

BOUND TO THE  
HIGHLANDERS

HIGHLAND FLING BRIDES BOOK 2



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## CHAPTER 1



GLENASH VILLAGE, SCOTLAND, 1875.

Fiona Magellan opened her eyes and had to rub them before they would focus on anything other than green. Everything was green in Scotland. It was something she'd learned in the few weeks since she arrived in Glenash, an out-of-the-way fishing village on the west coast of the Highlands, barely a month after she had turned twenty-one.

She must have fallen asleep in the field. Looking to either side of where she lay, she realized she was surrounded by two enormous men. The pain in her head was making it difficult to think. That, and the chilly early morning draft that... wait. She was naked. Naked, in a field, flanked by ginormous highlanders. And her ears were ringing.

It took her reluctant brain a few moments to piece together what had happened, then all the memories of the Circle Dance overwhelmed her. Fiona groaned, rolled onto her front, and buried her face in the dewy grass. This was about the worst predicament she'd ever gotten into in her entire life.

She had accidentally married two men, right after writing to a third one in the hope that he would come and propose.



THE NIGHT BEFORE

“Ah, c’mon, Fee, you’ve never been to a real Highland midsummer fling, you’ll love it,” her aunt Trina had coaxed.

Fiona nodded, then frowned, sucking on the top of her pen. “It’s certainly not something I’ve ever seen in London, but what do I wear? How do I speak to people? What are the rules?” She grimaced at all the uncertainty.

The older woman laughed warmly. “Dinnae fret about things like that, lass. Just turn up. As long as you dinnae dance the Circle Dance you’ll be fine. And even if you do, I’m no fussed. Finding a husband or two at your age is no bad idea. Heck, when I was your age, I had two husbands.”

Fiona stared at her aunt in shock. “You... two? How?”

“The Circle Dance. You were probably too wee to remember your other uncle, Trevor. The poor man got taken in the terrible floods we had fifteen years ago.”

Trina’s face fell for a moment, and Fiona’s heart wrenched. Not wanting to add to her aunt’s grief, she didn’t say anything, but she *did* remember an uncle Trevor, from the one visit she’d made to Glenash as a small child of four or five. She remembered her own parents sniffing their disapproval about so many things in the village, and at the time she hadn’t known the cause of their distaste. Perhaps that was why they had left the village in favour of London. She also remembered uncle Trevor and uncle Keith, one holding each of her hands as they swung her around like a tiny monkey. It had been so much fun.

Perhaps it had been those happy memories that had drawn her back here after her parents died. She craved companionship and

friendly faces, and this village was the only place she had ties to and which had both of those things in abundance. If they wanted to have strange ancient—probably *pagan*—rituals, she wasn't going to judge them, even if she found them peculiar. They all went to church on a Sunday, and none of them took the Bible too literally. Anyway, there had been a movement over the past thirty-five years for a growing minority of churchgoers in London to attempt to speak with ghosts—spiritualists, they called themselves—and although Fiona didn't believe in any of that nonsense, nobody seemed to think there was anything wrong with other people doing it, or that it conflicted with anything else people believed.

Fiona frowned, and absently signed the letter she was writing to her dear friend Martin, back in London. She didn't especially want a husband from the locals. Rather, she had high hopes that when Martin received this letter, he would catch the next train here and sweep her off her feet and down the aisle. They hadn't said as much, and she'd never so much as walked out with him, but after what happened to her parents, he had insisted they exchange addresses, and they had been corresponding at least weekly ever since.

She had heard that midsummer was when all the matching happened in the village for the year. It seemed a long time to wait for anyone who met their true love on the twenty-second of June, but as traditions went, she was curious. London held little of the folkloric old ways which still took place in little pockets of culture which had been kept mostly safe from the reach of mass-manufactured goods. Getting hitched only on one day of the year, before the whole village, seemed like an interesting one, although she wanted no part of it.

Another thing occurred to her. "They do remain fully clothed during the Circle Dance, don't they, Aunt Trina?"

"Aye. During the dancing. You're fretting o'er the wrong things, lass. Propriety, decency, these are nothing to concern yourself with at your age. That city filled your head with too many rules about

what you should and should'nae do, and not enough with interest in the world beyond your own front door. It'll be fun. You'll see." Trina winked at Fiona, who tried to stop worrying about how to know if speaking with anyone at the fling would be too forward if they hadn't been introduced, yet.

Fiona finished addressing the envelope for her letter, then she took it to the post office and sent it first class, hoping that Martin would act quickly and get her out of this barmy village with its bizarre customs before she ended up going native.

She was grateful to her relatives for taking her in after her parents' death, but the steadfast and earnest men from the village weren't what Fiona wanted out of life.



WHEN IT WAS time for the dance, Fiona dutifully followed her aunt out of the house, smoothing her dress down one last time and patting her hair before she stepped out into the balmy June evening. Up here, it was rare for it to be warm and dry, but through summer, the weather redeemed itself. So far, Fiona hadn't needed the scarves and cloak she had brought with her when she packed her trunk and headed into the distant north.

The light was still bright at this hour, and the local villagers were gathering in the green. Already, at barely seven o'clock, some bonfires were being lit from expertly-stacked cones of logs. Fiona trailed behind her aunt, who occasionally stopped to greet people she knew, until they reached the centre of the action.

There, a small crowd of eligible men was assembling and talking amongst themselves. Trina didn't concern herself with formalities as she waved and greeted people.

Fiona stopped dead when she stood three feet away from the tallest, most incredible, and finely-chiselled man she had ever met. He was breath-taking. She completely forgot her manners and just stared. Her eyes widened as she caught his twinkling azure gaze.

"Have you met my niece, Fiona, yet? She's just arrived this past month from London," Trina said by way of introduction.

"Well met," the perfectly-formed man said amiably, but there was an undertone of something else beneath his words—something commanding—and Fiona could tell that he wasn't someone to get on the wrong side of.

Fiona's tummy reverberated as she continued to stare. His brown hair was rugged and his entire appearance was untamed yet alluring. Eventually, her brain noticed that Trina was elbowing her in the ribs, and she remembered to breathe for a moment, then curtsied, mumbling a sheepish, "How do you do?" before she was too overcome with nerves and racked her brain for an excuse to hurry away.

"Th-there's Lindsey, I need to ask her about n-needlepoint," Fiona stuttered, then she practically bolted toward an eighteen-year-old redhead who stood thirty feet away.

"Fee, whatever's wrong?" Lindsey asked, as Fiona nearly ran through her in an attempt to get as far from the human god-man as possible.

"Uh... nothing. I don't know. I don't think so..." Fiona's voice trailed off as her brain pointed out that the words she was speaking didn't fit with what Lindsey had said. Worse still, she looked over her shoulder and found his eyes were still on her. Fiona turned away quickly, but Lindsey followed her gaze.

"Oh. William McCall. Aye, he's enough to make any lassie flee."

"He's so... tall," Fiona finished lamely.

"Aye, he's that. And he's almost never here. He's a hunter. Exactly the sort of fellow the Circle Dance was made for. You ken that it came about because a lot o' the chaps around these parts are in dangerous lines o' work? So, at some point in the mists o' time, someone said, once a year, any two men from the village can claim the same woman."

Fiona nodded; she knew that already. "But why is it on Midsummer's day?"

“It’s the solstice. It’s traditionally the day when the boundaries between our world and the spirit world are weaker. So we can marry anyone at all who walks the Earth. An’ we hardly lose *anyone* in the summer. So everyone gets at least a few months o’ happiness, and if the worst happens, there’s still someone to take care of the young lady and any babies she might have on the way.”

Fiona passed no comment on the idea of a spirit world. She didn’t truly understand the connection that all the people of Glenash seemed to have with the natural world, let alone their predilection for attributing nature with a vast folklore of magic and myth. Even if it weren’t real, it still shaped the way everyone here saw the world.

“You’re thinking tae much again,” Lindsey told her. That was the other thing about the people of Glenash: They always told people what they truly thought, even if it wouldn’t be especially polite in London. At first, that had upset Fiona greatly, but now she was getting used to it, she had to admit that she liked knowing straight away what people thought and felt, without necessarily having to deconstruct shrouded meanings and allusions. That was now one of her favourite things about the Highlands.

The Highlands were like a foreign country compared to London.

“You should leave our good Highland men alone and go back to that city of yours!” Millie Woodward snapped as she wandered past. The woman had been giving Fiona sideways glares ever since she arrived.

“Oh, pay her no mind.” Lindsey waved a hand dismissively. “She’s only jealous.”

“So, what’s the story with William McCall?” Fiona tried to ask the question casually, but somehow, she was far too interested to succeed.

Lindsey smiled and put an arm around Fiona’s shoulder. “He’s the meanest man in the village. I’m not sure if he even counts as a resident of Glenash, any more. He spends so much time out of the



village hunting that people have started wondering if he's gone wild. He hardly speaks to anyone, and he's so... I dinnae ken how to describe it... serious, maybe? He keeps everyone at arm's length. Naebody e'en kens if he likes girls or not."

Fiona stared at Lindsey in amazement. The idea of even *suggesting* a man liked other men was scandalous.

"Dinnae look at me like that, lassie, it's something we've all wondered. O'course, if he *did* have a thing for the menfolk, the main problem he'd have is that he'd struggle to find a man to come home to. We're a little lacking in options."

"Are there *any*... men who like men?" Fiona had never even come across anyone who would speak of such things, let alone speculate so casually. She couldn't decide if it was nice to be open about it, or improper to talk about anyone in such a way.

"They're very few and far between. But if two chaps get into the Circle Dance wi'oot a lassie, naebody pays them any mind."

"Doesn't the vicar call a stop to it?" Fiona couldn't imagine any man of the cloth letting two men marry a single woman or one another.

"There's no vicar involved. The Circle Dance is older; more natural and visceral than the new ways of church and Sunday hats. Naebody can stop a match if all the parties are in the circle. The spirit world; the fey, the dryads, all those, simply bind the correct people together. As long as they consummate within three days, they're as good as wedded."

Fiona was more surprised than ever. She had thought, despite how her aunt had described it, that the Circle Dance was to be presided over by a religious man. How else could one have a wedding? She knew weddings were very different in Scotland compared to England, and she had heard of people from London eloping to Gretna Green, just over the Scottish border, and being married at the village's smithy, but she hadn't ever thought about how that might happen.

More to the point, she was sure that Martin wouldn't approve

of any such nonsense, and she was still hopeful that he would come and marry her, soon. Perhaps she shouldn't even speak with any highlanders, but the men here seemed so friendly, and the divide between the sexes wasn't enforced so rigidly, that it would clearly be very rude to only speak to the women.

"Dinnae think about it tae hard, lass. There's more pressing matters. Like whether you've tasted Andrew Callanish's apple ringey."

"Ringey?"

"Aye. It's named after how it makes your ears ring the morning after."

"Oh." Fiona accepted a cup as it was handed to her, and she took a polite sip. "This is very syrupy. And tart. It's like someone made whisky out of apple pie."

"That's about the long and short of it, aye." Lindsey took a drink and grinned. "A dozen more swigs an' you'll be oot there talking to the fellows."

Usually, Fiona didn't drink much, so the warming feeling in her chest lasted a long time and seemed to bring with it an altered state.

It wasn't long before she strode confidently into the circle and stood in front of the towering highlander.

"William McCall," she said, then tried to tip her hat to him, but she wasn't wearing one.

"That's my name. You'll mind not tae wear it out." He winked at her and she giggled.

"How tall are you?" she asked, noting that he had a glass of his own in one hand, filled with a colourless liquid that could only be more of the apple ringey.

He stared at her with his intense, penetrating gaze, and for a moment she was sure he was going to eat her, but then the corners of his mouth turned up and a moment later he was laughing.

"That's the strangest way anyone's ever started a conversation. I'm six feet and four inches tall. Let me guess... you're four feet

eleven inches, but you tell everyone it's five feet because it's less embarrassing."

She widened her eyes as a hot flush stole over her face and neck. He was too insightful by far. "How did you know?"

"You're the same height as the top of the wooden entrance tae the whisky store. You were stood beside it earlier, and I remember thinking tae myself that you must be the only adult here who wouldn't have tae bend tae get inside it. And I ken for a fact it's an inch shy of five feet. Like you."

It seemed strange that he had noticed her at all before this moment, let alone thought about her enough to guess her height. She giggled and sipped the ringey whilst trying to think of something deep and thoughtful to say; something that would really impress him. In a complete failing, her brain came up with, "Do you live in the village?" then it ran away.

He paused for a moment, the amusement still evident on his face, then he nodded. "Anyway, I need tae go and speak with Frazer over there. He owes me a few shillings." William nodded to her, touched his forelock, although she was sure he did it in jest, then walked away. Given her stellar attempts at conversation, she didn't blame him in the slightest.

The ringey was going to her head quickly, and she sat down heavily as she tried to understand why she cared whether a conversation with a strange, intense hunter had gone well or not. Since her parents died two months ago of consumption, she had promised herself she would wait before seeking a husband. Somehow, it didn't seem right to think about it at the moment, even if it was all everyone else was thinking about.