
Chapter 1

As he exited the ferry, Ian grabbed a trolley from the side of the busy terminal, depositing their luggage on the flat, metal bottom. He looked over at Ailsa and gave her a smile. Her long chestnut hair blew madly around her face; pushing it behind her ears, she smiled back. "Put your coat on, darling. The wind out here will cut right through you," he said. Even though the day was mildly warm, the constant breeze gave it a biting edge.

"Are you sure I can't take those for you, Your Grace, and see you and the duchess settled, at least?" James, his personal protection officer and assistant, asked as he ushered them over to the side of the platform, out of the way of the crowd.

They were wrapping up the last of their month-long honeymoon in Spain, and instead of going straight home like Ailsa thought they would, they'd made a detour to the Orkney Islands, off the northern coast of Scotland.

"No. I want us to have these last few days alone," Ian said to his assistant. "Really alone. No one knows we're here. We won't leave the estate. I promise we'll be safe."

"I'll stay in Kirkwall on Mainland, in case you need me,"

James said, resigned. Ailsa thought it was more of a reassurance to himself.

When Ian sent the royal office their itinerary, he told her he had deliberately left the last few days in Orkney off. He said he doubted anyone would suspect they were at the small island estate he owned. He had been careful with the arrangements, even having James rent a car for them in a different name, to avoid being tracked down by the paparazzi.

James put their luggage into the boot of the black Land Rover. "I've arranged for the staff to have a holiday, so the house will be empty, like you requested. It's been stocked with food and supplies," he instructed. "Keep the alarm system activated at all times, and if you see or hear anything suspicious, call me immediately."

"We'll be fine," Ian repeated, getting into the car.

James opened the door for Ailsa. "My lady, please don't leave his side. The tabloids and death threats have calmed down over the last month, but security is still high."

Ailsa crossed her heart, giving him a smile. "I promise I won't." He shut the door, giving them a small nod before walking off muttering to himself. She turned to Ian. "How did you manage this?" she asked, stunned at the unexpected side trip.

He laughed. "I threatened James that I would send the tabloids a video of our honeymoon night."

"Ian, we don't have a video."

"I know, but James doesn't know that. He went a decent color of puce at the thought of dealing with the royal office, so he quickly gave in."

She smiled at him. The last month in Tenerife had helped to solidify their relationship. They'd left the tabloids, the marriage contract, the shooting, even the impromptu wedding, in the past and worked on simply being a couple. These extra few days, just the two of them, were a bonus she never expected. She wasn't

ready to return to Glen Torridon and all the responsibilities it encompassed.

The car sped over a narrow causeway, connecting to a smaller island. Green, sloping hills rose up gently in the distance. They skirted the perimeter of the island, coming to a small bay where a quaint village straggled along the shore of a sheltered harbor. Ian turned the car up a dirt road leading to a large house situated at the base of a sweeping hill. It overlooked the shallow, blue water of the Scapa Flow. The house was immense; Ailsa counted six chimney stacks alone, yet it still held the charm of the village with its whitewashed outer walls and dark, deep slanting, slate roof.

"Welcome to Torridon Hall," Ian said, pulling up to an outbuilding as he parked the car.

"It's huge." Ailsa undid her seatbelt, opening the door and getting out. She stretched her legs. It wasn't yet four in the afternoon and the sun was already setting.

"The ninth Duke of Torridon purchased the land for hunting and fishing. In the early 1900s, Torridon Hall was added as a hotel, though that petered out and our family mainly used it as a summer home. I refurbished it a few years ago, and now we rent out rooms again to holiday goers in the summer." Ian led her up a cobbled pathway, and unlocking the front door, he showed her in.

The house inside was remarkably modern in contrast to its old-fashioned exterior. Ian set their bags down on dark, wood floors that led into a vast great room with a stacked stone fireplace and floor to ceiling windows looking out over the bay. It flowed into a modern kitchen, which sported two-tone cabinetry in brown and white with highly polished, flushed surfaces and geometric designs. It was gorgeous.

Coal was already laid in the fireplace. Ian bent down to light it, while Ailsa switched on several lamps. "The bedrooms are

upstairs. The place looks modern, but I'm still working on switching over the utilities."

"It's beautiful, Ian." She stood by a window watching the sun make its final descent on the horizon, casting the bay in brilliant shades of orange and pink.

"It's yours." He came up behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Mine?" she questioned.

"Aye, yours. A wedding present for my duchess. I had the deed transferred into your name."

Ailsa turned toward him. "Ian, I don't know what to say." She had never owned property before. Reaching up, she ran her hand through the back of his hair and pulled his head down, kissing him. "Thank you."

A present sat on the French, seared oak dining table. Ian handed it to her. A heavy key was tied on top with a gold bow. Ailsa brushed it with her finger. "Don't open it yet," he said, hesitating for just a second as if he wanted to say something else but thought better of it. "Let me open a bottle of wine first."

She took the package over to the living room and set it down on the coffee table. She sat down on the gray, midcentury sofa, removed her boots and tucked her feet up under her. Something piqued at the back of her mind, perhaps the slight waver in Ian's demeanor caused it. There was a shift in his energy. Tenerife had offered them a reprieve from their rather complicated beginning, but the closer they got to Scotland, a shadow of unease began to creep into her gut. Their brief respite was over. Orkney wasn't just a fanciful end to their trip as she'd hoped. Ian wanted to negotiate their terms. She turned the antique wedding band on her finger nervously, her apprehension building. This was just a place to mediate the conversation. The last few months flooded back to her in waves—the car crash which had brought them together, Ian caring for her while she recovered from her injuries, the intensity of their affair and eventually falling in love. Then,

Ian's marriage proposal and her overcoming her doubts about their future, the domestic discipline contract she had signed, finding out Ian was a duke. There was the harassment from the tabloids and the death threats against her, the ambush on the road by the terrorist, Al-Saad, and getting shot. She had met the father she thought abandoned her and, finally, her and Ian's impromptu wedding. It was as if she had lived two years in three months. Her hand rubbed the scar on her shoulder where the bullet from Al-Saad's attack grazed her, even though it was healed it still ached with phantom pain, the same apparition which haunted her heart in the form of Robert McFadden, her personal protection officer and the kiss they shared before she took her wedding vows. Her and Ian's honeymoon with its blissful innocence was over, its illusion simply a hallucination, the specter of their future was about to rise up and Ailsa only hoped they had the strength to conquer it.

Ian handed her a glass of white wine, sitting down beside her. He gave her a half smile. Her breath caught momentarily in her throat. She was still taken aback by his good looks, and it still surprised her that someone like him would want her. He ran a hand through his dark brown hair, troubled. Rarely hesitant, this was a quality she wasn't used to seeing in him, but his steel gray eyes held the same uncertainty she knew hers did. Something was wrong.

"We need to talk," he said softly, biting his lip.

She looked down at her untouched glass, silent for a moment, a small part of her hoping she was mistaken. Looking up, she caught his narrowed eyes. Apparently not. She took a sip of the crisp, dry wine. "I know," she said wistfully. "I guess the honeymoon's really over."

"It's not over, sweet girl," he said, reaching out to touch her leg. "We just need to figure out how to go forward when we return to Glen Torridon."

"I wish we never had to go back."

"It's our home, Ailsa. I know things were difficult, but I promise it will be different," he said.

She leaned forward, setting her drink down and fingering the present with its smooth, shiny paper. Glen Torridon was his home; it didn't feel like her home. After the shooting, Ian revoked the domestic discipline contract she'd signed, leaving them in unknown territory. They didn't seem to know how to be a couple without it but were at odds with it. The shooting left her feeling scared and adrift, and at that moment, she needed Ian's strength, so she had re-signed the contract. Now she wished she hadn't acted so rashly. Her self-reliance was a trait she'd grown to rely on.

"Can I open it?" she asked, picking the package up.

"Let me explain something first," Ian said, stopping her. He looked as if he had the weight of the world upon his shoulders. "And I don't think you're going to like it."