

Ransom Novel Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Brodick strode down the aisle, shaking the rafters of the little church with each hard step as specks of dust rained down from the ceiling. Gillian valiantly held her ground.

Blessedly, when he was just a couple of feet away, he stopped, then clasped his hands behind his back and insolently studied her, his gaze moving from the top of her head to her feet and then back again. He took his sweet time, and after he had finished his rude inspection, he kept his eyes locked on hers and waited for her to speak.

She had planned for this moment and had rehearsed exactly what she would say to him. She would begin by introducing herself because that was the polite thing to do, and then she would ask him his name. He would tell her he was Brodick, but she wouldn't believe him until he had proven his identity by answering several questions she had cleverly come up with, a test, actually, to determine that she could trust him.

Aye, she was going to be clever with her questioning, and just as soon as she could calm down, she would begin. The way he was looking at her was unnerving, and she was having difficulty coming up with a single thought.

He quickly grew impatient. "Are you the woman claiming to be my bride?"

The anger in his voice heated her face. She felt herself blush with mortification. "Yes, I am."

He was surprised by her honesty. "Why?"

"I lied."

"Obviously."

"I don't usually..."

"Usually what?" he asked, wondering why she was so nervous. His stance was relaxed, his hands were clasped behind his back, and he had given Dylan his sword before coming into the church. Surely she realized he wasn't going to do her any harm.

"I don't usually lie," she explained, thrilled that she could remember what she was talking about. Staring at his chin helped, for his eyes were too intense. "You aren't old." She blurted out the thought and then smiled. "I was told you were very old," she whispered, "... with white hair."

And then she laughed, convincing Brodick she was out of her mind.

"I believe I should start all over. My name is Lady Gillian, and I really am sorry I lied, but claiming to be your bride was the only way I could think of to get you to travel such a long distance."

He shrugged. "The distance wasn't great."

"It wasn't?" she asked in surprise. "Then, pray tell, why did it take you so long to get here? We've been waiting in this church for a very long time."

"We?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, we," she replied. "The Hathaway brothers... the two guards outside the door... and I have been waiting all that time."

"Why were you so certain I'd show up at all?"

"Curiosity," she answered. "And I was right, wasn't I? That's why you came."

A hint of a smile softened his expression. "Yes," he agreed. "I wanted to meet the woman who dared such audacity."

"You are Brodick... I mean to say, you are Laird Buchanan, aren't you?"

"I am."

Her face lit up with relief. Damn, but she was pretty. The messenger hadn't lied about her appeal, Brodick thought. If anything, Henley had understated her beauty.

"I was going to test you to make certain you really were Brodick, but one look at you convinces me. I was told, you see, that your glare could part a tree trunk, and from the way you're scowling at me, I do believe you could do it. You're quite intimidating, but you know that, don't you?"

He didn't show any reaction to her remarks. "What is it you want from me?"

"I want... no, I need," she qualified, "your help. I have a very valuable treasure with me and I need assistance getting it home."

"Aren't there any Englishmen who could come to your aid?"

"It's complicated, Laird."

"Start at the beginning," he suggested, surprised by his own willingness to extend this meeting. Her voice appealed to him; it was soft, lyrical, yet husky and sensual, as sensual as the woman herself. Brodick was conditioned to keeping his thoughts hidden, and for that reason he was certain she didn't have any idea of the effect she was having on him. Her wonderful scent was a clear distraction. It was very feminine and smelled faintly of flowers, which he found both alluring and arousing. He had to fight the urge to move closer to her.

"This should explain everything you need to know," she said as she slowly removed the dagger and sheath from her sleeve and held it up for him to see.

He reacted with lightning speed. Before she could even guess his intent, he'd snatched the dagger out of her hand, grabbed hold of her injured arm, and jerked her forcefully toward him. Towering over her, he demanded, "Where did you get this?"

"I will explain," she cried out. "But please let go of me. You're hurting me."

The tears in her eyes confirmed her words. Brodick immediately let go of her and stepped back. "Now explain," he demanded again.

"I borrowed the dagger," she said, and then she turned and called out, "Alec, you may come out now."

Brodick had never been so close to losing his composure. When the Maitland boy came running toward him, he felt his knees buckle and his heart lodge in his throat. He was too stunned to say a word, and then Alec threw himself into his arms. Brodick's hands shook as he lifted him up and clasped him to his chest.

The little boy wrapped his arms around his protector's neck and hugged him. "I knew you would come. I told Gillian you would help us."

"You are well, Alec?" he asked, his voice trembling with emotion. He turned to Gillian questioning her with his eyes, but she was watching Alec with a soft, motherly smile on her face.

"Answer him, Alec," she instructed. www.onlinefreenovels.com

The child leaned back in Brodick's arms and nodded. "I'm very well, Uncle. The lady, she took good care of me. She gave me her food to eat and went hungry when there wasn't enough for both of us, and you know what? She wouldn't let nobody hurt me, not even when the man wanted to."

Brodick stared at Gillian while Alec chattered away, but nodded when the little boy had finished his explanation.

"You will tell me exactly what happened," he told Gillian. It wasn't a question but a statement of fact.

"Yes," she agreed. "I'll tell you everything."

"Uncle, you know what?"

Brodick turned to Alec. "No, what?"

"I didn't drown."

Brodick was still too shaken to laugh over the ridiculous understatement. "I can see you didn't," he answered dryly.

"But did you think I did? I told Gillian you wouldn't believe it, 'cause you're stubborn, but did you?"

"No, I didn't believe you drowned."

Alec leaned around Brodick so he could see Gillian. "I told you so," he boasted before turning his attention to his uncle once again. "They put me in a wheat sack, and I got real scared."

"Who put you in a sack?" he demanded, trying to keep the anger out of his voice so he wouldn't frighten the child.

"The men who took me. I maybe even cried." He sounded as though he were confessing a terrible sin. "I wasn't brave, Uncle, but you know what? Gillian said I was."

"Who were these men who put you in a sack?"

His abruptness worried the boy, and he looked down when he answered forlornly, "I don't know. I didn't see their faces."

"Alec, he isn't angry with you. Why don't you go and collect our things while I speak in private to your uncle."

Brodick gently lowered Alec and watched him run to the front of the church.

"Will you help me get him home to his parents?" she asked.

He turned to her. "I'll make certain he gets home."

"And so will I," she insisted. "I made Alec a promise, and I mean to keep it, but I must also speak to his father. The matter is extremely urgent. Besides," she added, "I trust you, Laird Buchanan, but I don't trust anyone else. I was told eight men ride with you today. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see every one of them before Alec steps outside."

"You want to look at them?" he asked, puzzled by the bizarre request. "They're Buchanans," he added, "and that's all you need to know."

Alec came running down the aisle just as Gillian made her demand once again. "I will see them first."

"'Cause you know why, Uncle?"

Brodick looked at the little boy. "Why?"

"She saw the traitor," he blurted out, wanting to be the first to explain. "I fell asleep, but Gillian saw him good. She told me so. She made us hide a long time just so she could see him. He's a Highlander," he thought to add.

"Oh, Alec, you weren't supposed to tell anyone—"

"I forgot," he interrupted. "But Brodick won't tell nobody if you ask him not to."

"The man I saw is probably just now on his way back to the Highlands," she said. "I don't know how long he was going to stay in England, but I'm not taking any chances. It's better to be safe."

"And you want to see my soldiers just to make certain one of them isn't the man you saw?" he asked, his outrage clearly evident.

She was suddenly feeling so weary she needed to sit down, and she certainly wasn't in the mood to be diplomatic and come up with a suitable reply that would placate the laird. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm wanting to do, Laird Buchanan."

"You have said that you trust me."

"Yes," she agreed, and then quickly qualified her answer. "But only because I have to trust someone, and you are Alec's protector, but I'm not going to trust anyone else. Alec told me he thought that there were three Highlanders who took him from the festival, but there could be more besides the man who planned the kidnapping, so you see, Alec is still in danger, and I'm going to continue to guard him until I get him safely home."

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Before he could respond to her argument, a whistle sounded outside, drawing his attention. "We must leave now," he announced. "My men grow impatient, and it's only a matter of time before the MacDonalds gather more soldiers and come back here."

"Are you feuding with the MacDonalds?" Alec asked.

"We weren't," Brodick answered. "But now it seems we are."

"Why?" Gillian asked, puzzled by his half-given explanation to Alec. "The MacDonald I met was a very pleasant gentleman, and he obviously was also a man of his word because he kept his promise and took my message to you."

Brodick nodded. "Aye, Henley was his name, and he did give me your message, but only after he had told his laird and pricked the curiosity of his clan."

"And they came here to fight you?" she asked, trying to understand.

He smiled. "Nay, lass, they came to steal you, and that, you see, is an insult I cannot allow."

She was astounded. "Steal me?" she whispered. "Why in heaven's name would they want to do that?"

He shook his head to let her know he wasn't willing to go into further explanation. "As much as I would like to kill a few MacDonalds, I will have to wait until after I have gotten you and Alec to the Maitlands. We're leaving now."

Alec would have run to the door if Gillian hadn't grabbed hold of his hand and forced him to stay by her side. "You will wait until I'm convinced that it's safe for you to go outside."

"But I don't want to wait."

"And I don't want to hear any argument, young man. You'll do as you're told. Do you understand me?"

Alec immediately looked to Brodick for help. "I keep telling her my papa's a laird and she's not supposed to tell me what to do all the time, but she won't listen. She isn't afraid of Papa at all. Maybe you should tell her."

Brodick hid his amusement. "Tell her what?"

"To let me have my way."

"The lady wants to do what's best for you, Alec."

"But tell her about Papa," he pleaded.

Brodick conceded. "Iain Maitland is a powerful man in the Highlands," he said. "Many fear his wrath."

She smiled sweetly. "Is that right?"

"Many would also guard what they say to his son."

Alec was nodding his agreement when Gillian looked at him. "I am more interested in keeping you alive than in winning your father's approval by spoiling you and perhaps getting you killed."

"Let me see your arm," Brodick demanded.

She blinked. "Why?"

He didn't answer her or wait for her to comply with his command but took hold of her hand and pushed the sleeve up past her elbow. A thick bandage covered her skin, but he could see from the swelling and the redness at her wrist that the injury was infected.

"How did this happen?"

Alec squeezed closer to her side. "Are you gonna tell on me?" he whispered worriedly.

Brodick pretended he hadn't heard the boy's question. He had his answer; Alec was somehow responsible for Gillian's injury, and later, when he and Alec were alone, he would get the particulars. For now he would let the matter rest.

Gillian and the boy were clearly exhausted, for both had dark circles under their eyes. Her complexion was flushed, and Brodick was pretty certain she was feverish. He knew that if the wound wasn't taken care of soon, she would be in real trouble.

"It isn't important how I hurt myself, Laird."

"You will call me Brodick," he said.

"As you wish," she replied, wondering why his voice had softened and the scowl had left his face.

Before she realized what he was doing, he grabbed hold of her chin and tilted her head to one side so he could see the faint marks on her cheeks. "How did you come by this bruise?"

"The man, he hit her with his fist," Alec blurted out, thankful his uncle's attention had turned away from Gillian's arm. He was ashamed that he had cut her and hoped that his uncle would never find out. "And, Uncle Brodick, you know what?" he rushed on.

Brodick was frowning at Gillian when he answered. "What?"

"Her back is all black and blue too. It used to be, anyway, and maybe it still is."

"Alec, do be quiet."

"But it's the truth. I saw the bruises when you got out of the lake."

"You were supposed to be sleeping," she said before pushing Brodick's hand away from her face. "May I see your soldiers now?"

"Yes," he replied.

She had intended to leave Alec inside while she stepped out on the step to look at the soldiers, but Brodick had other ideas. He whistled, loud and shrill, causing Alec to giggle and cover his ears with his hands. The door flew wide and eight men immediately rushed inside the church. Gillian noticed that every single one of them had to duck under the doorframe. Were all the Buchanans giants?

The second the door had opened, she had shoved Alec behind her back, thinking to protect him, which really was laughable considering the sheer size and obvious strength of the warriors coming toward her. Brodick saw how she shielded the boy and tried not to take offense over the insult she was giving him and his soldiers.

Though considered ruthless against their enemies, the Buchanans would never raise a hand against a woman or a child. Everyone who lived in the Highlands knew them to be honorable, but Gillian was from England, and he therefore excused her behavior because she didn't know any better.

Dylan tossed his laird's sword to him as he strode forward, and Brodick slipped the weapon into the sheath at his side, inwardly smiling over the stunned soldiers' faces. They were obviously taken with the beautiful lady, for they couldn't take their eyes off her.

His amusement quickly turned to irritation, however, and he found he didn't like them openly staring at Gillian after all. It was one thing to look, and quite another to gawk. Hadn't they ever seen a pretty woman before?

Alec peeked out from behind Gillian, spotted Dylan, and waved to him. The commander's step faltered, and he bumped into Robert, who promptly shoved him back.

Gillian studied each man while Brodick kept his attention focused on her. "You are convinced now?" he asked calmly after she had finished scrutinizing each one of his soldiers.

"Yes, I am convinced."

"Is that a Maitland hiding behind a woman's skirts?" Dylan asked, his composure still not completely recovered. "I swear to God, the brat looks like Alec Maitland."

Alec immediately ran to Dylan and laughed with delight when the soldier lifted him high up over his head. "She made me hide. I didn't want to, but she made me."

"We thought you drowned, boy," Liam whispered, his voice as raspy as dried leaves.

Dylan lowered Alec and settled him against his shoulder. The child immediately put his arms around the warrior's neck and then leaned to the side so he could see the others. "I didn't drown," he announced.

The eight soldiers surrounded Alec, but several continued to stare at Gillian. Broderick took a possessive step closer to her and scowled his displeasure at Liam and Robert, the worst offenders, so that they would know their laird was angered by their behavior.

"Is the Maitland holding a great distance from here?"

"No," he answered. "Robert, get her satchel and tie it behind your mount," he ordered as he took hold of Gillian's hand and started for the door. "Alec will ride with you, Dylan," he added, and as he marched past Robert, he muttered, "Have you never seen a pretty woman before?"

"Never one as pretty as this," Robert replied.

Dylan shifted Alec to one side and stepped forward to boldly block his laird's path. "Aren't you going to introduce us to your bride, Laird?"

"She's Lady Gillian," he said. He then introduced his soldiers to her, but he said their names so quickly and in such a thick brogue, she only caught one or two.

She would have made a curtsy, but Brodick continued to hold her hand, and so she bowed her head instead. "It is a pleasure to meet you," she said slowly, speaking in Gaelic for the first time since she had met Brodick, and she thought she had done an adequate job until they all smiled at her. Were they pleased with her attempt at their language or were they laughing at her because she'd failed miserably? Her speech became more halting with her growing lack of confidence when she continued, "And I would thank you now for your assistance in helping me get Alec back to his parents."

She was thrilled when all of them nodded.

Robert stepped forward. "Are you his bride?" he asked, blunt as always.

"No," she answered, blushing slightly.

"But you claimed to be his bride," Aaron reminded her.

She smiled. "Yes, I did, but you see, it was just a lie to make your laird curious so that he would come here."

"A claim's a claim," Liam said. The others immediately concurred.

"What does that mean?" she asked the warrior.

Dylan smiled. "It means, lass, that you're his bride."

"But I lied," she argued, thoroughly confused by the conversation. Her explanation seemed simple to understand, yet these soldiers were acting perplexed.

"You have said it is so," a soldier said. She remembered his name was Stephen.

"Now isn't the time for this discussion," Brodick announced.

He led the way outside, pulling Gillian along in his wake, and barely paid any attention to the two Englishmen waiting by the side of the steps. The horses were tethered near the line of trees.

"You'll ride with me," Brodick told her.

She pulled away from him. "I must say good-bye to my friends."

Before he could stop her, she hurried over to Waldo and Henry. Both men bowed their heads and smiled when she spoke to them. Brodick couldn't hear what she was saying, but he could tell from the men's faces that they were pleased.

When he saw her take hold of their hands, he went back to her side. "We've wasted enough time."

She ignored him. "Laird, I would like you to meet Waldo and Henry Hathaway," she said. "If it were not for these courageous men, Alec and I would never have made it this far."

He didn't speak, but he did bow his head slightly to the two brothers.

"Waldo, will you please return the horse I borrowed," she requested.

"But you stole the horse, milady," Henry blurted out.

"No," she countered. "I borrowed the mount without permission. Please promise me, too, that you will both hide until this is finished. If he finds out you helped me, he'll kill you."

"Aye, milady," Waldo said. "We know what the blackheart is capable of, and we will both hide until you return. God protect you on your quest."

Tears came into her eyes. "Twice now you have come to my aid and saved me from disaster."

"We've come a long way together," Waldo said. "You were such a little girl when we first met. You didn't speak then."

"I remember what my dear friend Liese told me. You came forward to offer your escort on that black day. And now you once again have come to my aid. I will forever be in your debt, and I don't know how I will ever be able to repay you."

"It was an honor for us to help you," Henry stammered.

Brodick took hold of her arm and pulled her back so she would have to let go of the older brother's hand. "We must leave now," he demanded, though this time his voice was much more forceful.

"Yes," she agreed.

She turned, spotted Alec in Dylan's arms, and motioned to the Hathaway brothers to wait. Then she pushed Brodick's hand away and rushed across the clearing.

"Alec, you will want to say thank you to Waldo and Henry for helping us."

He shook his head. "No, I won't," he said. "They're English, so I don't have to say thank you. Highlanders don't like the English," he added arrogantly.

She held her temper. "Dylan, would you please give Alec and me a moment of privacy?"

"As you wish, milady."

As soon as he put Alec down, Gillian latched onto his arm and dragged him toward the trees. Then she leaned down and whispered in his ear while the child squirmed to get away.

Dylan turned to Brodick. "What's she doing?" he asked.

Brodick smiled. "Reminding the boy of his manners," he answered. He glanced at the two brothers once again, then let out a sigh. "It seems I have also been reminded."

Before Dylan could ask him to explain his odd remark, his laird turned toward Waldo and Henry. The brothers were obviously afraid, for both backed away from him until he commanded them to stand still.

Dylan couldn't hear what Brodick was saying to the men, but he saw him reach down and pull his jeweled dirk from the top of his boot and hand it to Waldo. The stunned expression on the Englishman's face mirrored Dylan's. He watched as Waldo tried to refuse the gift, but Brodick won the argument.

Gillian also saw what was happening and smiled as she continued to instruct Alec in his duty.

A moment later, Alec, deliberately dragging his feet, made his way across the clearing to speak to the Englishmen. Gillian gave him a little push between the shoulder blades to get him to quicken his step.

Alec lowered his chin to his chest and stood next to Brodick when he addressed Waldo and Henry. "I thank you, 'cause you both watched out for me," he said.

"And?" Gillian prodded.

"And 'cause you didn't have to but you did anyway."

Exasperated, she said, "Alec means to say that he is sorry he was a bother, Waldo and Henry. He also knows that the two of you put your lives at risk for him. Isn't that right, Alec?"

The child nodded and then took hold of Gillian's hand as he watched Waldo and Henry take their leave.

"Did I say it right?"

"Yes, you did just fine."

Dylan lifted Alec onto his mount and then turned to his laird. "Has she told you what happened or how she and Alec ended up together?"

Brodick swung up onto his stallion's back before answering. "No, she hasn't told me anything yet, but she will. Be patient, Dylan. Right now it's more important to get her and the boy away from the MacDonalds. Once I know they're safe, and I don't have to

keep looking over my shoulder, I'll get her explanation. Tell Liam to take the lead," he commanded. "We're going to Kevin Drummond's cottage before we head north. Robert will take the rear to watch our backs."

"The Drummonds are several hours out of our way," Dylan said. "It'll be sunset before we get there."

"I know where the man lives," he countered. "But Kevin's wife is well known for her healing ways, and Gillian's arm needs attention."

Gillian stood in the center of the clearing, shivering from the cold while she patiently waited for the men to finish discussing her. It was apparent she was their topic, for they both frowned at her while they conversed with one another. The summer sun beat down on her face, but she was getting more chilled by the minute, and every muscle in her body ached. She knew it wasn't just fatigue, and, dear God, there wasn't time now for her to get sick. She needed every minute of every day before the fall festival to search for her sister. Oh, it all seemed so hopeless. She shouldn't have lied to Alford by telling him that her sister had King John's precious box. How was she ever going to find it when every soldier in the kingdom had searched for the treasure at one time or another over the past fifteen years? Could Christen still have it with her? Alford seemed to think she did, and Gillian had fueled his belief because at the time Alec had been in terrible danger. In her heart she knew the box was gone forever, and now she felt she was weighed down in a quagmire and sinking rapidly.

She did have a fragment of a plan. Once she got Alec home, she was going to plead with his father for assistance in getting her to the MacPherson holding, where Christen was reported to be living. And then what? she thought. Her mind was filled with unanswerable questions, and she prayed she would be able to sort it all out when she was feeling better.

Rubbing her arms to ward off her chills, she forced herself to think about the present. Brodick nudged his mount toward her. He didn't slow the stallion's gait as he approached. He leaned to the side and, with little effort, wrapped his arm around her waist and swept her onto his lap.

She adjusted her skirts to cover her knees and tried to sit straight so her back wouldn't touch his chest, but Brodick wouldn't let her maintain any formality. He tightened his hold and hauled her up against him.

In truth, she was thankful for his warmth, and his masculine scent appealed to her. He smelled like the outdoors. She wanted to close her eyes and rest for just a few minutes and maybe even pretend this nightmare was all over. She didn't dare give in to the foolish fantasy though, because she needed to keep a watchful eye on Alec.

She turned in Brodick's arms and looked up at him. He was really quite handsome, she thought, forgetting for the moment what she wanted to say to him. She had heard stories about the Viking warriors who roamed England centuries before and thought Brodick was surely a descendant, for he was as huge as the Vikings were reputed to be. His bone structure was well-defined from his high cheekbones to his gently squared chin. Aye, he was handsome all right and had surely caused many a lady to lose her heart. That thought led to another. Alec had told her Brodick wasn't married, but did the laird have a sweetheart at home waiting for him to return?

"Is something wrong, lass?"

"Could Alec ride with us? We could make room for him."

"No."

She waited a full minute for him to explain why he had denied her request, then realized he had said all he was going to say. His manner was distant, but she tried not to take offense. Her Uncle Morgan had often told her that the Highlanders were a different breed of men and danced to what he called their own strange tune, and she therefore assumed that Brodick wasn't actually trying to be rude. His abruptness was simply part of who he was.

She leaned back against him and tried to relax, but every so often, she looked behind him to make certain Alec was all right.

"We're almost there," Brodick said. "You're going to get a stiff neck if you keep looking back every other minute. Alec's fine," he insisted. "Dylan isn't going to let anything happen to him." With that, he shoved her head down on his shoulder. "Rest," he ordered.

And so she did just that.