

HIS RULES COLLECTION



ISABELLA KOLE



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Isabella Kole
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THE HIGHLANDER'S CURSE



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The Highlander's Curse

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PROLOGUE



The year was 1814, and thirty-year-old Ian Galloway stood in the field beyond his home and gazed at the large castle. Galloway Castle had been in his family for many years. Ian was to become the next Duke of Galloway and it had been strongly suggested he find a young woman to become his Duchess. In all his travels over the vast Scottish countryside the handsome young Duke hadn't been able to find the woman with whom he'd choose to spend his life with. His golden hair blowing in the wind, the plaid kilt rustling around his muscular legs, he looked around once more at the lush green countryside. His land, the property his sons would someday inherit. But first, he must find a mother for the sons he planned to sire. Of course every young woman in the villages that surrounded Galloway Castle wanted to be the next Duchess of Galloway.

One beautiful young woman in particular had her sights set on the young Duke. Her name was Bridget MacCloskey. Some said she was a witch. Ian had scoffed at the idea. Bewitching she may be with her long golden locks and full bosom but witches didn't really exist. It was folklore. He had been seen squiring the luscious young woman around the village, but he had not asked for her hand in

marriage. In fact, he had decided to end things with her that very night. But first, he needed to return to the castle. There was business to be dealt with.

As he entered his majestic home a few moments later, he was told by a servant that his father wanted to see him immediately. He wasted no time finding the elder Duke.

“Father, ye wish tae see me?” he asked as he entered the library.

“Where have ye been all afternoon? Whiling away the hours daydreaming?” his father said in a booming voice.

“I was surveying the land, Sir.”

“The war is over. It is time tae think about the future of our land. We have to see that the farms begin tae thrive. Yer soon tae be taking over and ye have yet tae find a suitable wife. What say ye for yerself, lad?”

“I refuse tae chain myself tae the wrong woman for eternity.”

“Ye have a high opinion of yerself.”

“I will continue tae search.”

“Time is running out, my son. If ye are not married by the summer, yer step-brother and his wife shall be the Duke and Duchess of Galloway.”

Turning on his heel, Ian stormed out of his father’s library. He walked swiftly down the vast hallway and out the massive front doors of the castle. He walked to where his horse was lazily feasting and untied him, mounted him and took off at a gallop, thundering down the lane.

As he came to the clearing below the castle gates, a carriage approached. When it came to a halt, Ian yelled, “Whoa,” and stopped his steed beside the carriage. As he looked at the driver, he asked if he could be of assistance.

“The young lady wishes tae speak to ye, your Grace,” the driver said.

The door to the carriage opened and Ian saw that the lady in question was none other than Bridget MacCloskey. He jumped down from his horse and held out his hand.

As the beautiful buxom blonde took his hand and gracefully emerged from the carriage, she said, "It's so good tae see ye again."

"What might ye be doing out on this beautiful day, my lady?"

"I feel the time has come for us tae speak about our future."

"Is that so?" Ian asked with a raised brow.

"My father is of the belief ye have no intentions tae make a life with me. Is that so, your Grace?"

"Milady, I have thought long and hard on this very subject. It is true I must find a Duchess before I can assume the duties as the next Duke of Galloway. And though I have seriously considered a match with ye, I have come tae the difficult decision that it cannae be. I am sorry if this distresses ye. My sincere apologies," he replied as he kissed her hand.

"Why, ye are the most reprehensible creature I have ever known. Ye shall pay for this, Ian Galloway. I curse you..."

Ian looked at the driver and said, "Please take her away. Our business here is over." He jumped onto his horse's back and galloped away, never looking back.

That evening when his son did not return home, the elder Duke sent his men to search for him. They searched far and wide, over the countryside, in the forests and hills and the nearby villages, but there was no sign of the young Galloway heir. No one had seen him.

For weeks, they searched. The weeks turned into months, the months into years. Ian's father finally succumbed to a broken heart. His stepbrother reluctantly took over as the Duke of Galloway. Ian's mother and stepbrother never gave up the search.

Ian Galloway was never heard from again...

CHAPTER 1



Amanda Brown pushed a stray strand of long, blonde hair back from her face and went on with her work. It had been a long day and it was only half over. As she read over the contract one last time before signing it, she sighed. She loved her job as assistant to one of Cincinnati's major contractors most days. Today was not one of those days. She had just signed her name to a contract for a cut in pay. The business had not been doing well, and all the employees had been asked to take a pay cut for the next six months. If things turned around, they would receive their old salary plus a bonus at the end of the six months. Luckily, money wasn't a problem for Amanda. She'd inherited a substantial amount when her parents had been killed in an auto accident a few years ago. She'd never known her father's family and her mother's family was all gone now so everything had gone to her. She'd sold their home and lived very comfortably in a small apartment near her office. If she watched her spending, she'd be okay for years to come. She worried about some of her fellow employees though. How would they survive the next six lean months?

Well, it's done, time for lunch, she thought as she grabbed her purse and the contract. She dropped the document in her boss's

inbox and left the building. The late fall Ohio sunshine smacked her in the face the minute she walked outside. Reaching into her bag for her sunglasses, she put them on her pretty face to shield her eyes and walked to the deli down the street. Once inside, she spotted a few of her co-workers and waved to them. When she walked over to join them, she was welcomed by some pretty gloomy faces.

“Did you sign your contract, Amanda?” one girl asked.

“Yes, reluctantly, I did. I hate to think what would happen if I didn’t. I may not have a job.”

“Can they do that?” another girl asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m not taking any chances.”

“It’s only for six months. Maybe we can turn things around by then. But with the holidays coming, it’s going to be rough for some of us,” Carol, another co-worker, added.

“Ray has some great ideas. I think things will definitely turn around,” Amanda said in an effort to reassure them. Actually, it was true. She’d sat in on a meeting with her employer and the board of directors and if what they had planned was a success, they’d all be sitting pretty a year from now.

“I hope you’re right. At least they didn’t let anyone go.”

“Let’s order lunch and forget about it for an hour,” Amanda suggested.

When she returned from lunch, there was a message from Ray asking her to come into his office. Picking up her notebook and a pen, she walked across the hall and knocked lightly on his door.

“Come on in,” the voice from inside called out.

“You wanted to see me?” Amanda asked.

“I did. Have a seat. I got your signed contract. I wanted to thank you for agreeing to the pay cut. If all goes as planned, it won’t last the full six months. I really hated to do this, you know, but it was either this or a reduction in force.”

“I understand. It’s just a bad time of the year for the employees with families.”

"My employees are some of the highest paid in the city. A small cut shouldn't affect them if they are careful."

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is. I want you to take this list and call each of these people. They're companies we've bid on work for. I want you to follow up with them."

"I'll get on it right away," she said as she stood to go.

"Amanda, thanks again for sticking with me. I'd imagine some of my employees are going to look for employment elsewhere."

"I really see no reason for me to go that route at this time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get busy on this list."

The afternoon was nearly over. She'd made her calls and had been told by most of the contacts on the list that no decisions had been made yet.

She was just about to lock up for the day when she received a call from the receptionist.

"Amanda, there's a lawyer here to see you. A Mr. MacCleod, from Scotland," the young girl told her.

"All the way from Scotland?" she asked in a puzzled tone. "I wonder what he wants."

"He says it's a personal matter."

"Show him into my office and I'll take care of it."

As Lauren showed Mr. MacCleod into her office, Amanda asked him to have a seat.

"What can I do for you, Mr. MacCleod?" she asked politely.

"I have some news for ye, Miss Brown," the kindly older gentleman told her.

"And you came all the way from Scotland to bring me this news?"

"I felt it tae be a matter that should be handled in person. Ye will most likely be surprised by it."

"Well, let's hear it. What is this big news?" she asked, only half interested in what he had to say.

"Your father's great-great aunt Ruby has passed away."

"I don't recall ever hearing about an Aunt Ruby. I wasn't acquainted with many of my father's family over the years."

"I understand that. Ruby married a Scot, a duke tae be exact, and moved tae Scotland many years ago. I doubt she kept in contact with many of her family over the years."

"Obviously, since I've never heard of her." Amanda looked at her hands lying flat on her desk, nervously waiting to hear what any of this had to do with her.

"It seems that since Ruby and her husband had no children of their own, and her husband passed on several years ago, she has left all her worldly possessions to ye, her only living relative."

"How did she know about me?"

"Aye, as she got on in years, she hired our firm tae search for any living relatives in the States. When your father was killed, that left only ye."

"I see. So these worldly possessions, what might they be?" she asked.

"To begin with, there is a large sum of money. It will be deposited tae your bank account as soon as ye sign the paperwork. And then there's the castle, of course, and everything in it."

"A castle?" she asked, bewildered. "What in the world will I do with an old drafty castle in Scotland, of all places?"

"That, my dear, is entirely up tae ye. Might I suggest that ye visit Scotland and see the home of your aunt before making any decisions? Our land is very beautiful."

"Well, I *am* due for a vacation. Maybe I can use some of my inheritance and take a trip over there. I can speak to someone about selling it."

Mr. MacCleod gave her an odd look before he answered her. "Perhaps once ye see it, ye will have a change of heart."

"I don't know how I can possibly keep it. My life is here."

"Here are the papers ye will need tae sign for me. I will have the monies deposited in the morning. If ye decide tae visit, please

contact me. Here is my card." He laid the paperwork in front of her and waited for her to read and sign it.

Once she'd finished going over all of it, had asked a few more questions and had signed every last paper, she stood up and shook hands with the elderly attorney. "Thank you for making this trip. I'll be in touch."

He bowed to her and said, "It was my pleasure, Lass. I look forward tae seeing ye again soon."

Still in shock, she left the office and went home to her apartment, where she spent the evening doing extensive research into her family's past. It all seemed to be true. She went through papers belonging to her father and also searched online.

"Well, I'll either be wealthy in the morning or flat broke, if this is a hoax," she said aloud as she turned off her laptop for the night.

The first thing she did the next morning when she arrived at the office was to log into her bank account. It was there! Every penny accounted for. As she sipped her coffee, she sat back in her chair. Now what?

Most of the morning was spent contemplating her next move. Finally, she phoned Ray's office and asked if she could speak to him. He told her to come to his office in ten minutes.

As she sat facing her employer ten minutes later, she didn't know where to start. Finally she said, "I had a rather peculiar visitor yesterday afternoon just before I left the office."

"Oh, really?" her boss asked. "Who was it?"

She told him everything. When she was finished, she looked at his face. He was clearly surprised.

"And the money was in your account this morning, as promised?" he asked.

"Yes, every penny of it. Now, it seems, I need to make a trip across the pond to check out the rest of this so-called inheritance. I'll need to make arrangements for the sale of the castle and the contents."

"Are you asking for an extended vacation?" Ray asked.

"Yes, I guess I am. I don't really know how long I will need to take care of this."

"Are you sure you want to sell it?"

"How can I keep it up? It would take my entire inheritance to keep an old castle going from here, don't you think?"

"You have a point there. Still, it would be a nice place to visit. Take as much time as you need, Amanda. You have vacation time coming to you and if you need to stay longer, we'll work it out. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity and you should, by all means, check it out. It's not every day a person inherits a castle."

"Thank you for understanding. What would you like for me to do here before I make my arrangements for the trip?" she asked.

"Let me speak to Lauren. Perhaps you can give her a crash course and she can fill in for you. It would give her a chance to earn some extra money by doing two jobs in your absence."

"I'll be glad to do that."

She went back to her office and found that she couldn't focus on anything. When lunchtime came, she walked to the deli and found a table, preferring to eat alone.

Lauren spoke to her when she returned. "I guess we need to get together so you can show me the ropes soon."

"We'll start tomorrow. I've made no travel plans yet. Are you okay with this arrangement?"

"Oh, yes, definitely. And how about you?" the other girl asked. "This is all so exciting for you, like something out of a movie."

"I'm not so sure about that. It may be just one big headache. But I still need to take care of it. Besides, I've never been to Scotland. Maybe it will be fun."

"I'd love to be able to do that. You have no one to answer to, loads of money to travel with now, and a castle to stay in."

"I still think the castle is nothing more than a nuisance, and the sooner I can get rid of it the better."

"You may change your mind once you see it."

"I highly doubt it. Meet me in my office at nine in the morning.

Or better yet, I'll come to you. You'll need to be available to answer the phones."

"That probably would be best."

The rest of the afternoon she spent going over the things Lauren would need to take care of in her absence. She consulted with Ray several times throughout the afternoon. Once she finally made it home, she was ready for a hot bath, a bowl of soup and her bed. The past two days had been crazy and her life was about to get even crazier.

Traveling alone to Scotland was not something she'd ever imagined herself doing. Not in a million years. What did she, a young, independent girl from Cincinnati, know about selling a castle? She would have to consult with Mr. MacCleod. He would help her, wouldn't he?

Three weeks later, she had crammed Lauren's head with the most important details of her job and made arrangements for her flight to Scotland. She had called Mr. MacCleod and he had been elated at the news she'd be flying over for a visit. He told her he would arrange for her to be picked up at the airport and driven to the castle where he would meet her.

As she packed the last of her bags the night before her flight, she sighed. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she looked around the tiny bedroom. *I don't know what I'm getting myself into but it's going to be an adventure, I'm sure.*

As the cab dropped her off at the airport the next morning, she hurriedly made her way to her gate. A short time later, as she was settling into her seat on the plane, she spoke to the woman in the seat next to her.

"Ye headed tae Scotland?" the woman asked.

"Yes, I am."

"First time, isn't it?"

"Why, yes. Do you live there?" Amanda asked.

"All my days, I have. I am returning after a visit with a dear friend. Now, what can I tell ye about my land? Are ye visiting

friends or family?"

When Amanda told the woman she was going to visit Galloway Castle, the woman's eyes grew wide. "Did ye say Galloway Castle?"

"Y...yes, why?" Amanda asked.

"What business do ye have there? The last of the Galloway clan passed on recently."

"Ruby Galloway was a relative of my father's."

"Is that so? That must mean that Galloway Castle has passed on tae ye, now."

"Well, yes, but I've never seen it. Can you tell me about it?" she asked.

"Oh, tis a beautiful place, the gardens and all, but much sadness over the years within those walls."

"Why is that?" Amanda asked, intrigued.

"The Duke and his Duchess had no children of their own. And back over the years, the Duke's great-uncle, Ian Galloway, met with some sort of mishap. No one really knows what happened tae the poor young man. He disappeared one afternoon, never tae be heard from again. That's when the Duke's grandfather took over Galloway Castle. It should have gone tae Ian. T'was a very sad time for the family, as the story goes. They mourned dear Ian for many years, never giving up on finding him."

"They never found him?" Amanda asked.

"Alas, no, many say he was cursed by a beautiful witch. Others say he ran away."

Amanda laughed. "Well, more than likely, he ran away."

"One never knows," the woman replied. The look in her eyes sent a shiver down Amanda's spine.