

Tempting the Highlander (Pine Creek Highlanders Series Book 4)

By Janet Chapman



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She has the power to tempt him beyond all reason....

Catherine Daniels arrives in Pine Creek, Maine, at just the right time for Robbie MacBain. She is on the run from her ex-husband, and Robbie is a sexy, single foster parent who needs a housekeeper while he travels back in time to medieval Scotland. Unbeknownst to Catherine, Robbie's looking for a book of spells to save the future of his family...and little did he expect to find a burning passion in Catherine's arms. Can Robbie seal his family's fate while enticing Catherine to follow him and her own heart wherever love will take them?



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Editorial Review

From Booklist

Catherine and her two small children travel to remote Pine Creek, Maine, to escape her abusive ex-husband, and then she runs away from Robbie MacBain after raiding his hen house for eggs. Robbie is impressed with his little thief, and hopes to catch up with her and help her as he does anyone in trouble. Robbie is the guardian for his unusual family--his parents, uncles, and four foster boys deemed incorrigible by the state-but that's not all that makes him unusual. Robbie's family has traveled from thirteenth-century Scotland to modern-day Maine because of a mischievous wizard who now needs Robbie to travel back in time. After Robbie convinces Catherine to become his housekeeper, he embarks on his journey, which takes him away at night but brings him home in the morning. Catherine starts to trust the imposing Scotsman but believes he needs someone to watch over him as he watches over everyone else. An improbable plot that works because of the interesting characters, this is a wonderful addition to Chapman's Highlander trilogy. *Patty Engelmann Copyright* © *American Library Association*. *All rights reserved*

About the Author

A native of rural central Maine, Janet Chapman lives there in a cozy log cabin on a lake with her husband. Three cats and a stray young bull moose keep them company. The author of the hugely popular Highlander time-travel series, she also writes contemporary romances.

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Chapter One

Come on, baby. Give it to me, you sweet thing."

Robbie MacBain came awake totally alert and battle-ready, with absolutely no idea what was going on.

"That's it. Move for me, baby."

What the hell? He had *not* gone to bed with a woman, so he shouldn't be hearing a husky, seductive voice in his ear. He knew he was in his bedroom at the farm, but, more important, he knew he was alone.

"Just a little bit more, sweetie."

Robbie sat bolt upright in bed and tried to see through the darkness. Nothing. No woman. Yet her voice had been quite distinct -- and soft and sexy and close.

"Come on," she whispered with fading patience. "I've got to get going. Oh, for God's sakes, just move!"

At the squawking of several disgruntled hens, Robbie snapped his head toward the baby monitor on his nightstand. And he cursed, throwing back the covers and jumping out of bed.

The henhouse.

He was supposed to be guarding the henhouse.

He scrambled into his pants and grabbed his shirt, stopping only long enough to glance at the clock by his bed. Five-thirty, he saw, breaking into a grin as he slipped on his shirt and found his socks.

Deciding earlier that he didn't need to be sleeping outside on this cold March night, he had put the baby monitor in with the hens and let the electronic device do his job. And it had worked, he decided as he hopped first on one foot and then the other, pulling on his boots and tying them.

This was the third henhouse raid this week. Only half a dozen eggs were taken each time, and there was always a dollar bill left in their place. But it was the principle of the thing. Someone was *buying* his eggs. He didn't much care for mysteries, and that sexy-voiced woman on the monitor was one mystery he was suddenly eager to solve.

Robbie ran down the stairs and skidded to a halt in the kitchen. Quietly, he opened the farmhouse door and crept onto the moon-shadowed porch just as the woman came sneaking out of the henhouse.

He blinked into the night. If he hadn't just heard her voice on the monitor, he would swear his thief was a kid. She looked like a child, squatting beside a backpack as she carefully placed her stolen breakfast in it.

She spotted him when he stepped off the porch.

She dropped two of the eggs when she stood with a startled squeak, swung the pack onto her back, and bolted for the pasture.

"Hey! Hold it!"

She scaled the paddock fence with the agility of a cat.

With an utterly male grin Robbie broke into a run. His thief certainly had a nice rear end. And he also happened to notice, as he vaulted over the fence himself, that what height she did have came from a pair of long legs that swiftly carried her into the night.

But he was six-foot-seven in his socks, and Robbie didn't doubt for a minute he would quickly run her to ground. Then he'd find out who she was and what she was doing stealing his eggs.

Robbie's smile was gone a little over a mile later. She was getting away! Rasping for breath through gritted teeth, Robbie forced his legs to move faster. He'd arrogantly told his boys that he could catch a simple egg thief, and "No, thank you," he didn't need their adolescent help. He was not about to let last night's bragging to them turn into hoots of laughter this morning.

Robbie chased the woman for nearly two miles before he finally realized he wasn't going to catch her. The long-legged little cat had left the pasture, sprinted down the gully and over the knoll, and disappeared into the thick forest of TarStone Mountain.

Dammit! It was a cold walk back in the stingy morning light. Robbie used up most of his litany of curses during the first mile of his return and was down to swearing in Gaelic by the time he reached his yard.

He stopped in the middle of two dozen foraging chickens that had escaped out the open henhouse door, and looked back at TarStone to see the rising sun peeking over its summit.

"It looks like scrambled money for breakfast again," Cody said as he stepped out of the henhouse, snapping a wrinkled dollar bill between his hands. "We got any cheese to go with this?" he continued despite Robbie's warning glare. "Ain't nothing like burnt toast and dollar-bill omelets to start the day right."

Robbie took a threatening step forward.

The sixteen-year-old juvenile delinquent pocketed the dollar bill, crossed his arms over his chest, and smiled. "Is that egg I see on your face, boss?" he asked.

Robbie also folded his arms over his chest. "No, you're seeing my decision that you're cooking breakfast."

Cody's smile disappeared. "I cooked yesterday."

"You did such a fine job and you can do it again today."

Muttering what Robbie guessed was a nasty curse, Cody stomped off toward the house. The screen door opened and Gunter stepped onto the porch, moving aside to let Cody go slamming past him.

Robbie sighed. Gunter wasn't dressed for school, but for work. With his arms still crossed over his chest, Robbie turned to face his next challenge.

"Harley called. Two of the loggers are sick," Gunter said as he approached. "So I'm going to work today."

Robbie wasn't surprised that the eighteen-year-old would rather spend a day of hard labor in the woods than go to school. Hell, Gunter would rather muck out stalls than go to school.

"Harley said two loads of saw logs are leaving today," Gunter continued, stopping in front of Robbie, his nearly black eyes more eager than defensive for a change. "You need me to run the loader."

"I can run the loader."

"You have a meeting with Judge Judy this morning."

Damn. He did. And those saw logs needed to go out today.

"Her name is Judge Bailey, and she's all that's standing between you and an eight-by-ten cell."

"I only have metal shop and one regular class today," Gunter continued. "I'll make it up tomorrow."

Robbie returned Gunter's direct stare and weighed the boy's need for an education against his desire to escape the structure of the classroom.

Hell, everyone needed a safety valve occasionally, and a long day working in the woods just might serve to remind Gunter that an education would make him an easier living.

Besides, the kid deserved a reward for going two whole months without starting a fight at school.

Robbie nodded agreement. "Tell Harley I'll come out to the site after my meeting with Bailey. And Gunter?" he said as the boy turned to leave. "You only have ten weeks left to get your diploma. Anyone can endure

anything for ten weeks."

A faint grin appeared on Gunter's usually stoic face. "I've endured your cooking for a month," he said softly.

Bolstered by that grin, Robbie smiled. "Gram Katie is bringing over a lasagna for us tonight," he offered in concession. "With salad and homemade rolls."

Gunter turned fully to face Robbie, his expression serious. "When are you going to look for another housekeeper?"

Robbie shook his head. "Word's out about you hoodlums. I couldn't offer enough money to bring another woman here."

"We've learned our lesson," Gunter said. "If it will save us from your cooking and doing our own laundry, we'll treat her like the queen herself."

"I'll be sure to put that in the ad," Robbie said, turning at the sound of a cane tapping a hurried rhythm on gravel.

Gunter turned, too. And seeing Father Daar walking down the driveway from the woods, the boy spun on his heel and sprinted for the house.

It took all of Robbie's willpower not to do the same.

"I'm wanting a word with you, Robbie," Daar said, using his cane to scatter the chickens. "I need your help on a matter."

"If this is about your well pump, I've already ordered a new one," Robbie said, hoping to forestall the old priest who lived in a cabin halfway up TarStone Mountain. "It'll be in tomorrow, and the boys and I will install it after school."

Daar was shaking his head. "I'm not here about the pump." He stepped closer and lowered his voice when Rick came rushing out of the house. "It's a bit more important than that."

"Peter overstuffed the dryer again and started a fire!" Rick shouted from the porch. "Where's the extinguisher?"

Robbie bolted for the house, leaving the priest in a flurry of flapping hens. This was all he needed, for his mother's old homestead -- which had survived four generations of Sutters -- to be burned to the ground by a fifteen-year-old delinquent who thought household appliances were really demons trying to suck him into the netherworld.

This was the second fire Peter had started this month. Three weeks ago, it had been the toaster, along with the curtains, and part of one cupboard that had gone up in flames. They still hadn't gotten the smell out of the house.

Robbie grabbed the fire extinguisher hanging on a peg not two feet behind Rick, ran into the laundry room, and doused the flames already spreading up the wall.

Stepping back into the kitchen, wiping powder off his face, Robbie scanned the group of wide-eyed young men staring at him as if he held their fates in his hand. Which he did.

Four boys, all wards of the state, all in his care for the last eight months. Well, except for Gunter. Gunter had been liberated on his eighteenth birthday six weeks ago, but the boy seemed in no hurry to leave.

That was fine with Robbie. For as long as it took Gunter to get a toehold on life, he would have a home here.

Much to Judge Bailey's dismay.

Bailey did not care to see the other three boys, especially fifteen-year-old Peter, living under the same roof with a known brawler who was nefarious in three county courtrooms and assorted detention centers. Hence today's meeting.

f0 "You moron!" Rick said, punching Peter in the arm. "Are you trying to get us sent back to foster care?"

"What in hell is this place?" Peter growled, rubbing his arm and glaring at his older brother.

"This ain't no foster home," Rick snapped. "And it's a hell of a lot better than the detention center. Dammit, I'm not leaving here because of you," he said, moving to punch him again.

Robbie caught Rick's fist in his own. "Nobody is going anywhere but to school," he said softly. "If the house burns down, we'll live in the barn. You're all staying here until you decide you'd rather be someplace else."

"It would be easier if you'd just hire a new housekeeper," Cody said, pulling his burning toast from the shiny new toaster.

"We'd have a housekeeper if you hadn't run off the last three," Robbie reminded him.

"None of them had a sense of humor," Cody said with a snort, scraping the black off his toast into the sink.

"I'll be sure to put that in the ad," Robbie said, setting the empty fire extinguisher by the door to take to town and refill again. He headed into the downstairs bathroom to wash his face and hands. "You boys have to take the school bus today," he said through the open door. "Gunter, take the pickup to work." He stepped back out of the bathroom, wiping his hands on his shirttail because he couldn't find a towel. "And don't go anywhere but to work and back," he warned, giving the youth a level stare. "And don't make me sorry for letting you miss school," he added quietly.

"How come Gunter isn't going to school?" Peter asked.

"Because I already learned how to run a dryer and a toaster without starting a fire," Gunter told him.

"Where? In home ec?"

It took only a threatening step forward from Robbie to stop Gunter's advance on Peter and a warning growl to get all four boys moving toward the door.

" 'Morning, Father," Cody said around a mouthful of toast as he stepped aside to let the priest in the house.

" 'Morning, Father," Gunter mumbled as he squeezed by.

" 'Morning, Father," both Rick and Peter said as they rushed out to the safety of the yard.

Daar gave each of them a silent glare as they strode past.

Robbie couldn't help but smile. For the last eight months, the old priest had used sheer terror to bully the boys into respecting him. Daar had given them a piercing glare upon their arrival, pointed his cherrywood cane at them, explained he was really a wizard, and warned that if they didn't act civil around him, he'd turn them all into dung beetles with his powerful staff.

They'd nodded respectfully, only to roll their eyes at each other once they turned away, apparently deciding to humor the obviously crazy old man.

Robbie wondered what their reaction would be if they knew Daar really was a wizard?

His full name was Pendaär, and besides turning delinquents into dung beetles, the ancient *drùidh* was also capable of bringing ten Highland warriors eight hundred years forward through time. Robbie knew this because his father, Michael MacBain, had been born in twelfth-century Scotland. So had Robbie's uncle Greylen MacKeage, along with Morgan, Ian, and Callum MacKeage.

And since providence had seen fit to gift Robbie with the powers of guardianship over his two clans, the warriors had happily dropped Daar's care onto his capable shoulders about five years ago, after many lectures that Robbie not believe *anything* the old priest told him. It had been a long five years, with innumerable escapades that could have turned into disasters but for Robbie's vigilance.

"About my little matter," Daar said, waving a hand through the lingering smoke as he made his way to the kitchen table.

"I'm afraid it will have to wait," Robbie said, going over to the counter and pouring them both a cup of coffee. "My day just filled up. I now have to buy a clothes dryer on my way to see Judge Bailey."

Daar snorted and thumped his cane on the floor. "I could take care of that old hag if you'd let me."

"Martha Bailey is not old and she's not a hag," Robbie told him, setting a cup of coffee in front of him. "She's only doing her job." He took a seat at the table. "And our deal is you don't mess with the magic if you want to stay living on TarStone Mountain."

Daar harrumphed, took a sip of his coffee, and shuddered in disgust before taking another sip.

Robbie took a sip of his own coffee, stood up, dumped it down the sink, and went to the fridge to look for some juice.

"My matter can't wait," Daar said. "The vernal equinox is tomorrow."

Robbie stilled, the fine hairs on the back of his neck rising in alarm. He slowly straightened from peering into the fridge and looked at the priest. "What's so important about the vernal equinox?"

"All the planets will be lined up just right."

"Right for what?"

"To fix this little problem we have."

It was the "we" that most alarmed Robbie. Daar's little problems had a way of becoming huge headaches for Robbie, and when "we" was attached, it usually meant a full-blown migraine.

Robbie closed the fridge door, set his fists on his hips, and glared at the priest. "And what exactly is *our* problem?"

Daar turned away to face the table and spoke to his coffee cup. "Your papa and the others are going back to their old time come June," he whispered.

Robbie could only stare at Daar's back.

"I have only three months to extend the spell that brought them here," the *drùidh* continued to his coffee. He finally turned to look at Robbie. "They will have been here thirty-five years on this summer's solstice, and that's when the spell runs out."

It wasn't a headache Robbie felt but a painful pounding in his chest that made it difficult to breathe. He was going to lose his father in three months? And Grey and the others? Dammit. They had wives. And children. And a supposedly stable life here.

"Say something," Daar whispered.

"Make it stop!"

"I've tried!" the priest snapped back, thumping his cane on the floor again. "I nearly blew up the summit house trying, and I started a landslide down TarStone!"

"That landslide was you?" Robbie whispered, his head filling with images of the destruction. "And the summit house fire last month? You started that?"

Daar looked down at his cane, rubbing one of the weathered cherrywood burls with an age-bent hand. "I also caused the flood that took out the town bridge last week." He lifted his chin. "I was trying to figure out a new spell to extend the old one."

Robbie ran an unsteady hand over his face. "Let me get this straight. You've known about this...this thirty-five-year time limit all along, and you're just telling us now?"

"Not *us*," Daar said, his eyes widening in alarm. "Just you. Laird Greylen and the others can't know about this."

"Why not? It's their lives about to be destroyed."

"But we can stop it," Daar said with an eager nod. "You'll go back in time and get me a new book of spells, and then I'll be able to extend the old spell to keep them here."

Still standing by the fridge, still reeling in shock, Robbie slowly shook his head. "Oh, no. I know all about

your attempts to replace the book you blew up twenty years ago. As long as you don't have those spells, we are all safe -- fires and landslides and floods notwithstanding."

"But that's what I'm trying to tell you. The five remaining Highlanders are *not* safe. Come the summer solstice, they're headed back home."

"They are home!"

"To their old home!" Daar shouted. He heaved a huge sigh. "Robbie," he said softly, getting up and coming to stand in front of him. "I brought Greylen MacKeage here to father my heir. Ya know that already. But what nobody knows is that I only needed him here long enough to sire seven daughters and protect his youngest girl, Winter, until she's old enough to begin training as my successor. For me to have cast a permanent spell, I would have had to make concessions."

"What kind of concessions?"

Daar took a step back. "I would have had to live out the rest of my unnatural life in modern time."

Robbie stepped forward. "So, for your own selfishness, you chose to rip apart the lives of five men. Twice!"

Daar raised his cane as a puny defense. "I wasn't thinking that far ahead. And it was only supposed to be Greylen, not the others. They were an accident."

"Which makes me what? Another accident?"

Daar frantically shook his head. "Nay. You are their salvation. You were born their guardian and have become a fine warrior, Robbie. And now it's time to fulfill your destiny."

"By getting you a book of spells and restoring you to full power," Robbie said, crossing his arms over his chest and settling his weight back on his hips. "How very convenient that my destiny perfectly matches your need."

Daar gasped, stepping back and bumping into the table. "Ya think I'm lying?" He pointed his cane at Robbie. "A pox on ya, MacBain! I'm a priest!"

Robbie sprang from his negligent pose and advanced on the priest until that cane was touching his chest. He towered over the *drùidh* and gave him a look so threatening that Daar stumbled backward into his chair and sat down with a thud. "Don't even attempt to curse me, old man," Robbie whispered. "My guardianship over my two clans is protected by divine right." He leaned even closer, glaring into Daar's widened blue eyes. "You've been allowed to live here only because Winter MacKeage will need your help in the future. And until then, you will stay quietly up at your cabin and consider yourself lucky to be under the protection of a benevolent laird. Because," he continued, pulling the cane from between them and tossing it onto the table, "I would not be as forgiving as Laird Greylen if you had interfered in my life the way you did his."

"It...everything worked out for him. He loves his wife and daughters and his new life here. All the Highlanders are happy."

Robbie grunted, straightening away from him. "Only because you can't further interfere in their lives."

"I'm not completely powerless," the *drùidh* said, defiantly lifting his chin now that there was some distance between them.

"Aye. You can still start fires and floods and landslides."

"I can still travel through time," Daar added, once again leaning forward. "And the planets will be lined up just right tomorrow eve."

Robbie closed his eyes and scrubbed his face with both hands before looking back at the tenacious old priest. He heaved a weary sigh. "There will be no time travel, *drùidh*. No spells and no book."

"Then in three months, there will be five fewer men living in Pine Creek," Daar returned. "It's going to happen, Robbie, whether ya like it or not. Unless," he quickly added, "ya travel to thirteenth-century Scotland and get me a new book."

Robbie stared at him in silence. How many times had he been warned not to believe Daar? And how many tales had the old priest spun over the last five years, attempting to gain Robbie's help in replacing his book of spells? But this was by far the most devious story to date. Daar knew Robbie would do *anything* to protect his family.

"No," Robbie growled.

"Meet me on the summit of TarStone at sunset tomorrow," Daar said, grabbing his cane and standing. "And bring yar sword."

"No."

"Ya might want to find the MacBain plaid your papa was wearing when he came here," the priest continued, walking to the door. "Ya can't wear clothes made of modern materials or take anything else with you that hadn't been invented back then."

"No."

Daar stopped, his gaze lifted to the ceiling but focused inwardly in thought. "I should probably send ya back about ten years after the Highlanders disappeared."

"I'm not getting your book, old man."

Daar leveled his crystal-clear blue eyes on Robbie. "Ya have no choice," he softly told him. "Not if ya want your family to stay intact. Tomorrow at sunset on the summit," he said, turning and walking out the door.

Robbie stood rooted in place for several seconds, then rushed out onto the porch. "Why me?" he asked the retreating priest. "Why not Greylen or my father or Morgan? They know that time, the ways of the people, and the terrain."

Daar stopped in the middle of the driveway and turned to face him. "Though still vital men, they're too old, Robbie," he said. "I'm needing a powerful warrior in his prime. Someone strong and cunning and capable, who can be lethal if need be."

"What about Callum's son? Or one of Morgan's boys?"

Daar shook his head. "Their strengths run to business, not warring. MacBain raised you as a guardian. He understood your calling and prepared you well." Daar shot him a crooked grin. "I'm thinking your short career as a modern soldier may also prove helpful, though you won't be able to take any modern weapons with you."

"It's a moot point, because I am not going."

"Then I suggest ya enjoy what little time ya have left with your papa and uncles," Daar said, turning away and walking into the woods.

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