
THE LAIRD'S COMMAND

The Glen Torridon Series Book One

FINLEY BROWN

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-915-2
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

Scotland

Ailsa gripped the steering wheel tightly on the tiny Vauxhall she had rented, her full attention on the road. It was hard enough to drive on the left side of the highway, not to mention in the fog and pounding rain. The storm seemed to have come out of nowhere, materializing before her eyes without warning. When she started out on her journey this morning, it was sunny, which matched her optimistic spirit. Now, it was sleeting, and a dense mist had descended like a wall. Ailsa was beginning to think she had made another mistake. She was searching for the perfect wedding venue in Scotland for her prestigious clients. However, as the day quickly turned into night and the first ominous clap of thunder shattered the air around her, her mood began to darken. She regretted getting off the A9, Scotland's northernmost carriageway and gateway into the Highlands, but she could swear someone had been following her in a truck. She was lost and trying her best not to crash on the single lane road she currently found herself on. She knew she was

being paranoid, but she couldn't take the chance of messing up this assignment.

This trip was a last-ditch effort to restore her almost ruined career. If she messed up this wedding, it would mean the end of her livelihood and the career she worked so hard to build. Ailsa still wasn't sure what exactly happened with the last wedding she was in charge of and how it had gone so wrong. She worked hard to keep things confidential and private to ensure her famous clients could enjoy the most meaningful day in their lives without the media. Until four months ago, she had a perfect record—until she arrived at the small chateau in the Swiss Alps with the famous bride to the paparazzi and flashing cameras. The wedding was ruined and had to be canceled and, with it, her reputation. She still didn't know who had leaked the date and location. She had been so careful to ensure the privacy of her clients. It caused her to become suspicious of everyone, including her co-workers, and she was worried someone was trying to sabotage her future in the company. Regardless, she hadn't been contacted by a potential client since then, and her boss had all but forgotten her existence. Until the President and CEO of Hartford and Company, Harold Hartford, had been personally approached by some new clients explicitly requesting Ailsa as their wedding coordinator. Although she had never met the infamous bride or groom, she had met with their attorney and promised to do everything in her power to ensure the couple's confidentiality. That was what brought her to this remote part of Scotland and a possible secluded venue.

The sleet and rain were falling faster now, and as the temperature dropped, it wouldn't be long before it turned to snow. Ailsa shifted the car into a lower gear. She could barely see two feet in front of her, and the dense fog was causing her to move at a crawl. She was lost, the signal on her phone and maps went out over an hour ago. She had been driving around aimlessly, looking for a town or village where she could pull over and get directions

without luck. The road was starting to flood, and she knew she should stop, but she couldn't find any place to do that safely on the winding lane.

"Damn it." Why did she always have to be so impetuous?

This trip was becoming a metaphor for her current life. It was spiraling out of control. While, on the outside, she looked like she was in charge of everything, the reality was, on the inside, she was secretly caught in a whirlpool of panic and self-destruction. The wheels of the rented Vauxhall suddenly skidded on the slick road, causing her to hydroplane. Ahead of her, the road abruptly disappeared and a rapidly rising river loomed. Ailsa hit the brakes, but nothing happened and the car continued to glide. She pulled the wheel hard to the left, hoping to avoid the river, but overcompensated the turn that led to a bridge, sending the car spinning around, slamming into a tree.

Everything went black.

AILSASLOWLY OPENED HER EYES, her head pounding. Her left arm ached. She was in a large bed, but she couldn't remember how she got there.

"You've been in a car accident, lass," a deep voice spoke.

She tried to lift her head off the pillow to see where the voice was coming from, but spots danced in front of her eyes and she immediately shut them.

"Where am I?" she managed to ask.

"Torridon House," the voice said. "My ghillie and I found you in your car last night. You hit your head in the crash and have most likely given yourself a concussion. You gashed your arm, too. I sutured it."

That explained her aching arm. It was wrapped from wrist to elbow in a white gauze bandage, and it felt swollen and inflamed.

"Who are you?" Ailsa reluctantly opened an eye and made

out the blurry form of a man. A very handsome man, she gleaned as her vision cleared.

"My name is Ian McLennan. I'm laird of this estate. We're lucky we found you before the bulk of the storm hit," he said in a constrained tone.

She looked up into icy gray eyes that flashed with disapproval.

Ailsa felt something pull low in her belly and a slow flush rose on her pale skin. She had never reacted to a man this way before, but there was an instant attraction. She closed her eyes, trying to shake the sudden awareness that captured her body.

He came over to the side of the bed and sat down in a chair pulled up beside the edge. "How are you feeling?" he said, softening his voice a little, though his eyes remained harsh.

Ailsa grimaced as she tried to sit up. Every muscle in her body ached, and her head screamed with disapproval. He reached out to help her, adjusting the pillows behind her back.

"Everything hurts." She rubbed at a knot the size of an egg on the side of her head; her hair felt sticky and stiff. "You said you stitched my arm. Are you a doctor?"

"Aye, I was. I'm not practicing anymore, but I keep up my license." His dark eyes looked troubled. "Now that you are awake, I would like to examine you again to make sure I didn't miss anything from last night. It was late, and my main concern was your head and arm. You're pretty banged up. In the meantime, is there anyone I can contact for you?"

Ailsa hesitated, trying to remember everything. She was having a difficult time focusing. She was in Scotland. No one even knew she had left the country. She was so afraid to mess up the confidentiality of this wedding, she never told her work exactly where she was going. They only knew she was on an assignment. She needed to get back to her hotel and get in touch with her boss, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember the name of the place where she was staying. She had already

missed her first deadline to check in regarding the status of her clients.

"No, I'm fine, I just need my phone, so I can get a cab."

Ian chuckled, running a hand along the back of his neck. "You aren't going anywhere, lass. The roads are all shut down and impassable due to the storm. Not to mention, you need to stay in bed because of your head. I didn't see a phone when we found you. We only found your purse, and there was no phone in it."

He leaned back in the chair, studying her, his dark eyes piercing. Ailsa looked down. His size, alone, was intimidating. He must be at least six-foot-four and, from what she could tell, made of solid muscle. Dark hair framed a chiseled face, sporting the new growth of a beard. However, it was those eyes that scared her the most. They were studying her, and she could not hold their gaze.

"Shit," she cursed to herself. Her phone was her lifeline.

Ian cleared his throat in disapproval, leaning in toward her. "That is not the word of a young lady. I'll ask you to watch your tongue." His tone was hard and uncompromising.

"You went through my purse?" Embarrassed by the chastisement, Ailsa threw the accusation back at him. She made herself meet his eyes in challenge.

"I looked in your purse for identification, *Ms. McKenzie*." He raised an eyebrow at her, emphasizing her name, and pointed to her passport sitting on the nightstand. "I gave your information to the police, in case anyone was looking for you. At which point, there was no way for me to transport you to hospital due to the storm, so I informed them I would keep you here with me. What is an American lass doing in the Highlands during a storm by herself, anyway?"

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, storm or no storm," she said in a small voice, fumbling with the white duvet covering her.

Ian laughed, ignoring Ailsa's comment, and pulled a notepad and pen out of the nightstand drawer. "Now, if you give me the phone numbers of your family, I will contact them and let them know you're okay and that you will be staying here for a few weeks until the roads clear."

"A few weeks!" Ailsa said, sitting up too fast and jarring her already aching head. A wave of nausea rolled over her and she buried her head in her arms, trying to shut it all out. She waited for it to pass before leaning back into the pillows. "I can't stay here a few weeks."

Ian watched her intently as if he could read her thoughts.

"You don't have a choice, lass. The roads won't clear, and we are too remote for the plows. The storm isn't over yet; it's still raging outside. I'm responsible for you now; so again, if you give me the phone numbers, I will make the phone calls for you, then I will examine you to see if I missed anything. In the meantime, you can think of yourself as my guest."

Ailsa froze. She could feel his deep gray eyes staring at her and undressing her to her core. What was it about this man that made him think he was responsible for her? Who said things like that? Again, the same feeling low in her belly pulled at her, and she could feel her nipples grow hard and tight. Moreover, why was her body responding to him in this way? She was an independent woman who took care of herself. She glanced up into frowning, stern eyes. She realized how intimidating he was, and she didn't want him to know she never took the time to memorize any phone numbers. They were all on her cell phone. She had no way to contact her work to let them know where she was, and she had no family who would be looking for her. She didn't want him to know any of this.

She shook her head, "No one will be missing me."

Ailsa knew she should be scared. She didn't know where she was. To make matters worse, she was injured, she had no phone or computer, no way to contact the outside world. She didn't

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know the man in front of her at all or if he was going to harm her. He came across as arrogant and formal, qualities she usually avoided in men, yet there was something about him she found attractive.

"I find that hard to believe, Ms. McKenzie," he said, resigned. "If, at any time, you want to give them to me, I will be more than happy to help you. In the meantime, I insist on giving you a proper medical examination. I have a room set up." He leaned over to pull the covers off her, and strong arms picked her up. It was then she realized she wasn't wearing her clothes but, instead, a short, thin, white nightgown of the softest cotton fabric. Ailsa felt her cheeks grow red, and she knew he saw it, too.

"You were soaked to the bone when we found you." He smiled, and his face softened for the first time. "My housekeeper and one of her wee maids helped me change you."