



EMBRACE THE *Lace*

SHANNON
MACLEOD

Chapter 1



In the Year of Our Lord 1659

The Highlands of Scotland

Show yerself, ye wee bastard...

Laird Andrew MacIver turned a narrowed eye to the slight movement in his trencher. Beneath the bannock, next to his favorite mashed turnips, beside the charred beef and dangerously close to the lumpy quagmire disguised as the new cook's attempt at gravy...*there*. The quivering antennae ventured out from underneath the flaky haven, followed by the brown almond shape of the roach. He sighed and pushed his evening meal away. "Mrs. Norris – a word, an it please ye."

The matronly dame bustled about, overseeing service in the noisy and crowded great hall. "Aye, Milaird," she called back over her shoulder, holding up a single finger in response even as she barked at a yawning boy dragging an empty breadbasket. "Get yerself to the kitchen with that and carry it proper – ye doona know what has been on this floor. Would ye like to?" No fool he, the lad heeded the warning and snatched the basket up over his head, feet flying as he scampered off. She scanned the tables and with a snap of her fingers pointed to a cluster of soldiers rising from their meal to seek out the evening entertainments. Two of the serving girls ran at once to gather up the dirty dishes and spirit them away for

washing. Hoping to catch the eye of the handsome laird, one of the young women gave Andrew a coquettish glance as she passed then lingered as if she meant to speak. That budding flirtation ended as quickly as it began when the eagle-eyed Mrs. Norris cleared her throat loudly at the girl's boldness. Duly chastened, the flustered lass ducked her head and hurried to refocus on her assigned task.

Oblivious to the drama playing out before him Andrew watched Mrs. Norris, hiding a grin at the unflappable skill with which the dame ran the hall. She handled loud joviality and budding alcohol fueled ruckuses equally with the good humor, tact, and authority of a seasoned army general. His former governess and secret favorite of the ever-growing castle staff, she never failed to have a sweet roll and a smile tucked away just for him. Her honey brown hair, always pulled back in a tight bun, now held an increasing amount of silver and white streaks. She was not what some would call beautiful, but she had sparkling eyes, a mischievous sense of humor and laugh lines that became more pronounced with each passing year. Although he would never say so aloud, he sometimes wondered if she realized he was a man full grown and no longer the young lad who required her daily ministrations to appear presentable.

As he glanced around the room, he saw his family, friends...*his* people. Meeting their gazes, he nodded to several in greeting, careful to avoid looking at the vacant chairs to his right and left. He sighed again; now at the advanced age of but a score and five, it fell to him to assume the mantle of laird alone. After his beloved mother fell ill and died from a sudden sickness, his chieftain father rallied for a time then slipped into a frail depression that eased only in sleep. It had indeed been a blessing that during his slumber he joined his darling Catriona forever, delivering his clan into the capable hands of Andrew and his new bride Ailis. The following winter had nearly passed before Death turned up at his door again, this time bringing a raging fever that swept throughout the land. Too many children, elderly and infirmed succumbed to the ravenous illness. The greedy specter also took Ailis and their unborn child, leaving Andrew alone on the chieftain's dais mourning empty chairs.

"Aye, sir?" Mrs. Norris bounced up before his unseeing eyes like a cheerful jack in the box. "Something ye wished, Milaird?"

Aye, if only I knew what I wished for... Andrew leaned forward, lowering his voice to a whisper, "twould appear not all Cook is serving this eve is...ah...dead." He pushed the plate towards her with a meaningful look.

Her eyes widened comically as not one, but two – *where did that second bastard come from?* – roaches evacuated. "Brighid save me, I'll skelp her, that

sorry excuse for a – “She paused to collect herself, took a deep breath and started again. “My apologies, Milaird. O’ course, I will have a word with her at once.”

He felt a small twinge of guilt for speaking up; a tongue-lashing from this formidable woman was something the servants avoided like the plague. “Dinna ye be too hard on her, she is trying to learn. Which is more than I can say for some,” he said, casting a pointed glare at the closest tapestry, the grey stone wall underneath visible in several threadbare places. “Were the lasses no’ to start some new ones? In tatters, all of them.”

She paused as if considering his words then drew in a deep breath. “They are learning right enough, but until ye have a proper lady to oversee your household this is what ye’ll get, Sir,” she said with a firm nod.

Andrew flinched in horror and tried in vain to stem the impending flood of motherly chastisement. “I doona wish to discuss it again this eve,” he said, his tone flat.

“If ye’ll not mind my saying, Milaird....”

“I just the now said I did, and if...”

“...until ye find a worthy lass and marry again this fine hold yer father and mother – God rest them both – “

“God rest them,” he echoed obediently, crossing himself.

“...built for ye is going to fall down about yer ears and crumble into a big pile of unkept rocks and ye laird of it all.” This sentence came out as one long word, punctuated with flaps of her voluminous apron. “That Lowland lass ye married – God rest her, poor lamb – “

His shoulders sagged, accepting the inevitable. “Aye, God rest her too.”

“...wasna nearly hardy enough for these Northern climes. Yer next lady should be hale and strong, not one to sicken and die with the first chill wind that blows through, and skinny as a reed in the pond to boot, leaving ye with no sons to carry on yer name. I know the marriage was yer father’s idea – God rest him – “

That did it. Having petitioned the Almighty to rest all his dearly departed, Andrew clapped both hands together and smiled with what he hoped conveyed the necessary *I am the one in charge here* confidence. “Mrs. Norris, I ken well what it is ye say and sound advice it is, too. When choosing my next wife, I will look for someone...sturdier. With bountiful hips. Aye?”

It seemed those were the magic words. “Aye,” she beamed. “And with the gathering but days away, ye’ll have yer pick of winning lasses.” Her gaze darted

around, taking in the current state of the great hall. “We will work to have things a bit more ...ah...presentable by then.” Picking up his trencher, she gave it a discreet shake and appeared satisfied when nothing else ran for cover. “Is there aught else I can bring ye? Ye canna go until morn with no food in yer belly,” she asked, her brow furrowed in concern.

He gave her a kind smile and patted his flat stomach. “I believe I will be just fine for the night, Mrs. Norris. My appetite seems to have waned a bit.”

“Cook is going to get the scolding of her life, see if she doesnae,” she snorted. “I have nae doubt any one of the stable lads could cook just as well. And her coming recommended and all. Nae doubt her former employers are pleased indeed to be rid of her.” She glanced around again then turned her gaze back to him. “And I will see to those wall coverings on the morrow for certain, Sir.”

“Aye, well - ye have yer work ahead of ye, so I shall deliver it into yer capable hands.” Andrew rose to his feet and gave her a short bow, clicking the heels of his soft boots together. “By yer leave, Mistress.”

“Go on with ye and yer airs,” Mrs. Norris admonished but despite her age blushed like a young maid at the chivalrous gesture. “I’ll just go see to Cook, then, shall I?”

Andrew watched her stomp back towards the kitchen then strode from the hall himself before anything else caught his eye that wanted tending. He paused briefly at the foot of the stairs, then making up his mind headed straight for the tall oaken doors at the castle entrance. The soldier leaning against the doorframe appeared as ancient as the door itself and just as attentive. Andrew was almost on top of him before the old man whirled around with a muffled “Whassisit? Who’s there? I’ll gut you, so I will.” He swung his spear wildly, his oversized leather helmet slipping down over one eye.

Andrew sidestepped the blunted weapon with a graceful, practiced ease. “Tis but me, Mr. Hogg,” he said with a fond smile. “I’ll be talking Bonny Nell out for a ride this e’en. Why doona ye draw up a stool and ah...bide a wee. I should think we be safe from calamity tonight, at least until the outlying clan arrives in the days to come.” That last he added out of concern for the old man’s bones – judging from the reek of whisky and peculiar tilt at which he stood, the elder Mr. Hogg had been making a week of it.

“*Och*, that auld girl will be right glad to see ye, lad.” He hiccupped softly and adjusted his helm. “I remember yer ma, bonny wee thing but wild as a hare, that one...rode like the wind itself and wouldna stop for naught but yer da, as I recall... Beautiful horse. Ran like the wind. I thought at first ye da had gone mad

as that was too much horse for such a gentle born lady, but yer ma handled her like she was born in the saddle. Here's a tale for ye..." his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

Andrew gave an inward groan of frustration then berated himself for less than chiefly impatience with his elder. "What story is that, Mr. Hogg?" he asked.

"I remember one bonny summer afternoon much like today. I had gone out to fetch yer da from one of the border fields; there had been a report of reivers and yer parents had ridden out to speak with the farmers. By the time I got there, the chief and his lady had already left. Since I dinna see them on the way, I took a different path back in hopes of catching up to them, and what do I find but the two of them galloping circles in a field, yer ma wearing trews and looking for all the world as a young lad. She were holding them reins and standing straight up on top of that saddle fearless as any gypsy. Her hair were loose and flying out, and I swear her beauty would blind ye if ye looked at her too long," His voice trailed off as he stared across the years, remembering. "She rode close to yer da and just threw herself off Nellie right into his arms. My heart nearly stopped on the spot, but I could hear the both of them laughing like their sides would split from the sheer joy of it."

Andrew blinked in surprise, trying to imagine his parents doing such. On second thought, he amended that to *doing such where they could be seen*. He grinned inwardly at the thought. "And what happened next?"

Mr. Hogg colored with embarrassment. "I didna stay to watch, Sir. 'Twas obvious they, um...thought themselves alone and I thought best to give them their privacy. Ye know Sweet Nellie was yer da's birthday gift to yer ma, right before...she took ill and..." He hiccupped again and sniffed, sounding dangerously close to tears.

"Thank you for that wonderful tale." With a solemn nod, Andrew tugged at the handle and slowly eased through the door lest his window of opportunity for escape be lost. "We shall not be riding fast this eve, just a slow turn about the far pond and back. Ye've my word; I shall return anon."

"Sweetest lass, yer ma. Such a shame, her untimely passing...*sniff*... leaving ye and yer da all alone...*sniff*... in the world...be ye careful, la...Milaird. And dinna ye worry about a thing – I am here to guard whilst yer away."

"I have the utmost faith in ye, Mr. Hogg," Andrew called back as the door closed. He exhaled then sucked in a deep breath of the first peaceful air he'd had all day. It was the gloaming, and a fine, quiet and disaster free evening awaited him.

Andrew made it to the expansive garrison stables nearest the castle without running into anyone or anything else requiring his immediate attention. Despite being a large man, he moved with wraithlike silence as he slipped inside, giving his eyes time to adjust to the low light. A stable lad - or mayhap two, judging from the racket - snored in the loft upstairs. He drew in another welcome deep breath, relaxing into the familiar smell of leather, horse, and summer grains. Grabbing a light saddle and blanket from the rack, he selected bridle and reins from the repurposed wagon wheel he designed to keep order in the long leather strips. The old stable hands had laughed when he first hung it up, but after seeing it work so efficiently, they gave up teasing and over time became more accepting of the odd inventions that popped up here and there. Stepping around several watchful but sleepy deerhounds, he made his way down the long row of wooden stalls, his boots crunching the dried hay underfoot.

He passed the stall holding his massive warhorse *Sgiathan*, taking a quick look in to check on the welfare of the glossy black destrier. *Sgiathan* looked to have been asleep but upon seeing his master snorted and bent his shaggy head for a quick ear scratch. "Good lad, back to sleep now," Andrew murmured before moving further down the row. Chuffing softly under his breath he said in a low voice, "*Nellie mo nighean* – let's go out for an evening ride, ye and me."

A large dark head poked out of the last stall, the big nostrils sniffing eagerly. Andrew held out his hand for her and she nickered in anticipation. "Sssh, ye'll wake the laddies," he cautioned, patting her neck affectionately. The roughhewn half door opened with a low creak as he stepped inside. Trembling with excitement, the big mare waited patiently while he tacked her up. With a start, he realized he had unthinkingly grabbed his mother's old bridle and reins instead of his own. Decorated in white, red, and pink roses, their hammered colors had faded into the smooth, cracked leather, custom made for her fine birthday gift. Andrew's heart tightened with a wistful memory of these same reins in his mother's delicate hands as she taught him to race with her across the open fields.

He led Nell quietly out into the yard, but the instant his arse hit the saddle the courser shot forward like a ball out of a cannon. Her horseshoes beat out a melodious tattoo on the cobbled street as she raced towards the gate. They thundered past the first of the barracks, the chandler, goldsmith, tailor, smithy, and alehouse, and for a split second he considered reining her in as they neared the stately kirk but decided the good Lord would forgive them for making such a joyful noise.

As they neared the outermost entrance, however, he did pull back ever so slightly in a strong sense of self-preservation. "Open the gates," he bellowed and

with a complaining squeal, the portcullis lifted with only seconds to spare before horse and rider splattered across the latticed metal gate. Andrew laughed out of sheer exuberance and Nellie jumped in response, kicking her heels, and swinging her head. “Hold fast, Milaird – she’ll do ye in this time for sure,” the guards called out as the chorus of laughing voices faded behind him.

By his best guess, Nell ran for nearly three quarters of an hour once they reached the outskirts of the large village surrounding the castle. Past the sturdy stone cottages with thatched rooftops, through fields, over the occasional stream and respectfully around the faery mounds masquerading as hills in the rolling countryside, he let her have her head until she slowed first to a trot, then to a sedate walk. The stars came out, twinkling overhead like millions of tiny jewels set in a sky of dark, cloudy lace. The intoxicating fragrance of heather in full bloom was almost more than his senses could take and when Nell finally stopped to take a drink from the dark loch, Andrew succumbed to the urge and fell back into the cushiony softness of the purple flowers, heaving a sigh of deep contentment. “Ah, Nellie – if only all of life could be as peaceful as it is here and now,” he murmured, using his heels to pull his boots off and free his toes for a good stretch. Lacing his fingers together, he made a cradle behind his head and stared up into the night sky. With August nearly halfway through, soon it would be fall and a completely new set of problems would arise. It had been a good growing year, so everyone would eat well this winter...yet the sobering matter of finding a wife to manage his castle remained. He anticipated the first of the outlying clansmen arriving very soon, with more and more coming over the following days.

His thoughts turned to his ride out on the morrow, making the ten day journey his father and grandfather made before him to welcome his tenants as they traveled to the gathering. Upon reflection, it seemed a different lifetime ago but only five years had passed since the last celebration of family and friends. He had vowed to steel his nerve about the task, but how could he not be anxious? His first ride as chief and without his father by his side, the responsibility mingled with the excitement in his stomach and poked at him sharply.

He shook himself and tried to direct his thoughts back to the matrimonial quandary. “Like as not I will be seeing both kin and all manner of new folk, and they will be bringing their daughters, Nell. Short, stout, tall, lean – some with faces sweet as honey and others favored with the countenance of comely piebald goats.”

Nellie did not seem to grasp the significance of his dilemma and began munching the sweet grass growing near the water’s edge. “And it will be yes, Milaird and no, Milaird and can I butter yer bread fer ye, Milaird and God only

knows what else.” He rolled up onto his side and studied the horse, oblivious to everything but her snack. “And make nae mistake, ‘tis marriage they are after, Nell. They will not want any hand holding or pretty words – they are headed straight for the altar and planning to drag me with them whether I will it or no’.”

He fell silent, watching the mare enjoy her meal. With a heavy groan, he laid flat again and stared up at the sky, trying to recall the details of his mother’s face. He could just barely remember her fine chestnut hair spread over the pillow as she lay on her deathbed. So pale and wan, still she managed to smile and call him “my brave wee man” in a tired, broken whisper.

“I doona remember as much as I would like about Ma,” he confessed to the stars, “and it pains me so to say. I do remember Da yelling all fearsome at the top of his lungs, chasing her through the castle and her laughing as she ran...it sounded all sweet, like tiny bells at Christmas. They always smiled so when he would finally catch her, like they two hit a secret away from the rest of the world.”

Andrew frowned into the growing darkness. His father had been the strongest, wisest man he had ever known. With a ready smile and easy laugh, Colin rode into battle cloaked in that quiet confidence men followed without question. He navigated clan intrigue that would make even Solomon the Wise scratch his head in consternation, although in fairness to the great king, dealing with the cantankerous Scots occasionally did call for divine intervention. The only thing that had succeeded in bringing his father low was the death of his beloved wife. *That is a dangerous kind of love, he mused, to take a man such as he from heaven to hell in the space of a heartbeat. Or in the lack of one. A man would have to be mad to wish for...*

A twinkle of light from above caught his attention and he glanced up just in time to see a star shooting across the violet heavens. The thought of making that wish immediately crossed his mind, but he shook his head against the childish notion. Exhaling heavily, he closed his eyes and murmured, “I must truly be mad, then. I know not how...but whatever may come... I want a passion such as that about my bride, whoever she be.”

And just then...the wind changed.

About the Author



Shannon MacLeod lives next to an abandoned theme park. A proud member of Romance Writers of America and PAN, her Celtic romantasies include the award winning *Embrace the Lace*, *Rogue on the Rollaway*, *The Celtic Knot: Suit of Cups (Arcana Love I)*, *The Gypsy Ribbon: Suit of Wands (Arcana Love II)*, available now from Kensington Books. Her tales are filled with strong heroes and equally strong heroines, interesting locales, colorful secondary characters, a touch of magick and mystery, loads of quirky humor, a body count, and absolutely no sparkly vampires.

Writing as her evil twin, *The Celtic Cross Tarot Spread: Cutting to the Chase* and the companion book for the *Shadowfox Tarot* (as Jennifer Shadowfox) are currently available from Schiffer Publishing.

When not writing, she lives a life of servitude to three spoiled cats and one very entitled German Shepherd dog. She enjoys rainy days, good music, and spending long hours gazing at her beloved ocean. An avid wearer of boots regardless of season and dangerously high heels, she watches *Lord of the Rings* more than any sane person should and can, in fact, reenact entire battle scenes using interpretive dance. Her spirit animals are the Honey Badger and Gordon Ramsay.

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