sore head. 'Ouch.' He rubbed his skull, trying to lessen the pain, but didn't take his eyes off Killian, who was heading for the door. 'What did you say?'

'Get yourself washed and dressed, then come downstairs to the study and I'll explain.' Killian turned, his stern expression softening into a grin. 'And eat something. You look awful and no respectable Scottish lass will give you so much as the time of day in that state.'

'Who says I want them to?'

But Killian had already left, so the question remained unanswered. Brice scowled in the direction of the closed door, but his father's words had intrigued him and he knew he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep now.

‘Damn it all,’ he muttered, but for the first time since he’d found out about Jamie and Elisabet, something had penetrated the fog of pain and piqued his interest.

Ignoring his aching head, he went in search of food and hot water.

Balancing a heavy tray on one hand, Marsaili knocked on the door to the estate office.

‘Come in.’

‘Sit. Stay,’ she ordered Liath in a stern whisper. As usual, he’d padded behind her as she went about her daily work, but she knew this was one room he couldn’t enter. She managed to open the door and manoeuvre her way through without dropping either the tray or its contents. Leaving it slightly ajar, she went across to the desk and deposited Seton’s breakfast in one corner where there were no papers or ledgers at present. Porridge with thick cream and buttermilk, two bannocks and a quart of ale, as well as some honey and cheese. Nothing but the best for the factor.

‘Thank you,’ he said, without looking up at her.

Marsaili’s stomach churned. As housekeeper, it wasn’t really her job to serve Seton, but the maids were all terrified of him so she’d taken over the task a while back. Now she wished she hadn’t. She’d been dreading this encounter after what had happened the night before, but he seemed to be acting as if she didn’t exist. *Well good*, she thought. The less notice he took of her, the better. *What on earth was he thinking? He’s much too old for me.* But she knew there was nothing rational about men who lusted after women. And he was good-looking for his age, she’d give him that, so perhaps he’d genuinely thought she would welcome his advances.

As he pulled the tray over and started on the porridge, she turned to go, but before she’d taken more than a few steps she

heard him spit loudly. 'What the devil is this?' he grumbled.

'I beg your pardon?' She looked over her shoulder, bracing herself for an eruption of wrath. His temper was volatile, to say the least.

'I always have the great oats, not this pap, you know that well enough.' He threw down the silver spoon borrowed from the laird's cabinet and it landed in the cream, splashing globules all around. This made him visibly more irritated as he then had to mop the mess off his papers with his handkerchief.

Marsaili drew in a steadying breath and replied as calmly as she could. 'There were none left, Mr Seton, only these. I informed you just the other day that we were running low on provisions. You said we'd have to make do as there's no money for more.' The so-called 'black oats' were an inferior type, usually given to the servants, but it was all they had now. Times were hard, or so Seton claimed, and the harvest still a good month away at least.

'You're the housekeeper, you should have rationed it better,' he accused.

'No one has been given any except you, Mr Seton, I assure you. I kept it under lock and key, as you instructed.'

'Huh, this is what comes of giving a slip of a girl responsibilities above and beyond what she can manage. Housekeeper, indeed. It's a position for older and more experienced women.'

Marsaili decided not to answer. She was nearly twenty-two and didn't consider herself a 'slip of a girl' any longer, but since Seton was probably in his mid-forties, perhaps that seemed very young to him. Either way, they'd had this conversation before and she'd learned that maintaining a dignified silence worked better.

'Well, what are you waiting for? Find me something decent

to eat,' Seton snarled.

'But the bannocks ...?'

'Are all well and good, but won't keep hunger at bay till dinner time. I need proper victuals – eggs, mutton, something I can sink my teeth into. See to it.'

'Yes, Mr Seton.'

Turning to leave again, she was halted once more by his parting shot.

'And if I catch your dog inside the house again, I'll personally shoot him, is that clear?'

Drat, she thought, *he must have heard Liath's claws clicking on the flagstones outside the door.* 'But the mistress said –'

'Devil take it, woman! He's to stay where he belongs and there's an end to it.'

Marsaili closed the door behind her without a word.

Brice joined his father downstairs at last, clean and presentable, and slightly less hung over after a cautious breakfast of rye bread, cheese and ale.

Killian waved him to a seat and came straight to the point. 'I want you to go to Rosyth. Something's not right there and we need to know what it is.'

'Why me?' Brice asked. 'Can't you send someone else?' The last thing he wanted was to go gallivanting across the North Sea when he'd only just come back from the long journey to Canton.

'I could, but the estate is yours anyway, so it should be your responsibility. I've tried to look after it from a distance on your behalf, but it's impossible. Since I can't go myself to see what's happening, you'll have to sort it out.'

Brice frowned. 'I don't understand. It belongs to you. Has done for ages.'

Rosyth House was his father's Scottish property, inherited some ten years earlier from old Lord Rosyth, Killian's grandfather. Although technically Killian was now the laird and chief of clan Kinross, he hadn't been able to set foot in Scotland since taking part in the Jacobite rebellion on the side of Prince Charles Edward, the man the English called 'the Young Pretender'. Brice had been brought up to think of him as the true king's heir, but most people had now given up hope of him ever gaining the throne. Rosyth House had remained in Killian's possession, however, despite him being branded a traitor to the crown. He'd had the foresight to become a Swedish citizen and was therefore outside the reach of English law. Since the uprising, he'd lived in Sweden where he and Brice's mother Jessamijn ran a prosperous trading company.

Killian shook his head. 'No, I signed it over to you before I declared for the Prince. Apart from the fact that you're Swedish, you were too young to fight so no one could accuse you of being a Jacobite. It seemed the best thing to do at the time and it worked. The English couldn't confiscate Rosyth, no matter what. Other lairds did the same, or so I've heard.'

Brice was having trouble taking this in and squinted at his father. 'So you're saying it's been mine all along?'

'Since 1745, yes.'

'Why didn't you ever tell me?'

'I was going to when you were legally old enough to run it yourself, but you were in China when you turned twenty-one. I'm telling you now.'

'Well, what's wrong with it?' Brice asked. 'I thought you had a steward looking after matters. And what about your late cousin's wife, Aunt Ailsa? Isn't she keeping an eye on things? Why do I need to go there?'

Killian stood up and began to pace back and forth, his

hands behind his back. Brice knew his father's barely perceptible limp was a constant reminder of how close Killian had come to losing his life for the Jacobite cause, just like his father and two brothers before him. He'd been lucky though. He had lived to return to Gothenburg, together with a number of other Scotsmen whose lives he'd saved by allowing them to board his merchant ship before the Redcoats caught up with them.

'Ailsa's not in good health and I haven't heard from her in ages. But there is a factor, yes, Colin Seton,' he said now. 'He sends me regular reports and the income that is your due. I've kept it for you and I'll hand it over before you leave. Lately, however, there hasn't been so much as a farthing and Seton's letters are full of tales of woe. The tacksmen are insolent, they don't pay their rents, the sheep and cattle are dwindling in numbers, the house has needed repairs, the crops are failing ... The list is endless and as a result he's asking me for money instead of sending any. I want to know why.'

'Isn't it possible he's right though? I mean, the Scots have suffered since the forty-five and I've heard tell there's a lot of hardship. Why not at Rosyth?'

Killian shook his head. 'My grandfather ran it with an iron fist. It's always been prosperous and in my youth, when he was teaching me all about it, he showed me that even during hard times, Rosyth ought to do reasonably well. Some losses are always to be expected, certainly, but not to this extent. I'm telling you, there's something seriously wrong. I want you to get to the bottom of it.'

'Very well. I suppose it's no worse than sitting around here brooding. And the whisky is good, I hear.'

Killian shot him an impatient look, his blue eyes darkening with anger. 'This is serious, Brice. You're the new Lord Rosyth, it's your concern.'

‘Me, a Scottish laird?’ Brice almost laughed. He hadn’t been to Scotland since he was a boy and considered himself Swedish through and through, despite his father’s antecedents. Even though he’d known about it, becoming the next laird had always seemed like something that was too far away to bother thinking about.

‘It’s not a laughing matter. The oldest son always inherits and that’s you, whether you like it or not. Sooner or later, it would have been yours. It’s a very important position, but one which brings with it responsibilities. A Highland chief is almost like a father to his clan – less so now the accursed new English laws are in place, but the people will still expect things from you. And Scotland is beautiful. Who’s to say you won’t like it and want to stay? You used to love it there as a boy.’

Brice snorted. ‘Right now, going back to bed sounds more appealing to be honest.’ He caught another dark look from his father and held up his hands. ‘But fine, if you want me to go to Rosyth, I will. Just tell me what to do. Shouldn’t be that difficult.’ He knew his father was trying to help him forget about the recent marriage *débâcle* and to a certain extent he’d succeeded. Thanks to Killian, Brice now had a purpose and an excellent excuse for leaving Sweden. The more he thought about it, the more he realised it was a good thing.

‘Right. Then let me tell you my plan ...’

To be continued ...

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