

The
PRINCE'S
Bride



JULIANNE
MACLEAN

The Prince's Bride
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PART I

The Abduction



Chapter

1



Paris, July 19, 1815

THIS WAS WRONG, SO VERY, very wrong... She was a villain tonight, there could be no denying it, but any guilt was somehow eclipsed by the unexpected pleasure of this wicked and very sinister charade.

The passion is not real, Véronique reminded herself as she took hold of Prince Nicholas's gloved hand, met his gaze with a mischievous look of desire through her half mask, and allowed him to assist her into the coach.

Quickly, before he joined her, she glanced around at the cushions placed just so, the bottle of champagne in the corner, and breathed in the subtle scent of rosewater, which she had splashed onto the dark green velvet upholstery a few hours ago, before she'd entered the ball.

The coach lamp flickered wildly as the night breeze

wafted in through the door. With graceful, controlled movements, she sat down and reclined seductively.

Prince Nicholas, her quarry, followed her inside and closed the door behind them.

At last, they were completely alone.

As he slid onto the seat beside her, the lamplight reflected off the brass buttons of his royal regalia and sparkled in his enticing blue eyes. His mask covered most of his face, but not those luscious full lips. Not that the disguise made a difference. She already knew what he looked like. He had been shown to her the day before, pointed out like a partridge in the wood.

"Look, that's him down there—in the black coat. That's Wellington beside him. Viscount Castlereagh, the British foreign secretary, is wearing the gray hat." Pierre Cuvier handed her the spyglass. "Will you be able to pick him out in the crowd?"

Leaning out over the rail of the stone arch bridge that spanned the Seine, Véronique shut one eye, peered through the lens, and peered down at the three men standing on the bow of the boat as it passed beneath them.

She had been briefed about Prince Nicholas's extraordinary good looks, but had not expected to nearly lose her breath as she caught him in her sights.

She'd also been warned about his notorious reputation with women. According to Pierre, he was a flagrant charmer and heartbreaker. A scoundrel of the highest order.

Now that she had seen him in the flesh, she understood why he could get away with such behavior. Not only was he a royal prince of Petersbourg—a small

but powerful European nation on the North Sea—but he also had the face of a Greek god, with jet black hair and blue eyes, a teasing smile that could charm all the angels out of heaven, and a strapping muscular build, unquestionably fit for a throne.

Though he would likely never wear the crown, for his brother's wife, Queen Alexandra, had recently given birth to a son.

None of that concerned Véronique, however. She had a job to do, and she must stay focused on the task at hand.

"Yes, I will be able to pick him out," she replied as she snapped the spyglass shut and handed it back to Pierre.

"He'll be wearing a mask," he warned.

Véronique turned to walk back to the coach. "Don't worry. It won't be a problem."

Yet here she sat this evening, reclining on the soft upholstered seat in the overheated coach, smiling at her captured prince with tempting allure, wondering how much time she had. How long would they be alone before the laudanum took effect? Five minutes? An hour?

Her desire for him was alarming, and she realized she may not be in full control here. She supposed she had known that before she stepped into the coach, for everything had turned rather warm and hazy in the ballroom when they first met. Something very potent had sparked between them, and now she was caught up in a delicious sexual current, which she feared might sweep her off her feet.

"I didn't expect this tonight," Nicholas said in a

low, husky voice that heated her blood. "It was supposed to be a night of political debates and endless arguments."

"You've all been arguing for days," Véronique replied, referring, of course, to the fate of Napoléon, who had been defeated at Waterloo less than a month ago, and had just surrendered to the British. He had boarded the HMS Bellerophon at the port of Rochefort, but no one could agree on what to do with him. "Haven't you had enough?"

Nicholas slid closer, slowly removed his gloves one finger at a time, then cupped her chin in his hand. "Enough talk of politics, yes, but not nearly enough of you."

There it was...the famous charm. She would have liked to believe she was immune to it, for she was the seducer in this situation, but when he spoke to her in that velvety voice and touched her with those strong, gentle hands, she melted like every other woman who found herself blinded by his impossible charisma.

Keep your head, Véronique. It won't be long now...

"Are we going somewhere?" he asked while his gaze dipped to her parted lips. "Or did you invite me to your coach for some other decadent purpose?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

The corner of his mouth curled up in a devilish grin. "I'm not sure, darling, but you seemed rather determined to lure me out of there. Where do you live? Is it far? Or do you have some other plan for me? A hotel perhaps, or a long, leisurely drive through the city?"

The coach lurched forward and pulled away from

the curb.

Prince Nicholas's eyes remained fixed on hers, and he smiled. "A drive it is, then."

With a simmering look of desire, he kissed the side of her neck, and the moist heat of his lips lifted her into a dreamlike cloud of arousal. Letting her head fall back on the seat cushion, she laid her hands on the gold epaulets on his broad shoulders and closed her eyes. How relaxed she felt in his arms.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. She wasn't supposed to let it go this far.

Nicholas continued to lay a trail of hot kisses across her collarbone and down to her cleavage. "You taste sweet, my darling," he whispered. "Like honey."

Then he lifted his head and gazed intently at her for a heart-wrenching moment.

Slowly he reached up and pulled his own mask away. Tossing it to the floor, he said, "I am glad I found you tonight, and that you dragged me out of there."

Seeing his whole face for the first time in the golden lamplight caused a shiver in her heart—a sudden twinge of uncertainty. Or perhaps a better word was regret, for what she was about to do to him.

What was it about this man? she wondered frantically. Was she foolish to think there was something more between them than a devious plot on her part, and a casual sexual seduction on his? Perhaps he made all women feel this way when he held them in his arms, as if there were something deep and profound between them. True love at first sight, so to speak.

She didn't love him. No, of course she didn't. To her, he was just a means to an end.

"May I have the pleasure of removing your mask, Véronique?" he asked. "I would like to see your face."

She laid her gloved fingers upon it to hold it securely in place. "But isn't this part of the allure?"

Her voice was full of a confident, teasing melody, but she felt her lip twitch at the dishonesty, for they were alone now, like true lovers. She reminded herself that she was being paid to seduce him, and very soon the mood in the coach was going to take a severe turn.

He surprised her then, by sitting back, slouching in the seat, and grasping her gloved hand. He looked down at it with curiosity as he weaved his fingers through hers. "You still haven't told me your full name. Why ever not? Do you feel you must keep secrets from me? Is it because of who I am?"

A ball of heat caught fire in her belly. "I didn't think the details of my identity—or yours—should matter to either one of us tonight. Napoléon will soon be dealt with, and for that reason, you won't be in Paris much longer. Besides, I am no fool. I know your reputation. You want a single night of pleasure with me, no strings attached, isn't that right?"

He paused. "Is that really what you think of me? Of this?"

She chose her words carefully. "Am I wrong?"

He said nothing while he rubbed the pad of his thumb over the back of her gloved hand. Then he raised it to his lips.

"I don't know what has been happening to me lately," he confessed with eyes closed. "I am not myself."

Book One in the Royal Trilogy
BE MY PRINCE
by
Julianne MacLean

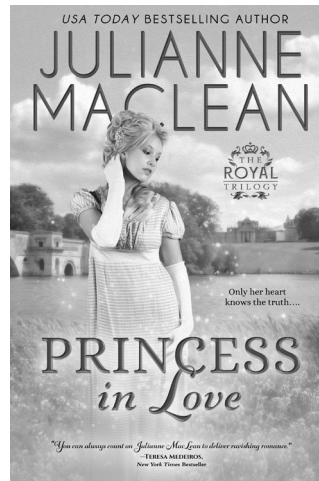
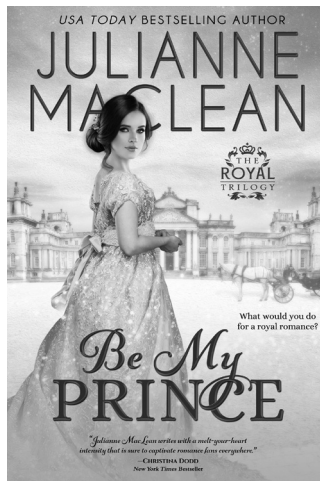
Attention one and all. His Royal Highness, Prince Randolph of Petersburg, will set sail for London in early June and reside at St. James Palace for one full month...Some say the true motive for the prince's visit to our fair country is to seek and marry his future queen. I will therefore pose the question to our devoted and reflective readers: Who among us will be the chosen one?


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Read on for an excerpt from the first book in Julianne MacLean's popular Highlander series:

CAPTURED BY THE HIGHLANDER
Available Now!



Chapter

1

*Fort William, the Scottish Highlands
August 1716*

MONSTROUS AND MIGHTY, TEETH BARED like a feral beast, the Butcher rose from his battle lunge and watched the English soldier drop lifelessly to the floor at his feet. He swung his damp hair away from his face, then knelt down and removed the keys from the dead man's pocket. The Butcher continued in silence through the cold corridor of the barracks, ignoring the stench of stale sweat and rum, while he searched for the staircase that would take him to his enemy.

The chilly haze of death flowed through him, steeled him viciously, and compelled him to the top of the stairs, where he stopped outside the heavy, oaken door of the officers' quarters. The Butcher paused briefly to listen for the ill-timed approach of yet another tenacious young guard, but there was no sound other than

“Some say he fights for Scottish freedom. Others say he is a bloodthirsty savage. I know him as the Butcher of the Highlands, and you will know him only by the gleam of his axe when you draw your last breath.”

—Anonymous

the noise of his own ragged breathing, and the beat of his heart as he savored this long-awaited moment of vengeance.

He adjusted the shield strapped to his back, then squeezed the handle of the sawed-off Lochaber axe in his hand. His shirt was grimy with dirt and sweat from days in the saddle and nights spent sleeping in the grass, but it had all been worth it, for the moment had come at last. It was time to cut down his foe. To slaughter the memory of what had occurred that cold November day in the orchard. Tonight he would kill for his clan, for his country, and for his beloved. There would be no mercy offered. He would strike, and he would strike fast.

With a steady hand he inserted the key into the lock, then entered the room and closed the door behind him. He waited a moment for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness, then moved silently toward the bed where his enemy lay sleeping.



Lady Amelia Templeton was dreaming of a butterfly, fluttering over a hazy field of heather, when a faint noise caused her to stir in her bed. Or perhaps it was not a noise, but a feeling. A sense of doom. Her heart began to pound, and she opened her eyes.

It was the nightmare. She had not had it in years, not since she was a girl, when images of the massacre she'd witnessed at the age of nine still burned hellishly in her mind. On that dreadful day, she had pressed her tiny nose to the window of her coach and watched a bloody battle between a band of rebel Highlanders and the English soldiers sent to escort her and her

mother into Scotland. They had been traveling to visit her father, a colonel in the English army.

Amelia watched the dirty Scots slit the throats of the soldiers and bludgeon them to death with heavy stones they picked up on the road. She heard the screams of agony, the desperate pleas for mercy, quickly silenced by sharp steel blades through the heart. And just when she thought it was over, when the screaming and sobbing faded to an eerie silence, an ugly blood-splattered savage ripped open the door of the coach and glared in at her.

She had clung to her mother, trembling in fear. He studied Amelia with burning eyes for what seemed an eternity, then slammed the door in her face and fled to the forest with his brethren. They disappeared into the glistening Highland mist like a pack of wolves.

The sense of terror Amelia felt now was no different, except that it was mixed with anger. She wanted to kill that savage who had opened the door of her coach years ago. She wanted to rise up and shout at him, to slay him with her own bare hands. To prove that she was not afraid.

The floor creaked, and she turned her head on the pillow.

No, it could not be. She must still be dreaming... .

A Highlander was moving toward her through the darkness. Panic swept through her, and she strained to see through the murky gloom.

The light sound of his footsteps reached her ears, and suddenly he was above her, raising an axe over his head.

“No!” she cried, reaching out to block the strike,

even when she knew the heavy blade would cut straight through her fingers. She squeezed her eyes shut.

When the deathblow did not fall, Amelia opened her eyes. The brawny, panting savage stood squarely over her bed. His axe was poised and gleaming in the moonlight from the window. His long hair was wet with grime or sweat or river water—she knew not which. Most terrible of all, his eyes glowed with the boiling furies of hell itself.

“You’re not Bennett,” he said in a deep, growling Scottish brogue.

“No, I am not,” she replied.

“Who are you?”

“I am Amelia Templeton.”

He had not yet lowered the macabre weapon, nor had she lowered her trembling hands.

“You’re English,” he said.

“That’s right. And who are you, to dare enter my bedchamber at night?”

She wasn’t quite sure where she’d found the courage or sense to inquire so boldly about his identity when her heart was pounding like a mallet in her chest.

The Highlander took a step back and lowered the axe. His voice was deep and terrorizing. “I’m the Butcher. And if you scream, lassie, it’ll be the last breath you take.”

She held her tongue, for she’d heard tales of the brutal and bloodthirsty Butcher of the Highlands, who committed grisly acts of treachery and left a trail of murder and mayhem in his wake. According to legend, he was descended from Gillean of the

Battle-axe, who had long ago crushed an invading fleet of Vikings. The Butcher was never without his morbid death weapon, and he was a Jacobite traitor, straight to the bone.

“If you are who you claim, why have you not killed me?” she asked, fear and uncertainty burning in every pore.

“I was expecting to kill someone else tonight.” His sharp, animal eyes surveyed the room, searching for some hint of the person he’d come to slaughter. “Whose room is this?”

“There is no one here but me,” she informed him, but his heated gaze swung in her direction and compelled her to answer the question more thoroughly. “If you are looking for Lieutenant-colonel Richard Bennett, I am sorry to disappoint you, but he is away from the fort.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

He studied her face through the moonlight. “Are you his whore?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you are, I might slice your head off right now, and leave it here in a box on the table, for him to admire when he returns.”

A nightmarish queasiness churned through her belly as she imagined her head in a box. Where would he put the rest of her? Would he toss her headless body out the window?

She struggled to breathe evenly, in and out. “I am not Colonel Bennett’s whore. I am his betrothed. My father was a colonel in the English army and the fifth

Duke of Winslowe. So if you mean to kill me, sir, be done with it. I am not afraid of you.”

It was a bald-faced lie, but she would not let him see her cower.

Something in his face changed. One large, strong hand squeezed the handle of his axe, and he lifted it to rest on the edge of the bed. She found herself staring mutely down at the dangerous hook at its tip, which was pressing against her thigh. She noted the huge broadsword in a scabbard at his side, and the flintlock pistol in his belt.

“Get up,” he commanded, poking her. “I want to look at ye.”

Amelia swallowed over a sickening knot of fear in her throat. Did he mean to ravish and abuse her before he killed her?

God help them both if he tried.

He poked her harder, so she carefully folded the covers aside and slid her legs over the edge of the bed. Eyes fixed on his, one hand clutching the neckline of her shift, she stood.

“Come closer,” he commanded.

As she moved forward, she noted that his face was drawn from elegantly sculpted contours and sharp, flawless angles, and his eyes unveiled a passionate fury—the likes of which she had never seen before. There was a spellbinding intensity there, and it gripped her by the throat, held her captive in its power.

The Butcher backed up, and she followed. She could smell the masculine scent of his sweat. His shoulders were broad, his biceps heavy, his hands rugged and enormous. They were a warrior’s hands, roughened

by years of battle and butchery.

Her eyes returned to the fierce expression on his striking face, and she felt her insides quiver. As brave as she wanted to be at this moment—and she had always *dreamed* she would be brave—she knew she was no match for this beast of a man. There was little chance she could ever overpower him, no matter what she tried to do. If he wanted to ravish or kill her, he could. He could knock her to the floor with one swift swing of that deadly battle-axe, and she would be powerless against him.

“When it comes to your fiancé,” he said in a coarse voice, “I have an axe to grind.”

“Do you intend to grind it on me?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Sheer suffocating panic squeezed the air out of her lungs. She wished she could scream for help, but something was paralyzing her—a strange, almost hypnotic power that turned her muscles into useless pools of liquid.

He moved slowly around her. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a woman.” He circled around to the front, lifted his axe, and touched the hook to her shoulder. Her mind flooded with alarm as the smooth steel slid over her flesh.

“Are you his beloved?” the Butcher asked.

“Of course I am,” she proudly replied. “And he is mine.”

She loved Richard with all her heart. Her father had loved him, too. And God help this dirty Jacobite when her fiancé learned of this.

“Is that a fact?”

She turned her raging eyes to meet his. “Yes, sir, it is a fact. Though I doubt you would know the meaning of the word *love*. It is outside your realm of understanding.”

He leaned close until his lips touched her ear. His hot, moist breath made her shiver. “Aye, lass, I have no use for tenderness or affection, and you’d do well to remember it. So it’s decided, then. I’ll kill you instead of him.”

Terror swept through her. He was going to do it. He truly was.

“Please, sir,” she said, working hard to soften the animosity in her voice. Perhaps she could distract him with a desperate plea for mercy. With any luck, his entry to the fort had been noticed and someone would soon come to her rescue. “I beg of you.”

“You beg of me?” He chuckled grimly. “You don’t strike me as the begging type.”

He was enjoying this. It was a game to him. He had no compassion. None at all.

“Why do you want to kill my betrothed?” she asked, still hoping to delay the inevitable.

Please, God, let someone knock on the door. A maid. My uncle. The cavalry. Anyone!

“How do you know him?” she asked.

The Butcher lifted the axe off her shoulder and tipped it upward to rest on his own. He continued to circle around her, like a wolf studying its prey. “I fought against him at Inveraray,” he said, “and again at Sherifmuir.”

The Jacobites had been defeated at Sherifmuir. It was the battlefield where Richard had saved her

father’s life. It was why she fell in love with him. He’d fought with courage and valor, with unwavering honor to the Crown—unlike this savage moving around her, who didn’t seem to understand the rules of war. He seemed bent only on exacting some dark, personal revenge.

“Do you intend to kill *all* the English soldiers you fought against that day?” she asked. “Because that may take you a while. And there were Scots there, too, fighting for the English Crown. Campbells, I believe. Are you going to butcher all of them as well?”

He circled around to her front. “Nay. It was only your beloved I wanted to slice in two this evening.”

“Well, I am sorry to disappoint you.”

Visions of war and murder spun before her eyes. How unfair it all was. Her father had been dead for only a month, and she had come here to Fort William under the guardianship of her uncle to marry Richard. Her protector.

What was going to happen now? Would she die a grisly death here in this room, under the cold, heavy blade of a Highlander, just like in her childhood nightmares? Or would he leave her to live while he went on in search of Richard and succeeded in killing the man she loved?

“But I’m not disappointed, lass,” the Butcher said, cradling her chin in his calloused hand and lifting her face, forcing her to look at him. “Because tonight I stumbled on something much more appealing than a swift, clean death for my enemy. It’s something that’ll make him suffer much longer.”

“You’re going to kill me, then?”

Or perhaps he was referring to something else.

Fighting against the knot of upheaval in her belly, she glared at him with hatred. "I am betrothed, sir, to the man I love. So if you mean to rape me, I promise you, I will scream my guts out—and you can kill me if you want to, because I would rather die a thousand agonizing deaths than be violated by *you*."

His eyes narrowed; then he swore something in Gaelic and let go of her chin. He strode to the tall wardrobe where her clothes were stored.

After tearing through the costly gowns of silk and lace, he threw them to the floor in the center of the room, then found a simple skirt of heavy brown wool. He pulled it from the wardrobe, along with drawers and stays, stepped over the other gowns, and thrust the articles at her.

"Put these on," he said. "You need to learn a lesson or two, so you're coming with me." He backed away and waited for her to dress in front of him.

For a moment, she considered her options, and thought it might be best to obey him, if only to buy more time. But when she imagined stepping into the skirt and lacing herself up in front of him—so that he could steal her away to the mountains and do Lord knows what with her—she could not do it. She would rather be beaten to a pulp.

Amelia squared her shoulders. She was terrified by this man, there was no denying it, but the intensity of her fury somehow overpowered her fear. Before she could truly contemplate the consequences of what she was doing, she had flung the clothes on the floor.

"No. I will not put these on, nor will I leave this fort

with you. You are welcome to try and force me, but I told you before that I would scream if you touched me. So if you do not get out of my bedchamber this instant, I will do it. I promise I will scream and you will soon be dead."

For what seemed an eternity, he glared at her, clearly surprised and baffled by her rebellion. Then his expression changed. He took a slow step forward, and their bodies touched.

"So you're Winslowe's daughter," he said in a deep and quiet voice. "The famous English war hero."

She felt the Butcher's warm breath at her temple, and his tartan brushed against the front of her shift.

Her heart trembled at the nearness of him. He was like some kind of living, breathing mountain of muscle. She could barely think or breathe through the heady effect of his presence, so overwhelmingly close. "Yes."

"You're fearless, like him. I like fearless women." The Butcher took a lock of her hair in his hand, rubbed it between his fingers, then lifted it to his nose and closed his eyes. He seemed to drink in her scent; then he touched his lips lightly to her cheek and whispered, "And you smell good."

Amelia gave no reply. She couldn't think. All her senses were shivering with flames of terror and confusion. The heat was making her dizzy.

"Now take off your shift," he quietly said, "and do it now, or I will cut it off of you myself."

At last, she found her voice and reached for one last shred of courage. She lifted her eyes and regarded him steadily. "No, sir, I will not."

“Are you testing me, lass?”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

His gaze traveled over her face and searched her eyes; then he looked down at her breasts. She felt a curious sensation in her belly and tried to pull away, but he took hold of her arm and held her against him. His lips brushed against hers as he spoke.

“This is your last warning. I said take it off—and if you continue to defy me, I won’t be held responsible for what I do to you next.”

Amelia looked up at him and shook her head. “And I’ll say it a hundred times if I have to. The answer is still no.”



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Join countless other romance readers who have been captured, claimed, and seduced by Julianne MacLean’s passionate and adventurous bestselling Highlander series.

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He is Angus the Lion, a fearsome Highland laird who has returned from the north to reclaim his father's castle. After ramming through the castle gates and defeating his enemies in battle, he claims the chief's beautiful daughter Gwendolyn as his prize.

Gwendolyn has no choice but to submit to her clan's powerful conqueror, but she will not do so willingly. The Lion is intrigued and aroused by her bravery and will stop at nothing to take her to his bed and possess her, heart, body and soul. So begins a slow and tantalizing seduction that plunges them both into an all-consuming passion—but will it be enough to save them against unseen enemies who are determined to tear them apart?



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Lady Catherine does not recognize the dark and brooding Highlander who approaches her with a shocking request to end his curse, for her memories are lost to her. Frustrated and driven nearly mad by his yearnings for the beautiful lass with the power to end his suffering, Lachlan takes Lady Catherine as his prisoner—to deliver her to the place that will unlock the secrets of her past. Soon, when their enemies are revealed, Catherine must learn to trust the mysterious cursed Highlander, even when the intensity of his unfulfilled desires becomes far too seductive to resist...



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Julianne MacLean is a *USA Today* bestselling author of more than thirty novels, including the contemporary women's fiction *Color of Heaven Series*. Readers have described her books as “breathtaking,” “soulful” and “uplifting.” MacLean is a four-time Romance Writers of America RITA® finalist and has won numerous awards, including the *Booksellers' Best Award* and a *Reviewers' Choice Award* from *Romantic Times*. Her novels have sold millions of copies worldwide and have been published in over a dozen languages.

MacLean has a degree in English literature from the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and a degree in business administration from Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. She loves to travel and has lived in New Zealand, Canada, and England. MacLean currently resides on the east coast of Canada in a lakeside home with her husband and daughter. She invites readers to visit her website for more information about her books and writing life, and to subscribe to her mailing list for all the latest news: www.JulianneMacLean.com