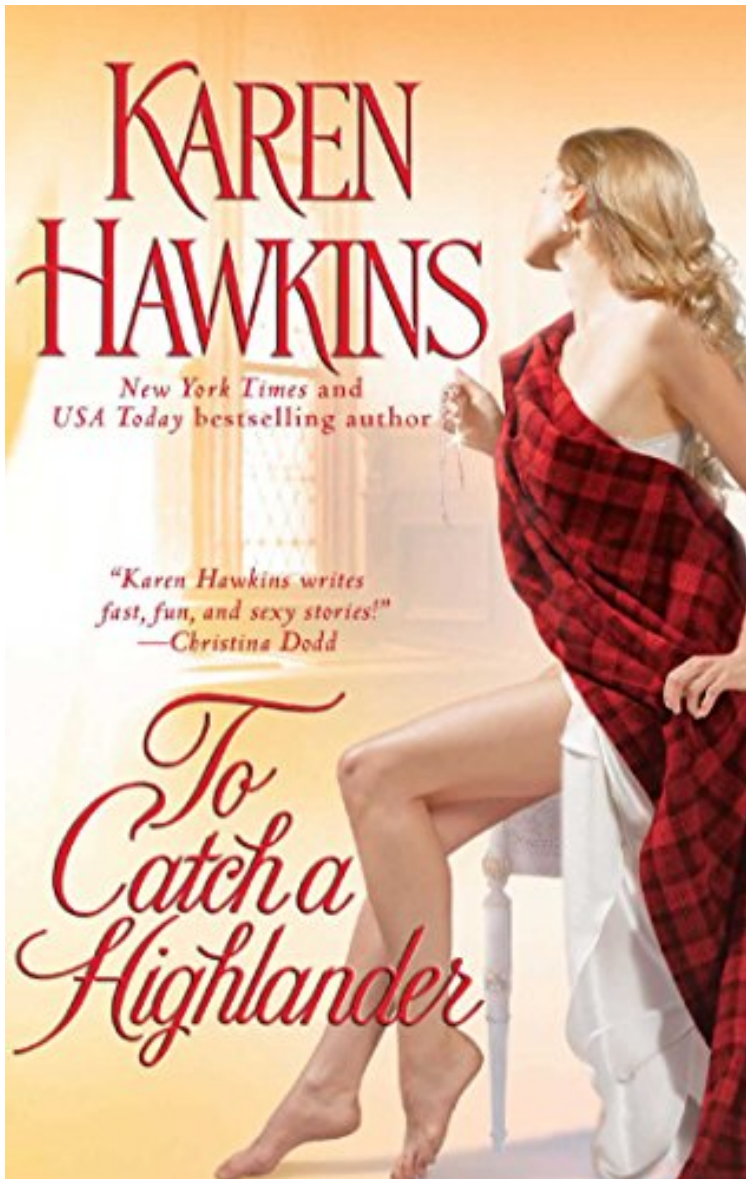


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# To Catch a Highlander



*Par Karen Hawkins  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn this sizzling romantic adventure, a daring Highland lass plays a high-stakes game to keep the home she loves...but ends up losing her heart instead. When her father gambles away the family estate to darkly dangerous Lord Dougal MacLean, Sophia MacFarlane is determined to use her wiles to regain it. Forced to stake the one thing she has left -- her virtue -- she desperately hopes her skill can limit her losses to a few kisses...no matter how hotly tempting Dougal turns out to be. Dougal MacLean knows that Sophia has some trick up her sleeve, but he can't resist the challenge -- or her ravishing beauty. So when she proposes a card game with most unusual stakes, Dougal is delighted to accept. But as the game ends,

Dougal and Sophia discover they've wagered something even more precious -- their hearts. Chapter 11 It was eleven-thirty when Marlie Keen left the cinema with the rest of the Friday night moviegoers. The movie had been a good one, a lighthearted romp that had made her laugh aloud several times and left her in a cheerful mood. As she walked briskly to her car, she thought she could tell which movie people had seen by how they were acting now. It wasn't that difficult; the couples who were holding hands, or even exchanging kisses in the parking lot, had obviously seen the sexy romance. The aggressive bunch of teenage boys had seen the latest martial arts thriller. The well-dressed young professionals who were in earnest discussions had seen the latest Thelma and Louise imitation. Marlie was glad she had chosen the comedy. It was as she was driving home on the brightly lit expressway that it hit her: She felt good. The best she had felt in years. Six years, to be precise. In startled retrospect, she realized that she had been at peace for several months now, but she had been so caught up in the sedative routine of the life she had built here that she hadn't noticed. For a long time she had simply existed, going through the motions, but time had done its slow work and eventually she had healed, like an amputee recovering from the loss of a limb and learning to cope, then to enjoy life again. Her loss had been mental rather than physical, and unlike an amputee, she had prayed through dark, endless nights that she never recover that part of herself. At some point in the past six years, she had stopped living in dread that the knowing would return, and simply gotten on with her life. She liked being normal. She liked being able to go to movies the way normal people did, liked being able to sit in a crowd; she hadn't been able to do that before. Several years ago, when she had realized it was actually possible, she had turned into a movie junkie for a while, visually gorging on the films that she thought were safe. For a long time any degree of violence was unbearable, but for the past couple of years she had been able to watch the occasional thriller, though they weren't her favorite type. To her surprise, she hadn't yet been able to watch any sex scenes; she would have thought that violence would have been immeasurably more difficult for her to handle, maybe even impossible, but instead it was the portrayal of intimacy that gave her problems. Dr. Ewell had been fond of saying that no one should ever lay bets on the human psyche, and she was amused to find he was right. The violence in her life had been traumatic, devastating, while the sex had been merely unpleasant, but it was the "love" scenes that still had her squeezing her eyes shut until it was over. She exited off the expressway onto a four-lane street, and of course was caught by the traffic light at the bottom of the exit ramp. The radio was tuned to an easy-listening station and she inhaled deeply, feeling the slow music and the lingering lightheartedness of the movie combine in a delicious, physical sense of contentment ---- the knife flashed down, gleaming dully. A sodden, muffled THUNK! as it struck. The blade rose again, dripping red -- Marlie jerked back, an unconscious physical denial of the horribly real image that had just flashed in her mind. "No," she moaned softly to herself. She could hear her own breathing, sharp and gasping. "No," she said again, though she already knew the protest was useless. Her hands were clenched on the steering wheel, white-knuckled, and even that wasn't enough to stop the trembling that started at her feet and went all the way up. Dimly she watched her hands start shaking as the spasms intensified. -- Black, gloating pleasure. Triumph. Contempt -- It was happening again. Dear God, it was coming back! She had thought herself free, but she wasn't. The knowing was coming closer, growing, looming, and she knew from experience that soon it would overwhelm her. Clumsily, her coordination already deteriorating, she steered the car to the right, so she wouldn't block the exit ramp. A car horn blared as she wavered too close to the vehicle beside her, but the noise was distant, muted. Her vision was fading. Desperately she braked to a stop and shoved the gear lever into park, hoping that she had managed to get completely out of traffic, but then the nightmare image was back, hitting her full strength like a beacon that had brushed by her in search before homing in. Her hands fell limply into her lap. She sat in the car staring straight ahead, her eyes unblinking, unseeing, everything focused inward. Her breathing became harsher. Rough sounds began to form in her throat, but she didn't hear them. Her right hand lifted slowly from her lap and formed itself into a fist, as if she were gripping something. The fist twitched violently, three times, in a rigidly restrained stabbing motion. Then she was quiet again, her face as still and blank as a statue's, her gaze fixed and empty. It was the sharp rapping on the window beside Marlie that brought her back. Confused and exhausted, for a terrifying moment she had no idea who she was, or where, or what was happening. An unearthly blue light was flashing in her eyes. She turned a dazed, uncomprehending look at the man who was bent over, peering into the window as he tapped on it with something shiny. She didn't know him, didn't know anything. He was a stranger, and he was trying to get into her car. Panic was sharp and acrid in her mouth. Then identity, blessed identity, returned with a rush and brought reality with it. The shiny thing the man was using to rap against the glass transformed itself into a flashlight. A glint on his chest became

recognizable as a badge, and he, frown and commanding voice and all, was a policeman. His patrol car, Mars lights flashing, was parked at an angle in front of hers. The images of horror were still too close, too frighteningly real. She knew she had to block it out or she wouldn't be able to function at all, and she needed to get control of herself. Some vague danger was threatening, some memory that danced close to the surface but wouldn't quite crystalize. Desperately she pushed away the fog of confusion and fumbled to roll down the window, fighting for the strength to complete even that small act. The exhaustion was bone-deep, paralyzing, muscles turned to mush. Warm, humid air poured through the open window. The officer flashed the light beam around the interior of her car. "What's the problem here, ma'am?" She felt cotton-brained, thought processes dulled, but even so she knew better than to blurt out the truth. That would immediately get her hauled in on suspicion of being under the influence of some kind of drug, probably a hallucinogen. Yes, that was it; that was the vague danger she had sensed. A night in jail, for a normal person, would be bad enough; for her, under these circumstances, it could be catastrophic. She had no idea how much time had passed, but she knew that she must look pale and drained. "Ah...I'm sorry," she said. Even her voice was shaky. Desperately she sought for a believable explanation. "I -- I'm an epileptic. I began to feel dizzy and pulled over. I think I must have had a slight seizure." The flashlight beam sought her face, played across her features. "Please step out of the car, ma'am." The trembling was back; she didn't know if her legs would hold her. But she got out, holding to the open door for support. The blue lights stabbed her eyes, and she turned her head away from the brightness as she stood there pinned in the glare, a human aspen, visibly quaking. "May I see your driver's license?" Her limbs were leaden. It was an effort to retrieve her purse, and she dropped it immediately, the contents spilling half in the car, half on the ground. Innocuous contents, thank God; not even an aspirin bottle or pack of cigarettes. She was still afraid to take over-the-counter medications, even after six years, because the mental effects could be so unpredictable. By concentrating fiercely, holding the crippling fatigue at bay, she managed to pick up her wallet and get out her license. The policeman silently examined it, then returned it to her. "Do you need help?" he finally asked. "No, I'm feeling better now, e-except for the sh-shakes," she said. Her teeth were chattering from reaction. "I don't live far. I'll be able to make it home." "Would you like for me to follow you, make sure you get there okay?" "Yes, please," she said gratefully. She was willing to tell any number of lies to keep from being taken to a hospital, but that didn't mean she had lost her common sense. She was incredibly tired, the aftermath worse than she remembered. And there was still the nightmare image -- knowing or memory, she couldn't tell -- to be dealt with, but she pushed it out of her mind. She couldn't let herself think about it; right now she had to concentrate only on the tasks at hand, which were remaining coherent, upright, and functional, at least until she could get home. The policeman helped her pick up her belongings, and in a few moments she was behind the wheel again, edging back onto the pavement, driving with excruciating care because every movement was such an effort. Twice she caught herself as her eyes were closing, the darkness of unconsciousness inexorably closing in. Then she was home, turning in to the driveway. She managed to get out of the car and wave at the officer. She leaned against the car, watching him drive away, and only when he turned the corner did she set herself to the task of getting inside the house. To safety. With weak, shaking, uncooperative hands she looped the strap of her purse around her neck, so she wouldn't drop it. After pausing for a moment to gather strength, she launched herself away from the car in the direction of the front porch. As a launch, it was spectacularly lacking in power. She staggered like a drunk, her steps wavering, her vision fading. Every movement became m...Prsentation de l'diteur

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