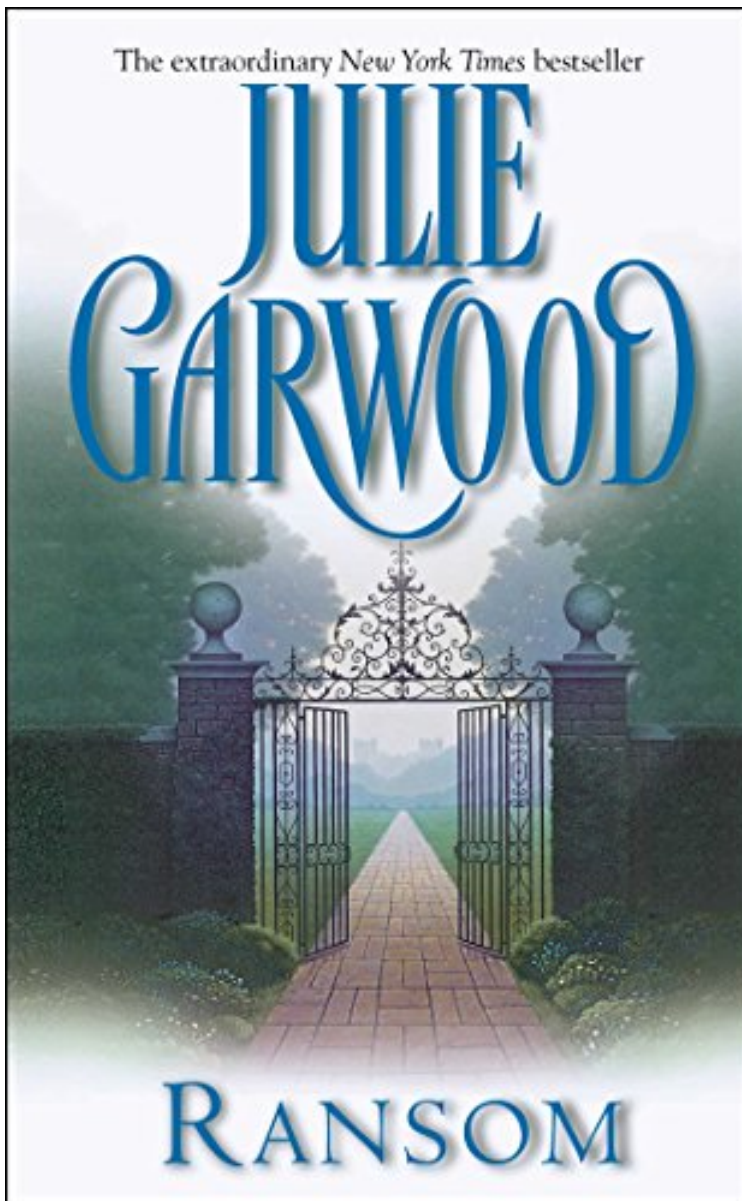


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Ransom



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Description : Description du produit In the dark days after the death of Richard the Lionhearted, lives and lands would fall into upheaval at the hands of a power-hungry British ruler and his violent minions. One victim of the scourge is innocent Gillian, who is a mere child when the cruel and ambitious Baron Alford slaughters her father and tears her family apart. Alford, determined to recover a jeweled box for the despotic King John, is furious when the precious treasure slips through his fingers -- only to be lost for more than a decade. Now a beautiful young woman who has forged a life for herself, Gillian finds the key to resolving her past in handsome Scottish chieftains Ramsey Sinclair and Brodick Buchanan. With the cunning and courage of the daring Scotsmen to aid her, and finding a bond of trust and friendship with a new ally, Bridgid KirkConnell, Gillian at last fights the unscrupulous Baron Alford, laying claim to her home, her

family, and her father's reputation. But in the presence of the mighty warriors beside them, Gillian and Bridgid will discover that desire can be a weapon of conquest...betrayal can slay trust in a heartbeat...and the greatest risk of all is surrender -- to the deep emotions of unexpected love. Resounding with the steely clash of sword-against-sword, and the pounding of hearts bound by cliff-hanging peril, Ransom sweeps from Scotland to England with all of the majesty of medieval glory days. With her special storytelling gifts in full force, Julie Garwood spins an unforgettable page-turner of passion and loyalty, justice, and honor.

Prsentation de l'diteurFor fans of Scottish medieval romances comes this beloved and classic page-turner from #1 New York Times bestselling author Julie Garwood.In the dark days after the death of Richard the Lionhearted, lives and lands would fall into upheaval at the hands of a power-hungry British ruler and his violent minions. One victim of the scourge is innocent Gillian, who is a mere child when the cruel and ambitious Baron Alford slaughters her father and tears her family apart. Alford, determined to recover a jeweled box for the despotic King John, is furious when the precious treasure slips through his fingersonly to be lost for more than a decade.Now a beautiful young woman, Gillian finds the key to resolving her past in handsome Scottish chieftains Ramsey Sinclair and Brodick Buchanan. With the cunning and courage of the daring Scotsmen, and with the friendship of a new ally, Bridgid KirkConnell, Gillian at last fights the unscrupulous Baron Alford, laying claim to her home, her family, and her father's reputation. But in the presence of the mighty warrors, Gillian and Bridgid discover that desire can be a weapon of conquest, betrayal can slay trust in a heartbeat, and the greatest risk of all is to surrender to unexpected

love.ExtraitCHAPTER ONEScotland, fourteen years laterThe fate of the entire MacPherson clan rested in the hands of Laird Ramsey Sinclair. With the recent birth of Alan Doyle and the peaceful passing of Walter

Flanders, there were exactly nine hundred and twenty-two MacPhersons, and the vast majority of those proud men and women desperately wanted and needed Ramsey's protection.The MacPhersons were in a bad way. Their laird, a sad-eyed, mean-tempered old man named Lochlan, had died the year before, by his own hand, God forgive him. His clansmen had been stunned and appalled by their laird's cowardly act and still could not talk openly about it. None of the younger men had successfully challenged for the right to lead the clan; though, in truth, most didn't want to fill Lochlan's shoes because they believed he had tainted the position by killing himself. He had to have been mad, they reasoned, because a sane man would never commit such a sin, knowing that he would spend eternity burning in hell for giving God such an insult.The two elders who had stepped forward to temporarily lead the MacPherson clan, Brisbane Andrews and Otis

MacPherson, were old and worn-out from more than twenty years of off-and-on fighting with the land-hungry clans to the east, south, and west of their holding. The fighting had intensified tenfold after the death of their laird, for their enemies knew their vulnerability with the lack of leadership. Desperate times called for cunning measures, however, and so Brisbane and Otis, with their clan's approval, decided to approach Laird Ramsey Sinclair during the annual spring festival. The social opportunity seemed the ideal time to present their petition, as it was an unspoken rule that all the clans leave their animosity at home and join together as one family for two full weeks of competition and goodwill. It was a time when old friendships were renewed, harmless grudges were stirred up, and most important, marriage contracts were sealed.

Fathers of young daughters spent most of their days frantically trying to protect their offspring from unwanted suitors while at the same time trying to make the best possible match. Most of the men found it a thoroughly invigorating time.Because the Sinclair land bordered the MacPherson holding on the southern edge, Ramsey assumed that the MacPherson leaders wanted to talk to him about a possible alliance, but as it turned out, the old men wanted much more. They were after a union -- a marriage, so to speak -- between the two clans and were willing to give up their name and become Sinclairs if the laird would give them his solemn word that every MacPherson would be treated as though he had been born a Sinclair. They wanted equality for every one of their nine hundred and twenty-two clansmen.Ramsey Sinclair's tent was the size of a large cottage and spacious enough to accommodate the gathering. There was a small round table in the center with four chairs and several mats strewn around the ground for sleeping. Ramsey's commander in arms, Gideon, and two other seasoned Sinclair warriors, Anthony and Faudron, his trusted leaders, were present. Michael Sinclair, Ramsey's younger brother, fidgeted in the shadows while he waited for permission to rejoin the festivities. The child had already been rebuked for interrupting the meeting and kept his head bowed in embarrassment and shame.Brisbane Andrews, a cantankerous old man with a piercing gaze and raspy voice, stepped forward to explain why the MacPhersons sought a merger."We have young soldiers, but they are poorly trained and cannot defend our women and children against our aggressors. We need your

strength to keep the predators at bay so that we may live a peaceful life." Otis MacPherson, a legend in the Highlands because of his remarkable though highly embellished feats as a young man, sat down in the chair Ramsey offered, clasped his hands on his knobby knees, and nodded toward Michael. "Perhaps, Laird, it would be best if you would listen to your brother's request and allow him to be on his way before we continue this discussion. Children often repeat secrets by accident, and I wouldn't like anyone to know about this...merger...until you have either accepted or denied us." Ramsey agreed and turned to his brother. "What is it you want, Michael?" The boy was still terribly timid around his older brother, for he barely knew him, having seen him only a couple of times in his short life. Ramsey had been living at the Maitland holding as an emissary after his mandatory years of training to become a fit warrior and had returned to his Sinclair home when their father had called for him on his deathbed. The brothers were nearly strangers to one another, but Ramsey, though somewhat inept at dealing with children, was determined to rectify that situation as soon as possible. "I want to go fishing with my new friend," Michael stammered, his head still bowed low, "if it's all right with you, Laird." "Look at me when you ask your question," Ramsey instructed. Michael quickly did as he was ordered and repeated his request, adding the word "please" this time. Ramsey could see the fear in his brother's eyes and wondered how long it was going to take for the boy to get used to having him around. The child still mourned their father, and Ramsey knew that Michael felt as though he had been abandoned. The boy didn't remember his mother -- she had passed away when he was just a year old -- but he had been extremely close to their father and still had not recovered from his death. Ramsey hoped that with time and patience Michael would learn to trust him and perhaps even remember how to smile again. "You won't go near the falls, and you'll be back in this tent before sunset," he ordered quietly. "I'll be back before sunset," Michael promised. "Can I leave now?" "Yes," Ramsey answered, then watched in exasperation as his brother tripped over his own feet and knocked a chair over in his haste to join his friend. "Michael," he called as his brother was rushing out the entrance, "haven't you forgotten something?" The child looked puzzled until Ramsey nodded to the visitors. Michael immediately ran to the two men, bowed to his waist, and blurted out, "May I take your leave?" Otis and Brisbane gave their permission, smiling as they watched the child bolt outside. "The boy resembles you, Laird," Brisbane commented. "'Tis the truth he's your very image, for I well remember you as a lad. God willing, Michael will also grow into a fine warrior. A leader of men." "Yes," Otis agreed, "with proper guidance, he could become a great leader, yet I couldn't help but notice that the child fears his brother. Why is that, Laird?" Ramsey wasn't offended by the question, as the old man spoke the truth and was simply making an observation. "I'm a stranger to the boy, but in time he'll learn to trust me." "And trust that you won't leave him?" Otis asked. "Yes," he answered, realizing how perceptive the old man was. "I remember when your father decided to marry again," Brisbane remarked. "I thought Alisdair was too old and set in his ways to take another wife. Your mother had been dead over ten years, but he fooled me, and he seemed very content. Did you ever meet Glynnnes, his second wife?" "I attended their wedding," he said. "Because she was so much younger than my father, he was certain he would die first and he wanted to be sure she was well provided for," he explained. "And he asked this of you?" Otis inquired, smiling. "I am his son," Ramsey responded. "I would do whatever he asked." Otis turned to his friend. "Laird Sinclair would never turn his back on anyone in need." Ramsey had wasted enough time talking about personal matters and turned the discussion back to the primary subject. "You have said you want my protection, but could you not achieve this with a simple alliance?" "Your soldiers would have to patrol our borders night and day," Otis said. "And in time they would grow weary of the duty, but if you owned the land..." "Yes," Brisbane eagerly agreed. "If the Sinclairs owned the land, you would protect it at all cost. We have --" He suddenly stopped, for he was so stunned by the fact that Ramsey had moved forward to pour wine into their empty goblets, he lost his train of thought. "You are laird...yet you serve us as though you are our squire. Do you not know the power you hold?" Ramsey smiled over their bewilderment. "I know that you are guests in my tent," he answered, "and my elders. It is therefore my duty to see to your comfort." The men were honored by his words. "You have your father's heart," Otis praised. "It is good to see Alisdair lives on in his son." The laird accepted the compliment with a nod and then gently led the men back to the topic he most wanted to discuss. "You were saying that I would protect your land at all costs if I owned it?" "Aye," Otis agreed. "And we have much to offer in return for this union. Our land is rich with resources. Our lakes are glutted with fat fish, our soil is rich for planting, and our hills are filled with sheep." "Which is why we are being constantly attacked on all our borders by the Campbells and the Hamiltons and the Boswells. They all want our land, our water and our women, but the rest of us can go to hell." Ramsey didn't show any outward reaction to the passionate speech. He began to

pace about the tent with his head bowed and his hands clasped behind his back. "With your permission, Laird, I would ask a few questions," Gideon requested. "As you wish," Ramsey told his commander. Gideon turned to Otis. "How many soldiers do you count among the MacPhersons?" "Nearly two hundred," he answered. "But as Brisbane explained, they have not been properly trained." "And there are one hundred more of an age to begin training," Otis interjected. "You could make them invincible, Laird," he said. "As invincible as Laird Brodick Buchanan's Spartans. Aye, it's possible, for they already have the minds and hearts of warriors." "You call Brodick's soldiers Spartans?" Gideon asked, smiling. "We do, for that is what they are," Otis replied. "Haven't you heard the stories about the Spartans of times past from your fathers and grandfathers as we have?" Gideon nodded. "Most of the stories have been exaggerated." "Nay, most are true," Otis replied. "The stories were written down by the holy monks and retold countless times. They were a barbaric tribe," he added with a frown. "Sinfully proud but extremely brave. It was said they would rather die by the blade than lose an argument. 'Tis my opinion they were a stubborn lot." "We wouldn't want our soldiers to be as ruthless as the Buchanan warriors," Brisbane hastily interjected. Ramsey laughed. "Aye, Brodick's soldiers are ruthless." His smile faded as he added, "Know this, gentlemen. Though we are often at odds, I count Brodick as one of my closest friends. He is a brother to me. However, I will not take exception to what have said about him, for I know Brodick would be pleased to know that you think him ruthless." "The man rules with passion," Otis said. "Yes, he does," Ramsey agreed. "But he is also fair to a fault." "You were both trained by Iain Maitland, weren't you?" Brisbane asked. "We were." "Laird Maitland rules his clan with wisdom." Ramsey concurred. "I also count Iain as my friend and brother." Otis smiled. "Brodick rules with passion, Iain with wisdom, and you, Laird Ramsey, rule with an iron hand of justice. We all know you to be a compassionate man. Show us your mercy now," he pleaded. "How can you know what kind of leader I am?" he asked. "You call me compassionate, but I've only been laird for six months and I've yet to be tested." "Look at your commanders," Brisbane said with a nod. "Gideon and Anthony and Faudron led and controlled the Sinclair clan when your father was ill, and after he died and you became Laird, you didn't do what others in your position would have done." "And what would they have done?" "Replace the commanders with men you know would be loyal you." "We are loyal to our laird," Gideon blustered. "You dare to suggest otherwise?" "Nay," Brisbane countered. "I'm merely saying that other lairds would be less...confident...and would rid themselves of any competitors. That is all. laird, you showed compassion by allowing them to stay in their important positions." Ramsey didn't agree or disagree with the old man's judgment. "As I just mentioned, I've been laird for a very short time, and there are problems I must solve within the Sinclair clan. I'm not certain that now is the time to -- " "We can't wait any longer, Laird. The Boswells have declared war and there's talk that they'll align themselves with the Hamiltons. If that happens, the MacPhersons will all be destroyed." "Would your soldiers willingly pledge themselves to Ramsey?" Gideon asked. "Aye, they would," Otis insisted. "All of them?" the Sinclair commander persisted. "There are no dissenters?" Otis and Brisbane glanced at one another before Otis answered. "There are but a few against this union. Before we came to you with our proposal, we put it to a vote four months ago. Everyone, man and woman, was included." "You let your women vote?" Gideon asked, incredulous. Otis smiled. "Aye, we did, for we wanted it to be fair, and our women will also be affected by the union. We wouldn't have thought to include them if Meggan MacPherson, granddaughter of our past laird, hadn't insisted on it." "She is a most outspoken woman," Brisbane added, though the glint in his eye indicated he didn't see that as a flaw. "If you voted four months ago, why are you just now making this request to Ramsey?" Gideon asked. "We've actually voted twice now," Otis explained. "Four months ago we put the vote to the clan and then allowed a period for everyone to consider the matter again. The first vote went in favor of the union, but by a smaller margin." "We didn't want it to be said that we rushed such an important issue," Brisbane added. "So we gave them time to consider all the ramifications. Then we voted again." "Yes," Otis said. "Many who were at first against the union changed their minds and voted in favor." "We shouldn't have waited so long to come to you, Laird, because now our situation has become critical." "What was the result of the second vote?" Ramsey asked. "How many of your soldiers are still against the union?" "Sixty-two are still against, and all of them are young, very young," Otis said. "Pride has colored their judgment," Brisbane volunteered. "They're led by a stubborn-headed rebel named Proster, but all the others were in favor of the union, and the majority rules." "Will the dissenters go along with the decision?" Ramsey asked. "Yes, but grudgingly," Otis admitted. "If Proster can be won over, the others will come with him. There is a simple way to gain their loyalty...a very simple way." "And what might that be?" "Marry Meggan MacPherson," Brisbane blurted out. "And unite us by marriage." "Men have married for far less than what we offer you," Otis interjected. "And if I choose

not to marry Meggan?" "I would still plead with you if that is what it will take to get your agreement to let our clan unite with yours. Marriage to a MacPherson would only make the union stronger. My clan...my children...need your protection. Just two weeks ago, David and Lucy Douglas were murdered, and their only sin was that they ventured too close to the border. They were newly wed." "We cannot lose any more of our good people, and if you do not take us in, one by one we will be hunted down. What will happen to our children?" Brisbane asked. "We have boys your brother's age," he added in an attempt to sway the laird. Ramsey couldn't turn his back on their cry for help. He knew the lengths the Boswells would go to in order to claim more land. None of their soldiers would think twice about killing a child. "The Boswells are jackals," he muttered. Gideon knew his laird well and had already guessed what his answer was going to be. "Ramsey, will you put this matter to our clan before you give these men your decision?" "I will not," he answered. "The matter isn't open for discussion." Gideon held his frustration. "But will you think about this before you decide?" Knowing his commander was trying to caution him to wait and was wanting a private discussion before any commitment was made, Ramsey gave Gideon a brisk nod before addressing the MacPhersons again. "Gentlemen, you will have my answer in three hours' time. Does that suit you?" Otis nodded as he stood. "With your permission, we will return then to hear your answer." Brisbane latched onto his friend's arm. "You've forgotten to tell him about the competition," he whispered loudly. "What competition?" Gideon asked. Otis visibly colored. "We thought...to save our soldiers' pride, that you would agree to compete in a series of games. We can't possibly win, but it would be easier to give up our name and take the Sinclair name if we were soundly beaten in games of strength." Gideon stepped forward. "And if you should win?" "But we wouldn't," Otis insisted. "But if you did?" "Then the Sinclairs give up their name. You would still rule as laird, Ramsey, but you would become a MacPherson, and the man who bested you would become your first in command." Gideon was outraged, but Ramsey had the opposite reaction. So absurd was the request, he felt like laughing. He forced himself to maintain his stern expression as he said, "I have a commander and am well pleased with him." "But, Laird, we thought only --" Otis began. Ramsey cut him off. "My commander stands before you, gentlemen, and you insult him mightily with your proposal." "What if you were to put the question to your clan?" Brisbane asked. "The games have only just started and there are still two full weeks. You could compete at the end of the games." "Then I, like you, would want every man and woman to have a say, and since most are not attending the festival, I assure you it would take months before everyone had voted. We would have to wait until next year to compete." "But we cannot wait that long for a decision," Otis said. "I will be completely honest with you and tell you I wouldn't give the matter to my clan to decide anyway. The mere suggestion is obscene. The Sinclair name is sacred. However, since you say you wish only to save your soldiers' pride, if I decide on this union, then I will also suggest they compete for positions within my ranks under my commander. Those MacPherson soldiers who show strength and courage against my soldiers will be personally trained by Gideon." Otis nodded. "We'll return then in three hours to hear your answer," he said. "God guide you in making this momentous decision," Brisbane added as he followed his friend outside. Ramsey laughed softly. "We've just been led down a crooked path," he remarked. "Otis believes the MacPherson soldiers could beat us and then he would have it all. Our protection and his name." Gideon wasn't amused. "They come to you with hat in hand, begging, but then they have the audacity to put conditions on you at the same time. They are outrageous." "What say you, Anthony?" he asked Gideon's second in command. "I'm against this union," the yellow-haired soldier muttered. "Any man who would willingly give up his name disgusts me." "I feel the same," Faudron interjected, his hawk-like face red with anger. "Brisbane and Otis are despicable." "Nay, they're simply cunning old men who want the best for their clan. I've known for some time now that they were going to come to me, and I've had time to contemplate the matter. Tell me, Gideon, are you in favor of such a union?" "I know you are," he replied. "Your heart is too soft, Laird. It's a troubling flaw, that. I see the problems involved in such a union." "So do I," Ramsey said. "But Otis is right; they have much to offer in return. More important is their cry for help, Gideon. Can you turn your back on them?" His commander shook his head. "Nay, the Boswells would slaughter them. However, I'm most concerned about Proster and the other dissenters." "They've had time to come to terms with this union," Ramsey reminded him. "You heard what Otis said. They first voted four months ago. Besides, we'll keep a close eye on them." "Your mind's made up, isn't it?" "Yes, I'll welcome them into our clan." "There'll be problems with our soldiers..." Ramsey slapped Gideon's shoulder. "Then we'll deal with them," he said. "Don't look so bleak. Let's put the matter aside for now and join the festivities. Iain and Judith Maitland have been here since yesterday afternoon and I've still not spoken to them. Let's hunt them down." "There is one more pressing

matter you must attend to first," he said. Ramsey dismissed Anthony and Faudron and then said to Gideon, "I can see from your grin the matter isn't serious." "To your faithful soldier, Dunstan Forbes, the matter is very serious. You might as well sit down, Laird, for Dunstan has requested permission to marry Bridgid KirkConnell." Ramsey was suddenly weary. "How many does this make now?" Gideon laughed. "Including me, I count seven proposals in all, but Douglas swears there have been eight." Ramsey sat down and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "Does Bridgid know about this latest suitor?" "Not yet," he answered. "But I have taken the liberty of sending for her. She's waiting outside, and you will at last meet the thorn in your side." After making the comment, he burst into laughter. Ramsey shook his head. "Do you know, Gideon, all this time I believed that when I challenged you for the position of laird, I beat you fairly." Gideon instantly sobered. "But you did beat me fairly." "Are you certain you didn't let me win just so you wouldn't have to deal with Bridgid KirkConnell?" Gideon laughed again. "Perhaps," he said. "I'll admit I like being in her presence, for she's a beautiful woman and a true delight to observe. She has a spirit few other women possess. She's quite...passionate...but alas, she's also as stubborn as a Buchanan. I'm glad now she turned me down, for I have no wish to marry such a difficult woman." "How is it that I have had to deny three proposals on this woman's behalf while I have been laird but I have yet to meet her?" "She sent her refusals from her uncle's home in Carnwath. I specifically remember telling you that I had given her permission to help her aunt with the new bairn. They, too, are here at the festival." "If you told me, I've forgotten," he said. "I do remember her rejections though. She always sent back the same message. 'I've a feeling she'll say those very words today and Dunstan will join the rapidly growing ranks of the brokenhearted.'" "My father is to blame for this nuisance duty I'm now saddled with because he was the one who gave his promise to Bridgid's father that she could choose her husband. It's unthinkable to me that she alone will decide her future." "You don't have a choice in the matter," Gideon said. "You must honor your father's word. Bridgid's father was a noble warrior, and he was on his deathbed when he forged this promise. I wonder if he knew how stubborn his daughter was going to be." Ramsey stood and then suggested Gideon call Bridgid inside. "And stop grinning," he ordered. "This is an important matter to Dunstan, and we shall treat it as such. Who knows? She may say yes to his proposal." "Aye, and it might rain pigs this afternoon," Gideon drawled as he folded back the flap of the tent. He hesitated, turned back to his laird, and in a soft voice asked, "Have you ever had your head turned by a lady?" The question exasperated Ramsey. "No, I haven't." "Then I'd brace myself if I were you. I swear your head's going to spin." A moment later, Gideon's prediction almost came true, as Bridgid KirkConnell walked into the tent and literally knocked the wind out of her laird. She was an astonishingly pretty young lady, with fair skin, sparkling eyes, and sinfully curly, long honey-colored hair that floated beyond her shoulders. Her gentle curves were in all the right places, and Ramsey was surprised that there had been only eight proposals. She made a curtsy, smiled ever so sweetly up at him, and said, "Good day to you, Laird Ramsey." He bowed. "So we meet at last, Bridgid KirkConnell. I've had to break the hearts of several suitors on your behalf without benefit of knowing why those good men were so anxious to wed such an obstinate woman. Now I understand the reason my soldiers are so persistent." Her smile vanished. "But we have met before." He shook his head. "I assure you that if I had met you, I would not have forgotten." "But it's true, we did meet," she insisted. "And I remember our encounter as though it had taken place just yesterday. You had come home for your cousin's wedding. While my parents were attending the celebration, I decided to go swimming in the lake beyond the glen. You fished me out." He clasped his hands behind his back and tried to concentrate on what she was telling him. Gideon hadn't exaggerated. She was an extraordinary woman. "And why did I fish you out?" "I was drowning." "Didn't you know how to swim, lass?" Gideon asked. "Much to my surprise, I didn't." She smiled again, and Ramsey's heartbeat began to race. He was stunned by his own reaction to the woman, for he couldn't get past the fact that she was so damned pretty. It wasn't like him to behave like this -- he wasn't a boy and he had certainly been in the presence of comely women before. It was her smile, he decided then. It was really quite infectious. He wondered if Gideon was experiencing a similar response to the lass, and just as soon as he could find the discipline to stop gawking at her, he'd look at his commander. "If you didn't know how to swim, why did you go in the lake?" Gideon asked, trying to make sense out of such an illogical act. She shrugged. "Swimming didn't look difficult, and I was sure I could figure it out, but alas, I was mistaken." "You were a bold lass," Gideon commented. "Nay, I was stupid." "You were young," Ramsey offered. "You must have turned your parents' hair white," Gideon said. "I was accused of doing just that on several occasions," she replied before turning her attention to Ramsey again. "I understand why you don't remember. I've changed in my appearance and it has been a long while. I'm grown up now, but I'm not

obstinate, Laird. Truly I'm not." "You should have married by now," Ramsey said. "And it would seem to me that you are being difficult. All of the men who have proposed marriage are fine and worthy soldiers." "Yes, I'm certain they are good men," she agreed. Ramsey took a step toward her. She took a step back, for she knew what was coming and wanted to be close to the opening of the tent so she could make a quick exit. Ramsey noticed her glancing over her shoulder and thought she might be judging the distance to freedom. He maintained his serious demeanor, but it was difficult. Her panic made him want to laugh. Was marriage that repulsive to her? "Now another soldier has stepped forward to ask for your hand in marriage," he said. "His name is Dunstan. Do you know him?" She shook her head. "No, I don't." "He's a good man, Bridgid, and he would certainly treat you well." "Why?" she asked. "Why what?" he countered. "Why does he want to marry me? Did he give you a reason?" Since Ramsey hadn't spoken to Dunstan personally, he turned to Gideon. "Did he give you a reason?" The commander nodded. "He wants you." Ramsey could tell from the hesitation in Gideon's voice that he wasn't telling her the full story. "Give her his exact words," he ordered. Gideon's face colored. "Surely the lass doesn't wish to hear every word, Laird." "I think she does," Ramsey countered. "And Dunstan expects us to speak for him." The commander scowled to cover his embarrassment. "Very well then. Bridgid KirkConnell, Dunstan swears his love for you. He treasures your beauty and worships the very ground you...float upon....As God is my witness, those were his very words." Ramsey smiled, but Bridgid wasn't the least bit amused. Insulted by the declaration, she tried to hide her feelings, knowing that her laird wouldn't understand. How could he? He was a man and, therefore, couldn't possibly know what was in her heart. "How can this be?" she asked. "I have not even met this man, yet he declares his love for me?" "Dunstan is a good man," Gideon told her. "And I believe he means what he says." "He's clearly infatuated with you," Ramsey added. "Would you like time to consider his proposal? Perhaps if you were to sit down with him and discuss this matter --" "No," she blurted out. "I don't want to sit down with him, and I don't need time to consider his proposal. I would like to give my answer now. Would you please tell Dunstan that I thank him for his proposal, but..." "But what?" Gideon asked. "I won't have him." Those were the identical words she had used to deny eight other men. "Why not?" Ramsey demanded, his irritation obvious. "I don't love him." "What does love have to do with a marriage proposal? You could learn to love this man." "I will love the man I marry or I won't marry at all." After making her vehement statement, she took another step back. "How do I reason with such an absurd belief?" Ramsey asked Gideon. "I don't know," he replied. "Where could she have gotten such notions?" Their rudeness in openly discussing her as though she weren't even there angered and frustrated her, but she tried to control her temper because Ramsey was her laird and she should respect his position. "You won't change your mind about Dunstan?" Ramsey asked. She shook her head. "I won't have him," she repeated. "Ah, Bridgid, you are a stubborn lass to be sure." Being criticized a third time stung her pride, and she found it impossible to keep silent any longer. "I have been in your presence less than ten minutes, but in that short while you have called me obstinate, difficult, and stubborn. If you are through insulting me, I would like to join my aunt and uncle." Ramsey was astonished by her burst of anger. She was the first woman ever to speak to him in such a tone. Her behavior bordered on insolence, yet he couldn't fault her because he had said those very words to her, and they were insulting. "You will not speak to your laird with such disrespect," Gideon commanded. "Your father would turn in his grave if he could hear you now." She lowered her head, but Ramsey saw the tears in her eyes. "Let's leave her father out of this," he said. "But, Laird, at the very least she should apologize." "Why? I insulted her, though not deliberately, and for that I apologize." Her head snapped up. "You apologize to me?" "Yes." Her smile was radiant. "Then I must tell you I'm sorry for being so contrary." She bowed, then turned and ran outside. Gideon frowned after her. "She's a difficult woman," he remarked. "I pity the man who does marry her, for he will have a fine battle on his hands." Ramsey laughed. "But what an invigorating battle it would be." Gideon was surprised by the comment. "And would you be interested in pursuing a --" A shout stopped his question and he turned to the entrance just as a young soldier came running inside the tent. He was Emmet MacPherson's son, Alan, and he looked as though he had just seen the ghost of his father. "Laird, come quickly. There's been a terrible accident...terrible...at the falls," he stammered, panting for breath. "Your brother...oh, God, your little brother..." Ramsey was already running outside when Alan's next words hit him. "Michael's dead." Copyright 1999 by Julie Garwood From Library Journal In *The Secret* (Pocket, 1997), Garwood introduced fans to Brodick Buchanan and Ramsey Sinclair, then left us dangling for years with the hint that Brodick and Ramsey were going wife-hunting to find the happiness Laird Ian Maitland found in his Judith. Well, they don't seem to have remembered the purpose of their quest, possibly because each is too busy being laird of his own clan. When Lady Gillian arrives in

Scotland to search for her long-lost sister and to return a kidnapped boy to the Maitlands, she pulls Brodick away from his duties by claiming to be his bride. Her guardian, Baron Alford, believes her sister holds the key to a treasure King John is desperate to find. Alford, the man responsible for killing Gillian's father, uses her uncle as a ransom against her return. Gillian needs Brodick's help to locate her sister, who is believed to be hiding within Ramsey's clan. When the two strong-willed people meet, tempers flare and sparks fly. Jan Maxwell provides an excellent interpretation of the nuances of Garwood's writing, but the abridgment itself leaps too quickly across important plot points and lingers on background material, leaving listeners to wonder "What happened?" Wait for the unabridged version. Not recommended.

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