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## *Dedication*

*To my husband, John.*

*While my heroes exist primarily in my head,  
my imagination is far more vivid when I am with you.*

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# *Contents*

*Dedication*  
*Acknowledgments*

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23  
Chapter 24  
Chapter 25  
Chapter 26  
Chapter 27  
Chapter 28  
Chapter 29  
Chapter 30  
Chapter 31  
Chapter 32

*An Excerpt from Summer Is For Lovers*

*About the Author*

*Books by Jennifer McQuiston*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

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# Chapter 1

*Somewhere in Britain, 184*

**T**HOUGH SHE WOULD never admit it to polite Society, Lady Georgette Thorold hated brandy almost as much as she hated husbands. So it was the cruelest of jokes when she awoke with nary a clue to her surroundings, smelling like one and pressed up against the other.

As she reluctantly came to her senses, unwelcome scents and fears crowded out lucid thought. In all her twenty-six years, Georgette had never even raised a glass of the amber liquid, much less slept under sheets that smelled as if they had been washed in a distillery. She was used to a feeling of comfort on waking, or at least familiarity. But judging by the stained wallpaper in her bleary line of vision, she was not in her bedroom, and there was nothing of comfort in the pounding of her head.

And, more to the point, her husband had been dead for two years.

A man's warm body was stretched against her back, and she could feel the telltale press of an erection knocking against the base of her spine. She stared down at the muscled forearm that lay across her shoulders, noting its possessive, sinewy strength. For the briefest of moments she considered closing her eyes and going back to sleep in the appealing cage of this man's arms. But clarity punched its way through her murky confusion.

She was in bed. *With a stranger.*

Heart pounding, she wiggled her way free and leaped from the tangled covers, dodging a gauntlet of broken glass and articles of clothing as she scrambled for safety. She sucked in a roomful of air, trying to escape the panic perched on her shoulders.

There were feathers everywhere. On the floor. On the ceiling. On *her*. Horrified by her lack of hygiene and the fear that somewhere in this room there might be a slaughtered goose, she closed her eyes, praying that when she opened them again it would all disappear. But the lack of eyesight proved ill-advised in the mess of the place. She tripped and stumbled against a wardrobe that looked to have survived the Jacobite Risings only to now sit ruined, one door hanging off its hinge.

Despite her graceless clattering, the man in the bed snored through it all. Georgette scrubbed a fist across her eyes, as if she could banish the sight of him, then lowered her hand to cover her mouth. The smell of brandy hovered there on her skin. Had she bathed in the vile stuff? What on earth had she done?

Dear God, she was in a strange room with a strange man, smelling of the same spirits her former husband had consumed to lethal outcome—what *hadn't* she done?

Bile, thick and bitter, rose in the back of her throat. This could not be happening. This was not who she was. Her now-dead husband had been the rake and libertine. She had been the wife who turned

blind, tortured eye. She abhorred the thought that in one night, she appeared to have sunk to the level of debauchery her husband had embraced during their brief marriage.

Nay, she had sunk below it. Because while such behavior was permitted among the men of the town, she was a lady. And ladies did not wake up in strangers' beds, without a clue of how they had come to be there.

She took a step backward, certain her circumstances couldn't get any worse. The wall scorched the bare skin of her shoulders with all the subtlety of a branding iron. Air clawed at her lungs, demanding entrance. Apparently, her circumstances *could* get worse. Because in addition to waking beside a man whom she didn't know, she was undressed.

And the only thing Georgette hated more than brandy and husbands was nudity.

Her heart tripped along in her chest as if she had awakened from a bad dream. Only this was no dream. Dream men didn't snore. Her former husband had taught her that, if nothing else. And dream or no, she needed to locate her clothes and her sanity, both of which seemed as absent as her memory.

She grabbed the nearest item of clothing she could find, which turned out to be the sleeping man's shirt, and shook tiny bits of glass and feathers from it before claspng it against her bare chest. The shirttails came down to her calves. The rustling of fabric released a not unpleasant fragrance, clean soap underlaid with a hint of horse and leather. She felt an answering, instinctive tug in her body's most intimate places. How could she be so brazen? She didn't know this man. She didn't *want* to know this man. Her stomach churned in confusion and embarrassment, and she cursed her body's traitorous response.

Evidence of her bed partner's own state of disarray peeked out from beneath the covers, hinting at their interactions of the previous evening. A muscled calf, scattered with a dusting of dark hair, flexed alarmingly. The sheets shifted as he turned over, revealing a head of brown hair. He sported a full beard that no young man in London would have suffered without a wager first being laid down, but he did not hide the patrician slope of his nose or the sensual slide of his lips. In sleep, his face looked peaceful. Appealing in a masculine sort of way.

And terrifyingly unfamiliar.

"Dear God, what have I done?" she whispered. Claspng the shirt tighter against her body, she picked her way closer and studied his features, trying to jog her memory for some hint of what he meant to her, or she to him. He looked to be in his early thirties. His hair showed a tendency to curl at the edges, and the brightening light of dawn caught the glint of red in his dark beard. His eyelashes lay like a smudge against his lightly weathered cheek, making Georgette's pale, pampered skin feel insipid by comparison. No slice of recognition accompanied her perusal, though standing this close to him brought a rush of heat to her limbs.

Beneath the man's head she could see sheets that looked none too clean. The thought of fleas niggled at her, and her skin jumped beneath an imaginary assault. If she had chosen this room, why had she chosen in him?

"Please, please, at *least* be a gentleman," she muttered, trying to decide if the sleeping man looked more like a footman or a peer. The shirt she held against her was of fine cotton lawn. But most gentlemen of her acquaintance weren't quite so . . . muscled.

She spied her dress in a graceless heap on the floor and stooped to pick it up, then dropped to her knees to look under the bed, searching for her shoes. Shards of glass and rough-hewn floorboards scraped at her knees, and above her the man gave another rattling snore. A thought struck her with blinding horror. If her partner in sin was a gentleman, he might insist on marrying her after what she presumed must have taken place.



And if there was one thing she was determined to avoid, aside from word of this reaching London scandal sheets, it was another loveless marriage to a man with a penchant for women and drink.

She rose to her feet and yanked her wrinkled gray silk over her head, not even bothering to try to find either her corset or her chemise. A shifting on the mattress sent her panic to new heights, and she abandoned her haphazard efforts to button the bodice and dashed for the door with no thought in her head other than to put some distance between herself and this anonymous, offensive stranger. But the dirt and glass-strewn floorboards sucked at her slippers, and the latch seemed to snag on her hand.

Then she saw it.

The ring on her left hand glittered in a skein of sunlight that snaked its way between the room's lace curtains. Horrified, Georgette twisted her hand, peering at the bit of gold. The symbolic weight it was as heavy as the weight of her worst fears. She wore a signet ring emblazoned with a family crest, one she did not recognize.

And judging by its position on her hand and the circumstances of her morning, she appeared to be married.

Disbelief settled in her bones. It was not possible. A wedding took planning. A posting of the banns, or a special license, at least. And the logistics of the matter aside, she *couldn't* have done this. Not now, when she was finally shaking off the manacles of two years of mourning. Not now, when she was finally poised to taste the freedom long denied her.

She whirled back to look at the man again. No matter how handsomely proportioned the stranger that bed might be, no matter how the sight of his muscled calf sent a flutter of expectation in her abdomen, she was certain she could never have wanted this.

Anger flooded her chest, filling the space where fear and uncertainty once held ground. She stepped closer. She needed to wake him, to find an explanation, but the thought of touching him made her fingers curl in trepidation. Cursing her lack of a weapon, Georgette scanned the room. She grasped the nearest object she could find, then turned back to face her still-sleeping bed partner. Hefting the thankfully empty chamber pot on one hip, she reached out a hand and thumped it against his bare shoulder.

“Open your eyes,” she hissed in a voice she barely recognized.

The man in question rolled over, stretched, and blinked up at her. Sleepy green eyes the color of an apothecary glass focused on her. A seductive smile curled the edges of his lips, revealing even, white teeth.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice a rustic, rumbled burr. “I dinna ken why you have left, but I wish you would come back to bed.”

His uncultured accent told Georgette as clear as any map where she was, and her heart squeezed tight in her chest. A snippet of memory settled over her shoulders like a heavy woolen mantle. She was in Scotland, where an irregular sort of marriage could indeed be had on a whim.

She remembered now, at least some of it. She remembered planning a holiday, and her hopes for a rebirth of spirit after the terrible circumstances of her husband's death and the endless cycle of mourning. Her cousin had come north to study the fauna of Scotland, hoping to write a treatise on his work, and he had invited her to visit. She remembered thinking, *Scotland is the place*, with its breath-taking pine forests and pastoral summer scenes and, most importantly, its distance from London's Season. She needed that distance, needed time to collect herself and prepare for the pitying stares that would no doubt accompany her return to polite Society.

Only, never in her wildest imaginings had she considered that return would occur as a married woman. And try as she might, she still could not remember the circumstances that brought her here,

what had to be a public inn, or to this man.

~~The necessary words, dry as the burnt toast she could smell wafting up from some lower level~~ the building, stuck in her throat. She forced herself to choke them out. “Who are you?”

A surprised chuckle escaped the man as he shifted and sat up. “Now you ask? It didn’t concern you last night overmuch.”

The slide of the sheet pulled her eyes in a far too southerly direction. His abdomen was washboard of muscle, layers defined as precisely as a scalpel’s blade. She swallowed. This was not a gentleman, and probably no mere footman either. Not with a physique like that. The sight of his bare chest brought heat licking against the edges of her body, and the warmth settled with terrible sureness between her legs. She was attracted to this man. Shame in her body’s inappropriate reaction screamed in her ears.

“What are you?” she pressed, her voice a strangled knot.

He chuckled. “What a daft question to ask, after the service I have provided you.” He nodded in the direction of her hand, and his smile shifted to a smirk. “I am your hero husband, milady. And you owe me another kiss.”

Another kiss? Dear God, she couldn’t remember the first one, though a primitive, distant part of her mind regretted the loss. And though she had suspected it, the confirmation of their circumstances twisted her panic to new, dizzying heights. “Husband?” She licked her lips, desperate for a moment’s clear thought.

This man, with his uncultured consonants and eye-pleasing musculature, was clearly a commoner. She was the widow of a viscount. If she chose to marry again—which she would not—it would not be to a man who looked as if he made his living at indecent labor. No matter what this scoundrel thought he had gained, and no matter what manner of shocking intimacy she had forgotten, she would never have done this.

“Do you know who I am?” she demanded, trying to intimidate this man who sent her heart bounding in fear but her body inexplicably leaning toward him.

“I ken you as well as any man can know a woman.” He crooked his finger at her and beckoned in a playful, possessive display. “Now bring yourself back, my lady wife, and let us get reacquainted.”

His voice was teasing, but his words were damning. This was why she had sworn to never marry again. How *dare* he summon her that way? How *dare* he presume? His words flung her body into motion. The chamber pot’s trajectory was more instinctive than calculated. A certain resolve burrowed beneath her skin even as the sound of crockery on bone sent her feet to flight.

She was no one’s plaything, not anymore.

And she would be no one’s wife.

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## Chapter 2

GEORGETTE RUSHED DOWN the dark stairwell of the ramshackle inn, past the public room with its gut-wrenching smells of coddled eggs and smoked kippers, past even the shocked innkeeper, who did more than call out after her as she plunged through the front door.

The cacophony of the street outside was an assault on her mind and body, as if a giant's hand had flung her against a stone wall. The sun's low-slanting rays hinted at the morning's early hour, perhaps no more than seven o'clock, but the jostling of street vendors and the noise from the nearby market told her the citizens of this modest Scottish town took their mornings seriously. The smell of frying dough wafting from the street corner made her head pound and her stomach turn over in objection, but she tamped down the urge to vomit. Her body's complaints about her raucous night were not chief on her list of things to sort out this morning.

She had struck a man. Had struck her *husband*. She hoped the man—whoever he was—was unharmed, that she hadn't done permanent damage to that handsome profile. She hadn't been thinking, had impulsively given in to a lifetime of frustration. And was it any wonder she had behaved without due deliberation? She could scarcely breathe.

Thinking was out of the question.

She lifted her skirts and hurried down the street at an unladylike jog, determined to put as much space between her and the scene of her shame as possible. She repeated her inescapable new mantra over and over with her steps. *Dear God, what have I done?* And after a minute or so, through a dawning sense of panic and confusion, she added a new piece for good measure: *Dear God, where am I?*

She hurried past foreign-looking storefronts, so different from London they made her eyes ache. There was no familiar landmark she could see, no sense of having been here before, no sense of knowing where she was going. Dogs and children, all bearing the ribbed, hungry look of the Scottish hills, scattered before her, and the thick brogue of snatched bits of conversation battered her ears.

She made it five blurry blocks before the exertions of the previous evening caught up with her. Reaching out a hand to brace herself against a brick wall, she leaned over, sucking in great breaths full of air beneath the shade of a shop awning. A pair of young women passed by, their bonnets trailing pink ribbons. They studied her with avid curiosity, putting their heads together to whisper behind cupped hands.

Georgette hated to imagine what she must look like. Heavens, her unbrushed hair alone should be enough to stop traffic, and there was no denying the smell of brandy still polluted the air around her. When she had escaped the inn, she entertained no thought beyond fleeing. But now she stood in a state of dishabille on a public street, her gown gaping rudely down the partially buttoned front.

She couldn't even remember the last time she'd gone without the benefit of a corset, and now the

were witnesses to her disgraceful, slatternly appearance.

Straightening up, she turned in a full circle, searching for a safe face or landmark. This time, with the benefit of a moment's rest, she could see more. The striped awning across the street. The communal pump with its line of townsfolk waiting their turn to gather water. But Georgette truly had no idea where she was. The only person she knew in this town was the handsome, heathen Scotsman she had left in her bed.

And the only other person she knew in Scotland was her cousin, Randolph Burton.

She groaned, slumping back against the wall as she contemplated the mess her life had suddenly become. This was supposed to be the start of a two-week holiday at her cousin's house in Scotland. She remembered arriving three days ago—or was it four? Randolph's obsequious welcome had been a disappointment, as had the realization that the promised female escort was not in residence. Worse, she remembered her suspicions that Randolph's interest in her seemed more calculated than cousinly, bolstered by a dinner when he had stared at her over candlelight and she had fidgeted in her seat. That, unfortunately, was where her memory ended.

"I've brought you a kitten, miss."

Georgette whirled, her heart leaping in her throat. A man in a bloodstained apron stood a few feet away, close enough that she could smell the coppery, sweat-soaked scent of him. He sported a beard the color of clay, littered with bits of food and other ill-considered things.

Around the burly figure, the business of the town's morning swirled. Children skipped by, and women with baskets headed to the market Georgette had seen a few blocks before. No one seemed to notice or care the man held a cleaver in one meaty hand, and clasped a brown and gray striped kitten by the scruff of the neck in the other.

"Do I know you?" Georgette asked, taking a cautious step back, not even caring that the movement took her into the street.

A smile cracked his lips, revealing a red, jarring hole where his top front teeth should have been. "MacRory's the name. I dinna have a chance to tell you last night while we were getting acquainted."

"I met you last night?" And they were *acquainted*? The man appeared to weigh close to twenty stone, all flesh and gristle. He was either an unhygienic butcher or a murderer. Neither career recommended him as a close, personal friend. He could crush her with a finger as easily as a fist. How familiar could they have become in the brief span of her memory loss?

"You dinna remember? Ach, well, you were on me and off again so fast, I suppose that explains it. The aproned man's voice carried the same rumbling burr of the man she had left in her bed, but the timbre of his voice evoked none of the same soul-stirring reactions. His words, and what they implied, made her neck flush with horror rather than attraction.

"I was *on* you?" Georgette prayed she had misheard him.

"Oh, aye. Wrapped your hands right around my girth you did." His hearty laugh made the stains on his apron shake like windblown curtains. "You knew just how to squeeze."

Sweat pricked the hollows of Georgette's underarms and a racking shiver shook her spine. Her mind's screamed protestations tumbled about until they distilled into a single, inarguable question. "I beg your pardon?"

"Take it, lass." The man gestured toward the squirming tabby with his knife. "You earned it."

Georgette was confused—and alarmed—enough to reach out her hand and snatch the kitten to her chest. It was impossibly tiny, perhaps three or four weeks old. How she was supposed to take care of the thing she hadn't a clue, but some long-dormant nurturing instinct welled up in her chest. She could not give it back, not now. It might end up on someone's dinner table if she did.

The butcher gave her one more gap-spaced grin and then turned and lumbered off down the street. Bile rose in the back of her throat as she watched him disappear into the crowd. Dear God, had she really touched him so intimately last night?

And worse, had she serviced him in exchange for a kitten?

Georgette blinked against the tears gathering in her eyes. She had not cried when her husband had died, though she felt no small measure of guilt for his untimely death. Neither had she cried upon discovering her shameful circumstances this morning, nor upon stumbling about a foreign town in a state of half dress and being gawked at by a pair of young ladies who looked as fresh as pressed flowers.

But now, upon hearing that she might have engaged in disreputable activities with more than one man last night, *now* she was crying? She was as disgusted with herself for her weakness now as for her apparent recklessness last night.

The sound of hooves and wheels pulled her from her self-flagellation, and Georgette jumped in her skin as a black draught horse cut through her thoughts, the driver shouting at her in some unintelligible brogue. She scrambled toward the edge of the street, her slippers grappling for purchase on the manure-slicked paving stones. She almost fell, then righted herself one-handed.

She clutched the kitten against her chest as the cart rumbled by. She shuddered as she considered how close she had come to dropping the helpless creature in her dash to safety. She slipped the kitten down the front of her bodice, then fastened the remaining buttons over it. It curled into a ball, right between her breasts. She would sort out what to do with it later. Right now she needed both her hands.

“Georgette!”

Her cousin’s voice, shrill as the hawkers selling their wares on the street corner, sent relief coursing through her body. She turned toward the shout to find Randolph standing a few feet away, his mouth wide enough to catch the dust from the retreating wheels of the wagon that had almost killed her. She had known Randolph Burton since childhood, and he had always been a fastidious sort of person. But this morning, his normally well-waxed hair hung in tufted blond clumps around his face and his necktie was rumpled and askew.

Georgette had never seen him look so disheveled, or so dear.

He lurched toward her and she welcomed his familiar clasp on her elbow. “Cousin,” she murmured, placing a grateful hand in his proffered one.

The touch of skin on skin was jolting. She had left her gloves in the room at the inn, if indeed she had even worn them last night. The reminder of just how far she had stepped outside of propriety, and the realization that she honestly didn’t know what she might have done, tightened her fingers in his fierce grip. Just a few days ago she shrank from Randolph’s touch, not wanting to encourage his fumbling interest.

Now, she didn’t care. She wanted only to lean on someone who could whisk her away from this place and these circumstances. “I am happy to see you,” she choked out.

He swallowed, the motion visible between the drooping edges of his en pointe collar. “You . . . you are truly happy to see me? Then why are you crying?”

Georgette swiped at her eyes. “You cannot imagine how glad, Randolph. You are the first familiar face I have seen today. I have no idea where I am, but if you are here, I must presume we are in Moraig.”

He swallowed again. “Er . . . yes.” His gaze scraped her skin. “Where have you been all night, Georgette?”

Her initial relief faltered at that. She pulled her hand from his grasp. Of course there would be

questions. Not even Randolph—bumbling, oblivious man that he was—could accept her appearance this morning without wondering. “I . . .” She wiped her sweating palms on her skirts and shook her head. She could not say. It was too shaming, and far too intimate to share with her cousin.

A man in a top hat walked by on the opposite side of the street and called out a hullo, to which neither of them Georgette could not be sure. Randolph raised a hand to the man before turning his attention back to her. “I have looked for you all night,” he said, his voice dropping to a fierce whisper. “I was worried about you, desperately so. I was just on my way to the authorities when I saw you in the street.”

The thought of her cousin reporting her evening’s escapade to anyone, authority or no, made her pulse pound out a terrified objection. Georgette found a false smile and stretched it across her teeth. “No need for that.” She willed him to believe her. “Here I am, safe and sound.”

Randolph’s thin brow rose. “Truly? Where did you spend the evening?”

This was a delicate matter. Clearly, things were not right here, but she loathed revealing the exact circumstances of her morning to Randolph. “I . . . I was hoping you could tell me that,” she admitted.

He squinted down, concern flooding the gray eyes she knew matched the color of her own. Instead of answering her, his gaze pulled down in the vicinity of her bodice and lingered there. His face flushed, a ruddy confection of capillaries and shock that sent her toes curling inward with shame.

“Where is your . . . er . . . corset?” he asked.

As if on cue, the kitten started to squirm. Georgette winced in mortification as tiny claws punched through the front of her bodice. “I would rather not say.”

For a moment he leveled a mystified stare at the space where she had stashed her little passenger. Then his face went from red to white in a heartbeat. “Dear God!” he gasped. “Have you been assaulted?”

She shook her head, despair clutching at her chest as sharply as the kitten’s needlelike claws. “No,” she whispered. “I do not think so.” Whatever else her mysterious Scotsman’s sins, she did not think she had been an unwilling party in the night’s festivities, not when her body flushed every time she thought of him. “How did I come to be here?” She sighed, pressing her fingers into her temples.

“On the street?”

“In town!” she snapped.

Randolph stuttered a moment. “Wha-what is the last thing you recall?”

Georgette closed her eyes. She remembered putting on the dress she now wore, a dove gray silk that was only just barely a step above mourning. She recalled struggling with the mother-of-pearl buttons and her consternation that Randolph had neglected to provide her with the promised maid. Not so much for the convenience of the thing, but the propriety of the matter. She didn’t like being alone with Randolph, had wanted the buffer another human being would provide over afternoon tea.

She opened her eyes. “I remember taking tea with you. We had those ginger biscuits.” She recalled choking them down with an artificial smile plastered on her face. Hard as river stones, those cookies had been. Although Randolph possessed an almost frighteningly accurate knowledge of the historical and medicinal uses of aromatic herbs, his ability to translate such knowledge into something edible was suspect.

“And what next?” Randolph pressed, looking a sickly white.

She squirmed, trying to sort through the mental fog. A new memory surfaced, clear as daylight over water. Of Randolph twisting nervously in front of her near the hearth, saying, “Dearest Georgette, you are a woman of no small means. Now that you are out of mourning, there will be those who would take advantage. Let me be the one to protect you.”

“You asked me to marry you.” She remembered the taste of panic in her mouth that had

accompanied his fumbled proposal. "And I explained why I could not."

Randolph winced, his eyes squinting owl-like over his spectacles. She regretted hurting him then and she regretted hurting him now. But she had come to Scotland for a respite, not an offer of marriage. That he thought she needed protecting had perturbed her at the time.

That he might have been right shattered her now.

"So *that* you can remember." His voice hung thick with regret.

"Yes." Georgette blew a hot breath between her teeth. "Then . . . nothing." She searched and came up empty. It was a maddening affair, to not know what she might have said or done. Why, anything could have happened. Anything at all.

She almost laughed. It was necessary to keep from catching on a sob.

"We went out," Randolph offered, his fingers gripping her arm to steady her.

"Out?" she echoed.

He nodded. "After tea, we came to Moraig to attend evening services at St. John's."

"But why would I not remember that?" Georgette protested.

Randolph shook his head and took in a none-too-appreciative sniff. "I suspect it is because of the brandy."

Georgette's eyes widened. "I do not like brandy." A warning began to pound in her ears.

Randolph smiled, and for the first time that morning he appeared positively smug. "That did not stop you from having two—no, I believe it was three glasses yesterday evening, before we departed."

She gasped. "That . . . that isn't possible!" Surely she would remember doing something so out of character. Then again, she couldn't remember getting married, or crawling into bed with a deliciously proportioned Scotsman either.

Randolph leaned in, so close she could see the hairs that escaped his nostrils and the lines of exhaustion under his eyes. She had to resist the urge to back away from him. "Perhaps you were upset over our discussion, Georgette. Perhaps you were rethinking such a strong opinion, realizing how positive a match between us might be. I honestly do not know what was trotting around your head—scarcely ever do. I tried to dissuade you, after the first glass, but you said you had come to Scotland to break free, to try new things."

Guilt squirmed in her stomach. She could sense the disapproval falling off her cousin's shoulders. She didn't want to believe it, but this part of the conversation rang all too true. It echoed her secret thoughts and dreams, dreams she had kept hidden her entire life, even during her very proper come-out and the subsequent disappointment of her marriage.

Worse, with Randolph supplying the details, she remembered the first glass, now. And, dear God, she *had* been brandy.

"If it was your first experience with strong spirits," he said, "is it any wonder you can't remember?"

"I . . . I suppose you are right," she breathed, shaken to her core.

"Perhaps it is better to just focus on the future, rather than on the events of yesterday." He covered a sudden yawn with one hand. "Given your appearance this morning, it might be something better forgotten, hmmm?"

Georgette wanted to agree. Randolph was being so nice, so understanding, it quite made her feel worse. He had lost sleep looking for her, while she had been out all night carousing and collecting orphaned kittens and forgetting her corset. But even as she turned herself over to the idea of banishing all thoughts of the man with whom she had awakened, an image of straight white teeth flashed into her mind. Had those teeth grazed her hot skin and nipped at the hidden recesses of her body last night?

She had never imagined such a thing, had never even let her husband touch her so inappropriately. Her entire body flushed, as if objecting to the very idea of letting go of the false memory.

She wasn't sure she *could* forget the way her Scotsman had looked on waking this morning. His lips had curved with wicked intent, just a shade higher on the left side than the right. His eyes had been the color of new grass, and just as fresh. No, wasn't sure she could forget him.

Or that she wanted to.

Oblivious to her discomfort or the direction of her inappropriate thoughts, Randolph pulled her toward a waiting curricule. She let him lead, her hand still curved around his. He had not pressed her for more details. Her secret was safe. Relief trailed her, though it did little to lessen the guilt.

"I need only to speak with Reverend Ramsey," Randolph said amiably as they walked, his words light and fluffy as the clouds crowding the morning horizon, "and we can be married by tomorrow."

Georgette dug her thin-soled slippers into the pavement and pulled them to a graceless halt. It wasn't the words that jarred her as much as the arrogant assurance in her cousin's voice. Panic scratched beneath her skin, panic of an entirely different sort than had sent her fleeing the brawny Scotsman this morning. Whereas that man had set her feet running because she feared her body unwanted, jolting response to the sight of his bare chest, the thought of intimacy with *this* man made her want to curl into a tight, protective ball that could not be breached. "We shall do no such thing," she choked out. "As I explained yesterday, I have no wish to marry you."

Randolph turned on her then, his gray eyes flashing. "That was before you stayed out all night and drank yourself into a stupor, cousin. Before you did God knows what with God knows who." He pushed his spectacles up the narrow plank of his nose. "That was before Reverend Ramsey called out hullo on the street, and saw us both looking as we do. You have precious little to recommend you except your reputation, Georgette, and you have done a frightfully poor job protecting it. You are lucky I care for you enough to still offer for you, after the evening you appear to have enjoyed. You should be thanking me."

Georgette gasped and pulled her hand from fingers that suddenly felt closer to talons. "I cannot marry you," she hissed. That was not the complete truth, she realized as she stared at a muscle jumping angrily above her cousin's pale brow. She didn't *want* to marry him.

Where was a chamber pot when you needed one?

"You can and you shall marry me." Randolph leaned in, his earlier familiarity escalating from something comforting to vulgar. "Everyone will believe you spent the night with me," he went on, his voice an eager rasp. "Reverend Ramsey will have surely repeated it by now. And when you see how much you have to lose, I imagine you will happily say your vows."

Anger splintered her rising panic. Randolph was the second man this morning who had tried to twist her to his will, the third if you counted the butcher who had foisted the kitten upon her. She was heartily tired of playing the biddable lady and doing what everyone expected of her. And the thought of marriage to Randolph, with all his panting insecurities, filled her with revulsion. She knew of one way to dissuade him.

"It is too late," she blurted out. Her voice was surprisingly steady, given the shaking of her limbs. "I appear to have gotten married last night."

There. She had given voice to the terrible thing she had done. Randolph would be disappointed, but at least he would no longer be so desperate as to keep asking for her hand. And she felt sure he would not tell anyone *why* they could not marry. He was her cousin. He valued her enough to have offered for her, had only said those terrible things because he wanted to marry her. He would guard her honor. She was sure of it.



“Why do you believe you are married?” he asked, his voice very close to a growl.

~~“I awoke this morning next to a stranger who called me his wife,” she admitted, wishing it did not sound so . . . unseemly. “And there is this.”~~ She twisted the ring around on her finger.

There was a beat of silence as Randolph stared down at the bit of gold. While he had been expressive throughout their earlier exchange, he now seemed hewn from granite. Clearly his unflappable cousin was in shock. She knew *she* still was. Why, yesterday he had done no more than wince when she had turned him down, but this morning he was frozen by the news of her evening escapades. He was no doubt wondering about her sanity, measuring her against the standards of Society and finding her lacking.

She was a proper lady, or at least she had been yesterday.

But she had a sinking feeling she would never deserve that title again.

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## Chapter 3

“CAN YOU HEAR me, you sodding fool?”

Though better sense bade him not to, James MacKenzie opened his eyes. His brother William loomed over him, as fierce and wild as their ancestors must have looked when they fought against Edward I. William’s face held a smirk and his fingers curved around shards of white pottery. Once upon a time, James would have put a fist to his older brother’s clean-shaven jaw in response to the insult. But that was a lifetime ago. He was a man now, with a measure of self-control. Besides something about the oddity of waking to William’s none-too-handsome face told him that now was not the right moment for such childish antics.

“Bugger off,” James moaned, his head a mass of mangled thoughts and pain. “Can you not see I am sick?”

William hefted the ruined bit of china and dangled it above James’s nose. “I confess that was my first thought, but by the looks of things here, it seems you have put the chamber pot to a different use.” He frowned a moment, the motion looking more like a grimace. “Injured, is more like it. Do you get in a fight with your piss pot, then?”

James squinted up at his brother, absorbing his words like water into sand. As a fledgling solicitor his life was built on seeing the truth behind a set of given facts, but he was damned if William’s remarks made any kind of sense. He had spent yesterday bent over his desk sorting out the proper legal precedent for damages over a mixed-breed bull jumping the fence to impregnate someone’s prizewinning heifer. His evening had consisted of dinner and several draughts of ale in the local public house. Now he felt as if he had been hauled in from the knacker’s.

What had any of that to do with a ruined chamber pot?

“You don’t know what you are talking about.” James started to shake his head and then decided it was better of it. Life seemed so much easier when his brain wasn’t bouncing around his skull.

“Oh that’s rich, coming from a man who doesn’t know where his boots are.” William tossed a pair of battered footwear onto the bed. “ ’Tis a bonny nap you’ve had, nigh on two hours since dawn. But the innkeeper insists on your removal now, I am afraid.”

“Innkeeper?” James sat up and waited until his chest stopped heaving and the walls stopped bending toward corners. “Is that where I am?” He swung his bare legs off the edge of the mattress and hefted his barer arse off the bed, for once grateful for William’s brute strength as his brother caught him in a forward pitch. The floorboards crunched under his feet, and the sharp, sweet odor in the air gave him pause.

Christ, had he smashed a bottle of brandy on the floor last night? He peered around the room, took a look in the ruined wardrobe, the upturned washbasin. Feathers floated in the air and stuck to the walls.

woman's corset hung from the drapery rod, something plain and demure but oddly beautiful for its lack of adornment. There was no denying the room looked as if a bloody good party had taken place.

"I hope she was worth it, you daft fool," William snorted.

"Who was worth it?" James muttered, grabbing his shirt from the floor.

"The woman you brought up here last night."

James stiffened against the slide of fabric across his chest. The shirt seemed different. It smelled brandy, and an exotic fragrance that he could not quite name. "What woman?" he managed, starting on his buttons. "And where in the bloody hell am I?"

"The Blue Gander." His brother chuckled. "And the woman you married last night."

That froze James's progress more efficiently than had his hands been tied. What William was suggesting was impossibly vile. He was not someone who married women he didn't know. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, stop your sniveling outrage," William chortled. The obvious glee on his face sent James's fingers curling into a tight fist around the edges of his shirt. "It wasn't a real marriage."

James managed to raise one brow. This, at least, was familiar. He was used to being teased, by William in particular. Perhaps his brother had even cracked him over the head with the chamber pot himself, although that would admittedly be beyond the pale. "Put your wasted Cambridge education to work and attempt to formulate a complete sentence," he growled. "What are you talking about?"

"I am simply telling you what I heard when I stopped by your rooms this morning looking for you," William qualified. "I don't know what went on last night, but your friend was right full of information and all too willing to share. I came here to see for myself."

"Have you been checking up on me?" Anger spliced through the pounding of James's skull at the mention of his friend. Patrick Channing shared a set of rooms with him on the east side of Moraig, a necessity when you struggled to save every penny your fingers touched. More to the point, Patrick had shared several of those pints he recalled from last night.

But neither explained why his family was poking about his business.

"Someone needs to make sure you don't kill yourself," William retorted. "Channing said you didn't come home last night, so I thought I'd better look in at the Gander. The innkeeper sent me right on up." He tilted his head, a flash of sympathy skirting his usually hard features. "Ah, Jamie-boy. Happens to the best of us. There's no denying you are in a sorry state for having gone sniffing after the wrong woman. You are bleeding all over the sheets."

"The devil you say!" James pushed his hand to his right temple, then immediately regretted his haste as he located at least one source of his discomfort. "Oh! Ow." He sucked in a breath as shards of memory, as fragmented as the bit of pottery in William's hands, danced behind his skull.

"Aye, it's a right fine one she gave you," William nodded.

James's fingers came away sticky with partially congealed blood. He held them up to his eyes and his usually faithful stomach pitched like a child's toy boat in a stern gale. Someone—apparently *female* someone—had given him a right good rap to the skull. He shook his head, trying to focus the pieces of memory that refused to fall into place as a result of the injury. His remembrance of how he had come to be here was as wrinkled as the shirt he had just buttoned. He could recall his blood name. His recollections of his past were there too, bright and vivid and lamentable. Even his brother's none-too-handsome face seemed as familiar as his own skin.

He just couldn't remember her.

"Who was she?" James choked out. Whoever she was, the woman appeared to harbor a violent streak. Perhaps he should count himself fortunate to come out of the encounter breathing. But even

he considered the evidence, a ghost of a memory tickled at his anger. Nymph-white hair, dancing candlelight. Wide gray eyes. A wide, laughing mouth. *On him.* He swallowed hard.

The woman had attacked him. What she might or might not have done before the assault bore no relevance.

“According to your friend Patrick, she wasn’t the queen, but about as high and mighty, and twice as pretty. Lucky bastard.” William tossed him his trousers. “Although unlucky might be a better title given how things have turned up.”

James struggled into his trousers, one unsteady leg at a time. “Never was one for titles,” he breathed.

“Just because you do not have a title does not mean you do not have means, Jamie. ’Tis not your family’s fault you were born too pigheaded to see reason, and so determined to make your own way no matter the cost. Besides, this griping about not liking titles could not have helped you with the lady in question. Why, it’s no wonder she departed under such questionable circumstances. Couldn’t stand the Highland stink of you, I would wager.”

James sat down and fumbled to get his boots over his sockless feet. “I . . . I can’t remember.” The memory that tugged at him was too opaque for clarity, but something told him his partner of the previous evening hadn’t objected to his origins in the slightest.

“Getting soused will do that to you.”

James fought back a snarl. William’s yammering was starting to match the pounding above his temple. “I had a few, but I was not tumbledown drunk, if that is what you are implying.” He staggered to his feet and shrugged each protesting shoulder into his jacket. “And I’ve never forgotten a bloody thing before, not even when I have been falling down in my cups.” The throbbing in his skull reached a new crescendo of pain. “I suspect my memory loss has more to do with my crushed skull than with the glass too many last night.”

“If you canna remember,” William retorted, “it matters little either way.”

Ignoring his brother, James stepped toward the window, his eye drawn by white linen. The floor crunched menacingly beneath his feet. He wondered if his companion of last night had cut her feet on the shards of glass upon waking. Somehow, the thought did not please him as much as it should.

He peered up at the bit of clothing that had caught his attention. The corset he had spied earlier hung from the drapery rod like a demented flag. Up close he could see the fine stitching and silken ribbons that lined the edges. The edge of an ivory busk peeked out of the center pocket, tempting him with a hint of engraving. He lifted the entire garment from its mooring, tucked it under one arm, and headed for the door.

William’s voice tickled his ear. “I don’t think it’s your size, Jamie-boy, which leaves me to wonder what you want with that bit of frippery. Memento of the evening you have forgotten? A spoil of war, perhaps?”

“It is a clue.” James stepped gingerly into the hallway and peered down the dank, musty stairwell.

William’s chuckle pierced the shadows that swept in from all sides. “Ah, like Cinderella’s slipper?”

James shook his head, which turned out to be a poor idea. The world spun on a broken axis, and he cursed beneath his breath. He hated feeling weak, out of control. It reminded him of how he had felt as a young man, striking out at and hating everyone and everything. He had worked too hard to overcome that feeling, just to sink back into it after one drunken night.

He focused on feeling his way along the sticky wall until the banister fit into his hand. “No, not like Cinderella. *She* didn’t attack the prince the day after the ball. When I find the owner of this corset, I will find the woman who assaulted me.” He turned his head back to his brother and offered a grimace.

promise. "And then I will know who to prosecute."

"Oh, aye, that's rich." William laughed. "Let the town know you can't handle one wee lass in your bed." A thick black brow rose in amusement. "And how are you going to find this woman? Are you going to strap the bloody thing on every girl you see until you find the one that fits? Do you need men to hold each one down while you try it on for size?"

James turned away from his brother's taunts, concentrating instead on putting one unsteady foot in front of the other. He knew the value of a good clue. The busk alone was a promising lead. Perhaps it bore an inscription or etching that might hint at the owner's identity. He imagined his bed partner tripping this way only a few hours earlier without her corset. He wondered if she, at least, had a few headful of memories to warm her nights for her trouble. It didn't seem fair that he should be left with so little of her, just the feminine garment beneath his arm and the smell of her skin on his shirt.

He reminded himself she had hit him. *With a chamber pot*. If that wasn't a statement of some sort, he was a donkey's arse.

He focused on feeling his way to the inn's front desk. No matter what happened last night, he did not deserve to be assaulted. If history was any guide, she had been an all too willing partner, and he would have done his best to make it memorable for her. But this business about being married, or pretending to . . . it didn't sit well with him. He was a man of the law, dependent on a certain trust among Moraig's citizens for his practice. If he had demonstrated some culpability, or been seen exercising such questionable judgment last night . . . well, it needed to be sorted out, and quickly.

The inn's proprietor stopped them on the threshold to the street. "Ah, Mr. MacKenzie." The man's smile did not reach his eyes. "You weren't trying to sneak out again without covering your damages, were you?"

James breathed out through his nose. "Damages?"

"Oh, aye. You had quite a time in the public room last night, just before you snuck out the fire door. Never say you don't recall."

James met William's gaze over the little man's balding pate. William shook his head and lifted his finger to his lips.

Every fiber of James's being told him he was not the only party responsible for the events of last night. But short of admitting he could not remember, he could see no way clear. "I am terribly sorry for any trouble. How much was that again?"

The innkeeper's shoulders relaxed a bit. "Five pounds should cover it."

James gave an incredulous laugh. "Five pounds? That is robbery, man!"

The innkeeper shook his head. "You smashed the entire front row of windows out on the north side. Destroyed a table and a set of four chairs. Knocked out the butcher's front teeth. Had him bleeding all over my public house."

The silence that followed the man's pronouncement roared in James's ear. What the innkeeper was suggesting was impossible. But a faint scratching of his conscience told him *something* had happened. The town's butcher was formidably built, and not a man he would normally invite to brawl, even dead in his cups. "Well, did he deserve it?" was all he could think to say.

"He deserves an apology." The innkeeper crossed his arms over his chest.

James was mollified. If he had created such a public spectacle last night, he needed to invest in some damage control. Between the butcher and the innkeeper, the pair knew everyone in town. "Alright," he admitted. "But five pounds seems like a bloody lot of money for a few windows and some furniture."

"The lady bought several rounds for all the patrons," the innkeeper said.

James blinked. “The cost of those drinks is the lady’s responsibility, is it not?”

“The lady is not here,” the proprietor countered, “and there was a roomful of happy customers last night who can attest you stood up and claimed responsibility for the lady’s offer. And then, of course, there is the cost of the room.”

“I accompanied the lady to *her* room.” James knew it wasn’t chivalrous, but something in him balked at the innkeeper’s presumption. He had a perfectly good house and a perfectly good bed that he paid rent toward each month. “She did not cover the cost of the room when she departed?” he asked, his throat thick with irritation.

The innkeeper shook his head, the very picture of an affronted businessman.

“Do you happen to know the lady’s name?” James wanted a name to attach to his new flash of annoyance.

The innkeeper hesitated. It was clear as the birthmark on the man’s right cheek he didn’t know the lady’s name either. “Er . . . *Mrs. MacKenzie*, wasn’t it?”

Behind him, William chuckled. James’s fingers tightened to fists. “She is not my wife.” At least, he didn’t think she was.

The innkeeper cocked his head and his feet spread out mulishly. “ ’Tis not my business, *Mrs. MacKenzie*, but you do the lady a disservice. If you have misplaced her, ’tis no one’s fault but your own. Treat your wife with a bit more respect, and she will be more likely to stay ’round come morning.”

“It is not your affair,” James ground out. “You know nothing about it.”

But the man was not yet done with him. “I suppose, out of all the *MacKenzies*, it would be you who do this. Your father, Lord Kilmartie, would never be involved in the likes of this.”

“I am not my father.” The old familiar beat of guilt began to pound in James’s chest. “And she is not my wife,” he repeated again, this time through tightly clenched teeth.

“And I did not stumble into town yesterday, sir.” The innkeeper’s cheeks had gone ruddy. “Last night was an odd state of affairs, I will rightly admit, and I am sorry for it. But I *will* have my five pounds.”

James felt near to boiling over. Only William’s big hand on his shoulder stayed him. The woman in question had assaulted him before she had sashayed out the door and left him with her bill, and the proprietor was lecturing *him* on respect? If he had been better rested, he would have lodged a more effective argument. Arguing the facts was what he did best, after all. But his brain was still fuzzy, and he reluctantly acknowledged he was tired enough to cut his losses. Anything to escape the stink of the place, and the memory—or lack of memory—of the woman who had brought him so low.

James ran a hand over his jacket. His account ledger was in its usual place, stashed in the left pocket of his coat. He remembered going over his practice’s accounts the day before, and intending to make a deposit at the bank, only to arrive—as usual—five minutes past closing. He dipped into his right pocket to find the ivory-inlaid cuff links his mother had given him for Christmas.

But something was missing. He forced his eyes to meet William’s. “Have you seen my money purse?”

William let out a low whistle. “She took your purse?”

“That depends,” James said slowly. “Did you *see* it in the room?”

They returned to the scene of his downfall, accompanied by the inn’s proprietor. Together they searched. Pulled back the bedclothes and looked under the bed. Rummaged through the ruined wardrobe. There wasn’t much space in the cramped room, and deucedly few places a full money purse could hide.

“It’s not here,” James finally admitted.

~~“Aye, and now that I’ve seen your room, the bill is now six pounds.”~~ The innkeeper swept an arm around the scene.

William dutifully pulled out his own purse and counted out the outrageous sum the innkeeper claimed was due. It made James want to smash something to see his brother hand over money on his behalf.

“I’ll pay you back,” he choked out.

“No need, Jamie-boy. Only too happy to help.” William leaned in close. “I only require your everlasting gratitude, of course.”

“You’ll have the money,” he growled. There was no way he was giving William the satisfaction of bailing him out without repayment. Confusion and resentment fell away to anger as reality set in. The damned missing purse had contained over fifty pounds, the equivalent of a half year’s salary given his current slow rate of practice. And she had taken it.

It did not matter if she had the face of a fairy sprite, or the mouth of a courtesan. It did not matter she had given him a cockstand *and* a headache. There was more at stake here than regaining his memory or his pride.

The purse his evening’s escort had absconded with held more than mere money. He had been scraping and saving with only one goal in mind, a goal that now seemed to have been stripped from his reach. There were surely worse things than serving as a solicitor in a little town like Moraig, but the year he had been practicing here he hadn’t found a single one.

He dreamed of establishing a practice in London. But setting up a practice took money, and in Moraig, soliciting didn’t pay. Or, at least, it didn’t pay *him*. Too often, townsfolk looked at him and saw only the miscreant youth James had once been, and now that he was doling out legal advice, his past proved difficult for some of Moraig’s residents to forgive. Worse, the town’s currency was little more than eggs and salted pork, and James had little to do other than negotiate the tedious thread of life running through this sleepy village. Sometimes James was tempted to strangle someone, just for the privilege of finally having a real trial to attend.

He *needed* that money, or he was set six months back. Needed it, or he would be stuck in Moraig fighting his history and being heckled by William for the rest of his life. The flash of resentment he felt now toward the pale, angelic vision that haunted his mind made his earlier irritation seem like mere chafing.

He wasn’t dealing with just a heartless wench who had taken him to bed and then awakened with the buyer’s remorse.

He was dealing with a bloody thief.

And he would see her hang.

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## Chapter 4

GEORGETTE STARED GLOOMILY at the house Randolph had leased for the summer. In his letter some weeks ago inviting her for this visit, her cousin had mentioned neither the house's small size nor its isolation. It lay on the grounds of a larger, more reputable estate. Like many in Scotland, the house sported a traditional thatched roof and small, dank rooms. The fireplace leaked smoke, coating the furniture with gray soot and making the upholstered furniture smell perpetually of winter even though it was newly May.

The most that could be recommended of it was that it made one very much want to spend more time out of doors.

She had been disappointed when she had first seen it and realized her two-week holiday was to be spent brushing shoulders with Randolph in such tight quarters, without benefit of a maid or female companion. The cousin she remembered preferred marble foyers and fine china and a bevy of domestic servants. That he had leased a house best suited for said servants' quarters bespoke either a lapse in the man's financial well-being, or a significant change in his tolerance of such things.

She was no longer sure she knew or understood the pale, brooding young man beside her. They had once been close, but since he had set off for university some four years ago and she had been married off, they had seen each other very little. As her cousin's carriage jostled up the pitted drive, Georgette acknowledged that perhaps the house *did* fit Randolph's new scholarly image. He was supposed to be spending the summer prowling the surrounding acreage examining seed pods and root systems, now moldering away inside some old Scottish edifice.

"Are you sure you can't remember his name?" Randolph asked again as he reined in the curricule front of the little stone structure.

Georgette bit her lip to keep from uttering the insult that came to mind. The same bookish instinct that Randolph applied to his study of Scottish flora had been summarily directed toward her since her hasty confession. Even the kitten seemed to object to Randolph's oft-repeated question, twisting and mewling within the confines of her bodice.

No, she didn't know the mysterious Scotsman's name, which meant she didn't know *her* name. "I cannot remember his name any more than I can recall the second and third glass of brandy I had last night," she retorted as she gathered her skirts.

A stooped figure lumbered from the shadows of the stable to assist her from the carriage. The only servant Randolph had seen fit to hire, other than the woman who came to cook every other day, was this groundsman who also served as groom. He was a local, with weathered hands and the perpetually graying beard that Scotsmen seemed to prefer. The man lurked in the background and mucked out stalls and brought in the wood, but was helpless against the quarter-inch layer of dust that had accumulated



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