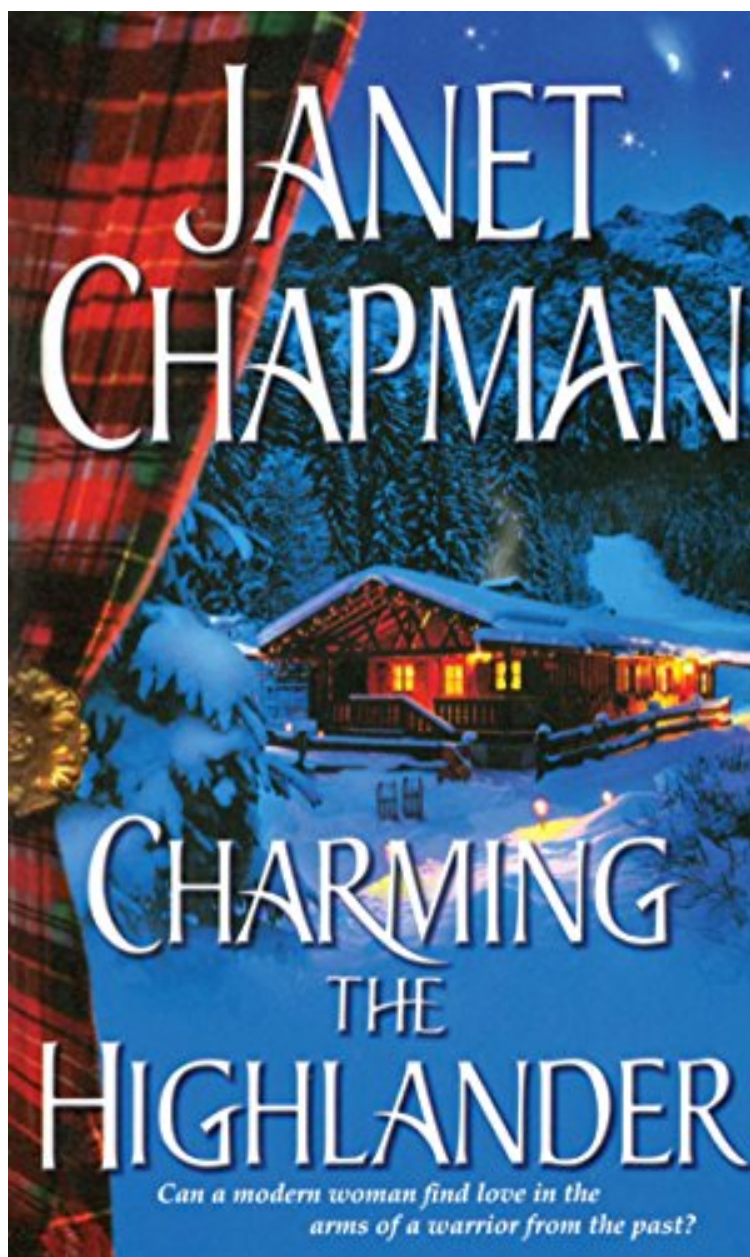


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## Charming the Highlander



*Par Janet Chapman*  
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Extrait Chapter One

Early winter in modern-day America It was sheer stubbornness keeping Mary Sutter alive now. She still had something she needed to say, and she refused to give in to the lure of death until she was done giving her instructions to her sister, Grace. Grace sat by the hospital bed, her eyes swollen with unshed tears and her heart breaking as she watched Mary struggle to speak. The gentle beeps and soft hums were gone; the countless medical machines monitoring her decline had been removed just an hour ago. A pregnant stillness had settled over the room in their stead. Grace sat in painful silence, willing her sister to live. The phone call telling Grace of the automobile accident had come at noon yesterday. By the time she had arrived at the hospital, Mary's child had already been born, taken from his mother by emergency surgery. And by six this morning, the doctors had finally conceded that her sister was dying. Younger by three years, Mary had always been the more practical of the two sisters, the down-to-earth one. She'd also been the bossier of the two girls. By the time she was five, Mary had been ruling the Sutter household by imposing her will on their aging parents, her older half brothers still living at home, and Grace. And when their parents had died nine years ago in a boating accident, it had been eighteen-year-old Mary who had handled the tragedy. Their six half brothers had come home from all four corners of the world, only to be told their only chore was that of pallbearers to their father and stepmother. After the beautiful but painful ceremony, the six brothers had returned to their families and jobs, Grace had gone back to Boston to finish her doctorate in mathematical physics, and Mary had stayed in Pine Creek, Maine, claiming the aged Sutter homestead as her own. Which was why, when Mary had shown up on her doorstep in Norfolk, Virginia, four months ago, Grace had been truly surprised. It would take something mighty powerful to roust her sister out of the woods she loved so much. But Mary only had to take off her jacket for Grace to understand. Her sister was pregnant. Mary was just beginning to show when she had arrived, and it was immediately obvious to Grace that her sister didn't know what to do about the situation. They'd had several discussions over the last four months, some of them heated. But Mary, being the stubborn woman she was, refused to talk about the problem with Grace. She was there to gather her thoughts and her courage and decide what to do. Yes, she loved the baby's father more than life itself, but no, she wasn't sure she could marry him. Was he married to someone else? Grace had wanted to know. No. Did he live in the city, then? She'd have to move? No. Was he a convicted felon? Of course not. For the life of her, Grace could not get her sister to tell her why she couldn't go home and set a wedding date -- hopefully before the birth date. Mary wouldn't even tell her the man's name. She was closed-mouthed about everything except for the fact that he was a Scot and that he had arrived in Pine Creek just last year. They had met at a grange supper and had fallen madly in love over the next three months. She'd gotten pregnant the first time they made love. It was another four months of bliss, and then Mary's world had suddenly careened out of control. In the quiet evening hours during a walk one day, the Scot had told her a fantastical tale (Mary's words), and then he had asked her to marry him. Two days later Mary had arrived at Grace's home in Virginia. And for the last four months, Grace had asked Mary to reveal what the Scot had told her, but her sister had remained silent and brooding. Until she had announced yesterday, out of the blue and with a promise to explain everything later, that she was returning to Pine Creek. Only she hadn't been gone an hour when the phone call came. Mary had not even made it out of the city when her car had been pushed into the opposite lane of a six-lane highway by a drunk driver. It had taken the rescue team three hours to free Mary from what was left of her rental car. And now she was dying. And her new baby son was just down the hall, surprisingly healthy for having been pulled from the sanctuary of his mother's womb a whole month early. A nurse entered the room and checked the IV hooked up to Mary, then left just as silently, leaving Grace with only a sympathetic smile and a whisper that Grace should let her know if she needed anything. Grace rushed to follow her out the door. "Can she see the baby?" Grace asked the nurse. "Can she hold him?" The nurse contemplated the request for only a second. Her motherly face suddenly brightened. "I think I can arrange it," she said, nodding her approval. "Yes, I think we should get that baby in his mother's arms as soon as possible." She laid a gentle hand on Grace's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Miss Sutter, for what's happening here. But the accident did a lot of damage to your sister, and the emergency cesarean complicated things. Your sister's spleen was severely ruptured, and now her organs are shutting down one at a time. She just isn't responding to anything we try. It's a wonder she's even conscious." The nurse leaned in and said in

a whisper, as if they were in church, "They're calling him the miracle baby, you know. Not one scratch on his beautiful little body. And he's not even needing an incubator, although they have him in one as a precaution." Grace smiled back, but it was forced. "Please bring Mary her son," she said. "It's important she sees that he's okay. She's been asking about him." With that said, Grace returned to the room to find Mary awake. Her sister's sunken blue gaze followed her as she rounded the bed and sat down beside her again. "I want a promise," Mary said in a labored whisper. Grace carefully picked up Mary's IV-entangled hand and held it. "Anything," she told her, giving her fingers a gentle squeeze. "Just name it." Mary smiled weakly. "Now I know I'm dying," she said, trying to squeeze back. "You were eight the last time you promised me anything without knowing the facts first." Grace made a production of rolling her eyes at her sister, not letting her see how much that one simple word, dying, wounded her heart. She didn't want her sister to die. She wanted to go back just two days, to when they were arguing the way sisters did when they loved each other. "And I'll probably regret this promise just as much," Grace told her with false cheerfulness. Mary's eyes darkened. "Yes, you probably will." "Tell me," she told her sister. "I want you to promise to take my baby home to his father." Grace was stunned. She was expecting Mary to ask her to raise her son, not give him away. "Take him to his father?" Grace repeated, slowly shaking her head. "The same man you ran away from four months ago?" Mary weakly tightened her grip on Grace's hand. "I was running back to him yesterday," she reminded her. "I'm not making any promises until you tell me why you left Pine Creek in the first place. And what made you decide to return," Grace told her. "Tell me what scared you badly enough to leave." Mary stared blankly at nothing, and for a moment Grace was afraid she had lost consciousness. Mary's breathing came in short, shallow breaths that were slowly growing more labored. Her eyelids were heavy, her pupils glazed and distant. Grace feared her question had fallen on deaf ears. But then Mary quietly began to speak. "He scared me," she said. "When he told me his story, he scared the daylights out of me." "What story?" Grace asked, reaching for Mary's hand again. "What did he tell you?" Mary's eyes suddenly brightened with a spark of mischief. "Lift my bed," she instructed. "I want to see the look on your face, my scientist sister, when you hear what he told me." Grace pushed the bed's lift button and watched her sister sit up. Mary never called her a scientist unless she had some outrageous idea she wanted to convince her was possible. Grace was the rocket scientist, Mary was the dreamer. "Okay. Out with it," she demanded, seizing on that one little spark like a lifeline. She settled a pillow behind Mary's head. "What did lover boy tell you that made you run away?" "His name is Michael." "Finally. The man has a name. Michael what?" Mary didn't answer. She was already focused on gathering her words as she stared off into space over Grace's right shoulder. "He moved to Pine Creek from Nova Scotia," Mary said. "And before that he lived in Scotland." She turned her gaze to Grace, her drug-dilated, blue eyes suddenly looking apprehensive. "He told me he was born in Scotland." And then, in a near whisper, she added, "In the year 1171." Grace straightened in her chair and stared at Mary. "What?" she whispered back, convinced she had heard wrong. "When?" "In 1171." "You're meaning in November of 1971, right?" Mary slowly shook her head. "No. The year eleven hundred seventy-one. Eight hundred years ago." Grace thought about that. Fantastical was putting it mildly. But then she suddenly laughed softly. "Mary. You ran away from the man because he believes in reincarnation?" She waved her hand in the air. "Heck, half the population of the world believes they've led past lives. There are whole religions based on reincarnation." "No," Mary insisted, shaking her head. "That's not what Michael meant. He says he spent the first twenty-five years of his life in twelfth-century Scotland and the last four years here in modern-day North America. That a storm carried him through time." Grace was at a loss for words. "Actually," Mary continued, "five of his clan and their warhorses came with him." Grace sucked in her breath at the sorrow in her sister's eyes. "And where are these men now? And their...their...horses?" "They're dead," Mary said. "All of them. Michael's the last of his clan." Her features suddenly relaxed. "Except for his son now." She reached for Grace's hand and gripped it with surprising strength. "That's why I was going back. Family is important to Michael. He's all alone in this world, except for our baby. And that's why you have to take his son to him." Mary let out a tired breath. "I'm dying." She looked at Grace with sadly resigned eyes. "You have to do this for me, Gracie. And you have to tell Michael I love him." Tears were spilling over her cheeks. Grace stared down at her sister through tears of her own. "Will you listen to yourself, Mare? You're asking me to take your son to a madman. If he really believes he's traveled through time, then he's touched in the head. You want him bringing up your child?" Mary released a shuddering breath and closed her eyes again. A stillness settled over the room once more. Mary was asking her to take a child -- her nephew -- to a man who was not sane. Grace covered her face with her hands. How could Mary ask such a thing of her? And how could she not grant her sister's dying

wish?The door opened again with a muted whoosh, and Grace looked up to see a clear plastic basinet being wheeled into the room. White cotton-covered little arms waved in the air, the sleeves so long there was no sign of the tiny hands that should be sticking out of the ends.Grace had to wipe the tears from her eyes to see that Mary was awake again, straining to see her baby. "Oh, God. Look at him, Gracie," Mary whispered, reaching toward him with a shaking hand. "He's so tiny."The nurse placed the basinet next to the bed. She put a pillow on Mary's lap and carefully placed Mary's cast-covered right arm on top of it. Then she picked up the tiny, squeaking bundle from the basinet and gently settled him on the pillow in Mary's lap."He's so pink," Mary said, gently cupping his head. "And so beautiful." "He's thinking it's dinnertime," the nurse said. "You might as well feed him a bit of sugar water if you feel up to it." "Oh, yes," Mary said, already tugging at his blanket.The nurse repositioned him in the crook of Mary's broken arm and handed her a tiny bottle of clear liquid with a nipple on it. The tubes sticking in Mary's left hand tangled in her child's kicking feet. The nurse moved around the bed, handed the bottle to Grace, and carefully removed the IV from Mary's hand, covering it with a bandage she pulled from her smock."There. You don't really need this," she said, hanging the tubes on the IV stand. She took the bottle of sugar water back and stuck it in the fretting baby's mouth. Free now, Mary awkwardly but eagerly took over.The nurse watched for a minute, making sure Mary could handle the chore, then turned to Grace."I'm going to leave you in privacy," the nurse said, her eyes betraying her sadness as she smiled at Mary and her son. She looked back at Grace. "Just ring for me if you need anything. I'll come immediately."Panic immobilized Grace. The nurse was leaving them alone? Neither one of them knew a thing about babies."Look, Gracie. Isn't he beautiful?" Mary asked.pardGrace stood up and examined her nephew. Beautiful? He was unquestionably the homeliest baby she had ever seen. His puffy cheeks were red with exertion, his eyes were scrunched closed, his chin and neck blended into a series of overlapping wrinkles, and gobs of dark straight hair shot out from under a bright blue knit cap."He's gorgeous," she told Mary."Pull off his cap," her sister asked. "I want to see his hair."Grace gently eased off her nephew's cap but was immediately tempted to slip it back on. Two rather large, perfectly formed ears popped out a good inch from his head, pushing his now freed hair into frenzied spikes.He looked like a troll."Isn't he beautiful?" Mary repeated."He's gorgeous," Grace reconfirmed, trying with all her might to see her nephew the way her sister did. Mary was the animal lover in the Sutter household and was forever dragging home scruffy kittens, wounded birds and chipmunks, and mangy dogs. It was no wonder Mary thought her little son was precious.He was. Homely, but precious."Let's undress him," Mary said. "Help me count his fingers and toes."Startled, Grace looked at her sister. "Count them? Why? Do you think he's missing some?"Mary gave a weak laugh as she wiped her son's mouth with the edge of his blanket. "Of course not. That's just what new mothers do."Grace decided to humor her sister. Gingerly, she attempted to undo the strings at the bottom of the tiny nightshirt. It was a difficult task as the baby, now happy with a full belly, kept kicking his legs as he mouthed giant bubbles from his pursed lips.Finally, with her two good hands and Mary's unsteady uninjured one, they freed his legs. Grace held up first one foot and then the other and counted his toes out loud.She counted them again.Twelve.Six on each tiny foot.Mary gave a weak shriek of joy. At least, it sounded joyful. Grace stared at her numbly."Gifts from his daddy," Mary said in a winded whisper. "Michael has six toes on each foot."And this was a joyful thing? Grace wanted to ask. Being deformed was good?"Pull his shirt and diaper off," Mary said then. "I want to see him naked."Grace was afraid to. What other surprises was the clothing hiding? But she did as her sister asked, even though she feared the tiny baby would break from her handling. She didn't know what she was doing. Heck, she hadn't even played with dolls when she was a kid. She had hiked and fished with her father until she was eight, until one of her older brothers had brought home a biography of Albert Einstein and she had discovered the world of science. From then on it was telescopes, science books, and mathematical formulas written on chalkboards.Grace took off the baby's nightshirt and peeled off the diaper. She gasped and quickly covered him back up.Mary pulled the diaper completely off. "You're a prude, Gracie," Mary said, cupping her baby's bottom. "He's supposed to look like that. He'll grow into it." Mary traced the outline of his face, then possessively rubbed her fingers over his entire body. "Get a new diaper before we get sprayed," she said. Grace quickly complied. And between the two of them and their three hands, they eventually got him changed and back into his nightshirt.Grace was just retying the strings at his feet when she noticed a tear fall onto her hand. She stopped and looked up to find Mary silently crying as she stared down at her son."What's the matter, Mare? Are you in pain?" she asked, holding the baby's feet so they couldn't kick out and hurt her.Mary slowly shook her head, never taking her eyes off her son as she ran a finger over his cheek again. "I want to see him grow up," she whispered in a voice that was growing more fatigued, more faint, by the

minute. She looked at Grace. "I want to be there for him when he falls and skins his knee, catches his first snake, kisses his first girl, and gets his heart broken every other day." Grace flinched as if she'd been struck. She closed her eyes against the pain that welled up in her throat, forcing herself not to cry. Mary reached up and rubbed her trembling finger over Grace's cheek, just as she had done to her son's. "So it's up to you, Gracie. You have to be there for him, for me. Take him to his daddy, and be there for both of them. Promise me?" "He's not sane, Mary. He thinks he traveled through time." Mary looked back at her son. "Maybe he did." Grace wanted to scream. Were the drugs in her sister's body clouding her judgment? Was she so fatigued, so mentally weakened, that she didn't realize what she was asking? "Mary," she said, taking her sister by the chin and making her look at her. "People can't travel through time." "I don't care if he came from Mars, Gracie. I love him. And he will love our son more than anyone else can. They need each other, and I need your promise to bring them together." Grace walked away from the bed to look out the window. She was loath to grant such a promise. She didn't know a thing about babies, but she was intelligent and financially stable. How hard could it be to raise one little boy? She could read books on child-rearing and promise him a good life with lots of love and attention. She had never met this Michael the Scot, and she sure as heck didn't like what she did know about him. But then, she was even more reluctant to deny Mary her wish. This was the first time her sister had ever asked anything of her, and she was torn between her love for Mary and her worry for her nephew. "Come get in bed with us, Gracie," Mary said. "Just like we used to." Grace turned around to find Mary with her eyes closed and her child clutched tightly to her chest. The infant was sleeping. Grace returned to the bed and quickly lowered it. Without hesitation she kicked off her shoes, lowered the side bar, and climbed up beside her sister. Mary immediately snuggled against her. "Ummm. This is nice," Mary murmured, not opening her eyes. "When was the last time we shared a bed?" "Mom and Dad's funeral," Grace reminded her. She laid her hand on the baby's backside which was sticking up in the air. "Don't you think we should give this guy a name?" she asked, rubbing his back. "No. That's Michael's privilege," Mary said. "Until then, just call him Baby." "Baby what? You didn't tell me his father's last name." "It's MacBain. Michael MacBain. He bought the Bigelow Christmas Tree Farm." That was news to Grace. "What happened to John and Ellen Bigelow?" "They still live there. Michael moved in with them," Mary said, her voice growing distant. She turned and looked at Grace, her once beautiful, vibrant blue eyes now glazed with lackluster tears. "He's a good man, Gracie. As solid as a rock," she said, closing her eyes again. Except he believes he's eight hundred years old, Grace thought. She moved her hand from her nephew's bottom to her sister's hair, brushing it away from her forehead. "I'm still waiting for your promise," Mary said, turning her face into Grace's palm. Grace took a deep breath and finally spoke the words she had so stubbornly, and maybe selfishly, been avoiding. "I promise, Mare. I'll take your son to Michael MacBain." Mary kissed Grace's palm and sighed deeply, settling comfortably closer. "And you'll scatter my ashes on TarStone Mountain," she said then, her voice trailing off to a whisper. "On Summer Solstice morning." "On...on Summer Solstice. I promise." Grace left one hand cupping Mary's head and the other one cradling Baby as a patient, gentle peace returned to the room. Grace placed herself in the crook of her sister's shoulder, feeling the weakening drum of life beneath her tear-dampened cheek. In two hours it was over, without the pain of a struggle. Mary's heart simply stopped beating. The only sound that remained was the soft, gentle breathing of a sleeping baby. Copyright 2003 by Janet Chapman Presentation de l'diteur A feisty beauty tempted by a bold highlander's touch... When a plane crash strands brilliant scientist Grace Sutter on an icy mountaintop in Maine, she finds herself alone in the wilderness with the only other surviving passenger -- Greylen MacKeage, a sexy, medieval warrior who's been tossed through time to find the woman he's destined to love. Forced together to survive the harsh, wintry landscape, neither expects the fierce passion that flares between them. But Grace is not used to letting her heart take control, and Greylen will settle for nothing less than her heart's surrender...