

Chapter One Excerpt

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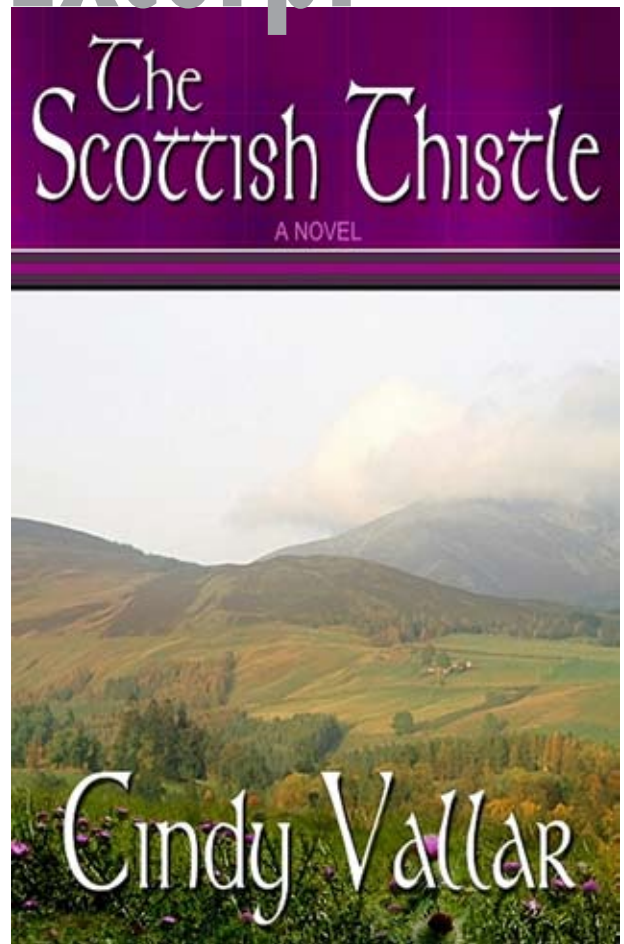
An historical novelist and freelance editor, Cindy Vallar has been a contributor to *The Celtic Guide* and also writes two columns: “Pirates and Privateers”, on the history of maritime piracy, and “The Red Pencil”, on how authors revise their historical novels prior to publication.

She received the first Friend of Clan Cameron Award from the Clan Cameron Association of North America in 2005. She is a member of the Historical Novel Society, Clan Cameron Association of North America, Scottish Clans of North Texas, National Maritime Historical Society, Laffite Society, and the Louisiana Historical Society. She also serves as Secretary for the Historical Novel Society Conference Board.

Her novel, *The Scottish Thistle* is a tale of loyalty and honor. A Highland warrior prizes both more than life, and when he swears his oath on the dirk, he must obey or die. Duncan Cameron heeds his chief’s order without question, but discovers his wife-to-be is no fair maiden. Although women are no longer trained in the art of fighting, Rory MacGregor follows in the footsteps of her Celtic ancestors. Secrets from the past and superstitious folk endanger Rory and Duncan as much as Bonnie Prince Charlie and his uprising to win back the British throne for his father. Rory and Duncan must make difficult choices that pit honor and duty against trust and love Cindy hopes our readers will enjoy this excerpt from Chapter One. Visit her website, *Thistles & Pirates* (<http://www.cindyvallar.com/>), and you’ll find pictures of Scotland, further tidbits about the story, and an interview about the Rising of 1745.

The excerpt . . .

Earlier, Thistle had blessed the torrential rain. Now, the smuggler cursed it. A lightning bolt slashed the ink-black sky. The shadows of



the night blurred, and Thistle shuddered. The premonition descended with the finality of a coffin lid being nailed shut.

Thistle stood at the left hand of a dark-haired man. Swirls of mist curled around their feet and shadowy forms rose up between them, separating Thistle from the stranger. A flash of steel pierced the darkness. The white mist turned bright red, then faded to nothingness.

The smuggler’s eyes flew open! Thistle strained to hear, but thunder and wind obliterated other sounds. Lightning flashed; in the instant it illuminated mountain and glen, Thistle glimpsed a lone rider spurring his mount along the rough Highland track bordered by tall firs. He stiffened and toppled from his horse. Two caterans crept from the trees. While one searched their



thunderclap startled the thief. He raised his head and screamed. His companion dropped the pilfered booty. He fell to his knees and crossed himself. “Please, Thistle, spare us! We meant no harm.”

The smuggler smelled their fear and snickered beneath the mask. “Are ye saying the man sprawled in the mud is after taking a wee nap during such a fierce storm?”

They cried out, each trying to shout down the other.

“We found him here!”

“He is dead!”

The rider moaned.

“Dead, ye say? Then he comes back to haunt ye.” Thistle stepped closer and spoke words laced with menace. “Truis! Be gone! If ever I find ye in these bens again, I willna be so forgiving.”

unconscious victim, the other rifled his satchel.

As the smuggler’s four companions surrounded the caterans, Thistle stepped onto a wind-smoothed boulder. With an arrow nocked taut against the string of the black longbow, Thistle aimed the lethal missile at one cateran’s heart and waited.

A flash of white light followed by a jarring



Above, the DunTelve broch, an Iron Age broch unrivalled on the Scottish mainland for the degree to which it survives. Top photo: The entrance to DunTelve. Thistle seeks refuge in this ancient broch.

The caterans scrambled over each other in their haste to escape. Thistle waited until the darkness swallowed them before jumping from the boulder to kneel beside the stranger. The short wooden hilt of a sgian protruded from the man's upper back. Thistle extracted the knife, then bandaged the wound with a piece of black cloth ripped from the smuggler's own shirt.

The stranger moaned. Easing him onto his back, Thistle braced the stranger's head and shoulder against a thigh. The man's eyes fluttered open.

"Can ye ride?" Thistle asked.

The rider nodded.

Thistle gave him over to the other smugglers and went to collect the stranger's stallion. When Thistle reached for its reins, the horse flared its nostrils and snorted. Its hooves clattered on stones. Thistle grabbed its halter, stroked its neck, and whispered soothing words in Gaelic. The stallion whinnied, ceased its clawing of the earth, and grew calm. After the others helped the rider remount, Thistle swung up behind him. The two men who took the van wove their way through the rocks and into the woods. Thistle followed while the remaining pair brought up the rear.

Fallen pine needles muffled their footfalls. Firs towered over them, providing some respite from the rain. They climbed the mountain in a zigzag fashion. When they reached the northern edge of the pine canopy, Thistle nudged the stallion onto a rough dirt track along a bluff of jagged cliffs. Immense sea

waves crashed against the rocks below, forcing white spume high into the air. The crescendo rivaled the beating of a thousand war drums, while the roiling tempest matched the frenzied turmoil that churned within Thistle.

The Watch, who safeguarded against further rebellion, kept a lookout for outlaws and smugglers, especially those with bounties on their heads. If the Watch discovered them, they would all hang. By rescuing the stranger, Thistle compounded the danger faced on these occasional midnight sojourns. Yet, having



The interior of DunTelve broch.

suffered injustice at the hands of others, the smuggler refused to ignore a stranger who needed help.

Aware that it was foolhardy to remain in the vicinity any longer, Thistle prodded the stallion toward the ruins of a stone tower. When they reached the broch, two men lifted the stranger from the horse and carried him inside.

Thistle turned to the remaining smugglers. "Take the horse to Andrew. He will see to its keeping. Keep a sharp lookout."

They nodded and hurried on their way. Thistle stooped to enter the narrow passageway of the broch whose ancient builders had constructed the high circular walls of stone without benefit of mortar. Continuing past a tiny guard chamber on the left until reaching a spacious center courtyard, Thistle straightened and looked heavenward. Instead of a sloping thatched roof, the tower opened to a purplish pink sky. The deluge of the past two days had ended; the sun would again shine on the Highlands.

The windowless broch consisted of two tapering concave walls with a staircase between them. Hundreds of years ago the steps had led to wooden galleries, but the timbers had long since rotted away, leaving stairs that led nowhere. The entryway into the staircase was several feet off the ground. After clambering inside, Thistle felt along the outer wall. There was a soft click, then rumbling echoed through the ruin as a stone slab opened.

The small group descended the hidden steps that smugglers had added centuries after the broch's original inhabitants had disappeared. Thistle extracted a burning torch from its holder on the wall, and the secret entrance closed. They wound their way through a tunnel to an underground chamber where the men propped the stranger against a damp wall.

Thistle doffed a tricorne hat and squatted to examine the man's face in the flickering light. Thistle gasped. The face in my vision!

The crooked nose indicated it had been broken more than once. A small scar creased the

man's chin. Dark brown curls fell across a brow bloodied by a ragged gash several inches in length. When Thistle dabbed at the dried blood, the stranger's hand encircled Thistle's wrist and held tight.

"Who?" the stranger whispered.

"Who am I?" Thistle asked, transfixed by the man's purple eyes. The same hue as in my vision.

The stranger nodded.

"Thistle."

Surprise, then pain, flashed across the man's face. His hand fell to his side.

"Ye must wait a wee longer before I tend to your wounds. Until then, perhaps ye might be after answering a few questions."

The man gave a slight nod.

"'Tis unusual to find a stranger riding alone in these parts. Caterans prey on unsuspecting travelers, especially those daft enough to travel at night. If not daft, perhaps ye are a spy sent to ferret me out for the excise men."

"I search for a man."

"What man?"

"He calls himself Angus."

"Of what clan? 'Tis a common enough name amongst Highlanders."

"The nameless clan."

"The outlawed Clan Gregor."

It was a statement, not a question. Thistle despised the necessity of hiding behind a mask, but the law left little choice. The king had handed down a royal edict against the MacGregors during the previous century, and while other clans had been forgiven for past wrongdoings, Thistle's had not.

"Mayhap I can help, stranger. What business have ye with Angus?"

"I bring a message from Sir Donald Cameron of Lochiel. Angus will understand."

"And have ye a name?"

"Duncan of Clan Cameron."

"How do I ken ye are not a spy come to harm the MacGregors? Can ye prove what ye say?"

The man grimaced. Thistle waited until

the pain passed from his face before repeating the question. “Can ye prove what ye say?”

“Rannoch Moor.”

Festering memories assaulted Thistle. Baying hounds. Bloodied swords. Tormented wails. The stench of death. Thistle’s throat constricted. Gasping for air, Thistle yanked off the dank, woolen mask.

Duncan’s eyes widened, and he drew a sharp breath. His lips moved, but no words came. His eyes closed and his head sank onto his chest.

Thistle’s companions drew near.

“Dead?” Thistle asked.

“No, I think he fainted,” one answered, in a voice laced with amusement.

At right: DunTelve, between the walls.

