

Greer MacLaren

Meghan Bird

Meghan Bird was born and raised in Chanhassen, Minnesota, and is currently a senior at the University of North Dakota where she is working hard to obtain her BA in English, as well as her certificate in Writing and Editing. Meghan's career goal is to work in publication as she wants to help aspiring writers the way her professors and classmates have helped her!

Greer realized that being led to the gallows instead of the pyre was a form of kindness. She now shivered against the crisp breeze that blew through the Strath Fillan glen that she, and a group of men, now walked through. No one had broken the damp silence that clung in the air around them. They had collected her from the village long before the sun would even break through the A'Bheinn Mhòr and so Greer had spent the first hour of the walk unaware of who was leading her to her death. They were now about three miles out of Strathyre before the sun began to rise, revealing familiar faces.

There were seven men total that were stationed on horseback around her. Greer knew the men in front well enough to recognize that they were Callan's cousins. Their names weren't rememberable nor important to her, but she knew them to be quite nasty and forked tongued.

True MacGregors, she thought to herself.

Beside her were two older men she recognized from her wedding ceremony, and when she turned her head to see the set of men behind her, one of the cousins jerked the rope that was around her neck and sent her face first into the grass and into a choking, coughing fit. When she was finally able to breathe and get her legs beneath her, she lifted her face and noticed that the seventh man, the one leading the party, had stopped his horse, and was now watching her through his lowered hood. Although Greer couldn't see his face, she felt as though she was being stripped naked under his gaze. He wore no tartan or pin that could hint at his clan, and so Greer deduced that he was the Hangman.

No, she told herself, almost happily. *Not my husband.*

They were taking her into the Trossachs. Greer knew she should have been trialed at the court in Stirling—or in Edinburgh for that matter—but it had been privately decided that her life was in the hands of the MacGregor clan. She knew *why* they hadn't brought her case to the mercy and minds of the Stuarts of Stirling, or any Stuart clan. They were Greer's most powerful ally and every clan in Perthshire knew it. She also knew that if the court caught wind of rising witchcraft amongst the clans, allies or not, every highlander would suffer. And so, Greer would be hanged and forgotten in the Trossachs, left to rot in its dark, quiet trees.

She had never liked the quiet.

It was something she had never grown accustomed to, even after the death of her family. Growing up, Ma had made music and dance a requirement within the halls of their estate. Ma, who had come from a long line of royal bailees, a few lairds, and a Duke—or so she's claimed—had been bred for such arts. And so, Greer and her sisters had vocal and dance lessons with her while Leith, her only brother, learned the pipes from Da. Greer had learned patience from those breathless lessons, as well as how to cure a splitting headache from Leith's heinous attempts with the squealing instrument.

With those lessons, weekly performances became tradition after dinner. It had been Greer's favorite because she loved the way Ma looked at them while they sang and reeled to whatever tune Leith had learned that week. And guaranteed at the end of every performance her parents would join in; their experienced feet bringing awe and laughter to her and her siblings as the pair danced to silly drinking songs they'd bellow together. Da had told anyone who would listen that he had fallen in love with Ma the moment he heard her sing at the gathering of the MacLaren's and Stuarts. The MacLaren clan had been loyal to the Stuarts for over a century now. It all began with a marriage between a MacLaren daughter and a Stuart Lord. *We were fated to be*, Da had told her at one of the gatherings. Greer remembered how he gazed softly at the spot Ma took up with her sister at the end of the table and—

Greer met a dip in the ground and she stumbled, her memories quickly vanishing. It had been painful to remember how happy she had been then. To remember her life before. She had forgotten how deeply her parents had loved each other—how *happy* they had been.

It made her want to cry.

To weep and grieve once again that she never got to experience that kind of love. Her throat burned and she blinked quickly, hoping to disband the forming tears before they could grow fat enough to roll down her cheeks. *I would sooner die before I let these deceived men see me cry.*

Greer knew better than to bring up memories of her family. To distract herself,

she observed her surroundings and recognized that they were now along the river banks of the Loch Voil. Greer had played along these banks as a child; dancing and fantasizing with her siblings while her parents watched them with their hands intertwined. Da had grown up north of the river in a small village named Balquhidder, where most of her clan had subsisted before the MacGregor's came.

She estimated that they still had four hours to go.

The men began to venture farther along the river, searching for a section of shallow water that would allow their horses to cross peacefully. This, unfortunately, didn't take long. While crossing, a gust of wind blew through her damp chemise and Greer silently cursed as the river turned her feet slow and numb. It was the end of October and these men had failed to give her shoes or even a kirtle to hide her nakedness. The noose, as it hung uncomfortably tight, scraped continually over her exposed skin. Greer peered down into the water and looked upon the woman who stared back at her. *Who are you?* she asked herself, shivering against the water's icy bite. *I don't recognize you.*

Something within her—something she believed to have been dead—pushed past the mental walls she placed around her heart and mind. Before she knew what was happening, a question had forced its way into her conscious: *Would Rory recognize me?*

Rory.

Greer had forgotten how beautiful that name was to her. How comforting and right it felt to her. Oh, the sweetness she tasted when she formed his name on her tongue and lips! *Rory, Rory, Rory.* Rory had been a dream—he had been *her* dream.

Greer wanted to remember him.

Greer hadn't known what her Da had meant about fate until her seventh gathering. She and Caitrin were overseeing Leith while their parents talked with one of the many Stuart lords about an unruly neighboring clan—or whatever tedious things adults talked about—when Iona appeared beside her, tugging her close so she could whisper in her ear.

"That handsome black-haired lad sitting next to cousin Farlan has been starting at you all night." Greer turned to look in the boy's directions when Iona jerked her hard, "Don't be daft!" she hissed. "Don't make it so obvious!"

Greer blushed. She was fourteen now, a woman, and she knew that gatherings were a fine place to find a husband. Her parents had met like this after all. So, she glanced around the great hall and feigned interest in the stone-work hearths and banners that she'd seen over a hundred times. She had always adored Doune castle. It had been a second home to her and her clan during these celebrations. Even Queen

Mary retreated here, *she recalled, feeling one step closer to the Scottish sovereign.*

This silly play gave her the opportunity to sneak glances at her admirer. Iona hadn't been wrong; he was quite handsome. He wasn't a boy but a young man. His features were quite dark—hair, eyes, and eyebrows all enveloped in the same onyx black. His eyes, Greer would later discover, were hazel and could change color with the weather. His striking face was slightly soft in the cheeks, but she knew that once he got older those suggestions would become definition.

He was someone she had never seen before. Greer would have remembered him. "Perhaps he's a cousin we haven't met before?" was all she could suggest. "We tend to marry within the family, so who knows."

"Oh hush! He's too handsome to be related to any of us!" Iona pointed out.

Caitrin snorted beside them and Greer frowned at her sister, who, although was three years younger, shared a comparable face to her own. Calling Iona plain meant that she would be calling herself plain and Greer, by her own vanity, knew that she was far from it. "All the inbreeding has finally caught up to us I'm afraid," she teased, picking at her nails.

"Oh, Saint Margaret, Greer!" Iona gasped in horror.

She had another retort, but the rising movement of the young man stopped it in her throat. She watched as he excused himself to Farlan and made his way to their end of the table. Iona had been right once again. He was not a MacLaren, as his red and green kilt publicly announced himself as a Stuart. Smoothing her plaited hair from her face and pinching her cheeks for some color, Greer watched as he approached her and her siblings and bowed deeply as he introduced himself.

He was Rory Stuart, son of the 4th Laird of Ardvorlich and he wanted to dance with her.

Rory had been decent at dancing, Greer remembered, but she had been better. Rory had always been quite tall, having over a foot on her, and at the time she had blamed his lanky limbs for his sluggishness. To put him out of his misery, she had led him away from the group of reeling dancers and had brought him to the corner of the room where she showed him the foot movements in slower motions. The image of his flushed cheeks flashed in her mind and she wanted nothing more than to place her cold hands upon his young cheeks and warm them. *He had always been so warm,* she recalled.

Greer struggled to take a deep breath. She wanted more of him.

They were staring at each other now and Greer shamelessly let her eyes wander to Rory's lips. She watched the poor man blush and for a split second she envisioned herself getting on the tips of her toes and kissing him. Now she too was blushing at her improper thought.

Rory was the first to break the silence. "I was told by Farlan," he began, "that the only way to a MacLaren woman's heart was through his dancing ability."

"Aye, it is one of the ways." She breathed out, cheeks still flushed.

"And so, I demand nothing but the honest truth when I ask: could my dancing win affections amongst the women in your clan?"

Greer couldn't stop herself from smiling. "Depends on the MacLaren woman you're trying to win affections with." To her own delight, Rory laughed and she couldn't help but join in. It was a warm thing, his laugh, and Greer wanted to hear it again.

He ran a hand through his hair, a lingering smile had appeared on his face as he watched her through dark eyelashes. "And if you were that woman, what would you say?"

Greer's body tingled with a soft, intimate excitement she had never felt before. Perhaps this is what Da had felt with Ma! She had just met Rory, but she wished for nothing more than to know him further. To know how he filled his days and what made him happy. She wanted to know everything.

"Well," Greer sighed, "I'd say we have a lot of work to do."



The memory of that night blurred as Greer realized she was struggling to breathe.

Realization struck her. When Callan's cousin had jerked the rope, the noose around her neck had tighten, restricting her airflow. It had been uncomfortable at first, but now it was unbearable. Greer's natural response was to reach for the rope, but her hands were uselessly secured behind her back.

They were beyond the river, perhaps six miles out of Strathyre when Greer started seeing black spots in her vision. She knew that if she fell behind, the rope would likely be yanked once more and maybe, she wished darkly, it would finish the job. *I'm a dead woman either way, so does it really matter if I died in some field outside of the Strathyre forest than in some damn tree in the Trossachs?*

Hell no longer scared Greer. She was already there.

As Greer slowed her pace, readying herself for the rope's devilish mercy, an awful choking sound escaped her narrowed throat before she could stop it. Heads whipped towards her and curses flew as Greer, with all her might, threw herself backwards.

Her world went dark and she forgot who she was.

When Greer finally came to, she was being hauled to her knees and rough hands were pulling the noose free from her neck. Someone in the swimming background snarled into her ear, "You're dyin' on our terms, you bloody she-devil!"

She could hear fragments of a heated conversation in between her ragged breaths. Greer swore she heard someone telling the others to give her a moment to rest.

I'm going crazy, she thought to herself.

Once Greer finally got her breathing under control, she lifted her head and looked upon the seven men who decided that allowing her to resume the walk with a noose around her neck would be a shite idea.

Greer felt the Hangman studying her from his position in the front. Refusing to shrink under his gaze, she slowly rose to her feet and took in his dark form. His hood still covered his eyes and most of his face while a dark, cropped beard and grimacing lips were the only things exposed. They stared at each other, neither one backing down.

Greer was no longer afraid of death, and she realized that he knew it too.

Suddenly, the Hangman dismounted from his horse and began walking towards her. "Don't touch me!" she hissed, taking another step back. "I'll walk!" He gave her no response as he approached her. *He's going to hurt me; make me pay for slowing them down. He was going to—*

Greer watched the Hangman in disbelief as he carefully lifted her up into his arms and walked them back to his horse. He placed her in his saddle, dismissing the cries from the other men as he mounted behind her. He was sitting so close that she could smell him. *He does not smell like Death*, Greer thought to herself. He had an earthy aroma of highland grass and snow drops, she realized. *How odd...*

Three hours left, she estimated as they entered the Strathyre Forest. The last time she had been through these woods, roughly six years back, she and Rory had been a week away from their hand-fasting ceremony.



Realistically, Greer knew that marriage was for political arrangements and never for love. Anyone with a motive knew that.

However, her parents had married for love and so Greer declared that she would accept nothing else. After her and Rory's first gathering, they had spent the next two years finding reasons to be within the other's company. Rory's family were the Stuarts of Ardvorlich who were of the same flesh and blood as the Stuarts of Balquhiddy. They *always* knew what was happening in their village. Nothing slipped past them.

So, it was no surprise when they had learned about her and Rory's affections for one another and began inviting Greer and her family over whenever they hosted Rory's. This was how they had fallen in love. She had taught him how to properly reel during the span of three different feasts, and by the time the next gathering came

around, the two of them were on the floor all night dancing to the point of collapse. She learned that Rory was a man of nature and would spend his days walking the banks of Loch Earn or hiking the hills of Ben Vorlich, as he had studied botany at St. Andrews. Greer had begged him to teach her all that he knew.

That was how their walks began. Cold mornings through damp glens led to grand talks about plants, politics, art, and passions. Greer wanted to forever walk these lands with him; to watch the sunrise wash over him and his beautiful eyes. Rory was kind and thoughtful and true and Greer wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Greer was just shy of seventeen when her family received an invitation letter to join Rory's in Loch Lomond. His mother had family matters to attend to but wished to make a holiday out of the journey. The letter had also suggested a time to conduct her and Rory's hand-fasting ceremony. However, Auntie Elsbeth had traveled to their estate several days before their departure to the loch, and so everyone but Greer remained behind.

Greer had been standing on the steps of her family's estate, kissing and hugging her family goodbye as Rory and his mother waited for her in the drive. She felt a tightness in her belly which she first deemed as excitement and nerves, but now she wasn't sure. It felt wrong to leave while her family remained behind... she just couldn't shake this strange feeling that she needed to stay.

"We'll be reunited in a weeks' time, love." Da promised, kissing her forehead. "Before ye know it, we'll be together again!"

Greer, comforted by this, kissed and hugged her family one last time before descending the stairs to the drive.

When they reached Loch Lomond, Greer and Rory never got a moment alone. She had been passed from one relative to the next, always asking about her upbringing, her family's trade, and how much land did her Da own. There were three more days of this until they had finally found their moment to slip away one early morning.

They decided to walk the banks of the loch, and when they reached it, Rory sat down in the grass and encouraged Greer to join him with a gentle tug of her hand. Greer sat with him, folding herself into his warmth as he wrapped them up in a thick blanket.

"I love you," he whispered sweetly, pressing a warm kiss to her temple. "I always will. Never forget that."

Smiling at the kiss, she closed her eyes and snuggled deeper into Rory and inhaled. He smelt like highland grass. She knew he meant every word and so she told

him, “I love you too.”

They stayed like this for hours; snuggled deep in each other’s warmth. It wasn’t until the sun had reached the hilltops did Rory speak, but his words died on his lips as voices in the distance screamed their names with such urgency that Rory and Greer ripped themselves from their reverie and followed the voices back home.



In 1558, clan MacGregor had killed eighteen MacLaren families and seized their lands.



In the end, Greer did *not* marry Rory.

She had to marry a young man named Callan MacGregor as a bond of manrent paid to her and her clan for the killing of her family, alongside seventeen other MacLaren families. Her clan had tried to obtain help from their stronger neighbors, the Campbell’s, but the bastards had tried to force them into a bond of their own, which ultimately would have paralyzed the MacLaren clan.

She had screamed and screamed and screamed till her throat became raw and silent. It had been the Campbell’s fault. They had persecuted the MacGregor’s, which had driven them into Balquidder—into *her* land—where her clan lacked the power to stop them. Lands were pillaged and families were killed—*her* family had been killed.

The Stuarts eventually came to help, forcing the MacGregor’s so far into a corner that manrent to her clan was the only thing that could save them. The Stuarts believed it was the only way to establish peace and forgiveness between the clans. It also kept them from expanding deeper into the highlands, which the Stuarts benefited greatly from.

She had cried for months. She had cried for her parents, for Caitrin, Iona, and little Leith. She had cried for Rory too and for their ruined future. Since they weren’t hand fasted yet, Greer wasn’t legally bound to him. This meant cutting ties with Rory and his family had been easier than she wanted it to be. When they had met to say their final goodbyes, it had taken several clansmen to pry them apart.

Rory had punched Callan on his way out.

Rory married a year after she did. Greer learned of Rory’s new wife and how they resided in England eight months out of the year. After learning this, she never returned to another gathering; too broken to see him there with someone else, living the life that had been meant for her.



Greer was still closely wrapped in the Hangman’s arms as they grew closer and clos-

er to the Trossachs. He was so close that she could feel the man's heart thudding heavily into her back. *Why was his heart beating so fast? Was he scared...of me?* She wondered.

"I didn't—I'm not a...," Greer began to whisper. She didn't know why she suddenly felt like talking...like she had to explain herself. Perhaps it was because he was the kindest thing she had experienced in years. "It was his fault—Callan's the reason why my family's dead."

He didn't answer.

"I was so tired of being alone."



Greer had suffered her first miscarriage at seventeen.

She hadn't realized what the severe pain in her abdomen and back had meant until she started bleeding. It didn't stop until a week later. By the time she had turned twenty-two, Greer had suffered four more miscarriages and two stillbirths. When she had given birth to her first stillborn, Greer didn't let the babe go until Callan had to pry them from her arms a day later.

All Greer had ever wanted was to have a family again. Callan was not her family. He had taken them from her—he was legally bound to fix this! All she needed was a family; a child to hold and to love.

And so, she contacted a midwife in Callander. There had been whispers amongst the village women that she possessed herbs that had helped several other families in Perthshire conceive. After a few exchanges by letter, Greer and the woman had settled on a time to meet.

They had met in the older women's home and Greer had explained her situation as briefly as she could. The woman, Fia, had only looked upon her with sad, wrinkling eyes as Greer repeated, *I don't want to be alone*. She had been sent back home with several bags of herbal teas and salve, and that was that. There were no other meetings, no more letters, and for once there was no pain—only hope.

Hope, however, had been short lived when Greer had awoken to Callan and several other MacGregor's dragging her out of bed. While she thrashed and flailed, Callan began throwing furniture and clothing across the room as he began his search for *evidence*. He had screamed the word over and over again as her family heirlooms were smashed and destroyed. Callan only stopped once he found what he was looking for in her wooden chest.

The conception herbs.

Fia, Greer later learned, had been convicted and brought to Stirling on the charges of witchcraft. They found her guilty, on the account of her own confession after several days of torture, and was brought to Edinburgh where she was burned.

When they had first collected Fia from her home, they had also collected anything that could be used against her.

This included Greer's letters to the woman.

The only reason why Callan and his family now held her prisoner was because the guards who had found her letters were Callan's cousins. They brought the letters back to the clan.

According to the MacGregors, she had bought those herbs from the witch to kill Callan. *It is no secret that she is unhappy in her marriage*, someone had screamed at her. Other clansmen came forward and explained that they believed the reason why she had lost all the babes was because of her relationship with the devil. Some agreed, arguing that they had been sacrifices.

And through it all, Greer didn't say one bloody word. There was no point. She had realized that when she had been dragged out of her family home. She knew she'd never see it again.

No point.

After days of careful inspection, painful tests, and further lack of evidence, they had decided that Greer was *not* a witch, but she had conspired with one, which was just as bad. And so, the MacGregor's convicted her for attempted murder and for conspiring with a witch. And because this went against the bond of manrent and the peace treaty Callan and Greer's clans had made when they married, Callan declared that it was his right to do with her as he saw fit. Burning her would cause a large enough scene for the Stuart's to get involved, which was what the MacGregor's were trying to avoid.

So, he settled on having her strung up and forgotten about.



Without realizing, they arrived in the Trossachs. Greer had lost track of time; spent too much time in her head. She watched as the cousin's pointed to the tree they wanted, and the rest of the men dismounted and began setting up.

The Hangman was the last to dismount. She watched his hands as they opened and closed several times around the reigns, as if he didn't know what to do. A moment later he finally released his hold and slipped swiftly down from the horse and offered his hand. She took it and he slowly helped her out of the saddle. When Greer touched the ground, she had to squeeze her eyes shut to prevent herself from crying out. After the pain in her ankle had lessened, she reopened her eyes and found the exposed hazel eyes of the Hangman staring back into hers.

She couldn't breathe.

"Rory."

She could never forget the beautiful dark eyes that now stared into hers. He

was as handsome as she remembered him. These past six years had been kind to him as time molded him into man. His face had lost the soft, gentle youth that had first captured her heart and was now stretched tight over his high cheekbones.

And for the first time since her conviction, Greer let herself cry.

What would be mistaken for tears of fear and regret, were tears of momentary happiness. She couldn't remember the last time she felt this way. There was too much to say to him, so Greer said nothing at all. She wanted to hold him and apologize and explain why she never came back to another gathering, but she realized that she couldn't do any of that... not without hurting the both of them.

How? Greer wanted to demand. *How did he find out? How did the others not know who he was?* But she already knew the answers.

The Stuarts of Balquidder knew about everything that happened within their village. They even have eyes and ears within the neighboring parishes, so if anything got out about her hanging, the Ardvorlich Stuarts would have known. And soon will the Stuarts of Stirling. And these men wouldn't have forgotten what the 4th Laird of Ardvorlich looked like because Rory spent the majority of these past six years in England.

It was all too perfect.

Rory's eyes held hers and she knew if he reached for her she could do nothing but reach back. For years she tried to forget him, but even in her darkest hours she couldn't. *He was here! He was truly here!* Rory would save her; he would take her away and he would love her and he—

No.

Rory wasn't here to save *her*, Greer realized.

Rory came to save the young MacLaren girl he had planned to marry six years back. She knew, however, that if she allowed him to look at her— to *truly* look at her—the warm memory Rory kept of her would be changed forever. Greer was no longer the girl who taught him how to dance, or the girl he spent hours roaming the highland hills with. She was no longer the Greer MacLaren he had fallen in love with. She had died when her family did. And she knew that this was exactly what he needed to see.

So, she let him see her. Truly see her.

And he did.



Callan's cousins came to her now, each grabbing a wrist and directing her to the tree.

It was time and she was no longer afraid.

During the years Greer had spent cold and alone, she often imagined what life would have been like to love Rory as a husband. How he would have pieced her

back together after the loss of her family and how he would have erased the guilt and loneliness that followed it. However, having Rory here now wouldn't change what was about to happen.

Greer was ready to see her family again.

She let the tears roll as the Hangman—the real Hangman—fitted the noose over her neck once more. She watched Rory turn away.

Greer would see all of them in the next life. Her parents, Iona, Caitrin, Leith, her children, and Rory. She will get to love again them in the next life. This next life would be better. They will all be together again, just like Da had promised.

In the next life.

In the next life.

In the—