

The Hunter (Highland Guard, Book 7)

By Monica McCarty

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *RT BOOK REVIEWS*

The war for Scotland's freedom continues as King Robert the Bruce battles on. At his command is an elite army of trained warriors, soldiers dedicated to their king, their country—and to the remarkable women they love.

Prized for his unbeatable tracking skills, Ewen "Hunter" Lamont accepts a dangerous assignment: locate a missing undercover courier. But this is no ordinary target. Ewen has met his prey before as "Sister Genna," a fiery, forbidden woman forever etched in his memory after one stolen, sinful kiss. Now that he knows her real identity, he's more determined than ever to keep her safe. But without the protection of the veil between them, fighting the allure of the beautiful lass may be the toughest battle this extraordinary warrior has ever faced.

After her ill-fated attempt three years ago to rescue her twin sister, Janet of Mar has found salvation acting as a royal messenger—until she surrenders to a darkly handsome warrior whose rough, sensual kisses stir feelings the woman in her can't deny. But when betrayal leads to danger, and a crucial communiqué is put in jeopardy, Janet has no choice but to put her faith in the hunter who can find anything—perhaps even her heart.

Praise for *The Hunter*

"[Monica] McCarty breathes life into her memorable characters as they face dangerous adventures. The fresh plots, infused with romance and passion, are also brimming with history and drama. She's outdone herself with this fiery story of a forbidden love. What a fantastic addition to the series!"—***RT Book Reviews***

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The Hunter (Highland Guard, Book 7) Summary Details

The Hunter (Highland Guard, Book 7) by By Monica McCarty ebook read online.

pdetail:

- Sales Rank: #470913 in Books
- Brand: Ballantine Books
- Published on: 2013-06-25
- Released on: 2013-06-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.88" h x 1.09" w x 4.19" l, .45 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 388 pages

editorial:

Review

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About the Author

Monica McCarty is the bestselling author of *The Recruit*, *The Saint*, *The Viper*, *The Ranger*, *The Hawk*, and *The Chief*, the first six books in the Highland Guard series, the Highlander trilogy (*Highlander Untamed*, *Highlander Unmasked*, and *Highlander Unchained*), and the Campbell trilogy (*Highland Warrior*, *Highland Outlaw*, and *Highland Scoundrel*). Her interest in the Scottish clan system began in the most unlikely of places: a comparative legal history course at Stanford Law School. After a short but enjoyable stint as an attorney, she realized that her career as a lawyer set against her husband's transitory life as a professional baseball player was not exactly a match made in heaven. So 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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One

Coldingham Priory, near Berwick-upon-Tweed, English Marches

Ides of April, 1310

Ewen didn't hold his tongue, which more often than not, caused him problems. "You sent a woman? Why the hell would you do that?"

William Lambertson, Bishop of St. Andrews, bristled, his face red with anger. It wasn't the blasphemy, Ewen knew, but the not-so-subtly implied criticism.

Erik MacSorley, the West Highland chieftain and greatest seafarer south of the land of his Viking ancestors, shot Ewen an impatient glare. "What Lamont meant to say," MacSorley said, attempting to mollify the important prelate, "is that with the English tightening their watch on the local churches, it could be dangerous for the lass."

Not only could MacSorley sail his way through a maelstrom of shite, he could also talk his way out of one and come out smelling like a rose. They couldn't have been more different in that regard. Ewen seemed to step in it wherever he walked. Not that he cared. He was a warrior. He was used to wallowing in muck.

Lambertson gave him a look to suggest that muck was exactly where he thought Ewen belonged—preferably under his heel. The churchman addressed MacSorley, ignoring Ewen altogether. "Sister Genna is more than capable of taking care of herself."

She was a woman—and a nun at that. How in Hades did Lambertson think a sweet, docile innocent could defend herself against English knights bent on uncovering the pro-Scot "couriers of the cloth," as they'd been dubbed?

The church had provided a key communication network for the Scots through the first phase of the war, as Bruce had fought to retake his kingdom. With war on the horizon again, the English were doing their best to shut down those communication routes. Any person of the cloth—priest, friar, or nun—crossing the borders into Scotland had been subject to increased scrutiny by the English patrols. Even pilgrims were being harassed.

Perhaps sensing the direction of his thoughts, Lachlan MacRuairi interjected before Ewen could open his mouth and make it worse with Lambertson. "I thought you knew we were coming?"

The thin, nondescript bishop might look weak, especially compared to the four imposing warriors who were taking up much of the small vestry of the priory, but Lamberton had not defied the greatest king in Christendom to put Robert the Bruce on the throne without considerable strength and courage. He straightened to his full height—a good half-foot under the shortest of the four Guardsmen (Eoin MacLean, at only a few inches over six feet)—and looked down his long, thin nose at one of the most feared men in Scotland, as MacRuairi's war name of Viper attested. "I was told to look for you at the new moon. That was over a week ago."

"We were delayed," MacRuairi said without further explanation.

The bishop didn't ask, probably assuming—correctly—that it had to do with a secret mission for the Highland Guard, the elite group of warriors handpicked by Bruce to form the greatest fighting force ever seen, each warrior the best of the best in his discipline of warfare. "I could not wait any longer. It is imperative that the king receive this message as soon as possible."

Though they were in England, it was not Edward Plantagenet, the English king, of whom Lamberton spoke, but the Scottish one, Robert Bruce. For Lamberton's efforts in helping Bruce to that throne, the bishop had been imprisoned in England for two years, and then released and confined to the diocese of Durham for two more. Although recently the bishop had been permitted to travel to Scotland, he was back in England under English authority. It was where Bruce needed him. The bishop was the central source for most of the information winding its way to Scotland through the complex roadway of churches, monasteries, and convents.

"Where did she go?" MacLean asked, speaking for the first time.

"Melrose Abbey by way of Kelso. She left a week ago, joining a small group of pilgrims seeking the healing powers of Whithorn Abbey. Even if the English do stop them, they will let her on her way once they hear her accent. What cause would they have to suspect an Italian nun? She is probably already on her way back by now."

The four members of the Highland Guard exchanged glances. If the message was as important as the bishop said, they'd best make sure.

MacSorley, who had command of the small team for this mission, held Ewen's gaze. "Find her."

Ewen nodded, not surprised the task had fallen to him. It was what he did best. He might not be able to sail or talk his way out of a maelstrom like MacSorley, but he could track his way through one. He could hunt almost anything or anyone. MacSorley liked to say Ewen could find a ghost in a snowstorm. One wee nun shouldn't give him too much trouble.

Sister Genna was used to finding trouble, so initially she wasn't alarmed when the four English soldiers stopped them on the outskirts of town. It wasn't the first time she'd been questioned by one of the English patrols that roamed the Borders from one of the castles they occupied nearby, and she was confident of her ability to talk her way out of any difficulties.

But she hadn't factored in her companion. Why, oh why, had she let Sister Marguerite come along with her? She knew better than to involve someone else. Hadn't she learned her lesson four years ago?

But the young nun with the sickly disposition and big, dark eyes so full of loneliness at being so far from her

home had penetrated Genna's resolve to avoid attachments. Over the past nine days on the journey from Berwick-upon-Tweed to Melrose, Genna had found herself watching over the girl who'd just recently taken her vows, making sure she had enough to eat and that the walking wasn't tiring her overmuch. The girl—at barely ten and eight, Genna couldn't think of her as anything else—had already suffered one breathing spell since leaving Berwick. Sister Marguerite suffered from what the Greeks called “asthma.” The lung ailment had taken her from her home in Calais in a pilgrimage to seek the healing powers of St. Ninian's shrine at Whithorn Abbey.

But Genna's journey had come to an end at Melrose, and when the time had come for them to part ways this morning, she'd found her throat growing suspiciously tight. Marguerite had looked at her with those soulful brown eyes and begged Genna to let her walk with her part of the way. And God forgive her, Genna had relented. “Just as far as Gallows Brae,” she'd told her, referring to the small foothill not far beyond the market cross where the church used to hang its criminals. What harm could come to the girl in the middle of the day, a stone's throw from the abbey?

Plenty, it seemed.

Marguerite gave a startled cry as the soldiers surrounded them, and Genna cast her a reassuring glance. It will be all right, she told her silently. Let me handle it.

Genna turned to the thickset soldier with a tinge of red in his beard, whom she took for the leader. Seated on his horse with the sun behind him, she found herself squinting at the gleam from his mail. What little she could see of his face under the steel helm and mail coif looked blunt, coarse, and none-too-friendly.

She spoke at first in Italian, with its roots in Vulgar Latin, which it was clear he didn't understand, and then in the heavily accented French that she used with Sister Marguerite and was more commonly understood in the area, which he did. Looking him straight in the eye and giving him her most reverent smile, she told him the truth. “We carry no messages. We are only visitors to your country. How do you say . . . p-p,” she feigned, looking for the right word.

He stared at her dumbly. God, the man was thick—even for a soldier! Over the past few years she'd run into her share. Giving up, she pointed to her pilgrim's staff and the copper scallop-shell badge of St. James that she wore on her cloak.

“Pilgrims?” he filled in helpfully.

“Yes, pilgrims!” She beamed at him as if he were the most brilliant man in the world.

The man might be thick but he wasn't easily put off. His gaze sharpened first on her and then on Marguerite. Genna felt her pulse jump, not liking the way his gaze turned assessing. “Why do you not speak, sister? What are you doing out here on the road alone?” he asked Marguerite.

Genna tried to answer for her, but he cut her off. “I will hear from this one myself. How can I be sure you are foreigners as you say?” He said something in English to one of his companions, and Genna was careful not to react. She didn't want him to realize that she understood English. Not even Marguerite knew. “Look at those tits,” he said, pointing to Marguerite. “Bet they're half her weight.”

Marguerite shot her a terrified look, but Genna nodded her head in encouragement, glad for Marguerite's ignorance of their words. Still, Genna's heartbeat quickened.

“We were saying goodbye, monsieur,” Marguerite explained in her native French.

His eyes sparked. “Goodbye? I thought you were on a pilgrimage?”

Fearing what Marguerite might unintentionally reveal, Genna interrupted again. “My destination was Melrose. Sister Marguerite seeks the healing powers of Whithorn Abbey.”

His eyes narrowed on the young nun, taking in her thin face and pale complexion. For once, Genna was grateful that the fragile state of Marguerite’s health was reflected in her delicate appearance.

“Is that so?” he asked slowly. “I did not realize Melrose Abbey was a popular pilgrimage destination.”

“Perhaps not as popular as Whithorn or Iona, but popular enough for those who revere the lady,” she said, crossing herself reverently, and he frowned. Melrose, like all Cistercian abbeys, was dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

“And you travel by yourself? That is quite unusual.”

Genna had had a dog like him once. Once he got hold of a bone, he wouldn’t let it go. She just needed to find a way to get him to drop it. But first she had to make sure Marguerite was safely away. “In my country, no. Only someone possessed by the devil would harm a bride of Christ.” She paused innocently, letting him contemplate that. His face darkened, and she continued, “There is a group of pilgrims we passed on their way to Dryburgh Abbey,” which was only a few miles away. “I hope to join them for the rest of the journey. Perhaps you will be so kind as to show me the way?” Without waiting for him to answer, she pulled Marguerite into a hug. With any luck, Marguerite would be gone before he realized what she’d done. “Goodbye, Sister. Godspeed on your journey,” she said loudly, then whispered in her ear so that only she could hear, “Go . . . quickly . . . please.”

The girl opened her mouth to argue, but Genna’s hands tightened on her shoulders to stave off her protests.

Marguerite gave her a long anxious look, but she did as she was bid and started to walk away. She tried to slip through a gap between two of the horses, but the leader stopped her. “Wait there, Sister. We have not finished our questions yet. Have we, lads?”

The way the men looked at each other made Genna’s pulse take an anxious leap. They were enjoying this, and it was clear that it was not the first time they’d been in this position. Could these soldiers have something to do with the group of nuns who’d gone missing late last year?

She looked around for help. It was the middle of the day—mid-morning, actually. Surely someone would pass along this way soon. However, although the village was just behind them, the thick trees that shrouded the road like a leafy tunnel prevented anyone from seeing them. And even if they were seen, would anyone interfere? It would take a brave soul to stand up to four mail-clad English soldiers.

Nay, it was up to her to get them out of this. She’d tried appealing to the leader’s vanity and that hadn’t worked. Nor had appealing to his honor, which appeared distinctly lacking. The man was a bully, who liked to prey on the weak and vulnerable—which, fortunately, she was not. But he’d shown discomfort when she reminded him of her holy status, so she would concentrate on that.

A quick glance at Marguerite made her heart sink with dread. God help them, fear was bringing on one of

Marguerite's attacks! Though it had happened only once before, Genna recognized the telltale quick gasping of breath.

Genna didn't have much time. Having lost patience with the soldier's game, she rushed over to the girl and pulled her under her arm protectively. She murmured soothing words, trying to calm her down, all the while glaring up at the captain. "Look what you have done. You have upset her. She is having an attack."

But the words seem to have no effect on the man. "This won't take long," he said. "Bring them," he said to his men in English, presumably so she wouldn't understand.

Before Genna could react, she and Marguerite were being dragged deeper into the forest, her staff lying useless in the leaves behind them. Marguerite was clutching at her frantically and let out a desperate cry when the soldiers finally managed to separate them.

Genna tried to appear calm though her heart was racing. "Don't worry, Sister," she said confidently, "this will all be sorted out quickly. I'm sure these good Christian men mean us no harm."

It was a sin to lie, but in some cases, she was certain it would be excused. Genna didn't need to understand the soldiers' words to guess what they planned. But unfortunately, she understood every one of them, so she heard the chilling details.

"The old one is prettier," the captain said, switching again to English to speak to his men. "But we'd better start with the sickly one in case she doesn't last. I want to see those tits."

Genna forced herself not to show any reaction to his words, but anger, and perhaps a twinge of fear at hearing them talk so matter-of-factly about rape and the death of her friend, surged through her. She had no intention of allowing that to happen. And seven and twenty was mature, not old!

The situation was deteriorating, but Genna had been in lots of sticky situations before. This might be stickier than most, but it wasn't over yet.

The soldiers didn't bother taking them very far, almost as if they knew no one would dare interfere. Bruce might control the north of Scotland, but the English reign of terror was still in full force in the Scottish Marches. The English operated with impunity—except for the occasional raid or ambush from Bruce's men. The English were no more than brigands with authority, Genna thought. But soon Bruce would send them running back to England. She had put herself in this position to help ensure that happened.

They entered a small clearing in the trees, and the men released them with a hard push. Both women stumbled forward, Genna barely catching herself before falling to her knees. Marguerite wasn't so fortunate, and Genna watched in horror as her gasping intensified. She couldn't seem to get off her hands and knees, as if the effort was too much for her.

"I see she's ready for us," one of the soldiers snickered.

Genna bowed her head, muttering a prayer in Latin so the men wouldn't see the heat rise to her cheeks in anger. She might be innocent, but she'd been in enough barns with rutting beasts to understand their meaning. Apparently, men were no different.

The captain was eyeing Marguerite's raised bottom. When his hand reached under his habergeon mail shirt

to loosen the ties at his waist, Genna knew she had to act fast.

She stepped between them, trying to turn him from his foul intent—or at least turn it to her. “My sister is ill, sir. Perhaps if you tell me what you are looking for I can clear up this misunderstanding, and we can all get on with our duties. Ours to God,” she reminded him, “and yours to your king.”

It was clear he’d forgotten the original purpose for which he’d stopped them. “Messages,” he said, his gaze drifting impatiently to Marguerite behind her. “Being carried north to the rebels by churchmen—and women,” he added. “But treason will not hide under holy vestments any longer. We’ve had reports that many of these messages have passed through Melrose Abbey. King Edward intends to put a stop to it.”

“Ah,” she said, as if in sudden understanding. “Now, I see the reason for your suspicion, sir. You were certainly justified in stopping us, but as I told you, neither Sister Marguerite nor I carry any of these messages.” She held out the leather bag she carried with her belongings for him to inspect. Bending down, she reached for Marguerite’s small purse, trying to ignore the frantic gasping of her friend’s breathing. Comfort would have to wait. Untying it, she held it up to him. He barely glanced inside before tossing it away.

“See?” she said. “Nothing to hide. Now that we have proved to you our innocence, you have no cause to detain us.”

He was angry; she could see that. But the longer she delayed him, the more time he had to think about his actions—his unjustified actions. He seemed to be hesitating when one of the men suggested, “What if it’s hidden someplace else, Captain?”

She pretended not to understand him, but a cold chill ran down her spine as a slow smile spread up the captain’s mouth. He reached down and tore off her veil. She cried out as the pins were ripped free, and her hair tumbled down her back in a heavy silken mass. Her hands immediately went to her head, but there was no way to hide it.

She swore under her breath at the reaction it provoked, hearing the exclamations and oaths. The long golden tresses were her one vanity—her one connection to her past identity. Janet of Mar was dead; it was silly to hold on to what she’d been. But she couldn’t bear to cut her hair as most of the nuns did. And now that vanity might cost her.

The captain let out a slow whistle. “Would you look at that, lads,” he said in English. “We found ourselves a real beauty. Wonder what else the lass is hiding under those robes?”

No amount of training could have prevented her from flinching at the words she was not supposed to understand, knowing what he meant to do. Fortunately, he was too caught up to notice her reaction. He pulled her to her feet, put his gauntleted hands at her neck, and ripped the coarse wool fabric of her scapula and habit to the waist.

Marguerite screamed.

Genna might have too. She struggled, but he was too strong. He tore the cloak from her neck and tugged the damaged gown past her shoulders. All that prevented her from nakedness was a thin chemise that was far too fine for a nun—another indulgence—but he didn’t notice. And after a few more tears, that was gone too. Wool and linen had been reduced to strips of fabric hanging off her shoulders. She tried to cover herself, but

he pulled her arms away.

The captain's eyes grew dark with lust as his gaze locked on her naked breasts.

Her heart froze in terror. For one moment her confidence faltered.

"What does she have on her back, Captain?" one of the men said from behind her. Genna wanted to thank him. His words—his reminder—struck the fear from heart, replacing it with fiery determination. She would get them out of this.

She spun on him, not bothering to cover herself. "They are the marks of my devotion. Have you never seen the mark of whips and a hair shirt?"

The men startled. Genna knew what they saw: the horrible lines of pink puckered flesh that marked her pale back. But she didn't see them that way. The scars were a reminder, a badge she wore to remind her of a day she could never be allowed to forget. Of a man who'd been like a father to her whose death was on her soul. These scars had made her stronger. They'd given her a purpose.

"I've never seen scars like that on a woman before."

"I'm not a woman," she snapped at the man who'd spoken. He was younger and not as certain as the others of the course his captain had set upon. "I'm a nun. A bride of Christ." She hoped this was another one of those times that a lie wouldn't be considered a sin. She pulled down the shreds of cloth that remained, turning slowly so each man could see. "Touch either of us and you will suffer eternal hellfire. God will punish you for your transgressions."

The younger man went white.

She looked back to the captain, her eyes blazing with the fury of her conviction, daring him to come near her. "Our innocence is meant for God. Take it and you will suffer." The captain started to back away and Genna knew she had won. She stepped toward him, unrelenting and uncowering. "Your body will burn with the fire of your sin. Your manhood will shrivel to black, your bollocks to the size of raisins, and you will never know another woman. You will be damned for eternity."

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After her ill-fated attempt three years ago to rescue her twin sister, Janet of Mar has found salvation acting as a royal messenger—until she surrenders to a darkly handsome warrior whose rough, sensual kisses stir feelings the woman in her can't deny. But when betrayal leads to danger, and a crucial communiqué is put in jeopardy, Janet has no choice but to put her faith in the hunter who can find anything—perhaps even her heart.

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