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SUSAN WIGGS

AT THE QUEEN'S SUMMONS
THE TUDOR ROSE TRILOGY

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

SUSAN WIGGS

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SUSAN WIGGS

AT THE QUEEN'S SUMMONS
🌹 THE TUDOR ROSE TRILOGY 🌹

BOOK THREE



Dedicated with love to my friend,
mentor and fellow writer,
Betty Traylor Gyenes.

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Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets filling one another;
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen and full of water:
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high.

—William Shakespeare
King Richard II, Act IV, Scene i

Part One



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Richard II (IV, i, 184)

From the Annals of Innisfallen



In accordance with ancient and honorable tradition, I, Revelin of Innisfallen, take pen in hand to relate the noble and right valiant histories of the clan O Donoghue. This task has been done by my uncle and his uncle before him, since time no man can remember.

Canons we are, of the most holy Order of St. Augustine, and by the grace of God our home is the beechwooded lake isle called Innisfallen.

Those before me filled these pages with tales of fabled heroes, mighty battles, cattle raids and perilous adventures. Now the role of the O Donoghue Mór has fallen to Aidan, and my work is to chronicle his exploits.

But—may the high King of Heaven forgive my clumsy pen—I know not where to begin. For Aidan O Donoghue is like no man I have ever known, and never has a chieftain been faced with such a challenge.

The O Donoghue Mór, known to the English as Lord of Castleross, has been summoned to London by the sheking who claims the right to rule us. I wonder, with

shameful, un-Christian relish, after clapping eyes on Aidan O Donoghue and his entourage, if Her Sassenach Majesty will come to regret the summons.

—Revelin of Innisfallen

One



“How many noblemen does it take to light a candle?” asked a laughing voice.

Aidan O Donoghue lifted a hand to halt his escort. The English voice intrigued him. In the crowded London street behind him, his personal guard of a hundred gal-lowglass instantly stopped their purposeful march.

“How many?” someone yelled.

“Three!” came the shout from the center of St. Paul’s churchyard.

Aidan nudged his horse forward into the area around the great church. A sea of booksellers, paupers, tricksters, merchants and rogues seethed around him. He could see the speaker now, just barely, a little lightning bolt of mad energy on the church steps.

“One to call a servant to pour the sack—” she reeled in mock drunkenness “—one to beat the servant senseless, one to botch the job and one to blame it on the French.”

Her listeners hooted in derision. Then a man yelled, “That’s four, wench!”

Aidan flexed his legs to stand in the stirrups. *Stirrups.*

Until a fortnight ago, he had never even used such a device, or a curbed bit, either. Perhaps, after all, there was some use in this visit to England. He could do without all the fancy draping Lord Lumley had insisted upon, though. Horses were horses in Ireland, not poppet dolls dressed in satin and plumes.

Elevated in the stirrups, he caught another glimpse of the girl: battered hat crammed down on matted hair, dirty, laughing face, ragged clothes.

“Well,” she said to the heckler, “I never said I could count, unless it be the coppers you toss me.”

A sly-looking man in tight hose joined her on the steps. “I saves me coppers for them what entertains me.” Boldly he snaked an arm around the girl and drew her snugly against him.

She slapped her hands against her cheeks in mock surprise. “Sir! Your codpiece flatters my vanity!”

The clink of coins punctuated a spate of laughter. A fat man near the girl held three flaming torches aloft. “Sixpence says you can’t juggle them.”

“Ninepence says I can, sure as Queen Elizabeth’s white arse sits upon the throne,” hollered the girl, deftly catching the torches and tossing them into motion.

Aidan guided his horse closer still. The huge Florentine mare he’d christened Grania earned a few dirty looks and muttered curses from people she nudged out of the way, but none challenged Aidan. Although the Londoners could not know he was the O Donoghue Mór of Ross Castle, they seemed to sense that he and his horse were not a pair to be trifled with. Perhaps it was the prodigious size of the horse; perhaps it was the dangerous, wintry blue of the rider’s eyes; but most likely it was the naked blade of the shortsword strapped to his thigh.

He left his massive escort milling outside the church-

yard and passing the time by intimidating the Londoners. When he drew close to the street urchin, she was juggling the torches. The flaming brands formed a whirling frame for her grinning, sooty face.

She was an odd colleen, looking as if she had been stitched together from leftovers: wide eyes and wider mouth, button nose, and spiky hair better suited to a boy. She wore a chemise without a bodice, drooping canion trews and boots so old they might have been relics of the last century.

Yet her Maker had, by some foible, gifted her with the most dainty and deft pair of hands Aidan had ever seen. Round and round went the torches, and when she called for another, it joined the spinning circle with ease. Hand to hand she passed them, faster and faster. The big-bellied man then tossed her a shiny red apple.

She laughed and said, "Eh, Dove, you don't fear I'll tempt a man to sin?"

Her companion guffawed. "I like me wenches made of more than gristle and bad jests, Pippa girl."

She took no offense, and while Aidan silently mouthed the strange name, someone tossed a dead fish into the spinning mix.

Aidan cringed, but the girl called Pippa took the new challenge in stride. "Seems I've caught one of your relatives, Mort," she said to the man who had procured the fish.

The crowd roared its approval. A few red-heeled gentlemen dropped coins upon the steps. Even after a fortnight in London Aidan could ill understand the Sassenach. They would as lief toss coins to a street performer as see her hanged for vagrancy.

He felt something rub his leg and looked down. A sleepy-looking whore curved her hand around his thigh,

fingers inching toward the horn-handled dagger tucked into the top of his boot.

With a dismissive smile, Aidan removed the whore's hand. "You'll find naught but ill fortune there, mistress."

She drew back her lips in a sneer. The French pox had begun to rot her gums. "Irish," she said, backing away. "Chaste as a priest, eh?"

Before he could respond, a high-pitched mew split the air, and the mare's ears pricked up. Aidan spied a half-grown cat flying through the air toward Pippa.

"Juggle *that*," a man shouted, howling with laughter.

"Jesu!" she said. Her hands seemed to be working of their own accord, keeping the objects spinning even as she tried to step out of range of the flying cat. But she caught it and managed to toss it from one hand to the next before the terrified creature leaped onto her head and clung there, claws sinking into the battered hat.

The hat slumped over the juggler's eyes, blinding her.

Torches, apple and fish all clattered to the ground. The skinny man called Mort stomped out the flames. The fat man called Dove tried to help but trod instead upon the slimy fish. He skated forward, sleeves ripping as his pudgy arms cartwheeled. Just as he lost his balance, his flailing fist slammed into a spectator, who immediately threw himself into the brawl. With shouts of glee, others joined the fisticuffs. It was all Aidan could do to keep the mare from rearing.

Still blinded by the cat, the girl stumbled forward, hands outstretched. She caught the end of a bookseller's cart. Cat and hat came off as one, and the crazed feline climbed a stack of tomes, toppling them into the mud of the churchyard.

"Imbecile!" the bookseller screeched, lunging at Pippa.

Dove had taken on several opponents by now. With a wet *thwap*, he slapped one across the face with the dead fish.

Pippa grasped the end of the cart and lifted. The remaining books slid down and slammed into the bookseller, knocking him backward to the ground.

“Where’s my ninepence?” she demanded, surveying the steps. People were too busy brawling to respond. She snatched up a stray copper and shoved it into the voluminous sack tied to her waist with a frayed rope. Then she fled, darting toward St. Paul’s Cross, a tall monument surrounded by an open rotunda. The bookseller followed, and now he had an ally—his wife, a formidable lady with arms like large hams.

“Come back here, you evil little monkey,” the wife roared. “This day shall be your last!”

Dove was enjoying the fight by now. He had his opponent by the neck and was playing with the man’s nose, slapping it back and forth and laughing.

Mort, his companion, was equally gleeful, squaring off with the whore who had approached Aidan earlier.

Pippa led a chase around the cross, the bookseller and his wife in hot pursuit.

More spectators joined in the fray. The horse backed up, eyes rolling in fear. Aidan made a crooning sound and stroked her neck, but he did not leave the square. He simply watched the fight and thought, for the hundredth time since his arrival, what a strange, foul and fascinating place London was. Just for a moment, he forgot the reason he had come. He turned spectator, giving his full attention to the antics of Pippa and her companions.

So this was St. Paul’s, the throbbing heart of the city. It was more meeting place than house of worship to be sure, and this did not surprise Aidan. The Sassenach were

a people who clung feebly to an anemic faith; all the passion and pageantry had been bled out of the church by the Rome-hating Reformers.

The steeple, long broken but never yet repaired, shadowed a collection of beggars and merchants, strolling players and thieves, whores and tricksters. At the opposite corner of the square stood a gentleman and a liveried constable. Prodded by the screeched urging of the bookseller's wife, they reluctantly moved in closer. The bookseller had cornered Pippa on the top step.

"Mort!" she cried. "Dove, help me!" Her companions promptly disappeared into the crowd. "Bastards!" she yelled after them. "Geld and splay you both!"

The bookseller barreled toward her. She stooped and picked up the dead fish, took keen aim at the bookseller and let fly.

The bookseller ducked. The fish struck the approaching gentleman in the face. Leaving slime and scales in its wake, the fish slid down the front of his silk brocade doublet and landed upon his slashed velvet court slippers.

Pippa froze and gawked in horror at the gentleman. "Oops," she said.

"Indeed." He fixed her with a fiery eye of accusation. Without even blinking, he motioned to the liveried constable.

"Sir," he said.

"Aye, my lord?"

"Arrest this, er, *rodent*."

Pippa took a step back, praying the way was clear to make a run for it. Her backside collided with the solid bulk of the bookseller's wife.

"Oops," Pippa said again. Her hopes sank like a weighted corpse in the Thames.

“Let’s see you worm your way out of *this* fix, missy,” the woman hissed in her ear.

“Thank you,” Pippa said cordially enough. “I intend to do just that.” She put on her brightest I’m-an-urchin grin and tugged at a forelock. She had recently hacked off her hair to get rid of a particularly stubborn case of lice. “Good morrow, Your Worship.”

The nobleman stroked his beard. “Not particularly good for you, scamp,” he said. “Are you aware of the laws against strolling players?”

Her gaze burning with indignation, she looked right and left. “Strolling players?” she said with heated outrage. “Who? Where? To God, what is this city coming to that such vermin as strolling players would run loose in the streets?”

As she huffed up her chest, she furtively searched the crowd for Dove and Mortlock. Like the fearless gallants she knew them to be, her companions had vanished.

For a moment, her gaze settled on the man on the horse. She had noticed him earlier, richly garbed and well mounted, with a foreign air about him she could not readily place.

“You mean to say,” the constable yelled at her, “that *you* are not a strolling player?”

“Sir, bite your tongue,” she fired off. “I’m...I am...” She took a deep breath and plucked out a ready falsehood. “An evangelist, my lord. Come to preach the Good Word to the unconverted of St. Paul’s.”

The haughty gentleman lifted one eyebrow high. “The Good Word, eh? And what might that be?”

“You know,” she said with an excess of patience. “The gospel according to Saint John.” She paused, searching her memory for more tidbits gleaned from days she had spent huddled and hiding in church. An inveterate collec-

tor of colorful words and phrases, she took pride in using them. "The pistol of Saint Paul to the fossils."

"Ah." The constable's hands shot out. In a swift movement, he pinned her to the wall beside the *si quis* door. She twisted around to look longingly into the nave where the soaring stone pillars marched along Paul's Walk. Like a well-seasoned rat, she knew every cranny and cubbyhole of the church. If she could get inside, she could find another way out.

"You'd best do better than that," the constable said, "else I'll nail your foolish ears to the stocks."

She winced just thinking about it. "Very well, then." She heaved a dramatic sigh. "Here's the truth."

A small crowd had gathered, probably hoping to see nails driven through her ears. The stranger on horseback dismounted, passed his reins to a stirrup runner and drew closer.

The lust for blood was universal, Pippa decided. But perhaps not. Despite his savage-looking face and flowing black hair, the man had an air of reckless splendor that fascinated her. She took a deep breath. "Actually, sir, I *am* a strolling player. But I have a nobleman's warrant," she finished triumphantly.

"Have you, then?" His Lordship winked at the constable.

"Oh, aye, sir, upon my word." She hated it when gentlemen got into a playful mood. Their idea of play usually involved mutilating defenseless people or animals.

"And who might this patron be?"

"Why, Robert Dudley himself, the Earl of Leicester." Pippa threw back her shoulders proudly. How clever of her to think of the queen's perpetual favorite. She nudged the constable in the ribs, none too gently. "He's the queen's lover, you know, so you'd best not irritate me."