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CLAIRE DELACROIX

The Rose Red Bride



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*The
Rose Red
Bride*



CLAIRE DELACROIX



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Chapter One



Kinfairlie, on the east coast of Scotland—August 1421

ALEXANDER CONGRATULATED HIMSELF upon a matter well concluded. Although the marriage of his eldest sister Madeline had not begun auspiciously, his solution had ultimately proven to be a good one. Just as he had predicted, Madeline was wedded and happily so, all the more content for the babe already rounding her belly. Though Alexander had not located Rhys FitzHenry by any conventional means of matchmaking, the man who had bought Madeline's hand at auction had proven to be an excellent spouse.

All had ended well, and Alexander was inclined to grant himself credit for that happy fact. A man had to find encouragement where he could. There was little else that stood to Alexander's credit at Kinfairlie and he often felt overwhelmed by the burden of his hereditary holding.

Alexander stared out the window at Kinfairlie's fields, frowning that they were not more lushly green. The crop was slightly better than his castellan had predicted, but not sufficiently abundant. Though his sister Madeline

was wedded, his brother Malcolm was training at Ravensmuir, and his other brother Ross was training at Inverfyre, there remained four unwed sisters for whom Alexander was responsible. The castellan had been firm in his counsel that there must be fewer mouths at the board for the winter.

The fields offered a telling reminder. Alexander would still have to see his sister Vivienne, the next eldest after Madeline, married before the snow flew.

Sadly, Vivienne was not proving to be any easier to wed than her elder sister Madeline had been. Vivienne was willing to wed, but she wished to feel affection for her spouse before her nuptials were celebrated. Indeed, she wished to be in love. Alexander was certain they had visited every man in Christendom to no avail. He might well roar if Vivienne met his gaze and gave that minute shake of her head one more time.

Though Alexander would prefer for Vivienne to be happy, August was already upon them. Soon he would be compelled to take matters into his own hands.

Alexander sighed and buried himself in the accounts of the estate, hoping to discover that matters were slightly better than he knew them to be. He did not have sufficient time to become bored with the tedium of checking tallies before a rap sounded upon the wooden portal.

Anthony, Kinfairlie's elderly castellan, entered the chamber and cleared his throat when Alexander did not immediately respond. "A gentleman to see you, my lord. He begs an audience in privacy at your earliest convenience."

Alexander was intrigued, for guests seldom arrived unbidden at Kinfairlie and even less frequently insisted upon privacy. "Has he a name?"

"Nicholas Sinclair, my lord." Anthony sniffed as Alexander started in surprise at the familiar name. "I am dubious of his character, my lord. No man of merit whispers his name and hides his face within the shadows of his hood."

Alexander sat back in astonishment. "But Nicholas Sinclair was the very man who courted Vivienne some years ago!"

Anthony straightened in disapproval. "I believe as much, sir, though the Sinclair men are rogues indistinguishable each from the other. They are said to be of Viking lineage, my lord, which gives them little credit." He apparently noted Alexander's interest in this new arrival and cleared his throat again. "Although I admit that is solely my own opinion, sir. There are those, often women, I have heard, who find a certain allure in Sinclair men."

What had gone awry between Nicholas and Vivienne? Alexander could not recall. Indeed, he might never have known. He had not paid much attention to Vivienne's loss of a suitor, for in those days, such matters had not been his concern.

"I should be delighted to see Nicholas Sinclair," he said, noting that Anthony was taken aback by his vigor. Alexander smiled, for he had come to enjoy surprising his very proper castellan. "Bring him to me with all haste, if you please, and some ale as well."

"Ale, sir?" Anthony's silver brows rose high. "Are you certain it is wise to make a Sinclair so welcome?"

"Ale, Anthony, to be sure." Alexander spoke with the firmness he had learned to use with his opinionated castellan. "A guest is a guest, no matter his name."

Anthony cast a glance over the accounts, spread over

the table before his liege lord, and his lips pinched yet more tightly. "I would suggest that your affairs not be so displayed, my lord. The Sinclairs have a reputation for coveting what is not their own."

"I have had my fill of the accounts at any rate," Alexander said, then began to put the books away as the castellan left. He rolled scrolls tightly and refastened their ribbons, storing all carefully in a trunk.

The table before him was bare when a tall, cloaked man entered the chamber. The man limped, favoring his left leg, but strode with vigor all the same. As Anthony had noted, the man kept his hood raised, and his face was in shadow.

Alexander turned, his curiosity keen. "Nicholas Sinclair?"

The man nodded curtly. "Good day to you. I thank you for this courtesy." Nicholas offered his hand and Alexander shook it. It was a large hand, tanned and roughened, the hand of a man well familiar with the weight of a blade. Nicholas's grip was no less sure than Alexander might have expected. His manner was purposeful and confident, and Alexander could not help but think that a man resolutely of this world might be a good partner for his sister who loved whimsical tales.

Alexander made to take his seat once more and gestured to the bench opposite. "I confess to a certain curiosity about your arrival here."

The other man pushed back his hood, then sat upon the bench. Alexander struggled to hide his shock. He blinked, he glanced down at his own hands to school his expression. Then he looked his guest squarely in the eyes again.

Nicholas Sinclair watched him shrewdly and Alexander knew that his discomfiture had been noticed. "It was

not my intent to startle you," he said, though Alexander suspected this was not perfectly true.

No man could fail to be startled by the scar that ran from temple to chin on the left side of Nicholas's face. It was a puckered angry scar, one so vehement that Alexander was certain he would have remembered if it had been there before, one so angry a red that he suspected it was newly won.

Truth be told, Alexander could not recall Nicholas overwell, though the man looked vaguely familiar beyond the scar. Nicholas was tall enough to tower over Alexander, and was more broad of shoulder. His coloring did hint at some Viking blood in his veins, for his hair was fair and would have fallen straight to his shoulders had it not been tied back with a leather lace. His eyes were a striking, clear blue. He was tanned and muscled, and would have been sufficiently handsome to snare the eye of any maiden, at least before he had gained that scar.

"I apologize, for I am a man of blunt speech," Nicholas said. "I come to make my suit for Vivienne's hand."

Alexander found this man's arrival too convenient to be readily believed. He had learned some caution in arranging the match of Madeline and the hard edge in Nicholas's tone would give any man pause. "I had understood that you and Vivienne had ceased your courtship some years ago."

Nicholas averted his gaze. "Due to my folly alone."

"If you believed as much, then why did you not return sooner?"

"I had no home to offer a bride." If anything, Nicholas looked more grim at this detail.

"I remember this matter now," Alexander said, shak-

ing a finger at his guest as his recollection returned. His father and Vivienne had argued heatedly about the folly of wedding a man who was unlikely to inherit property. Though Nicholas's name had not been mentioned, Vivienne had defied her father with such spirit that all had known the question to be of import to her.

And if memory served Alexander well, the ardent Nicholas had disappeared from Kinfairlie shortly thereafter. He nodded at his guest. "You had an older brother who would inherit afore you, did you not? Erik was his name."

A shadow touched the other man's features. "Erik Sinclair was disavowed. Nicholas stands laird of the Sinclair lands at Blackleith now."

There was no shortage of bitterness in the guest's tone, and though Alexander thought his reference to himself was oddly stated, there was no denying the lilt of the Highlands in his guest's voice. Perhaps the man was less accustomed to speaking English than Gaelic, and in Gaelic, the statement would have passed unnoticed.

Alexander's gaze strayed unwillingly to the other man's scar and he wondered what had passed between the brothers to cause such a disavowal and such bitterness. There was no good way to inquire after such a delicate matter, and what difference truly, if Alexander could ensure that Vivienne wed the man she desired and lived comfortably as well?

If the courtship had ended because of Nicholas's lack of an inheritance, she would certainly be delighted to wed him now that he possessed one.

In fact, a lingering affection for this very man might be the reason that she found no other suitor appealing. Madeline had certainly had a similar reason for finding

all suitors lacking, and Alexander was striving to learn as much as he could with regards to understanding and pleasing his sisters.

He had three more to see wed after Vivienne, after all.

Nicholas continued with determination. "It is time I claim a bride and my choice is Vivienne."

Alexander found his reservations melting. This man had faced formidable obstacles, it was clear, and still he was wounded by whatever had riven his family. He could well imagine that Nicholas had never forgotten Vivienne, for though she was his own sister, he was well aware of her abundant charm. Her merry manner and optimism might be just the balm this man needed.

Perhaps his affection for Vivienne had been the one hope that had sustained him in the face of such trials.

The more Alexander considered the match, the more he liked its prospect. He asked after the revenue of Blackleith and its location, as a matter of responsibility, though such details were of less importance than his sister's happiness. He was reassured that Nicholas seemed to know fully the details of his holding, the number of tenants and amount of land, the annual tithes and what was yet to be done. Here was a responsible baron, to be sure.

"You need not doubt the weight of my purse," Nicholas said in conclusion. He removed a sack that jingled as he set it upon the table. He shoved it across the expanse of wood toward Alexander. "And I am prepared to show compense to you for seeing my suit successful in short order."

Alexander stared at the sack of coins, guessing that Kinfairlie's salvation was within it. He lifted the sack, as if less concerned with its contents than he was, and peered inside. His heart leapt at the quantity of silver

coin, though he kept his features impassive. This would see them all through the winter, and let him take his leisure in wedding his three younger sisters.

"You seem anxious for haste," he said, noting the sole detail that troubled him. *An honest man has no need to rush*, Alexander's father had often said, and Nicholas's urgency made him suspicious.

"What man would not desire speed when the yearning of his heart is clear?" Nicholas smiled, though his lips seemed so unfamiliar with forming that curve that it looked more like a grimace. "I grow no younger. I have dallied overlong over this matter and would see it resolved. A man must seize the moment when the Fates favor his course."

"You have a scheme." Alexander did not let his hand close over the coin, not yet.

"I would not linger over banns and betrothals."

"What then?"

Nicholas frowned, then leaned forward, bracing his elbows upon the table. His eyes shone a vehement blue, which told Alexander the vigor of his intent. "I would capture my intended in the night, consummate our match, then be wed in the morning."

Alexander put the coin down on the board with force and pushed it back toward the other man. It slid across the polished wood until Nicholas caught it. "It is vulgar to steal a bride! Though others condone kidnapping and rape as expedient, it will not be done at Kinfairlie!"

"This course is a necessary one."

"No man of honor refuses to court his bride."

Nicholas leaned back, touched the wound upon his own face with a fingertip, and said no more.

"The Lammergeier wed," Alexander insisted, fearing

that Nicholas offered some pagan convention instead of marriage. "We exchange our vows honorably and before witnesses."

"I fully intend to wed Vivienne as you suggest. I would merely celebrate the nuptial night before making those vows."

Alexander understood that the other man feared that his injury would repel his intended, but still he was troubled. One heard of such arrangements, though usually the maiden was seduced because her father protested the match. "Why such need for haste?"

Nicholas's lips tightened to a harsh line. "My cousin means to contest my suzerainty of Blackleith on the basis that I have no bride. I have need of a wife and a son, I have need of both soon, and I choose Vivienne." He looked Alexander in the eye. "There is no time to delay, for a babe is not brought to light in a night and a day. I desire to wed Vivienne, and I desire to ensure that she cannot deny my suit because of my wound." He cast the sack of coin back across the table and Alexander caught it.

This time, Alexander let his fingers close over the hard coins. Though he did not like the means, he could find no fault with the end result. And he guessed that if he declined Nicholas's plan, the man would leave Kinfairlie and find another bride.

Alexander could not so disappoint Vivienne. He knew that if ever there was a woman who could look beyond a man's face to his heart, it was his sister Vivienne. And he guessed that the reason she found favor with no other suitor was that this was the man she wished to wed.

"It is Thursday," Alexander said thoughtfully. "And it would be inappropriate for a wedding to be celebrated on

a Friday, despite your desire for haste, for that day is meant for penance. Let your meeting with Vivienne be tomorrow night, then, and your nuptial vows be exchanged immediately afterward on Saturday morning. Saturday nuptials are a good omen for future happiness, after all. I will ensure that Vivienne sleeps alone in the highest chamber of the tower."

"How?"

Alexander smiled, knowing precisely the tale he would tell to encourage his sister to do his will of her own volition. "Leave the matter to me. She will be there. I insist only that you grant her every courtesy due to a lady."

His guest inclined his head in agreement. "The wall of your tower faces the sea, and there are windows at the summit."

"Three large windows are there, and they all lead to that chamber. You will have to scale the wall, to be sure, and it was wrought smooth purposely to challenge such a feat," Alexander said. "Surely your desire is sufficient for you to succeed at such a test of valor?"

Nicholas's eyes narrowed as he considered this scheme. He looked suddenly dangerous and disreputable, a man untroubled by the prospect of scaling a wall to seduce his bride.

But then, Vivienne adored old tales. If her true love made such an effort to win her hand, doubtless she would be charmed. Alexander was reassured that Nicholas understood Vivienne so well.

"And the sentries?" Nicholas asked, resolute as he began to rise to his feet.

Alexander mused for a moment, then knew what he would do. "I can ensure that they look away, though their

inattention will not last long. Move with haste when the bell on the village church tolls at midnight."

Nicholas nodded and drew his hood over his head once more. He shook Alexander's hand with vigor. "I thank you for your aid in this. You cannot guess its import to me."

"Be warned that I will have your hide if you fail to treat my sister with honor."

The men exchanged a steely glance, then Nicholas turned away, his cloak flaring behind him. By the time Anthony returned with two mugs of ale, Alexander's guest was gone.



VIVIENNE WAS POSSESSED of a new restlessness since her return from Madeline's new abode at Caerwyn. It was more than the rigor of routine after the adventure of pursuing Madeline and Rhys clear across England with several of her siblings. It was more than missing Madeline, though they two had shared more secrets with each other than with their other sisters.

It was the smile that Madeline had gained upon her journey that was at root of Vivienne's dissatisfaction. It was a curious smile, both content and teasing, a smile that Madeline bestowed upon her husband in the most unexpected moments, a smile that claimed Madeline's lips when her hand stole over the curve of her belly, a smile that turned mysterious when Vivienne asked about matters abed.

It was a smile that haunted Vivienne, even after she was no longer in her sister's presence. Madeline knew something—and Vivienne had a fair guess what that

something involved—that Vivienne did not. That created a new gulf between the sisters, one wider than the distance that separated them.

Vivienne had never been one to take well to mysteries or matters left undiscussed. She had never been able to keep a secret and usually failed to surprise her siblings, for she could not refrain from sharing the details of any scheme or gift in advance. And she had never had any capacity for patience.

She wanted to know what Madeline knew and she wanted to know immediately, if not sooner.

Vivienne knew that Alexander wished to see her wed, as well, and she was willing to make vows before the altar. She wanted, however, to pledge herself to a man she loved, as maidens and knights loved in her favored tales.

There were not so many women who smiled as Madeline did. Vivienne aimed to be one of them. She had attended every social event of which she heard tell, she had begged Alexander to accompany her to York and to Edinburgh and to Newcastle, she had met every eligible man with optimism.

To no avail. Not a one of them had made her yearn to know more about him. Indeed, Vivienne felt little but desperation. She knew that Alexander would not be patient forever—after all, she had already seen twenty-one summers. Time and the right to choose were slipping away from her, like sand flowing through a glass.

Surely Vivienne, who loved happy tales so well, could not be destined to be live her days unhappily?

Vivienne had a certainty that there were critical moments of choice in each person's life, moments which led irrevocably from the most minute decision to events of great import. The moment her parents had chosen to buy

passage upon a specific ship had been a decision of enormous consequence. Once they had boarded the ship and set sail, there had been little or nothing they could have done to avoid the sinking of that ship and the loss of their lives.

The moment in which Madeline had chosen to flee her betrothed, Rhys, had been another of those choices, albeit one which had set a happier sequence of events in motion. Vivienne knew that there must be one such moment in her own life, but as the days passed and no man caught her eye, she began to fear that she had missed her chance.

What if marital happiness could only be found by women like Madeline? As her elder sister, Madeline had always marked an impossible standard for Vivienne to meet. Not only did Madeline do every deed first, but her nature had always been more calm than Vivienne's own. Madeline was less inclined to make impulsive choices than Vivienne, and seldom had any reason to apologize to another member of the family.

Worse, Madeline had always been impeccably groomed. Her hair remained in its braid, her veil never slipped, her hem never tore. Vivienne was plagued by all three flaws, her unruly hair alone prompting sighs from every maid who had ever been compelled to serve her. Madeline had never lost a glove or a shoe or a stocking, while Vivienne had lost so many that the odds often made new pairs. Madeline had been the echo of their mother, composed even as a child, while Vivienne looked unkempt no matter how hard she tried.

Could it be that love was only for those women as composed as Madeline and their mother, Catherine? What if men only found tidy women alluring? The prospect was terrifying to Vivienne.

Hope is a potent elixir, especially for those such as Vivienne, who have drunk heartily from its cup, but even Vivienne's hope began to waver as August evenings took winter's chill.

If only she still had the chance to make her choice!



AS A RESULT OF THIS FRETTING, Vivienne had so little appetite at the board on Friday night that her mood did not escape notice. Even the absence of Ross and Malcolm had not diminished the teasing between the siblings who remained at Kinfairlie, and Vivienne was convinced that her three younger sisters had vision like hawks.

"Do you not want your fish?" Isabella demanded. Already as tall as Vivienne, Isabella had recently begun to grow with vigor, and her appetite showed similar might. "The sauce is quite delicious. I could eat another piece, if you intend to waste it."

Vivienne pushed her trencher toward her sister. "Consider it your own." Isabella attacked the fish with such enthusiasm that she might not have eaten for a week.

"Did you not like it?" quiet Annelise asked, her concern evident. Annelise was the next youngest sister after Vivienne, the two absent brothers between them in age. "I suggested to the cook that she use dill in the sauce, as it would be a change. It was not my intent to displease you."

"The sauce is delicious, as Isabella said," Vivienne said with a smile. "I am not hungry this evening, that is all."

"Are you ill?" Elizabeth, the youngest of them all, asked.