



A Sword Upon the Rose (Hqn)

By Brenda Joyce

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New York Times bestselling author Brenda Joyce takes you back to the Highlands, where the battle for land, liberty and love rages on...

A bastard daughter, Alana was cast away at birth and forgotten by her mighty Comyn family. Raised in solitude by her grandmother, she has remained at a safe distance from the war raging through Scotland. But when a battle comes close to home and she finds herself compelled to save an enemy warrior from death, her own life is thrown into danger.

Iain of Islay's allegiance is to the formidable Robert Bruce. His beautiful rescuer captures both his attention and his desire, but Alana must keep her identity a secret even as she is swept up into a wild and forbidden affair. But as Bruce's army begins the final destruction of the earldom, Alana must decide between the family whose acceptance she's always sought, or the man she so wrongly loves.

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Editorial Review

Review

"As dangerous and intriguing as readers could desire. This is a tale reminiscent of genre classics, with its lush and fascinating historical details and sensuality."-RT BookReviews on Surrender

"Another first-rate Regency, featuring multidimensional protagonists and sweeping drama...Joyce's tight plot and vivid cast combine for a romance that's just about perfect."-Publishers Weekly starred review on The Perfect Bride

"Truly a stirring story with wonderfully etched characters, Joyce's latest is Regency romance at its best"-Booklist on The Perfect Bride

"Sexual tension crackles...in this sizzling, action-packed adventure."--Library Journal on Dark Seduction

About the Author

Brenda Joyce is a New York Times bestselling author of more than 50 novels and novellas, including the popular and critically acclaimed de Warenne Dynasty Saga, a series of novels set in Regency and Victorian England. She lives on a ranch in Arizona with her dogs, broodmares and the year's current crop of foals. If she isn't on the back of a reining horse, she can be found madly at work in her office, penning her latest romance novel.

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Brodie Castle, Scotland—December 1, 1307

Fire raged everywhere, a blazing inferno. Men screamed in agony, horses whinnied in terror, and swords rang.

The smoke cleared. Horror overcame Alana.

A manor had been set afire, and before its walls, men fought with sword and pike, both on foot and from horseback. Some were English knights, mail-clad, others, bare-legged Highlanders. An English knight was stabbed through by a Highlander's blade; a huge destrier went down, impaled through the barrel, a Highlander leaping off...

Where was she?

Alana was confused. The ground tilted wildly beneath her feet. She thought she fell, and she clawed the ground, looking up.

Amidst the brutal fighting, she saw one man. The warrior was on foot, bloody sword in hand, his long dark hair whipping about his face, his leine riding his bare thighs, a fur flung back over his broad shoulders. He was shouting to the Highland warriors, urging them on—every man bloodied and desperate and savagely fighting for his life now.

The tides of the battle changed, some of the English soldiers fleeing, some of the knights deciding to gallop away in retreat. But the dark-haired Highlander did not cease, now engaged in fierce combat with an English knight. Their swords clashed viciously, time and again.

Alana tensed. What had she just heard?

Her gaze flew to the burning manor. A woman was screaming for help from inside. And did she hear children crying, as well?

Somehow Alana got to her feet. But the dark-haired Highlander was already at the burning manor door.

Smoke burned through the wood, and flames shot out of an adjacent window. He pushed his shoulder hard against the door, oblivious to the smoke, the heat and the flames....

Suddenly she was afraid for him. As suddenly he turned, and for one moment, she could see his hard, determined face. His blue eyes pierced hers.

And then he was rushing into the burning manor. A moment later he reappeared, carrying a small child. A woman and another child ran outside with him.

Relief overcame her. He had rescued the woman and her children—they would not die.

The roof crashed in. More flames shot into the sky. He covered the child with his body, now on the ground. Burning timbers fell around him.

Then he leaped up, racing away to some safer distance from the burning house where he returned the child to its weeping mother. He turned, his gaze searching the woods where Alana hid—as if to look for her.

As he did, a man with shaggy red hair, another Highlander from the same army, came up behind him, raising a dagger at the warrior's back.

"Behind you!" Alana screamed.

The dark-haired Highlander must have sensed danger, for he whirled as the dagger came down. He did not scream—he stiffened, the dagger penetrating his chest. And then his sword was cutting through the air, faster than her eyes could see.

The red-haired traitor fell to the ground, stabbed through his chest. The Highlander delivered another clearly fatal blow, and paused, towering over his victim.

He staggered and fell....

"Alana! Wake up! Yer frightening me!"

Alana gasped and tasted mud and snow. And for one more moment, she could not move, overwhelmed by the sight of the battle—the treachery—she had just witnessed.

The hair was raised on her skin, her nape prickling. She had the urge to retch.

"Alana! Alana! Quick! Before someone sees!" her grandmother cried.

Alana became aware of her surroundings now. She was lying in the snow, facedown. Her cheek was freezing, as were her hands, for her mittens were stiff and frozen. She did not know how long she had been lying there.

She fought for air, for composure, waiting for the nausea to pass. Her nape stopped prickling. Her stomach calmed.

She inhaled, but her relief was short-lived as she sat up with her grandmother's help. Dismay consumed her.

She was near the stream that ran just outside the castle walls in the spring. It had been a clear and cold winter day and she had gone outside the castle with some of the maids' children, who had wanted to play.

She must have frightened them when she collapsed; they must have rushed to find Alana's grandmother.

She stared at the stream. It was mostly frozen now, but patches of water where the ice was melting were visible. Dear God. The water...even now, it beckoned, dark and mysterious, offering up secrets no soul had any right to....

She hadn't had a vision in months. She had been praying she would never have one again. She jerked her gaze away from the dangerous water, releasing her grandmother and standing up.

Her grandmother stared, her lined face filled with worry. Eleanor quickly pulled Alana's wool mantle more securely about her. Alana saw now that they were not alone.

Duncan of Frendraught's son was standing behind her grandmother, his pale face twisted with fear and revulsion. "What did you see?" Godfrey demanded, blue eyes wide. He was wrapped in a heavy fur, and his booted feet were braced in a belligerent stance.

"I saw nothing," she lied quickly, lifting her chin. They lived in the same place, but they were not related, and although they were on the same side in the war that raged across the land, he was her enemy.

"She tripped and fell," Eleanor said firmly. Her tone was filled with an authority she did not have.

He sneered. "I'll ask you again—what did you see, Alana?" There was warning in his tone.

She trembled as she stood. "I saw your father, victorious in battle," she lied.

Their gazes locked. He stared, clearly trying to decide if she told the truth or not. "If you're lying to me, you will pay, witch," he spat. And then he strode away.

She sagged against Eleanor, relieved he was gone. What had she just seen?

"Why do you fight him? When he can strike you down if he wishes?" Eleanor cried.

Alana took her hand. "He goads me, Gran."

Her grandmother stared at her with worry. Eleanor Fitzhugh was a tiny woman, her eyes blue, her hair gray.

But she was as determined as she was small. Her body had aged, but her wits had not. Alana did not want her to worry, but she always did. She was the mother Alana did not have, even though they were not actually related.

"He is rude and arrogant, but he is master here," Eleanor said, shaking her head. "And Godfrey will have a fit if we don't have his supper ready. But, Alana? You must not let your hatred show."

It was impossible, Alana thought. They had had this same conversation many, many times. She hated Godfrey not merely because he goaded her to no end, and not because he hated her, but because one day, he would be lord of Brodie Castle.

"I do try," she said.

"You must try harder," Eleanor returned. Though she was sixty and Alana just twenty, she put her arm around her, helping her back toward the castle's front gates, as if their ages were reversed. But Alana was weak-legged and still slightly queasy; the visions made her feel faint.

The huge wood gates were open, large enough to admit two wagons side by side at a time, or a dozen mounted knights, and the drawbridge was down. Godfrey had already vanished from her view. Unfortunately, he could not be easily avoided, not when Brodie was one of the Earl of Buchan's castles.

Brodie Castle had belonged to Alana's mother, Elisabeth le Latimer. It had been her dowry when she had married Sir Hubert Fitzhugh, Eleanor's son. Sir Hubert had died in battle without children, and Elisabeth had turned to Alexander Comyn, the Earl of Buchan's brother, for comfort. Alana had been the result.

Elisabeth had died in childbirth, and Lord Alexander Comyn had married Joan le Latimer, Elisabeth's cousin. Two years after Alana was born, Joan gave birth to a daughter, Alice, and a few years later, to another girl, Margaret.

Alana had met her father exactly once, by accident, when he was hunting in the woods, and his party had become lost. They had come to stay at Brodie Castle for the night. Alana had been five, but she would never forget the sight of her tall golden father in the hall's firelight—as he stared at her with similar surprise.

"Is that my daughter?"

"Yes, my lord," Eleanor had answered.

He had strode over to her, his stare unnerving. Alana had been frightened, uncertain of what he would say or do, and she had not been able to move. He had seemed so tall, unnaturally so, more like a king than a nobleman. And then he had knelt down beside her.

"You look exactly like your mother," he had said softly. "You have her dark hair and blue eyes...she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen when we met, and to this day, I have yet to meet anyone as fair."

Alana was thrilled. Shyly, she had smiled. Somehow, Alana had known that was praise. And before leaving Brodie, he had told Eleanor to take good care of her. Alana had been in earshot, and she had heard. Her father cared about her!

But he had never come to Brodie again. She had expected another visit, and disappointment had become

heartache. But the pain had dulled and died. She was just a bastard, and so be it.

When she was thirteen, she had been told he meant to arrange a marriage for her. Alana had been in disbelief. By that time, she had come to believe that her father did not even recall her very existence. And before she could become excited about the prospect of having a husband and a home of her own, she had learned that her dowry would be a manor in Aberdeenshire.

Eleanor told her she must be grateful, but as much as Alana wished to be grateful, she was disappointed. Brodie Castle had belonged to her mother. But an illegitimate daughter could not inherit such a stronghold, and as there had not been any other heirs, Brodie Castle had been awarded to the Earl of Buchan by King Edward of England, and in turn, he had given it to his loyal vassal, Duncan of Fren draught. Alana had been eight at the time. Foolishly, when her father revealed that he would give her a dowry, she had thought he would somehow—miraculously—return Brodie to her.

But he had not, and it did not matter in the end, for Alana remained unwed.

No one wanted to marry a "witch."

Eleanor held her arm as they hurried through the frozen and muddy courtyard. They passed long-haired cows, standing with their backs to the walls, their faces to the sun. A pair of maids was bringing in water from the well. A boy was carrying in firewood. They did not speak.

They stepped inside the great hall, which was warmer, two huge fires roaring there in two facing hearths. Godfrey and his men were seated at the trestle table before one hearth, and were in a heated discussion. Alana hoped they were arguing over her fabricated vision of his father being victorious in a battle. The idea gave her some small satisfaction, even when she knew it was petty of her.

Once they were safely in the kitchens, Eleanor pulled her aside.

"What did you see?" Eleanor asked carefully, keeping her tone low.

Alana glanced about the kitchens, where Cook and her maids were bustling to prepare supper. Venison and lamb were roasting on spits. She removed her fur-lined wool mantle, hanging it on a wall peg. "A terrible battle, and a stranger, a warrior, stabbed in the back by his own."

Eleanor started as their gazes locked. "Since when do you see strangers?"

She shook her head. "You know I have never had a vision about someone who was not familiar to me." It was true. Now, as she recalled her vision, she was shocked. Why had she seen some stranger in the midst of a battle with the English? The memory was causing her nape to prickle uncomfortably again.

Her stomach roiled—as if another vision was imminent. Yet there was no water to lure her into its depths....

"Are you certain you didn't know the man?"

Alana was certain, but she visualized him now, with his hard face and dark hair, his blue eyes. "He did seem familiar," she decided. "Yet, I don't think we have ever met. What could such a vision mean, Gran?" Would she now be cursed with seeing the future when it belonged to those she did not know? Wasn't it bad enough that she could foresee the future of her friends and family?

"I don't know, Alana," Eleanor said.

Suddenly the door to the kitchens burst open and Godfrey stood there, appearing furious. "Where is our meal?" he demanded, his hands on his hips.

Alana stared coldly at him. When he was in such a foul temper, there were always consequences to pay, and it was best to be meek—and to avoid him. His temper was so easily set off, and he was a cruel man—just as his father was.

"Your meal is to be served at once," Eleanor said easily.

"Good." Godfrey scowled.

"My lord, did the messenger that arrived at noon bring ill tidings?" Alana asked as politely as she could.

"He brought very ill tidings!" Godfrey swung his hard gaze to Alana. "Robert Bruce has sacked Inverness. He has burned it to the ground."

Alana froze. Inverness was a short distance to the south, within a day's march of Brodie!

For as long as she could recall, various families and clans of Scotland had been at war with England—and each other. But almost two years ago, Robert Bruce, who had a claim to the throne of Scotland, had murdered Red John Comyn, the Lord of Badenoch—her father's cousin. He had then seized the throne, and Scotland had been at war ever since.

Her mind raced frantically now, as a silence fell over everyone in the kitchens.

"Aye, you should all be afraid!" Godfrey cried.

"Bruce has been on the march all year, destroying everything and everyone that he can! If he comes here, he'll destroy Brodie—he'll destroy us all." He stormed out.

Alana glanced at the staff—everyone was white with fear.

She was afraid, too. When Bruce had first been crowned at Scone by a handful of bishops loyal to him, the coronation attended by his closest allies and friends, it had seemed impossible that he might actually be triumphant. How could he defeat the great power of England, and the great power of the Comyn family? And his army had been decimated at Methven that summer, by the mighty Aymer de Valence, who was now the Earl of Pembroke. Bruce and his ragtag, starving army had spent the rest of the summer of 1306 hiding from Aymer and the English army in the forests and the mountains, while retreating across Scotland on foot. They had finally found a safe haven with Angus Og MacDonald, the mighty chieftain of Kintyre. During the rest of that year, Angus Og and Christina Mac-Ruari had given him men, arms, horses and ships.

Bruce had returned to Scotland last January with a terrible vengeance. He had spent the winter attempting to gain back his lands in Carrick, and when there was no outpouring of welcoming support from his old tenants, he had taken to the forests to terrorize the villagers and squires at will—until they sued him for peace, paying dearly in tribute for it. He had then gone to war upon all of Galloway, to exact revenge for the capture and execution of two of his brothers. He had met and defeated Aymer de Valence at Loudoun Hill.

And recently, he had turned his attention to the north of Scotland—to Buchan territory.

For the Earl of Buchan and the entire Comyn family was his oldest and worst enemy.

Bruce had taken a series of small strongholds since the fall, before attacking and destroying the Buchan fortresses at Inverlochy and Urquhart, in a quick sequence. And apparently, he continued to march up the Great Glen, for he had just taken and destroyed Inverness!

Was it now possible that Robert Bruce might be triumphant?

Would he even think of attacking Brodie Castle? Alana wondered with a shrinking sensation. Until now, the war had not concerned her—it had been a distant affair, the concern of her father and the family she had never been a part of.

Brodie was such a tiny stronghold! Why would Bruce bother?

What about the odd vision she had just had? Had she seen a battle in the war for Scotland's throne?

Users Review

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