

*New York Times and USA Today
Bestselling Author*

TANYA ANNE CROSBY



LYON'S GIFT

BOOK #2 THE HIGHLAND BRIDES

Lyon's
Gift

TANYA ANNE CROSBY

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Dedication

For Chaise

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Tanya Anne Crosby

THE MACKINNON'S BRIDE
ON BENDED KNEE
LION HEART

LION HEART coming soon as e-book

Prologue

The forest was their sanctuary.

Meghan and her grandmother had spent many a morning in the dimness of the woodland, gathering herbs for her grandmother's potions. Just now they were searching for sweetbriar upon MacLean land, and Meghan was on her hands and knees, crawling across the ground at the forest's edge, painstakingly inspecting foliage.

They were not supposed to be here, she knew, as old man MacLean was apt to be angry if he discovered them once more upon his land. Last time he had accused her Minnie of poaching, though there had not been a whit of evidence in their sack. All they had borne away with them that day were weeds and little more. He did not know her grandmother if he thought she would do such a thing; her Minnie would never eat an animal if she looked the creature in the eyes beforehand.

"Ye dinna have to look so carefully, Meghan!" her grandmother directed. "'Tis not so wee a plant, child—more like a shrub!"

"I remember, Minnie, and you said look for the pink flowers, too. So I'm looking, but I dinna see any!"

"Och, lass! That's because you're crawling on your belly like a bloody viper! Get yourself up before you grind the dirt into your sweet knees!"

Meghan peered back at her grandmother over her shoulder, watching her an instant. The old woman was hunched over, scanning the plants, murmuring to herself as she scrutinized each one. Every so oft she would bend to pluck a sample and then crush it between her fingers.

"Be careful with the thorns," her grandmother said absently as she inspected a small branch of some plant.

"I will!" Meghan promised, though she wished her Minnie wouldn't treat her like a wee bairn. She was all of eight summers now, and not

nearly so little anymore.

Her grandmother, oblivious to her complaint, began to sing and dance.

*“Wretched mon, why art thou proud,
That art of earth made?
Hide not behind your shroud!
But fore thou came naked!”*

Meghan giggled at the sight of her, dancing so lively, and felt warmed by the old woman’s joy.

“Ta ta dum, da dum, da dum,” her grandmother hummed.

Meghan made to rise, except that in that instant she spotted a face peering out at her from behind a wide oak and she gave a startled blink. The face was just about the size of her own, and the eyes were wide and full with fright. They were visible only an instant and then they vanished behind the tree.

Her grandmother carried on.

*“When thy soul have journeyed out,
Thy body with the earth covered over!
That body that was so haughty and loud Of all men is hated!
Ta dum dee dum, dee dum!”*

“Och, Meghan!” she called out suddenly.

“Aye,” Meghan replied, turning to peer over her shoulder to see if her Minnie had noticed the face too.

“*Never* let a handsome smile turn your head and woo your heart, d’ ye hear me, lass?”

“Aye, Minnie,” she replied, confused. She didn’t have any notion why her Minnie was so concerned with boys. Meghan certainly wasn’t.

“Ye know that Adam took that apple all on his own, d’ ye not? Bluidy knave blamed it on Eve because he did not have the nuts to take the burden on his own!”

Meghan rolled her eyes, having heard this tale more times than she could count.

“It serves him right that Eve shoved that apple down his cowardly throat and that he bears it still!”

“Aye,” Meghan answered absently, and crawled closer to the tree, her heart pounding within her breast. The face did not peek out again, even when she’d reached the trunk, and she was sorely afraid they’d scared her off. Holding her breath, she craned her head around the tree trunk, and gasped at the sight of a wide pair of eyes as green as her own staring back.

“Oh!” Meghan exclaimed. “There you are! I feared you’d run away!”

The little girl said nothing, merely stared at Meghan and cast nervous glances over Meghan’s shoulder at her grandmother still carrying on behind her like a mad woman. Meghan turned and appraised her grandmother an instant, seeing her through another’s eyes, and frowned. Her grandmother suddenly fell to the ground upon her knees, cackling in delight at some discovery she made, and Meghan winced at the sight she presented.

“She’ll not hurt you, I promise,” Meghan swore, turning back to the little girl. “She’s not really mad, she’s just my Minnie.”

The little girl’s face was frozen in an expression of doubt and her eyes shifted warily to Meghan’s grandmother.

“Och, Meghan!” her grandmother said, “I believe I’ve discovered something here!”

The little girl's eyes widened in sudden fear.

Meghan shook her head. "Don't worry," she said, understanding the girl's alarm. "I willna tell her you are here." Meghan smiled at her and then called out, "What is it, Minnie?"

"Touch-me-nots!" her grandmother declared.

Meghan loved the delight with which her grandmother embraced all things great and small.

"What is it good for?" Meghan asked, trying to keep her grandmother's attention from turning to their unexpected guest.

"Not a bluidy thing!" her grandmother said and cackled. "Have you ever seen such a thing, Meghan?"

"Nay, mum," Meghan replied, glancing again at her grandmother who was now lying upon her belly on the bracken of the woodland floor.

And she would have had Meghan get up off her knees? Meghan rolled her eyes again.

"Looky here! Ye touch the bluidy little buggers and the pods burst with seeds!" Meghan watched her grandmother poke her finger at a few, and then listened to her laugh uproariously.

She turned back to the little girl. "I am Meghan," she said to the girl. "What's your name?"

"Alison," the little girl replied, still staring at the cackling old woman.

"We're looking for sweetbriar," Meghan shared.

"Why?" Alison whispered.

"I don't know," Meghan whispered back. "For my Minnie's potions." And then she realized how her disclosure must sound and winced.

"To turn people into toads?" the little girl asked with no small measure of concern.