



Some Like It Scot

PEPPER BASHAM

Some Like It Scot

a novel



PEPPER BASHAM



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Some Like It Scot

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PROLOGUE

I'd love to say I became famous because of my excellent writing skills. Doesn't that sound like a superb reason for fame? Or, at the very least, a wonderful way to pay the bills.

"Hi, my name is Katie Campbell, and I actually write well enough to pay my bills." I know of dozens of excellent authors who'd love to make that claim.

But no, I am not one of the top travel writers for *World on a Page's* international magazine because of my captivating prose (which is decent but not Austen) or my insightful descriptions (which I can do, sometimes) or my breathtaking narrative adventures (okay, breathtaking due to laughter). No, I am internationally known as a travel writer because of my *misadventures*.

These have garnered me the memorable and somewhat embarrassing moniker Miss Adventure and have led to my popular articles, a few documentaries, plus an award-winning podcast titled *Where in the World Is Miss Adventure?*

What could have initiated such a claim to fame? A series of mishaps crossing three different countries and consecutively involving a one-horned bull (now he has one horn), an engagement ring and a sand trap (the ring wasn't for me), and a psychotic penguin (you had to be there).

I shouldn't really be surprised. My grandpa used to say that the only grace I had was the grace of God. If he could see me now, he would proclaim himself a prophet, because who *ever* gets paid for their

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clumsiness? Or making mistakes? Or being ridiculous?

Me, y'all. It's me. I'm the problem.

So here I am. Falling, quite literally most times, into life as a travel writer whose buffoonery makes money. Truth be told, trouble finds me in ways almost mythical. And though I enjoy a good laugh as well as the next person, living a story of successive blunders is starting to get a little old.

For me. Not the readers.

And to be honest, though the attention is nice, I'd really like to be known for more than my ineptitude, poor timing, and . . . bad luck. But traveling doesn't really equate with staying anywhere long enough to belong, so until I can get my children's books published, misadventures are my stories to tell.

And Miss Adventure . . . is me.

CHAPTER 1

T raveling is what I do, Dave.” I pinched my phone between my shoulder and cheek, freeing my hands to grab my camera, and tapped my long-suffering taxi driver on the shoulder. “It’s why you pay me, remember?”

Archie sent me a good-natured squint over his shoulder from the driver’s seat. The friendly Scot had gotten accustomed to my picture-taking obsession about thirty minutes into our one-hour drive from the ferry drop-off to my final location, Craighill House.

“And you’re great at it.” My boss’s tone clearly hinted at a teeny bit of frustration at my reticence. “But you’re also an excellent writer and encourager. You have a gift, and I’ve worked with you long enough to know you’d make a top-notch editor.”

I gestured toward the window with my camera, where a sliver of aqua river split rows of mossy green hills in a curvy line, all cloaked in a halo of late-morning sunshine and mist. Surely we couldn’t pass by the beauty without trying to capture another photo!

Archie pulled the taxi over to the side of the narrow road and met my gaze in the rearview mirror, a smile crinkling his face.

Well, at least he didn’t mind stopping every five minutes.

“The view,” I whispered. “Those hills, Archie!”

The driver offered an exasperated sigh tempered by the twinkle in his pale eyes. “It’s the same bràigh as before, lass.”

My grin took an upswing at the sound of the moniker. Why had I waited so long to take an assignment in Scotland? Me, of all people.

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A third-generation Scottish American! I really should be ashamed of myself. Especially when the burr of that word *lass* brought back all sorts of the best memories of summers with my grandparents. The resident twinkle in Archie's eyes even looked a little like my grandpa's.

"But it looks different from this angle," I shot back, offering him a grin and an apologetic shrug before extracting myself from my seat belt. "Don't want my faithful followers to miss out on the exquisite beauty of the Highlands now, do we?"

I heard Archie's low chuckle brew beneath Dave's response on the phone.

"Exactly," Dave answered as Archie nodded and tapped his derby. "Dinnae fash yourself." His smile was edged with mischief. "I got all day as long as you got the money." He patted his digital meter on the dash and offered an impish wink.

I couldn't help but laugh. If the rest of the Scots oozed with such welcome, spending three weeks here was sure to be a blast. And why shouldn't Archie grin? My visceral need to take photos every five minutes earned him a pretty purse full!

"You're great at getting new followers, and I'm not contesting that," Dave continued as I slipped out of the cute, little blue Volkswagen into the breezy July air.

"You're one of the best travel writers I have—probably *the* best at bringing in new readers for the magazine, both online and in print."

"And why would you want to go messing with that success, Dave?" I switched the phone to speaker and tucked it into the top of my jeans so my hands were free to take photos, but truly, the pictures couldn't do this landscape justice. The stark contrast between the foreboding brownish mountains in the distance with the fog-covered, lush emerald hills in the foreground, all topped by molten gold as sunshine squeezed through some remnant clouds? Breathtaking. Otherworldly. My travel blog readers—not to mention the magazine audience—were going to be ecstatic.

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I flinched as the teeniest bit of longing hit me square in the chest out of nowhere. With a deep breath, I rubbed my fingers into the spot. Grief often came out of nowhere.

Grandpa and Gran would have loved to see this.

I shook away the unexpected pull to linger in the feelings—maybe even in the view—and redirected my squirrely brain.

I didn't linger places.

Never for very long.

Traveling is what I did. Traveling and story catching. Then I brought those adventures to life through words for others to experience. And I sometimes engaged in humorous misadventures along the way, which only increased ratings and readers.

Which were a few of the many reasons why Dave shouldn't distract me with an editorial position.

Editor?

The word hinged in my brain with cautious—and maybe a little unwanted—curiosity. Like trying food from a jungle tribe in the Amazon. Fifty percent of the time it was going to be tasty. One hundred percent of the time you didn't want to know what it was made of. But something about the idea of becoming an editor stirred a tiny bit of nervousness in my stomach.

"Because," came his voice from the phone, "when you see someone with talent in the right places, you want to put them where they'll make the greatest impact. If you were an editor, you'd improve half a dozen of our other writers within the first six months just because of your skills. That would increase our quality output exponentially."

I lowered my camera and sighed, loud enough for him to hear.

"This is your boss speaking, Katie." His tone deepened a little to prove his point. "With Carla retiring next month, I need someone with the skill set to take her place as associate editor for *World on a Page*. You're my top choice. I don't ever plan to ask you to stop traveling, but editing would give you the chance to grow as a writer and a

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professional. Give you some structure *and* options. Maybe even allow you to put down some roots.”

Roots? I *had* roots. Sort of. Back home in Waynesville, North Carolina. In fact, I’d inherited an entire family farm (which I barely saw) from my grandparents—a place that held some of my favorite childhood memories. Those two amazing people had offered a much-needed sanctuary from my childhood home life with a passive-absent dad and a super society-conscious mother. And expectations no one, except she, ever met.

“Whoa there, Dave.” I shook my head and took another photo. “I just turned twenty-eight. I don’t think I’ve met my expiration date just yet.”

“Seriously, Katie.” His voice softened, pricking at my conscience a lot more than the “boss” voice. “I want you to consider this. I *really* think it would be good for you.”

For some reason, when I thought “editor,” I pictured Dave, who looked like a classic fiftysomething, small-town car salesman, who was one of the best guys in town and lived in a white picket-fenced house with his lovely wife, two and a half kids, and perfect dog.

Settled.

Older.

Which really was ridiculous because I knew it wasn’t true. So why did the idea stick like a splinter beneath my skin? Well, it was not so much annoying as . . . uncertain.

And this was coming from Dave, who’d basically mentored me from a crummy writer wannabe to now. He was a good-hearted, smart man, who cared about me and my professional future. I couldn’t disregard his instincts or faith in me. Gran always said that listening to the people who knew us best was a sign of wisdom.

But . . . editing?

“I’ll think about it.” I pulled the phone close to my mouth. “But you have to promise I’ll still travel.”

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"I promise—if that's what you want."

If that's what I wanted? Of course it was. Why wouldn't it be?

"Over the next few weeks, I'm going to send some articles your way to edit."

"What happened to me *thinking* about it?"

He didn't even take the hint. "This assignment in Scotland sounds like you'll have some free time, so when you're not rummaging up stories or cosplaying like a Victorian, then you can stretch those editing muscles a little."

"Dave, it's the Edwardian time period, not Victorian. I've talked to enough historians to know it makes a difference. And it's not cosplaying. The brochure states—several times—that it's an Edwardian Experience." Whatever that meant. "No lightsabers or hobbit cloaks."

"You *still* dress in costume for a few weeks and pretend to be in a different era."

Three weeks, to be exact—a fact that still felt a little weird. Since beginning the whole travel-writing gig, I'd been careful to keep all my assignments to a week, sometimes less. It reduced the mess. No hard goodbyes, no super-deep conversations.

But Mrs. Lennox, the creator of this new specialty holiday house, evidently had not only an extremely rich overindulgent husband but one who held some surprising connections in the media world. So various available and quality media influencers from across the travel-writing community had received an invitation to join her on the Isle of Mull for a first look on how to "live as an Edwardian."

With a media preview, especially if the reviews were good, Mrs. Lennox could start her new business on a successful trajectory. Word of mouth mattered. And influencers, bloggers, online personalities, and magazines had a way of making a big difference in spreading the news far and wide.

"Besides, you're a big fan of all things quirky, and I think this place might be right up your alley."

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Quirky? To be fair, anyone who decided to re-create an entire era for tourists possessed a unique passion and determination that wasn't exactly normal, but the way he said *quirky* raised my internal alarm.

I looked down at the phone in my hand, trying to decipher Dave's comment. "How quirky?"

"I guess you'll just have to find out." Dave's voice took on a chipper ring. "You live for the adventure, so I couldn't think of a better person to represent *World on a Page*."

"Dave?" My voice cracked slightly, even as my boss exuded confidence.

"I look forward to seeing your articles on this assignment, Katie. And those edits!"

Dave's avoiding explanation did not bode well for my misadventuring future. "Do you know something about this place that I don't?"

"Gotta run, Katie! Talk to you soon."

"Dave!" I frowned down at the blank phone screen.

Not cool! Especially after I'd just been mentally praising his good-hearted attributes.

I raised my chin and stared back at the horizon.

I could handle quirky.

How bad could it really be? I'd been plenty of places, quirky and all, so a *Downton Abbey* cosplay didn't sound all that bad. The dresses, the hats, the handsome men in eye-catching suits.

I shrugged away the doubt and took a few more photos before climbing back in the car. Archie greeted me with "Just let me know if ya need another snap or two. I got all day."

I narrowed my eyes at him, fighting a smile. "I bet you do."

He laughed before steering the car down the hill.

I avoided asking him to stop yet another time within five minutes, although the views kept captivating me. Something inexpressible wove among the forests and mountains of this place. A strange sort of magic. It had gripped me as soon as I'd stepped off the plane in Inverness

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and breathed the crisp, Scottish morning air for the first time. Kind of like that feeling I had right before a good cry when I wasn't at liberty to let the tears free yet. Not bad necessarily. Not good either. From the time I was knee-high to a grasshopper, my grandpa (a proud Scots-Irish Presbyterian who owned a kilt, collected historic Scottish weapons, and played a bagpipe poorly) raved about this country of his kindred, so maybe a little bit of preconditioned déjà vu inspired the strange feelings coursing through me as we drove through the diverse countryside. But I couldn't shake it.

I'd traveled to dozens of countries, stepped off even more airplanes, but had never felt as if I'd walked into a scene of my own life that had been waiting for me to live it.

Is it possible to feel a genetic link to a place you've never visited?

Whatever it was, some strange swoosh of welcome blasted through me as if every one of my grandfather's ancestors had risen from their battlefield deaths and shouted a hearty and ironic, "*Lang may yer lum reek!*" a phrase Grandpa translated as, "May you live long and prosper!"—a Scottish version of *Star Trek*'s Spock's famous salutation.

Maybe "quirky" just went hand in hand with Scotland, which, for some reason, helped me feel even more prepared for the adventure ahead.

"You'll have to visit Tobermory once you get tucked in, Ms. Campbell."

I looked up from scanning over my photos and registered the village name in my mind from research. Aha! The capital of the small island.

"It's the place with all the colorful houses along the coastline, isn't it?"

"Aye," came his warm reply. "But there are quite a few villages with the same. Glenkirk is no far from Craighill and is one of the few villages along Loch na Keal."

With the island being so small, I didn't imagine a massive number

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of villages, but as the hills grew in size and breadth, the wide-open emptiness of the vista resurrected the unsettling feeling I kept trying to ignore.

“There’s Briggs Mussel Farm,” Archie announced. “We’re close now.” He slowed the car’s speed for my ogling pleasure—and likely a few extra coins in his purse.

Another mussel farm. Probably the fourth one I’d seen since disembarking the ferry at Craignure. Yep, this island maintained its fishing town persona. Maybe that’s what gave it an untouched, old feeling.

The green hillsides framed the loch on two sides with taller, more barren mountains rising behind those in imposing hues of gray and olive. And yet, the desolation created its own sort of mesmerizing beauty.

I bit back another request to stop. Craighill House’s website mentioned that Glenkirk was only a mile away, and Salen another five after that, but more populous villages like Calgary and Tobermory were over fifteen and Dervaig was upward of twenty, so I’d have to hire a car to visit places like the capital of the isle and perhaps Iona.

Besides, within a couple of weeks, Tobermory would be hosting the Mull Highland Games, and my readers/followers would love an inside look at something as classic Scottish as the games. But for now it was time to settle into my temporary home and—I braced my shoulders—the early twentieth century.

We followed Loch na Keal for another mile, and then we turned toward a forest, slipping into the shadows of trees. For some reason, the sudden darkness of the forest closing in on all sides caused my spine to tingle. Anticipation? Warning? Something else?

I stared into the passing woods. No—I released the hold on my breath—it felt more like the sense I’d experienced when I stood before the Giza pyramids for the first time or when I stepped inside Rome’s massive Colosseum. The weight of centuries lingered in the

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atmosphere, lives lived and histories haunting the breeze.

The farther away from Craignure we drove, the deeper the sense of . . . something else pulled through me. Something old and familiar and just out of reach of identity. I shot Archie a glance, as if he could use his native powers to give me a clue, but he just kept his face forward as he whistled some happy tune.

The anniversary of my grandpa's death usually ramped up my emotions a few degrees, and with Gran dying a year before him—almost to the day—the twin losses turned me a bit more introspective than usual. And, for almost five years now, I'd missed their presence. Something in the acknowledgment of the length of time they'd been gone, or the fact they'd have loved visiting Scotland with me, ushered up a deep longing. For the home I once knew with them maybe? For their infectious love? Certainly.

A set of black iron gates appeared on the left with the letters *C.H.* embossed on them, though the gold had partially stripped off over time.

"Craighill, up ahead." Archie's gravelly voice pulled my attention away from the shadowed woods, and I barely held in a gasp. The trees spread aside like a curtain to reveal a magnificent structure rising up from the clearing. Gray and tan bricks created a towering edifice with jutting rooflines, towers with parapets, and even two turrets. No, it wasn't as massive as Russia's Winter Palace or Prague Castle with its fifteen hundred or so rooms, but the way the landscape behind Craighill House swooped into an almost cinematic expanse created a unique sort of captivity. As I looked behind me through the scattered tree line—a mixture of rolling hills and massive mountains of stone rushed to meet the rocky shore of the loch and tucked behind a hillside—I caught a glimpse of a steeple.

Perhaps that was Glenkirk.

At least living Edwardian came with an impressive view.

The clouds deepened, changing the landscape from magical to

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broody in a blink. Perhaps my emotions were just tracking with the weather.

"I'll collect your bags." Archie doffed his cap and then tapped his meter as a not-so-subtle clue for me to get his fee ready.

With a deep breath, I grabbed my purse and camera and stepped out onto the graveled drive.

The house rose four stories above me, the stormy sky bringing out more of the gray in the stonework. I gave an internal dare to a few of the resident ghosts, paid Archie for his excellent services, and walked toward the entrance with my bag rolling behind me, half expecting a procession of servants to greet me as they did on some costume drama.

After a few stops to take a picture or twelve, I knocked on the massive wooden door.

Nothing.

I scanned the front and then noticed a small, vintage-looking button to the right with the word *Press* at the center. A bell-like sound erupted from inside at my touch . . . followed by an indistinguishable call.

Maybe I was supposed to let myself in? The official start to the Edwardian world wasn't for a couple of days, so maybe they hadn't pulled out the butler and maids yet. I chuckled. I rarely dressed in costume for my travels, but as my viewers knew, I was always up for a new adventure.

With a look back at Archie—my only ally in Scotland—I pushed open the door, and someone immediately grabbed my arm and jerked me inside. My assailant turned out to be a small, dark-eyed woman, wearing something that resembled a maid's dress from an old-fashioned mystery movie. White lace collar, simple black gown, complete with apron.

"Close the door!" Her pale, wide eyes stared into mine, and she cried, "Merlin has escaped!"

Without another word, the young woman slammed the door

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behind me and dashed off down the hallway, tossing another entreaty for me to help find Merlin.

Merlin? As in the wizard? I stared at her disappearing silhouette as she turned the corner of a narrow hallway where a massive stuffed ostrich stood sentry. Ostrich?

Sure, the whole King Arthur legend was wrapped up in Scottish lore, but a maid searching for Merlin in a Scottish house with a stuffed ostrich? Had I fallen asleep in the taxi, and this was all a weird side effect of eating one too many of the Twirl bars I'd purchased from an airport vendor?

A vaulted white deco style ceiling rose two floors above me, carrying the woman's echoing plea through the room. On either side of the entry hall in which the maid had disappeared stood two suits of armor, both holding lances at their sides as if guarding the way forward.

Was I in Craighill or some sort of madhouse?

My face cooled. Perhaps they were the same.

Maybe I should take the advice of those armored suits and return to Archie's nice familiar taxi. But then I saw paintings. I released my hold on my suitcase and shuffled a few more feet forward on the glossy, checkered marble floor. Just up ahead the most spectacular floating stairway spiraled up and out of sight, but along the surrounding walls hung dozens of framed paintings of all sizes.

Visual art is my kryptonite. Okay, not my only kryptonite. I'm also a weakling to chocolate, masculine jawlines, fuzzy socks, and bruschetta . . . and a few dozen other things of lesser power. I'd never been able to create visual beauties like my sister, Sarah, but visual art had always captured me. All kinds—paintings, sculptures, handcrafts.

With a glance behind me for any other possible attacks from maids, I rounded the ostrich and slipped toward the stairway, taking in the intricate design of the wooden railing along with arched ceilings. Even the molding at the top of the arched entryways boasted unique designs of animals and flowers. The detail was remarkable.

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And then one step led me closer to another painting and then another, mostly oils and landscapes.

I raised my camera for a shot of the amazing display of art and architecture.

“Merlin,” came the cry again, except from an older voice. Very English and with a McGonagall-type authority. “I command you to appear at once.”

My body froze at the incantation. And from an Englishwoman too.

I’d read my Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, so séances and weird magic fit into the Edwardian vibe, but I’m not sure I wanted to be a part of bringing Merlin back from the . . . wherever he’d gone.

I frowned. But wasn’t King Arthur the legendary one who was supposed to rise from the dead?

I shouldn’t have paused to contemplate. I should have headed directly for Archie and his overpriced taxi, but when I turned in the direction of the voice, my feet froze to the stair.

Coming toward me, wings outstretched and beady eyes capturing mine, flew a massive blue-and-yellow macaw holding a red hat in its talons.

But that wasn’t the most alarming sight.

Running from the entryway in pursuit of the macaw emerged a small collection of three women. The lead woman wore a stylish Edwardian day suit and waved a broom in the air. The younger woman wore some sort of vintage gown with a red feather boa that flapped behind her like—forgive me—a broken wing. And the third woman was the maid who rushed ahead raising a sword.

What on earth was happening?

Or perhaps I wasn’t on earth . . . and I’d opened the front door into another dimension.

My camera flashed as my finger reflexively squeezed.

The macaw closed in.

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So did the women.

Keeping a firm hold on my camera, I pressed my body against the railing to give both the bird and the women as much access to pass as the stairway provided.

“Catch him!” The lead woman screamed. “That hat was given to my mother by the King of Spain.”

Her English accent lengthened the vowels in an exaggerated way as she rushed forward, but my full attention focused on the macaw, who, without any hesitation, landed on my shoulder.

I held my breath, his weight surprising and the prick of his talons intimidating. With the slightest whimper, I pressed a little farther back into the stair railing, gripping the wood with all my might to keep from moving.

“Don’t move.” The elder lady slowed her pace, one palm outstretched and the other holding the broom.

“The broom will not work, my dear.” A male voice sounded from somewhere above, much too calm for the situation. “It will only annoy him further.”

The talons pinched more tightly into my shoulder as if to confirm the man’s words, and two things happened at once. The bird took flight and a resounding crack reverberated through the room.

The railing gave way.

The nonexistent heels of my flats scraped the wood step in a vain attempt at slowing my demise, the English woman released a loud gasp, and my body lost its fight with gravity, sending me hurdling backward toward the ground.

My life flashed before my eyes, just as the sun split the clouds out the windows and haloed my face. My twelve-hour romance in Italy. An escape from a killer monkey in Africa. Grandpa’s laugh. Gran’s chocolate cake.

I resigned to my end, only disappointed that the last photo anyone would find on my phone would be of an oversized macaw carrying a

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hat with a barrage of Edwardian ladies in pursuit.

I hugged my camera to my chest with one arm—at least the photo of dad wearing a duckbill for my nephew would survive—and tried to remember what I grasped in my other hand.

My body tensed for impact, but the back-breaking strike of the floor didn't come. Instead, I hit something firm and somewhat soft at the same time.

Another terrifying masterpiece by a taxidermist?

A grunt proved I'd hit something more human—and probably male—than stuffed and exotic. We both crashed to the floor, or rather, he crashed and I landed on top of him. I glanced up at the beautifully ornate ceiling and prayed to God I hadn't just squished a frail gardener or tenderhearted grandpa.

I wasn't the smallest of women.

With a catch in my back and a groan of my own, I sat up, my auburn hair blocking my vision for a full two seconds as my one hand gripped my camera and the other held—*wince*—a broken piece of the stair railing.

Some guttural rain of unidentifiable words rasped from the breathless man who'd broken my fall, and I scooted off his stomach just in time for him to come to a sitting position in front of me.

He was huge, and as a six-foot-one lady, that was saying something. My mom lovingly referred to me as sturdy, and my brand of sturdiness had succeeded in protecting half the female population in middle school from a notorious set of bullies determined to make small girls cry. But still, when this man sat up, I felt small and the sudden curiosity of watching him unfold into his full height distracted me from the current debacle I'd quite literally fallen into.

A wild array of mingled hues of brown curls splayed across his head in all directions. I tilted my head in closer examination. Maybe they couldn't be tamed.

My fingers twitched for a second.

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His nose sat a little crooked, like it might have been broken once or twice. I cringed—hopefully I hadn’t added a third. But what snagged my attention most were his eyes. A piercing light blue beneath those dark brows, and their intensity snatched the gratitude right from my brain. Who had eyes that unearthly shade of blue?

I tried to open my mouth to say something simple like, “Thank you for saving my life,” or a not so simple, “How do you fit those shoulders through the doorway?” Or even something much less expected like, “Your eyes are the same color as Chile’s Lake Pehoe at sunset.” But the only thing that came out was a squeak. It wasn’t every day someone saved your life. I flinched at that thought. Okay, I’d had it happen three times, but how was I supposed to know that sharks were nearby and attracted to beef jerky if the scuba instructor didn’t happen to mention it in his overview of the diving class? And the rock-climbing incident was due to poor directions on the guide’s part.

The massive man’s attention slipped from my face to my right hand, which clutched my camera, and then to my left, which held the incriminating stair rail. Those periwinkles of his flashed back to my face, and the shade of his cheeks moved from a suntanned hue to definite carmine within a span of two seconds. Something like a growl erupted from his chest, and he jolted upright, leaving me to stumble back and fall, unceremoniously, on my softest spot.

“You broke my stairs!”

The accusation blustered out beautifully in Scottish curls, especially the *br*, but with none of the warmth of Archie’s welcome. I blinked, still trying to comprehend what on earth was going on, but comprehension wasn’t emerging quite as quickly as usual. Or maybe it was and none of it made sense anyway.

My mouth dropped open again, resulting in another annoying squeak.

The man leaned forward, and I thought for a second he meant to help me stand, but he merely plucked the piece of railing from my

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hand. “I’ve worked on that railing for three days, and in five minutes you took out two meters of freshly hewn ash.”

My jaw locked in a frown, and I released my own growl, though it wasn’t nearly as impressive as his. *Fine*. He didn’t seem the type to enjoy a sea sunset anyway.

Mesmerizing eyes or not, all six foot three hundred—or whatever he was—of him was Highland jerk.

“Are you kidding me?” I pushed myself to a quaking stand and barely stood as tall as his crooked nose. “The stairs?” I yelled back into his reddening face. “I am immediately accosted by some wizard macaw on the loose carrying a hat, followed by a collection of Agatha Christie actors, then nearly lose my life—not to mention my camera—by falling off a flight of stairs, and you’re concerned about your railing?”

I considered taking the broken piece of railing back and poking his inflated chest with it.

Both of his too-bushy brows shot high for a split second and then crashed over his highly uninteresting eyes. “If you dinnae like the company, find a new place to stay and leave the rest of us and *my* stair railing in peace.”

“I couldn’t care less about you, this madhouse, or your precious stair railing.” I reached for the broken railing to turn my thoughts into action, but the size of his hands wrapping around it distracted me for a full second. Were there giants in Scotland, along with fairies and dragons and birds named Merlin?

“Ms. Campbell?”

The pristine voice peeled through the cavernous room and pulled me from my near assault on Mr. Scottish Grump.

The lean woman wearing the Edwardian dress who’d been chasing Merlin stepped forward, smoothing a palm over her ruffled hair. Her lips seemed to wrestle with an expression, finally ending on a tight smile as she folded her hands in front of her.

“I’m Mrs. Elizabeth Lennox.” She offered her hand. “And I do

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hope you won't base your opinion about Craighill House on this most unexpected initial impression."

My bottom lip dropped for a split second, and then I sucked it back up for a smile. "I'm used to stumbling into unexpected adventures, but never with a hat-stealing parrot."

Her manicured brow rose almost imperceptibly as she followed Mr. Highlander's march up the stairs. "Well, I can assure you, my husband's delinquent, Merlin, will remain well hidden for the extent of your and our other guests' time here."

I followed Mrs. Lennox's gaze to the top of the stairs where a middle-aged man, perched a floor above us, smiled, while rebel Merlin perched on his shoulder. The former offered a welcome—the latter . . . well, I avoided looking into those beady little eyes.

"At least this time it wasn't the weasel," the younger lady with the red boa offered. "Marzipan may not pinch anything, but he is notorious for trying to bite off people's heels."

Mrs. Lennox offered a nervous laugh. "This is my daughter, Ana, who will be referred to as Miss Lennox during the *experience*." Mrs. Lennox gave a flourish of her hands as she said the last word and a new glow lit her pale eyes.

The nervous feeling returned. I opened my mouth to say, "Maybe I'm the wrong gal for this sanatorium," but Mrs. Lennox continued, completely unfazed by my disarray, Mr. Giant's grumblings, and the way her curls had come loose from her bun and stood to electrified attention in contrast to the uniformity of her dress. "I just received the most delightful phone call from Mr. Carson, and he raves about you. We are looking forward to the publicity your experience will provide."

My shoulders deflated. I'd promised Dave, assured him I could do this extended assignment. And, in exchange, he'd promised me a raise, editorial position or not. "He's a great guy." Though saying it through gritted teeth sounded less believable.

"Oh yes, and he assures me you will help bring guests to Craighill

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and our Edwardian *Experience*”—again with the hand flourish—“To the magazine, social media, and even your personal blog. He shared that you often give more personal accounts on your blog, which lead to your articles in the magazine, reaching a broader audience.”

My possible escape plan suddenly shrank to a sigh. I couldn't leave the madhouse. My and the magazine's reputations were at stake. I'd signed on for the long haul. I shrugged my shoulders and accepted my fate. I'd been trapped before, and this couldn't be as bad as the volcano.

My attention slid back up the stairs to meet a set of narrowed blue eyes, and my body instinctively prepared for battle.

I raised my chin and flashed Mrs. Lennox a smile. “I look forward to sharing Craighill and the Edwardian Experience”—without the hand flourish—“With the world. You can count on me.”

About the Author



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Pepper Basham is an award-winning author who writes romance “peppered” with grace and humor. Writing both historical and contemporary novels, she loves to incorporate her native Appalachian culture and/or her unabashed adoration of the UK into her stories. She currently resides in the lovely mountains of Asheville, NC, where she is the wife of a fantastic pastor, mom of five great kids, a speech-language pathologist, and a lover of chocolate, jazz, hats, and Jesus.



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