



The Rock (The Highland Guard)

By Monica McCarty



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The first time he caught sight of Elizabeth Douglas, Thomas MacGowan thought she was a princess. To the son of the castle blacksmith, the daughter of the powerful Lord of Douglas might as well be. When it becomes clear that his childhood companion will never see him as a man she could love, Thom joins Edward Bruce's army as a man-at-arms to try to change his lot. If he's harbored a secret hope that he could close the gap between them, he faces the cold, hard truth when Elizabeth comes to him for help. She might need the boy who used to climb cliffs to rescue her brother from the hands of the English, but she would never see the son of a smith as a man worthy of her hand.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A pair of star-crossed lovers defy society and tradition in this action-filled, fierce romance set during the turbulent time of Robert the Bruce." ---Library Jorunal

About the Author

Monica McCarty is the bestselling author of the Highland Guard series, the MacLeods of Skye trilogy, and the Campbell trilogy. Her interest in the Scottish clan system began in the most unlikely of places: a comparative legal history course at Stanford Law School. After realizing that her career as a lawyer and her husband's transitory life as a professional baseball player were not exactly a match made in heaven, she traded in her legal briefs for Scottish historical romances with sexy alpha heroes. Monica McCarty lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and their two children.

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The Rock

1



Douglas, South Lanarkshire, February 1311

THOM (NO ONE called him "wee" anymore) had waited long enough. He struck one last blow with the hammer before carefully setting aside the hot blade.

Wiping the sweat and grit from his brow with the back of his hand, he pulled the protective leather apron over his head and hung it on a peg near the door.

"Where are you going?" his father asked, looking up from his own piece of hot metal—in his case a severely dented helm. The Englishman who'd once worn it must be suffering a foul headache. If he was still around to be suffering, that is.

"To the river to wash," Thom replied.

His father frowned, the dark features made darker by the layers of grime that came from toiling near the fires all day. Every day. For forty years.

Though no longer the tallest man in the village (Thom had surpassed his father in height almost ten years ago), Big Thom was still the most muscular, although a few more years of Thom wielding the hammer might force his father to cede that title as well. Physically the men were much alike, but in every other way they were opposites.

"There is still plenty of time before the evening meal," his father pointed out. "Captain de Wilton is anxious for his sword."

Thom gritted his teeth. Although the villagers in Douglas had no choice but to accept the English occupation of their castle—with the current Lord of Douglas a much hunted “rebel”—it didn’t mean he had to jump to their bidding. “The captain can wait if he wants the work done properly.”

“But his silver cannot. Those tools aren’t going to buy themselves.”

Though there was no censure in his tone, Thom knew what his father was thinking. They wouldn’t need the coin so badly if Thom wasn’t being so stubborn. He was sitting—or more accurately sleeping—on enough silver to replace every tool in the forge and expand to take on a handful of apprentices if they wanted them. But that was his father’s dream, not his. His mother had left him the small fortune, and Thom wasn’t ready to relinquish it—or the opportunity that went along with it.

They wouldn’t need coin at all if the current Lord of Douglas wasn’t so busy making a name for himself with all his “black” deeds that he actually gave thought to those who were left in his wake and bore the brunt of English retaliation. Thom tried to push back the wave of bitterness and anger that came from thinking of his former friend, but it had become as reflexive as swinging his hammer.

The last time Sir James “the Black” Douglas had attempted to rid his Hall of Englishmen—about a year ago when he’d tricked the then-keeper, Lord Thirlwall, from the safety of the castle into an ambush but failed to take the castle—the remaining garrison had retaliated against the villagers, whom they accused of aiding the rebels.

“War is good for business,” his father liked to say. Except when it wasn’t. Big Thom MacGowan, who’d never been shy about his loyalty to the Douglas lords, had paid for that loyalty with a nearly destroyed forge and the loss of some of his most expensive tools. Tools that were probably in some English forge right now.

Fortunately the garrison and commander who’d replaced Thirlwall, De Wilton, seemed a more fair-minded man. He didn’t blame the villagers for the actions of their rebel laird, and he and his men were frequent customers of the village smith, or as the wooden sign not-so-imaginatively proclaimed it, The Forge. His father might not like the English, but he was happy to take their silver, especially at his special English rates.

“I’ll finish it soon enough,” Thom said. “And Johnny is almost done with the mail, aren’t you lad?”

His fourteen-year-old brother nodded. “A few more rivets and it will be as good as new.” He grinned, his teeth a flash of white in his blackened face. “Better than new.”

Thom grinned back at him. “I don’t doubt it.”

Although more like their father in his even-keeled, contented temperament, Johnny possessed the same instinctive skill with the iron as Thom. Big Thom liked to say his lads were born to it, which made Johnny beam and grated on Thom like emery under his plaid. The instinctive skills such as knowing just when to pull the metal out, where to strike it with a hammer, and how to make it strong enough to do its job without being so hard that it shattered or broke that made his father so proud felt like a chain wrapped around Thom’s neck.

It would have been far easier if he’d never showed any talent for the work. If he’d shattered one too many blades by cooling the metal too quickly or striking it in the wrong place while hardening. If he were less precise in detail, couldn’t fit a handle to save his life, a poorer judge of temperature, off on his proportions . . . anything.

His father didn't understand how someone with Thom's "God-given talent" wasn't content. Skill like theirs was meant to be used.

Which was part of the problem with Johnny. Johnny was too good with the hammer to haul coal and operate the bellows, the tasks normally given to a young apprentice. With Big Thom handling most of the day-to-day smithing work, from repairing cast iron pots to shoeing horses, and Thom with more sword work than he could handle, they were turning away jobs as it was. Big Thom wanted Johnny at the forge, which meant they needed someone to do the apprentice work. But Thom couldn't bring himself to give up the one chance he had to change his destiny. His mother had wanted to give him a choice.

Thom opened the door and—ironically—coughed at the breath of fresh air. His lungs were so accustomed to the black smoke it was as if the purity somehow offended them. Daylight at this time of the year didn't last long, and night was already falling. The mist, however, was not. The stars would be out tonight in full force. That was what he was counting on.

He wasn't all that surprised to hear the door open behind him. "Son, wait a minute."

Thom turned, seeing the features so like his own aged by time, hardship, and loss. He knew his father had a woman in town he sometimes saw, but no one had ever replaced Thom's mother in his father's heart. Not that you'd ever hear his father rail or complain about the injustice fate had handed him. Like everything else, Big Thom had taken his wife's death with unquestioning, stoic acceptance.

Thom never accepted anything. It was his curse, and the source of his discontent. He envied his father and brother sometimes. Life was simpler when you didn't question. When you didn't want more than what birth so capriciously allotted.

He met his father's worried gaze.

"Don't go, son."

"I'll finish the sword—"

"I know she's back."

The words fell with the weight of an anvil between them. Thom stiffened, his jaw clamping down like a steel wall, an implicit warning that beyond there be dragons. The subject was not one he wanted to discuss with his father—ever. It was a subject upon which they would never agree.

But his formidable father wasn't one to back down from dark looks—or dragons. "I know Lady Elizabeth is back, and you are going to try to see her tonight. But don't go, Thommy. No good will come of it. Leave the lass be."

"You don't know what you are talking about." His father had never understood about him and Ella—or Jamie for that matter, when they were still friends. From the first time he'd come home after rescuing Ella from that tree, his father had tried to discourage his friendship with the Douglasses, warning him not to get too close. But the four of them had been inseparable before Ella had been sent away to France for her protection at the start of the war—and Jamie had discovered Thom's secret. He'd lost the girl he loved and his best friend in one day.

Thom tried to turn away, but his father took hold of his arm. “I know more than you think. I know she’s been back for the better part of a fortnight. I know she’s staying at Park Castle with her stepmother and younger brothers. I know that she could have come to see you, if she wanted, but she hasn’t. I know you’ve loved her since she was a little lass, but she’s not a little lass anymore. She’s a lady. A noble. The sister of our laird. She’s not for you. She’s never been for you, and there is nothing you can do to change that. I wish it were different, but that’s the way it is.”

“So I should just give up, is that it? Accept it?” Thom shook him off. “That isn’t me, that’s . . .” You.

He stopped before the word was out, but it was too late. He saw the flinch reverberate through his father’s big frame. His father, who was one of the toughest men in the village, who’d broken up more fights in the alehouse because no one was fool enough to strike him, could be hurt by his son’s unthinking words.

“I’m sorry,” Thom said, raking his fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. “Don’t listen to me. I’ve no right to take my foul mood out on you. I just wish you’d try to understand.”

“I do, Thommy, more than you know. I was in your place once. But the daughter of a household knight is a far cry from the daughter of one of Scotland’s leading nobles and sister of one of Robert the Bruce’s chief lieutenants. The lass has spent the better part of the last five years in France; can you honestly see her happy with the life you could give her?”

His father’s words struck too close to the mark, raising fears Thom didn’t want to give voice to. “Ella isn’t like that. You know her.”

His father’s eyes leveled on him somberly. “I knew a chattering magpie of a ten-year-old lass who I had to ban from the forge so you could get some work done, and I knew the sweet, teenage lass you used to sneak out to go visit at night.” He paused at Thom’s look of shock. “Aye, I knew about that. Just as I knew that if I tried to stop you, you would only find another way. The lass looked at you like a brother, I didn’t think there would be any harm. But I was wrong. The Douglases put ideas in your head. They made you think this wasn’t good enough.” Thom started to protest, but his father put up his hand to stop him. “Maybe not in words, but by bringing you into their world. A world in which you don’t belong. Not even your mother’s coin will raise you high enough for a Douglas—whatever you try to make of yourself. You’ve a God-given gift, son. With your skill you could be making swords for a king one day; don’t waste it by chasing a foolish dream.”

Thom tightened his jaw. It wasn’t foolish. The bond between him and Ella was special—different.

Acceptance. Fate. He didn’t want to hear it. “So I can stay here and chase your dream instead?”

Thom regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. But it was too late to retrieve them.

His father stilled, his expression as tight as steel hardened right to the shattering point. After a pained pause, he stepped back. “Perhaps you are right. I’ve no right to interfere. You’re a man now. Three and twenty is old enough to make your own decisions. I’ll not try to hold you here if you wish to leave. But make sure you are doing so for the right reasons. Leave because you don’t like being a smith, not because you think it will give you a chance with Lady Elizabeth.” He paused and held Thom’s gaze. “I know how you feel about her, lad, but if she feels the same way, why hasn’t she come to see you?”

It was a good question, and one Thom would have answered tonight.



The old stone peel tower of Park Castle wasn't as easy to climb as Douglas Castle. Or maybe it was just that Thom was out of practice. It had been nearly five years since he'd scaled the walls of the tower house of Douglas Castle to meet Ella.

Their rooftop meetings had started not long after his father barred Ella from the forge, where she would sometimes (often) "drop by" with some excuse to watch him finish his work. His father was right. The lass could chatter for hours. But Thom had never minded. He'd listened to her stories and her silly jokes and even cleaning up had sped by.

Knowing how disappointed she was, and missing her company more than he'd expected, one night he'd decided to surprise her. She'd mentioned that sometimes when she couldn't sleep, she climbed up to the roof and sat on the battlements, looking at the stars. He had to climb the tower five nights in a row, but on the sixth she finally emerged.

She'd been shocked, excited, and amazed. Not just at his ability to climb the keep, but also that he could do so while evading the castle watch. It hadn't been all that difficult—although he certainly didn't tell her that (even back then he wanted her admiration)—people didn't look where they weren't expecting to see anything. All he had to do was watch the guardsmen on patrol, figure out their pattern, and stick to the shadows. The castle itself, although "enceinte," and fortified by a stone wall, was of wood frame construction, giving him a virtual ladder to climb.

For the next handful of years, a few times a month on the nights the mist permitted the stars to shine, Thom would wait in one of the outbuildings for the castle to quiet and then climb the tower where Ella would be waiting for him. They'd talk for hours—actually, Ella would do most of the talking, except when he'd point out the constellations and tell her the old stories his mother had passed on to him before she'd died. He didn't know how many times he'd had to retell the one about Perseus and Andromeda, but the lass never grew tired of it.

Those nights on the tower were where their friendship had turned to something more—at least for him. The meetings had been their secret, until Jamie discovered them right before he'd marched off to join Bruce. Or so Thom had thought. He still couldn't believe his father had known this whole time and never said anything.

Thom's arm muscles strained as he reached for a gap in the rock big enough to grab on to in the rough surface of the stone wall. He made sure his grip was solid before moving his right foot and then his left up another couple of feet. Finally, with the next handhold he was able to reach the edge of the crenellated parapet wall and lift himself over and onto the battlements.

Christ, that had been harder than he'd anticipated. His arms were burning as he took a moment to look around and catch his breath. It hadn't looked that difficult, but the jagged stone walls of Park Castle didn't provide as many foot- and handholds as the wooden framework of Douglas Castle. Although the tower was small and no more than thirty feet high, he might not have been able to climb it at all had it not been neglected for years, with much of the lime-rendered harling—meant to even the surface and protect the stone from weather—cracked and worn away.

Park Castle had been built as a watchtower years ago by the church, but was purchased some years back by the English knight Lady Eleanor Douglas had married after the death of the old laird. William the Hardy had died in the Tower of London about two years after Thom's mother for rebelling against King Edward again.

Ella had been forced to leave Douglas Castle for a couple of years then as well. It had been a difficult time for her, one that she didn't like to talk about.

With the English and Sir Robert Clifford in possession of the old Douglas lands, Park Castle now served as home to Lady Eleanor (recently widowed for the third time), her stepdaughter, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's two half brothers, Archie and Hugh.

He looked around. The pitched wooden roof and surrounding battlement were deserted. Thom tried not to be disappointed. It was early yet. Ella usually waited until well after everyone went to sleep, making it easier to sneak up to the garret to access the small door.

Despite the clear night, it was cold, and Thom was grateful for the extra plaid he'd tossed into his sack as he sat to wait. He'd been right. The stars were out tonight. Coupled with the nearly full moon, a soft glow had been cast across the quiet countryside. It seemed so peaceful it was hard to believe they were in the midst of a long, brutal war.

The village of Douglas had seen more than its share of conflict, and as long as the English occupied its castle, Thom knew it would see more. If James Douglas had to destroy the entire town, he would to rid Douglasdale of the English for Robert the Bruce. Thom wanted the English gone, too, but Jamie's vengeance went too far. His former friend had changed.

Had Ella?

Thom didn't want to think so, but why hadn't she come to see him? When she'd left, he'd been so certain that she'd begun to feel the same way as he. "Will you wear my ribbon around your sleeve when you are a knight in a tourney, Thommy?" or, "I know you hate it, but how will we go to France when we are older if you don't learn to speak French?" She'd been thinking about a future with him, even going as far as telling him one of the rare times he lost his temper with her that if he were her husband, she'd put spiderwort in his soup (which was known for its digestive effect), and give him cause for his black mood, if he ever snapped at her like that again. He'd been chastened and enchanted. His little princess had some fire.

If only Jamie hadn't sent her away, damn it.

Time passed slowly while Thom waited. After a few hours, he was forced to concede that she wasn't coming. He stood and started to stuff the plaid back into his sack. He was a fool. His father was right. Five years was a long time. She'd probably forgotten—

The door opened, and his heart dropped.

He glanced up as she stepped over the threshold, a beam of moonlight catching her in its hold and taking his breath along with it.

Jesus.

He might have jolted. The glimpse he'd caught of her with her stepmother, as she'd ridden through the village a couple of weeks ago, had not prepared him for the vision before him now. Long, shimmery waves of flaxen hair tumbled around her shoulders in a silky veil down her back. Her features were small and even, perfectly positioned in an oval canvas of snowy white. Her mouth was red, her cheeks pink, and her chin delicately pointed. Dark arched brows and long feathery lashes framed round, wide-set eyes the unusual blue

of peacock feathers. She was gowned in an ice-blue dressing robe lined with white fur, the thick gold braid belt around her waist emphasizing its trimness as well as the softly rounded curves above and below. Her breasts were firm and generous, her hips slender, and her legs long.

Ella had always been beautiful, even as a child. But it had become so commonplace to him that he stopped thinking about it. The last time he'd seen her at a just-turned-sixteen, she'd still possessed the vestiges of the girl who'd traipsed all over the countryside with him and Jo. But the woman standing before him didn't look like she'd ever traipsed anywhere—she floated. She didn't look real; she looked like a figment from a faerie tale or an ice princess from the lands of the Northmen. Refined, sophisticated, and utterly untouchable. She looked nothing like the girl he remembered.

Thom didn't second-guess himself very often, but he did so now.

It was only when he looked down on her wrist and saw the faint edge of brass that he felt some of his confidence return. She still wore the bracelet he'd given her right before she'd been sent away. She hadn't forgotten him.

Users Review

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